

Risk Assessment of Parental Alienation.
**A Grounded Theory study on early signs of detection of Parental
Alienation**

Daniela Gravina

Institute of Family Therapy (Malta)

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Abstract

The purpose of this Grounded Theory study is to describe, understand and highlight the early warning signs of Parental Alienation (PA) in order to aid professionals with early detection, risk management and prevention of PA. Two samples of participants were chosen, with 12 participants in total selected through the online forum of the international PA Study Group (PASG). The first sample included 5 participants who experienced parental alienation. The second sample consisted of 7 professionals specialised in the field of PA. Data analysis yielded a theory of early warning signs that included 2 Core Categories and their main categories:

Core Category 1: Dysfunctional Family Dynamics

- Main Category 1: Cross-generational coalition
- Main Category 2: Child as the symptom carrier

Core Category 2: Power and Control

- Main Category: Controlling all aspects of family life

Findings from these Core Categories show that early signs and symptoms of PA are present within family dynamics, patterns of interaction, boundaries and the distribution of power.

Thus, observation of early warning signs, can draw the attention of professionals to the possible risk of marital relationship problems, and eventually PA.

Keywords: Parental Alienation, Early warning signs, Risk Assessment, Marital Breakdown, Parent-child relationship

Declaration

I, the undersigned, hereby declare that the work in this dissertation titled 'Risk Assessment of Parental Alienation. A Grounded Theory study on early signs of detection of Parental Alienation' in partial fulfilment of the Master in Systemic Family Psychotherapy, was carried out by myself. Appropriate citation has been included when referring to studies by other authors.

Daniela Gravina

386796(M)

Dedication

I dedicate this work to my mother Dorianne, and father Joseph who have been my support system from the very first day of primary school, up until finishing my Masters course (and I'm sure beyond).

Also to my partner Ryan, who endured many weekends spent inside whilst I worked on my thesis, with him by my side. I cannot forget our dogs Maggie & Daisy who, without knowing, supported me with their endless cuddles and kisses.

I also dedicate this research to the professionals who voluntarily gave their time and shared their years of knowledge and experience with me. It is clear that these professionals want to help fellow researchers continue to grow the field of parental alienation research.

Finally, I dedicate this research to the mothers and fathers who shared their stories of loss with me. Their resilience is one to admire. I have learned so much from them and have been changed as a person through our interactions. This is your research too!

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I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my tutor Dr Charlie Azzopardi for sharing his expertise on parental alienation with me, and for his advice and guidance throughout the research process.

I would also like to thank all the tutors and lecturers at IFT Malta who each had a hand in getting me to where I am today- namely, Ms Karen Bishop, Ms Yanica Richards Chircop, Mr Karl Wright and Ms Carmen Delicata.

I also extend my gratitude to my course colleagues, who made these two years a time of continuous personal and professional growth.

This is a Hindi song by Kshitij Tarey titled “Haara Nahi” meaning "I haven't lost".

The song writer dedicated this song to targeted parents.

Such will be the state of my life

I had never imagined

That I'd pine to meet you

I had never imagined

But let me assure you, that I am not broken

Even if this harsh world tries to keep us apart

You are the most important part of my life

I will keep fighting, and one day we will be together

I have not given up

And I have not left you alone

I have not given up

I miss those days when we roamed together

When we played together

When you stumbled and stood up again

And came into my lap

Your joyous laughter

I have not seen in a long time

If you meet me today, will you laugh again?

The stories you'd hear from me at bedtime

If you meet me today

Will you listen to those stories again?

Will you hug me again and insist

That you want to stay with me

And that I take you away with me? I shall always try

That, no matter what, I will not break down

I have not given up

I have not left you alone, I shall never leave you alone

I have Not given up

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Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Preamble

Since the early 1800s, court cases around the world have documented family law cases involving one parent turning their child against the other parent (Harman et al., 2019). By the mid-1940s, clinicians working with families going through the process of divorce, started publishing their observations about parents enlisting their children as ‘allies’ against the other parent (Rand, 2013). In 1985, Richard Gardner coined the label ‘parental alienation syndrome’ to describe this. Other terms were assigned yet the term most commonly used today is parental alienation [PA] (Lorandos et al., 2013). Family theory and therapy is now at the forefront in developing a specialist area in PA (Harman et al., 2019).

1.2 Definition of terms

To clarify, in this study I will be using the following terminology:

Parental alienation (PA): A child who allies strongly with one parent (the alienating parent) and rejects a relationship with the other parent (the targeted parent) without legitimate justification.

Alienating Parent (AP): The parent engaging in parental alienation behaviours.

Targeted Parent (TP): The parent being distanced from the child in a relationship eventually severed.

1.3 Research Purpose Statement and Research Question

The purpose of this grounded theory study is to describe, understand and highlight early warning signs of PA in order to help front-liners and professionals pre-empt a PA situation or prevent further PA severity. I am seeking to understand the family dynamics, patterns of interaction, boundaries and the distribution of power experienced by the study's participants, wherein seeds of alienation may have just started to sprout.

The overall aim is to aid professionals with early detection, risk management and prevention of PA by providing information useful to therapists in their clinical practice.

1.4 Overarching Research Question:

This study aims to answer the following question:

What are the early warning signs of Parental Alienation present within the family's dynamics, prior to further severity of Parental Alienation?

1.5 Rationale of the study

Whilst Harman et al. (2019) noted that research on alienation has moved from "greening" to a "blossoming" stage, characterised by greater development and integration of theories and testing, most of the current research focuses on cases of PA arising during or after high conflict marital separation. Nevertheless, alienation tactics are at play during the vulnerable process of marital breakdown that may span over years (Azzopardi, 2023; Mooney, et al., 2009). This explains why my research focuses on identifying early warning signs of PA. With a focus on risk assessment, management and prevention. Frontline professionals can detect the risk and

make appropriate referrals to family and systemic therapists; early provision of the right services to the family can stop PA.

1.6 Parental Alienation within the local context

Whilst participants hailed from different countries, I am adding this section to contextualise better my knowledge on relationships, marriage and family life. I am a Maltese woman, daughter and partner who works professionally within a Maltese context.

Whilst marriage is still popular amongst Maltese couples, more people are now opting for civil weddings (Times of Malta, 28/01/2019). Concurrently, marital breakdown is on the rise (Malta Today, 22/03/2021). Marital breakdown is highly relevant as it is within this context that most PA transpires.

Whilst an NGO, 'Happy Parenting Malta' (2021) works incessantly to improve public awareness on PA, a survey by Marmara` (2022) showed that knowledge and public awareness on PA is inaccurate and low: over 80% of participants did not know what PA meant. Progress, however, is visible in the first and only accredited postgraduate training in PA, started in 2021 by the Institute of Family Therapy - Malta (2022), in collaboration with Parental Alienation Europe; the second run of the course having just finished successfully leading to a formation of frontline professionals with in-depth knowledge on PA.

1.7 My personal and professional curiosity

My personal and professional interest in PA was spurred during the Masters course in Systemic and Family Psychotherapy within the Institute of Family Therapy (IFT) Malta. During our first year, my academic tutor and chairperson of IFT, Dr Charlie Azzopardi, introduced my cohort to the concept of PA. I must admit this was news. Hearing Dr Azzopardi speak passionately on

the topic swayed me to read further literature to better understand this phenomenon. Yet, most of the literature was legal, indicating where interest in the topic began, or assessment based (Gardner, 1985). I struggled to integrate this research into my practice yet finally took the plunge for PA. I discussed with Dr Azzopardi different perspectives I could follow within the field of PA, and finally settled on early warning signs of PA.

I must also mention another key person who continued to fuel my interest in this topic, Brian O'Sullivan. I met briefly during an IFT gathering wherein he instantly and passionately spoke about individuals he has worked with who were experiencing the process of PA. Hearing these families affected by PA, contextualised further and made relevant all the research I had read. As a trainee therapist, knowledge on early warning signs of PA have become imperative in my work with families, including knowing that features of PA can be observed in family patterns of interaction, boundaries and the distribution of power, and during the early stages in the lengthy process of marital breakdown.

Thus, all key people, Dr Azzopardi, Brian O'Sullivan and other theorists, such as Amy Baker, Benjamin D. Garber, and Linda J. Gottlieb fuelled my passion for PA.

1.8 Conceptual framework

1.8.1 Systemic Paradigm

I adopted a systemic social constructionist approach in my research. Given the systemic nature of this study, systemic theories and ideas were crucial in understanding dyadic processes. In Bateson's (1979) view, "everything is connected to everything else"; indeed, persons affect each other in complex and reciprocal ways. Understanding couples and their relational dynamics in cases of marital breakdown wherein the process of alienation may have begun, is supported using systemic theories. Consequently, Minuchin's (1974) work on family structure, Boszormenyi-Nagy and Spark's (1984) concept of loyalty conflicts, and Bateson's concept of

the double bind theory (Bateson, et. al. 1956) provided systemic research that will be referenced throughout the study.

1.8.2 Social Constructionist Paradigm

Rejecting modernist assumptions of an objective reality, a singular and external truth, and that of the therapist as observer-expert, social constructionism allows for collaborative inquiry and a shared process of reflection leading to the development of multiple realities and a complexity of views. This concerns interactions between individuals, “within a cradle of communication” (Hoffman, 1990, p. 2). Gadamer (1975/2004) posited language as “the universal medium in which understanding occurs” (p. 389). Thus, through the interactive process of dialogue, participants and researcher (myself), generated new meanings (Anderson, 2005, p. 500; Andersen, 1987; Anderson & Goolishian, 1992; Guba and Lincoln, 1989). Recalling ‘language’ and ‘understanding’, Gadamer (1975/2004) stressed that the latter involves interpretation which is influenced by the individual’s background or history. Consequently, I observed carefully the various social constructs of the participants, sensitive to culture, in order to understand and interpret the participants' influence, on the process of co-construction of data (Etherington, 2004).

Social constructionism (Burger & Luckmann, 1981; Gergen, 2015), and systemic theories (Minuchin, 1974; Haley & Richeport-Haley, 2015; de Shazer et al., 2007; Tomm, 1987a; 1987b; 1988) qualified my studies. Their theories guided all parts of the research process, including the questions I asked, or didn’t ask, how I interpreted and understood data. My transparency here aims to inform the reader about my own part in the co-construction of the data.

1.8.3 Attachment Theory

The process of alienation presupposes the existence of a parent-child emotional bond. Attachment theory describes the development of these bonds (Ainsworth, 1989; Ainsworth et al., 1974; Ainsworth, 1978; Bowlby, 1988). The quality of a child's attachment to their caregiver refers to the ability of the child to use the caregiver as a secure base, from which to draw emotional comfort. Attachment develops during infancy and continues throughout adult romantic relationships (Ainsworth, 1989; Mikulincer, 2002). Couples' interactions and patterns of communication are guided by partners' attachment style: secure, anxious-preoccupied, dismissive-avoidant, or fearful-avoidant (Hazan and Shaver, 1987). Activated during moments of distress, conflict and emotional intensity (Cassidy & Shaver, 1999), they influence couples' interplay between emotional closeness and distance. For Byng-Hall (1985, 1988, 2008), if a balance is not reached, children or extended family members may be triangulated in. This is a crucial PA dynamic.

1.9 Overview of chapters

The following chapter presents a literature review articulating concepts associated with the research topic. The third chapter presents the methodological approach. This is followed by the discussion of the research findings. The concluding chapter highlights the main findings of this research and indicates the study's limitations. Recommendations for future research are also presented.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

Various terms have been used to define Parental Alienation (PA); what remains consistent is the child's unjustified rejection of a parent in response to inter-parental conflict and loyalty issues (Baker & Sauber, 2013). This section provides an overview of available research on PA. The goal is to explain in more detail, concepts I will utilise in my results and discussion on the identification of early warning signs, commonly visible in couple and family therapy (Azzopardi, 2023; Jaffe et al., 2010; Marcus, 2020).

2.2 What is Parental Alienation?

Richard Gardner (1998) originally coined the term 'parental alienation syndrome' during the mid-1980s. Yet, PA phenomena were identified long before by systems theorists and practitioners. In the 1950s, they noted parent-child alignments were a significant challenge in family dynamics (Ackerman, 1958; Bowen, 1966; Jackson & Weakland, 1971; Minuchin, 1974; Haley, 1980). Beyond misalignment, PA has been defined as an observable constellation of behaviours of a "child, who venomously rejects, and directs undeserved anger towards a previously loved parent during or following a separation" (O'Sullivan, 2018, pp. 4). To note, rejection is considered unjustifiable and undeserved (Templar et al., 2017). When a child rejects a parent on justifiable grounds, it is estrangement not PA (Bernet et al., 2020; Kelly & Johnston, 2001; Drozd & Olesen, 2004; Whitecombe, 2017).

Behind it all, a parent gradually, explicitly or implicitly erodes the other parent's relationship with the child. Research shows that PA varies in extent and impact on the child-AP relationship (Baker & Damall, 2007; Baker, 2006). Here, the focus will be on PA warning signs when still mild, that is, while the child criticises the TP but once in their presence, it is as if this criticism never happened (McCartan, 2022).

2.3 Marital Breakdown and the child

Most research focuses on cases of high conflict marital separation. Yet, alienation tactics are already at play during the vulnerable process of a long-winded marital breakdown (Azzopardi, 2023; Mooney, et al., 2009). This explains my focus on identifying early PA warning signs, and thus, prevention and risk-management. Marital breakdown can be predicted, through various detachment stages in a couple, communicated through Criticism, Defensiveness, Contempt, and Stonewalling, during periods considered most critical for marriage survival (Gottman, 1994; Gottman & Levenson, 2000). The uncoupling process is typically very stressful. Stressors, in turn, increase the risk of negative emotional, behavioural, and health outcomes for adults and children (Amato, 2000).

A number of interactive factors contribute to the complexity of parental separation and its impact on children, including parental conflict, quality of parenting and parent-child relationships, parental mental health, socioeconomic factors, and repeated changes in family structure and living arrangements (Mooney et al., 2009). These gain momentum up until separation. A long-winded marital breakdown is usually the time when couples seek therapeutic support; creating a risk assessment for professionals to assess early signs of alienation can help intervention to stop early PA or its further development. To recall, this is why my research focused on early warning signs of PA.

2.4 Parental conflict and the child

Conflict is a common and necessary aspect of marital life. As spouses attempt to integrate their lives, they inevitably face differences likely to elicit conflict (Theiss & Leustek, 2016). Distressed couples often become polarised; when this escalates, partners may become reactive (Fishbane, 2023). Amato and Afifi (2006) discovered that continuous discord between parents contributed to children feeling caught in the middle (triangulated) leading to loyalty conflicts. Interparental conflict makes children feel they have little control over events or self-blame, increasing the risk of adjustment problems (Jenkins & Smith, 1990; Kim et al., 1997). Furthermore, the quality of inter-parental relationships is increasingly recognised as a primary influence on parenting practices (Harold et al., 2016; Katz & Gottman, 1996).

Interparental conflict affects cognitive, social, academic, and even psycho-biological functioning within the child (Ellis & Garber, 2000; Fergusson & Horwood, 1998; Cummings & Davies, 2002). Children's powerlessness or self-blame may be linked to how much they become involved in inter-parental disputes (Buchanan & Waizenhofer, 2001). The intensity, frequency and content of marital conflict moderates the level of distress within the child (Fincham, 1994; Fincham & Osborne, 1993; Grych & Fincham, 1990). Clearly, the child's wellbeing depends on the child's susceptibility to parental influence. This susceptibility may lead the child to align with one parent, and as soon as it is detected, becomes a significant early warning sign of PA.

2.5 Parental Alienation and Family Dynamics

O' Sullivan (2018) explains that PA characteristics are observable in family patterns of interaction, boundaries and power distribution. Thus, with a risk assessment of early PA warning signs, the family therapist may be able to assess and prevent the escalation of PA.

Garber (2011) discussed the importance of having and maintaining clear, flexible parent-child hierarchical boundaries, which may break down in times of parental conflict

Many prominent theorists have discussed the dysfunctional family dynamics wherein a cross-generational parent-child coalition marginalises the other parent and damages the child (Andolfi et al., 1983; Boscolo, et al., 1987; Gottlieb, 2012). This process has taken on many names such as “perverse triangle”, “cross-generational coalition”, “Undifferentiated Ego Mass” and “pathological triangle” (Ackerman, 1958; Bowen 1966, 1978; Haley, 1967; Bateson, 1956; Minuchin, 1974; Satir, 1964, 1972, 1988). The double bind theory (Bateson, et al. 1956) was identified as the communicative means by which the child is locked in an unresolvable dilemma of one parent requesting the child’s allegiance against the other parent.

When triangulated in their parents’ disputes, children may attempt to maintain close ties to both parents, which leads them to an aversive state of dissonance, feeling simultaneously loyal and disloyal to both parents (Festinger, 1957; Minuchin et al., 1978). Boszormenyi-Nagy and Spark (1984, pp. 37) use the concept of “multi-personal loyalty fabric” to explain how guilt-laden loyalty conflicts arise within families, leading to coalitions and splits (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark, 1984). Amato (2000) explained that from the early stages of marital conflict, children already start to experience significant loyalty conflicts. These may lead children to resolve this state of psychological imbalance by forming an alliance with one parent against the other (Amato & Afifi, 2006; Amato & Booth, 2000; Baker & Chambers, 2011; Ellis, 2005; Minuchin, 1974). Although this may temporarily resolve feelings of dissonance, it creates a double bind within the child when ending up with just one parent and may lead to taking a parentified role (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark, 1984; Garber, 2011; Gardner, 2006; Minuchin, 1974). With its own structured relationship patterns, diffuse transactional style and internalised

expectations, overall, PA becomes pathological, a repetitive, rigid and predictable pattern as it disempowers and excludes the TP (Bowen, 1966).

2.6 Mirror Neurons

Azzopardi (2023) utilised the concept of mirror neurons to offer another dimension to understand children's assimilation of parental distress and attitudes. Mirror neurons 'mirror' the behaviour of the other as though the observer were itself acting, allowing for imitation, an important learning feature in child development (Iacobini, 2009; Mukamel, et. al., 2010). Mirror neurons can also 'mirror' the other's emotions, such as disgust, happiness, and fear (Trautmann-Lengsfeld et al., 2013; Wicker et al, 2003). This means children can experience and express their parents' emotions as if they were their own, making PA possible.

2.7 Parental Alienation and its effects on the child

The well-researched impact of PA on victimised children has strongly linked it to psychological abuse (Bernet et al., 2020; Gottlieb, 2012; O'Sullivan, 2020; Rowland, 2019). Devastating effects include verbal, emotional and psychological abuse on children and their health (Moore & Pepler, 2006), psychiatric problems (Dutton, 2007), trauma symptoms (Taft et al., 2006) and may become alexithymic (Goldsmith & Freyd). Comparing outcomes of adult children from divorced families with and without PA, Ben-Ami and Baker (2012) found that adult children who experienced PA were more likely to exhibit lower self-sufficiency, lower self-esteem and mental-health issues. They also found that due to the controlling nature of PA strategies and lack of responsiveness to the child's needs, their autonomy and intrinsic motivation were compromised, becoming less likely to be securely attached in adult relationships. This links with Baker's (2005) finding on generational patterns explained in more detail below. Research on alienated children has shown these children had problems with manipulation, authority

figures, emotion regulation, peer relationships, school adjustment, and a disregard of social norms (Baker, 2007; Ben-Ami & Baker, 2012; Buchanan et al., 1991; Gardner, 1998; Kelly & Johnston, 2001; Rowland, 2019). Providing teachers and other frontliners with tools for assessing early warning signs of PA, such as by noting externalising and internalising behaviours of the child, many of which are portrayed at school and during extracurricular activities, can help in PA management. Teachers can refer to a family therapist.

2.8 Mutigenerational processes of Parental Alienation

Baker (2005) found the same replicative cycle of alienation noting many child-alienated parents were alienated as children. Bowen's (1966) 'multi-generation transmission process' construct explained the intergenerational nature of PA. Bowen explained that the child most triangulated into the family's emotional process became the least differentiated, selected a partner who shared similar low-level differentiation from their family, and thus passed on the limited differentiation from the family of origin to the next generation by "inadvertently organising family rules, roles and routines in rigid enmeshed and fused ways that prevent differentiation" (Carr, 2006, pp. 161). Early identification of PA perturbs this replicative and repetitive cycle.

2.9 Early Identification of Parental Alienation

Jaffe, Ashbourne and Mamo (2010), Marcus (2020) and Azzopardi (2023), discussed the need for early identification of parental alienation. Mostly legal and therapeutic, literature has focused on assessment and treatment (Baker, 2018; Baker & Damall, 2007; Bernet, 2020; Gardner, 1998; Rowlands, 2019; Templer et al., 2017; Warshak, 2010). Azzopardi (2023) suggested using tools already developed for PA assessment to identify very early warning signs

of PA. Triangulation behaviours listed in these instruments are commonly observable during couples and family therapy (Gardner, 2006; Baker, 2008; Bernet, 2020).

2.10 Conclusion

Whilst this literature review did not exhaust all PA literature, it justifies my research topic and portrays the need for further research on prevention and risk management of PA in order to curb it early in its roots. These concepts will emerge and be further developed in the combined findings and discussion section.

Chapter 3

Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of the study's methodological approach. I explain the choice for a qualitative approach and specifically grounded theory (GT). I will then describe the research design, analysis and procedures. The final section will outline ethical concerns and researcher's self-reflexivity.

3.2 Research Approach

3.2.1 A qualitative approach

Glaser and Strauss (1999) explained that the research method choice depends on research circumstances; the researcher's training and personal interests; the particular data sought by the research questions and underlying theory. I chose a qualitative approach in order to maintain consistency between theoretical starting point and methodological approach thus attaining methodological congruence (Morse & Richards, 2002; Morse et al., 2002).

Systemic and social constructionist conceptual frameworks align with qualitative research. Burck (2005) favoured qualitative methodologies for systemic practitioners, especially when researching subjective experiences. She believed systemic clinician-researchers have an advantage in the ability to elicit and hold multiple perspectives, even when contradictory in nature. Choosing a qualitative methodology allowed me to stress the socially constructed nature of reality, build an intimate relationship with the participants, and emphasise the value-laden nature of inquiry (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

3.2.2 Why Grounded Theory?

Grounded Theory (GT) first emerged from sociologists' Glaser and Strauss's collaborative work (1999). They shifted the focus from testing existing theory to generating theory grounded in data through inductive, iterative and comparative data analysis. I adopted Charmaz's (2011) Social Constructionist GT, which treats earlier GT strategies as flexible guidelines and heuristic devices, rather than fixed rules. Charmaz's (2000; 2006; 2008; 2011) GT aligns with my theoretical stance, encouraging reflexivity, assuming relativity and focusing on the researcher and participants' subjective positions, situated in a particular time and place in history, emphasising multiple realities. Charmaz's GT follows an interpretive endeavour wherein researchers bring prior theoretical sensitivity to raise new questions and understandings, without forcing preconceived ideas on the data. If understood contextually, findings are applicable to people experiencing similar situations to the participants of the study (Morse et al., 2021). Burck (2005) discusses how a systemic worldview, like my own, embraces the iterative process of data analysis and collection, flexible frameworks and data-grounded theory. My research question tends towards knowledge creation, focused on a lacuna namely PA risk assessment prior to its occurrence (Jaffe et al., 2010; Azzopardi, 2023). For this, GT methodology becomes appropriate (Chun Tie et al., 2019; Charmaz, 2021).

3.3 Research Design

3.3.1 Sample selection

My initial sampling procedure was purposive - participants with specific characteristics, able to provide data relevant to the research question (Morse, 2007). Two participant samples were chosen - parents who experienced PA and professionals working in the field. This promised more and differentiated knowledge for my research question. One sample provided first-hand

accounts of personal experiences, the other professional, as such, more theoretical. That said, the combination of both sets provided rich insights.

After the first set of data was collected, coded and analysed, I moved on to theoretical sampling. Guided by the initial data, it assisted to develop a theory as it was emerging (Charmaz, 2006; Chun Tie et al., 2019; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This was guided by my theoretical codes (discussed in more detail later). One such code consisted of multigenerational patterns. Through theoretical sampling I sought participants who could fit within the multigenerational code, filling any missing data, clarifying queries, testing my working hypothesis and eventually leading to data saturation on categories previously coded (Hood, 2007).

3.3.2 Recruitment

Both samples were selected through the online forum of the Parental Alienation Study Group (PASG), an international, not-for-profit corporation with 800 members from 62 countries, open to anyone who is interested in the topic of PA, both personally and professionally. I submitted an information sheet and inclusion criteria for both professionals and alienated parents on the forum and provided my contact details.

In GT research, once theoretical saturation is achieved, sampling ceases (Stern, 1991, cited in Stern & Kerry, 2016; Morse, 2007; Tomson, 2011). In my research, the sample size was of twelve participants, seven professionals and five alienated parents. Keeping in mind dissertation time limits, I believe I did reach saturation on the theoretical codes. For this, I used all the relevant data in my interviews and also managed relative theoretical sampling. Still, more theoretical sampling and a larger GT study would have yielded richer theoretical saturation (Hood, 2007).

3.3.3 Participants

The 12 participants interviewed for the research study were rendered non-identifiable using pseudonyms (table 3.1).

Table 3.1- Participants			
Participant Pseudonym	Nationality	Professional/Alienated parent	
Arnold	Maltese	Alienated Father	Experienced alienation three times.
Lucy	American	Professional	High-conflict parenting specialist, aiding family court, and assessing PA
Liam	American	Professional	Reunification therapist, expert consultant, PA evaluations. Worked in this field for over 43 years.
Michela	Canadian	Alienated Mother	Experienced PA for 17 years. Also alienated from her own father yet regained a relationship with him during the last 5 years of his life.
Martin	American	Alienated Father	Alienated from his two children.
Pauline	American	Professional	Works in high-conflict divorce cases, Reunification Therapy and PA assessments. She was alienated from her father.

John	English	Professional	Former Family Court judge. Engages in research and lecturing on PA.
Claire	American	Alienated Mother	Alienated from three children, yet managed to maintain a relationship with all three. Ex-husband continues to try to alienate them.
Anne	American	Professional	Mental Health Counsellor, Family Mediator, Parenting Coordinator and a Reunification Counsellor/Coach, focuses on PA in her practice.
Josephine	American	Professional	Masters in Marriage and Family Therapy and Counselling. Extensive training. Gained Reunification Therapy certification. Voluntarily runs online support groups of PA.
Martha	American	Alienated Mother	Currently alienated from her three children. Still in contact with her eldest.
Ruth	Canadian	Professional	25-year experience as Marriage and Family Therapist in high-conflict divorce, PA and Reunification Therapist

3.3.4 Data collection

The information letter (Appendix 1 & 2) and consent form (Appendix 3 & 4) were sent to the interested participants who emailed after seeing my post on the PA Study Group. The information letter contained an explanation of the criteria for inclusion and significance of the research, the method of data collection and the role of participants. It provided all necessary information to make an informed decision on participation.

The participants were informed the interviews would be audio- and video-recorded on Zoom, for proper transcription and the researcher's full attention to the participant (Charmaz, 2006). All agreed. Some of the alienated parents asked for a copy of their video recording; it was sent to them.

Only one participant was interviewed face-to-face; the others residing in a different country were interviewed on Zoom. This permitted engagement across different time zones and places; otherwise I might not have had the opportunity. I chose synchronous interviews which offer opportunities for real-time participant responses and a high level of participant involvement, mirroring face-to-face interviews, providing greater spontaneity and supporting the development of the online research relationship (James and Busher, 2012).

3.3.5 Interview Procedure

I utilised semi-structured interviews (Morse et al., 2021) within a Constructionist GT (Charmaz, 2014). Interactions provided a mutual exploration and co-construction of interviewee-interviewer experiences. Data analysis began immediately after the first interview, allowing the use of concepts from the initial data set during the following interview; more

pointed questions and exploring unanticipated areas became possible, until saturation was reached (Corbin, 2021; Charmaz & Thornberg, 2020).

The interview schedule (Appendix 5) included open-ended questions. Further questions were asked, changing and becoming more refined due to the iterative research process, allowing me to gain a better understanding of the constructs surrounding the early warning signs of PA (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2020; Creswell, 2014). In Appendix 5, I highlight a question in the interview guide added after theoretical sampling.

My focus during the interview was to listen deconstructively, as suggested by Freedman and Combs (2002), with a ‘not-knowing’ attitude. Thus, I followed the complexity of participant views rather than limiting myself to data fitting previous theories. This worked well with the methodology chosen. Charmaz and Thornberg (2020) suggested not to take the literature as “true or final statements” (p. 311); it sustained curiosity.

3.3.6 Data Analysis

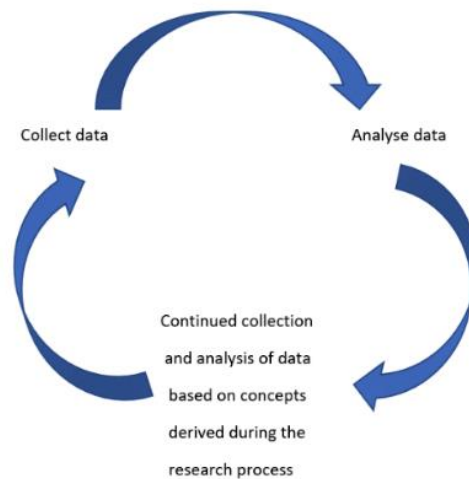
GT favours constructing theoretical analyses of significant processes found in the data rather than focusing on the richness in the participant’s narrative (Charmaz, 2011). Data analysis becomes a constant comparative analysis, a search for similarities and differences in order to refine theoretical concepts and categories (Chun Tie et al., 2019; Mills et al., 2006B). The iterative process moving back-and-forth between empirical data and emerging analysis (refer to Figure 1) makes the collected data progressively more focused and the analysis successively more theoretical (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007).

I started with a knowledge of “sensitising concepts”, background ideas from a short literature review, informing the overall research problem (Blumer, 1969). To maintain curiosity, I did

not marry my hypothesis and changed focus when any “sensitising concepts” did not fit participant experience (Bowen, 2006; Cecchin, 1987). This constant comparative analysis allowed me to refine theoretical concepts and categories (Chun Tie et al., 2019).

Figure 1

Iterative process of Data Collection and Data Analysis



Note. Adapted from Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory J. Corbin & A. Strauss (2008)

Codes: GT methodology utilises coding - applying shorthand labels to pieces of data. These fragment, define and make comparisons between the data (Charmaz, 2014). Language plays a crucial role in coding. I trained myself to use gerunds, verbs ending in *-ing* when coding the data, as advocated by Charmaz (2006) and Saldaña (2014). Charmaz (2006) adds that codes should be kept as similar to the data as possible. Some of the codes I used were in-vivo codes, verbatim quotes from participants crystallising and condensing participant meaning (Charmaz, 2014). Initial, focused and theoretical coding was used for this study (see Figure 2).

Initial Coding: I utilised incident-by-incident coding (Appendix 6) to discover patterns and contrasts, and highlight early PA warning signs (Charmaz, 2014). The incident-to-incident comparison was followed by an incident-to-conceptualisation comparison (Charmaz, 2014).

Memos: Throughout coding I wrote extended notes called memos (Hood, 2007; Saldaña, 2014). As informal analytic notes, they helped develop theoretical categories and detailing reasons for decisions made throughout the research process (Appendix 7).

Focused Coding: Once categories were developing, I moved on to focused coding (Appendix 8). Here, I used significant, or more frequent initial codes to help me synthesise, explain and categorise larger segments of data (Charmaz, 2014). Data were translated into abstract concepts and core categories started to emerge; they were analysed for any potential relations (Chun Tie et al., 2019).

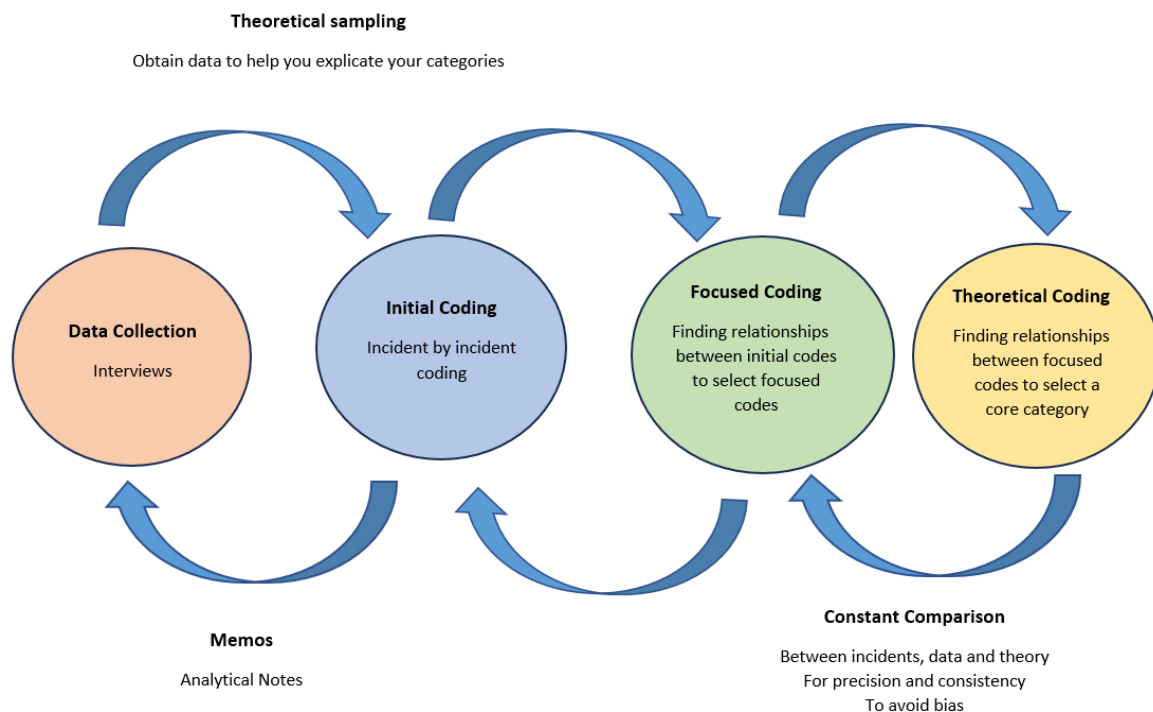
Advanced Coding: Finally, I utilised advanced coding in order to produce a theory grounded in the data (Appendix 9). A feature of advanced coding is theoretical coding wherein the researcher hypothesised how focused codes may relate to each other in order to move the analytic story in a theoretical direction (Charmaz, 2014; Saldaña, 2016).

Abductive reasoning: Abductive reasoning assisted to check hypotheses with the interview data and then pursue the most plausible explanation (Charmaz, 2006). I could consider all possible theoretical explanations for unexpected findings, until the most plausible explanation was found (Reichertz, 2007).

Theory: In GT, theory means prioritising the phenomena of study and seeing both data and analysis as created from shared experiences with participants and other data sources. Rather than causality or linear reasoning, priority is given to patterns and connections (Charmaz, 1990, 1995b, 2000, 2001,2006; Charmaz & Mitchell, 1996). Furthermore, a social constructionist approach theorises the interpretive work of research participants but also acknowledges the resulting theory as interpretation, with both data and analyses seen as social constructions that reflect what their production entailed (Bryant, 2002, 2003; Charmaz, 2000, 2002a; Hall & Callery, 2001; Thome et al., 2004).

Figure 2

Data analysis in GT



Note. Data analysis process utilised in GT study

3.4 Validity and Quality

Charmaz (2006; 2014; Charmaz & Thornberg, 2020) offers four main criteria for achieving quality in a Constructionist GT study: credibility, originality, resonance and usefulness. *Credibility* refers to offering readers sufficient data, and developing an in-depth analysis. The researcher maintains a reflexive stance throughout the research, explaining to the reader any preconceptions the researcher held, through gaining “methodological self-consciousness” (Charmaz, 2016B). This means the researcher (I) makes positionality - worldview, language, identity, positions, privileges and power - transparent (Etherington, 2006; Charmaz, 2016B). The next quality criterion in GT research involves *originality* in the creation of or adding-on to theory (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2020). In my case, without current theories on early PA warning signs, it was the former. The researcher must also ensure *resonance*, which allows findings to guide others in a similar situation to the research participants (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2020). The final criterion is usefulness, a ‘foundation for policy and practice application’ (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2020, p. 316). This research followed the four criteria to ensure validity and quality.

3.5 Ethical considerations

Approval was granted by the Institute’s Research Ethics Committee for IFT-Malta on the 22nd October 2023.

Due to the sensitive nature of the study, if participants felt psychologically harmed, and needed support, I ensured to provide them therapy sessions from the Institute of Family Therapy Malta. None asked for this.

3.6 The researcher and reflexivity

Within a social constructionist orientation, one can construct new understandings, beliefs, values and realities. Each engagement with others offers possibilities of creating new meaning (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). McNamee (2014) invites us to view research as a relational process, understanding the constitutive nature of language, instilling new possibilities. I confirm I found myself changing.

As explained in the introduction, prior to this research I was unfamiliar with PA, personally not knowing anyone with the experience. I had to read the research, and most importantly utilise first-hand alienated parent experience, to believe such a concept exists. Literature available helped me conceptualise PA theoretically yet reading only got me so far. ‘Contact refusal’, a behaviour in PA, sounds clinical yet hearing a mother describe how long it was since she hugged her children, gave the concept new meaning.

Research may note these down as signs for assessment, as I am doing in this research, yet one must remember that these signs involve mother, father, child experiences as told in the many stories shared. When reading research, I thought of them. When turning their experiences into codes, I thought of them. In low moments, when I got too stressed out and thought about stopping my thesis, I thought of them. The mothers, fathers, and in one case, grandparent who shared their story of loss and pain, gave me the strength to finish this research. It felt as though there was a countertransference of their resiliency. I am thankful for that, and I hope that through the shared process, I too have contributed something to them.

Chapter 4

Findings & Discussion

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the emergent theory developed from an analysis of the early warning signs of the psycho-social and behavioural processes at play, anticipating the start of PA experienced by the participants. It follows Corbin and Strauss's (2015) GT-research-structure, which joins findings, analyses and discussion of the research project. When relevant, data-grounded findings are supported with sensitising concepts described in the literature review (Blumer, 1969).

The labels 'targeted parent' (TP) and 'alienating parent' (AP), even in a very early stage, will be used. For PA participants, a (P) will follow every participant pseudonym, and (PP) for participant-professionals working in the PA field.

Findings and discussion are presented in detail beginning with Core Category, followed by the Main Categories and Sub-categories emerging from GT analysis. Following, a summary of key findings from each Core Category will be provided in the Conclusion and Appendix.

4.2 Core Category 1: Dysfunctional Family Dynamics

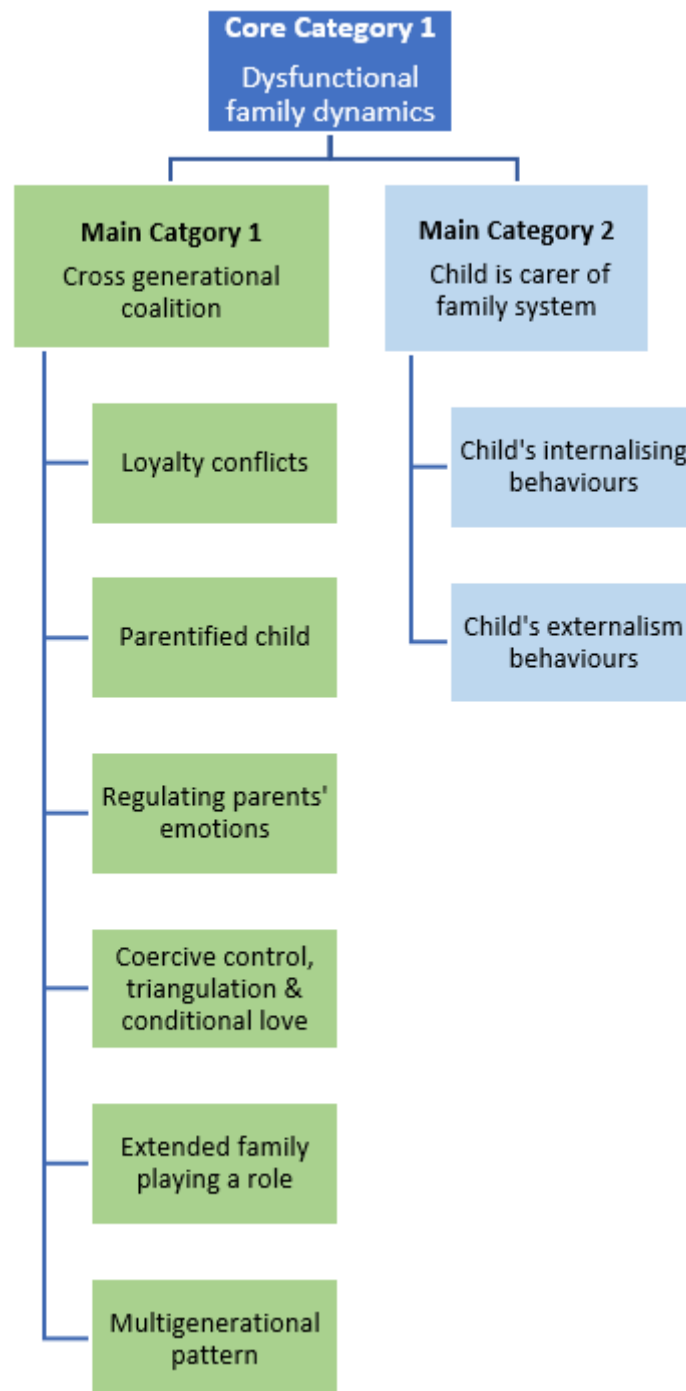
One central component of the emergent theory involves assessment of dysfunctional family dynamics - assessing early PA warning signs. This core category is split into 2 Main Categories, each with sub-categories.

As a systemic family therapist trainee, I am aware that dysfunctional family dynamics is a broad category that could have encompassed this emergent theory, yet through analysis, I could see a distinct shift in the meaning-making on issues regarding family dynamics. For some participants, the focus was the dynamics at work, others emphasised control needed by the alienator. Consequently, I opted for two core-categories, which circularly influence each other. Gottlieb (2012) analysed the structure of families that experienced PA, finding cross-generational alliances between the alienating parent (AP) and the child, with the conscious or unconscious aim of depreciating and rejecting the targeted parent (TP), which she described as a dysfunctional family dynamic.

Below is a diagrammatic representation showcasing Core-Category 1, Main-Categories and subsequently their Sub-Categories (Figure 1).

Figure 1:

Core-category 1: Dysfunctional family dynamics



Note. Core-Category 1 & its 2 Main-Categories

4.2.1 Main category 1: Cross-generational coalition

When children find themselves in cross-generational coalitions, they are ‘invited’ to take sides (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark, 1984; Kelly and Johnston, 2001). Early processes of dysfunctional family dynamics - unresolved parental conflict, triangulation and psychological abuse - can “violate children’s core developmental needs and threaten their psychological growth” (McIntosh, 2003, pp. 63), as well as leaving enduring negative effects on brain development, leading to psychopathology (Teicher, 2000; Teicher et al., 2016; Teicher & Samson, 2016).

Six sub-categories emerged:

- Loyalty conflicts
- Parentifying the child
- Children regulating parents’ emotions
- Coercive control, triangulation and conditional love
- The extended family playing a role in parental alienation
- Multigenerational patterns

4.2.1.1 Loyalty conflicts

From the early stages of marital conflict, children experience significant loyalty conflicts (Amato, 2000). Pauline (PP) recalled sessions with a child who informed her how he avoids getting caught in loyalty conflicts:

He'll say, 'Oh, Dad, let's go play this video game'. You know, like he'll deter his parents to avoid talking about it. Or um, well, we talk about how he avoids in different ways. He just... yeah, he changes the subject, deters it, um, makes jokes.

- Pauline

Constantly on the lookout for the next hook that might reel him in closer to one parent and further away from the other sounded exhausting. Juxtaposing this heaviness with the apparent lightness of a child asking his father to play video games, resonated with me yet left me with a sense of dissonance, maybe one the child felt at the time.

Anne (PP) worked with a girl who also found ways to avoid being thrust into a loyalty conflict, speaking equally about both parents. Once Anne (PP) spoke alone with the child, she was able to open up about her struggle:

Everything she says, like, no, I'm Switzerland, I'm Switzerland. She's panics. Like she just won't give an opinion. She won't say anything. But when I get her in the back, she'll open up.

- Anne

This excerpt made me reflect on the importance of remaining curious with what the client brings to therapy, for example deconstructing the meaning of 'I'm Switzerland' (Cecchin, 1987; Sallis, 1994).

Whilst working professionally with PA, Pauline (PP) experienced it with her father. She explained how she resonated with one boy she worked with, who reminded her of her own coping strategies when she was triangulated into her parents' relationship. Thus, Pauline (PP) brought into the therapy room her 'map of relational resonance', using her personal experiences to create a context for therapeutic work and maintaining the therapeutic relationship (Jensen, 2016):

He's gotten himself so wound up because he doesn't know what to do with himself ...And that's how I would... just cry and cry. I'd be throwing up, you know. And he's very

similar. He's very sensitive and he just doesn't know what to do. So he just starts crying. And then people misinterpret why he's crying.

- Pauline

His mother assumed that her son's tears proved to her that the TP was a 'bad' parent. This excerpt once again shows the importance of maintaining curiosity and not assuming the meaning of the son's tears, or what he was trying to convey.

For Pauline (PP), some children are not as "*emotionally strong or their temperament isn't as strong to deal with loyalty conflicts*". She further explained that a sensitive child, or a child with low-self-esteem was more at risk than other children. Anne (PP) also noted that children with learning difficulties or a processing disorder are more vulnerable, and thus, malleable for the AP.

Pauline (PP) noted that children with 'strong' personalities still got tired of fighting loyalty conflicts and resolved all by forming an alliance with one parent (Ellis, 2005; Baker & Chambers, 2011). Children, still parent-dependent, eventually align with one, doing whatever they can to get their basic attachment needs met (Bowlby, 1988). Ellis (2005) reminded that whilst an alliance resolved the child's feelings of being caught in the middle, it too had its own set of problems.

4.2.1.2 Parentifying the child

Once the child is triangulated into the couple subsystem, they may take on a parentified role (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark, 2014). Here, the child engages in role reversal, becoming one parent's confidant or resolving parents' ongoing conflict (Garber, 2011). Almost all participants discussed parentification.

O'Sullivan (2018) discussed how a parent might confide privileged information in the child or involve the child in adult disputes. Confirming from our course clinic work, many parents attempted to maintain parental authority claiming, "my daughter is my best friend". This juxtaposition of parent-friend roles creates ambivalence within the child, unsure where to position themselves with the other. Professionally, Liam (PP) noted children burdened with privileged information and asked to keep it secret, citing these as warning signs:

If the kid is saying, 'mom tells me this and mom tells me that', 'Don't let your dad find out', 'Don't let your mom find out'. All of those family systems are pathogenic, for children.

- Liam

A parent asking a child to keep a secret binds the child from corroborating the story fed to them.

Lucy (PP), professionally active in PA, experienced alienation as a grandmother. She noted a pattern in which the eldest child (Rebecca) would gatekeep with the grandparents information to be shared by her younger sibling (Daisy):

Daisy loved to talk. And she would start telling me stuff. And then Rebecca would go 'Daisy', or she would look at her and she would stop.

- Lucy

Later, Lucy (PP) discovered through Daisy that once home from their grandparents, their mother took the eldest daughter in another room and interrogated her as to what was said and done at their grandparents. A 'spy' role. Once:

I remember my daughter was brushing Rebecca's hair and she said, 'You have really pretty hair, like your mother'. Well, the next thing we knew when they got home, she was letting loose on my son saying that we were talking about her. And my son goes, 'The only thing we said was, 'You have pretty hair''. 'Oh, no, Rebeca said ...'

- Lucy

In her practice, Josephine (PP) noted that some parents, in a gesture of love, started “*referring to the child as their own children and not the other parent's child*”. I replied it was common to hear a parent in Malta proudly introduce their child, usually attached to the hip, as Mummy’s boy, or Daddy’s girl. This was a moment of resonance and reflection for me; when younger I proudly called myself ‘Mummy’s girl’, thinking nothing of it at the time, and what meaning my father made of this. Josephine (PP) also mentioned that parents even emphasised the child’s physical and facial features being similar to the alienating parent's or extended family whilst ignoring or denying features similar to that of the other parent. Emphasising the cultural interpretation, these comments can be potentially light-hearted; yet patterns can become eye-openers.

4.2.1.3 Children regulating parents’ emotions

Byng-Hall (2008) discussed the child’s role in distance and affect regulation when triangulated in a parents’ couple relationship. Parentification responsabilises the child into becoming overly protective of their parent, thus, ensuring to regulate the parent’s emotions. This is explained neuroscientifically, through the mirror neurons’ role in emotion transmission (Azzopardi, 2023; Iacobini, 2009; Mukamel, et. al., 2010). The child gives up autonomy to keep peace in the family, and be protected from their parents’ ‘negative’ emotions. Anne (PP) linked this process to coercive control.

Anne (PP) explains this process:

The parent projects all of their anxiety and all their fear and everything else ... their abandonment issues ...and throw them onto the child. So they also feel that way and... now that child will never leave me. So that alleviates my abandonment anxiety. So I'm using that child to help me emotionally regulate.

- Anne

Lucy (PP) recalled her 4-year-old grandson attempting to regulate his mother's emotions through a pair of diamond earrings:

He goes, 'My mommy wants diamond earrings. Can you buy my mommy diamond earrings? Daddy won't buy mommy diamond earrings'.

- Lucy

Her grandson didn't even know what diamond earrings were, but with mirror neurons at work, he understood diamond earrings were extremely important for his mother's wellbeing. Lucy (PP) likened the child's regulation to a drug that calms the AP down:

I feel like there was something going on that was like a big disturbance in the family about the diamond earrings. And the little boy was trying to stop that. He was kind of the, I call the drug that the AP gets to, to calm everything down. They would do whatever, they would lie, you know, do whatever they had to do to take care of that, regulate that parent.

- Lucy

Whilst this story provoked a chuckle or two during the interview, upon further reflection, I realised that the child's sweet, funny and innocent gesture was actually a significant warning

sign.

Pauline (PP) noted that parentified children were hindered from critical thinking and separating themselves from their parents. The literature review described children suffering a great deal of negative impact on their emotional, social and cognitive wellbeing (Azzopardi, 2023; Baker, 2007; Harman et al., 2018; Hillis et al., 2016; Warshak, 2015).

Liam noted, “*Instead of going to a therapist, the parent is using the child as a therapist*”. This was extremely worrisome as I recalled my first experience working therapeutically with clients 5 years earlier, constantly struggling to note, ‘Is this feeling mine, or is this countertransference?’ I took client experiences I resonated with, back home, and struggled to let go. Even with knowledge of the process, I struggled with balancing emotions, let alone a young child burdened with the *heavy* weight of parental emotions. It is no wonder that children adopt any means to please or validate the alienating parent, in order to keep them content, even if this means spying on or denigrating loved ones (Baker, 2018).

We couldn't even bring her [AP's] name up because that little girl had figured out that she had to give her mother some negative information.

- Lucy

4.2.1.4 Coercive control through triangulation and conditional love

Emotional abuse and neglect explain parents’ coercive control over the children. Glaser (2002) enlisted ways parents emotionally abuse and neglect their children in a process of persistent and harmful parent-child interactions: parents’ emotional unavailability; negative attributions directed towards the child; developmentally inappropriate parental interactions; parentifying

and isolating the child. Asen and Morris (2020) explain that this abuse will manifest itself in the child's behaviour, such as, when seeking parental approval by anxiously conforming to parents' instructions. The child may appear very passive and clingy, behave in an age-inappropriate manner or may be very withdrawn and apathetic.

Martha (P) claimed her ex-husband "groomed" their children into complying to his wishes by using verbal abuse. Her ex-husband would only be responsive to the needs of the child if he/she complied with his wishes. Martha recalled:

[Husband] wanted them to have their teeth brushed at night and get to bed. And [children] were three and four at the time. So it turned into a really big yelling, you know, he used that yelling booming control... to get them to do what he wanted to do. The youngest boy went in to brush his teeth. I could just see, [husband's] demeanour change. He's like, 'Yeah, I got him to do what I want. You're the good one. You're the good kid'. And gave him some really odd kind of affirmation.

- Martha

As only one child brushed their teeth following verbal abuse, the father only acknowledged "the good kid", dismissing the other. Martha (P) explained this as an ongoing pattern at home. James and MacKinnon (2010) labelled these interactions 'emotional abuse'. The father gained compliance through ongoing verbal abuse and anger outbursts, and concurrently, refused to acknowledge the other child not following through.

Michela's (P) ex-husband worked in the Military and was away from home for 6-12-month periods. She remembers clearly her children begging for their father's attention, feeling depressed without him, always aiming to be 'perfect' children when he was home. Yet, Michela

(P) explained that her children only received their father's love when doing as they're told, which involved abusing their mum:

They were seeking the father's conditional love and did what he asked them to do. And they abused me while he was gone. He would call them or email them and tell them to hurt me. It was really bad.

- Michela

Similar to Michela (P), Claire (P) noted that her children were conditioned to receive love from their father only when siding against her. She explained that her husband had “*withdrawn voluntarily for so many years, it created a hunger in the children and they really, really needed him*”. She further explained that her children “*were in a drought for [their father's] love*” and, “*they severely longed for his love, attention, acceptance and approval and they would be willing to do anything for it.*”. Through therapy and researching PA, she understood the process - her children aligned with their father not wanting to lose his love, whereas her love was unconditional. Forming an alliance with one parent, rejecting the other, became a momentary solution, yet it paradoxically maintained the problem in a vicious dysfunctional cycle (Ellis, 2005; Gottlieb, 2012; Minuchin, 1974).

The examples provided by the participants solidified the link between PA and psychological abuse (Bernet et al., 2020; Gottlieb, 2012; O'Sullivan, 2020; Rowland, 2019). In view of my research question on early warning signs, what worries me is that non-physical abuse is less identifiable; it's more discreet and may not even be considered abuse by the victims (Hamarman, Pope, & Czaja, 2002; O'Hagan, 1995). Seeing only the ‘tip of the iceberg’, therapists can mistakenly dismiss forms of non-physical abuse as relationship conflict (verbal abuse, nonverbal signs of contempt, rigid stereotyped gender relations), yet these signs serve as possible indicators of the presence of emotional or psychological abuse (James &

MacKinnon, 2010). To be able to look for early warning signs, the role of the therapist, (I suggest to utilise James & MacKinnon's (2010) framework) is to investigate the frequency and intensity of verbal abuse, the balance of power within the relationship and the possible isolation of the symptomatic person.

4.2.1.5 The extended family playing a role in PA

Martha (P) and Martin (P) both mentioned how in their PA experience, the AP's parents and extended family played a role from the start of the alienation process; it was one of the strategies Baker and Darnall (2006) noted in their research. McCartan (2022) also noted this claiming the extended family often contributed or supported alienating behaviours, thus putting further pressure on the children to please the alienating parent. For Martha (P), this resulted in being blamed for all of her ex-husband's shortcomings and wrongdoings. She recalled that her ex-husband had another child prior to their relationship, yet he was not actively in her life. Once Martha (P) started fostering a relationship with this child, disturbing the 'perfect image' of grandparents and father for not involving the child in the family, the extended family spread rumours around the whole family that Martha (P) was keeping her husband from having a relationship with his daughter; eventually this got to the child slowly breaking down their relationship.

Martin (P) also experienced the influence of his ex-wife's extended family in the process of alienation. Having previously lived with his wife in her birth country in East Asia, he explained how his ex-wife's parents were triangulated into the couple and parental subsystem, taking all the decisions. Culturally, his ex-wife could not disagree with her parents. This left Martin (P) without a place in the couple relationship as well as the parental relationship, noting "*that's where it started to unravel. And her parents were our number one issue, number one.*" Martin (P) added that he felt his father-in-law was pulling the strings and orchestrating PA and, I

hypothesised, culture facilitated the process of alienation.

4.2.1.6 Multigenerational patterns

Pauline (PP) noticed seeing generational effects of her own alienation, passed on in her family:

I think in my case, I've seen it in other places in my family and to some degree even with my children some ... uh ... some issues ... but not anywhere near severe.

- Pauline

Seeing similar patterns with his clients, Liam (PP) explained that during the assessment process with families, he always ensured to ask questions about the couple's families of origin, noting down transgenerational or intergenerational patterns.

From an attachment perspective, an individual's family-of-origin experience is thought to be predictive of that individual's future relationship attachments (Bowlby, 1988; Haft & Slade, 1989; Heffe, 1999). Linked to a systemic perspective, individuals experiencing trauma at home are at an increased risk for poorer quality romantic relationships in adulthood (Coleman and Widom, 2004), as well as poor parenting behaviours (Conger et al., 2013), with a significant impact on their children's psychosocial development (Davies and Cummings, 1994). Baker's (2005) study on the replicative cycle of alienation, and previously mentioned theories, indicate the importance of therapists asking different family members about abuse, parenting styles and relationships in their family of origin, besides any cases of alienation; these are indicators of potential multigenerational family patterns.

4.2.1.7 Summary of Main-Category 1

Summary of the early warning signs of PA noted in Main-Category 1: Cross-generational Coalition can be found in Appendix 10, as well as in the conclusion section.

4.2.2 Main Category 2: Child as the carrier of the family symptom

Throughout my journey as a trainee systemic and family therapist, I have regularly noted most families coming to therapy usually presenting their ‘symptom-bearing’ child as the identified client. As Jenny Brown’s (2013) aptly titled article sums up: ‘We don’t need your help... but will you please fix our children’. Families are unaware of the systemic and homeostatic notions at play when children experience psychosomatic illnesses, or psychiatric difficulties (Minuchin et al., 1978). Focusing on psychoeducation with parents, teachers, social workers and other front-liners would assist in noting early signs and directing these families to Family therapists, rather than taking the medical route and potential lifelong label.

From the early stages of couple conflict, children experience anxiety and worry about the implications of this conflict on their parents’ marital relationship, accurately anticipating the early signs of possible family breakdown (Azzopardi, 2023). Fishbein (1982) describes how unresolvable stress in the family shows up in the form of an emotional disturbance, in the most vulnerable members of the family system. Similarly, van Dijk et al. (2020) found that children involved in high-conflict situations were more likely to experience internalising and externalising problems, poorer self-esteem and lower social competence than their peers.

Two sub-categories are discussed:

- Internalising behaviours
- Externalising behaviours

4.2.2.1 Internalising Behaviour

Baker and Brassard (2013); Baker and Darnall (2006); and Ben-Ami and Baker (2012) found that loyalty conflicts, conceptualised as a form of psychological maltreatment, were strongly linked to internalising problems, such as depression and low self-esteem. Internalising one parent's messages of unworthiness targeting the other parent may lead the child to devalue themselves (Baker, 2005; Baker & Ben-Ami, 2011; Baker & Brassard, 2013).

Liam (PP) explained how early warning signs of PA involved children presenting psychosomatic symptoms such as headaches, rashes, panic attacks, encopresis, enuresis as well as GI problems. Other warning signs of a dysfunctional family noted by Liam (PP) included children experiencing a depressed mood, self-harm and suicidal ideation. He noted that parents sometimes take these symptoms as signs the couple needs to separate as staying together was affecting the child.

Harman and Biringen (2016) noted that psychiatric symptoms in children often indicate living, or having lived through traumatic experiences. Ruth (PP) noted that during the early stages of PA, parents sometimes brought their child to see a family therapist, understanding their child's behaviour to signify a psychological or psychiatric disorder such as separation anxiety or oppositional defiant disorder. It is important that families are referred to family therapy to ascertain whether the child was reacting to dysfunctional family dynamics.

Research on PA is consistent with the findings of this study noting that adolescents experienced disrupted social-emotional development, lack of trust in relationships, difficulties with impulse control, social isolation and low self-sufficiency (Baker & Darnall, 2007; Friedlander & Walters, 2010; Godbout & Parent, 2012; Harman & Biringen, 2016).

4.2.2.2 Externalising behaviour

Liam (PP) noted parents brought their children to therapy for various externalising behaviours including runaway behaviour or sexual promiscuity in teenage girls. Once disputes started in the home, children began to dysfunction immediately. Minuchin et al., (1978) viewed the function of externalised behaviour, as a conscious or unconscious aim to keep the family together. This conceptualisation is often observed in families in my Masters clinic. Liam (PP) noted that certain externalising behaviour can be seen in school settings - bullying, hitting children, answering back to teachers and getting suspended. John (PP) similarly noted changes in children joining up with a 'problematic' group of children or joining a gang. He also added children may suddenly start underperforming or over-performing at school. This behaviour was reflected in research on how children learned to be aggressive in relationships, from their parents (Garber, 2011). Harman and Biringen (2016) found that the greater the amount of time adolescent girls were exposed to family dysfunction, the more aggressive they were towards other girls in gossiping and bullying.

Josephine (PP) argued that a child's executive functioning skills get delayed at the stage the abuse began. In her practice, she remembered a 14-year-old acting like an 8-year-old. Balmer et al. (2018) similarly noted targeted children often projecting themselves with an unhealthy and age-inappropriate dependence on the AP. These are all early PA warning signs.

4.2.2.3 Summary of Main Category 2

Summary of the early warning signs of PA noted in Main-Category 2: Child as the carrier of the family symptom can be found in Appendix 11, as well as in the conclusion section.

4.3 Core Category 2: The Need for Power and Control

The emergent theory proposes that the second central component of early warning signs of PA is the alienator's need for power and control. Data analysis showed that control permeated all aspects of family life, through power dynamics, abuse and child weaponising.

Power exists in a relationship between people, allowing for differentiation between two (or more) people (Murphy & Hecker, 2017). Power imbalance implies the power-holder's potential to withhold those deprived of, or with less power, to develop their distinct potentialities, even blocking access to conditions basic for their flourishing. Most people would agree with the taken-for-granted assumption that couple relationships should enhance the well-being of both partners, yet in PA this is not the case.

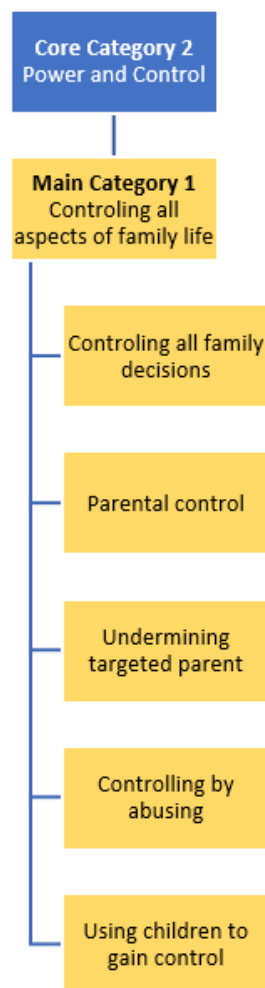
Language has been central in the discussion. Postmodern definitions of power include the ability to create and make meaning that is differentially held by certain groups of people (Foucault, 1980). Accordingly, while we all exercise power through language and interaction, power inequality translates, as we have seen, into some suffering its subjugating effects more than others (White and Epston, 1990).

Research established links within power imbalances, such as the demand-withdraw pattern, and negative relational outcomes, including a higher risk of divorce (Gottman et al., 1998) and domestic violence (Berns et al., 1999). It is important for therapists to address power differentials, both within family relationships, as well as the connection between relationships, families, and larger society.

This core category has 1 main category, and sub-categories.

Below is a diagrammatic representation showcasing Core-Category 2, Main-Category and the Sub-Categories (Figure 2).

Figure 2. *Core-category 1: Dysfunctional family dynamics*



Note. Core-Category 2 & its Main-Category

4.3.1 Main- Category: Controlling all aspects of family life

Power differentials between clients occur on many levels including income, household chores, parenting, and time with family and friends. A more direct indicator of power differences is conflict-management.

Five Sub-categories are discussed:

- Controlling all family decisions
- Parental Control
- Using children to gain control
- Undermining Targeted Parent
- Controlling by abusing

4.3.1.1 Controlling all family decisions

For Arnold (P), control started early, with his mother controlling all important decisions taken within the family: where to relocate and who the family can relate to. In his own relationships, Arnold (P) met women who similarly needed to hold control. Two partners demanded more from Arnold (P), controlling big family decisions such as buying a new house, relocating to a new country, or having a child:

And then we had our child ... and she told me 'No, I don't want to live in that house' ... she made a story ... from the beginning she started demanding a child and started demanding to buy another house. She said, 'Don't worry we go for a loan and buy another house' ... so I ended up with two loans. So we bought a house ... in a nice area ... pressure ...

- Arnold

He recalled one argument when still married and living together, when his wife grabbed their son and left for 10 days to live with her mother, cutting all contact with her husband. Once she returned home, the process of alienation intensified.

Similarly, Arnold's (P) second wife insisted on starting the relationship by relocating to another country and Arnold cutting ties with all his family. She chose where the couple lived; where her husband worked; even where her husband slept. Arnold (P) believed she was isolating him and making him dependent on her alone.

4.3.1.2 Parental control

Anne (PP) noted in her practice how some parents portrayed the self-image of a 'super-parent' in an effort to garner support from their community. This support would later come in handy when the process of alienation started to take hold.

Martin (P) explained that his wife felt like the second-best parent, and whilst he claimed to always have been there for her, she still felt unsupported in her maternal insecurities. When deconstructing what second-best meant to his wife, she felt missing an emotional connection with her children and was jealous of the time he spent with them, due to his working hours. Martin (P) also mentioned his wife's pregnancy at a young age and inability to keep her baby; the guilt and pain of this loss were still felt. Martin (P) connected this experience of loss, to his wife clinging tighter to her children. As discussed in an earlier section, he noted his ex-wife lacked ownership and power in her life. Thus, with her maternal insecurities, guilt and pain from the loss of her baby and her lack of ownership in life, Martin (P) believed this combination led her to alienation, a process in which she managed to gain control over one part of her life by gaining sole-ownership of her children, and removing Martin (P) from his children's life.

The presence of the child transforms the family system into a complex hierarchy of dyadic and triadic relations. Olsavsky et al., (2020) explained that new parents with pre-existing attachment insecurities may perceive and experience these structural changes as threats, activating perceptions and memories of the adults' experiences with their own parents during childhood (Bowlby, 1988; Simpson & Rholes, 2019). In their study, they found that attachment anxiety and jealousy in either partner may precipitate maladaptive relationship dynamics which ultimately may interfere with the establishment and maintenance of healthy parent-child and coparenting relationships.

Ruth (PP) recalled a couple, similar to Martin's case, with one parent jealous of the 'connection' the other parent had with their child:

One mother was trying to breastfeed her child. Her husband was jealous of her having that kind of connection with the baby. That's what the power and control dynamic was in their system.

- Ruth

Conversely, Martha (P) and Claire (P) had the opposite experience with their ex-partners. Both recall the physical and 'parental' absence of the children's father. Martha (P) explained that her ex-husband was uninvolved in parenting. She recalled:

I remember talking to my ex-husband and saying... um... we really need to talk about this because it's important. And he would just say, well, you're on your own because [their son] is probably just going to be a delinquent car thief anyway.

- Martha

Rather than the parental role, Martha's (P) ex-husband sought to become the children's friend and 'fun dad'. When the father took the children out, Martha (P) was purposefully never invited:

We're going to go to the science museum, but they didn't invite me or we're going to go do motorcycles, but they didn't invite me. We're going to go watch monster trucks with my friends at work, but they didn't invite me. So he was doing those kind of bonding stuff with my younger two.

- Martha

The fixed role Martha's (P) ex-husband took as 'friend' pushed her into the position of the 'disciplinary parent', unable to move between both positions with her children. This made me wonder what parental/family scripts were at play (Byng-Hall, 1985; Byng-Hall, 1988). Were they stuck in their rigid complementary roles within the family system (e.g. good/bad, controlling/passive, distant/close, victim/victimiser)? Relationships are based on finding partners who can play out some of the parts in each other's scripts, enabling role-switching. Conversely, if one partner stuck to one role, the other reciprocated in order to fulfil the sequence.

Claire (P) explained that she felt she was already a single mother, due to her ex-husband's lack of interest in parenting:

I felt like I was already like a single mom doing everything on my own. And I started to just look at him like, Why are you here? We're not a part you choose. You're choosing not to be a part of this family.

- Claire

She referred to her ex-husband as a “weekend-dad”, choosing not to be part of the family, until the process of alienation began:

He was very disinterested for about ten years when the kids were really young. He was very minimally involved. Didn't want to ... he never took any kid to a doctor appointment. He didn't care about parent teacher conferences or homework or science projects. He was just kind of the weekend dad and that was it. He really wanted no responsibility for about ten years.

- Claire

Still, Claire (P) explained, her ex-husband blamed her for making him invisible in the family:

I don't want him to be invisible. I wanted him to be a fully involved parent. But he always chose to just go sit in his office and work on a weekend. He chose just to be absent even though he was sitting in the house, he was not involved. Um, we had a big play set in the backyard. He wouldn't even go out there and push the kids on the swings and go to the park together. He distanced himself, but accused me of doing it.

- Claire

4.3.1.3 Undermining Targeted Parent

Most of the participants experienced being undermined by their partner, in their parental role and couple relationships.

Martha (P) recalled her ex-husband constantly interfered with her parenting and undermined her disciplinary style. She explained this as another way her ex-husband could gain control:

It was more of a power and control type of situation. Like if I was going to discipline the kids, he always undermined it by, let's say, if I said, 'Well, you were sick today, so you can't go to Bible study tonight'. And so those were my rules. And my alienator would say, 'Well, I'm not having anything to do with that. You can do whatever you want'. So the boundaries were really bad ... they couldn't develop a bond with me because he was always interfering and cutting down my parenting, you know, interfering with what I was trying to teach the kids. And if I taught them it was important to recycle, then that was just dumb. He undermined any of my value systems, whether he agreed with it or not.

- Martha

A similar example was given by Anne (PP) with the AP seemingly always seeking power and control:

If they say, 'I'm taking away your phone', then they expect the other parent to back them up. But if that other parent goes, 'Oh, well here they're overreacting that's ridiculous. Here's your phone back'. So it's that unequal power and it's always about power.

- Anne

Hearing these mixed messages made me wonder what cognitive dissonance the child must feel in this double bind (Bateson, et al. 1956). What are the family rules, if the parents are always disagreeing? What is actually expected from the child? I can only imagine confusion in the child's mind, navigating decision-making when no decision will please both parents.

In Martha's (P) case, her ex-husband undermined her as mother and wife, even if they had the same goal; always viewing her as a failure.

Anne (PP) noted that another way a parent undermined/removed the other parent's authority was through the process of triangulation (discussed in detail in Core Category 1). The TP *“slowly starts getting moved down [the hierarchy] and the children get moved up and given the authority. Now they're allowed to not pay attention to the TP. Their authority is gone.”*

Another example Anne (PP) noted was children calling one parent by their first name, removing parental authority and role, and *“the significance of the relationship”*. From a social constructionist perspective, a child calling their parent by his/her first name can, as Anne explained, work to remove the parent's position and role within the family (Berger & Luckman, 1966). This thought led me to question, if they are neither mum nor dad then who are they? Have they become a John/Jane Doe to their children? White and Epston (1990) noted that it was the members' meaning attributed to the event (word) that determined their belief. Thus, once noting this early warning sign, practitioners can provide the space for re-storying and re-authoring the narrative giving their experience a different meaning.

4.3.1.4 Dealing with Abuse

Attachment has been used as a framework to understand violence. Anger is viewed as functional, used to satisfy attachment needs, violence being an extreme manifestation of this (Dutton, 2011; Mayseless, 1991). Thus, anger is seen to be born of attachment-related fears leading to patterns of anxious pursuit or avoidant withdrawal to escalate (Gibby & Whiting, 2022). With this systemic view, both partners in an abusive relationship performed a role in the negative interaction cycles. Both had unmet attachment needs, and both might be engaged in ineffective strategies to meet these needs. This did not negate the need for perpetrators to be held accountable for their acts of violence.

Some of the participants described how prior to alienation, the AP was physically,

psychologically and emotionally abusive towards the TP. Michela portrayed a picture of violence involving burning, stabbing, and marital rape, endured daily, when her ex-husband was around. Unfortunately for Michela, and a few other participants, abuse did not stop once her husband was away (he worked with the military). He weaponised their children to continue the abuse on his behalf:

He used them to hurt me, to punish me. Each time. So these children grew up to be disrespectful when he was there, right. But when he went, he was military, when he went away for 6 to 12 months, he would be out of the picture, and the children became loving again. 'I love you, Mommy. I love you, Mommy'. And they hug me and kiss me, and stroke my hair instead of pulling it, they brush my hair instead of pulling it, they'd kiss me instead of spit at me.

- Michela

Michela (P) noticed she was replicating the same cycle of violence her parents went through:

My parents hid the abuse from us ... And that's how I grew, the same way to never let anyone know what was happening, to the children. So my children's father hid the abuse as well. It was in the bedroom, just like my parents.

- Michela

The intergenerational pattern of abuse is reflected in research as one of the most established risk factors for violence in couple relationships (Burgess et al., 1987; Halford et al., 2000; Mihalic & Elliot, 1997; Wallace et al., 2019).

Martha (P) also experienced abuse and violence from her ex-husband and in her experience,

alienation was the last step in the cycle of violence. By severely alienating her children from their mother, her ex-husband ensured to continue exerting control and pain on Martha (P).

Hearing the participants' experiences of abuse and violence was shocking: a parent enlisting his own child to abuse his mother/father. It did not stop at the shock. My inner conversation during Michela's interview reflected a polyphony of inner voices (Rober et al., 2008), (daughter, partner, therapist) sounding something like this: How can someone force this on any child? How will the child cope with what they've been made to do? How does the Michela make sense of the cognitive dissonance in having children who are hugging and kissing you, as well as spitting at you and pulling your hair, all in one day? How do they keep going on? After some reflection, I managed to reframe these voices from a position of resilience (Walsh, 2016) and recognised their strength in going through this "*living death*" (Michela's [P] words) and using this experience to advocate for others who are going through a similar situation, and teach professionals not fully aware of PA. These individuals have gone through so much pain. Yet, they keep going on.

4.3.1.5 Using children to gain control

In her own experience of PA, Lucy (PP) noted that her daughter-in-law used her children to gain control of everyone. Lucy (PP) would care for her grandchildren often, yet their mother would withhold access to her children as a 'punishment' for the grandparents if they didn't follow her rules:

You are not seeing the kids anymore ... you didn't brush their teeth ... or you gave them a cookie ... or you took them to the park.

- Lucy

Lucy's (PP) daughter-in-law would condition the children into thinking their grandparents (referred to as meme and papa) were 'bad' for not following her rules:

She wanted to be in control of every situation even if she wasn't there, she would want to be in control, and she wanted to make sure because when she got the kids home ... then it's like bad 'meme', bad 'papa'.

- Lucy

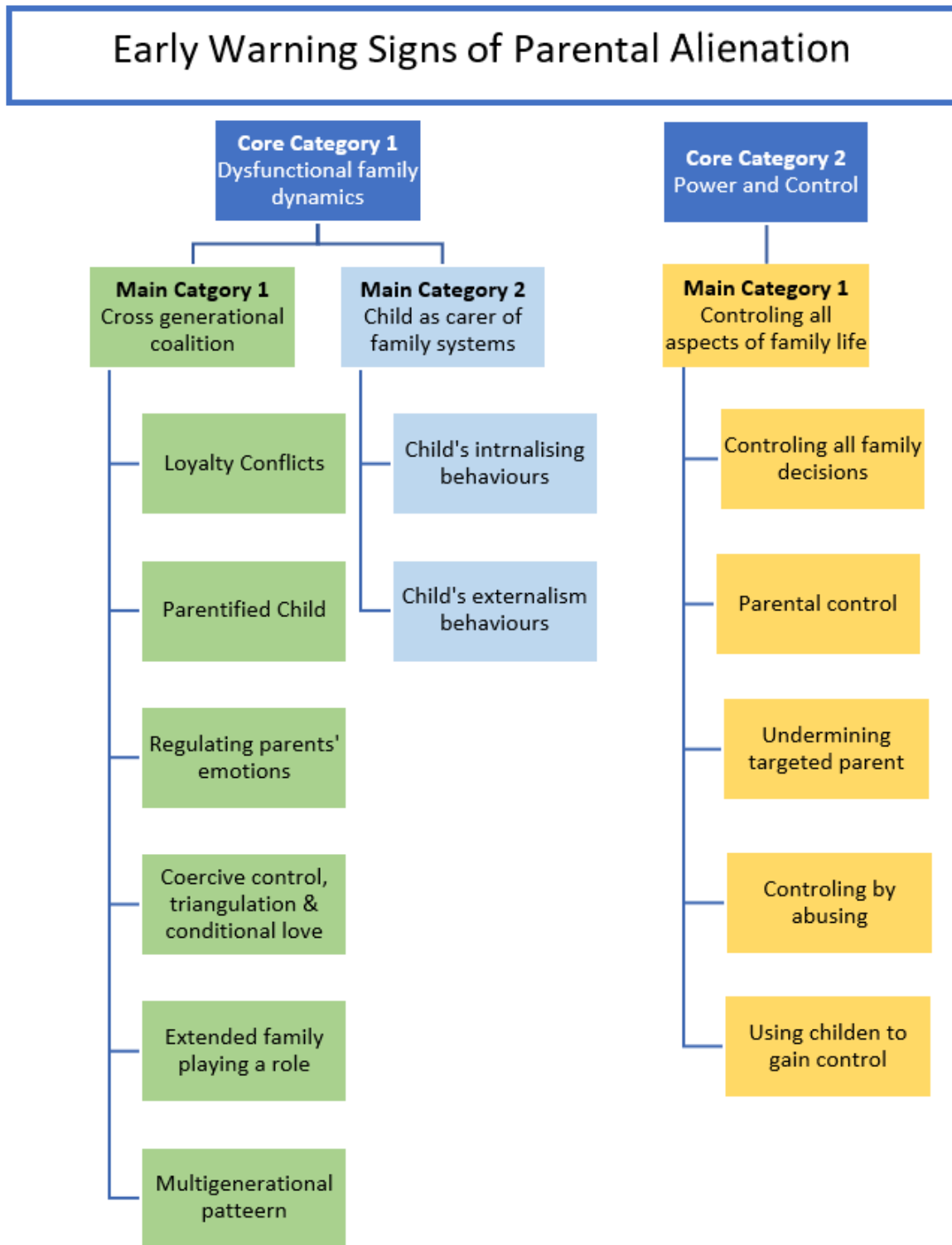
4.3.1.6 Summary of Main-Category 1

Summary of the early warning signs of PA noted in Main-Category 1: Controlling all aspects of family life can be found in Appendix 12, as well as in the conclusion section.

4.3.1.7 Summary of findings

Below is a diagrammatic representation showcasing the emergent theory on early warning signs of PA (Figure 3).

Figure 3. *Early warning signs of Parental Alienation*



Note. Emergent theory on early warning signs of parental alienation.

4.4 Conclusion

This chapter presented the results, analysis and discussion of the emergent theory grounded in the data acquired through interviewing twelve participants, who either experienced PA or professionally worked with cases of PA. The aim of this chapter was to aid professionals in noting, as early as possible, the first signs and symptoms of PA commonly visible in couple and family therapy. These warning signs will already be evident during family and couple sessions, allowing professionals to assess risk and prevent PA from occurring. A summary of the emergent theory will be provided in the conclusion section.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

5.1 Summary of Key Findings and Implications for practice:

Below is a summary of the key findings from each main category and sub-category contributing to the emergent theory. These findings include data from the participants as well as from the literature. Implications for practice are also discussed.

Core Category 1: Dysfunctional Family Dynamics

Main Category 1: Cross-generational coalition

Sub-Category 1: Loyalty Conflicts

Findings showed that the child in a loyalty conflict may use avoidance (Pauline: “*Dad, let's go play this video game*”), or speak in an equal way about both parents (Anne: “*I'm Switzerland*”). Pauline explained that children “*just [don't] know what to do. So [they] just start crying*”). These can all be viewed as early warning signs of PA.

Here, data underlined the importance of the therapist in remaining curious and deconstructing the various emotions and statements of the child. One must look for different ‘truths’ on the meaning of his/her emotions, without relying exclusively on parents' assumptions.

Sub-Category 2: Parentifying the child

Early warning signs from the findings show that parents may confide in their child privileged information, “*mom tells me this and mom tells me that*” (Liam), including secrets, “*Don't let your dad find out*” (Liam). The eldest sibling may be used to gatekeep information from the extended family (Lucy: “*Rebecca would go 'Daisy', or she would look at her and she would stop.*”). Parents used their children as spies, in order to know what is going on and being said, behind their back. Parents may also start “*referring to the child as their own children and not the other parent's child*” (Josephine). From my clinical practice, I have observed parents referring to their child as their ‘best friend’, blurring the boundaries.

Sub-Category 3: Child regulating parents' emotions

Findings discussed the child's role in distance and affect regulation as an early warning sign for PA. Here, the child gives up autonomy to keep peace in the family, and protects him/herself from the parent “*project[ing] all of their anxiety*” (Anne). The child becomes overly protective of the parent, sensitive to when a big disturbance is coming. Lucy's grandchild foresaw this big disturbance in his family and asked her, “*My mommy wants diamond earrings. Can you buy my mommy diamond earrings?*”. The child became the “*drug..... to calm everything down*” (Lucy).

Sub-Category 4: Coercive control through triangulation and conditional love

Literature demonstrates that a child may appear passive, clingy, behave in an age-inappropriate manner or be very withdrawn and apathetic (Asen & Morris, 2020). Parents may use “*yelling*

booming control” (Martha), in order to get their children to comply. Only acknowledging “*the good kid*” (Martha) who followed through, ignoring the child that didn’t. Children “*severely long for [their] love*” (Claire) when a parent chooses to be absent from their life, “*seeking the [parents’] conditional love*” (Michela) and are “*willing to do anything for it*” (Claire).

Here, the role of the therapist is to look for signs of non-physical abuse, such as in James and MacKinnon’s (2010) framework.

Sub-category 5: The Extended Family playing a role in Parental Alienation (PA)

Literature indicates the extended family may put further pressure on the children to please the alienating parent (McCartan, 2022). For Martha, this meant being blamed for all of her ex-husband’s wrongdoings. For Martin, his ex-wife’s parents were triangulated into the couple and parental relationship leaving him without a place, noting, “*that’s where it started to unravel ... her parents were our number one issue*”.

Sub-category 6: Multigenerational Patterns

Pauline noted patterns of alienation in her family, seeing these patterns, “*to some degree even with [her] children*”. Here, the therapist can ask clients about past occurrences of loyalty conflicts, parentification, abuse in the family or PA in the family of origin.

Main-Category 2: Child as the Carrier of the Family Symptom

Sub-category 1: Internalising behaviours

Research shows that loyalty conflicts are strongly linked to internalising problems (van Dijk et al., 2020). This study’s research and findings indicated the following are early warnings signs of PA through the child’s internalised behaviour:

- poorer self-esteem and lower social competence (van Dijk et al., 2020)
- depression (Baker and Brassard, 2013; Baker and Darnall, 2006; Ben-Ami and Baker, 2012)
- psychosomatic symptoms: headaches, rashes, panic attacks, encopresis, enuresis as well as GI problems (in Liam)
- Self-harm, suicidal ideation (Liam), and separation anxiety or oppositional defiant disorder (Ruth)
- disrupted social-emotional development, lack of trust in relationships, difficulties with impulse control, social isolation and low self-sufficiency in adolescents (as in Baker & Darnall, 2007; Friedlander & Walters, 2010; Godbout & Parent, 2012; Harman & Biringen, 2016)

Here, the therapist should aim to deconstruct the meanings and function behind the psychosomatic and psychiatric symptoms. Liam noted that some parents may take such behaviours as warning signs to separate, which may not solve the symptomatic behaviour, or prevent PA.

Sub-category 2: Externalising behaviour

Findings and research (Garber, 2011; Harman and Biringen, 2016) show that a child's externalising behaviour may be a sign of family dysfunction, and thus, an early warning sign of PA. The following emerged:

- runaway behaviour (Liam)
- sexual promiscuity in teenage girls (Liam)
- children bullying, hitting other children, answering back at teachers, getting suspended (Liam)

- joining up with a ‘problematic’ group of children, joining a gang (John)
- underperforming or over-performing at school (John)
- executive functioning skills getting delayed (Josephine)
- unhealthy and age-inappropriate dependence (Balmer et al., 2018)

Core Category 2: The Need for Power and Control

Here, therapists are encouraged to ask clients about power and address power differentials, both within couple and family relationships.

Main Category 1: Controlling all aspects of family life

Sub-Category 1: Controlling all family decisions

Arnold noted how his first wife would control family decisions, “*demanding a child and started demanding to buy another house*”, as well as where to relocate the whole family. Arnold also noted that she dealt with conflict by controlling the contact between them, and later doing the same with their child. Arnold’s second wife controlled where her husband would work and sleep.

Sub-category 2: Parental Control

Anne noted that parents may start portraying a ‘super-parent’ image prior to PA, in order to garner support from the community. Martin believed that his wife, feeling like the ‘second-best parent’ and jealous of his relationship with their children, may have facilitated the process of

PA. Martha's ex-husband took on the role of the 'fun dad', leaving her as the 'disciplinary parent'. Claire referred to her ex-husband as a "*weekend-dad*", and noted feeling like a "*single mom doing everything on [her] own*", up until the process of alienation began.

Sub-Category 3: Undermining TP

Most participants experienced being undermined by their partner, in their parental role and in their couple relationship. Martha disclosed how her husband "*was always interfering and cutting down my parenting, interfering with what I was trying to teach the kids*". Anne noted parents undermining their spouse by triangulating the children in their couple relationship, with one parent "*getting moved down [the hierarchy] and the children get moved up*", gaining authority. Lastly, the AP may encourage the child to call the TP by their first name, removing "*the significance of the relationship*" (Anne). Regarding the latter early warning sign, therapists can provide the space for deconstruction of meaning-making, re-storying and re-authoring the narrative providing a different meaning (White & Epston, 1990).

Sub-category 4: Dealing with abuse

Here, therapists are to look for attachment-related fears which may lead to patterns of anxious pursuit or avoidant withdrawal to escalate into anger (Gibby & Whiting, 2022), with violence being an extreme manifestation of this (Dutton, 2011; Mayseless, 1991). Participants mentioned enduring physical, psychological and emotional abuse in their relationship. Here therapists must work to identify any abuse occurring (for non-physical abuse refer to James and MacKinnon's [2010] framework), prior to one parent weaponising the child to continue the abuse on their behalf. Here, the therapist is encouraged to ask about violence in the family of origin, as a warning sign for any ongoing abuse.

Sub-category 5: Using the child to gain control

Lucy noted how in her experience, her daughter-in law used access to the children as a form of control, even telling her child that the extended family member is ‘bad’ for not following the rules.

5.1.1 Concluding remarks on emergent theory

Jaffe, Ashbourne and Mamo (2010), Marcus (2020) and Azzopardi (2023), discussed the need for research on early identification of parental alienation. Azzopardi (2023) suggests using the tools already developed for assessing Parental Alienation in order to identify the very early warning signs of PA. The findings of my study can be combined with the tools already developed and thus, can also be used as a risk assessment tool of early warning signs, to be utilised by therapists and other front-line professionals, with the aim of managing and preventing PA. I must express that by assessing any one of these signs in a family, does not automatically make this a case of PA, yet this should sensitise the professional to assess for any further risks, and refer to a systemic family therapist when needed. It is important to remember that in a social constructionist grounded theory study, the resulting theory is an interpretation; in this study created from shared experiences between myself and the participants and other sources of data. Finally, if data is understood contextually, findings are still applicable to people experiencing similar situations to the participants of the study (Morse et al., 2021).

5.2 Limitations of the study

In line with the chosen methodology of grounded theory, theoretical sampling was conducted. However, the small sample size of 12 participants may not have allowed for theoretical saturation to be reached, constituting a limitation of the study. Furthermore, the subjectivity in my interpretation during the data analytic and coding process may be considered a limitation of qualitative research, due to the possibility that another researcher analysing the same data might interpret it differently and produce varying results. In light of these limitations, I strongly recommend that continuous further research is done on developing risk-assessment tools to assess and identify the very early warning signs of PA, and prevent it from occurring or progressing.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Information Letter Alienated Parent

Dear Sir/Madam,

My name is Daniela Gravina and I am a student at the Institute of Family Therapy- Malta, presently reading for a Masters in Systemic Family Psychotherapy. I am conducting a research study for my thesis titled 'Risk Assessment of Parental Alienation. A Grounded Theory study on early signs of detection of Parental Alienation'. My supervisor is Dr Charlie Azzopardi. This letter is an invitation to participate in this study. Below you will find information about the study and about what your involvement would entail, should you decide to take part.

My study will explore early signs of detection of Parental Alienation *prior* to it occurring, with the aim of creating a risk assessment for clinicians to aid them in identifying and predicting Parental Alienation. This is understood as the experience of a biological parent engaged in a high conflict divorce or separation in which a child allies himself or herself strongly with the other parent while rejecting, without legitimate justification, the relationship with the other previously loved parent.

If you have gone through parental alienation, your participation in this study would help contribute to a better understanding of early signs of Parental Alienation, due to your expertise by virtue of your lived experience. Any data collected from this research will be used solely for the purposes of this study.

Should you choose to participate, you will be asked to attend one-on-one interviews which will be recorded.

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary; in other words, you are free to accept or refuse to participate, without needing to give a reason. You are also free to withdraw within three weeks from the day of your participation in this study, without needing to provide any explanation and without any negative repercussions for you. Should you choose to withdraw, any data collected from your interview will be erased, unless erasure of data would render impossible or seriously impair achievement of the research objectives, in which case it shall be retained in an anonymised form.

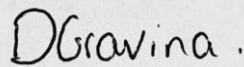
The interview will take around one hour and will be at a time and place convenient to you. The interview will be audio and video recorded and used solely for data collection and analysis. Audio and video recordings, transcripts and all the data collected will be treated confidentially. Data will be anonymised, password protected and saved in encrypted format on the researcher's

computer at home. Any material in hard-copy form will be placed in a locked cupboard. Only my supervisor, Dr Azzopardi, and myself will have access to this data. Please note also that, as a participant, you have the right under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and national legislation to access, rectify and where applicable ask for the data concerning you to be erased. All personal data and data traceable to you will be erased within completion of the study.

The study outcomes may be disseminated in publications, at conferences and other presentations beyond the study.

Thank you for your time and consideration. Should you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me by e-mail on, daniela.gravina@ift-malta.com; you can also contact my supervisor via email on azzopardi.charlie@ift-malta.com.

Sincerely,

A rectangular box containing a handwritten signature in black ink that reads "DGravina .".

Daniela Gravina

daniela.gravina@ift-malta.com

Appendix 2: Information letter for Professional

Dear Sir/Madam,

My name is Daniela Gravina and I am a student at the Institute of Family Therapy Malta, presently reading for a Masters in Systemic Family Psychotherapy. I am conducting a research study for my thesis titled 'Risk Assessment of Parental Alienation. A Grounded Theory study on early signs of detection of Parental Alienation'. My supervisor is Dr Charlie Azzopardi. This letter is an invitation to participate in this study. Below you will find information about the study and about what your involvement would entail, should you decide to take part.

My study will explore early signs of detection of Parental Alienation *prior* to it occurring, with the aim of creating a risk assessment for clinicians to aid them in identifying and predicting Parental Alienation. Your participation in this study, due to your expertise, would greatly help contribute to a better understanding of early signs of Parental Alienation. Any data collected from this research will be used solely for the purposes of this study.

Should you choose to participate, you will be asked to take part in an audio-recorded interview to provide insight on the topic.

The interview will take around one hour and will be at a time and place convenient to you. The interview will be audio and video recorded and used solely for data collection and analysis. Audio and video recordings, transcripts and all the data collected will be treated confidentially as well as rendered non-identifiable. Data will be anonymised, password protected and saved in encrypted format on the researcher's computer at home. Any material in hard-copy form will be placed in a locked cupboard. Only my supervisor, Dr Azzopardi, and myself will have access to this data. Please note also that, as a participant, you have the right under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and national legislation to access, rectify and where applicable ask for the data concerning you to be erased. All data collected will be erased within completion of the study.

The study outcomes may be disseminated in publications, at conferences and other presentations beyond the study.

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary; in other words, you are free to accept or refuse to participate, without needing to give a reason. You are also free to withdraw within three weeks from the day of your participation in this study, without needing to provide any explanation and without any negative repercussions for you. Should you choose to withdraw, any data collected from your interview will be erased, unless erasure of data would render impossible or seriously impair achievement of the research objectives, in which case it shall be retained in an anonymised form.

Thank you for your time and consideration. Should you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me by e-mail on, daniela.gravina@ift-malta.com; you can also contact my supervisor via email on azzopardi.charlie@ift-malta.com.

Sincerely,

Daniela Gravina
99287088

daniela.gravina@ift-malta.com

Appendix 3: Consent Form for Alienated Parent**Risk Assessment of Parental Alienation. A Grounded Theory study on early signs of detection of Parental Alienation**

I, the undersigned, give my consent to take part in the study conducted by Daniela Gravina.

This consent form specifies the terms of my participation in this research study.

1. I have been given written and/or verbal information about the purpose of the study; I have had the opportunity to ask questions and any questions that I had were answered fully and to my satisfaction.
2. I also understand that I am free to accept to participate, or to refuse or stop participation within three weeks from the day of participation in this study without giving any reason and without any penalty. Should I choose to participate, I may choose to decline to answer any questions asked. In the event that I choose to withdraw from the study, any data collected from me will be erased as long as this is technically possible (for example, before it is anonymised or published), unless erasure of data would render impossible or seriously impair achievement of the research objectives, in which case it shall be retained in an anonymised form.
3. I understand that I have been invited to participate in interviews in order to explore with the researcher early signs of detection of parental alienation. I am aware that the interview will take approximately one hour. I am aware that the interviews will be conducted in a place and at a time that is convenient for me.
4. I understand that my participation entails the potential risks of bringing up difficult memories.
5. I understand that, under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and national legislation, I have the right to access, rectify, and where applicable, ask for the data concerning me to be erased.
6. I understand that all data collected will be stored in a non-identifiable form and will be erased within completion of the study. However, I also understand that the study outcomes may be disseminated in publications, at conferences and other presentations beyond the study.
7. I have been provided with a copy of the information letter and understand that I will also be given a copy of this consent form.

8. I am aware that, by marking the first-tick box below, I am giving my consent for the interviews to be audio recorded and converted to text once it has been transcribed. (Please tick)

I agree to the interviews being audio recorded.

I do not agree to the interviews being audio recorded.

9. I am aware that my data will be pseudonymised; i.e., my identity will not be noted on transcripts or notes from my interview, but instead, a code will be assigned. The codes that link my data to my identity will be stored securely and separately from the data, in an encrypted file on the researcher's password-protected computer, and only the researcher and supervisor will have access to this information. Any hard-copy materials will be placed in a locked cupboard. Any material that identifies me as a participant in this study will be stored securely until results are published.

I have read and understood the above statements and agree to participate in this study.

Name of participant: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Daniela Gravina
Researcher

daniela.gravina@ift-malta.com

Dr Charlie Azzopardi
Research Tutor

azzoaprди.charlie@ift-malta.com

Appendix 4: Consent form for Professional**Risk Assessment of Parental Alienation. A Grounded Theory study on early signs of detection of Parental Alienation.**

I, the undersigned, give my consent to take part in the study conducted by Daniela Gravina.

This consent form specifies the terms of my participation in this research study.

1. I have been given written and/or verbal information about the purpose of the study; I have had the opportunity to ask questions and any questions that I had were answered fully and to my satisfaction.
2. I also understand that I am free to accept to participate, or to refuse or stop participation within three weeks from the day of participation in this study without giving any reason and without any penalty. Should I choose to participate, I may choose to decline to answer any questions asked. In the event that I choose to withdraw from the study, any data collected from me will be erased as long as this is technically possible (for example, before it is anonymised or published), unless erasure of data would render impossible or seriously impair achievement of the research objectives, in which case it shall be retained in an anonymised form.
3. I understand that I have been invited to participate in interviews in order to explore with the researcher early signs of detection of parental alienation. I am aware that the interview will take approximately one hour. I am aware that the interviews will be conducted in a place and at a time that is convenient for me.
4. I understand that my participation does not entail any known or anticipated risks.
5. I understand that, under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and national legislation, I have the right to access, rectify, and where applicable, ask for the data concerning me to be erased.
6. I understand that all data collected will be stored in a non-identifiable form and will be erased within completion of the study. However, I also understand that the study outcomes may be disseminated in publications, at conferences and other presentations beyond the study.
7. I have been provided with a copy of the information letter and understand that I will also be given a copy of this consent form.

8. I am aware that, by marking the first-tick box below, I am giving my consent for the interviews to be audio recorded and converted to text once it has been transcribed. (Please tick)

- I agree to the interviews being audio recorded.
- I do not agree to the interviews being audio recorded.

9. I am aware that my data will be pseudonymised; i.e., my identity will not be noted on transcripts or notes from my interview, but instead, a code will be assigned. The codes that link my data to my identity will be stored securely and separately from the data, in an encrypted file on the researcher's password-protected computer, and only the researcher will have access to this information. Any hard-copy materials will be placed in a locked cupboard. Any material that identifies me as a participant in this study will be stored securely until results are published.

I have read and understood the above statements and agree to participate in this study.

Name of participant: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Daniela Gravina
Researcher
daniela.gravina@ift-malta.com

Dr Charlie Azzopardi
Research Tutor
azzoaprdi.charlie@ift-malta.com

Appendix 5: Interview guide

Questions for Alienated Parents

Identifying moments in retrospect that participants can now identify as subtle or covert attempts by their spouse at alienating them.

Beginning of relationship:

- How did you meet your partner?
- How and when did you decide to have children?

Beginning of the Marital Dissolution:

- When did the conflicts that lead to the dissolution of your marriage begin?
- Did you see a common theme or issue in the conflicts?
- How long did these conflicts before divorce became an option?

What has been your experience with Parental Alienation?

- When did you first start feeling your children were being alienated from you?
- When was the first moment you started understanding that this was Parental Alienation? What were the first signs?
- What early examples can you provide that your partner either did, or that your children did that made you feel this way?
- Tell me some factors that contributed to the alienation in your case?
- Do you believe that you had any role or make any contributions to the alienating situation? Describe some of your behaviours or actions that contributed to the alienation?
- Has your partner used others to assist with the alienation early on? In what ways were they involved? *Extended family, Friends, Neighbours, Medical Providers, Mental health providers, School, Social services, Legal system*

Added question following the iterative process of data collection and analysis:

- Do you know if any family members from your generation or previous generations, both from your side of the family and that of your partner, have gone through anything similar to what you have? *Abuse, Parenting styles, Dealing with conflict and any known cases of alienation*

Follow up questions include:

- Please tell me more about what that experience was like for you?
- When you say _____ what do you mean by that?
- I would like for you to share more about that. Is there anything more you want to share about your experience?

Questions for Professionals

- What is your experience working in cases of PA?
- From your experience, what would you say are the early warning signs of parental alienation? *Prior to child manifesting 8 symptoms of PA & 17 alienating strategies of alienating parent*
- What should professionals look out for?

Appendix 6: Initial coding

Interview 6: Pauline	
Transcript	Initial Coding
<p>Interviewee: Oh, okay. Well, I mean, for example, one kid that I have his coping mechanism is and he'll we talk about this openly. Well, first of all, he won't confront his mom who is alienating, start trying to alienate him. But she isn't successful. But she's trying. Okay. And so his way of dealing with his mom or dad who put him in conflict issues is to. His. He just deters him. And he gives me examples. He'll say, like if his dad says, Well, why don't I keep this watch for like, whatever the conflict is, he says. And he doesn't want to answer or deal with it. He'll say, Oh, Dad, let's go play this video game. You know, like he'll deter his parents to avoid talking about it. Or um, well, we talk about how he avoids in different ways. He just. Yeah, he changes the subject, deters it, um, makes jokes. He just. Oh. And then the other way that's become a big problem is his mom would question him when he got home from his dad's and he started throwing a huge temper tantrum, acting crazy. And the mom was thinking that the dad was physically abusing him. And she is set on this paranoid delusion of he is being physically abused. But the kid talks to me saying, no, my dad never, he says his dad spanked him one time five years ago and never did anything like that again. But he doesn't want he's too scared to confront his mom because she believes this so strongly. And she also questions him and she used to take pictures of his whole body. You'd have to strip his clothes off. And and so this was so stressful to him that he began just throwing a big fit and acting like being mean to her. He'd hit himself. And now we've come to understand and talk about it openly that he does that because one, to avoid his mom's questioning, to avoid getting his clothes taken off and pictures taken, and because he is so angry that his mom puts him in this position, he throws a big fit, then all the attention is on, Oh my gosh,</p>	<p>Detering parents to get out of loyalty conflict</p> <p>Avoiding loyalty conflict by changing subject</p> <p>Avoiding loyalty conflict by throwing huge temper tantrum</p> <p>Alienating parent wielding power</p>

how do we calm him down? You know? And then by the time it's all over, he didn't have to talk about what happened at his dad's. He didn't have to get pictures taken. He didn't, you know, So he does that in smaller ways, but he also does it if he needed throw a huge fit and another.

Interviewer: For this just to avoid that that loyalty conflict. Yes.

Interviewee: To avoid it. And he he doesn't he's not alienated in the sense of he wants to see the his parent, his dad. But what he does is he won't speak up for the truth of his mom. He won't. Because I've said, do you want to why don't we sit down with your mom and help her understand? Oh, no. Nope, I'm not doing that. And I was like, well, why? I think this this could cause some problems because your mom really believes your dad is hurting you and the children. Youth recalled all these things and he said, She won't believe me or, you know, like, kind of like he'll be ashamed that he hasn't spoke up before. Um, so he, he won't do. And I understand it because he doesn't want to be put in that position. He'd rather just ignore it all, let all these other people deal with all the mess of it. And he just moves on.

Interviewer: And he's given so much responsibility. It's kind of on his back then, like you're the one who can speak to your mom. But if I speak to my mom, then then she'll think I'm on that side until. Yes.

Interviewee: And she doesn't want to think that either. He always says he'll make things sound equal. Like all his speech, he tries to make it sound equal when it's not even relevant. But he's used to having to do things like that. So yeah, so, you know, he's a very strong child, so he's doing the

Speaking in an exact and equal way about parents

Strong child until he gets tired of fighting against alienation

best he can, but he's at risk because he might break down at some point and just be tired of it. And that's what I've seen. As kids get older, they just give up and choose one parent. That's the easier one, which is the alienator usually or is, you know, and then, um, you know, because they, they can't withstand this pressure anymore. They're tired of using all these coping mechanisms. I have a little boy now that I'm doing a parent alienation assessment and he's a lot very much like I was in that his coping mechanism is yet to shut down and he gets super anxiety and they talk about this in the literature. And the alienating parent will say, well, the child can't go see them. They have all this anxiety. But the anxiety is actually about being literally they want to avoid having the anxiety of being in the middle so they just stop visiting that parent. It isn't they have anxiety about that parent or with that parent. It's the anxiety of being in the middle. And this boy is he literally starts crying and gets himself all wound up if he even has to be put in a situation or if I even ask him about a situation, he gets himself so anxiety provoked because it's sounding like, for example, his mom wants him to present in a certain way or don't share certain things to your dad or lie to your dad or, you know, and he he tries to he gets himself. He just shuts down and can't do anything. And he's crying and. And then people are like, Oh, he's so scared of his dad. No, he's not scared of his dad. He's he's gotten himself so wound up because he doesn't know what to do with himself in such a loyalty conflict. Like he just starts crying and crying. And that's how I would just cry and cry. I'd be throwing up, you know? And he's very similar. He's very sensitive and he just doesn't know what to do. So he just starts crying. And then people misinterpret why he's crying.

Giving up as the child can't withstand pressure anymore.

Wanting to avoid being in the middle, by 'having' anxiety attacks

Not knowing what to do in a loyalty conflict leading to an anxiety attack

Appendix 7: Memo writing

Memo 5: Control

The alienating partners' need for control has permeated the three interviews I've done till now. Control manifested in all the relationships the alienator had, as well as the relationships their partner or children had. What surprised me is that the need for control did not only pertain to big family decisions, such as having another child, relocating the family, but also smaller, almost insignificant decisions (in my eyes), such as getting diamond earrings. As this control can be on a smaller scale, on its own it may be viewed as insignificant, it may be easy to overlook these signs in therapy, and furthermore the targeted parent may not notice these subtle manipulations thinking nothing much of this. Had Lucy not had the knowledge that her four year old grandchild begging her to buy his mother the diamond earrings his father had not bought, wasn't just an adorable boy asking for something 'grown up'. Yet she saw that it was a boy who knew the importance and significance these diamond earrings had in regulating his mother's emotions, and how this would bring the family system back to a state of equilibrium. I fear that this subtle manipulation and control, using their children to 'do their bidding' could go unnoticed for a while, not knowing that this control may escalate to a situation in which the partner controls access to the children and thus weaponises the children in order to gain control again.

Appendix 8: Initial and Focused coding

Interview 1- Arnold	
Initial Coding	Focused Coding
Taking financial control in relationship Partner demanding more from husband Using others to guilt partner into giving her financial control Partner demanding new house Wife taking control of husband's finances	Controlling material and financial aspects

Appendix 9: Initial, Focused and Theoretical Coding

Initial Codes	Sub-categories	Main Categories	Core-Category
<p>Taking financial control in relationship</p> <p>Demanding more from husband</p> <p>Demanding new house</p> <p>Taking control of husband's finances</p> <p>Getting whatever she wants</p> <p>Blowing something up to be a big thing</p> <p>Controlling wife to appear and dress the way he wanted her to</p> <p>Using others to guilt partner into giving her financial control</p>	<p>Controlling all family decisions</p>	<p>Controlling all aspects of family life</p>	<p>Power and Control</p>

Appendix 10: Summary of Main Category 1 from Core Category 1

Main-category: Cross-Generational Coalitions	
Early warning signs	
Loyalty Conflicts	<p><i>Therapist: Maintain curiosity and deconstruct the child's meaning making around their emotions</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Child speaking in an exact and equal way about parents
Parentified child	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Parent calling her child her friend ● Child being used as parents' confidant ● Child resolving her parent's disputes ● Parent asking the child to keep secrets ● Siblings gatekeeping information that can be shared with the extended family ● Child being asked to spy on the extended family

	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Parent referring to their child as their own (excluding the other parent)● A child calling just one parent by their first name
Children regulating parents emotions	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Child asking for (adult) objects to please their parent● Child who lies to keep the peace● Child who is very worried about his parent

<p>Coercive control through triangulation and conditional love</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Emotional neglect from parent ● Child receiving negative attributions from the parent ● Parent isolating the child ● Child anxiously conforming to parents instructions ● Child who is passive and clingy ● Child behaving in an age inappropriate manner ● Child who is withdrawn and apathetic ● Fear-based authoritarian parenting ● Parent withholding love <p><i>Therapist: Identify non-physical abuse towards children (James and MacKinnon (2010)'s framework)</i></p>
<p>The extended family playing a role</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Grandparents triangulated into the parental relationship ● Extended family using son/daughter-in-law as scapegoat

Multigenerational patterns

Therapist: Ask about past occurrences of loyalty conflicts, parentification and abuse or in the family of origin.

Appendix 11: Summary of Main Category 2 from Core Category 1

Main-Category 2: Child as the carrier of the family symptom	
Early warning signs	
Children's Internalising behaviours:	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Depression• Low self-esteem (devalue themselves)• Psychosomatic issues• Disrupted social-emotional development• Lacking trust in relationships• Difficulties with impulse control• Social isolation• Low self-sufficiency

**Children's Externalising
behaviour**

- **Start bullying and hitting other children**
- **Start answering back to teachers**
- **Start getting suspended from school**
- **Under-performing**
- **Over-performing at school**
- **Child joins a gang**
- **Runaway behaviour**
- **Sexual promiscuity in teenage girls**
- **Child showing an age-inappropriate dependency on the alienating partner**

Appendix 12: Summary of Main Category 1 from Core Category 2

Main Category 1: Controlling all aspects of family life Early warning signs	
Controlling all family decisions	<p><i>Therapist: Who takes family decisions in the household? Looking for power dynamics and how power is shared in the family</i></p> <p><i>Who is choosing:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● <i>Who the family interacts with</i> ● <i>Where the family lives</i> ● <i>When and if the couple will have children</i> ● <i>Where the other partner can work</i> ● <i>Where the partner can sleep</i>
Parental control	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● AP as the ‘super-parent’ ● AP as the ‘second-best’ parent ● AP lacking ownership and control ● Attachment anxiety and jealousy in AP ● Parental absence from AP ● Fun parent (AP) vs disciplinary parent (TP) ● AP as the ‘Weekend parent’

<p>AP undermining TP</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● AP interfering when TP is parenting ● AP undermining value system of TP ● AP undermining consequences given to children by TP ● AP does not support partner ● AP undermines the TP by triangulating the child (removing parental authority) ● AP influencing child to refer to one parent as mum/dad and the other parent with their first name
<p>Controlling by Abusing</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Attachment-related fears in couple(intimacy /emotional distance) ● Identifying non-physical abuse of AP to TP through James and MacKinnon (2010) framework <p><i>Therapist: Ask about violence in the family of origin</i></p>
<p>Using children to gain control</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Using access to children to control extended family ● Telling child extended family member is ‘bad’ for not following the rules