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A qualitative exploration of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on parents' experiences of parental alienation in the United Kingdom

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Abstract

In the aftermath of the global Covid-19 pandemic, it has been highlighted how measures necessary to fight the disease inadvertently exacerbated family violence and placed strain on the judicial system. Across the four countries within the United Kingdom (UK), delays were, and still are, particularly prevalent in family law proceedings, partly due to new breaches in child arrangement orders associated with the pandemic lockdown. The present study therefore examined the experiences of non-resident parents (NRPs) who self-identified as targets of behaviours representative of Parental Alienation (PA) during the COVID-19 pandemic in the UK. Using an online survey, 76 non-residential parents' responses (92% male, $M_{\text{age}} = 45.1$ years of age; $SD = 7.9$) were thematically analyzed. Several themes emerged, including: (1) *experiences of parental alienation* (i.e., *risks for children* and *risks for parents*), (2) *intimate partner violence (IPV)* (i.e., *emotional abuse*, *physical abuse*, and *financial abuse*), and (3) *institutional abuse* (i.e., *Covid-19*, *family law*, and *safeguarding*). Specifically, parents detailed several alienating behaviours such as belittling, manipulation and coercive control, as well as novel forms of coercive controlling patterns which illustrated how the COVID-19 lockdowns created new opportunities for alienating parents to manipulate the non-resident parent-child relationship. The implications of results are discussed, including recommendations on improving safeguarding protocols for children with contact orders in place, and adopting policy measures to support non-resident parents. These are also discussed in the context of reforming the justice system utilizing COVID-associated "lessons."

Keywords: Intimate Partner Violence, Parental Alienation, Coercive Control, Family Violence, COVID-19

Introduction

Parental alienation is defined as "a situation whereby one parent has a negative influence on a child's relationship with the other parent and makes a deliberate effort to intervene and prevent the relationship from developing/continuing or improving" (McCarten, 2022, p. 2). In recent years, research on parental alienation has proliferated, with over 40% of all published work on this topic occurring in the last six years (Harman et al., 2022). Specifically, researchers have explored the behaviours involved in enacting parental alienation (also referred to as parental alienating behaviours or PABs) (Harman & Matthewson, 2020) and the connection between parental alienation and 'traditional' forms of violence and abuse (Haines et al., 2020; Harman et al., 2018). Designing accurate measures for parental alienation (Bernet & Greenhill, 2022) and applying these in prevalence research (Harman et al., 2016, 2019; Hine et al., 2023) has also led to further knowledge on the magnitude of this phenomenon.

With the development of more refined definitions and measurement tools, there has been a corresponding increase in evidence on the experiences of alienated parents (Lee-Maturana et al., 2022), children (Miralles et al., 2023), and wider family members (Avieli & Levy, 2022; Bounds & Matthewson, 2022). As summarised in several recent reviews, all of the above evidence suggest that PABs and parental alienation have a profoundly negative effect across a variety of domains, not least mental health (Harman et al., 2022; Hine, 2023, in press).

With a now well-established scientific evidence base (Harman et al., 2022), attention has now turned in earnest to examining the manifestation of parental alienation within various systems, including family court. Indeed, claims of alienation have a long and complex history in the context of family breakdown litigation (Lorandos & Bernet, 2020; Mercer & Drew, 2022) and several researchers have highlighted potential issues with how such claims are presented alongside other claims of abuse, particularly from mothers (Birchall & Choudhry, 2022; Clemente & Padilla-Racero, 2021; Jaffe-Geffner, 2021; Meier, 2022). More recent work with fathers suggests that they have at least equally distressing and unhelpful experiences with family court systems as mothers (Bates & Hine, 2023; Hine & Bates, 2022; Hine & Hine, 2022; Hine & Roy, 2023), in which they suggest that courts fundamentally devalue their role as

fathers, rarely award any level of custody, disregard their claims of alienation and violence from mothers, and leave them feeling worthless, lost, and suicidal (Bates & Hine, 2023; Hine & Bates, 2022). Other researchers have been more cautious about the potentially gendered impact of parental alienation on custody cases, including where DVA claims are also raised, arguing that parental alienation claims either do not impact custody evaluations or that this impact is gender neutral (Harman & Lorandos, 2021; Lorandos, 2020; Paquin-Boudreau et al., 2022; Sharples et al., 2023).

Parental Alienation and COVID-19

It has already been established that the economic insecurity and social isolation measures implemented across the globe to reduce the spread of the COVID-19 virus provoked an increase in family violence (van Gelder et al., 2020), intimate partner violence (IPV; Gunby et al., 2020; Lyons & Brewer, 2022) and child abuse behaviours (Usher et al., 2020). Moreover, school closures exacerbated the risk factors for family violence by isolating victims from family, friends, and mandated reporters such as teachers and by creating additional household responsibilities for parents (e.g., childcare, home-schooling; (Chandola et al., 2020). In relation to children specifically, stay-at-home mandates also offered perpetrators of family violence the opportunity to limit movement and exercise control over visiting other households due to risk of contamination (Lyons & Brewer, 2022). This is supported by statistics that indicate that 38.3% of IPV victims experienced breaches in child contact arrangements during the pandemic lockdowns (Davidge, 2020). It therefore follows that both the ability to enact parental alienating behaviours and the associated impact of such behaviours, as well as how claims of alienation were brought to and managed within the family court system, were all likely exacerbated by the pandemic. Such observations are founded on the observation that the very measures introduced across various countries, whilst designed to mitigate the spread of the disease, likely also limited contact and movement in a way facilitative of PABs.

Preliminary work from South Africa aligns with this hypothesis; arguing that the legislative decisions taken around limiting contact prohibited the effective and mandated transfer of children between parents sharing custody, even when contact orders were in place

(Viljoen, 2021) and therefore created opportunities for alienation to occur through limitation of contact. In the UK, the lack of clarity and guidance on private children's cases during the pandemic also created significant ambiguity regarding visitation rights of so-called non-resident parents (NRPs) under "stay-at-home" mandates (Thomson et al., 2021). Residential parents could thus potentially unilaterally restrict or wholly depart from mutual agreements or arrangements made with the other parent prior to the global health crisis based on 'a sensible assessment of the circumstances, including the child's present health, the risk of infection and the presence of any recognised vulnerable individuals in one household or the other' (Courts and Tribunals Judiciary, 2020). Moreover, closer confinement of alienating parents and their children also increased the likelihood of enmeshment in their dynamic, exacerbating the rejection of the targeted parent (Warshak, 2015).

Taken together, it can be argued that these risk factors left children and parents (particularly NRPs) greatly exposed to alienating behaviours, and with little support. It can therefore be argued that the pandemic represented a significant risk to children (and NRPs) who were already alienated, *and* it created an opportunity for new alienation due to the circumstances created by associated mitigating measures.

COVID-19, Parental Alienation, and Family Court in England and Wales

Those who were denied parent-child contact by an alienating parent during the COVID-19 pandemic will have also likely struggled to have a case successfully scheduled within a continually overwhelmed justice system, or to progress within the system at any sort of reasonable pace (Gregory & Williamson, 2021). Specifically, the social distancing measures imposed by governments to curb the spread of the virus rendered the face-to-face administration of justice inviable and subsequently produced unprecedented and now ongoing strain on the judicial sector. The significant challenges in the family court system after the virus outbreak are described by Richardson et al. (2021). For example, they highlighted how child custody cases had to be prioritized into three categories: 'work that must be done,' 'work that will be done,' and 'work that we will do our best to accommodate' (with private family law cases often falling into the last of these categories) (Courts and Tribunals Judiciary, 2020). Moreover,

although remote/hybrid hearings were implemented shortly after lockdowns, high-conflict cases still required in-person assessments, which meant private family law disputes often fell into the non-urgent categories, leading to a significant number of cases not being concluded. Because serious delays in family court procedures can exacerbate the continuation of parental alienating behaviours and cause them to become entrenched, both within the alienating parent and the child, a clear suggestion can thus be made that the additional delays created by the pandemic will have had devastating effects on cases being brought. There is, therefore, an urgent need for the family court system within the UK to act in the best interest of the children affected by this type of family violence and seek to rapidly conclude such cases (both in relation to both the COVID-19 'backlog', as well as existing and future cases). This led Sourdin and Zeleznikow in late 2020 to suggest that the COVID-19 pandemic had not only caused an immediate rise in civil litigation, but that the interpersonal and economic impacts will eventually result in a delayed 'tsunami' of disputes, many of which are now already active within the UK system (Sourdin & Zeleznikow, 2020).

The Present Study

However, at present, no detailed examination of the experiences of alienated parents during the COVID-19 pandemic in the UK exists. This is an important area of inquiry when considering the characteristics of measures implemented to mitigate the virus (i.e., restriction of movement) that may have exacerbated or facilitated alienating behaviour, and the now growing evidence highlighting the impact of the pandemic on a) interpersonal violence, and b) mental health. Indeed, research investigating the experience of mothers and fathers affected by disruption to the parent-child relationship during COVID-19 is of vital importance to clinicians, service providers and policymakers, in order to inform practice relating to management of child contact under different global circumstances. The present study therefore examined how mitigating, or 'lockdown' measures introduced in the UK in response to the COVID-19 pandemic caused disruption for NRPs, whether the global health crisis exacerbated or incepted experiences of parental alienation, and parents' pre- and post-pandemic perceptions of the UK family court system. The aim of this study is therefore to generate a

better understanding of parental alienating behaviours and outcomes; crucial for developing treatment avenues, preventive programs, and policy frameworks in the United Kingdom both in the context of a global health crisis and beyond.

Method

Participants

The sample consisted of 77 non-resident parents in total, 8 females ($M_{\text{age}} = 46.5$, $SD = 7.4$), 55 males ($M_{\text{age}} = 44$, $SD = 8.1$) and 14 undisclosed gender ($M_{\text{age}} = 47.5$, $SD = 6.5$) who reported experiencing alienating behaviours during the UK Covid-19 lockdown period (March 2020 to July 2021). Of those who disclosed their ethnicity ($n = 71$), 84.1% came from an English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish, British or any White background, 8.2% came from a Pakistani, Indian, Bangladeshi or any other Asian background, and 1.3% came from a Black, Black British, Caribbean, or African background. Of those disclosing their nationality/ethnic background and gender, 42 males and five females came from an English/Welsh/Scottish/Northern Irish background, three males and one female came from an Irish background, three males were Pakistani, and one male was Indian. The median duration of their relationships with their former partner was 10.2 years ($SD = 6.5$); 39.5% of participants were divorced, 34.8% never married, 20.9% were separated (living apart) and 4.6% were separated (living together). Of those separated, 74.4% separated before the time of the first pandemic lockdown (i.e., March 2020) and 25.6% separated after it had begun. Participants were recruited through opportunity sampling with the aid of organizations supporting alienated parents across the UK. This included advertising the study on social media (including 'X' formerly Twitter and closed Facebook groups for alienated parents), and through email using charity mailing lists.

Measures

The online survey provided participants with 26 open-ended, experiential questions designed to capture the experiences of NRPs of disruption to the parent-child relationship as the result of behaviour by the resident parent. Survey questions were developed utilizing existing parental alienation literature, including psychological tests and measures created to

aid mental health professionals and court evaluators in the identification of parental alienation behaviours in samples of children and adults. These included, but were not limited to, the Baker Strategies Questionnaire (BSQ; Baker and Chambers, 2011), Rowlands' Parental Alienation Scale (RPAS; Rowlands, 2019, 2020), and the Parental Acceptance-Rejection Questionnaire (PARQ; Bernet et al., 2018, 2020). Based on the theoretical groundwork of previous research (Baker, 2020; Milchman, 2019; Tavares et al., 2020; Warshak, 2020) the final questionnaire attempted to reduce mistaken identifications of parental alienation in targeted parents' testimonies and improve the reliability of their claims by asking them to detail the relationship they had with their children prior to the onset of alienating behaviours. It also sought to explore experiences both before and after separation with their former partner as well as prior to and following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns.

There were eight sections to the structured and open-ended questionnaire, including: (1) demographic information; (2) memories of the relationship from the participant's perspective prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic (i.e., "Can you describe what your relationship was like with your child(ren) before the relationship with your ex-partner ended?"); (3) experiences of intimate partner violence (IPV) prior to separation and the impact this had on their mental wellbeing and that of their children (i.e., "Can you describe what happened when there was conflict in your relationship?"); (4) changes in the romantic, parental, and extended family relationships after separation; (5) parents' processes in reaching a contact arrangement, the experience of the custody/court process and the emotional impact of these experiences (i.e., "What was/is your experience of the custody dispute (including court process, if applicable)?"); (6) experiences during the pandemic and related restrictions in the UK and Ireland (i.e., between March 2020 and July 2021) up to the present day (i.e., "How, if at all, did/has the Covid-19 pandemic affected the nature and quality of your relationship with your child(ren)?"); (7) help-seeking behaviour (i.e., "If you tried to seek help with how the above experiences you described affected you, where did you come across the available charities or organisations to support you and how would you describe the support received?"); and (8) the current situation surrounding the relationship with their children (i.e., "This section is to give

you an opportunity to add any further comments or information you wish to share with us that you think might be beneficial in helping us better understand your circumstances in relation to your child(ren) and their other parent”).

Procedure

Participants were able to access the survey directly through an online link advertised on social media platforms, within newsletters for charitable organisations, and the websites of supporting organisations on this project. Interested participants received an information sheet and a consent form outlining their rights for anonymity, confidentiality, the right to withdraw, the allowance for not answering questions if they did not want to, and withdrawal of data post-participation. After collecting key demographic information, the survey presented parents with open-ended questions relating to their relationship experiences both pre- and during the COVID-19 pandemic. Finally, participants were given a debrief sheet explaining the study and providing sources of support for mitigating potential distress. This study was approved by the relevant ethics committee at the University.

Analytic Plan

The Braun and Clarke (2019) six stages approach to thematic analysis was used to assess the content by focusing on semantic and latent meanings in the data and generating codes while reflecting on the research question “How has the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated manipulation of non-resident parent-child relationship and contact?”. Undertaken by the first and second authors, the analysis involved repeated active reading of the whole data set and taking notes, generating initial codes, and grouping those into sub-themes, searching for prevalent themes, revising them into main themes and sub-themes, identifying latent themes, naming them, and providing a narrative account using evidence from the data. A cognitive map was created to illustrate the cause/effect association between themes and subthemes (see Figure 1).

[Insert Figure 1 About Here]

Results

Three main themes were identified from the dataset: (1) experiences of parental alienation; (2) intimate partner violence (IPV); and (3) institutional abuse (see Table 1), all of which were spoken about in relation to pre- and during pandemic experiences.

[Insert Table 1 About Here]

Theme 1 – Experiences of Parental Alienation

The experience of parental alienation theme was grouped into two sub-themes, risks for parents and risks for children. Capturing the central tenet of parental alienation, these parents described how *“children have been incentivized to reject contact and punished for exercising contact”* (Tom - pg. 112, ln. 2070-1) and how *“children have been coerced to report falsehoods to independent professionals and express negative views regarding contact and relationship”* (Tom - pg. 112, ln. 2071-3) with the targeted parent.

Sub-theme 1a - Risks for Parents

Targeted parents reported living with unresolved grief, a feeling of ambiguous loss, and described common parental alienating behaviours such as *“shouting, name calling, making ultimatums, accusing me of being lazy and dishonest”* (Anthony - pg. 71, ln. 31). Parents disclosed psychological symptoms of intense pain, emptiness, numbness, *“long term depression, anxiety, inability to work”* (Luke - pg. 93, ln. 1093), fear of emotionally connecting to others, coupled by physical grievances, sleep disturbances and digestive issues. One parent described how they had *“panic attacks, fell regularly in the street, developed skin complaints, lost hair, put on weight”* (Sophie - pg. 93, ln. 1123), indicating that a combination of physical and psychological effects occurs in severe cases of parental alienation. Particularly mothers expressed feeling shame and stigma for not being able to take part in their children’s lives: *“I feel embarrassed and humiliated that I do not have residency of my children, especially being a teacher”* (Corinne - pg. 104, ln. 1639-40).

The toxicity and volatility of parental relationships described by individuals suggest that parental alienation became a means for furthering abuse in IPV relationships (see main theme 2), through belittling and undermining their roles as parents in front of the children. For

example, fathers claimed they were subjected to symbolic aggressions such as being stripped of their title of caregiver *“as dad or daddy to now being alienated and called ‘the man in the phone’”* (Shaun - pg. 97, ln. 1291-1292).

Sub-theme 1b – Risks for Children

Parents in this study regretfully acknowledged the psychological harm their children are exposed to as witnesses and unwilling participants to the parental conflict. For example, Allan stated, *“stuck in the middle between a dad who wants to be involved and be there for her and a mum who will only allow this on her terms and when in complete control”* (Allan - pg. 95, ln. 1222-3). Parents disclosed concerns over children’s physical, behavioural, emotional, and cognitive development, reporting how parental alienating behaviours left them struggling with *“anger, confusion, depression”* (Fin - pg. 97, ln. 1306). Although this study did not interview children specifically, their parents accused their former partners of *“using children as weapons, not allowing me to see them, hiding their location from me when she was in temporary accommodation”* (Zahid - pg. 100, ln. 1461-2). Children were allegedly encouraged to take sides and coerced into making false claims in support of the alienating parent in the custody proceedings, *“reporting false memories to independent professionals taking their views at school”* (Tom - pg. 99, ln. 1417-8).

Parents also claimed their children suffer from sleeping/eating disorders and mental health issues, *“showing strong signs of depression, suicidal thought processes, erratic behaviours and indecisiveness”* (Ellie - ln. 76, 1292-3). The children described by this sample also exhibited *“selective mutism, anxiety and toilet problems”* (Charlie - pg. 97, ln. 1322), representative of developmental delays and regressions. Alienated parents expressed worries over the children’s *“ability to enter healthy, balanced relationship with a partner they consider an equal and not a subordinate”* (Louis - pg. 96, ln. 1282-3). Moreover, some children *“missed 40% education and have been isolated from the world”* (Jack - pg. 81, ln. 506) and the NRP, which presented with long-term consequences for children such as reduced academic and professional achievement.

Sub-theme 1c – Mental Health Issues (latent)

Mental health issues represent the latent theme identified in this study relating to the negative consequences affecting parents and children experiencing parental alienation. Adjacent to physical health grievances, alienated parents reported poor mental health, symptoms of *“PTSD, diagnosed anxiety and severe depression”* (Ellie - pg. 93, ln. 1135) and *“feeling suicidal”* (Bill - pg.93, ln. 1117). While some parents disclosed that they *“had counselling through the NHS which helped”* (Angus - pg. 92, ln. 1078-9), others claimed that the support made available through charities and the healthcare system is limited and hard to access.

All parents expressed *“unrelenting grief and hopeless longing to protect [their] child”* (Jack - pg. 77, ln. 341), reporting age-appropriate negative symptoms such as *“anxiety and phobias, attachment issues, feeling caught in the middle, feeling guilty, nails biting, insomnia”* (Sophie - pg. 80, ln. 488-9). Parents described confusion and distress in toddlers, selective mutism or *“acting out”* at school and severe anxiety, depression, eating disorders, self-harming, and suicidal ideation in older children.

Theme 2 - Intimate Partner Violence

The second main theme this study produced is intimate partner violence (IPV), grouped into three sub-themes: Physical Abuse, Emotional Abuse and Financial Abuse. Parents endured manipulation and alienating behaviours similar to those disclosed by survivors of other family violence – *“it was like being brainwashed and I am still working through the emotional and financial aftereffects a decade after the relationship ended”* (David - pg. 77, ln. 333-4). Targeted parents were *“prevented from seeing family”* (Aaran - pg. 87, ln. 805) and were isolated from friends and support networks. Parents participating in this survey also conveyed that the relationship they had with their ex-partner started off well but had changed after they had a baby together, suggesting a potential gap in support for new parents.

Sub-theme 2a - Emotional Abuse

Emotional abuse represents the most pervasive form of behaviour experienced by the sample, affecting targeted parents both before and after separation from the alienating parents.

These parents accused alienators of manipulation, coercive control, hostility, lack of boundaries, character denigration, passive-aggressive behaviour, isolating them from friends and family. Gaslighting was a tool used by both mothers and fathers to hurt targeted parents, who were made to believe they were going *“mad, dwelled on the bad times, too sensitive, overreacting”* (Ellie - pg. 94, ln. 1139). Fathers were criticised and belittled, told they were *“ugly and useless”* (Kai - pg. 83, ln. 592) or that they were not a *“proper dad because they didn’t earn enough money or provide a bigger home”* (Sam - pg. 83, ln. 592-3), feeding negative gender stereotypes relating to masculinity. Mothers reported passive-aggressive behaviours, claiming that men *“used silence as power”* (Sharon - pg. 84, ln. 595) and resorted to social media platforms to exacerbate their abuse - *“ex and his new partner posted on social media with lots of negative comments about me. Had messages which were threatening and intimidating”* (Megan - pg. 85, ln. 731-2).

Sub-theme 2b - Physical Abuse

Both men and women accused their partners of severe physical violence, contradicting other researchers’ findings that mothers only ever resorted to indirect forms of abuse such as manipulation or gaslighting. There were a number of male victims of domestic violence, with several fathers claiming to have *“endured physical abuse”* (Elroy - pg. 77, ln. 323-4). Illustrating the stigma male victims of IPV still face and their documented apprehension towards help-seeking, one father disclosed that men do not *“talk about it because many don’t believe abuse happens this way round”* (Adam - pg. 95, ln. 1162) and that *“there is an unwritten expectation that one should ‘man up’”* (Elroy - pg. 77, ln. 325). Female perpetrators of abuse reportedly used objects to inflict harm *“by throwing a glass”* (Dominick - pg. 85, ln. 696), with other accounts raging in severity - *“once she attacked me with a kitchen knife and another time hit me with a pot”* (Angus - pg. 83, ln. 631-2). Furthermore, women used extended family members to intimidate partners - *“ex-wife’s brothers threatened me with physical violence more than once”* (Dishan - pg. 85, ln. 720). While male victims’ accounts appeared to be minimized by police officers who *“said they wouldn’t do anything as she was a new mum”* (Anthony - pg. 83, ln. 608), mothers’ allegations of abuse were discredited by other support services. One woman

“was falsely accused in 2018 by [Organisation Name] of parental alienation because I said I was a survivor of domestic abuse” (Ruby - pg. 77, ln. 311-2). Female victims of parental alienation described severe verbal and physical abuse perpetrated in front of children or claimed sexual abuse when partners were *“too inebriated to realise [she] didn’t always consent” (Corinne - pg. 84, ln. 653-4).*

Sub-theme 2c - Financial Abuse

Financial abuse represented one of the early signs of coercive control for parents in this sample. Prior to separation, alienating parents *“withdrew most of money from the joint account” (Anthony - pg. 87, ln. 820),* controlled spending, and limited career aspirations of their partners. With relationship deterioration, control around finances became the gateway to larger scale financial abuse. Parents’ testimonies disclosed attempts of property takeover, as well as collusion and fraud against targeted parent and their extended family members after the relationship ended - *“she forged my signature on a tenancy agreement, stole financial information and ran up bills in my name” (David - pg. 100, ln. 1447-8).* After separation the financial abuse was aggravated by using children as pawns in parental conflict, making false claims in Family Court and restricting contact with the intention of achieving higher child maintenance payments – *“making malicious allegations and stories up to try and stop or shorten contact, with the aim to financially hurt me. Less nights with me means more maintenance to them. Even though I want to and am able to co parent 50 /50” (Teman - pg. 106, ln. 1743-5).*

Theme 3 - Institutional Abuse

Institutional abuse is the third main theme this study generated, grouped into three sub-themes: family law, safeguarding, and Covid-19. Parents described *“being abused by the legal system at the other party’s behest” (Peter - pg. 98, ln. 1364)* and expressed worries that *“the systems in place to safeguard children are all broken: schools, town councils, GPs, courts, police, etc.” (Marie - pg. 126, ln. 2865-6).* Particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic, parents disclosed *“contact orders broken, deviated from, withholding and restricting parental time and then unduly influencing the child to make them feel unsafe” (Tom - pg. 99, ln. 1414-5)* should

they decide to visit the NRP during the mandated lockdowns. Several parents claimed that *“family courts should be opened to the public and no more of this abuse behind closed doors should continue”* (Dishan - pg. 128, In. 2925), signalling grave systemic issues, such as severe delays in sanctioning breeches in child arrangement orders (CAO) and dissatisfaction with judges’ awareness of parental alienation.

Sub-theme 3a - Family Law

Parents expressed strong dissatisfaction with the Family Law system, signalling *“court orders for contact are routinely broken and rarely enforced with impunity for the resident parent”* (Tom - pg.108, In. 1873-4). Not only are the proceedings *“extremely costly - £300k in private law”* (Tom - pg. 108, In. 1875), but they are *“extremely drawn out over years”* (Tom - pg. 108, In. 1872). One father *“ended up homeless sleeping rough for 2 years”* (Mason - pg. 75, In. 242) due to the financial strain child custody cases place on parents. Manipulation of the family court system through false claims of abuse to gain sole custody of the children is a pervasive testimony in this sample, who described alienating parents as *“hostile, abusive, adversarial”* (Matt - pg. 107, In. 1815) and claimed that *“children were used as witnesses for false allegations”* (Craig - pg. 79, In. 431) with the assistance of legal solicitors, who are financially motivated to prolong cases. According to fathers, Courts were biased in favour of mothers, who reportedly *“could use the police and systems as an extension of [...] abuse”* (Craig - pg. 101, In. 1521-2).

Sub-theme 3b – COVID-19

Unsurprisingly, as this study sought to explore experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, parents described how the lockdowns *“became the ‘golden ticket’ for people wanting to stop contact and restate parental alienation”* (Mark - pg. 120, In. 2435). Most parents described how prior to the pandemic their relationship with their children *“was the best it had ever been”* (Jeff - pg. 115, In. 2209) and they were able to co-parent successfully – *“the 50/50 court order was never breached, contact had been regular, prompt handovers etc”* (Sharon - pg. 115, In. 2206-7). However, lack of clarity from judicial branches and punitive legal measures during the global health crisis, coupled with significant delays in proceeding

aggravated the contact denial practices. Parents reported *“several correspondences from the court saying hearings were not happening or were delayed”* (Morgan - pg. 118, In. 2366-7). As presumed, the alienating parents *“either ignored or modified the existing CAO to suit [their] own purpose”* (Karim - pg. 91, In. 1001) or relocated geographically *“ex used Covid as an excuse to move away from (high covid) Oxfordshire to be closer to her parents in (low covid) Suffolk, so the court order was shot to pieces”* (Brandon – pg. 76, In. 2407). Parents claimed that during the lockdowns, resident parents were able to control contact fully, which translated in no physical contact at all, *“no phone calls, just texts that were suspicious”* (Cezar - pg. 118, In. 2370). Others highlighted the unique opportunity to abusers:

“It has provided countless excuses for the mother to prevent contact and to cause trouble around quarantine, track and trace etc” (Mark – pg. 66, In. 2084)

Fearmongering and coercive control were the main tools used to manipulate children. Parents reported how *“phone contact was heavily controlled”* (Brad - pg. 98, In. 1370) by alienating parents who were misleading children into thinking *“government guidance forbade any contact”* (David - pg. 119, In. 2410). One child was reportedly threatened with being *“confined to his bedroom for 14 days after his last period of contact on grounds of Covid-19. He was to have his meals brought to him and isolated in his room alone”* (Tom - pg. 119, In. 2384-7) upon return to the permanent residency under the pretence of quarantine. Furthermore, *“lawyers and courts were closed so this was difficult to resolve”* (Angus - 118, In. 2345-6).

“I issued court proceedings in Nov 2020 which were ongoing until 10 June 2022 as she twisted stories and events and made false allegations” (Disham – pg. 70, In. 2244)

In cases where parents managed to appeal breaches in contact, they eventually *“got video calls on contact days, but ex presided over them, trying to distract [our] kids by offering TV video games sweets if they stopped the call. Sometimes she just hung up”* (Angus - pg. 118, In. 2347-8). Parents of smaller children *“went weeks without any communication/contact as they were too young to have her own phone”* (Allan - pg. 68, In. 2164). Loss of contact with their children further exacerbated the anxiety and powerlessness parents were experiencing

during the global health crisis by not knowing anything relating to the safety of their children and not being able to actively participate in their lives *“despite being a teacher, working from home and living in very close proximity he would not let me home school them”* (Corinne – pg. 65, In. 2074). Isolation from mandated safeguarding reporters due to school closures facilitated abusive and controlling behaviours from alienating parents, who reportedly *“would punish the child, induce sickness and seek to medicate the child”* (Tom - pg. 119, 2382-3).

“I know many fathers who had the same experience - the minute the schools shut, they were blocked from seeing the kids.” (Zahid – pg. 66, In. 2120)

Resident parents failed to alleviate children’s fears regarding the safety of the NRPs during the global health crisis causing them to be distressed and *“upset saying their mum said lockdown existed because covid would kill everyone otherwise and they thought I may be dead, and they’d never see me again”* (Angus - pg. 118, In. 2349-51).

“My youngest son (15yrs then) became mentally unwell during Covid, and I later learned was self-harming” (Jamie – pg. 67, In. 2131)

Sub-theme 3c - Safeguarding

Safeguarding highlights the parental and institutional abuse that children exposed to parental alienation face. Illustrative are parent’s fears about the safety and wellbeing of children who are *“vulnerable and self-harming”* (Richard - pg. 95., In. 1228). Parents plead that parental alienation *“is recognised as a huge risk to children”* (Mark - pg. 82, In. 545-6) manifesting through *“anxiety, poor mental health, bad behaviour at school, eating disorder”* (Sam - pg. 80, In. 450). It was also acknowledged that this form of abuse is still rarely spoken about meaning that children and targeted parents have limited access to the communities they need to recover and to treatments and interventions that can restore their relationships – *“the system is failing the very children whose best interests is their paramount concern and it is a matter of public interest to ensure systemic change is achieved. No parent or child should have to endure the horror that is PA”* (Tom - pg. 128, In. 2834-6).

Parents in this study had been recruited with the support of charities which promoted our survey through their social media platforms. Therefore, this sample represents a privileged

group who received some support in managing conflict with former partners and disruptions in the parent-child relationships. However most still described that the support is limited, costly, hard to identify or access—*“for men it is limited, for parents suffering from no contact of children and parental alienation it doesn’t exist. If it does exist, it is not common knowledge”* (Mark, pg. 124, *In.* 2669-70). Parents found comfort in help lines, support from charities, shared experiences through local groups and/or online communities of parents affected by parental alienation. Moreover, whilst support is available to some extent, the true difficulty of parental alienation lies in the ambiguous loss affected parents report. Several parents described that charities were a lifeline in the darkest hours, however their recovery was slow and required a mix of therapies, such as meditation, CBT, antidepressant treatments, talk therapy, religious groups, and local communities.

Discussion

The present study sought to extend current knowledge on parents’ experiences of parental alienation during the COVID-19 pandemic in the UK. This is one of the first studies to explore how the recent public health crisis both created and exacerbated parents’ experiences of parental alienation in this country. The findings presented illustrate that the pandemic created a fertile environment for abusive parents to exert power and control, exacerbating parental alienating behaviours (PABs) and generating opportunities for new forms of manipulation targeting the parent-child relationship.

In line with evidence from Harman et al. (2022) and Bernet and Greenhill (2022), the current study identified multiple forms of abuse representative of current conceptualizations of parental alienation and PABs, with new types of harassment exercised through the use of social media platforms and coercive control mechanisms facilitated through the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns. Moreover, results supported past studies highlighting the significant negative impact of PABs on parents’ mental health as a result of the disruption to their relationship with their children (Harman et al., 2022; Lee-Maturana et al., 2022). Moreover, through the testimony of parents, and in support of Miralles et al. (2021), children were reportedly self-harming, experiencing eating and sleeping disorders, developmental delays

and regressions, emotional dysregulation, and behaviour problems at home and at school. Many of the parents interviewed expressed feeling suicidal (Harman et al., 2022; Hine & Roy, 2023) and in need of mental health support, claiming that access to communities of parents experiencing parental alienation through charitable organisations has been a lifeline for them (Hine & Bates, 2022). These findings further support the need for policy framework to recognize parental alienation as a form of family violence and offer support to its victims through the healthcare system and specialised charities (Harman et al., 2018).

The second main theme prevailing in this study, Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) detailed participants' detailed accounts of financial, emotional, and physical abuse, implicating parental alienation as a form of family violence, within a broader pattern of IPV. Consistent with Harman et al. (2022), participants in this study claimed that the partner with whom they had their children used badmouthing, criticism, aggression, isolation from family and friends, coercion, financial and emotional manipulation, interferences with email, telephone conversations or visitations of children living a separate household, breaches of child arrangement orders, contact denial/restrictions and serious false allegations in courts (all of which represent commonly identified PABs; Harman & Matthewson, 2020). Several fathers also self-identified as victims of IPV and disclosed the complex pattern of stigmatization and the barriers men face in accessing support, such as conflicting inner ideals of masculinity and ineffectual reporting to law enforcement (Hine et al., 2020; Hine et al., 2021; Huntley et al., 2019; Lysova et al., 2020). These results support previous work with both mothers (Katz, 2019; Katz et al., 2020; Monk & Bowen, 2021) and fathers (Bates & Hine, 2023; Hine & Roy, 2023) which situates parental alienation as a form of coercive control situated within a wide pattern of abusive behaviour.

The final main theme in this study outlined systemic issues in accurately identifying and intervening in cases of parental alienation (Harman et al., 2018). Specifically, the lack of clarity and interpretative nature of the "stay-at-home" mandates directed by the Courts and Tribunals Judiciary (2020) during the COVID-19 pandemic actively aided alienating parents into frustrating targeted parent-child contact. Participants accounts therefore provide further

support for previous findings of an increase in breaches of child contact arrangements (e.g., Davidge, 2020; Viljoen, 2021) and potentially explain the unprecedented number of unresolved child custody cases accumulated during the COVID-19 pandemic (Richardson et al. 2021). Moreover, the use of new coercive control mechanisms disguised by alienating parents as “shielding” measures to exert control over their children echoes research investigating the experience of victims of domestic violence during the global health crisis (Lyons & Brewer, 2022). Results also revealed variations in existing PABs specific to the COVID-19 lockdowns, such as increased surveillance and interference in communication, manipulating children into terminating videocalls (legally mandated in lieu of visitation agreements) by rewarding rejecting behaviour with sweets, television or games and punishing their attempts at visiting the non-resident parents’ home by confining them to their rooms under the pretence of quarantine upon return to the primary residency. Moreover, school closures mandated to curb the spread of the virus isolated children with allegedly controlling and abusive parents, preventing mandated reporters such as teachers, early years providers or clinicians who are trained in safeguarding the opportunity to detect concerns and intervene on their behalf.

There was also some preliminary evidence in support of gender asymmetry of PAB perpetration, specifically in relation to gender differences in the use of false accusations during custody disputes, echoing findings from Harman et al. (2022). Fathers reported that they were victims of false allegations of sexual and physical abuse as previously identified by Sarrió (2016) and mothers described accusations from their former partners of being too focused on their careers to care for their children, aligning with commonplace allegations of neglect against women identified in previous research (e.g., Kopetski et al. 2006; Harman et al., 2018). Most fathers expressed the feeling that the family courts are biased towards women, a claim reflective of other qualitative research in this area (Bates & Hine, 2023; Hine & Roy, 2023). Indeed, the perceived gender biases and systemic issues in the family law courts caused fathers in this study to lose hope in the judicial sector and in achieving any resolution or access to their children.

The present study thus has significant implications, both for management of parental alienation during public health crises that involve restriction of movement, and beyond. First, results have demonstrated the profound mental health implications for litigants ‘trapped’ in lengthy court proceedings, from both before the pandemic and because of it. Thus, considering the substantial backlog of private family law proceedings in the United Kingdom prior to the global pandemic (Kaganas, 2017), discussions around the need for judicial reform have only increased following the significant number of unresolved cases still awaiting resolutions as a result of the pandemic itself. Some attempts have been made to help resolve the issue, for example the use of remote technologies to deliver hearings. However, research investigating the experience of legal practitioners working during pandemic points to difficulties ascertaining false claims (Richardson et al., 2021) and ensuring adequate safeguarding (Sourdin & Zeleznikow, 2020) in high-conflict family cases through virtual hearings. These findings suggest that the family court system within the UK is actively (re)traumatising alienated parents and their children, and that substantial funding should be dedicated to resolving these cases as quickly as possible so that cases seen as ‘work that will be done’ and ‘work that we will do our best to accommodate’ may be rightfully seen as ‘work that must be done’, in order to protect vulnerable children (Courts and Tribunals Judiciary, 2020).

Second, results support a now robust argument for parental alienation to be seen as a form of family violence (Harman et al., 2018; Hine, 2022), and demonstrate how differing societal structuring can facilitate new coercive control mechanisms or avenues disguised as protective behaviours (i.e., “shielding”). Findings are also informative in presenting new forms of abuse which merit addition/reconceptualization within existing PAB lists and in highlighting the tactics of parental alienation perpetrators in making use of social media platforms for ongoing harassment and denigration of the targeted parent’s character within friends and family circles. Worryingly, participants’ extensive knowledge of the phenomenon was often presented in juxtaposition to that of legal professionals, with whom alienated parents frequently reported being deeply dissatisfied (Tavares et al., 2021). There exists, therefore, a desperate need for training of legal professionals on the new and rapidly expanding academic literature

on parental alienation so that parents may be adequately supported. Moreover, a deeper understanding of parental alienation (i.e., how it is enacted, measured, and as a form of family violence and coercive control) would enable both policymakers and practitioners to be better prepared for circumstances where such behaviours may proliferate (i.e., in national/global public health crises and when the movement of people is restricted) and in everyday life.

This study is not without limitations. First, there is significant gender asymmetry in this sample, with the vast majority of respondents being fathers. While this could simply be a representation of the fact that fathers are more likely to be NRPs and consequently experience more COVID-19 related restriction of contact with children, it could also be that charities supporting fathers were more engaged in this study. Current prevalence research suggests that mothers and fathers are equally likely to experience parental alienation, and that being a resident parent is not protective in this regard (Harman et al., 2016, 2019). Therefore, future research with a greater sample of mothers, and research measuring the prevalence of parental alienation in the UK, would help clarify this apparent discrepancy.

Second, while surveys allow for the gathering of detailed qualitative information from a larger sample of individuals, and/or deeper introspection and candour from participants due to perceived anonymity and confidentiality, with this format of inquiry there are no opportunities for clarification or probing. Future research utilising interviews could provide a more detailed insight into, for example, how previously functioning contact arrangements are lost. Moreover, such studies could work with the entire family unit, including alienating parents and children, to understand the dynamics of parental alienation and identify the prevalence of personality disorders (borderline, narcissistic personality disorders) in high-conflict families where manipulation of children against the other parent are common.

Conclusion

It is increasingly evident that parental alienation should be classified and conceptualised as a form of coercive control, and it is clear from this study that particular societal circumstances (e.g., public health crises and associated measures) provide conditions ripe for novel or further enactment of these behaviours. In this sense, the COVID-19 pandemic

has brought into sharp focus the existing tensions within the family court system in the UK, and its inability to offer suitable and sustainable outcomes for parents involved in high-conflict child custody cases, both during a pandemic and beyond. Moreover, it is clear from participants' responses that the court system, as it is presently, actively harms parents and children, suggesting an urgent need for reform and much improved provision of care. Indeed, such reform is necessary in order to ameliorate the substantial physical and mental health issues that affect both alienated children and targeted parents, and to ensure that children are safeguarded from this deeply damaging form of abuse during public health crises and day-to-day life.

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Tables

Table 1. Table of themes and sub-themes with data extracts derived from parents' experiences of Parental Alienation

Theme	Sub-theme	Supporting Quote
Experience of Parental Alienation	Risks for Parents	"When she realised I was leaving her the false allegations and mental abuse was horrendous." (pg. 97, ln. 1387) "I tried to take my own life on 3 occasions and ended up homeless sleeping rough for 2 years." (pg. 73, ln. 242)
	Risks for Children	"Anxiety, poor mental health, bad behaviour at school, eating disorder." (pg. 78, ln. 450) "My kids developed anxiety and phobias, attachment issues, feeling caught in the middle, being felt guilty, nails biting, insomnia" (pg. 78, ln. 488-9)
	Mental Health Issues	"Child psychologist found it has affected the mental health of my kids." (pg. 93, ln. 1215) "There is a correlation between male suicides and this very act of cutting access to children." (pg. 128, ln. 2943)
Intimate Partner Violence	Emotional Abuse	"She has prevented contact and caused conflict." (pg. 101, ln. 1626) "Abusive - controlling and coercive, financial, physical, verbal, emotional abuse" (pg. 69, ln. 33)
	Physical Abuse	"She hit me when conflict escalated or would use indirect physical violence" (pg. 81, ln. 602) "I was physically assaulted" (pg. 70, ln. 69)
	Financial Abuse	"She used the children as a pawn to get money out of me." (pg. 96, ln. 1365) "Constant harassment, false accusations, financial collusion, and demeaning words" (pg. 108, ln. 1950-1)
Institutional Abuse	Family Law	"I am now being abused by the legal system at the other party's behest. I am homeless, childless and almost penniless." (pg. 96, ln. 1365) "The lack of criminal law to combat contact denial practices has given the mother carte blanche to engage in these practices" (pg. 55, ln. 1767-8)
	COVID-19	"Alienation has been an issue for a few years prior; Covid 19 cemented it." (pg. 114, ln. 2236) "It became the "golden ticket" for people wanting to stop contact and restate parental alienation." (pg. 118, ln. 2437)
	Safeguarding	The systems in place to safeguard children are all broken; schools, town councils, GP's, courts, police" (pg. 76, ln. 2451) "I was falsely accused in 2018 by Cafcass of parental alienation because I said I was a survivor of domestic abuse." (pg. 75, ln. 311-2)

Figures

Figure 1. Cognitive map depicting cause/effect relationships between themes and sub-themes in parents' experiences of parental alienation

