**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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**Chapter 1**

**Introduction**

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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).

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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.

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