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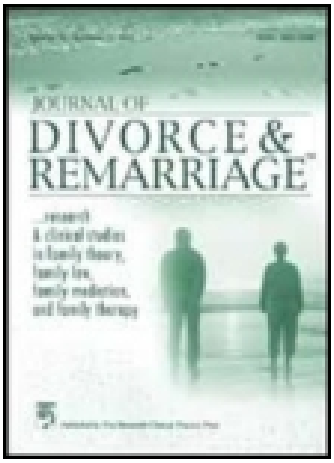

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The Life Paths and Lived Experiences of Adults Who Have Experienced Parental Alienation: A Retrospective Study

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The Life Paths and Lived Experiences of Adults Who Have Experienced Parental Alienation: A Retrospective Study

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This qualitative study concerns the life paths and lived experiences of 6 adults who have been alienated from a parent in the past. The results suggest several hypotheses concerning the factors that might place children at risk of being alienated from a parent. The presence of postseparation conflict and, in some cases, domestic violence, as well as the triangulation of the child appear to be elements that favor the emergence of parental alienation. Moreover, this study supports a multifactorial explanation of parental alienation. In the scope of lived experience, respondents associated alienation with difficulties at school, internal and external behavior problems, and a search for identity after reaching adulthood. Finally, overcoming the state of alienation involves issues surrounding the establishment of boundaries with the alienating parent and the rebuilding of a relationship with the alienated parent.

KEYWORDS parental alienation, postseparation conflict, triangulation

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Parents who separate face the difficult challenge of ending their conjugal relationship while preserving functional links that can allow their children to maintain a fulfilling relationship with both parents (Cloutier, 2001). Unfortunately, not all separated couples are able to attain this ideal relationship. A significant proportion of former spouses who share parental responsibilities remain in conflict after their separation. In fact, nearly one third of all separated parents continue to experience disputes following their separation. This proportion declines to approximately 25% 4 years after the separation and remains at 10% for lengthy periods thereafter (Fischer, De Graaf, & Kalmijn, 2005; Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992). Conflicts that persist after a separation can have a potentially destructive impact on children's adjustment to separation. In fact, postseparation conflicts might have a higher impact on children's psychological adjustment than the separation per se (Cyr & Carobene, 2004; Sarrazin & Cyr, 2007). These alarming findings therefore raise vital questions on the effect of postseparation conflict on children's adjustment.

A risk that has been particularly linked to conflict surrounding separation is parental alienation (Drapeau, Gagné, & Hénault, 2004). This study examines this phenomenon by analyzing the life paths and lived experiences of adults who have been alienated from a parent in the past.

PARENTAL ALIENATION: VARIOUS PERSPECTIVES

Although there is no universally accepted definition of parental alienation at this time, several researchers describe parental alienation as an alliance between a parent and child that serves to isolate the second parent; this typically occurs in postseparation conflict situations. In the 1980s, Gardner pioneered the study of parental alienation and introduced the term *parental alienation syndrome* (PAS). According to Gardner (1998), this syndrome was a form of pathology in the child. This notion has been disputed by some researchers and clinicians (Bow, Gould, & Flens, 2009; Brown, 2008; Drapeau et al., 2004; Gagné, Drapeau, & Hénault, 2005; Kelly & Johnston, 2001). In response to Gardner's work, Kelly and Johnston (2001) developed a systemic approach to parental alienation that also takes into account the characteristics, attitudes, and behaviors of parents and children. This study adopts this systemic approach and, thus, examines parental alienation as a problem that reflects difficulties associated with the family system as a whole, rather than as a disorder diagnosed in the child.

THE PROCESS OF PARENTAL ALIENATION

Kelly and Johnston (2001) argued that parental alienation might be caused by more than the alienating behavior of the parent. They adopted a

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comprehensive approach that also accounts for the child's context. This led to the development of a theoretical model that posits various factors that directly and indirectly influence the child and have the potential to increase the risk of alienation. These factors include a history of spousal conflict, a separation that humiliates one of the parents (causing narcissistic injury), separation accompanied by conflicts and litigation (which can sometimes be induced by certain professionals), involvement of extended family in the conflict, both parents' personalities and ages, and the child's cognitive capacity and temperament. Moreover, there are other variables that could moderate or intensify the child's response, such as the alienating parent's beliefs and behaviors, the child's degree of vulnerability, the rejected parent's reactions, and relationships with siblings. This model has been given at least partial empirical support in two studies (Johnston, 2003; Johnston, Gans Walter, & Olesen, 2005a) that showed that, based on the clinical records of children whose parents had separated, multifactorial explanations of parental alienation merited careful consideration. Indeed, both studies conclude that a child's rejection of one parent and close association with the other has many determinants, which include both (the rejected and the alienating) parents' behaviors, the child's level of vulnerability (separation anxiety, lack of social skills, behavior problems), and parent–child role reversal.

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The Role of the Alienating Parent

The literature has frequently portrayed the alienating parent as the instigator of parental alienation. According to this view, the alienating parent adopts an overwhelmingly negative view of the other parent and repeatedly degrades the alienated parent in the child's presence, either directly or through subtle allusions (Kelly & Johnston, 2001). The alienating parent might also use strategies that serve to sever ties between the child and the other parent. For example, the alienating parent might interrupt or block telephone calls, as well as messages or letters addressed to the child. In extreme cases, any mention of the other parent is forbidden within the family (Kelly & Johnston, 2001). These clinical observations have been corroborated by qualitative research carried out by Baker (2005b), whose study involved adults who had experienced parental alienation as children. Baker identified 33 alienating strategies used by alienating parents such as regularly speaking about the other parent in a negative manner, limiting contacts with the other parent, becoming angry or demonstrating less affection for the child if the child acts positively toward the other parent, and telling the child that the other parent does not love him or her. According to Kelly and Johnston (2001), certain beliefs or opinions can act as a foundation for alienating behavior. For example, the alienating parent might believe that contact with the other parent has little positive value for the child and that the other parent could even be dangerous for the child (violent, abusive,

or negligent). Such beliefs could drive alienating parents to cast themselves into a protective role with their children and act in accordance with their perception of the other parent, notwithstanding that perception's relation to reality (Kelly & Johnston, 2001). Kelly and Johnston also pointed out that parents who cultivate parental alienation often show predispositions to pathological anger, boundary issues, enmeshment with the child, severe separation anxiety, and a skewed perception of reality. Several studies have explored the hypothesis that alienating parents exhibit pathological behavior (Gordon, Stoffey, & Botinelli, 2008; Siegel & Langford, 1998). This suggests that parents who induce PAS in their children, might suffer from a personality disorder. Consistent with these results, Baker (2006) described patterns of alienation that involve narcissistic personalities and violent behavior, among other characteristics observed in the alienating parents.

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The Role of the Alienated Parent

Using their theoretical model, Kelly and Johnston (2001) identified behaviors in the alienating parent that might contribute to increased alienation. These behaviors include passivity in the face of conflict, rejection of the child in reaction to being rejected, a rigid parenting style, immaturity and egocentrism, placing exaggerated demands on the child, and displaying little empathy toward the child. These findings were supported by Johnston (2003) in a study demonstrating that the principal factor associated with a child's rejection of a parent was the lack of warm involvement from the rejected parent during the year following the separation and up to 2 years afterward. However, the lack of parental engagement and presence might be a reaction to, rather than a cause of, the child's rejection of the parent (Johnston, 2003).

The Role of the Child

Although alienated children are above all victims of family situations that have been thrust on them, some of their own individual characteristics might nevertheless favor the development of parental alienation. According to Kelly and Johnston (2001), cognitive limitations, unequivocal thoughts (seeing everything in "black and white") as well as difficulties in analyzing and solving problems are risk factors that can favor the alienation of children from their parents. Several of these clinical observations have been corroborated by subsequent research. Working from the clinical records of children in families who had experienced custody disputes, Johnston, Gans Walter, and Olesen (2005b) were able to determine that children in the sample who had rejected a parent generally exhibited more internal and external behavior problems, displayed lower reasoning abilities, experienced more problems with socialization and coping, and were more uninhibited in expressing their emotions.

PARENTAL ALIENATION AND ITS HARMFUL EFFECTS ON CHILDREN

A number of authors have drawn parallels between parental alienation and psychological violence (Boch-Galhau & Kodjoe, 2005; Drapeau et al. 2004; Gagné & Drapeau, 2005). Gagné and Drapeau (2005) argued that denigrating a parent, alienating the child from the parent, and exposing the child to intense postseparation conflict are all forms of psychological abuse. In fact, many parental behaviors linked with parental alienation can be described as psychologically abusive behaviors, including depriving the child of important social contacts, using brainwashing techniques (e.g., lying, imposing guilt, blackmail, manipulation), reversing the child–parent roles and enmeshing with the child (Gagné & Drapeau, 2005). These findings are supported by Johnston et al. (2005a), who conducted a study that showed that intrusive parental behaviors, such as child–parent role reversal and boundary dissolution between the alienating parent and the child are associated with parental alienation.

The conception of parental alienation as a form of maltreatment implies long-term effects on the mental health and well-being of children who experience this phenomenon. Indeed, various difficulties resulting from parental alienation can continue into adulthood. Baker (2005a) found that adults who have been alienated from a parent in the past exhibit identifiable difficulties, such as low self-esteem, depression, drug and alcohol abuse, and in some individuals, the alienation of their own children, marital breakdown, and identity and anger issues.

THE EVOLUTION OF FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

Few authors have written on the evolution of parental alienation situations from childhood into adulthood. Baker (2007) addressed this issue in a study that interviewed 40 adults who were alienated as children. Among these adults interviewed, 11 reported that that they realized that they had been alienated from a parent during adolescence, but the majority became aware of this only after entering adulthood. For 20% of this sample, maturity was the most important factor that enabled them to recognize that they had been alienated from their parents. The study's respondents also described certain precipitating events that were key events or changes (Baker, 2007). These results have been supported by Darnall and Steinberg's (2008a, 2008b) study, which examined youth who had spontaneously initiated a reunification with an alienated parent. Paralleling Baker's findings, Darnall and Steinberg highlighted the importance of maturity and pivotal life events as motivators for reconciliation. Darnall and Steinberg (2008a) also addressed the development of relationships between previously alienated parents and children. One third of the respondents who had initiated a reunification

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maintained a good, long-term relationship with the alienated parent after the reconciliation. Another third of the sample maintained contact with the alienated parent, but had not developed a close relationship with this parent. Finally, one third of the respondents did not maintain any contact with their alienated parent. Other data on the evolution of relationships between previously alienated parents and their children are exceedingly scant. A study conducted by Moné and Biringen (2006) shows that in adulthood, feelings of alienation from one's mother are associated with a lower quality relationship with one's father. Based on this finding, the authors posited that an alienation situation could become detrimental to the alienating parent in a phenomenon they termed the *backfire effect*.

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RESEARCH PROPOSAL

The fundamental premise of the research described in this article is to improve the state of knowledge on parental alienation. Presently, most of the relevant literature is based on clinical observations, and there is very little empirical evidence in the literature. This is true not only for the theoretical literature on PAS, but also for studies that have adopted a systemic approach (Gagné et al., 2005). The main objective of this study was to better understand these difficult situations through the perspectives of adults who had experienced parental alienation as children. Three specific research questions were explored:

1. How do children become alienated from their parents?
2. How is alienation experienced?
3. How do family relationships evolve over time?

METHOD

Sample and Procedure

Six respondents (2 men and 4 women) between 24 and 42 years of age participated in the study. Table 1 presents the respondents' sociodemographic and family information.

The sample was drawn using voluntary and snowball sampling techniques, which were selected due to their compatibility with a marginalized and little-known subject of study. Recruitment was conducted between March 2007 and January 2008. Respondents were recruited through a study announcement addressed to a university community and to various family service organizations. To participate in the study, respondents were required to have voluntarily rejected a parent from their life for a period of at least 6 months, and to believe that the rejection of one parent was caused

TABLE 1 Respondents' Sociodemographic and Family Characteristics

Respondent	Age	Parents' separation		Custodial parent	Period of parental alienation	Alienated parent
		Age	Year			
1. Marie	42	7 years	1972	Mother	Age 7–adulthood	Father
2. Martin	24	6 months	1983	Mother	Age 7–early adolescence	Father
3. Julie	24	4 years, 6 months	1987	Shared physical custody	Age 17–early 20s	Mother
4. Eric	38	7 years	1976	Mother	Age 10–18	Father
5. Sarah	28	15 years	1996	Mother	Age 17–early 20s	Father
6. Natacha	24	9 years	1992	Mother, age 9–13, Father, age 13–16	Age 13–16	Mother

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at least partly by the actions and attitudes of the other parent. During a preliminary interview an assessment was conducted to determine the intensity and rigidity of manifestations of hostility toward the alienated parent according to criteria elaborated by Warshak (2002). Moreover, to ensure that respondents had not voluntarily separated because a parent was violent or abusive, special attention was given to issues of maltreatment (physical and psychological abuse, sexual abuse, and neglect). Finally, although parental alienation can be experienced within an intact family (Baker, 2006), parental separation or divorce was one of the study selection criteria, because the large majority of the literature describes PAS as occurring in these contexts (Gagné et al., 2005).

Semistructured interviews were conducted that were 90 minutes in length. Respondents answered a series of questions. The interview focused on three primary themes that related to the three specific research questions. Factual data were collected at the end of each interview. Interviews were recorded on audiotape and later transcribed as accurately as possible. The collected material was analyzed using thematic content analysis methods (Mayer & Deslauriers, 2000).

RESULTS

How Do Children Become Alienated From Their Parents?

Prior to and during the separation

The respondents described the relationship between their parents prior to the separation as being, at best, fragile and distant. There was a lack of love in the couple and the spouses functioned with little mutual interaction. Already the relationship was marked by intense conflict, substance abuse, infidelity, or some combination thereof.

> My father was an alcoholic so, of course, he would often come home drunk, so of course there were fights about that . . . on top of being an alcoholic, he was cheating on my mother. (Marie)

Although in many of the reported situations the parents' separation was provoked by a father's infidelity, it is important to note that the process of separation was characterized by intense conflict in all of the reported situations. This period of hostile interaction resulted in feelings of resentment that continued for a number of years. For two respondents, the period of separation was marked by violence and threatening remarks from a father who refused to accept the separation. Their responses clearly show that the mothers were victims of domestic violence perpetrated by their former spouses during the period of separation.

> He would call the house and he'd make threats, sometimes her tires were slashed or she'd find a baseball bat in the backseat of her car. . . . Pretty stressful stuff. (Natacha)

For four of the respondents, parental alienation was preceded by periods of triangulation of various lengths. *Triangulation* is a family systems theory concept that refers to situations in which two people (parents) engage in conflict and use a third person (child) to deflect the tension created by their conflict (Buchanan & Waizenhofer, 2001). The child thus becomes entangled in conflicting loyalties and situations that are adult issues. In this study, a range of issues that included custody arrangements, leisure time, clothing, and expenses were likely to elicit parental conflict. Respondents were torn between two opposing sides and were often attributed roles of messengers or informers.

> I was the messenger. "You tell your mother to come pick you up," "You tell your father that I can't come pick you up because I've got something tonight." . . . There were also secrets, [my Mother would ask]: "Is Lucy around? What did you all do on the weekend?" I could feel that it was more to [get information on my father's new girlfriend] than out of concern for me. (Julie)

As discussed previously, it appears that parental alienation can spawn during tumultuous periods of separation, which serves as the base from which a process of rupture develops between the child and the alienated parent. This process is stimulated by the behavior, attitudes, and characteristics of various actors.

The role of the alienating parent

The alienating parent has been the focus of the majority of research on parental alienation, and the alienating parent is considered to be the

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instigator of the alienation process. However, the role that the alienating parent plays in the development of a parental alienation situation cannot be examined in isolation of other influential factors in the child's environment. Nevertheless, issues surrounding the behavior and attitude of the alienating parent were a central element of the respondents' statements. All the respondents related that the alienated parent was the object of sustained vilification by the alienating parent. The alienating parent persistently told the respondents that the alienated parent was a bad parent. Various beliefs underlie such statements including that the alienated parent is dangerous, does not care for the child's well-being, and has never really loved the child. The alienated parents' personalities and behaviors were also attacked, injurious words were used to speak about them, and the alienating parent would tell various lies to their children about the other parent. According to the respondents, although the vilification of the alienated parent might have been based on lies or distortions of reality, there were some negative remarks that were based on facts. Reality was presented to the child in harsh terms that were sometimes grossly exaggerated. The alienating parent could then apply a great level of pressure so that the child sees no other choice but to develop an exclusive alliance with the alienating parent. The alienating parent would in some cases attempt to eliminate the other from everyday conversation or from the child's memories, or even from the child's identity by changing the child's family name ($n = 3$). Some respondents were forbidden from speaking about the alienated parent or mentioning their name. This resulted in blurred or erased identities for the alienated parents because they were referred to only by pseudonyms and all traces of their existence were removed.

> It's like he became a stranger. We weren't supposed to talk about him. . . . We even had these pictures with my father, childhood pictures, and baptism pictures. My father's head is cut out of them. (Marie)

However, four respondents felt that the process of denigration was more insidious. In addition to denigrating language, the alienating parent might have an attitude that should be taken into account. The alienating parent does not necessarily speak of the other parent in overtly belittling terms and might actually deny having any influence over the child's attitude. Thus, when the child rejects the alienated parent, the alienating parent disavows any responsibility.

> My father would tell me all the time: . . . "You decide, Julie, you do what's best for you." . . . He was putting power in my hands, as if I hadn't been influenced. (Julie)

The alienating parent's attitudes might also work to reverse parent–child roles. The resulting parentification functions as a dynamic in which the

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child "nurses" a vulnerable parent or becomes the parent's confidant. This was the case for Sarah and Natacha, both of whom had to tend to an alienating parent suffering from depression following the separation. This dynamic maintained the adolescents' sense of loyalty toward the alienating parent.

> When my father left, she had to start again from nothing, it went on for months, me taking care of my mother. (Sarah)

The role of the alienated parent

Although it is more difficult to understand the role of the alienated parent, there could be certain characteristics, attitudes, or behaviors that this parent displays that might increase the risk of alienation from the child. According to three of the respondents, the alienated parent tried to remain neutral and not to involve the child in conflicts between the former spouses. Although this behavior might be appropriate, it seems to have certain adverse consequences. This behavior could feed the other parent's attacks and makes the alienated parent all the more vulnerable to rejection. In these situations, the child's opinion might be shaped by the alienating parent only.

> Since she didn't give us her opinion, I couldn't really formulate my own opinion, so I had only my father to follow and to believe. (Natacha)

Some of the alienated parent's behaviors could be described as inept: being stern and inflexible ($n = 1$), giving the child insufficient encouragement ($n = 1$), and using discipline that is not age appropriate ($n = 1$). However, these traits take on added significance when contrasted with the other parent's attitudes and personality, which might offer the child a more appealing alternative. Hence, the child is faced with one parent who is stern and distant, whereas the other is affectionate; one parent who imposes rigid discipline is counteracted by the other, who is more lenient. These differences are sometimes more magnified by personality conflicts or a lack of affinities between the child and the alienated parent.

In the case of three study participants, the father disengaged from his relationship with the child. Although the respondents understood in hindsight that their parents felt helpless in the face of the hostility directed at them, at the time this behavior only served to reinforce the belief that the alienated parent was not a good parent or never loved the child.

> Oh yes, he might have contributed to the problem, I think somehow, yes, he withdrew from all that because he felt helpless, he didn't know what to do about it. (Sarah)

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The role of the child

The collected data do not suggest that there is any particular age at which children are more vulnerable to parental alienation. Rather, it would seem to be more closely linked with the developmental stage and the issues inherent in each stage of development. In this study, the youngest participants, Martin (7) and Eric (10) were easily influenced, as they did not yet question adult opinions.

> It's mainly that a child is easy to manipulate, the child soldiers in Africa, 2 weeks of indoctrination; they pick up an AK-47 and shoot people without remorse. It's not any different here. Kids are vulnerable to that kind of manipulation. (Martin)

Older children can also be victims of parental alienation. Adolescence is a stage characterized by advanced cognitive development that can make adolescents more opinionated and concerned about justice.

> Oh! When I learned that my father had a girlfriend; that stunned me for real. . . . And just like that, without my mother having to say anything, my father was the bad guy. (Sarah)

Certain respondents ($n = 3$) felt that they had contributed to their parent's alienation because at the time they had been unable or unwilling to consider the other side of the story; that is, to take the alienated parent's perspective into consideration. These respondents believed that they were intransigent and unfair.

> Always believing a bit naively what my father told me, not going to check with my mother, is it true or not? . . . My role was kind of to be naive, well and also to really lay into my mother. (Julie)

How Is Alienation Experienced?

As outlined earlier, most respondents experienced difficult family situations after their parents' separation as they witnessed intense conflict and were subjected to extreme triangulation. Four respondents recounted their experiences, explaining they were forced to struggle with loyalty conflicts. Because the difficulties surrounding the parents' separation can be very difficult for the child, forming a close alliance with one of the parents might be a means for the child to break free of the intense and unbearable loyalty conflicts. Two respondents stated that they had attempted to distance themselves from both parents when they were adolescents before eventually forming a close alliance with one of them. The situations of perpetual conflict that they

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endured were so difficult that they attempted to separate themselves from the family.

> Closer to the end when I still lived with my mother, I would run away, I was never home, I would hide everywhere and I just wasn't there anymore. I just didn't want to be in all that anymore, to live in that environment. (Natacha)

Children who were already severely destabilized by the incessant conflicts between their parents were also highly influenced by the alienating parent's sustained vilification of the alienated parent. Five respondents stated that they developed feelings of hate and anger toward their alienated parent due to the consistently negative discourse of the alienating parent. The resentment they felt at the time is clearly evident in their statements:

> I called her the cow, the bitch, she wasn't my mother anymore and I despised her, I hated her like hell. (Natacha)

For one of the respondents, fear of the alienated parent became a dominant emotion as a result of the alienating parent's vilification campaign.

> I remember playing outside, and it was like I was always scared. When a car would stop . . . I remember like always being afraid that I'd see my father get out . . . that he'd come, and grab me and take me away and that I wouldn't see my mother anymore. (Marie)

Despite the animosity and hostility, Julie and Sarah stated that they still loved their alienated parent, but that they did not show it overtly. They both experienced very conflicting emotions—anger and resentment along with bouts of sadness and guilt:

> I cried a lot because I felt guilty about doing it, too. . . . So there was this deep love/hate feeling, you know, because I hated him all the same. (Sarah)

Consequences for the child's adjustment

Five respondents had adjustment problems, which they attribute to the disruptive family environments in which they lived. Adjustment problems are associated not only with parental alienation, but more broadly with post-separation conflicts between the parents and the triangulation to which the children are subjected.

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An adjustment problem cited by four respondents was difficulties at school, which, for some was quite severe. Two respondents reported experiencing internal behavior problems such as sadness, low self-esteem, anxiety, and somatization. Three other respondents reported externalized behavior problems, including drug abuse in adolescence, hyperactivity, and resistance to authority.

> I wasn't there, I turned off, I had trouble sleeping at night, I was rebelling. I had completely . . . I was out of control . . . . These reactions were connected with that, that separation and all the disagreements that there was between the two of them and what that made me feel. (Eric)

Long-term repercussions

Three respondents talked about the need they felt as adults to come to terms with their earlier experiences. Two of these respondents had sought out the assistance of a therapist to help them in the process. Eric and Marie were both concerned about their view of their fathers and about their overall conception of fatherhood. The questions to which they were attempting to find answers included the following:

- What are the bonds that link them to an absent figure?
- How can they find balance and coherence between snippets of memory and the distorted image of the parent that they carried for many years?

Marie stated that taking back her original name enabled her to reclaim her identity and make sense of her past.

> At one point it became very important for me, in my evolution, in my balance, to reclaim that identity. (Marie)

Two respondents drew links between what they lived with their family and certain obstacles that they have had to overcome in their personal relationships, including difficulties related to putting their trust in another person and respectful communication.

How Do Family Relationships Evolve Over Time?

The process of recognition

All the respondents stated that they realized at a certain point in time that they had been presented with a false image of their alienated parent. For two respondents, that realization came as a result of pivotal events: a family crisis that revealed a darker side of the alienating parent's personality, and

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the shock resulting from having given false testimony in court at the urging of the alienating parent. For the four remaining respondents, the process of recognition was more gradual and was linked to their growing maturity and the development of capacities to recognize falsehoods and discriminate between facts and opinions.

Setting limits: The evolution of the relationship with the alienating parent

When the respondents in this study recognized that there had been parental alienation, they attempted to extricate themselves from the alienating parent's influence by setting certain limits within their relationship. A strategy adopted by the majority of respondents was to refute the alienating parent's statements or ask the alienating parent not to speak negatively about the alienated parent in the respondent's presence. This was a difficult step for all respondents that caused either open conflict or introduced a distance in the relationship with the alienating parent. Choosing this course of action subjected the respondents to recrimination and mockery from the alienating parent. In broad terms, the relationship with the alienating parent deteriorated as a result of the respondents' attempts to free themselves from the parent's influence. In one situation, the alienating parent's reaction was especially violent.

> It was after, when I went back to live with my mother, my father started again with his violence, let's say that things deteriorated. One day he showed up at our place and it was horrible . . . after that I went for a year and a half without seeing him, speaking with him, without saying a word to him. (Natacha)

Rebuilding a relationship: The evolution of the relationship with the alienated parent

Following the process of recognition already described, five of the respondents attempted to rebuild their bonds with the alienated parent. Two respondents stated that their alienated parent's openness greatly facilitated the reunification process.

> But he would always say: "My door is always wide open whenever you're ready to come back" and that's what helped me go back, I think. (Sarah)

Despite the changes in the respondents' perception]of their alienated parents and the desire to reestablish contact with them, three respondents stated that parental alienation left marks that were difficult to erase. In one case,

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the respondent's attempt to establish a relationship with his estranged father was unsuccessful.

> I was telling him: "If you want, we could see each other again, do something together," he said: "You'll call me." . . . I had the impression that I was always trying to grasp at something, just a ghost, in the end. (Eric)

DISCUSSION

This study aimed to examine parental alienation, a phenomenon widely considered to be both pressing and controversial. The study described herein was exploratory in nature and aimed to describe the ways in which parental alienation develops within families, the effects it has on children alienated from one parent, and the long-term effects it has on family relationships.

How Do Children Become Alienated From Their Parents?

This study first examined the family situations that respondents had experienced prior to their parents' separation. The interviews highlighted certain distinctive characteristics in this area. First, the parents' relationship was described by all respondents as very distant and tenuous. This finding substantiates the work of Kelly and Johnston (2001), who stipulated that certain background elements can become risk factors for children who are exposed to them. One of these factors is a family history of interparental conflict, which, according to Kelly and Johnston, is fertile ground for the development of parental alienation.

The parents of the majority of the study participants separated because of the father's infidelity. The resulting emotional pain caused the mothers of two of the respondents to manifest anger and resentment, thus sowing the seeds for subsequent alienating behaviors. The data corroborate the findings of a number of authors on narcissistic injuries resulting from a separation in which the alienating parents feel humiliated (Baker, 2006; Kelly & Johnston, 2001; Waldron & Joanis, 1996). Two other respondents stated that their fathers accepted separation with difficulty and reacted violently, threatening and attempting to intimidate the respondents' mothers. These results elicit questions about possible links between parental alienation and domestic violence. Indeed, this type of alienation could be seen as an extension of domestic violence beyond the separation, in that it is an attempt to control the other ex-spouse through the former couple's child (Gagné et al., 2005). This conception of parental alienation is consistent with the position adopted by organizations that provide assistance to women experiencing domestic violence, interviewed by Gagné, Duquet, Jean, and Nadeau (2009) on the subject of parental alienation.

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An important aspect that emerged from the interviews is the role of the alienating parent and parenting practices that contribute to alienation. Such parenting practices were distinct behaviors (e.g., denigrating and excluding the other parent, and protecting the child from the "dangerous" parent, among others) and these resemble findings described in the literature, particularly in the work of Baker (2005b). These behaviors are based on the misrepresentation of reality and on false allegations against the alienated parent. In addition, the results of this research show that some children are subjected to parentification by the alienating parent, who treats the child as a confidant or relies on the child for emotional support in times of distress. This result corroborates the work of Johnston et al. (2005a), who demonstrated that certain parental behaviors that cause a reversal of child–parent roles and boundary dissolution could be linked to parental alienation.

On the other hand, the alienated parent can also contribute to the development of parental alienation. Three respondents stated that their alienated parent disengaged from their mutual relationship and disavowed their parental responsibilities. Regrettably, this withdrawal serves to reinforce the alienating parent's stance in the eyes of the child: The alienated parent is not a good parent and is not concerned with the child's well-being. For the respondents in situations of intense conflict and triangulation, it became easier to bond more closely with the parent who appeared to them to be more competent and who seemed to offer advantages (e.g., one parent was more permissive than the other). It is important to note that this "comparative" aspect of the child's relationship with the parents is not cited in the available literature, which instead often focuses on individual characteristics observed in the parents. Another aspect of concern to this study was the lack of objective information available to the child that would allow him or her to formulate an independent opinion of the alienated parent. This raises certain issues for potential service development. Is it possible to ensure that children have access to information that would contradict the false allegations made by the alienating parent, without causing the child to be emotionally torn between both parents? Johnston, Gans Walter, and Friedlander (2001) considered that, depending on the child's age, it might be possible to help the child change erroneous cognitive beliefs and consider the other side of the story by doing various actions such as evoking pleasant memories of the alienated parent.

The respondents were at different ages at the time of parental alienation: three were aged 10 or younger, two were adolescents, and one was just entering adulthood. Kelly and Johnston (2001) stated that children between the ages of 9 and 15 were most likely to become alienated from a parent. In this study, the youngest children (7–10 years old) had more difficulties than their older counterparts grasping reality. The experience of respondents who were adolescents during the period of parental alienation was characterized by moral judgments of the alienated parent's actions and the

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child's desire to assert his or her identity in opposition to the alienated parent. These results agree with the work of Johnston and Roseby (1997), which stipulated that each stage of the child's development carries with it distinct elements that can contribute to the child's likelihood of experiencing parental alienation.

How Is Alienation Experienced?

Triangulation and ongoing conflicts seem to have severely unsettling effects. Two respondents expressed profound distress caused by the loyalty conflicts they had experienced and two others reported reacting to this conflict by adopting escape behaviors (frequent outings with friends, running away from home). These responses to conflicts between the parents preceded parental alienation. Placing the parental alienation process along a continuum allows one to better understand how children's reactions such as loyalty, conflict, and detachment, which children use to extricate themselves from the parents' conflict, can be viewed as preliminary stages that precede an ultimate stage at which the child forms a coalition with one of the parents. Furthermore, two respondents stated that despite the anger, hate, and fear that they felt toward their alienated parent, they also felt deeply guilty and sad after rejecting the parent. Clinicians working with these families need to take the children's suppressed feelings into account and help them gain awareness of their ambivalence (Johnston et al., 2001).

Although the respondents' statements were not subjected to formal measurements or diagnosis, they strongly suggest that five of the respondents suffered from external and internal behavior problems, which corroborates the results reported by Johnston et al. (2005b). Moreover, these results are coherent with the generalized conclusions of a large corpus of research on children's adaptation to postseparation conflict situations (Cyr & Carobene, 2004; Drapeau et al., 2004; Sarrazin & Cyr, 2007). All observable signs suggest that the alienation experience is emotionally painful and it can have serious consequences on the children involved. Nevertheless, it remains difficult to evaluate whether their experience differs from the experience of children who are triangulated in an interparental conflict, but are not alienated from one of the parents. Finally, among the long-term consequences of parental alienation highlighted by this study, identity seemed to be a crucial issue. The current literature on parental alienation, however, has accorded very little attention to identity issues.

How Do Family Relationships Evolve Over Time?

The respondents reported that the realization they had been manipulated was caused by significant events ($n = 2$) or occurred over longer periods of time during which the respondents achieved a certain level of maturity

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($n = 4$). These data confirm the results of several studies on the subject that have signaled the importance of maturity and of pivotal events in overcoming parental alienation (Baker, 2007; Darnall & Steinberg, 2008a, 2008b; Rand & Rand, 2006). Such changes in the respondents' perspectives triggered the desire to set certain limits in their relationship with the alienating parent. The change did not come easily—their relationship with the alienating parent was shaken, either temporarily or for a lengthy period, confirming the backfire effect hypothesis formulated by Moné and Biringen (2006), which stipulates that alienation might eventually work to the alienating parent's disadvantage. These changes could also have severe, unintended consequences. One of the respondents became the object of physical violence by the alienating parent when she attempted to free herself from the parent's influence. Thus, it is essential for clinicians to provide adequate support for individuals who decide to confront the alienating parent.

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LIMITATIONS

Few empirical studies have examined parental alienation. Consequently, it is difficult to ascertain whether the design of this study was optimal to describe the studied phenomenon. Another limitation was the small number of participants, which did not permit us to achieve data saturation. It is also possible that, due to its small size, the sample lacked diversity and did not represent a sufficient number of variations of the parental alienation phenomenon, which reduces the external validity of the study (Laperrière, 1997). Finally, because the collected data were drawn from the experiences and memories of the respondents, it is limited to the point of view of a single actor within each family. The study just presented was exploratory by design and is intended to be a starting point for subsequent research of a wider scope.

CONCLUSION

This study was concerned with the lived experiences of children alienated from their parents. It aimed to propose certain solution paths, as well as a glimmer of hope for overcoming alienation. For clinicians, it appears desirable to recognize the emotional pain experienced by alienating parents to help them to transcend it without unnecessarily involving the children in the parent's suffering. As for the alienated parents, the study suggests that it might be advisable to resolutely maintain a link with the child who rejects them, as even the most tenuous contacts appear to facilitate eventual reconciliation. Finally, this study suggests that it is possible for alienated children to free themselves from the undue influence of their alienating parent and

to rebuild, however imperfectly, the relationship with their alienated parent. They might then ultimately succeed in making peace with their past.

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