

## **Italian College Student-Reported Childhood Exposure to Parental Alienation: Correlates With Well-Being**

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*Two hundred and fifty-seven undergraduate psychology students in Chieti, Italy completed an anonymous and confidential survey regarding their childhood exposure to parental alienation, psychological maltreatment, and measures of current functioning. Results revealed high levels of reported exposure to parental alienation behaviors by those whose parents divorced or separated and by those who reported that—regardless of marital status—their parents’ relationship was “very bad.” Those with any exposure to parental alienation reported higher rates of parental psychological maltreatment, lower rates of parental caring, as well as poor functioning with respect to self-esteem, depression, adult attachment styles, alcohol abuse, self-direction, and cooperation. These findings support the theory that parental alienation represents a risk factor for compromised outcomes across the life span.*

**KEYWORDS** *divorce, parental alienation, young adults*

The impact of parental divorce on children’s functioning and well-being is well established (Amato & Keith, 1991; Emery, 2006; Heatherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999). What is also known is that it is not divorce per se that is associated with the more lasting negative effects, but rather interparental conflict, especially conflict that involves children (Buehler et al., 1998; Emery,

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1982; Pruett, Williams, Insabella, & Little, 2003; Schick, 2002). When children are involved in their parent's postdivorce struggles, they can suffer from intense feelings of divided loyalties and stress (Amato, 1994; Amato & Afifi, 2006; Grych, Seid, & Fincham, 1992).

Research with U.S. samples has identified 20 ways that parents can involve their children in their parental conflict, such as denigrating the other parent, limiting the child's contact with the other parent, interfering with communication between the child and the other parent, and limiting mention and photographs of the other parent. These behaviors are likely to create a loyalty conflict in the child, who might feel pressure to reject one parent to please the other. One way to think about these behaviors is that they constitute the effort on the part of one parent to turn the child against the other parent, otherwise referred to as parental alienation (Gardner, 1998). Associations have been found between reported exposure to parental alienation behaviors and reports of parental psychological maltreatment as well as well-being measures in a convenience sample of adults (Baker, 2007; Baker & Ben-Ami, 2011). This study was designed to contribute to the knowledge about the impact of exposure to parental alienation on additional outcomes in college students in Italy. Specifically, we examined whether reported exposure to parental alienation was associated with ratings of parental psychological maltreatment and parental care as well as with well-being measures including depression, self-esteem, alcohol abuse, adult attachment style, self-direction, and cooperativeness.

## PARENTING

### Psychological Maltreatment

The linkage between alienation and psychological maltreatment is expected based on the theory that exposure to parental alienation behaviors can result in children feeling "worthless, flawed, unloved, unwanted, endangered, or only of value in meeting another's needs," the definition of psychological maltreatment endorsed by the American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children (APSAC; Binggeli, Hart, & Brassard, 2001). The APSAC definition identifies specific subtypes of psychological maltreatment: spurning, terrorizing, isolating, exploiting or corrupting, and denying emotional responsiveness. Qualitative research has established that the specific parental alienation behaviors can be experienced in ways that map onto these subtypes of psychological maltreatment (Baker, 2007). For example, withholding love and approval when the child indicates positive feelings toward the other parent can result in the child feeling spurned and denied emotional responsiveness; telling the child that the other parent tried to harm the child and is unsafe can activate feelings of terror and fear; cutting the child off from the targeted parent and his or her friends and family constitutes a form of

isolating; and confiding in the child about adult matters can be exploitive and corrupting. Associations have been established between parental alienation behaviors and psychological maltreatment in two U.S. community samples of adults (Baker, 2010; Baker & Ben-Ami, 2011; Ben-Ami & Baker, 2012) but not yet in a sample of college students and not outside the United States.

### Parenting Bonding and Care

Parents who engage in parental alienation strategies are likely to lack nurturance, as they are unable to perceive that their children have the need to be cared for and nurtured by their other parent. The underlying message of the parental alienation behaviors is that the parent's needs for love, approval, and obedience from the child are more important than the child's own needs, a dynamic in which parental care is likely to be low. A fundamental incompatibility exists between utilization of parental alienation behaviors and parental nurturance of the child. Parents who use parental alienation behaviors are more concerned with their own needs than effectively meeting the emotional needs of the child (especially with respect to the child's needs for self-expression and to have a relationship with the other parent). Although qualitative research has identified the lack of care and nurturance experienced by children exposed to parental alienation behaviors (Baker, 2007), this has not yet been established using standardized measures, in college students, or in a sample outside the United States.

## WELL-BEING AND FUNCTIONING

### Depression

Parents who engage in parental alienation behaviors require a child to relinquish his or her autonomy and subjugate his or her needs to those of the parent (Baker, 2007), creating a heightened sensitivity toward disapproval and fear of rejection. That parent might also induce fear of abandonment by threatening to withdraw love if the child fails to reject the other parent (Baker, 2007). In a bid for approval and attachment with that parent, the child learns to meet the needs of the parent before his or her own. Consequently, these children might be vulnerable to resentment, approval seeking, and dependency (Bach, 1993; Olson & Gariti, 1993) as seen in parentified children, which in turn are risk factors for depression (Beck, 1983; Clark, Beck, & Brown, 1992; Sato & McCann, 2000). Another vulnerability to depression might be related to the child's belief that the rejected parent does not care for him or her (MacPhee & Andrews, 2006). Not only does the child suffer the loss of the parent, but he or she is forbidden to process or mourn the loss in a meaningful way. Theories about the effect of interpersonal loss have postulated that it is the inability to mourn the loss that creates a predisposition

to depression (Bowlby, 1982). These findings on interpersonal dependency, parental separation, and parental rejection suggest multiple risk factors for depression in individuals exposed to parental alienation. This association has been found in a U.S. sample of adults (Ben-Ami & Baker, 2012) but not in college students or outside the United States.

### Self-Esteem

It is through the early relationship with parents that children form their beliefs about their worth as a separate unique person and where they stand in relation to others. Parental support, encouragement, and responsiveness are factors related to the development of positive self-esteem in children (Felson & Zielinski, 1989). Such behaviors can help solidify a child's sense of autonomy, competence, and relatedness, important elements that contribute to well-being and positive self-esteem (Deci & Ryan, 2002; Chirkov & Ryan, 2001). On the other hand, self-critical attitudes and low self-esteem are thought to stem in part from problematic parental relationships (Blatt & Homann, 1992).

Exposure to parental alienation can result in reduced self-esteem in at least four ways. First, the behaviors encourage the child to believe that the other parent is an unworthy if not contemptible person who must be ejected from the child's life. These negative attributes about that parent can inadvertently become internalized into the child's feelings about his or her own worth (if my parent is no good, I must be no good as well). Second, the parental alienation behaviors encourage the child to falsely believe that the other parent has rejected and harmed him or her. Due to egocentric thought processes, children are likely to conclude that they must be unlovable and unworthy of love (if my parent doesn't love me, I must be no good). Third, exposure to the parental alienation behavior can be experienced by the child as a form of conditional love (my parent only loves me when I reject the other parent even when I don't want to). The child comes to understand that the love of even the favored parent is not based on the inherent qualities of the child (being lovable), but rather on the child meeting the parent's need for revenge, control, or enmeshment. Fourth, if the child does behave badly toward the targeted parent he or she may eventually come to feel guilty for that behavior. This was certainly experienced by the research subjects in Baker's (2007) qualitative study. Associations between parental alienation behaviors and self-esteem have also been established with standardized measures in a U.S. sample of adults (Baker & Ben-Ami, 2011).

### Alcohol Abuse

Alcohol can provide a palliative effect for emotional pain, helping traumatic experiences be felt less acutely (Khantzian, 1985). Substance use

can compensate for difficulties with affect regulation and can alleviate and soothe negative affect. Links have been found between substance abuse and depression (Sihvola et al., 2008), trauma (Kessler, Sonnega, Bromet, & Nelson, 1995), and low self-esteem (Mann, Hosman, Schaalma, & de Vries, 2004). Parental discord has also been found to be associated with substance use (Tschann et al., 2002). For example, exposure to multiple adverse events in childhood, including parental separation and divorce, have been shown to increase the risk of alcoholism, (Anda et al., 2002). Although the etiology of alcohol abuse is certainly multiply determined and complex (Minugh & Harlow, 1994), dysfunctional family dynamics is one potentiating risk factor (Hope, Power, & Rodgers, 1998; Menees & Segrin, 2000). Specific associations between parental alienation behaviors and alcohol problems were reported in qualitative research (Baker, 2007) but not in quantitative research (Ben-Ami & Baker, 2012) and not in a student population nor outside the United States.

### Adult Attachment Style

Early relational patterns form the blueprint for later styles of interpersonal relationships (Ainsworth, 1982). The parent's ability to provide attentive and sensitive responsiveness to the infant and child's needs creates a secure attachment in the child, whereas inconsistent or negligent parenting can result in an insecure attachment (Bowlby, 1982). The parent's response style to a child over time shapes the child's mental representation of relationships and organizes an individual's expectations, behaviors, and beliefs about relationships across the lifespan (Bowlby, 1982; Bretherton, Ridgeway, & Cassidy, 1990). These expectations are brought forward from the early relationship into adulthood in ways that create coherence for individuals in their understanding of their worthiness of love and the trustworthiness of others to meet their needs (Shulman, Scharf, Lumer, & Maurer, 2001). The parental alienation behaviors the child is exposed to—especially those that involve overriding the child's own needs for safety and security and those that emphasize the other parent's rejection of the child—contribute to the child's understanding of himself or herself as unlovable and of others as unable to provide love and care for him or her.

### Self-Directedness

Personality is defined as the ingrained pattern of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors characterizing an individual's unique lifestyle and mode of adaptation, and resulting from constitutional factors, development, and social experience (World Health Organization, 1994). Personality is used to give a comprehensive description of a person that is relatively consistent over

time and it is important for predicting psychopathology, as well as for affective states, affect regulation, and perception of well-being. Cloninger (1999) proposed temperament and character dimensions as constitutive elements of both normal and pathological personality. One character dimension proposed to be susceptible to parental alienation is that of self-direction, defined as the experience of oneself as the agent of one's life. Parents who encourage self-reliant behavior help their children develop a sense of autonomy and a sense of being able to handle problems while caregivers who discourage their children from performing tasks of which they are capable or ridicule attempts at self-direction, instill shame and doubt in them. Parents engaged in parental alienation demand obedience, which can interfere with the child's ability to make independent decisions and to be instrumentally competent. The controlling nature of parental alienation strategies and the lack of responsiveness to the child's needs could inhibit autonomy and intrinsic motivation (Grolnick, Deci, & Ryan, 1997). Parents who engage in parental alienation could induce in children immaturity, weakness, fragility, guilt, inefficacy, and irresponsibility. These children might be unable to develop an internal organizational principle, which renders them unable to define, set, and pursue meaningful goals. Associations between parental alienation and self-sufficiency (a concept related to self-direction) have been reported in a U.S. sample of adults (Ben-Ami & Baker, 2012).

### Cooperativeness

Cooperativeness accounts for individual differences in identification with and acceptance of other people (Cloninger, Przybeck, Svrakic, & Wetzel, 1994). Highly cooperative individuals are empathetic, tolerant, compassionate, supportive, and fair. They understand and respect the preferences and needs of other as well as their own (Cloninger et al., 1994). Studies show that everyday experiences with parents are fundamental to a child's developing social skill set: Parents provide children with their very first opportunities to develop a relationship, communicate, and interact (Papalia, Olds, & Feldman, 2002). Exposure to parental alienation can result in reduced cooperativeness in at least two ways. First, the behaviors discourage self-esteem and reduce a sense of competence in social interactions. Second, parental alienation behaviors encourage children to falsely believe that the other parent has rejected and harmed them, which might lead to a deep sense of mistrust toward others. Due to a sense of unlovability combined with an expectation that others will be negatively disposed toward them, these children are likely to avoid close involvement with others. Specific associations between parental alienation and cooperativeness have not yet been reported.

## THIS STUDY

The specific questions addressed in this study included the following:

1. What are the rates of exposure to parental loyalty conflict behaviors in a sample of college students in Italy?
2. Were rates higher for those whose parents were separated or divorced and for those who rated their parents' relationships as "very bad?"
3. Was reported exposure to parental alienation associated with reports of quality of parenting?
4. Was reported exposure to parental alienation associated with concurrent measures of well-being?

## METHOD

### Participants

Between January and February 2013 undergraduate psychology students at a university in Chieti, Italy, were invited to participate in the survey as an extra-credit activity for courses held in clinical psychology. Students were informed about the opportunity through announcements in classrooms. Interested students responded to the questionnaire after giving informed consent. Of the approximately 280 students invited to participate, 257 responded to the survey, representing a response rate of over 90%. The sample was 85% women, ranging in age from 21 to 61 years ( $M = 24.0$ ,  $SD = 3.9$ ). Analyses were conducted to compare the participants who reported no exposure to parental alienation (No-PA group) and those who reported any exposure to parental alienation (PA group). There were no differences between the PA and No-PA groups by age or gender.

### Measures

The paper-and-pencil confidential survey took approximately 60 minutes to complete. The survey consisted of a series of demographic questions, two of which were included in this study: whether the parents had ever been divorced or remarried (0 = no, 1 = yes) and at its worst how bad the parental relationship was (coded as 1 = very bad, 0 = everything else) and a series of standardized measures, seven of which were examined for this study.

### BAKER STRATEGY QUESTIONNAIRE

The Baker Strategy Questionnaire (BSQ) is a 20-item measure comprised of a list of 20 parental alienation behaviors. Each behavior is described from the child's point of view such as, "Made comments to me that fabricated or

exaggerated the other parent's negative qualities while rarely saying anything positive about that parent," and "Limited or interfered with my contact with the other parent so that I spent less time with him/her than I was supposed to or could have" (Baker & Chambers, 2011). The respondents answered on a 5-point scale ranging from 0 (*never*) to 4 (*always*). PA was coded in three ways: (a) presence-absence for mothers (No PA by mother vs. PA by mother), (b) presence-absence for fathers (No PA by fathers vs. PA by fathers), and (c) presence-absence overall (PA vs. No PA).

#### PSYCHOLOGICAL MALTREATMENT MEASURE

A five-item measure of respondent exposure to psychological maltreatment was developed by Baker and Festinger (2011). The measure is modeled on the definition of psychological maltreatment endorsed by the APSAC (Binggeli et al., 2001) and has one item each relating to spurning, terrorizing, isolating, exploiting or corrupting, and denying emotional responsiveness. The spurning item was worded, "Was hostile, rejecting, degrading humiliating; belittled you, or singled you out for unfair treatment." The measure has been validated against four established measures of psychological maltreatment, with statistically significant correlations indicating good validity. Each of the five items is rated separately for mother/stepfather and father/stepmother on a 5-point scale ranging from 0 (*never*) to 4 (*very often*). Total scores can range from 0 (score of 0 on all five items) to 20 (score of 4 on all five items). In this sample total scores ranged from 0 to 15 for PM by mothers ( $M = 1.0$ ,  $SD = 2.3$ ) with a Cronbach's alpha of .80 and for fathers the score ranged from 0 to 20 ( $M = 1.7$ ,  $SD = 3.0$ ) with a Cronbach's alpha of .80.

#### RELATIONSHIP QUESTIONNAIRE

Attachment style was assessed with the Relationship Questionnaire (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991), which consists of a single item presenting four short paragraphs describing prototypical adult attachment patterns, from which the respondent selects the one that best describes his or her interpersonal relationships. Each of the paragraphs represents one of the following four styles: secure, preoccupied, fearful, or dismissing. Responses were recoded as secure (score of 1) or not secure (score of 0).

#### ROSENBERG SELF-ESTEEM

Self-esteem was assessed with the 10-item self-report Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965), in which each item is rated on a 4-point Likert scale from 0 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*). Sample items include, "On



the whole, I am satisfied with myself," and "I feel that I have a number of good qualities." Total scores are created by summing the 10 items after reverse coding. In this study the summary score ranged from 13 to 40 and had an internal consistency coefficient of .83.

#### PARENTAL BONDING INSTRUMENT CARE SCALE

The quality of the parent–child relationship was measured with the Parental Bonding Instrument, a widely used research tool for assessing adult retrospective accounts of two dimensions of the parent–child relationship: care and overprotectiveness (Parker, Tupling, & Brown, 1979; Scinto, Marinangeli, Kalyvoka, Daneluzzo, & Rossi, 1999). In this study the Care index was used. Sample items include, "spoke to me in a warm and friendly tone" and "made me feel I wasn't wanted." The scale has 12 items each rated on a 4-point Likert scale from 0 (*very unlike*) to 3 (*very like*). After reverse coding, the Care scale was created for each parent and then summed to create an overall care index. The score could range from 0 to 36. Total scores for ratings of mothers ranged from 5 to 36 ( $M = 26.6$ ,  $SD = 6.6$ ) and the Cronbach's alpha was .91 for ratings of fathers the scores ranged from 0 to 36 ( $M = 23.0$ ,  $SD = 8.4$ ), with a Cronbach's alpha of .93.

#### SYMPTOM CHECKLIST–90–R DEPRESSION SCALE

The Depression scale from the Symptom Checklist–90–R (SCL–90–R) was used. The SCL–90–R is a self-report questionnaire originally oriented toward symptomatic behavior of psychiatric outpatients (Derogatis, 1977). It has been applied as a psychiatric case-finding instrument, as a measure of symptom severity, and as a descriptive measure of psychopathology in different patient populations (Derogatis & Savitz, 1999). Examples of the items include, "crying easily" "blaming yourself for things," and "feelings of being trapped or caught." The Depression scale has 13 items, each scored on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (*none*) to 4 (*extreme*), indicating the rate of occurrence of the symptom during the time period in question. The scale can range from 0 to 4. In this sample it ranged from 0 to 3.3 ( $M = .74$ ,  $SD = .65$ ), with a Cronbach's alpha of .89.

#### CAGE QUESTIONNAIRE

To assess alcohol abuse, the CAGE questionnaire was administered (Ewing, 1984), a four-item self-report questionnaire in which each item is rated present or absent. Endorsement of two or more items is considered indicative of alcohol dependence (Poulin, Webster, & Single, 1997). A dichotomous

variable was created to reflect alcohol abuse (score of 1) or not (score of 0) based on this cutoff.

#### THE TEMPERAMENT AND CHARACTER INVENTORY SELF-DIRECTION AND COOPERATION SCALES

The Temperament and Character Inventory–125 (TCI–125; Cloninger et al., 1994) is a self-report questionnaire with a true–false response format designed to measure dimensions of Cloninger’s model of personality (Cloninger et al., 1994). Specifically, the TCI measures individual differences in the way that people feel, act, or behave. The character scales were selected as most likely to be related to childhood exposure to parental alienation, as the behaviors are designed to undermine the individual’s cooperation with the other parent and self-directedness with respect to knowing and trusting one’s own perceptions and goals. The Cooperativeness scale is created by summing 25 items, each of which is coded true (1) or false (0), after reverse coding. Examples of the items include, “I can usually accept other people as they are, even when they are very different from me,” and “People involved with me have to learn how to do things my way.” Total scores can range from 0 to 25 and in this sample ranged from 6 to 25 ( $M = 19.7$ ,  $SD = 3.4$ ), with a Cronbach’s alpha of .75. The Self-Directedness scale was comprised also of 25 true–false items with a possible total score of 25. In this sample the total score ranged from 1 to 25 ( $M = 18.5$ ,  $SD = 4.7$ ). Internal consistency was established with a Cronbach’s alpha of .82.

## RESULTS

To address the first research question we began with a frequency distribution of each of the parental alienation behaviors (with data reported for either parent). These data are presented in Table 1 as the number and proportion of students who reported being exposed to these behaviors by either parent.

As can be seen, 13 of the 20 items were endorsed by at least 10% of the sample. One item was endorsed by over 60% of the sample, three items were endorsed by between 31% and 40% of the sample, one item was endorsed by between 21% and 30% of the sample, eight items were endorsed by between 11% and 20% of the sample, and seven items were endorsed by 10% or less of the sample. Examination of the total number of behaviors endorsed revealed that 75% of the sample endorsed at least one behavior.

Next we examined whether rates of exposure were higher, as would be expected for those whose parents were divorced or separated as compared to those whose parent were not. As expected, for all but one variable (encouraging reliance) the rates of endorsement were statistically

**TABLE 1** Frequency Distribution of Endorsement of 20 Specific Loyalty Conflict Behaviors

Behavior	<i>n</i>	%
Made negative comments	152	61.5%
Confided	85	34.4%
Encouraged reliance on himself/herself	82	33.2%
Required favoritism	79	32.0%
Asked to keep secrets	54	21.9%
Upset if I was affectionate with other parent	49	19.8%
Discomfort if I looked at picture . . .	45	18.2%
Tried to turn against other parent	37	15.0%
Fostered anger/hurt at other parent	35	14.2%
Made child choose	34	13.8%
Encouraged disregard of other parent	33	13.4%
Said parent was unsafe	30	12.1%
Asked me to spy	29	11.7%
Limited contact	23	9.3%
Said parent was unloving	23	9.3%
Made communication difficult	21	8.5%
Called other parent by first name	15	6.1%
Hard to be with extended family	12	4.9%
Withheld or blocked messages	4	1.6%
Referred to new spouse as Mom/Dad	4	1.6%

significantly higher for those whose parents were divorced/separated than for those whose parents' marriage remained intact (see Table 2). In each case the difference in rates was at least two times as great. We conducted an independent *t* test comparing the number of behaviors endorsed by whether or not the parents had been divorced or separated. Results revealed that, as expected, those with divorced or separated parents reported exposure to nearly three times as many PA behaviors ( $M = 9.6$ ,  $SD = 5.5$ ) than those whose parents did not divorce or separate ( $M = 2.7$ ,  $SD = 3.4$ ),  $t(27.35) = 7.63$ ,  $p < .001$ .

We also ran the analyses for those who reported that at its worst the relationship between their parents was "very bad" compared to those who rated their parents' relationship at its worst as not "very bad." Rates of endorsement were statistically significantly higher in 18 of the 20 variables (all but referring to parent by first name, and encouraging reliance on the parent). An independent *t* test compared the number of behaviors endorsed by quality of parental relationship. Results revealed that, as expected, those who rated their parents' quality of relationship as "very bad" reported exposure to over three times as many PA behaviors ( $M = 7.5$ ,  $SD = 4.8$ ) than those who rated the relationship as better than "very bad" ( $M = 2.2$ ,  $SD = 2.9$ ),  $t(68.65) = 7.9$ ,  $p < .001$ .

The next research question examined associations between exposure to parental alienation and the two measures of parenting: psychological

**TABLE 2** Proportion of Endorsers of Each Parental Alienation Behavior by Marital Status of Parents

Behavior	Intact	Separated or divorced	$\chi^2$	Significance
Made negative comments	57.7	96.0	13.95	.001
Limited contact	06.3	36.0	23.4	.001
Withheld or blocked messages	00.9	08.0	7.1	.05
Made communication difficult	06.3	28.0	13.6	.01
Indicated discomfort about other parent	11.7	76.0	62.3	.001
Upset child affectionate with other parent	14.4	68.0	40.6	.001
Said parent was unloving	5.0	48.0	49.3	.001
Made child choose	9.5	52.0	34.3	.001
Said parent was unsafe	7.7	52.0	41.4	.001
Confided in child	28.4	88.0	35.4	.001
Required favoritism of child	22.1	68.0	16.6	.001
Asked child to spy	9.5	32.0	11.0	.01
Asked child to keep secrets	17.1	64.0	28.9	.001
Called other parent by first name	4.1	24.0	15.7	.05
Referred to spouse as Mom/Dad	0.9	08.0	07.1	.01
Encouraged reliance on himself/herself	32.0	44.0	1.5	<i>ns</i>
Encouraged disregard of other parent	10.8	36.0	12.3	.05
Hard to be with extended family	3.2	20.0	13.8	.01
Fostered anger/hurt at other parent	9.0	60.0	48.4	.01
Tried to turn	10.4	56.0	36.8	.001

maltreatment and the Care scale. A multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) was conducted with PA vs. No PA as the independent grouping variable and parental divorce or separation as a covariate. Specifically, two sets of MANCOVAs were conducted. In the first, the ratings of exposure to parental alienation by the mother were included as the independent variable and psychological maltreatment by the mother and the Care scale for the mother were the dependent variables. For this analysis, the overall  $F$  was statistically significant,  $F(2, 243) = 9.7, p < .001$ . The means, standard deviations, and results of the follow-up univariate tests are presented in Table 3. Also presented in Table 3 are the parallel analyses for ratings the students made of their fathers' use of parental alienation as associated with ratings of father's psychological maltreatment and care.

Even after controlling for parental marital status, exposure to PA by mothers was associated with reports of psychological maltreatment by mothers,  $F(1, 244) = 8.9, p < .003, d = .43$ , and scores on the maternal Care scale,  $F(1, 244) = 12.9, p < .001, d = .52$ . The effect sizes were in the moderate range. Likewise, the data were statistically significant when examining the associations between reports of PA by fathers and reports of psychological maltreatment by fathers,  $F(1, 244) = 15.3, p < .001, d = .53$  and paternal care,  $F(1, 244) = 13.1, p < .001, d = .49$ .

Next, a MANCOVA was conducted with the well-being measures as the dependent variables, PA versus No PA by either parent as the independent

**TABLE 3** Results of Multivariate Analysis of Covariance on the Parenting Measures by Parental Alienation and No Parental Alienation Group, Controlling for Parental Marital Status

Ratings of mothers	No PA by mother	PA by mother	<i>F</i>	Significance	<i>d</i>
Psychological maltreatment by mother	0.23	1.3	8.9	.003	.43
Parental care by mother	29.2	25.7	12.9	.001	.52
Ratings of fathers	No PA by father	PA by father	<i>F</i>	Significance	<i>d</i>
Psychological Maltreatment by father	0.37	2.3	15.3	.001	.53
Parental care by father	26.3	21.3	13.1	.001	.49

Note. PA = parental alienation.

**TABLE 4** Results of Multivariate Analysis of Covariance on the Well-Being Measures by Parental Alienation and No Parental Alienation by Either Parent, Controlling for Parental Marital Status

	No PA	PA	<i>F</i>	Significance	<i>d</i>
Depression	.58	.79	4.3	.04	.31
Attachment	.54	.45	.96	<i>ns</i>	
Self-esteem	31.1	29.1	10.2	.002	.47
Self-direction	19.7	17.4	11.3	.001	.50
Cooperation	21.0	19.5	8.9	.003	.44
Alcohol abuse	.05	.14	3.3	.07	.27

Note. PA = parental alienation.

variable, and parental divorce or separation as a covariate. The overall *F* was significant,  $F(6, 239) = 3.1, p < .006$ . The results of the univariate tests are presented in Table 4. Even after controlling for parental marital status, PA by either parent was associated with depression,  $F(1, 244) = 4.3, p < .04, d = .31$ ; self-esteem,  $F(1, 244) = 10.2, p < .002, d = .47$ ; self-direction,  $F(1, 244) = 11.3, p < .001, d = .50$ ; cooperation,  $F(1, 244) = 8.9, p < .003, d = .50$ ; and alcohol abuse,  $F(1, 244) = 3.3, p < .07, d = .27$ . In each case the effect size was in the moderate range. The association with adult attachment style was not statistically significant.

## DISCUSSION

This study explored the reported exposure of Italian college students to childhood parental alienation behaviors, the efforts on the part of one parent to undermine and interfere with the child's relationship with the other parent. Before the results are discussed, some of the limitations of the study bear mentioning. The study was conducted during a single semester at a single location, albeit with very a high response rate. The study sample was

also disproportionately female as is the population of undergraduate psychology students at this university. As noted earlier, measurement from the perspective of the adult child precludes the full accounting of exposure to parental alienation behaviors because certain parental behaviors by definition (e.g., blocking messages, withholding mail) occur outside the child's level of awareness. Needless to say, additional validity work would be helpful in terms of identifying whether additional behaviors should be added to the measure and whether certain ones should be removed to result in a short form for easier administration. Item response theory analysis would be helpful with a larger and more nationally representative sample. Ideally, these data will be replicated in various samples and settings around the world to produce a reliable estimate of childhood exposure to parental alienation. All of the data are self-report and measured concurrently, not allowing for the testing and confirmation of the proposed theoretical directionality of effects.

That being said, several findings are worth noting. To begin with, 15% of the sample endorsed the item "one parent tried to turn me against the other parent," a slightly lower proportion than in Baker and Chambers (2011) who reported 20% endorsement of the same item; and comparable to the 16% rate reported by Baker and Eichler (in press) for a sample of southern U.S. undergraduate students. It could be that the difference between 20% in that study and 15% in this sample is not meaningful and is due only to normal variation between samples. There are also differences in sample characteristics that might explain the slightly lower rates in this sample. For example, the younger age of this sample (undergraduate students as opposed to adults) means that these respondents had fewer years away from home to reflect on their childhood. Additional studies should be conducted with larger samples to derive a stable population-based estimate. Nonetheless, some confidence is warranted in the estimate of at least 15% of college students reporting that one parent tried to turn them against another parent. In the subsample of students whose parents divorced or separated the rate was 56%, indicating the high prevalence of this problem for children of divorce.

A second significant finding is that the rate of endorsement of each of the parental alienation behaviors was statistically significantly higher in the sample whose parents divorced or separated than those whose parents remained married. In the absence of a control group (it is not feasible or ethical to randomly assign respondents into a group whose parent will divorce), this variable serves as a natural comparison group within the larger sample. Comparisons of rates of endorsement revealed that rates of almost all of the parental alienation behaviors were higher in the group whose parents divorced or separated than in the group whose parents remained married. Behaviors endorsed at a particularly high rate in the divorce group included requiring favoritism of the child, becoming upset if the child was affectionate with the other parent, creating situations in which the child felt obligated to

choose between parents, encouraging the child's reliance, and making negative comments about the other parent. These data are consistent with what is known about the prevalence of parental alienation within divorcing families (e.g., Baker & Chambers, 2011; Clawar & Rivlin, 1991; Gardner, 1998).

Third, reported rates of exposure to parental alienation behaviors were relatively high in intact families as well. Over half of the participants with parents who remained married endorsed the item "made negative comments" and about one fifth endorsed "encouraged reliance on him- or herself above all else" and "asked child to keep secrets from the other parent." These results are consistent with clinical wisdom and theory regarding dysfunction within intact families involving cross-generational alliances and intergenerational boundary dissolution, such as confiding, keeping secrets, and undermining the other parent's authority (Minuchin, 1974, 1993). These data also suggest that in some intact families these kinds of behaviors predate the divorce. The same pattern of higher rates of endorsement was also found for those who rated their parents' relationship at its worst as "very bad" and suggests that in some families parents engage in these behaviors regardless of their marital status.

The fourth significant finding is that reported exposure to parental alienation was associated with high rates of psychological maltreatment and lower rates of parental care. This was true for ratings of mothers as well as fathers. These data contribute to the growing body of evidence about the ways in which parents who engage in parental alienation behaviors are experienced by their children as maltreating and lacking in nurturance. Likewise, reported exposure to parental alienation by either parent was associated with all but one of the concurrent measures of well-being including depression, self-esteem, self-direction, cooperation, and alcohol abuse. These data confirm that exposure to parental behaviors that involve children in their parents' conflicts is associated with consequences into adulthood across several domains of functioning. The findings strengthen the argument that engagement in parental conflict is damaging to children and that these specific acts (denigrating the other parent, interfering with contact and communication, etc.) are not benign but rather are associated with decreased well-being into at least the young adult years.

Future research should aim to "unpack" some of the causal mechanisms from reported exposure to parental alienation to these outcomes. For example, is the depression associated with guilt of the poor treatment of the rejected parent, the unresolved loss of that parent, or from the dependency-promoting behaviors of the parent engaging in these behaviors? Is the lowered self-esteem a result of the internalized negative attributes of the rejected parent or a result of feeling unloved by that parent? For all aspects of well-being it would be helpful to know whether outcomes are worse for those who actually became alienated than for those who—despite being exposed to parental alienation—maintained a relationship with both parents.

Much remains to be learned about the specific causal pathways of exposure to parental alienation and outcomes for young adults and beyond.

## Implications

In the meantime, these findings can be utilized by mental health professionals working with young adults. As newly emerging from their family of origin, college students are likely to still be affected by parental conflict and parental alienation. However, as legal adults they are able for the first time to seek and receive mental health counseling without permission, input, or possible intrusion by their parents. Parents engaged in parental alienation often do not agree on the mental health treatment of their children and one parent can unilaterally withhold permission for a child's treatment, select a provider most likely to support his or her perspective, and sabotage the child's relationship with the provider should the treatment threaten that parent's relationship with or psychological control over the child (Garber, 2012). For these reasons, it is likely that some college students have received little by way of mental health counseling to assist them in making sense of and processing their childhood experiences of parental alienation.

It is also possible that it is during this significant separation from the family of origin that some are able to gain a new perspective, which could cause them increased psychological distress or social emotional dysfunction (social withdrawal, depression, anxiety) that could affect their well-being and functioning in the school environment. At the same time, the ongoing demands of a loyalty-conflicted family could interfere with a college student's individuation process (Minuchin, 1974) and, untreated, can negatively impact academic success and well-being (Lopez, 1991).

For these reasons, information about parental alienation behaviors should be made available to mental health professionals working with young adults on and off the campus of colleges. Not only should they be made aware of the problem in general, but they should receive training specifically about the types of parental alienation strategies that parents can engage in, and about the statements an adult can make that would signal that the individual is currently alienated (i.e., enmeshed with one parent and unjustifiably rejecting of the other). To mitigate the effects of the alienation, mental health professionals could also benefit from training about therapeutic strategies for working with such clients. As Rabiega and Baker (2012) noted, understanding that one has been involved in an alienation dynamic can be a painful realization that must be handled with delicacy in the therapeutic relationship. The therapist must determine that the client is ready and has the internal and external resources to critically think about his or her relationship with his or her parents. If the therapist criticizes the favored parent before the client is ready to explore that parent's role, the client might prematurely terminate counseling. It is quite possible that what brings the client into treatment



are the types of outcomes measured in this study such as low self-esteem, depression, and difficulties with substance abuse. It is essential to help the client cope with these issues while (if not before) exploring the underlying familial dynamics that created them. The therapist and counselor must balance being attuned to the felt reality of the client while mindful of the larger parental alienation context that unbeknownst to the client could be impinging on his or her ability to individuate and actualize his or her own personhood. Proper training and awareness of alienation dynamics is an essential element to helping college students and other young adults achieve long-term well-being.

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