

**E-BOOK**

# **II European Conference on Domestic Violence**

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Edgar Garcia Illustration

**II** Faculty of Psychology and Education Sciences of the University of Porto

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[IIndECDV@fpce.up.pt](mailto:IIndECDV@fpce.up.pt)

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Ana Guerreiro (ISMAI/FDUP/UMAR)

Cátia Pontedeira (ISMAI/FDUP/UMAR)

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**Theme:** Intimate Partner Violence

**Title:** ‘I did not see my daughters for years.’ The impact of coercive control on post-divorce relationships between mothers and children

**Author(s):** Sietske Dijkstra

**Affiliation(s):** Dijkstra Agency and Knowledgecenter Social Innovation (KSI), University of Applied Sciences, Netherlands

**Email contact:** [fran.dijkstra@gmail.com](mailto:fran.dijkstra@gmail.com)

### **Introduction:**

Investigating the roots and the penetrating effects of disrupted post-divorce family relationships is essential to raise awareness and guide practitioners and researchers in their attempts to understand and treat complex family matters. Only with greater awareness can society promote greater safety, diminish emotional harm, and promote healthy parenting. More specifically, post-divorce relationships are becoming a worldwide issue. Yet research is limited concerning how post-divorce relationships are poisoned by prior and continuing domestic violence. An issue of special interest is how post-divorce relationships are shaped by the continuing tactic known as *coercive control*, through which one parent reorients their children’s view of the other parent to sabotage their parent-child relationship, often with severe short-term and long-term consequences.

In *Mothering Through Domestic Violence*, Radford and Hester (2006) demonstrate that the undermining repertoire of domestic violence can include emotional violence by the male partner against the female other; a prime example is when the violent partner strives to denigrate and dissolve the parental bonds between the children and the targeted female as a mother. Thiara and Humphreys (2015) have coined the term *absent presence* to describe one way an abusive male ex-partner may try to control the relationship between the ex-spouse and their children. Katz (2016) has demonstrated that the impact of an ex-partner’s coercive control on children can show up in how they regard the targeted parent or are under attack themselves. Children of any age can become emotionally corrupted by becoming a part of the power play of the abusing parent (Dijkstra, 2016).

The disruption of a child’s relationship with one parent after divorce, is like abuse and witnessing abuse considered to be an adverse childhood experience (ACE), causing suffering and high costs in mental, relational, and health issues (Felitti, 2002). A substantial percentage of children do not see one of their parents anymore after the divorce. *Parental alienation*, meaning one parent’s turning the child against the other (Baker & Fine, 2014) might in continuing abuse cases be related to using coercive control of the child’s feelings and perspective to blame the targeted parent for the divorce.

At this time, the idea of parental alienation as an emotionally abusive tactic used by one parent to alienate the affections between their child and the other parent is controversial, mostly because it can be applied in either direction. It is crucial to distinct alienation, deliberate rejection after divorce without any ambivalence from estrangement due to realistic rejection based on past abuse experiences (Dijkstra, 2017).

A targeted parent can charge the abusive parent with deliberate efforts to alienate the child’s affections, but the reverse can occur: a parent can falsely make that same charge to pose as the victim of a vengeful ex-

partner. The claim of parental alienation can also be used by an abusive parent to threaten and gain control of the abused partner, using the threat of the loss of access to the child. Canadian shelter workers have reported false allegations of parental alienation leveled against mothers by abusive men as a tactic to threaten and scare the mothers living in a shelter setting, motivated by the men's desire to gain access and even sole custody of the children (Lapierre & Coté, 2016). Further, the idea of parental alienation might have intergenerational patterns, in which past abuse and alienation experiences of parents and grandparents form the basis for post-divorce rejection in their divorcing adult child (Dijkstra, 2017).

### **Questions, methods, and concepts:**

The focus of this ongoing, small-scale, in-depth study is on this process of alienation of affections between parent and child and its relational dynamics. Eight mothers and four fathers were interviewed for the study so far, and two focus groups were held with seven mothers and six fathers. This article considers the interviews with the mothers, concentrating on the power and communication dynamics between the two parents, and between parents and their children. (The fathers' interviews may be treated in a future article.)

Alienation is described that one parent, out of anger or resentment is deliberately or unconsciously influencing the children to distance and separate from the other parent, by making the other parent look bad, mad, ridiculous, and deviant as well as as imparting inappropriate information with the children such as allegations of adultery, addiction, or financial irresponsibility--a sharing process known as enmeshment. Parental alienation means that the child has become enmeshed with the preferred parent, and has rejected a relationship with the targeted parent. (In defining this term, a secondary issue is the extent to which the allegations against the targeted parent are factual.).

Once a child starts to reject a parent in spite of the previous parent-child bond, the child employs a defense mechanism known as splitting, meaning to divide the world and people into binary categories of all good or all bad. Although this might be done subconsciously as a protective measure, it leads to black-and-white thinking and blocks the capacity to sense nuance and ambiguity in transitions between worlds, and is a sign that the child may well be in deep psychological and emotional distress (Woodall and Woodall, 2017).

A child involved in splitting will switch from a comfortable state of harmonious bonding into a split mind of anger, resentment, hatred, rudeness, ruthlessness, and rejection. Normal contact is broken off (Woodall & Woodall, 2017). Switching typically follows the onset of splitting.

### **Interviews:**

The women interviewed were between 40 and 68 years of age and had been divorced for between three and 22 years. Each was a mother to two, three, or four children who at the time of the interviews were between nine and 38 years of age. During the interviews, each woman describe how in the period before and during the divorce she was put under great pressure, part of which originated from her partner's efforts to disrupt her contact with her children. Nicky (40) states that her ex-husband tried to humiliate her and eliminate her from their marriage, with the help of his mother:

*My two children have been stolen from my nest, and my ex-husband's family has been helping him erase me from their lives.*

Maria (68) has three adult children who were 12, 16 and 18 years old when she was divorced 22 years ago. Recently she had contact with her son due to his illness, but has not seen her daughters for years. She was severely abused physically and mentally by her former highly positioned husband. From time to time he would lock her in the garage and chain her there like a dog. He ruined her charge card account and gave her no household money. He denigrated her constantly during their marriage, even in front of their children. When she left him, he tried to run over her with his car. Maria describes her situation:

*When I left home for the divorce, after ten days I got my children back acting as if they were devils; I was afraid of them. They rejected me and said that I had enjoyed a beautiful life for more than twelve years, thanks to their dad and his high position. I was not welcome at their birthdays, at their graduation ceremonies, and their weddings, and they were sending me hate mail every day. The terror and manipulation of their father continues until today. If they have contact with me, they try to hide it.*

Sophie (45) lives with her ten-year-old son, while her thirteen-year-old daughter lives with her exhusband. Sophie describes another pattern in which her ex-husband's two-faced behavior and his manipulation of the children's perspectives became evident at the conclusion of their marriage. She also reveals that he hides his anger, remaining outwardly calm, and how he uses the alienation allegation against her:

*I did not know how manipulative he is until the end of our relationship. I had breast cancer then and one breast had to be amputated. He was like a chameleon until then, but after the divorce nine years ago his anger was really provoked. What kind of person is he? When I raise my voice, he stays calm and in control: his legs are spread wide, his body relaxed. He spreads his hands with open palms and looks up with puppy eyes. He is a very charming man who is pleasing, but who turns on you, manipulates while remaining outwardly calm. For years he did not look after our kids (now ten and thirteen). I was the nurturing parent. Now to the outside world he claims to be the alienated parent.*

Carey (48) also spoke about severe emotional abuse in her previous marriage. She is nine years divorced, with three adolescent children and has sole custody. Nowadays her ex-partner tries to turn the children against her. The two elder children, fifteen and nineteen, refuse to see their dad, but the youngest, fourteen years of age, is getting angrier all the time under his father's influence, and as a result tensions between the siblings are growing. His father has promised him a bigger room, a puppy, but according to Carey her ex-partner cannot take care of them:

*He indulged the children and compensated them. When my youngest of fourteen complained that he had to mow the lawn, he said, 'Oh my! Don't do it. You are far too young for this. Just come live with me.' He made my son write a letter to the judge saying that he wanted to live with his dad. All three of my children are affected: my eldest has a gambling addiction, my youngest is full of anger, and my daughter falls for dominant, nasty males. After nine years I am just a shadow of the woman I used to be, and very, very tired. My ex turns everything around, twists all the facts. My family fell apart regardless of whatever I did.*

Carey states that her ex-partner has not the capacity to raise their children:

*He appears to be a caring and sociable father who misses his three children dearly. But if you look more closely, you see he doesn't keep a single appointment [involving the children]. He cannot go into the world of his children and he knows exactly how to hurt me and put me down.*

And Norma (55) finds out that her ex-husband tries to erase her out of his life and the life of the children. The co-parenting soon fails and the children say they want to live with their father and his new wife, her former friend:

*Soon after the divorce decree, my ex started a relationship with my friend, a single mother I had known for more than twenty years. I have never seen her again. I initiated a phone call to her almost a half-year after the divorce; during that call she did not reveal the relationship. My ex told me that he had shared everything with her, just as he had shared everything with our children about our bad partnership, my neglect and abuse as a mother, and my adulterous behavior. It was all his version. He induced our children to become compliant accessories in his revenge against me, creating a justification for this ugly new truth.*

All the women interviewed gave examples of the rude, inpolite, angry, and manipulative behaviour of their children under their ex-partners' influence, in which they showed no ambivalence or remorse; sometimes two or more children would cooperate in group-think about how to persecute their mother.

*My children, 11 and 14, manipulate me now and show no compassion. Last Christmas at my house they were lighting the wall paper on fire where they had cut out a heart for their father and a skull death symbol for their mother, stating 'We hate you.' They acted as a team with their dad and phoned him to say they did not want to stay with me.*

The grooming process might be accelerated by the technology of the smartphone and WhatsApp, facilitating the absent-presence of the ex-partner in the life of their ex-spouses, controlling and manipulating the children:

*They are using their phones and texting on WhatsApp all the time they're with me, and my ex is fueling their rude behavior. Now I cannot make eye contact with my sensitive daughter anymore. Her eyes are mostly empty. My son came home and said, 'Why did you not kill the dogs? What the heck did my sister play on my X-Box?' He once was very sensitive, but now he is so angry and under pressure as the only one of our three children who sees his father.*

The process of splitting and switching is described by the mothers who feel helpless and powerlessness because they cannot make contact with their children when they see them as they are from this defense mechanism shut off from communication and unable to bond, which shows in the absent and of look of their eyes:

*I see a wall. Then I cannot reach my son. I see the look in his eyes. His eyelids are down. I see no emotion and no contact. He looks present, but he is absent.*

### **Analysis:**

All women describe serious relationship troubles with their children and feel nor understood nor supported by service provision or school. There seems to be different combinations and patterns of alienation.

Maria speaks about the ongoing violence and coercive control and personality problems of her ex-husband and she thinks that one adult child has serious personality problems as well and one has serious anger problems. All three adult children are afraid of their father. Nicky describes how the step family is enabling to alienate and claim the children, making it a group action. Norma, Carey and Mary reveal patterns of alienation in their own family history. Mary had not seen her own parents for years and Norma tells that her grandmother rejected both her children and that an older sibling broke off contact with their mother.

A second issue from the interviews is that the professional system can be blind to manipulation and violence among clients, which seems to be related to a dangerous lack of in-depth knowledge about the actual dynamics of mental domestic violence. They can lack the ability to cope with these complicated issues. Nicky states:

*They don't know how to ask the right follow-up questions and they seem to be unable to track or evaluate what is really going on in this case.*

This official tone-deaf stance fits well into a bureaucratic system designed to fit every case into a single frame, and it greatly benefits the manipulating ex-partner. In Nicky's case school was prejudiced by her ex-partner's slander against her:

*My ex-partner had badmouthed me to students and teachers in my son's school. My son was watched over by a teacher during and after the school play he was in, to prevent me from speaking with him.*

Sophie states that the referral to social professionals was useless because:

*Safe Home has no idea about my case. They do not see the violence.*

Carey too has lost confidence that she can get the help she needs. She is all too aware of the constant pressure exerted by what she calls "the divorce industry"—the multiple social professionals charged with treating complex divorce—urging her to communicate more effectively with her ex-partner, as if in every case the problem is about two well-meaning individuals who simply need more practice at communicating with each other. In such situations it seems that the professionals cannot admit that one of the two ex-partners may have a malevolent agenda that frustrates everything the social professionals' network can attempt to improve the situation. Communication is a usually helpful, but it can be dangerous if the overall context is misunderstood or the analysis of the circumstances is shallow and bound by bureaucratic routine:

*They overlook the structural manipulation of my ex-partner or they repeat the mantra of improving communication between us as parents. But my ex will never be able to do so. I am very tired of constantly explaining and still remaining unprotected. I have lost my faith that the system can help.*

## **Conclusion and discussion:**

Despite its small scale, this study nonetheless points to several significant conclusions if the perspective of the mothers quoted so far is taken seriously.

# International research is needed to substantiate and define further the phenomenon of children manipulated into rejecting and even demonizing one parent, and how that relates to prior violence and continuous coercive

control. What it can look like, how it operates, and what the impact might be on family relationships between partners and children in the short and long term are essential and fertile questions to be addressed.

# Make no mistake: the interviews cumulatively are a harsh indictment of society's present ability to recognize and cope with a huge and avoidable source of great suffering within families. The better social professionals and the general public understand the nature and impact of coercive control on children, and the vulnerability of children and especially teenagers to splitting their parents into angel and demon, the more quickly coercive control can be detected, identified, and targeted for treatment.

# As the interviews suggest, mothers are especially vulnerable to becoming targets of post-divorce abuse and denigration, when the preferred alternative is to strengthen the mother-child bond after violence occurs within the family.

# Generally speaking, domestic violence is known to be a gendered phenomenon as alienation might prove to be. Parental alienation is not limited to either gender; that means, for one thing, that future research needs to explore the causes and dynamics by which mothers and fathers after divorce are excluded from contact with their children and the consequences, both short-term and long-term, of that exclusion.

# How can social professionals better understand the double-edged sword of alienation, both as a tactic of false accusation to gain access and control over the targeted ex-partner, and as an anger or revenge strategy to destroy the ex-partner's parental experience by taking and claiming the children? The time around the age of twelve is when the splitting and switching process brings about the mental abduction of the children and the deprivation of the children of the parenting care of the targeted parent.

# Alienation is recognized as a mental health issue (Woodall & Woodall, 2017) and alienation that disrupts the parent-child bond is a form of child abuse and of ex-partner violence.

A deeper understanding of this kind of alienation, often unrecognized by social professionals even in its most flagrant form, is likely to improve the quality of professional care. A lack of understanding makes it more likely that professionals will simply reproduce the power imbalance and overlook the mental violence happening right under our collective nose.

# A deeper understanding can also protect social professionals from misunderstanding what is happening when a child turns against a parent. There can be an instinctive presumption of child-like innocence—that a child is too pure in heart to deceive and thus should be believed when the child says terrible things about a parent.

Recently in the Netherlands I developed a course for professionals engaged in child protection and family work to help them gain that deeper understanding by learning to recognise previously overlooked intra-family coercion and different patterns of violation. In doing so, I saw the importance of recognising these interlocking processes and how they interact with intergenerational patterns in families to make certain women and men more vulnerable to exclusion from family life during and after the divorce process. It became clear to me that further research is urgently needed to more clearly define those processes and patterns if social professionals are to be effective at addressing the causes and potential cures by developing a helping intervention strategy.

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