



Childhood exposure to parental alienation practices: a socio-educational analysis*

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Abstract: Objective. To carry out a study about family alienation practices and the extent to which they affect minors as they are exposed to such practices. Methodology. A qualitative research approach is used. In order to conduct this research, a case study made up of five families who attend the Specialised Family and Infancy Service in Spain was carried out. Results and conclusions. The obtained results revealed the high degree of effect on the family members who made up the sample due to the conflicts that legal separation or divorce procedures cause. It is important to ensure that the fundamental right of minors are suitably related to both their mothers and fathers by maintaining all their links.

Key words: alienation, family alienation practices, symptomatology, degree of effect, case study.

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La exposición de la infancia a las practicas alienadoras familiares: un análisis socioeducativo

Resumen: Objetivo. Realizar un estudio sobre las prácticas alienadoras familiares y el grado de afectación en los menores a causa de estar expuestos a estas. Metodología. Se empleó una aproximación a la investigación cualitativa. Para el desarrollo de la investigación se llevó a cabo un estudio compuesto por cinco familias usuarias del Servicio Especializado de Atención a la Familia e Infancia de un municipio de Valencia (España), con el fin de conocer el grado de afectación y la sintomatología existente en los menores que conviven bajo prácticas familiares disfuncionales sujetas a la alienación. Resultados y conclusiones. A partir de los resultados obtenidos se vislumbra el alto grado de afectación en los miembros de las familias que integran la muestra a causa de conflictos dados por procesos de separación o divorcio judicializados. Dicha realidad produce un grave daño en el bienestar emocional y en el desarrollo de los niños que lo sufren. Es importante garantizar el derecho fundamental de los menores a relacionarse adecuadamente tanto con su padre como con su madre manteniendo todos sus vínculos.

Palabras clave: alienación, prácticas alienadoras familiares, sintomatología, grado de afectación, estudio de casos.

Introduction

The family is a basic social co-existence nucleus whose structure and relations from the inside are fundamental for the development of each of its members. A family is “a living thing that changes and evolves, and the decisions made in the family affect it, regardless of them being individual or of the family as a group” (Cortés, 2010, p. 58).

Separation or divorce implies a series of changes and challenges for the family due to the alterations it causes in family roles and family functioning. Hence, the capacity of all the family members to adapt and accept the new situation, particularly parents and minors, will determine the individual and social development of people to a great extent.

As Bonasa *et al.* stated (2010), situations of separation and divorce imply, among other changes, modifying the roles that parents play because they entail implicit and different transitions and reorganisation, which are intrinsically defined as being stressful for the whole family, despite possibly affecting each family member differently.

Vilalta and Winberg (2017) pointed out that children face a period of instability because everything they have known and has been valid up until the separation varies. They often face responsibilities that exceed not only their competence, but they also become risk factors that go against their present psychological and emotional stability, and against their emotional future if not suitably dealt with. These difficulties could perpetuate to other interpersonal and/or partner situations.

Therefore, it is particularly important to refer to those families marked by the alienation processes generated by punitive separations or divorces, and all the components of the system in question are affected, especially the children living in this system. Consequently, it is important to define the concept of family alienation practices and to know their conceptual evolution as this terminological analysis will enable the reality of the families affected by these socio-family problems to be known. The use of the term Parental Alienation Syndrome (PAS) is debated and questioned in a wide range of areas, legal, family, social, education, etc.

Indeed many authors have indicated that they are against this terminology and conception for family alienation understood as a syndrome (Kelly and Johnston, 2001; Aguilar, 2005; Escudero, Aguilar and De la Cruz, 2008; Bolaños, 2008; Carratalá, 2013; Linares, 2015).

This term is controversial and not universally accepted as a syndrome. Accordingly, generating a theoretical analysis about the written scientific literature to date would be most relevant as it would allow us to know about its conceptual evolution. In the words of Arch and Pereda (2009), the so-called PAS was described for the first time as such by Richard Gardner in 1991.

However, other authors have previously recognised this concept, but used other names, like “Medea Syndrome” (Wallerstein and Blakeslee, 1989), “Malicious Mother Syndrome” (Turkat, 1994) or “Parental Programming in Divorce” (Clawar and Rivlin, 1991), among others. Such problems would be characterised by children presenting emotions, attitudes and behaviours related with rejection to one of the parents and his/her respective extended family, whose origin is an interference process by the other parent. Vilalta (2011) also indicated that this alteration appears in a divorce context in most cases, and the child scorns and criticises one parent. This is a negative, unjustified and exaggerated assessment.

We highlight Linares (2015), one of the main authors to show the terminological evolution of the alienation phenomenon by proposing a new nomenclature for such

socio-family problems. This author proposes the idea of abandoning the so-called Family Alienation Syndrome for two basic reasons.

Firstly, the conducts described according to this name do not fulfil the syndrome's epistemological requirements. A broad consensus has been reached about defining the syndrome as a series of signs and symptoms that coincide in a disease, in such a way that the presence of one of them is associated with others. Aetiologies can be diverse, but are certainly objectifiable, just like corresponding pathogenic developments.

Secondly, the name is affected by partiality with the presence of a "good" parent and a "bad" one, or an "innocent victim" and a "tormentor", which is consubstantial. This is because these reductionist and extremist considerations are far removed from the complex nature of relational phenomena. So as Linares stated (2015), family alienation practices are a series of relational situations characterised by these premises:

- Dysfunctional actions of both parents who, since a specific physical abuse pattern is lacking, constitute one alienator figure and another alienator.
 - The child/children's active collaboration in progressive mistrust and rejection dynamics.
 - Positions of the extended family members who correspond to both parents.
- (p. 40)

After learning the conceptual evolution of family alienation practices, we need to refer especially to the people mainly affected by them, namely minors because the children exposed to such practices tend to develop a series of symptoms that endanger their correct bio-psycho-social development. According to Segura, Gil and Sepúlveda (2006), the minors involved in a conflictive family breakup situation suffer an acute feeling of shock and intense fear tinged with utter confusion that involve a series of negative psycho-emotional and behavioural consequences.

These minors frequently have feelings of abandonment, blame, rejection, hopelessness and defencelessness, insecurity, as well as anxiety and depressive moods, regressive and disruptive conducts, and they have problems at school.

This symptomatology can increase when pressure is placed on children to participate in the legal procedures that derive from the conflict which a separation or divorce creates, and they form part of the dispute itself as their feelings are employed as arguments or tools to harm the other parent. (Segura, Gil and Sepúlveda, 2006, p. 119)

Gardner (1991; cited by Bolaños, 2008, p. 58) considered three alienation types (light, moderate and severe) with differing intensities as regards the symptoms that affected the children present. This symptomatology classification, as regards the

symptoms that children may present according to the intensity with which alienation practices are undertaken, is as follows:

- ***Denigrating campaign:*** As Gaffal presents (2012), minors will scornfully talk about the alienated parent, and will make pejorative remarks about him/her and his/her respective extended family. These attacks become a constant lack of respect, insults and humiliations about the alienated figure.
- ***Justifying scorn:*** Minors learn a series of arguments that refer to “past facts, personality being exaggerated or the alienated parent’s character, negative episodes of their lives in common, etc., in an attempt to justify that their attacks take place for all the harm caused” (Aguilar, 2005, p. 27).
- ***Lack of ambivalence:*** All human relationships, including parent-child ones, have some degree of ambivalence. Notwithstanding “in cases of family alienation it has been demonstrated that children do not show mixed feelings because everything is good with one parent, and everything is bad with the alienated figure” (Bolaños, 2008, p. 57).
- ***The independent thinker phenomenon:*** As Kelly and Johnston pointed out (2001), lots of children state that the decision to reject one parent is completely theirs, and they deny any type of influence by the accepted mother/father.
- ***Reflexive support to the alienating parent in the parental conflict:*** In those cases in which family alienation practices come into play, “the conflict between parents is lived by children. As a result, it is necessary to take sides by assuming the alienator parent’s defence and supporting him/her consciously” (Aguilar, 2005, p. 32).
- ***No sense of blame:*** The attacks that children make of their hatred parent come with no idea or feeling of blame.
- ***Presence of borrowed arguments:*** Different authors (Kelly and Johnston, 2001; Aguilar, 2005; Bolaños, 2008; Romero, 2010; Gaffal, 2012) indicate that the quality of the arguments that they use appears to have been rehearsed because children often use words or sentences that do not form part of children’s or adolescents language.
- ***Extending hostility to the extended family and the alienated parent’s social network:*** As Bolaños put it (2008), children reject those people who were previously a source of psychological gratifications for them because their hate is transmitted not only towards one parent, but also towards anyone who is part of the respective extended family or even their support networks.

Significant differences among the minors exposed to family alienation, and according to their current age, must be highlighted. As Boyd (2015) stated, small

children tend to display behavioural disorders, like regressive conducts, learning problems and depression, while adolescents tend to have social competence problems among which aggressiveness, being isolated from a group of friends or lacking social skills stand out.

In short, the consequences of exposing children to family alienation practices lead to a greater likelihood of relationally internalising conflicts, along with the use and share of power in the intrafamily domain, and the figure who exercises alienation against the people who face these problems is a dominant figure, and one who uses all kinds of coercion strategies against them.

Method

Participants

The study sample was selected through a non-probabilistic and intentional method as the process was done deliberately by considering different elements, like easy access to subjects and fulfilling a series of systematic criteria, which include the following:

- Being, or having been, exposed to family alienation practices.
- Having lived a conflictive separation or divorce process.
- Exhibiting the possible typical symptoms of family alienation that puts minors at risk.
- Having been referred by the Basic Social Services Team to the Specialised Family and Infancy Service in the geographical area in question.

Choosing the sample met the need to know the consequences caused in minors by being, or having been exposed to family alienation practices, and to investigate their parents' care capacities. This will allow problems to be known from various perspectives and will favour research that focuses on analysing those areas, which affect the subjects who make up the study sample.

The sample was divided into two groups as it included both minors and their parents, and they shared the aforementioned selection criteria. After considering the minors' characteristics, a group with nine minors aged between 6 and 12 years, who had been exposed to different forms of alienation was formed. It is necessary to add that the sample included more girls (55.56%) than boys (44.44%). All the children who formed the sample came from families whose parents had separated or divorced through highly conflictive alienation processes.

Although the aforementioned aspects are common for all minors, every single one of them has his/her own life story, plus a series of different individual and family

characteristics. This would mean that for each exposure to family alienation practices to which these children have been, or are, exposed a different level of effect from other children would be created. The mother and fathers of the minors were part of the sample and were the figures who exercised alienation in its various forms. These parents made up a group of five females and five males of Spanish nationality.

The mean age of the mothers was 38.8 years ($SD=4.43$), and most of them had completed elementary school education (80%), belonged to a medium-low socio-economic status, earned their own living, earned minimum wages, and were all in charge of their children. The mean age of the fathers was 40.4 years ($SD=4.56$), most of them had completed elementary and basic education (80%), and had a medium socio-economic status as they all earned a monthly income because they held better job posts than the mothers did.

Finally, our study sample presented different family typologies as 60% of them were reconstituted families, with both parents having joint custody of the child/children, while the remaining 40% were single-parent families as the mothers had the custody of the children.

Procedure

A qualitative research methodology was followed, like that indicated by Almerich, Orellana and Suárez (2010):

A type of research design characterised by many methodological possibilities, but in which the basis of the study process to create data and knowledge stands out as the common characteristics, which are obtained from interpreting a reality. In this reality, the researcher acts as an instrument used to collect information by selecting what to investigate, in what order and how to collect this information. (p. 127)

As Ballester sets out (2004), qualitative research implies using and collecting wide-ranging information that describes the reality, problematic situations and the meanings of people's lives. This qualitative design is specified in using case studies as the research methodology. A case study is understood as one of the main developed qualitative research methodologies, especially within the ethnographic frame (Jiménez-Chaves, 2012).

Among the various study typologies of existing cases, the present research is framed in explanatory case studies as the purpose was to investigate the characteristics of a phenomenon in-depth.

In turn, this case study is also deductive because, as Barratt, Choi and Li (2011) indicated, it starts with the existing scientific theory about this phenomenon in order to examine more closely and investigate the reality that is the study object.

Instruments

According to the typical characteristics of case studies, it is relevant to consider using the various data collection instruments that confer research more internal consistency and coherence. To this end, qualitative instruments were selected to carry out a thorough case study in an attempt to learn about those elements that make up the family alienation practices phenomenon and the consequences they have for minors.

- Semi-structured interviews

In this case, semi-structured interviews were held with the parents of the minors exposed to family alienation practices in an attempt to provide the analysis of the reality with a series of information about their life story, their children's reality as to the typical symptomatology of alienation, plus the maternal-paternal competences that they develop to look after children. This allows the effect generated by constant family conflicts to be known and how it affects rearing minors.

Semi-structured interviews are most interesting to collect information about cases of family breakups as the mothers and fathers of minors who answer this instrument find it hard to talk about the harsh experiences they have faced because family conflicts continue. This instrument is made up of 39 items using open questions because these allow to recognize different interesting components about the development of family alienation practices, such as:

- Parent's life story:
 - Neglect in infancy
 - Relationship with their partner
 - The separation or divorce process
 - Relationship with their former partner
 - Family relationship
- Minors who face family alienation practices:
 - Family atmosphere
 - Direct presence of conflicts between their parents
 - Family alienation symptomatology
 - Sequelae for minors
 - Parents-child/children relationship
- Maternal/paternal competences:
 - Caring for minors
 - Influence of conflicts on their maternal or paternal tasks
 - Maternal and paternal resilience
- *The Black Leg Test*

The present standardised instrument, known as *The Black Leg Test* (*Test de Pata Negra*), was created to evaluate, by using different variables, child personality and the conflicts that take place in their surroundings, especially family conflicts. This test intends to measure the different elements that compose children's perceptions of their family relationships by particularly underlining those conflicts that result from violence and aggressiveness as they directly influence one's building one's own self-concept and its subjectivity.

The Black Leg Test was devised and implemented by Louis Corman at the Medical-Psychological Centre in Nantes between 1956 and 1961. This test was conceived as "a projective technique composed of a series of laminae containing scenes that are clearly defined in their pictorial structuring, which represent different conflictive situations that correspond to child psychological development. The fundamental objective of the Black Leg Test is to explore the psychological development of children aged 6-12 years (Schwartz and Caride, 1997).

As Corman explained (2001), the material related to this instrument consists in three different kinds of laminae. Firstly, the *Frontispicio* lamina that corresponds to the start and presentation of the technique. Secondly, there are 17 laminae with which the Black Leg Adventures can be told. Third and finally, there is the final lamina called *The Fairy*. Ballús et al. (2015) pointed out that each lamina responds to various elements of a child's personality. Thus it is important to follow the process to administer the Black Leg Test according to the criteria set out by Corman (1981):

1. *The Presentation Phase, or Frontispicio.* It is the first lamina shown to the boy or girl to present the test characters (the Black Leg piglet with a patch on its leg, two same-sized piglets and two adult pigs, one male and one female, who also have a patch on their back). The subject must assign a gender, age and role to each one.
2. *Story-telling phase.* Next the child is shown the 17 other test laminae and he is asked to look at them carefully to select those he needs to tell a story. He can choose the number of laminae they wish, with no set limits.
3. *Preferences and the Identification phase.* In the third part of this test, once the story has been told, all the laminae are grouped and the child is asked to divide the laminae into two piles by selecting those he likes and dislikes. After this selection process, the child is asked to explain his/her selection and if he identifies him/herself with one of the characters of a given lamina. He is offered the chance to make up different stories with the laminae they dislike.

4. *The Introduction phase of the Fairy lamina.* In this phase, the child is introduced to the so-called Fairy lamina, where we can see the Black Leg piglet looking at the fairy piglet, which is drawn at the top of the picture, holding a magic wand. The child is told that the black Leg piglet can ask the Fairy for three wishes and if he can explain what he thinks the piglet will request.
5. *Expression phase through drawing.* Finally, the child is asked to draw the most interesting lamina from memory and Black Leg's dream on another piece of paper.

The projective Adventures of Black Leg Test provides us with information about boys and girls' structure and internal functioning by mobilising aspects of their emotional life. Such instrument becomes a key element in every child's psychological evaluation, bearing in mind that this information on a child's internal world may be fundamental to suitably design future interventions.

· *Reviewing files*

As part of qualitative research methods, reviewing files is the most useful because it examines deeply the specific realities to be studied as this provides professionals with an alternative to know former actions that have been carried out with each sample member, regardless of their role as parents or children. This enables research into the individual or family interventions offered by the corresponding municipal services (Specialised Family and Infancy Service, Social Services, Area for Women, etc.).

It also allows us to know the legal situation of all the families by particularly referring to separation or divorce sentences, governing agreements, possible reports placed and sentences passed for gender violence, among other legal reports of interest. The purpose of this review is to acquire information about the typical characteristics of the family background, family dynamics, about the support ecosystem networks to which they belong, and any element that hinders the proper development of those affected by family alienation practices to which the system components are exposed, particularly minors.

All this helps to complete the information about each minor and his/her parents when they come to the Specialised Family and Infancy Service owing to constant family conflicts and the indicators of alienation that they present as these are the reason why the Basic General Social Services Team refers them to the Specialised Family and Infancy Service.

Finally, it is necessary to point out that this instrument allows certain facts to be known, such as reports of abuse, protection measures, sentences or social reports, which informers may, or may not wish to share because they represent

difficulties when it comes to expressing in words the times that the conflicts have taken place to which they have been exposed and what they made them feel. So it is necessary to compile a series of elements from which it is possible to look closely at the reality of all the families that make up the research sample, which are the following:

- Data that identify parents.
- The family background before being referred to the Specialised Family and Infancy Service.
- The current legal situation.
- Relationship among parents.
- Existing social, medical and legal reports.

Data analysis

After obtaining the necessary information and bearing in mind the objectives and the qualitative research character, continuing with the description of the information processing procedure was considered suitable. Firstly, the interviews were recorded by a mechanical voice-recording archiving system.

This allowed processes to be generated to acquire information that adapted to the interviewees, which made the information collection period more caring and more convenient, and one in which to present the hard experiences to which they have been exposed.

Once the information from the interviews was obtained and recorded, it was synthesised in the data matrices, which included the different dimensions making up the semi-structured interviews. This allowed the information from each case to be later analysed. Secondly, the record system employed for the Black Leg Test was similar to that used in the interviews (audio recordings).

It was necessary to resort to pen-and-paper methods because the projective test characteristics rendered it necessary to combine the elements in the records from which different data about the minors and their experiences using their narrations and their subsequent drawings could be obtained.

The children's drawings were done on a template, which includes the projective test in question as they were linked to the characters that appeared in the different Black Leg Test laminae. Likewise, the collected information was analysed using different analysis tables from which the obtained data could be correctly interpreted following the analysis process indicated by the test in question. Finally, reviewing files was done using the information record model with the different aforementioned categories of interest. This allowed us to examine the various reports and files of each case in-depth.

Results

The results obtained from the data analysis evidenced the need to make future ecosystem interventions with each family that makes up the sample. This was because both parents and minors demonstrated different risk indicators when faced with the constant presence of family alienation practices, who internalised punitive forms when managing conflicts. Thus, in order to correctly process the obtained results, it was very important to divide them into analysis areas, which were as follows:

Parents' life story

Regarding the analysis area about the life story of the parents making up the sample, it is worth indicating the different aspects that resulted from the data analysis. First of all, it was considered necessary to refer to the figure of mothers in relation to the different aforementioned study dimensions. Secondly, it is worth mentioning that 60% of the mothers stated having suffered neglect in their childhood, and indicated that these times experienced in their childhood have accompanied them during all their development stages. These mothers stated having reproduced ways to relate with and care for their children given these experiences that they have seen and lived years ago with their own parents.

Regarding the mothers' relationships with partners, 20% indicated having found normalised relationships; that is, both involved parties felt that they were on an equal basis with no need for any form of violence. Notwithstanding, 40% of the involved mothers, plus 40% of the others, stated having found conflictive and punitive partner relationships.

This is a very interesting point to understand the creation of family alienation practices because they emerge through interparental conflicts that originate from partner relationships. It is also necessary to add that the mothers who indicated having held punitive relationships were victims of gender violence in these relationships.

Indeed all the mothers stated having started a contentious separation or divorce process, which is the typical element of those families marked by family alienation practices. Likewise for former married partner relationships, the results of the semi-structured interview and reviewing files evidenced that 60% of mothers maintained conflictive former married partner relationships, while the remaining 40% mentioned punitive relationships.

Secondly, as regards the fathers' life story, we present the following results obtained after analysing the information gathered during the research process. Regarding the fathers of minors, the results showed that 80% had suffered from some kind of irregular care or neglect during their childhood. This was understood as a risk element for family alienation practices developing in the family.

It is interesting to note that 60% of the fathers said that they had maintained a conflictive partner relationship, with the remaining 40% mentioned punitive partner relationships marked by gender violence. Like the mothers' results, all the fathers pointed out that their separation or divorce process was subjected to contentious legal processes.

However, the results about parents' former married partner relationships reflected that 80% were conflictive, while 20% were punitive. These data reveal that after marriage had ended, problems which placed the correct development of family components at risk continued because the conflict was understood as an element of relationship and union between both involved parties.

This makes the well-being of family members involved in existing disputes difficult, and legal disputes become a chronic element through new contentious processes, which increase the emotional harm of all those affected by such problems. To conclude, we indicate that all the fathers stated feeling subjected to dysfunctional family relationships that lacked systemic support networks. These results reflect a potential source of risk for all those affected by conflictive separation/divorce processes.

Caring for minors

It is relevant to know to what extent mothers and fathers fulfil their care duties given the importance of undertaking competent mothers/fathers parentage. This is because competent mothers/fathers parentage does not only ensure the healthy development of their children, but also provides them with models and sources of support to face adversity in painful times. Thus, in those cases in which family alienation practices take place at home, parents' caring tasks for minors are a fundamental element that can act as a protection factor, or otherwise as a risk factor.

The results obtained after the triangulation of the mentioned tests evidenced a risk situation about mothers/fathers caring for their minors. The mothers indicated that there had been times when they were unable to cover their child/children's emotional, physical and psychological requirements (60%) because they were in a situation in which they had to delegate these care tasks to other family members, mainly grandmothers and grandfathers.

Only 40% of the mothers who made up the study sample actually stated correctly providing their child/children with care and protection. It is necessary to point out that 80% of the mothers claimed that interparental conflicts entailed a higher degree of effect on their maternal tasks because they set limits and rules that badly matched their child/children's reality, assumed a permissive or authoritarian style of education, and indicated not always understanding the development changes and stages that their children were going through.

Consequently, in most cases, the fathers indicated that they did not fulfil their corresponding care tasks with their child/children (80%), and referred to not being the children's guardians, or not having a close link with their children, among other reasons. These results evidenced fathers that do not care for their children, which can be considered a risk factor and a vulnerability factor.

All the fathers also mentioned the existence of constant legal disputes, among others, that hinder them from correctly undertaking their fatherly duties, and also stressed constant denigrating campaigns as part of the typical symptomatology of the family alienation practices in minors, which they experienced while their children visited them as part of governing agreements.

Symptomatology of family alienation practices in minors

Regarding the symptomatology in minors caused by family alienation practices, it is worth mentioning the extent to which it affects them and the development of negative bio-psycho-social consequences as the results obtained after the Black Leg Test, along with the analysed information from the semi-structured interview and from reviewing files, showed a high degree of minors being strongly affected.

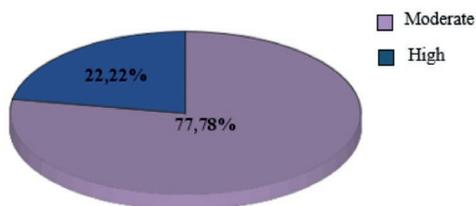


Figure 1. Degree of the family alienation effect

Source: Compiled by the authors

Figure 1 shows 77.78% of the minors whose family systems show alienation practices with a moderate degree of effect. This analysis evidenced that the level of alienation in these minors was considerably high as they acted more negatively and less respectfully, while the denigrating campaign could be continuous, especially during transition periods, in which minors perceived that the alienated parent was disapproved of by the alienator figure.

Moreover, these minors showed the eight previously described symptoms (denigrating campaign, justification for the scorn felt for the alienated parent, no ambivalence, independent thinker phenomenon, reflexive support for the alienating parent in the parental conflict, no sense of blame, borrowed arguments and spreading

hostility to the alienated parent's extended family and social network), although they were less intense than in severe cases.

The narrative generated with the projective Black Leg Test indicated that minors were strongly influenced by family discourse, and actually personalised the alienator parent through this test.

With these minors, the results showed that visits with the parent with no child custody became increasingly conflictive, especially when the child/children went to stay with this parent because confrontations tended to be frequent. Likewise, visits with the extended family involved expressions of dislike, if not expressly avoided with several excuses. The denigrating campaign intensified, be it somewhat subtly, which also spread to different areas or domains not previously contemplated.

In turn, 22.22% of children were constantly affected to a high degree given the family reality they faced. As the analysis of the results from the data matrices demonstrated, all the minors were immersed in denigrating campaigns against one of their parents and involved in a discourse that generates negative psychological and social consequences for children.

This degree of effect implies the presence of the eight typical symptoms of minors exposed to severe family alienation practices, which were the same ones described for moderate cases, despite the peculiarity of the growing hatred for the alienated figure. In relation to this, the denigrating campaign was extreme, and continued with time and space. Visits with fathers with no custody of children proved impossible, and many of these visits were cancelled.

The obtained results demonstrated that the minors exposed to a severe degree of effect have even run away from home, and displayed a constant open opposition and destructive behaviour towards the alienated figure and his/her corresponding extended family. Thus, the hostility shown by the child/children was so intense that they even resorted to using physical violence. Finally, it is necessary to refer to the alienator figures because, according to the analysis of the data gathered with the various tests, the mothers making up the sample were mainly those who exercised alienation, while only two fathers indicated encouraging alienation with their respective child/children (see Figure 2).

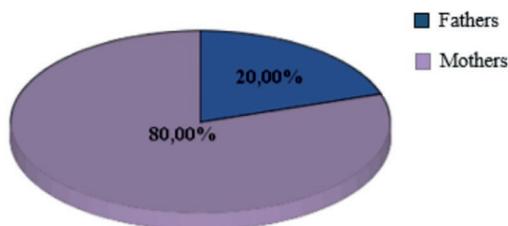


Figure 2. Alienation figure
Source: Compiled by the authors

It is also interesting to point out that, after analysing the results, several conclusions about the alienating figures included in our study sample were drawn. This was because 60% of the mothers were victims of gender violence caused by their former husband. This event implies these mothers maintaining feelings of pain and hate towards their former husbands, which transfer to their child/children either consciously, or not, through family alienation practices.

Discussion

Family alienation practices are one of the most serious complex problems that modern society faces, in which minors are the main victims. Therefore, nowadays, children are quite unprotected from this reality as professional actions are lacking as regards this phenomenon. As such problems exist, families marked by alienation appear, which implies dysfunctional family dynamics. The consequence of such is the deteriorated bio-psycho-social development of the family members who live in the family system. Many authors in the past (Gardner, 1991; Turkat, 2002; Aguilar, 2005; Segura, Gil and Sepúlveda, 2006; Bolaños, 2008; Romero, 2010; Gaffal, 2012; Linares, 2015) state that growing in a family where family alienation practices are exercised exposes minors to the risk of suffering sequelae and harm in the short, mid and long terms when they experience interparental conflicts and, even if they do not, and when they grow and develop in family structures submitted to contentious processes in which they form part of lawsuits.

It is mainly important to point out that identifying family alienation as a fact that corresponds to the private domain, which has taken so much effort to be pulled apart, is still valid when dealing with the boys and girls found in this scenario, and prevents their protection by safeguarding the father/mother-child relationship. This is all mainly because of lack of knowledge that the impact has on development when exposed to family alienation practices. Therefore, one myth to debunk refers to interparental conflicts only affecting partners because, as Segura, Gil and Sepúlveda indicate (2006), there is proof that family conflicts marked by alienation spread to sons and daughters, negatively affect their well-being and development, and leave sequelae in the short, mid and long terms, which can even be transmitted to successive generations.

Therefore, institutions that avoid this form of child abuse must make prevention programmes or projects a priority and provide help to the families that are going through conflictive separation/divorce processes as taking protection measures is a fundamental tool to guarantee overall development of both minors and their parents. This will help reduce the risk factors that trigger gender violence and will enable protecting networks to be set up to generate preventive measures, as well as actions that disseminate the fact that protection and help resources exist for mothers and their children.

However, there are very few intervention programmes or projects that deal with the consequences and sequelae arisen by family alienation experiences in boys and girls. After a search for documents and bibliography, a large amount of theoretical information about these problems was found despite the very little information available about the actions designed to work with those affected by family alienation practices.

What is true is that most of the interventions made are not systematically evaluated, and of all those that are actually studied, very few fulfil the basic quality criteria of good practices. What is more, after learning the reality of the families affected by these problems, we thoroughly investigated the processes followed to build family alienation practices and their impact on the correct development of the members that make up the family, especially minors.

With the collected data and their corresponding analysis, the study evidences that after living episodes of interparental conflict and participating in family alienation practices, minors experience a series of symptoms after being directly or indirectly exposed to alienation. Additionally, alienated parents disqualify their maternal/paternal counterparts, which poses a further element of risk and vulnerability.

To conclude, we point out that this case study allowed us to conduct research that adapts to the situation of the families who participated in it as each family member indicated painful experiences with their family realities. Thus the case study characteristics mean that the participants can present their experiences positively, which will help them to build a discourse that goes beyond the conflict they are living.

Limitations

Firstly, one of the limitations that exists in the study refers to the theoretical framework, specifically defining families in which family alienation practices take place because there is not any unanimous consensus that can be applied to families with these problems.

In this way, social resistance to recognise certain forms of abuse is perpetuated. In turn, the “family alienation practices” concept is not defined in a universal manner because there are several currents that understand this phenomenon as PAS. Thus, in relation to the theoretical analysis, very little information about these problems has been found as most literature and scientific reviews have adopted a clinical and medical perspective, and have left the social, ecosystem and emotional sphere aside.

Secondly, it is worth mentioning access to the social files of all the families that participated in our study as a limitation. This limitation is linked to the fact that these families resort to the different resources in their geographical location in the province of Valencia (Spain). Thus to correctly analyse information, it is necessary to visit

each institution to collect data. A problem appears when institutions wish to secure users' confidentiality, which was why access to the information had to wait until each parent who made up the study sample had provided authorisation. We also mention that the Service provided information more quickly about each person involved in our study than the Service for Women, which hindered access to each family's social information, even after obtaining the mother's authorisation.

Finally, the sample selected to create the study of the consequences of minors after being exposed to family alienation practices, along with the analysis of paternal/maternal competences, cannot be generalised to other people/families affected by the same problems. This is because each subject who is submitted to these family problems shows biological and cognitive characteristics, together with experiences of conflicts, which differ from those that affected peoples' lives.

These factors mean that each subject has singular characteristics and experiences; therefore, generalising data to another population affected by the same problems would be a mistake. So, it is necessary to redo a study about the symptomatology of minors with a thorough analysis of maternal/paternal competences when considering intervention processes with a sample that differs from that used herein.

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