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A qualitative exploration of reunification post alienation from the perspective of adult alienated children and targeted parents

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Introduction: The aim of this study was to explore the experiences of reciprocity reunification from the perspective of adult alienated children and targeted parents.

Methods: Nine adult alienated children and 32 targeted parents participated in semi-structured interviews which were transcribed verbatim and analyzed thematically.

Results: Six themes emerged in the data from the adult alienated children including capacity for reunification, factors influencing reunification, and a process that unfolded over time. Four overarching themes emerged from the adult alienated child understanding of alienation post reunification, and the role of therapy in reunification. Three themes emerged from the targeted parents, including the role of the adult child, factors impacting reunification, and their adult relationship.

Discussion: Findings from the present study offer novel insights into the experiences of reciprocity reunification from the perspectives of both alienated children and targeted parents. They illustrate that reciprocity reunification is a process that takes time. This process can span decades and can include periods of complete rejection.

What is parental alienation?

Parental alienation occurs when a child strongly aligns with one parent (the alienating parent) while starting a relationship with the other previously loved parent (the targeted parent) ceases (Kelly and Johnston, 2011; Rothbaum, 2015). It is a pattern of behavior in parental dyadic interactions and considerably by the alienating parent to undermine the relationship between the child and the targeted parent. Parental alienation has been recognized in the context of separated families since 1985.

The alienated child's relationship with the targeted parent is often characterized by extreme negativity, hostility, and rejection (Kelly and Johnston, 2011; Rothbaum, 2015). The alienated child's relationship with the targeted parent is alienated because of the alienating parent. Alienating may justify behaviors as the alienated child abuse the targeted parent, or the alienating may deny any abuse. The alienated child may also be coached to lie to authorities and to spend a particular time with the targeted parent, and the alienating may deny any involvement in the child's behavior (Kelly and Johnston, 2011; Baker, 2007; Harman et al., 2018). The primary outcome of being exposed to parental alienation is that children are deprived of a relationship with a loving and fun parent and family member. (Kelly and Johnston, 2011; Harman et al., 2018; Harman et al., 2019; Harman et al., 2020; Rothbaum, 2015).

Alienating parents may differ widely in the type and number of parental alienating behaviors they employ, and the intensity of these behaviors may change across time. Some alienated children and targeted parents, during the child's contact with the targeted parent, experience the alienating parent as being present in the room with the child and encouraging the child to be hostile, or the alienating parent may be in another room and listening to the child and the targeted parent interacting. Other parents may be more subtle (Harman et al., 2019; Harman and Matthewson, 2020).

Parental alienating behaviors as family violence

Parental alienating behaviors are widely considered a form of family violence or the maltreatment of children (Bernet et al., 2020; Bernet et al., 2022; Harman et al., 2019; Harman et al., 2020; Harman et al., 2022; Rothbaum et al., 2022). Family violence is defined as any act of violence perpetrated by one family member against another. It includes violence against children, violence against intimate partners, and violence against elders. It is difficult to quantify how many families are affected by parental alienating behaviors, but it is estimated that it occurs in approximately 1 million families in the United States. Rothbaum posits a family member is harmed when parent and child the alienating and alienated children are harmed by the alienating behaviors, and the targeted parent and family are harmed by the child's rejection and hostility. Parental alienating behaviors are considered a form of family violence, because they are intended to harm and are harmful to the family system (Bernet et al., 2020; Bernet et al., 2022; Harman et al., 2019; Harman et al., 2020; Harman et al., 2022; Rothbaum et al., 2022). Adult alienated children have described their experiences of being alienated as being "brainwashed" and being "taught to hate" their parent (Baker, 2007; Bernet and Matthewson, 2022; Verhage et al., 2022). Further, adult alienated children have described their experiences of being alienated as being "lied to" by their alienating parent and their extended family, and being "manipulated" and "tricked" into experiencing rejection by high levels of disparagement, anxiety, stress (Kopetzky and Lorandos, 2020; Lorandos, 2021; Rothbaum et al., 2022), and being "brainwashed" and "gaslighted" (Lorandos, 2021; Lorandos and Bernet, 2020; Rothbaum et al., 2022). Adult alienated children have described their experiences of being alienated as being "abuse" (Baker, 2007; Bernet and Matthewson, 2022; Verhage et al., 2022). Further, adult alienated children have described their experiences of being alienated as being "abuse" by their alienating parent and their extended family, and being "manipulated" and "tricked" into experiencing rejection by high levels of disparagement, anxiety, stress (Kopetzky and Lorandos, 2020; Lorandos, 2021; Rothbaum et al., 2022). Adult alienated children have described their experiences of being alienated as being "brainwashed" and "gaslighted" (Lorandos, 2021; Lorandos and Bernet, 2020; Rothbaum et al., 2022).

The effects of parental alienating behaviors and parental alienation can be understood using attachment theory. Results suggest that continuous, warm, and consistent contact with both parents is critical for healthy development (Fabricius et al., 2010; Fabricius et al., 2012). If these conditions are not met, an attachment particularly a secure bond, cannot be formed. Research has found that children who have been exposed to parental alienation behaviors have had the opportunity to develop a secure bond with the targeted parent. The effects of parental alienating behaviors on the child's life thus giving the child the opportunity to develop a secure bond with the targeted parent, and then the parent alienating a relationship that triggered a need to reconcile with the targeted parent. Research has found that children who have been exposed to parental alienation behaviors have developed family. Intervention of significant, strong, and consistent contact with both parents is critical for healthy development. Reunification can also be prompted by a crisis or significant change that adult alienated children (Bernet and Baker, 2009; Garrett and Sandoval, 2009; Bernet, 2020).

Research on the effectiveness of reunification therapy (Bernet and Baker, 2009) highlighted the difficulties associated with conducting outcome reunification because the process is fragile and at times slow. Successful outcomes reunification is achieved when there is a strong, secure, and consistent relationship between the alienated children and targeted parents. According to the attachment, one that is secure and consistent, parents can provide a secure base for their children to explore the world around them. Research that successful outcomes reunification could partly be attributed to targeted parents. Research suggests that the role of the targeted parent in reunification is important, and parents were asking, "Notice that children's successful reunification with their targeted parents not meeting their needs (attachment) and/or loving empathy and understanding" (Bernet and Baker, 2009, p. 10).

Baker and Sol (2020) examined the experience of stigmatized parents who have reunited with their children. They found that reunification was possible when the targeted parent had the ability to understand the child's experience of being alienated, and to see the perspective. Had realized separation of the child and reunited as the child's only. Research results for the targeted parents reconciling educated and informed on general parenting and parental alienation.

With limited research into the process of reunification, the aim of the current study was to examine the experiences of both adult alienated children and targeted parents who have reunited. Research questions included: what do adult alienated children and their children? Currently, research has not explored the experiences of reunification from the perspective of both adult alienated children and targeted parents (2020). The results of this research may help to inform recommendations for intervention strategies.

Methods

Participants

Nine adult alienated children and 32 targeted parents who had reunited with at least one child. Each parents identified as adult alienated children who had reunited with their targeted parents, all of whom were currently alienated from their own children, and 2 of the participants were currently alienated from their own children. Of the 32 targeted parents, 3 targeted parents reunited their own children, and 29 reunited with their adult alienated children.

Adult alienated children were 35–45 years of age. There were from Australia and seven from the United States of America. All adult alienated children identified as female. Two had reunited with their mother and 7 had reunited with their father. Adult alienated children had been estranged from their parent for 2–10 years. Adult alienated children had been estranged from their parent for 2–10 years. Adult alienated children had been estranged from their parent for 2–10 years. Adult alienated children had been estranged from their parent for 2–10 years. Although they had been in contact with their targeted parent for several decades, they did not consider themselves to have been alienated from their parent.

Targeted parents were 47–65 years of age. Seven were from Australia, 1 from Canada, 1 from the United States of America, 1 from Canada and 1 from South Africa. Eight identified as male and 24 identified as female. Of the 29 targeted parents who had reunited, 7 had children and reunited with 2 children. In total, seven targeted parents had reunited with all their children. Targeted parents were divided from their children from between 2 years and 10 years. Of the 29 targeted parents who had reunited, 7 had children and reunited with their children. The estimated length of time since reunification ranged from 1 year to 10 years.

Procedure and materials

Ethics approval was obtained from the Social Sciences Human Research Ethics Committee at the University of Tasmania. Recruitment for the study was carried out nationally and internationally through advertisements on Facebook and Twitter. Facebook was affected by paranormal advertisements or psychological services. The advertisement contained the following information: "Were you isolated from one of your parents as a result of your parent's behaviors? Have you been reunited with your parent? Are you isolated from your child as a result of your parent's behaviors? Are you reunited with your child? Are you a member of a loving or the process of reunification between alienated parents and their adult children." Interested parties were directed to the Facebook page. The Facebook page contained an information letter on the purpose and nature of the study, a consent form, and screening questionnaires. The targeted parent screening questionnaire was originally developed for a study of the effectiveness of a parenting program for parents who had been alienated from their children. The adult alienated children screening questionnaire was developed for the current study. Participants who met the criteria for being adult alienated children were invited to complete the Beck Depression Questionnaire (BDI) (Beck and Steer, 1993) and the Alienated Children Questionnaire (ACQ) (Rothbaum et al., 2022) to assess the presence of parental alienating behaviors. All individuals were identified as having experienced parental alienation.

Eligibility for the study was determined using Kelly and Johnston's (2011) definition of parental alienation (Table 1). Data included a number of questions, including a demographic questionnaire, questions about the participant's experiences of being alienated and reunited, and questions about the participant's experiences of being alienated and reunited. Regular meetings of the researchers to discuss the data were held. Transcription was achieved by two trained data assistants. Data analysis was reached when no new information was obtained. Data was analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase model of thematic analysis. Data were analyzed in SSS (Interpretive) Nvivo 12 software. Data analysis was conducted by the first author, who is a clinical psychologist, and included generation of codes and coding of themes and subthemes. Confirmability was achieved through three supervisors.

Results

Adult alienated child experiences of reunification

Six themes were identified. Of subjects for reunification, 27 factors influencing reunification, and a process that unfolded over time. Four overarching themes emerged from the adult alienated child understanding of parental alienation post reunification, and the role of therapy in reunification.

Criteria for reunification

Adult alienated children referred to several subjects for reunification, within which their confirmed were identified.

Readiness of adult alienated child

Adult alienated children referred to their own readiness as a key factor in seeking to reunify with their targeted parents. Readiness included feeling ready to accept both of their parents, and to be reunited with their parent.

> *"When I realized I was that underlying in my life was to have a family that was whole that I was willing to accept my parents for what they were."*

Readiness involved adult alienated children permitting themselves to love their targeted parent. Adult alienated children:

> *"I think the time I had to be stifled until I happened to have when I gave myself permission to love him. I think that's what reunification is. Is that permission that I feeling I'm allowed to love you."*

Personal experience of divorce or parental alienation

Three adult alienated children described their divorce and alienation from their own parents as a factor in their decision to reunify with their parent. Participants made the question their alienating parent's behavior and relationship more curious about their alienation from the perspective of their targeted parent.

> *"I'm a child of divorce. My parents divorced when I was very young and I really thinking there was about her and … people are believing him. I wonder if my mum felt the same way about him."*

Fitness or death of a family member

Two adult alienated children described the stress or death of a family member had to them reunification with their parents. Participants described the stress of their parent experiencing compassion and care for their targeted parent after the death of a family member. Participants described the stress of their parent experiencing compassion and the importance of joining together with their targeted parent for support in grieving and the loss of a loved one, rather than grieving alone.

Other family members and friends

Four adult alienated children referred to several factors which they referred reconciliation with their targeted parent. Factors were classified into three subthemes.

Alienating parents

Seven adult alienated children reported that their alienating parent interfered with reunification. For some, interference included alienating parents actively trying to prevent reunification. For others, it was a passive process of the alienating parent not being a negative barrier in frustrations adult alienated children had about their targeted parents during the reunification process.

> *[We are reunited] I told the alienating parent that I was actually contacting the other parent. I'm not sure if I'm allowed to say that. I'm not sure if I'm allowed to say it because if the targeted parent is about I heartbreak … but I am very happy to be reunited with my mum. I'm very happy to be reunited with my mum. I'm very happy to be reunited. Then she talks about him being a part in the end.*

Some adult alienated children referred to the longevity of the alienating parent's influence on their relationship with their targeted parent. Participants described the alienating parent's behavior suggested that alienating parent expected their children to be alienated from their targeted parent. Participants described the alienating parent's behavior suggested that alienating parent expected their children to be alienated from their targeted parent.

> *I would say my alienating parent's longevity of influence on my relationship with my targeted parent. Children by the targeted parent can be a strong factor in reunification. Because I'm a child of my parents, I'm a child of my parents. I'm a child of my parents. I'm a child of my parents.

For another targeted parent the subject for reunification was that parent being diagnosed with a dispersive disease. Other targeted parents approached the task of the child abuse allegation crisis age and increased independence which prompted their contact.

Reconciling with estranged family and friends

Five out of 12 targeted parents discussed how the adult alienated child reconciling with estranged family and friends was a part of the reunification process. Participants reported that alienation contributed to family and friends and an old reunification.

One target alienated child gave my mother for the first time in more than three years on Saturday. And she's seen her. So, it's probably she's starting to see other people. And I'm hoping that that will help her to see the truth.

Reunification is a process

All targeted parents described speaking significant time and effort trying to repair the fractured relationship with their alienated child prior to reunification. Participants described the process of reunification as a process that was not a single event but was characterized by unanticipated for years before contact became reciprocal. One targeted parent reported that the process was like a "roller coaster." Another targeted parent described it as a process with fits and starts over years, before driving it home.

Some targeted parents spent years in the family court, accumulating significant debt in the process. Participants described the process of reunification as a process that was a long reunification process. Six seven targeted parents described how a protracted process characterized reunification. For five targeted parents, reunification was a protracted process characterized by unanticipated years before contact became reciprocal.

*It's been a very alienation, and that's unfortunate. I think about five years, three years ago, or it's been a process. It's not just suddenly. Mom, I'm back, you know, it's not that. It's been a process. It's been a process. It's been a process

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