

Alienated Parents' Experiences - Other Side Perspective

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Umjesto zahvale roditeljima koji su nesebično podijelili svoja intimna i bolna iskustva, citat jednog od njih koji nas je posebno nadahnua: „Dijete je svrha, svrha života, a ne cilj koji treba postići“.

Pišući o vama, pišemo za djecu.

Instead of thanking the parents who selflessly shared their intimate and painful experiences, a quote from one of them that especially inspired us: “A child is a purpose, a purpose in life, not a goal to be achieved“.

Writing about you, we write for children.

Summary

Alienated / targeted parents are a relatively neglected population in scientific and practical terms, although it is estimated that more than 10% of parents experience or have experienced this form of domestic violence. Few studies to date have shown serious consequences for their mental health of with the perception of insufficient system support. The aim of this paper is to deeply explore the experiences and emotions of alienated / targeted parents before, during and after separation / divorce, stressing their cooperation with institutions and their needs in Croatia, given that no such research has been conducted in the region yet. Based on in-depth interviews with 17 alienated / targeted parents, this paper provides an overview of their experiences: (a) the influences of primary families; (b) unclear circumstances of the termination of the romantic relationship; (c) false accusations of violence; (d) the path to helplessness; (e) reflection on other aspects of life; and (f) needs by the system.

Key words: *parental alienation, alienated parents, targeted parents*

Sažetak

Otuđeni/otuđivani roditelji relativno su zapostavljena populacija u znanstvenom i praktičnom smislu, iako se procjenjuje da više od 10% roditelja doživljava ili je doživio ovaj oblik partnerskog nasilja. Dosadašnja malobrojna istraživanja govore o ozbiljnim posljedicama po mentalno zdravlje otuđenih/otuđivanih roditelja uz percepciju nedostatne podrške sustava. Cilj ovog rada je dubinski istražiti iskustva, doživljaje i emocije otuđenih roditelja prije, za vrijeme i nakon razdvajanja/ razvoda s posebnim osvrtom na suradnju s institucijama sustava i njihove potrebe u Hrvatskoj, s obzirom na to da u regiji dosad nije provedeno istraživanje koje bi se bavilo specifično ovom populacijom. Na temelju dubinskih intervjua sa 17 otuđenih/otuđivanih roditelja, ovaj rad donosi pregled njihovih iskustava: (a) utjecaji primarnih obitelji; (b) nejasne okolnosti prekida partnerskog odnosa; (c) lažne optužbe; (d) put do bespomoćnosti; (e) odraz na ostale aspekte života i (f) potrebe od strane sustava.

Ključne riječi: otuđenje, otuđeni roditelji, otuđivani roditelji

Introduction

The concept of parental alienation has been around since the middle of the last century, under different names and with different theoretical conceptualizations (Woodall and Woodall, 2019), but to date many scholars and practitioners understand the dynamics of parental alienation in different ways (Buljan Flander and Roje Đapić, 2020). Still, there is a consensus about the fact that some children unjustifiably reject one parent while at the same time idealising the other parent (e.g. Baker and Ben-Ami, 2011; Bernet et al., 2010; Gardner, 2002), which contemporary literature places in the domain of motional abuse of children by parents who interfere and disrupt the child's relationship with others parents (von Boch-Galhau, 2018).

The American stream (Parental Alienation Study Group, PASG) in its explanation of parental alienation currently advocates a factor model, according to which parental alienation is determined if the following factors are present: (1) the child refuses a relationship with one parent, (2) previously there was an adequate attachment relationship between the child and the rejected parent, (3) the rejected parent did not abuse or neglect the child, (4) the other parent uses alienating strategies (e.g. obstructs the child's and other parent's contacts, negatively describes the other parent to the child), (5) there are noticeable signs of alienation in the child (e.g., campaign to denigrate a rejected parent, presenting false scenarios) (e.g. Baker, 2020; Johnston and Sullivan, 2020).

The European stream (European Association of Parental Alienation Practitioners, EAPAP) explains parental alienation through a psychodynamic perspective, perceiving the rejection of one parent as a consequence of the child's pathological fusion with the other parent, resulting in induced defensive splitting in the child's intrapsychic world, which is then projected onto the primary objects (parents) and to the external observer this manifests as the idealization of one versus the demonization of the other parent (Woodall et al., 2020).

Both currents have emphasised the importance of the lack of ambivalence in a child, which in recent years has been shown through the validated instrument "The parental acceptance–rejection questionnaire" (e.g. Bernet et al., 2018). The results clearly indicate reduced ambivalence towards parents of alienated children, compared to children from traditional families, children of divorced parents in general, and children who have been abused/neglected (Bernet et al., 2018). Parental alienation today, therefore, in the broadest sense can be recognized as splitting in a child manifested through a lack of ambivalence towards parents. Splitting represents a cognitive distortion, a pattern of perception and thinking (Beck, Davies and Freeman, 2015), so there is a high risk in the future that the child "splits", roughly separates events, people, situations, self-image in black and white terms (APA, 2010).

The prevalence of parental alienation is difficult to assess by analysing existing data due to different definitions and terminology, the fact that some parents are alienated and do not recognize it, as well as the fact that some parents are not alienated but feel that way (Harman, Leder-Elder and Biringen, 2016). By extrapolation based on the results of a study with 610 parents in North America, Harman et al. (2016) estimate that 13.4% of parents have experienced that the other parent alienates and/or has alienated their children, which is a worryingly high prevalence. Guided by the best interests of the child and placing the child in the focus of interest, which is desirable in practical work, unfortunately alienated parents as a group are often neglected in both scientific and practical terms. Harman, Kruk and Hines (2018) warn of this problem and state that alienation is basically an unrecognized form of violence, not only against children, but also a form of partner violence against the alienated parent and his primary family.

Alienated parents, especially mothers who are traditionally perceived as primary caregivers, are often affected by the stigma that they have certainly in some way contributed to such strong rejection by their own children (Finzi-Dottan, Goldblatt, & Cohen-Masica, 2011). The idea that alienation is exclusively a product of high-conflict divorce can also cast an apparent responsibility on alienated parents (Roje Đapić and Buljan Flander, 2020), although the fact is that alienation can also occur in whole families (Baker, 2006), and the act of divorce is often the cause of manifestation of one parent's alienating behaviours (Woodall and Woodall, 2017).

Some researches explore the experiences of alienated parents, their intrapsychic and relational problems, and difficulties with the system, but those are few in numbers. Poustie, Matthewson, and

Balmer (2018) published arguably the most comprehensive research on the subject, based on 126 interviews with alienated parents. They found that the most difficult things for them were: feelings of distance from their own children, emotional and financial exhaustion, feelings of impaired psychological well-being and concern for the well-being of their children. The experience of oneself as a victim of domestic violence was often present, with a lack of understanding by experts. Lee-Maturana et al. (2019) conclude, based on a review of nine smaller studies in this area, that alienated parents are predominantly dissatisfied with the justice and health care system, burdened with feelings of despair, frustration and isolation, but also have some resilience, i.e. are not inclined to give up. Scharp et al. (2020) find that alienated parents cope with stress through the mechanisms of distraction and negation. However, due to prolonged helplessness in the alienation process, especially if court proceedings are lengthy and ineffective, according to Evenson and Simone (2005), alienated parents may develop depressive disorder and complex posttraumatic stress. In addition to mental health, Kruk (2010) finds consequences to other aspects of life, such as growing social isolation, more frequent job losses, inability to establish and/or maintain new relationships in life, all mediated by shame, stigma, helplessness and hopelessness.

The aim of this paper is to deeply explore the experiences and emotions of alienated parents before, during and after separation/divorce with special reference to cooperation with institutions and their needs in Croatia, given that no research has been conducted in our region as of yet which would deal specifically with this population.

Methodology

Participants

The participants are parents whose children are alienated or in the process of alienation (alienated and targeted parents, according to Roje Đapić, Buljan Flander and Galić, 2020). They were recruited from the authors' institution and through an association cooperating with the authors' institution, in order to ensure that indeed they are alienated/targeted parents, recognized as such by experts, and not parents who independently (or unprofessionally) declare themselves alienated/targeted. The sample includes only those parents, whose children (with the same partner) are alienated/ in the process of alienation (all children if they have more). There was a total of 17 participants (12 men/fathers, 5 women/mothers), ranging in age from 36 to 54 years ($M=47.78$). This appropriate sample was selected for the purpose of collecting "information-rich" statements, with depth replacing representativeness (Patton, 2002; Creswell, 2007). Twelve participants have tertiary or higher education; seven of them have secondary education. Ten of them have one child, four have two children, and three have three children with a partner who is alienating or has alienated the child/children. Descriptive data on alienating parents are not presented because they were obtained partially and indirectly, potentially diminishing their accuracy. Fifteen of them were previously married, and two of them were in a relationship, i.e. extramarital union with a partner who is alienating the child/children. For the participants who were married, in 11 cases the divorce process was judicially terminated, and for four it was not at the time of the interview. Marriages/extramarital unions lasted from 8 months to 16 years ($M=11.4$ years). The time elapsed from separation/initiation of divorce to interview ranged from 13 months to eight years ($M=4.6$ years), except for one case, in which the separation occurred during the mother's pregnancy. The age of the participants' children at the time of the interview ranged from two to 17 years ($M=9.3$ years).

Method

In-depth interviews were conducted from 2018 to 2020. At the very beginning of the interview, the participants were thanked for their participation and were given the following instructions: "Although you are in the role of a parent, we are interested in your personal experiences. Please answer the questions as extensively as possible and pay special attention to your own experiences and emotions in each answer."

The interviews were semi-structured with the following main areas: (1) general data; (2) family relationships before separation/divorce; (3) divorce/separation; (4) family relationships after divorce/separation; (5) experience with system institutions; (6) needs within the system. At the very end, the participants were given the opportunity to add something they considered relevant. The interviewers did not use the term “alienation” with the participants at any time in order not to affect their answers.

Except in theme of general data (age, gender, number/age/gender of children, etc.), the participants were asked questions openly and broadly, for example: “Describe family relationships before separation/divorce”. Asking sub-questions as needed was planned, but given that the participants answered the questions very extensively and comprehensively without difficulty, sub-questions were generally not needed. The most frequently asked sub-questions were: “How was it for you? / How did you feel? /What was that experience for you like? “

The interviews lasted from 40 to 90 minutes ($M=63$ minutes), depending on the extensiveness of the answers. All interviews were conducted by one of the authors of this paper, a master of psychology with psychotherapeutic education, according to a jointly established protocol, who in no way participated in the processing, treatment or expertise of the family before, during or after this research.

Analysis

The conducted interviews were subsequently transcribed. The approach to analysis was inductive in accordance with the phenomenological paradigm (Moustakas, 1994), in order to understand the experiences of the participants. Interpretative Phenomenological Content Analysis (IPA) was used. The two authors of this paper read all the transcripts several times independently, with the process of summarising the answers (identification of topics) and first with an independent, then joint initial interpretations of the results, after which the answers were categorised according to the main topics. Independent identification of topics contributed to intercoder reliability (Schwandt, 2001). The topics were grouped into clusters (e.g. experience of psychological well-being, suggestions for improving practice), with constant parallel checking of the validity of the topics and clusters in the original answers of the participants. The transcripts were then coded according to topics and clusters in the computer program Atlas.ti. The credibility of the analysis was ensured by the independent work of two authors according to the same principles (Lincoln and Guba, 1990), whose disagreements were discussed and resolved with the mediation of the third author.

Results

The presentation of the results is organized according to the final clusters and topics: (a) the influence of primary families; (b) unclear circumstances of the termination of partnership; (c) false accusations; (d) the road to helplessness; (e) reflection on other aspects of life; and (f) needs from the system.

a) The influence of primary families

The importance of the parents and possible other members of the extended family (e.g. sister, brother) is very clearly noticed in the experiences of the participants, both on the part of the alienating and on the part of the alienated/targeted parent.

Significant involvement of extended family members of alienating parents in the relationship/marriage is emphasised, sometimes before the birth of children and before separation/divorce, with participants feeling that extended family members (usually the other parent's mother) tried to control relationships and excessively interfere with the partner and parental relationship.

“Her mother was constantly present, even though we did not live in her apartment but in a rented one. We couldn't talk for a minute without her getting involved. She had her key, she would just come over (...) and if I said something, I would get a “lecture” that she helps us and that I'm ungrateful, comments about my mom not being here, that I might be jealous because of that.”

“He and his mother... I don't know, as if they wanted to have a child, and I was their auxiliary uterus. I know it sounds crazy, but it really was that way. We lived with his parents, the dad didn't interfere much, but Branko /changed name of ex-husband/ and his mom planned our marriage and life, they planned my pregnancy as if I was not right next to them during that conversation.”

Relationships with the primary family of the alienating parent showed to be significant for the alienation process itself, when in some cases the alienating parent passively let the alienation process to his/her family members and they successfully “did the job”.

“Her mother told her, for example, that I wanted to kill her before she was even born, and then you hear a 4.5-year-old child repeat it (...) the wife said nothing, she didn't speak against me, but she didn't stop her mother either, who was doing a nice job for her.”

“She would just keep quiet because she is under his roof, she can't go against her father, but her father can go against me as much as he wants.”

“We would have agreed somehow, but then his parents would come and then all of that would go down the drain (...) His mother is a better mother than me, his father is the smartest man in the world.”

Two participants spontaneously offered the hypothesis of a transgenerational transmission of trauma in the primary family of the alienating parent that would underlie the alienation.

“One thing that is very interesting to me, her mother, the kid’s grandmother, is also divorced and I don’t know that man at all (...) and her father, the grandmother’s, is a hated character in the family, he is never mentioned (...) Their fathers are bad just because they are men.”

“A lot of them killed themselves in that family, I don’t know the details, but I also know that her mother tried to kill herself (...) With all this now, as if they are trying to kill me, you know, erase me (...) as if someone has to die.”

Regarding their primary family, some participants had the impression that they hadn’t received enough support.

“And my family, nothing, they didn’t even want to hear about the divorce, let alone to help me. I was completely broken, in a lot of ways, even financially. They didn’t help me. According to them, I should have still been married (...) If it wasn’t for some friends, I don’t know how I would have survived.”

Many participants were further affected by the fact that their primary family was also affected by alienation, by the inability to establish contact and relationships with the child, which burdened them emotionally.

“And my mother hasn’t seen the kid in ten years. I barely saw her myself, always supervised, in her house, with her mom or sister. My mother didn’t have access for ten years (...) How many tears has she shed for her granddaughter (...) and me, how do I comfort her.”

b) Unclear circumstances of the termination of partnership

More than half of the participants don’t have a clear cause, reason or context for the termination of the partnership, while the rest state distancing (3), excessive differences (2), adultery on their part (1) and adultery on the part of the partner (2).

Four participants describe the projective tendencies of the ex-partner, which caused them confusion, guilt and re-examination of reality.

“We had each other’s passwords for everything, so even if I wanted to cheat on him, I wouldn’t do it through Facebook. But he imagined that I have lovers because of some friends on Facebook (...) Nothing was clear to me, he started to talk about how I didn’t like him, accusations saying why don’t leave if I’m better off with others (...) There was no way to justify myself, and I started wondering if I did something so terrible by having friends, by looking at those profiles, awful.”

“After she gave birth, I don’t know if it was postpartum depression or if something else ‘broke,’ we couldn’t talk anymore, she was very angry at everything (...) So one night the baby girl couldn’t sleep at all, she cried, she (mother) was very tired and nervous, I saw that she transferred that nervousness to the child, you couldn’t tell which was worse any more (...) I asked her to go to sleep, that I put the child to sleep, and instead of being glad to be able to rest, glad that I quickly calmed the child, I mean, I didn’t blame her or say anything bad (...) You see, I’m still justifying putting the child to sleep. Basically, she went crazy, saying that I think she is a bad mother, that I insult her (...).”

c) False accusations

Eleven participants were particularly burdened by the false allegations of violence, while all participants had at least some allegations of bad behaviour towards child and/or ex-partner that they believe were deliberately fabricated or over exaggerated by the alienating parents. In some cases, the allegations (which were later dismissed as unfounded) contributed significantly to the alienation, especially with the passage of time ranging from a few months to more than a year until they were resolved within the system.

“You know, when you’re being investigated for sexually abusing your children, you don’t get to see them for 13 months, and six months after that, you see them twice a week for an hour under supervision in a supermarket playroom. So, it’s enough for her to get the idea and report it and you don’t have your children for a year and a half (...) And not to mention what you go through, how you feel during this investigation (...) In the end, all charges were dropped, but no one can bring back the time that was lost.”

“I almost became labelled as a domestic abuser (...) She cut herself on the arm with a knife, there, and so shallowly, she called the police, saying that I wanted to kill her, that I attacked her with a knife (...) Although it was all made up and nothing happened, you have to go through it all (...) and then she’s afraid to hand over the kid to me because I allegedly tried to kill her, she can’t go to mediation with me because I tried to kill her with a knife (...) we can’t go to the Child and Youth Protection Centre together because I cut her with a knife (...) and everything drags on, and the policewoman immediately saw that it wasn’t deep and that she made it herself, I still have pictures.”

“It was cold in the car while we drove her to kindergarten together (...), she says: “Dad, it’s cold”; I say that the car also needs some time to warm up, mom then turns around and says to the child: “Dad intentionally wants you to be cold” (...) later accuses me of it as neglect.”

d) The road to helplessness

Although all participants still strive to have a relationship with their children, all of them are dominated by the emotion of (learned) helplessness through the various stages of the interview.

Some participants describe helplessness with this expression exactly, some name it differently, but further analysis shows that it refers to helplessness, while some express themselves in metaphors.

“Pathetic, miserable and helpless, that’s how I’ve felt a hundred times so far and I’ll probably feel that way again.”

“A certain indifference entered me (...) So after ten years, more, 12 years, I tried everything, I did everything, I spent my health, not to mention money (...) It’s torture for both me and the child, these encounters don’t make any sense when she still turns her head when she sees me and ‘sits through’ that hour under supervision. Whatever I try to do any more, I have already lost her.”

“It feels like someone throwing you in a pool with your hands and feet bound and saying: “Swim! Compete!” You can’t even surface, you can’t breathe, let alone swim in a race.”

Helplessness occurs predominantly due to systematic explicit rejection by the child and long-term inability to solve problems within the system.

“He cries, screams, tears away, he won’t come with me (...) I thought of all the advice and that maybe I should ignore it, set boundaries, somehow calm him down, but after I don’t know how many times, I couldn’t do it anymore, I would sit with him and cry. “

“Then everyone in the Centre changes after two years, so we start from the beginning, getting to know each other, a new measure, school for parents, mediation, counselling, then one court procedure, a third procedure, two more are separate that I know of so far. And all that time, whatever I do or don’t do, for the little one it’s the same. I can’t speed it up.”

All participants describe a sense of frustration when asked about experiences with the institutions, which seem to be mostly slow, sluggish, with insufficient understanding of the issue and determination to solve the problem.

“Believe me, I would like her to really understand what she is doing and to decide that she won’t do it anymore, but she won’t do it without pressure, she just won’t (...) For three years I haven’t seen the child properly until we came to the expertise, until then the child was afraid of me, she wouldn’t go against the child’s will (...) When the experts pressured her, all of a sudden she everything is possible, we go for ice cream. With her, nothing happens without pressure, someone should have pressured her a long time ago.”

“If he sees that he can ignore the verdict, the measure, the advice and everything, if he sees that they believe he is protecting the children from me, even though no one still explains to me what they should be protected from, then of course he will continue to ignore.”

“Someone needs to have the courage to make a decision, but everyone just ‘passes the hot potato’ around.”

Some participants state that they encountered prejudice from people employed in the system, as if they themselves were responsible for rejection, and unprofessional advice that they experienced as minimizing the seriousness of the situation.

“They tell me that I’m nervous, that I’m hostile (...) I am, yes, I’m both and a lot more, because for me it’s not the first but a hundred and first time having this conversation on the same topic, and I still don’t see my child, regardless of the fact that I saw this particular lady for the first time, I don’t know her name anymore (...) and then she asks me if I am like that in front of the child, as if saying the child rejects you because you are like that”

“Now the two of them sit together, a social worker and a psychologist, and they tell me to find a new wife, to redirect my energy, something like that (...) At first, I didn’t think I understood, then I am thinking – what kind of advice is that, then again, I think maybe I really do need to redirect energy, then I ask myself – are they insane.”

e) Reflection on other aspects of life

All participants, without being directly asked, describe that the experience of their children being alienated from them has left consequences on other aspects of their lives, of which emotional and financial exhaustion prevail; mental health disorders and relationship difficulties are also present.

“I’m tired, that describes me best (...) I haven’t been at sea, in the snow, I haven’t been anywhere in years, everything went to the lawyers, and I haven’t even asked for the property part yet because I’m afraid he will then retaliate even harder through the girls (children)”

“I’m afraid, I’m still afraid today, that if the adult daughter (who was also previously alienated, but is united with her mother) doesn’t answer her cell phone because, for example, she was on the toilet and didn’t hear the call, I’m immediately afraid it’s over, that I don’t have her anymore.”

“I can’t sleep; it’s a disaster, I just think, what I could have done, what I should have done.”

“It is a special kind of sorrow that overwhelms the whole being. You have a living child, and yet you don’t have a child. You can’t mourn him, you can’t be with him.”

“I don’t think I could ever have a child again. I didn’t tell her (current partner), but I’ll have to tell her. I couldn’t go through any of this again. “

“You know how interested I am in getting into new relationships? I’m not interested. And who would be interested in getting into a relationship with me? I deal with the courts 24/7, and when I don’t, I’m like a wreck of a man.”

f) Needs from the system

Participants expect that system’s staff is educated, sensitised, fast and firm in resolving cases of alienation from the very beginning of the process and that they take responsibility. Some of the participants emphasise the need to be heard and treated with respect.

“Unfortunately, I came to the right experts late, but I saw that there are some and that is why I would tell everyone that, following the example of real experts, they need a lot of knowledge and determination, without calculating and switching whose job it is, ‘this does not concern me’ attitude”

“I’ve read a lot and learned about this topic, it’s sad when I have to explain to people whose job it is that a five-year-old won’t just say that his dad wanted to kill him before he was even born if someone didn’t manipulate the child (...). We need you to know that, we need things to go fast before such big problems occur because then it is much harder to mend the damage (...). It should not be allowed for someone to manipulate for months and months because for example a child is sick, then a business meeting came up, then it was something third, and then the child was already heavily alienated by the time it came to an appointment.”

“Apart from these concrete things, I needed this today, for someone to smile at me, you know, to look at me as a human being, to see that someone understands that it’s hard for me, even though the child is the most important, to be able to tell a story.”

Discussion

This paper explores the experience, insight and emotions of alienated parents before, during and after separation/divorce with special reference to cooperation with system institutions and their needs in Croatia. The discussion will be organized in the same way as the results, given the final clusters and topics.

a) The influence of primary families

The importance and influence of primary families in the process of alienation in Croatian participants are more prominent than in current theories and findings of foreign research. Woodall and Woodall (2019), explaining the dynamics of alienation, talk about the transgenerational transmission of trauma in the primary family of the alienating parent, which was spontaneously described by two participants in this study. However the importances of the primary family of alienated/targeted parents, as well as the complicity of the primary family of the alienating parents have not been recognized in previous research. The reason for this can be found in the traditional nature of our society, which implies a greater attachment of adults to their primary families (e.g. Miralao, 1997; Smart, 2000), which in the context of alienation may be more important than in American and British society from which theories and research in this area predominantly arise.

It has been observed that the primary family of alienating parents (or at least some of its members) is in some cases actively involved in the parental partnership even before the separation/divorce, with participants feeling that extended family members (usually the other parent's mother) sought to control relations and excessively encroach on their relationship. This speaks of the symbiotic family dynamics of alienating parents, which should be further and more deeply explored, but indicates the psychodynamic basis of the process of alienation, in accordance with current European theories (Woodall et al., 2020).

Leaving alienation to one's primary family by the alienating parent represents an alienation strategy not covered by earlier categorizations (e.g., Warshak, 2003; Baker and Fine, 2008; Woodall and Woodall, 2017). This has a strong implication for checking and using the factor model of alienation in science and practice because as one of the necessary factors to define alienation it prescribes is that alienation strategies are observed in the alienating parent (e.g. Baker, 2020; Johnston and Sullivan, 2020). According to the literal interpretation of this factor, it seems that it is necessary for the parent to apply alienating strategies, and from this research it is evident that it can be done by someone else, such as the child's grandmother. Alternatively, passively leaving alienation to another person can also be considered an alienating strategy, along with other passive methods.

Regarding the primary families of alienated/targeted parents, it is important to point out that according to the participants, they were also emotionally affected by the alienation, i.e. the inability to establish and maintain a relationship with the child/children. Alienating the child from the family of the other parent has been recognized as a sign of alienation (Gardner, 2002), but there is not enough research that would address the experiences of extended family members of the alienated child. It is evident from this research that their emotional burden additionally burdens alienated/targeted parents, and the necessary scientific and practical attention could be paid to them as well. In addition to the interest and care for the child, members of the primary family prove to be important for the support of the alienated/targeted parent, more precisely, some participants point out as a particularly difficult experience the lack of such support. Disabling the parental role is emotional violence even outside the context of alienation (e.g. Summers, 2006; Mechanic, Weaver, & Resick, 2008), so alienated/targeted parents can be viewed as victims of emotional abuse by a former partner. Social support for victims of violence is crucial for adjustment and recovery (e.g. Rivero, 2012; Žukauskienė et al., 2019), so it is not surprising to find that the lack of primary family support has been particularly difficult for some participants and which they also emphasize as one of the salient experiences in the process of alienation.

b) Unclear circumstances of the termination of partnership

Less than half of the participants state the usual reasons (cause) for separation or divorce such as estrangement, excessive differences or adultery (Hawkins, Willoughby and Doherty, 2012), and with the rest there is no clear cause, reason or context for the termination of the partnership. At the same time, the projective tendencies of the former partner are noticed in four of them, which caused them confusion, guilt and testing the reality. Although for the purposes of this research the mental health of alienating parents has not been analysed and cannot be concluded, based on counter-transference reactions of participants, a hypothesis of latent or manifest psychopathology and/or elements of psychopathology can be made, as well as the use of immature defence mechanisms, predominantly projection (e.g. Ogden, 1979; Sandler, 2018).

According to the literature, alienating parents usually contain elements of narcissistic, borderline and paranoid personality disorder, delusional disorders and delusions (Woodall and Woodall, 2017). Gordon, Stoffey, and Bottinelli (2008) analysed the MMPI-II personality profiles of alienating parents and concluded that they have a clinically significantly higher level of use of primitive defence mechanisms compared to other parents in divorce, and Siegel and Langford (1998) warn of their marked defensiveness in the personality inventory, by which they express primitive defences and/or resistance to interventions. Mental health and defence mechanisms of alienating parents should be further examined with respect to prominent hypotheses and findings.

c) False accusations

False allegations of child abuse have been identified as a method of alienation according to existing classifications (e.g. Warshak, 2003; Baker and Fine, 2008; Woodall and Woodall, 2017). Karen and Nick Woodall (2017) describe the dual alienating power of false accusations of child abuse – on the one hand they are an alienating strategy in themselves (convincing a child that the other parent has harmed him), and on the other, they are often a way to prolong court proceedings and prevent the other parent and child maintaining the relationship, which corresponds to the experiences of the participants in this research. In addition to the allegations of abuse themselves, exaggerating the other parent's failure to diminish their authority and/or parental competencies has also been recognized as a classic alienation strategy (Warshak, 2003). Baker and Fine (2008) describe the same behaviours as creating an impression of danger for the child from the other parent.

What earlier research and theories do not recognize are the false accusations of the other parent for violence directed at him or her and not the child. Specifically, if an alienating parent falsely accuses the other parent of violence against him or herself rather than directly against the child, especially in a sluggish administrative system, it can also serve as an alienation strategy. This can reinforce alienation directly (giving the child details of the allegations) and indirectly with the passage of time, at the same pace as false accusations of violence against the child (Woodall and Woodall, 2017).

A special problem in practice is the setting the distinction between true and false accusations of violence (either against a child or against an ex-partner), and within the category of false accusations, the distinction between intentionally false accusations, which represent child abuse and system manipulation, and unfounded accusations resulting from authentic care (Tromce and Bala, 2005; Veraa, 2009). There is a danger that experts, depending on the area of specialization, will tend to believe each accusation or hold each accusation unfounded and act accordingly for months or years until the process is officially completed, and any bias prevents prudent judgment and genuine protection of children as well as adults (Guarnera, Murrie and Boccaccini, 2017). Therefore, especially in cases of separated parents, it is very important to ensure a prompt response of the system and, with intersectoral cooperation, to complete the investigation and possible trial as soon as possible.

d) The road to helplessness

Helplessness is one of the most difficult emotions that people can face (Arambašić, 2007). Although all participants in this study continue to make some effort to maintain or establish a relationship with their children, they have a strong sense of helplessness. It can reinforce alienation directly (giving the child details of the allegations) and indirectly with the passage of time, at the same pace as false accusations of violence against the child (Woodall and Woodall, 2017). Through their own life stories, they lead the authors through a process of falling into a sense of helplessness, which mostly involves a lot of invested energy and experienced frustration in relation to their children and the system, rejection and embarrassment, and eventually leads to learned helplessness through the passage of time. The phenomenon of learned helplessness was first named by Seligman and Maier (1967) and described as a learned acceptance of discomfort without attempting to control an event or escape from it. Learned helplessness results in cognitive, motivational, and emotional deficits after people are systematically met with the expectation of being helpless in uncontrollable circumstances.

Given that alienated parents are denied the opportunity to fulfil their parental role over a long period of time and given that they perceive the institutions of the system predominantly slow, and professionals as people who lack understanding and determination, learned helplessness is an expected emotion or condition. The study by Lee-Maturane et al. (2019) brings similar findings – they find “frustration and despair” in alienated parents, and at the same time persistence in some aspects of the struggle for a relationship with their children.

Learned helplessness can serve as an overture to a number of psychological difficulties, such as depression (Dušanić, 2007), which research also finds in alienated parents (e.g. Evenson and Simone, 2005; Kruk, 2010). It would be worthwhile to further investigate the dynamics of the development of psychological difficulties in alienated parents and the possible mediating effect of feelings of (learned) helplessness in their aetiology.

e) Reflection on other aspects of life

Alienation affects various aspects of the life of alienated/targeted parents, from which psychological difficulties can be singled out (e.g. sleep problems, chronic feelings of exhaustion, pronounced fear), financial problems and relationship problems (e.g. resistance to a romantic relationship or having another child). These findings, although somewhat different in content, are consistent with the findings of Kruk (2010), who finds more frequent job loss, the inability to establish and maintain new relationships in life in alienated parents.

No further research has been done on this topic, and it would be worth checking in more detail which areas of the life of alienated/targeted parents can alienation affect and in what way. However, the currently listed perceived effects of alienation on the broader picture of life of alienated/targeted parents can be related to the consequences suffered by victims of other forms of violence by their partners. These are consequences on physical and mental health, distorted self-image, difficulties at work, social and family relationships (e.g. Mignon, Larson and Holems, 2002; Tjaden, 2000; Campbell, 2002; Lysova, Dim and Dutton, 2019), which corresponds to the experiences of alienated/targeted parents, in accordance with the definition of alienation as a type of domestic violence (Harman, Kruk and Hines, 2018).

f) Needs from the system

Participants need an adequate and professionally responsible response from people employed in the system in terms of sensibility, knowledge, speed and determination. They also emphasize the importance of a humane approach that includes authentic interest and respect. These needs were presented by the participants mainly as opposed to what they have experienced, which is especially important feedback for experts from all sectors involved in these cases.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to deeply explore the experiences and emotions of alienated parents before, during and after separation/divorce with special reference to cooperation with system institutions and their needs in Croatia, given that no research has been conducted in our region so far which would deal specifically with this population, and foreign research is rare and much more often focused on alienated children than parents.

Some of the findings are consistent with previous theories and research, including feelings of helplessness, impaired mental health, problems in various aspects of the lives of alienated/targeted parents and the importance of support they receive or don't receive from loved ones and from the system, from which the perspective of isolating this vulnerable group as victims of domestic violence arises, in accordance with which they deserve further research and professional attention. Some of the findings are partly new in this area, such as the identification of the use of false accusations by alienating parents as an alienation strategy, not only for violence against children or exaggeration of the other parent's failure, but also for violence against themselves, which along with the slowness and sluggishness of the system can greatly contribute to alienation. It is extremely important to differentiate real victims of domestic violence in order for them to receive adequate help (the children as well) from a manipulation of the system, which is not possible without the prompt reaction of the judicial system.

Countertransference reactions of confusion, guilt and testing the reality by alienated/targeted parents in partner relationships with alienating parents shed additional light on theses on the elements of personality pathology and the use of immature defence mechanisms of alienating parents.

A very important topic of this paper is the influence of primary families because, although some theories speak of family dynamics and transmission of transgenerational traumas in the primary families of alienating parents, their impact on direct alienation (while the parent passively leaves the child abuse to them) has not been described. The population of the extended family of the alienated/targeted parent has not been investigated at all so far, and the findings of this research show that it is also affected by alienation and that it has an important impact on the life of the alienated/targeted parent.

The findings of this paper open up many opportunities for further research, for example possible additional strategies of alienation in our society in relation to the ones described so far, dynamics of primary families of both parents in alienation, underlying psychopathology and defence mechanisms of alienating parents, obviously complex dynamics of mental health problems and other aspects of life of alienated/targeted parents through the prism of helplessness, extended family of the alienated/targeted parent, challenges and opportunities to improve the quality and efficiency of system reactions, for which the results and considerations from this research can serve as a starting point and the source of hypotheses.

The scientific contribution of this paper is reflected in the depth and width of collected data on the experiences of scientifically very neglected, but numerous and vulnerable population of parents who have experience with parental alienation, based on which a better insight into their experience of the alienation process is obtained, through which the original theoretical theses from the domain of alienation are described, but also into the broader psychological sciences. The practical contribution of this paper is predominantly for professionals working with this population of parents and families, in illuminating the experience of "the other side", clearly presenting authentic experiences and the need to improve daily work.

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