**counting the costs: A phenomenological exploration of Non-Custodial Fathers who are the Target victims of custodial contact issues to discover interpersonal qualities that lead to overcoming related trauma**

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Member, Dissertation Committee

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor

of Philosophy

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September 2024

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**ABSTRACT**

The abstract appears at the front of the report, but it is written after all else has been completed. An abstract is a short unbiased summary (no more than 350 words) of the main elements of the completed research, so it is never part of a proposal. An abstract includes: introduction to the subject, description of what was done, results, and the meaning of it all. It captures the content of Chapters 3, 4, and 5 in extremely condensed form. This may be the most difficult part of the dissertation to write because it must clearly describe the whole in a few words.

Decide what will be of most value to your reader. If it were a sports story, you’d tell who won (the result), what sport it was (procedure), who played (context), and why it was important (significance). Same thing here. Make sure that it is clear to someone who knows nothing about the topic of your research. It is brief—just an overview to show that it was a carefully executed study. (A report of an NFL game doesn’t recite the rule book.) State each hypothesis and whether it was supported or not supported. Brag objectively about the significance if you wish. You may use energetic language even though it is written in formal style (APA 6th, 2.04, p. 25). The page is counted, but no page number is shown.

**DEDICATION**

To my grandchildren, Bradley, Chase, Cheyenne, Canaan, and Ezra. Everybody deserves both a mom and a dad.

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS [Optional]**

Acknowledgments are short and vivid like thank you’s at the Academy Awards but more sincere. Mention only the most meaningful helpers. Place on its own page, centered three inches from the top of the page.

**EPIGRAPH**

“Divorce is not the end of a family; it is simply the restructuring of it.”

 — Alice Berkowitz, Ph.D.

"A victim is defined by the harm that has come to them; a survivor is defined by their life afterwards." – Unknown

“Don’t ask him why he didn’t fight harder. Ask her why he had to fight at all.”

-- Eric Carroll

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LIST OF FIGURES

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glossary

Topic specific terms are listed here alphabetically.

Adult-child:

Alienating Behaviors:

Brainwashing:

Coercive Control:

Favored Parent/Alienating Parent/Alienator:

Gaslight/Gaslit/Gaslighting:

High-conflict divorce:

Infantization:

Parental Alienation (PA):

Parentification:

Targeted Parent/Alienated Parent:

Trauma bond/Trauma bonding:

Victim-Survivor (victim/survivor):

abbreviations list

Topic specific terms are listed here alphabetically.

AB Alienating behaviors

HCBF High-conflict birth father (or dad)

HCBM High-conflict birth mom (or mother)

HCBP High-conflict birth parent

PA Parental Alienation

PAS Parental Alienation Syndrome

Chapter 1: Introduction

When parents separate, where does that leave the children? Under the best of circumstances, the children end up having equal time with both parents and growing up to become stable and healthy individuals. Sadly, this best-case scenario is not the case in all situations. Sometimes, children are used as weapons to hurt the other parent and the parents end up fighting for parenting time with the children.

When this fighting for parenting time happens, it becomes known as a high-conflict situation. With high-conflict custody issues there is a continuum to the degree of difficulty faced by everyone involved. On the one end are the cases that can be overcome with some education and application of new parenting and communication tools and skills. The parents may not know what the problem is or how to co-parent. They may be so absorbed by their own hurt over the relationship breakdown they just want to lash out at the other parent and make them hurt too. It is these types of situations that the short involvement of a third party is often all they need to start putting the child’s needs ahead of their own.

On the other end of the continuum are the cases that are in total breakdown and can be considered abusive. These cases deal with an even more nuanced continuum that begins with custodial contact issues and ends with what is known as parental alienation (PA). ~~When PA is involved, both the child and the targeted parent suffer from various forms of emotional and psychological abuse (Harman, Kurk, & Hines, 2018; Kurk, 2018).~~ This research will consider what it takes for non-custodial fathers to overcome the trauma and other ramifications that come from dealing with this end of the continuum.

Problem Statement

 It is unknown what interpersonal qualities Non-Custodial Fathers who are the target victims of custodial contact issues need to overcome related trauma. What are the costs non-custodial fathers experience and endure all in order to have a relationship with his child? What does it take to overcome trauma resulting from PA and other custodial contact issues? This research will identify interpersonal qualities non-custodial fathers need to overcome trauma related to parental alienation and other custodial contact issues.

Parental alienation occurs to various degrees in more families than we realize (citation). That number only increases when the full spectrum of custodial contact issues is considered. There is a vast amount of research that addresses the fact that PA is an issue and that something needs to be done about it (several citations such as Harmon, Baker, Bernette, et. al.). There is even research available describing the ramifications and trauma experienced by the victims of PA (cite several here as well). However, after lengthy research through various databases, there is virtually no peer-reviewed research addressing how targeted fathers can overcome the ramifications resulting from parental alienation and other custodial contact issues.

 Background of the Problem

The family as an institution is under attack. Cohabitation is on the rise (Perelli-Harris, Berrington, Gassen, Galezewska, & Holland, 2017; Waggoner, 2016). Divorce is an everyday occurrence and part of life in the 21st century. Prior to the cultural revolution of the 1950’s and ‘60’s, both divorce and cohabitation were frowned upon (Hendi, 2019; Schlafly, 2014; Trost, 2016, p. 18). Today, family formation in various forms has become the acceptable norm (Gash & Yamin, 2016; Golden & Price, 2018; Grossbard, 2016). Additionally, 21st century social trends demonstrate that it is just as easy to get divorced as it is to get married and even easier to just live with each other without the legal paperwork and separate when the couple decides the relationship is over (Stanley, Rhoades, & Markman, 2006).

Confusion can arise concerning terminology when discussing family formation as well as when discussing the dissolving of an intimate relationship. Many of the nuanced differences between marriage and cohabitation tend to be based in legalities. For example, the primary difference between marriage and cohabitation is the legal recognition of the union (Liu, Chang, & Su, 2016,; Hamplová, Le Bourdais, & Lapierre-Adamcyk, 2014.; Golden & Price, 2018) In the same vein, the difference between separation and divorce is the legal recognition of the break-up. Though things are a bit more nuanced than that simple statement, a separation can be formalized legally as well but the legal aspect does not need to take place, it still comes down to the legal recognition of the couple now being two separate individuals.

Ramifications from a break-up are not bound by legal technicalities, especially to the children involved (Bell, Francia & Millear, 2022). For the children involved, it does not matter what terminology is used to describe their parents’ separation. Whether it is a divorce, a legal separation, a separation of cohabitating or never-married parents, or a simple break-up, children do not care about what adults call the new dynamic. To the children involved, all they know is their parents no longer live together or like each other and it tends to leave them wondering what it all means for them (citation). What matters is how the adults handle the parental break-up.

The problem with the prevalence of divorce today is the toll divorce takes on the children. Thankfully, there are families that are able to work together to make it as easy on the children as possible. There are even countries that have structured laws and the divorce process to be as stress free as possible (Olsson et al., 2020) so it can be done; positive experiences with divorce can occur. However, there is a portion of divorcing couples who seem to bicker over every detail including access to the children. These cases are known as high-conflict divorces or high-conflict custody cases. (Anderson et al., 2010.).

Common knowledge would suggest that children love both parents and want to be with both parents whenever possible. In high-conflict divorces, children seem to get used as pawns in a game of one-upmanship and superiority on the battlefield known as family court. Divorcing parents will fight over time, money, decisions, new love interests, etc. and all of this fighting is fueled by the legal system known as Family Law. Preliminary research has yielded no consensus on resources that focus on the child who is also experiencing the divorce, only on the perspective of adults supposedly looking out for the best interest of the child, such as a Guardian Ad Litem (GAL) or other form of advocate.

Even in these high-conflict cases, parents either figure out something that works for them, or the children grow old enough to voice their own opinion. Unfortunately, this is not the worst it can get. In some cases, the children are brought into one of the parents’ sides of the battle (typically the parent with residential custody, but not always) and taught to hate the other parent. When this happens, it is known as Parental Alienation (PA). (Amy Baker)

Parental alienation (PA) is when one parent attempts to limit or even prevent the involvement of the other parent, the targeted parent, from the life of the child. There are different levels or degrees of alienation and various techniques used by the alienating or favored parent to manipulate the child to reject the other parent. Baker (date) explains it this way “Parental alienation is the term used to describe the overall problem of children being encouraged by one parent -- the favored parent -- to unjustly reject the other parent – the targeted parent.” (<https://www.amyjlbaker.com/parental-alienation-syndrome.html> This quote is from her web site). The true determination concerning parental alienation is based on the child’s reactions and behaviors towards the targeted parent.

What are the differences between the child who falls for the brainwashing and the child who resists the alienating tactics? How do individuals survive this type of emotional, psychological, and relational abuse and move on to build new relationships once they can get out of the alienator’s power? This research will seek to discover what toll experiencing custodial contact issues including PA takes on the targeted father and what values, interpersonal skills, and character traits are needed to overcome the costs associated with such an experience.

Purpose

 The purpose of the research study is to investigate what interpersonal qualities of Non-Custodial Fathers who are the Target victims of custodial contact issues are needed to overcome related trauma.

Setting of this Research

This qualitative research was conducted on two levels. The first level was looking at the current literature using libraries, databases, and online sources. The libraries used included the Library of Congress in Washington, DC, the Omega Graduate School’s library, the Bryan Collage Library, and my personal/professional collection of books and journals associated with parental alienation and other related topics. The databases and online sources used included ProQuest, Google Scholar, the Parental Alienation Database, and direct access provided by research authors.

The second level for conducting research was through personal interviews. These interviews were conducted via Zoom. The participants were discovered through social media source serving people who have experienced parental alienation. These sources included … (TBD). The participants included targeted non-custodial fathers who are experiencing custodial contact issues.

Thesis Statement

This study will explore what interpersonal qualities of Non-Custodial Fathers who are the Target victims of custodial contact issues are needed to overcome related trauma.The first step in the exploration process is to identify terminology that aligns with the current understanding and usage of terms associated with parental alienation. This identification procedure requires inquiry through professional literature as well as questioning individuals actively involved with the parental alienation experience and field. The beginning to this discovery aspect is to ask the question: What do you consider to be parental alienation?

Research Questions

RQ1: What does it cost a father to fight for the right to be a father and have a relationship with his child?

What does it cost:

* Financially
* Emotionally
* Relationally
* Physically
* Spiritually
* Cognitively
* Self-esteem
* Masculinity / Manhood

RQ2: What can be done, what changes are needed to help alleviate the cost?

Research Approach

This research is qualitative in nature and will be conducted as a phenomenological study through interviews of non-custodial fathers experiencing custodial contact issues.

Anticipated Outcomes

The anticipated outcomes include the identification of several values, interpersonal skills and character traits that stand out as needed qualities for positive relational probabilities. I also expect to be able to identify personality, temperament, and other internal traits and bonding abilities that lead to desire for reconnection. Additionally, it is anticipated that the ideas of post traumatic growth, agency, and [need the word meaning the ability to survive, thrive, and make it thru adversity – grit? Tenacity?] will be identified. This includes the identification of terminology that is commonly used to describe the aftermath and survival of parental alienation and alienating behaviors over a period of time.

Other anticipated outcomes would be the identification of or formation of a category for situations that cannot be officially considered PA, a concept of a way to help facilitate reconnections that last, and a way to identify a healthy or potentially healthy relationship vs a toxic relationship. One of the main concerns about reconnection for me would be that no further damage be done to either of the victims, neither the child nor the parent. Since this is already on my radar, I would anticipate finding similarities that foster positive relational growth, even if starting on rocky ground.

Research Assumptions

One assumption is that the internal traits that will be discovered will line up with the Fruit of the Spirit. Some of the traits I expect to discover are grit, fortitude, tenacity, self-efficacy, patience, humility, forgiveness, positive or neutral self-esteem, resilience.

Another assumption is that the participants will have similar stories to other types of victims. This assumption includes similarities to victims of abuse including domestic violence, trafficking, and all types of abuse. It also includes commonalities to people who have been involved in cults or people who experience post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). A curiosity is to see if parental alienation victims express a resemblance to Stockholm Syndrome or Munchausen by Proxy in any way.

A third assumption is that the definition of Parental Alienation used by participants will be inclusive along the custodial contact issues continuum. It will be assumed that the participants will not realize the actual diagnosis definition of PA is based on the behaviors of the child and not the experience of alienating behaviors. It will also be assumed that fathers’ experiences will range from one end of the continuum to the other. This assumption is because the colloquial use of the term PA tends to include situations that would not fall within the diagnosis of parental alienation.

Some general assumptions are that the participants will be willing to openly share their stories, that they will understand the questions being asked, and that the terminology being used by the participants and myself will have the same meaning. It is assumed that the participants will be willing and available to participate after they have been given the full explanation of expectations, and that accommodations will be made to ensure that full participation can occur. It is also assumed that the participants will inform the researcher when there are scheduling conflicts or subjects they are not ready to discuss. It is also assumed that the participants are at an emotionally stable and mentally healthy point of their journey.

A final assumption is that the participants will express some form of faith or spirituality as something of importance to help them cope with their situation concerning the parental alienation experience. It is my belief that faith, or at least early training in biblical precepts to be key factors in the formation of coping mechanisms. Even people who are non-Christian typically are taught how to have a good relationship with others in society. These niceties or social mores for the most part, are based on Christian principals. It is my assumption that these principals will have a part in the survivability and tenacity needed to experience alienating behaviors and reconnect with the other alienated family member.

Significance of the Research

With the idea of doing what is in the best interest of the child, it seems logical to figure out what interpersonal skills, character traits, values, and any other internal drive is needed to survive and thrive beyond parental alienation and alienating behaviors in order to help prevent future alienation of other children. Identifying key values, interpersonal skills and character traits that are required to overcome ramifications of parental alienation will potentially lead to early interventions, informed decision making, and the ability to help others overcome the trauma related to parental alienation.

There is very little out there about the ramifications of PA ~~and the reunification process~~. Most of the PA research stems from a purely clinical perspective or from a legal standpoint, and it focuses on the act of alienation or trying to prove its existence instead of focusing on recovery from the experience. It is only recently (within the last 5 years or less) that PA is being studied as actual abuse. Much of what is out there is based on Gardner’s concept of Parental Alienation Syndrome (PAS) and what the DSM5 has to say about it. (It is still debated whether or not PAS qualifies as a diagnosis or not – a major issue considering legal aspects associates with PA).

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This chapter will look at the current research concerning parental alienation, custodial contact issues, and the ramifications that come from such experiences. It will provide a historical overview of what a family is and how it has changed over the years. It will then look at the breakdown of the family, the differences between divorce and separation, and how the legal system affects the family once it is involved. This chapter will then provide background for understanding the continuum from custodial contact issues through parental alienation. This will include opposing viewpoints, explanation of known ramifications resulting from the parental alienation experience and look at some of the reunification options currently available. Additionally, this chapter will show a correlation of parental alienation and alienating behaviors with domestic violence and child abuse and show similarities between victims of parental alienation and people who have experienced PTSD, addiction, and/or cult involvement. Finally, this chapter will suggest some alternative ways to address PA and custodial contact issues as well as provide the theoretical perspective that was used while conducting this research.

Purpose

The purpose of this literature review is to demonstrate a foundation and knowledge base concerning the importance of fathers, parental alienation, broken or dysfunctional family structure, and what fathers experience while trying to be a father and have an active role and relationship with their child. It also serves as an overview of the ramifications from divorce, involving the judicial system within family dynamics, and the complications resulting from mental health issues within the family. Furthermore, this literature review is intended to provide a general understanding of the insidious nature of parental alienation and the destruction of the family that is left in its wake.

Overview

**Parental Alienation (PA)**

*What is Parental Alienation Exactly?*

The official definition of parental alienation (PA) is [formal definition here] (Baker; Harmon; Gardner; Warshack; Childress; Bernet). There are three levels of PA, mild, moderate, and sever (Alase, 2017; Baker, 20??). The mild and moderate levels seem to overlap with situations that would fall into the custodial contact issues area of the custodial contact/parent-child relationship after divorce continuum [see fig. 1].The severe cases would fall at the farthest extreme of the continuum and would be the most likely situations to have an official diagnosis from a mental health professional.

Additionally, there are three types of alienating parents, naïve, active, and obsessed (Baker, 20XX). Naïve alienating parents use alienating behaviors and tactics without realizing exactly what they are doing in regard to alienation. Active alienators are intentional in the behaviors and tactics used. They may intentionally interfere with the parent-child relationship, but it is typically done out of the alienator feeling hurt and as an act of lashing out at the other parent. Typically, both the naïve and active alienators will change their behaviors with mild interventions such as psychoeducation or counseling. Once they learn how their behavior negatively affects their child, the alienator changes their behavior, especially when give the tools and resources to handle the situation differently.

The third type of alienating parent is the obsessed alienator. This type of alienator will do anything to keep the targeted parent away from the child (Baker, 20XX). Typically, this type of parent will be acting out of a sense of control or vengeance. Additionally, it will be this type of parent that will demonstrate personality traits that make others question their mental health standings. It will also most likely be this type of parent whose alienation tactics fall into the severe form of PA.

In other words, Parental Alienation (PA) is when one parent, the alienating parent, intentionally or unaware exhibits behaviors that prevent their child(ren) from having and/or developing a meaningful relationship with the other parent. To be clear, parental alienation is not gender based; the alienating parent can be either the mother or the father. According to (Baker; Harmon) the majority of alienators seems to be the mother, but fathers are just as capable of doing the alienating (Baker; Harmon). However, this research is focusing on the experiences of fathers as the targeted parent, so from here on terminology used will be from the perspective of a father who is experiencing custodial contact interruption on any level.

*Why is Parental Alienation So Important?*

Children deserve to have a relationship with both parents. Depriving a child of a relationship with one of his or her parents is doing more damage than anyone realizes. In America, we have a fatherless crisis that very few people talk about. The ramifications of fatherlessness have contributed to many of society’s problems such as gang involvement, incarceration, teen pregnancy, poverty rates, and others (Farrell & Gray; Blankenhorn). The interpersonal skills learned from gender differences and the relational dynamics experienced from the different genders cannot be gained from any other relationship other than parent-child (Gender topic author – Farrell; Sommers; Wilson; Schlafly). Additionally, identity comes from the influence of both sides of a person’s family. The traditions, culture, and heritage gained from each part of a family is irreplaceable. Depriving a child of a relationship with one parent is not just eliminating one relationship; it is the elimination of multiple relationships and denying half of who the child is (Baker; Harmon).

Parental alienation is currently a worldwide epidemic that is rarely acknowledged, frequently denied, and understood by only those who are or have experienced it and a handful of professionals who have made it their life’s mission to do something about this phenomenon (Petra Deeter and Dr. Kruk interview on Victim to Hero).

Parental alienation is a form of child abuse and needs to be recognized as such. [go into detail about how PA meets the criteria of abuse. This will lead nicely into PA & Mental health]

**Parental Alienation and Mental Health**

Fatherlessness, lack of interaction with both genders, and identity issues are only the starting point for what harm comes from parental alienation. Baker (date) expressed that there are long term effects from parental alienating behaviors, especially for the adult-child of PA. She shared that some of these ramifications could include relationship issues, self-worth and identity, as well as dysfunctional behaviors (i.e.: addiction, delinquency, and suicide).

Alienated parents have their own mental health concerns. Beyond the physical absence of their child in their lives, the absence of the parent-child relationship is detrimental to their mental health (citation). A common comparison within the parental alienation community is akin to the death of the child, the only difference being that there is never any real closure with PA. How can there be closure when the person being grieved is still very much alive?

The mental health aspect of PA is a core residual element that typical is not noticed until damage has already occurred. Because of the long-term effects PA has on everyone involved, there is currently a major push to have PA recognized as a form of child abuse, domestic violence and intimate partner violence (IPV) (citation). Additionally, advocates for PA are encouraging recognition of alienating behaviors and PA to be included in the DSM-V and the (the European equivalent).

PA does fit the diagnosis criteria in the DSM-V to be seen as a legitimate form of abuse. It fits [identify the codes it falls under]. It fits [European equivalent] as well. [Identify for European standards].

**Parental Alienation and the Law**

As of the time of this writing, there are no real legal ramifications for parental alienation. Some courts will order parenting education, supervised visitation, or even limited parental contact to reestablish a parent-child bond, but these interventions are typically seen only in the worst-case scenarios and after multiple attempts by the court to develop a parenting plan and shared custody arrangement that is followed by both parents.

When PA is involved, rarely is the alienating parent held accountable in any meaningful way (Carrol & Issak).

Lack of training, education and understanding of the topic of PA by all professionals is another legal aspect that needs to be addressed. Because parental alienation is counterintuitive by nature when it comes to addressing undesirable behaviors, traditional therapies or approaches to correct the situation do not work and have a high potential for doing more harm (Baker; Harmon; etc.).

Misunderstanding and belief of misinformation is another aspect of the legal arena that makes PA important. There are groups of parental alienation deniers that have worked hard to have their perspectives become the accepted understanding with very little to back up their rationale. A prime example of this is Joan Meyer (date) and her perspective that PA is pseudoscience and just an excuse used by abusive men to perpetuate further abuse.

Laws that are detrimental to the family also need to be reevaluated. These laws have good intentions behind them, but they are either outdated or biased in a way that perpetuates the possibility for PA. One primary law is known as Title IV-D of the Social Security Act (SSA). This part of the SSA deals with child support and how it is to be handled (cite exact location in bill). A new bill that was signed into federal law in March 2022 and is now being pushed for the states to adopt is commonly known as “Kayden’s Law.” This law directly affects parental alienation cases and ties the judge’s hands in what can and cannot be done when dealing with PA cases (cite law and Petra’s letter).

Parental alienation is important for so many reasons. Children are being forever traumatized, families are being damaged further than needed, and society needs a reality check. People in general, but Americans specifically say that children are important, precious, and need adults to protect them. If children are held in that high regard, then why do we do nothing, or at best very little, to think about them in situations that directly affect them and their wellbeing?

Background and History: A Deeper Dive

**Times are Changing**

*Parental Alienation through the years*

 Parental alienation (PA) has been around for a long time; however, in its current understanding PA started to be recognized and identified as a problem in 1985 by Richard Gardner (1992). Gardner identified Parental Alienation Syndrome (PAS) as “a disturbance in which children are preoccupied with deprecation and criticism of a parent – denigration that is unjustified and/or exaggerated (p. 73).” He goes on to explain that the defining statement is an oversimplification of a complex situation.

*Opposition*

There have been various arguments against parental alienation especially when using it in custody battles. Some of the major arguments have been from advocates for feminism, women’s rights, and domestic violence prevention (citation). A main argument centers on the idea that parental alienation is not in the DSM-V, the diagnostic manual used by psychologists, psychiatrists, and other mental health professionals to identify mental health problems. A second argument is that PA is used as a convenient cover for domestic violence, especially when men claim PA (citation).

 The rebuttal to all of these opposing viewpoints comes down to the reliability of their misinformation. Many of the sources used to support their misinformed beliefs come from articles that have not been peer reviewed. A primary example of a non-peer reviewed author is Joan Meyer ( find date ). [go into an explanation of who Joan Meyer is including her connections and activities]

*Terminology*

 Just like any other identified niche, parental alienation ideology has its own terminology that needs some explanation. Some of the major terms that will be used throughout this paper will be explained here. Some of the terms that are used less frequently will be explained in a special terminology section on page ( ) of this dissertation.

 A targeted or alienated parent is the parent with minimal to no contact with their child due to the behaviors of the favored parent.

The favored parent is the parent who is using alienating behaviors to limit the contact between their child and the other parent.

Alienating behaviors are those behaviors used by the favored parent that interferes with the relationship between the child and the other parent. These behaviors include but are not limited to controlling contact between the child and the other parent, talking bad about the other parent to the child and others, and using false information to try to convince the child to see things from the alienators point of view. Other terms associated with alienating behaviors include gaslighting, coercive control, manipulation, badmouthing, and abuse (categories of abuse are psychological, social/emotional, relational)

**What Happened to the Traditional American Family**

 *Family Make-Up Prior to the 20th Century*

Prior to the 20th century, the make-up of the family was predominantly close-knit groups of people related to one another by blood or by marriage. It was common to find extended family living in the same home if not the same neighborhood. Even the nuclear families who did not live with or close to extended family members were still, for the most part, intact family units (citation needed – check forum paper).

There were various other family designs throughout history. Divorce was available but looked down upon. Blended family situations occurred, but they were mostly due to death of a spouse/parent and the living parent marrying someone new. Despite the fact that it was shunned, giving birth out of wedlock still happened. Albeit there have always been different ways to be a family, the traditional family was considered the norm, or at least the acceptable norm.

*The 21st Century family*

The traditional family, made up of a mother, father, and their biological children, has been the norm for most of history. It is still seen as normal and an ideal family in the 21st century, but it is not the only form a family can take nor is it the only model seen as normal. In the 21st century, family is considered to be almost anything a person wants it to be. This degradation of the family seems to have started with the women’s rights movement, especially the second-wave feminism of the 1960’s and 1970’s.

*Women’s Rights Era*

 The beginning of changes to the family can be traced back to the women’s rights movement that began in 1848 (Bonnie Eisenberg and Mary Ruthsdotter 1998 <https://nationalwomenshistoryalliance.org/history-of-the-womens-rights-movement/>). This date was when the Suffragette movement and the fight for women’s right to vote began. Prior to the right to vote, women had no rights to anything. This included her children (citation needed – see if you can find something about the law stating fathers get children).

 Fast forward to the 1960’s and 1970’s when second-wave feminism came into vogue. (https://socialwelfare.library.vcu.edu/war-on-poverty/american-social-policy-in-the-60s-and-70s/ Developments in the Social Sector – The Women’s Movement) This time period saw a lot of advancements that helped women become autonomous and consequently began the breakdown of the family. This time period brought about social changes affecting the family such as easy access to birth control, abortion on demand, and no-fault divorce. It saw the development of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) and the idea that a woman can have it all and be it all, all at the same time. Women began demanding to be seen as equals to men, especially in the workforce demanding equal pay for equal work. This was also the time period when single parent households, especially homes headed by single mothers, became common. (citations needed – use Schlafly and others from forum paper)

*Tender Years Doctrine*

Two big factors came into play to encourage the single parent home. The first had to do with welfare and the policy that said a woman with children in poverty could not receive help from the government if there was a man in the home. This encouraged women to not have a man in the home, either through divorce or by not getting married and having children out of wedlock (citation). The second was the idea that a mother is a better parent for the child, especially in the younger years. This idea became known as the Tender Years Doctrine (Gardner,1998, pp. 74-75).

The Tender Years Doctrine stated that mothers are the better parent, especially during the early years of life – the tender years (Hartenstein, 2016). It was this idea that allowed for federal assistance to provide programs targeting single parent homes, especially female headed families. The Tender Years Doctrine was also the original policy used to decide who the primary caregiver of the children should be during a divorce.

When a couple divorced, because of the Tender Years Doctrine, the mother received primary custody of the children. This created a single-parent household with the mother as the head of the house. Based on poverty guidelines, women headed households tended to be impoverished which led to her needing government assistance. The welfare guidelines stated that in order to receive government assistance, there could be no adult male in the home (Gardner,1998, pp. 74-75).

Once the idea that mothers are the parent the child needs and the government will help her raise those children, the father was no longer needed in the family.

*Best Interest of the Child*

The Tender Years Doctrine was replaced by the Best Interest of the Child Standard (BIOC) (Citation). [in the 1970’s/1980’s (depending on resource information is coming from -- find better details about this shift. It wasn’t official doctrine until after the UN CRC in 1990). ] The BIOC standard was originated by the UN in 1990 (Citation). This 1990 version was based on previous versions of the Declaration of the Rights of the Child.

When applying the standard to child custody, the BIOC typically has two forms. One, the best interest of the child is seen as whichever parent/caregiver is seen as the primary caregiver, while the other form views the best interest of the child as having equal access to and involvement with both parents (Hartenstein, 2016).

**Divorce and Separation**

Divorce is messy. The entire divorce process has been designed to be an adversarial process. Even in the best of circumstances, when two people can no longer get along, there tends to be disagreements about finances and assets and who gets what. But when children are involved, the process of divorce becomes even more complicated and even more messy. The problem with the whole issue of divorce is that the children are the ones who pay. Yes, the divorcing couple experience emotional pain and financial strain, but children bear the biggest cost; their worlds have been ripped in two through no fault of their own.

What is even more complicated is when the parents are not legally married and decide it is time to separate. At the time of this writing, the rate of cohabitations as opposed to marriage is on the rise (Census citation). Though the laws vary from state to state, without the legal recognition of the union, unwed fathers tend to have an even more difficult time accessing their children (citation).

 For the purposes of this study, the terms divorced and separated will beseen as having the same result, a split of the family. Additionally, both terms will be in reference to biological parents who dissolve their romantic relationship and no longer live as a couple or family. The word divorce or divorced will be the terms primarily used throughout this paper when referring to a family who have had the romantic couple dissolve their relationship.

Divorce and the situations that result from divorcing parents are never in the best interest of the children. The best interest of the children is to have their family intact and healthy. When this cannot happen due to choices made by the adults in their lives, the best interest of the children becomes a decision made by a public official based on confrontational he said – she said information.

In the best-case scenarios concerning children and divorce, the judge can have a parenting plan put in place that allows for a 50/50 custody arrangement and the parents follow it amicably, never returning to court. However, this scenario rarely happens. Typically, one parent is designated as residential or custodial while the other parent is designated as visiting or non-custodial (citation).

The parent who is recognized by the court as the residential or custodial parent is the parent the child lives with for most of the time. Though things are beginning to change, this custodial parent is typically the mother (Jack Kent https://bestforthechildren.com/what-percentage-of-men-win-child-custody-battles-2020-2021-data/). Based on the 2019 United States Census Bureau (Living Arrangements of Children: 2019, Table 1, p. 3), children in single parent homes are about five times more likely to live with their mother than their father. Even when the custodial arrangements are considered 50/50, where both parents have a balanced or equal number of days with the child, there is typically a designated primary residence. Often, this is the parent who receives child support of some sort mandated by the court system.

The other parent, known as the visiting or non-custodial parent, is designated parenting time by the court. This parent normally is the one seeing his or her child on weekends or once a week if they are lucky. They are the parent paying child support to the other parent. They are also the parent who desires more time with their child, lives for the moments they have their child, and fights for every moment they can get with their child (quote a father or from a father’s rights article). This is also the parent who characteristically believes themselves to be missing out, getting the short end of the stick, or being treated unfairly (Harmon & Biringen, 2016).

In many instances concerning custody in divorcing or separating families, agreements about parenting time are made through cooperation and with minimal drama and both parents are ok with if not happy with the ending result. Statistics show around 90% of child custody cases are settled without the need for a court ruling (Lazic, 2021). They may not be ecstatic about the situation but have come to an agreement that each parent needs to meet in the middle and they both need to keep their child as their focus. It may not be an ideal situation, but neither is divorce. In general, divorcing parents tend to make the best of a bad situation.

Unfortunately, there are instances where cooperation and making the best of a bad situation are nonexistent. When divorcing or separating parents cannot agree on custody arrangements things can get nasty and full of conflict. In these difficult situations, the best-case scenario is frequent trips to court to hash out minor details or petty disagreements from the parents. The sad part is that this scenario happens frequently and has perpetrated a multi-million-dollar industry known as family law (DivorceCorp.; Baskerville, 2007).

*Divorce from a Child’s Perspective*

Divorce in general is a complicated thing. Emotions run high on both sides. The court system has set up an adversarial situation from the word go. The situation is further complicated when custody issues become the main focus. When parents go to battle looking to “win” custody of the child(ren), everybody loses. However, the biggest looser is not either of the parents; the biggest looser is the child.

Even in the best-case scenario, the child loses. Children of divorce loose a sense of identity, security, and worth (Miralles et al., 2021). They lose attachment bonds that play a major role in growth and development (citation something from Attachment Theory). The child loses mentoring from one gender or another (citation). But most of all, the child loses time with their parent, a sense of family, and the innocence that comes with stability (Haimi & Lerner, 2016).

Conceptual Framework

Narrative Description

With the understanding that parental alienation (PA) is a misunderstood and highly debated issue related to high-conflict custody cases, there is a need to start with the basics. This research begins with the general information regarding PA. It attempts to inform and educated the reader about the history of and the insidious nature of parental alienation, especially the effects experienced by the children and the targeted parent.

Once a basic understanding of PA has been established, I then provide a historical overview of the breakdown of the family that has led society to a place that allows PA and associated abusive behaviors to occur. I highlight the fact that what is known as family today is not exactly the historic idea of family. I then delve into the Civil Rights Era and how the family we know today came into being and prominence. I also discuss definition of terms that have changed over the years and how the non-traditional family has become commonplace.

After knowledge of foundational and historical information associated with PA has been established, I focus on mental health issues and concerns that other researchers have acknowledged. The importance of inclusion in the DSM-V and the (European version) is also reviewed. Likewise, the importance of attachment and other relationship-based issues are examined. Additionally, similarities to other situations as well as treatment options are discussed.

Only after the history and destructive nature of PA have been established, I then discuss the law and legalities that come into play and further affects the families involved. The actual process of family court is introduced as are the concepts of how adversarial, biased, and costly the experience can be. This section is concluded with a discussion of Title IV-D of the Social Security Act ( ) and reasons for the consideration of revamping the entire family court process and the elimination of Title VI-D

Graphic Description



Theoretical Framework

Narrative Description

The framework for this research is based on the concept of The Best Interest of the Child as defined by the UN (1990) through the lens of Bowen’s Family Systems Theory. This perspective is further guided by Bronfenbrenner’ Bioecological Theory, Bowlby’s Attachment theory, and Childism theory, a fairly new concept that is informed by Feminism except instead of woman centered, it is child centered (The Childism Institute, 2021; Wall, 2019; Young-Bruehl, 2012).

Much of the research concerning PA has been conducted through the lens of Bowen’s Family Systems Theory, but much of this research has been looking at parental alienation as a problem, educating others about PA, or addressing legalities and the recognition of PA as a mental health issue if not abuse. As a researcher looking for ways to positively influence and correct misinformation areas associated with PA, I believe a more well-informed perspective needs to be used. Though the theories that influence my perspective are distinct, the combination of them provides the weight and importance needed to address the ramifications of PA and what it takes to reconnect and rebuild relationship with estranged parents and their children.

Since research supports the use of Family Systems Theory, I will start my theoretical framework explanation with that. As for the subsequent theories, they are in no particular order other than ease of flow in the narrative. Narrative flow presentation is because I view these theories to be of equal importance and influence on this paper. At any point in the process the information presented could be seen through the lens of any of the theories and be just as relative to the research.

**Family Systems Theory**

According to the Bowen Center (2021), the official center focused on the work of Dr. Bowen (https://www.thebowencenter.org/dr-bowen), Family Systems Theory was developed by Dr. Murray Bowen. He was born in 1913 in middle Tennessee, went to college to become a doctor, and by 1941 he served as a wartime doctor with the Army. It was stated that because of his time in the army and observing the soldiers he changed his specialty from surgery to psychiatry (Bowen Center, 2021).

In 1954, Dr. Bowen entered into a five-year research project in conjunction with the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) in Bethesda, MD. The work was with families with at least one member as a schizophrenic inpatient. This research was the beginning development of Family Systems Theory (https://murraybowenarchives.org/bowen-theory/).

Hall (2016) provides a good overview of Family Systems Theory. They state, “From a [Family] systems perspective, behavior symptoms are generally conceptualized as overreactive responses to other family members, or to shifts in the patterns of interdependency in a family.” (p. 12). In other words, a family systems perspective sees behaviors as a series of actions and reactions based on the behaviors and interactions of others. It is the cause-and-effect process and interplay that makes each member of a family develop into the individuals they are at any given point in time.

Family Systems Theory is broken down into eight concepts. These concepts include Triangles, Differentiation of Self, Nuclear Family Emotional Process, Family Projection Process, Multigenerational Transmission Process, Emotional Cutoff, Sibling Position, and Societal Emotional Position (<https://www.thebowencenter.org/core-concepts-diagrams>). In short, Bowen saw the family as “an emotional unit” (<https://www.thebowencenter.org/introduction-eight-concepts>) that was interdependent upon one another. The Bowen Center explains it this way:

 Families so profoundly affect their members’ thoughts, feelings, and actions that it often seems as if people are living under the same “emotional skin.” People solicit each other’s attention, approval, and support, and they react to each other’s needs, expectations, and upsets. This connectedness and reactivity make the functioning of family members interdependent.

**Best Interest of the Child (BIOC)**

Best Interest of the Child (BIOC) was codified by the UN in 1990 (1990) and is currently standard by most members of the UN. It states how children are to be treated around the world. BIOC addresses everything about children from defining what or who are to be considered children, how children are to be treated and represented, and the rights children are to have throughout the world. There are several articles that directly address the child’s rights concerning family and parenting as well as articles directly addressing abuse and neglect. It will be these particular articles that have weight concerning this research.

As written by the UN in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1990), the articles that directly relate to PA are articles 3, 5, 8, 9, 10, 12, 14, 16, and 18. The following is a list of summaries for each article.

* Article 3 states the child’s best interests shall be a primary factor when dealing with situations concerning or involving children.
* Article 5 provides the parents with the responsibility for direction and guidance of the child
* Article 8 ensures that the child is entitled to their own identity and that includes a name, family, and culture.
* Article 9 guarantees the child will not be separated from their parent except in certain circumstances. It then explains which circumstances and further explains how to protect and ensure that the best interests of the child stays intact.
* Article 10 addresses situations when parents live in different states or countries.
* Article 12 states that the child has a right to their own opinions and views and that they are to be allowed to share and express those perspectives openly and freely.
* Article 14 ensures that the child has rights to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, and that the parents have the right to oversight and direction for the formation of the child’s freedoms
* Article 16 assures the child has a right to privacy, home, family, and correspondence.
* Article 18 states that both parents have equal rights and responsibilities to the child

There are other articles that can come into play when discussing parental alienation, but they are more directly addressing abuse and neglect. While PA is abusive behavior, it is still not understood as abuse in all situations. For this reason, I will keep PA and abuse separate. To use a metaphor for clarity, PA and abuse are like two sides to the same coin.

Though the United States has ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) (the official title of the document and the other name BIOC goes by) it has not signed into law and agreement. Part of the reasoning behind not signing has to do with our national sovereignty and how BIOC and UN governance could override US law and autonomy (The United Nations’ Convention on the Rights of the Child. Updated July 27, 2015.). Other reasons stated for not ratifying the CRC were state and federal laws as well as parental rights (p. 5). A final reason for not ratifying the CRC was the meaning behind the best interest of the child and how it is left to interpretations because there is no formalize blanket agreement on what actually constitutes best interest of the child (p. 9).

Basically, my theoretical ideology is:

* We do not live in a vacuum. We are influenced, guided, and directed by those around us. Our values, beliefs, understanding of the world, traditions, culture, etc. all come for external influences. Our primary influence is our family, specifically our parents. The next levels out are based on our parents’ spheres of influence.
* When our relationship with one or both of our parents is damaged or interrupted in any way, it affects who we are and how we relate to others for our entire life.
* Children need to be a higher priority that they currently are in our society. The Best Interest of the Child needs a definitive explanation that is standardized across the board. Because they do not have a voice in things that affect them, children need to be made a priority by adults when considering actions that will affect them (in the case of my research that would be divorce, custody, and everything involved)
* God made us to live in community, specifically the family. There are numerous reasons God hates divorce. One primary reason is that it does irreparable damage to everyone in the family – not just the couple.

These basic ideals are what drive my thinking and understanding of the ramifications of PA

Graphic Description

Chapter 3: Research Design and Methodology

The purpose of this chapter is to explain how the research will be conducted and the steps that will be taken to ensure the results of the study are viable.

Overview of Information Needed

The information needed for the study will be the participants lived experiences and how dealing with custodial contact issues has affected their lives.

Overview of Methodology

The methodology of this research will be qualitative in nature. It will follow a phenomenological approach during the data collection and discovery process. The participants will share their experiences through interviews, and the data will be processed through a development of themes and consistent concepts (Cresswell; Moustakas; Leavy)

Ethical Compliance

All participants will be provided detailed explanations of what I am doing. They will also be provided consent forms along the way for permission to conduct the interviews, have them recorded and transcribed for my research needs for the \_tbd\_\_length of time.

Demographic Data

Participants will be non-custodial fathers who are experiencing or have experienced custodial contact issues. These men will be volunteer participants from the social media platform, Dad Talk Today (DTT), from personal contact and knowledge, and from the Southeast Tennessee area.

Analysis and Synthesis of Data

The analysis and synthesis of the data was conducted with the aid of Dedoose software. Themes were discovered and further questions developed. These questions were followed up on through subsequent interviews and brought back in to be reevaluated.

The question and answer process was developed and formulized by first using a test interview process consisting of (who? How many? Are they used in the actual data collection process?)

Issues of Trustworthiness

The interviews will be conducted in an ethical manner and with the participants full approval and consent. Consent wavers will be signed. Participants will have full understanding of the process, what to expect from me and what will be expected from them prior to the interviews. They will have the option to opt out at any time for any reason.

Limitations

Limitations of the study are largely due to the limited number of participants. Because this study was qualitative in nature, the number of participants was small. Further study concerning the lived experiences of non-custodial fathers is needed to mitigate the limitations of this study.

Examples of participant related limitations include the single source of participant access (DTT), the small number of participants, the knowledge and understanding of participants beyond their own story about PA.

Additional limitations are related to me as the researcher and my personal experience with PA. There was a limited amount of peer-reviewed information related to the experience of fathers related to custodial contact issues and PA in the literature I was able to locate and gain access to. Another limitation related to me is that my perspective may not be as objective as another researcher’s due to my personal experience with PA. Having that experience, I am biased towards the plight of fathers when it comes to custodial issue.

 Summary

This qualitative research will be conducted with the highest integrity possible. It will focus on the lived experiences of non-custodial fathers who experience custodial contact issues to any degree. The intent behind the research is to discover what, if any, character traits, experiences, circumstances, or effects may be shared as commonalities and ramifications because of the custodial contact problems.

CHAPTER 4: SUMMARY OF RESULTS

[Brief introductory paragraph.]

Objective Descriptions of the Findings

(Other headings as needed; finding are not subject to interpretation by researcher.)

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

[Brief paragraph of introduction to the chapter without a heading.]

Subjective Description of Meaning for Each Finding

Analysis related to Research Questions

Conclusions

(Typically each conclusion drawn should be tied to the respective finding and intpretations.)

Recommendations

[Appropriate Level 2 Headings of Your Choice]

Suggestions for Further Research

But what about the situations that do not qualify officially to be considered parental alienation? At least with parental alienation, there are identifiable markers and behaviors to watch for. What about the children who know the residential parent is keeping them from the targeted parent, but they are helpless to do anything about it? What about the children who want a relationship with the other parent, but because of age, location, or circumstance are unable to do anything towards that end? These children are still experiencing alienating behaviors, but because the diagnosis of parental alienation is based on the child’s actions, attitudes and behaviors, this situation could not officially be considered parental alienation.

*This research will seek to discover what values, interpersonal skills, and character traits are needed to overcome alienating behaviors and rebuild a new parent/child relationship. [ this sentence is here to move the comment attached. It is not to be part of the prose, just a placeholder for an idea]*

The following are areas that need to be developed further and/or researched.

* Custody exchange murders
* Suicide rate for non-custodial/targeted parents
* Transition adjustment
* Title IV-D reform
* Family Court Restructuring (How do we get family court and the government out of our family)

[BACK MATTER]

 Many details are compiled in a section known as back matter. This information is more detailed than is needed for general comprehension of the purpose and outcomes of the research but is preserved in the report so that the entire process can be verified or repeated. Include all elements that were part of your research. These pages all carry page numbers.

 Works Cited. All materials referred to in the text.

 Related Works. (Rarely used). Materials used in the development of the project, but not cited in the text. These materials provide prerequisite or supplemental information not used in the research but that is closely related to the topic.

 Appendixes

1. Consent Form
2. Interview Protocol
3. Interview Notes and Transcripts
4. Software Report

 The author’s vita

 Index (Rarely used)

[OTHER BACK MATTER]

Anything else that is important to add follows the appendixes. Such items, which are optional and depend upon the nature of a particular project, could include:

Bibliography (materials consulted that contributed to your project but not cited)

Sources recommended for further information on the subject of the research

These are used uncommonly, but if you have materials that you believe must be included to enable optimal comprehension and use of the content, talk to your advisor about including them. Extraneous material diminishes the credibility of the study.

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Works read in preparation for a research study but not quoted, and thus omitted from the Works Cited section, may be listed alphabetically in an optional section entitled Related Works placed immediately after the Works Cited. The references follow the same APA 6th format. Use only if the information is useful to the reader lest you appear to be padding your report.

APPENDIX A

TITLE OF APPENDIX

APPENDIX A: TITLE OF APPENDIX

The plural form of “appendix” may be either “appendixes” or “appendices.” The dictionary followed by APA 6th (Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary, 2005) shows “appendixes” as the preferred form, as do most other current dictionaries. The appendixes follow immediately after the Works Cited and are placed in the sequence in which their material appears in the body of the dissertation. The appendixes that are included depend upon the nature of the research. Each has a title page identified by a letter—A, B, C and so on. (This book does not follow that practice.) Should you have more than 26 (!), continue from Z as AA, AB, AC.

An appendix may contain only one item although that item may be multiple pages. For example, a survey would be in one appendix, but a permission form for a minor child to fill out the survey would be in another. Include all material that would help a naïve reader to comprehend exactly what you did, but only if the material is relevant. Do not open yourself to criticism of padding out a weak report.

Side margins of an appendix may be narrowed to accommodate a data table, but reducing the size of the table is generally preferred. If the size of a figure or historical document is reduced, insert that information on the title page for that appendix (E.g., Map is 80% of actual size.)

Any instruction or other information given to participants. If given orally or by

 recording, include the script.

Letter requesting permission to do research at a location

Authorization received in response to a request for permission.

Forms for permission, release of information, or waiver of liability

CURRICULUM VITAE

A one-page vita is placed immediately after the last appendix. The vita includes significant summary information, including: date of birth; granting institution for previous college degrees with dates, degree nomenclature, and field of study; a brief summary of employment; and any other facts (such as awards) that describe your qualifications as a researcher. The information is limited so that it fits on one page with adequate white space.

References gained from other sources

DELEAT BEFORE FINAL SUBMISSION

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