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The Mirror Without a Face: The Assessment of Parental Alienation Among Children of High-Conflict Divorces

Ruth Ouzts Moore and Ann Ordway

Moore, Ruth O., is a core faculty member for the Master's in Mental Health Counseling Program at Walden University and has 18 years experience in the field. She is a Licensed Professional Counselor and National Certified Counselor. She is a frequent presenter in the areas of abuse/trauma, play therapy, and parental alienation. She has also been qualified as an expert witness in criminal, chancery, and youth court for her involvement in cases with children who have experienced physical and sexual abuse, parental alienation, and custody and visitation issues.

Ordway, Ann, is an instructor in the Psychology and Counseling Department at Fairleigh Dickinson University. She has 25 years experience as a court-appointed Guardian ad Litem and Law Guardian. Ann is a frequent presenter in the areas of high conflict divorce, court testimony, parenting coordination, and parental alienation.

Abstract

Parental alienation can have devastating, long-term effects on children (Baker, 2010; Ben Ami & Baker, 2012). Children who are experiencing parental alienation need to be involved in individual and family counseling to prevent emotional and behavior difficulties, especially as such problems could otherwise continue into adulthood. In order for treatment to be successful, counselors must first be able to identify children who are most at-risk. This article will discuss how interviews, observations, and certain standardized and projective assessment instruments can be beneficial when conducting assessments among high-conflict families. The authors will discuss the need for further research to determine if existing assessment instruments can be effective in identifying children who are experiencing parental alienation, as well as the need for the development of a reliable and valid assessment measure that can determine the level of severity of their emotional symptoms.

Gardner (1985) coined the term *parental alienation syndrome* to refer to a pattern of emotional and behavioral symptoms he observed among children and their parents who were involved in high-conflict divorces. High-conflict divorce cases are those in which the parents are typically involved in custody litigation. The parents become so engaged in argumentativeness that alternate dispute resolution techniques, such as mediation and parenting coordination, are generally unsuccessful (Blank & Ney, 2006). The alienating behaviors observed by Gardner (1985), however, were not new. Such

behaviors had been evidenced in court cases dated back as far as the 19th century and recognized by mental health professionals for decades (Bernet, 2010, Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980; Warshak, 2001). There has been significant controversy regarding whether these identified behavioral patterns indicate psychopathology and can be classified as a *syndrome* (Baker & Darnall, 2007; Carrey, 2011; Houchin, Ranseen, Hash, & Bartnicki, 2012; Kelly & Johnston, 2001; Rand, 2011). Therefore, scholars and practitioners have put forth significant effort to better understand the behaviors that result from the alienation between a parent and child, particularly when parental alienation is not easily assessed (Fidler, Bala, & Saini, 2013). Kelly and Johnston (2001) opined that an alienated child was “one who freely and persistently expresses unreasonable negative feelings and beliefs (such as anger, hatred, rejection and/or fear) toward a parent that are disproportionate to their actual experience of the parent” (p. 251). Eddy (2010) endeavored to distinguish *parental alienation* from *parental alienation syndrome*. The author suggested that more emphasis needed to be placed on understanding the dynamics of parental alienation and the related dynamics, instead of labeling the behavior as *parental alienation syndrome* which seemed to cast judgment and blame.

There is also debate over whether parental alienation is a tool utilized by primary caregivers to gain exclusive possession and affection of a child to the detriment of the other parent, or if it is a contrived concept created by fathers who are perpetrators of intimate partner violence to further victimize their former partners (Fidler et al., 2013). Other studies have reported a rapid increase in the number of divorce litigations where parental alienation is raised as an issue, thereby creating a greater ability to scrutinize these cases to determine patterns regarding gender, age, motive, and context (Bow, Gould, & Flens, 2009; Fidler et al., 2013). Nevertheless, such debates divert professional attention away from the impact parental alienation has on children and families (Fidler et al., 2013). While a greater understanding of parental alienation is important, the primary focus should be on helping the children and families involved by providing effective treatment.

Bernet (2010) estimated that 1% of children in the United States are exposed to parental alienation in some fashion when involved in high-conflict divorces (Fidler et al., 2013). Moore, Ordway, & Francis (2013) offered an overview of parental alienation for counselors by describing the levels of severity and the causes of estrangement between parents and children. These authors also discussed the complications that arise for counselors who become involved in these cases, intentionally or unintentionally. The reader is directed to Moore et al. (2013) for a basic foundation in parental alienation and its relevance to counselors.

Counselors often work with a variety of issues related to divorce. For example, they may counsel adults who are separated, divorced, going through divorce, or contemplating divorce. They also counsel adults who are, years later, feeling the impact of their own parents’ divorce that happened years prior. Counselors may provide services to children, who sometimes present with unrelated issues. Thus, counselors may encounter a variety of clients with different presenting concerns but who have all been affected in some way by divorce. Therefore, counselors should be familiar with parental alienation, as it causes significant, long-term emotional and relational difficulties (Baker, 2010; Ben-Ami & Baker, 2012). Baker (2010) noted that “greater public and professional

education is required for the extent and severity of the problem to be recognized” (p. 31). Bernet (2010) indicated that parental alienation is so pervasive that mental health professionals must not only be educated about it, but they must also thoroughly understand it and begin to explore uniform methodology for assessment and treatment.

Unfortunately, mental health professionals are currently without concrete assessment and measurement tools specifically geared for identifying parental alienation, its levels of severity, and the extent of damage at the time the counselor encounters the family (Fidler et al., 2013). This article will also address how existing, related assessment instruments can be utilized to identify the behavioral indicators associated with parental alienation. The authors will also discuss the need for additional research to examine the effectiveness of assessment instruments currently being used, as well as the need to develop measures that may be more suited for this population.

Understanding High-Conflict Divorce and Parental Alienation

Children who experience parental alienation often present with feelings of anger, hostility, and other complex emotional symptoms (Gardner, 1989; Moore, Ordway, & Francis, 2012; Moore, Ordway, & Francis, 2013). They may also have underlying feelings of confusion and pain but conceal these emotions from others (Fidler et al., 2013; Gardner, 1985; Moore et al., 2013). When children are exposed to parental alienation, they have difficulty with decision-making and emotional expression, and they can be highly resistant to therapy (Gardner, 1985; Moore et al., 2013). Thus, mental health professionals are challenged with the tasks of establishing a therapeutic connection and breaking through the child’s emotional barriers.

Moore et al. (2013) discussed the risks for emotional damage among children and families when counselors are not familiar with the dynamics of high-conflict divorces. Many families will not inform the counselor that they are currently or could be potentially involved in a custody dispute (Moore et al., 2013). Alienated children are not likely to discuss with a counselor the negative messages given to them by the alienating parent, therefore counselors may fail to recognize that the child is being affected by a high-conflict divorce (Moore et al., 2013). When a counselor is unaware that a high-conflict divorce exists, the counselor can cause further harm to the family by aligning with the child and reinforcing parental alienation in the family (Fidler et al., 2013; Moore et al., 2013).

Children who are exposed to parental alienation are likely to have relationship difficulties in adulthood if they are not involved in effective treatment during childhood (Baker, 2010; Ben-Ami & Baker, 2012). An alienated child’s intense feelings of anger and hostility can result in emotional dysregulation, angry outbursts, and other problem behaviors (Isaacs, George, & Marvin, 2009; Macklem, 2008; Moore et al., 2013). These authors also suggested that it is detrimental to a child’s emotional well-being for a child to be continuously exposed to parental conflict and negative parental messages. But, in knowing that many families do not inform counselors of their court involvement, how would a counselor recognize if parental alienation was occurring in a family? How would a counselor know if an alienated child was experiencing emotional difficulties, if the child was reluctant to make verbal disclosures other than those that were encouraged by the alienating parent? Moreover, when alienated children are aligned with the alienating

parent, will those children have the insight or courage to express their deepest emotions to the counselor when those children have indirectly learned to conceal or suppress their feelings? Such questions illustrate the need for counselors to not only be familiar with parental alienation, but to also conduct comprehensive assessments when working with children and families.

Assessing for Parental Alienation

Assessing for parental alienation can be challenging, especially in knowing that alienated children have difficulty with emotional expression (Fidler et al., 2013; Moore et al., 2012; Moore et al., 20013). However, counselors must have a clear understanding of the child's emotional world in order for treatment to be successful (Moore et al., 2013). Thus, counselors should not only be familiar with parental alienation, but they should also take measures to determine the severity of the child's symptoms before deciding the best course of treatment (Moore et al., 2012; Moore et al., 2013).

Numerous studies in the field of child custody have found that parent interviews, child interviews, parent-child observations, and the review of court records are the most useful strategies when conducting assessments among divorcing families (Bow, 2006; Bow et al., 2009; Gould, 2006; Gould & Martindale, 2007). Macie and Stolberg (2003) suggested that the level of parental conflict, the nature of the child's relationship with both parents, and the parenting skills of both parents are the most important factors in determining a child's ability to adjust to a divorce. Bow (2006) stated that many advances have been made in the field of child custody and the adjustment of children from divorce. He supported the use of multiple sources for data collection, including standardized assessment measures. The authors have found that interviews, observations, and standardized and projective assessment instruments are the most beneficial methods of gaining information when conducting assessments among high-conflict families. However, there are no methodologically sound assessments which specifically identify parental alienation or identify the level of severity or source of the alienation.

Interviews and Observations With Parents

When a parent brings a child to counseling, no matter what the parent identifies as the child's presenting concern, the counselor should inquire about the child's living arrangements and the child's relationship with both parents (Moore et al., 2013). The counselor should pay attention to any periods of parent-child separation and the reasons why the separation occurred. In the event that the parents are separated or divorced, the counselor should request the most recent copy of the court order (Moore et al., 2013). Separated parents sometimes have an interim agreement or a temporary court order to guide them while awaiting a final settlement or adjudication of their case. Court documents contain important information not only about visitation and custody issues, but also information about parental relationships and conflict. For example, the first author worked with a 5-year-old child whose mother abandoned the child due to drug use. The paternal grandmother and father were given joint custody, because the father suffered from a disability that prevented him from being able to take care of the child independently. In reviewing the most recent court order, the author was able to get information about ongoing family conflicts and litigation between the mother and father,

as well as between the maternal and paternal grandparents. There was specific information about the father's disability and the level of care that the Court believed that he could provide to the child. The author might not have gotten such detailed information from the father or maternal grandmother if she had not asked for a copy of the court order. Sometimes court orders contain provisions which instruct the parents to refrain from disparaging one another in the presence of the child. The orders may also impose sanctions against one parent for poor judgment or inappropriate conduct that might affect the child. Such clauses offer the counselor insight regarding parental conduct outside of the counseling setting.

When working with children of divorce, counselors should observe both parents' interactions with the child. Does the parent make negative comments about the other parent in the child's presence? The first author has observed parents in the waiting area talking negatively about the other parent while on cell phones and in the presence of the children. The author has also witnessed parents arguing on the phone with the opposite parent in the child's presence. Some parents profess to the counselor that they would never speak negatively about the other parent to the child yet will promptly instruct the child to tell the counselor the "terrible things" the other parent has "done to us." Inappropriate parenting behavior demonstrated in front of the counselor is merely a glimpse of what likely occurs in the privacy of their home (Carter, 2011). The parent's use of wording also offers clues as to private conversations that may have occurred between a parent and a child. For example, a mother might describe in the presence of the child such how the child's father "left us," or a father may state, "Who can blame this child for being upset; her mother is destroying this family because of her affair." Such behaviors are strong indicators that the child is being exposed to an even greater degree of parental conflict at home.

Some parents may use harsh language or try to denigrate the other parent's reputation when communicating with the counselor (Moore et al., 2013). When interviewing the parent, the counselor should consider, "Does this parent seem to be providing information so that treatment will be most successful, or does this parent seem to be trying to present the opposed parent in a negative light?" Counselors should try to keep the presenting parent focused on observations and concerns directly related to the child instead of projecting blame, which deepens feelings of animosity in the relationship.

Interviews and Observations With Children

Moore et al. (2013) discussed that children who have been alienated from a parent may provide responses that seem coached or scripted. These children may express feelings of anger, rage, or fear with little emotion or guilt (Gardner, 1989). However, they may not be able to provide detailed information when discussing their concerns about their relationship with the targeted parent (Gardner 1985; Gardner, 1989). A child's verbal disclosures may also be incongruent with the behavior demonstrated in the session or in the waiting room (Moore et al., 2013). For example, the child may report having chronic feelings of anger and depression; however, the child may seem happy and carefree in the waiting area. Furthermore, if the targeted parent brings the child to therapy, the child may interact lovingly with the parent in the waiting area but report in the session a desire to cease visitation with the targeted parent. The first author once worked with a 10-year-old child who had been alienated from her mother. The child

insisted that he hated his mother and wanted to live with his father. The father and step-mother often refused to send him for visits with his father, because he “didn’t want to go.” The court ordered that the child attend counseling. When the mother brought him for the sessions, he laughed in the waiting area and initiated acts of affection with her. However, in his counseling sessions, he was quiet and resistant to discussing his relationship with his mother, even though the author observed his having positive interactions with her in the waiting area. Furthermore, when his father brought him for the sessions, the child reported negative events that occurred in his mother’s home with little hesitation and insisted that he did not want to visit. The father often reminded him before the session, “Don’t forget to tell her [author] what happened this weekend.” Thus, the child was instructed as to what he should say in the session. And, even though the author witnessed the child laughing and hugging his mother on several occasions, the child vehemently denied that their relationship was improving. In contrast, there are situations when a child may be clingy with the preferred parent and ignore or dismiss the targeted parent while in the preferred parent’s presence. However, once the child is alone with the targeted parent and the counselor, the child may be warm and affectionate toward the targeted parent if the child feels safe and confident that the counselor will not share information about their positive interactions with the alienating parent upon return.

Counselors may notice that children involved in high-conflict divorces appear anxious when asked questions about the child’s relationship with one or both parents (Moore et al., 2013). They may avoid questions related to parental relationships and family dynamics. The first author once worked with a 7-year-old child who was alienated from her father. The author was unaware that the parents had recently become involved in a custody dispute. The child was brought to counseling because her grades suddenly declined in school, and the teachers thought she might have attention deficit disorder. In her counseling sessions, she had flat affect and seemed anxious when asked about her relationship with her parents. She shrugged her shoulders when asked direct questions about family relationships. As the sessions progressed, she began making disclosures about not wanting to visit her father, but she provided little elaboration about her reasons for not wanting to go. The child became increasingly anxious when the author probed further, and she only responded by shrugging her shoulders. Such behaviors suggested to the author that the child could be experiencing parental alienation. The author’s suspicions lead to more comprehensive assessment measures being implemented. The counselor soon realized that the child was being alienated from the father, and the family was in need of intensive treatment.

Moore et al. (2013) discussed that many alienated children make negative comments about the targeted parent because they are often encouraged or rewarded by the alienating parent. Some children feel such a strong sense of obligation to the alienating parent that they make disparaging comments about the targeted parent, even when they do not agree (Gardner, 1985; Gardner, 1989). Making these disclosures creates a sense of cognitive dissonance for alienated children and results in strong feelings of anxiety and confusion (Moore et al., 2013). Moreover, alienated children may become angry or uncomfortable in the counseling setting because they have not been given the information to respond to the counselor’s probes (Moore et al., 2013). Some alienated children categorically deny that there was ever anything positive about the relationship they had with the targeted parent (Gardner, 1985). The second author worked with

siblings, ages 7 and 12, who were alienated from their father. In sessions, their father tried to introduce positive memories from the past, such as a trip the family had taken to Disney World. The children denied the father was on the trip. During the next session, the father arrived with photographs depicting him with the children in the pool and with characters and on several rides. The children's facial expressions demonstrated that the children remembered the trip, and there was some modest conversation about their memories. In the following session, after having discussed the trip with their mother, the children suggested that the father "photoshopped the pictures to make it look like he had been there even though he had not been." This example indicates how powerfully influential negative parental messages can be and how challenging the assessment process can become in parental alienation cases.

Counselors should be aware that children may report negative information about one or both parents that warrants concern, and such information may be truthful (Margolin & Lund, 1993; Walker, Brantley, & Rigsbee, 2004). For example, if a child discloses a desire to stop visiting with a parent due to the parent's substance abuse, such feelings may be justified. However, counselors should gain as much information as possible to determine if the child is at potential risk for harm. For example, the first author once worked with a 6-year-old child who did not want to visit her father. She expressed feelings of anger but provided little information to support the intensity of her emotions. After several counseling sessions, she disclosed that her father fondled her during one of their visits. In this particular case, the child was not experiencing parental alienation. There were serious safety concerns that needed to be investigated and addressed. Therefore, when conducting assessments, counselors should not assume that the child's negative feelings toward a parent are definite indicators of parental alienation. All disclosures should be taken seriously. However, when appropriate, the counselor can work with the parent of concern to address any parenting issues that exist with the intent to strengthen or rebuild the parent-child relationship.

While interviews and observations can provide valuable information for a counselor who is trying to get an accurate picture of an alienated child's emotional difficulties (Bow, 2006), there are also limitations. In cases where severe parental alienation has occurred, a child may be resistant to making disclosures, or the child may mirror the parent's emotions and give disclosures that are verbatim to the parent's (Fidler, et al., 2013; Gardner, 1985; Gardner, 1989). A counselor may also observe what seems to be a strained relationship between a targeted parent and an alienated child. However, the counselor may not realize that the child could really want a relationship with the targeted parent but is too afraid to express such desires due to strong feelings of loyalty toward the alienating parent (Baker, 2010). Moreover, in cases where mild or moderate parental alienation is occurring, the emotional effects on children can be less obvious (Baker & Andre, 2008). In either case, counselors may be working with children and not have a thorough understanding of how deeply those children are being affected by their parents' divorces. An untrained counselor might have the best intentions, but by providing support and validating the child's feelings of animosity toward the targeted parent, the counselor could unintentionally cause the child to become more entrenched in the alienation (Moore et al., 2013). Therefore, when counselors have suspicions or have identified that a high-conflict divorce case is occurring and there is the possibility of parental alienation, more

formal assessment measures may be needed to gain an accurate picture of the child's emotional difficulties and determine the best course of action for the child.

Standardized Assessment Instruments

Standardized assessment measures can be useful in assessing emotional and behavioral difficulties among children. Although few studies have been conducted specifically addressing the effects of parental alienation and high-conflict divorce among children, the use of standardized assessment measures can be used as a part of a comprehensive assessment when working with children involved in high-conflict divorces. Standardized assessment instruments can be used in conjunction with interviews, observations, and court records to create a more accurate picture of the child's emotional world (Bow et al., 2009). It has been the authors' experience that judges and other court professionals often view recommendations that are based on standardized assessment measures as having more merit than those recommendations based solely on verbal disclosures and behavioral observations. The authors have found the *The Trauma Symptom Checklist for Children* (Briere, 1996) to be a useful instrument when conducting assessments with children involved in a high-conflict divorce.

The Trauma Symptoms Checklist for Children. *The Trauma Symptom Checklist for Children (TSCC)* is a self-report instrument measuring posttraumatic stress and other related psychological symptoms for children between the ages of 8 and 16 (Briere, 1996). The *TSCC* is reported to have high internal consistency reliability and concurrent validity (Briere, 1996). Although there is little to no research using the *TSCC* with children involved in high-conflict divorces, the authors have found the instrument to be highly useful with this population.

The *TSCC* has scales that measure anxiety, depression, anger, posttraumatic stress, and dissociation (Briere, 1996). There are also two validity scales that measure underresponse and hyperresponse (Briere, 1996). The underresponse scale indicates that the child has a tendency toward denial, a general pattern of underendorsement, or a need to appear unusually symptom-free. The hyperresponding scale suggests that the child generally overresponds to test items, has a specific need to appear overly symptomatic, or is highly overwhelmed by traumatic stress. The authors have found the underresponse and hyperresponse scales to be particularly helpful among alienated children. In that, some alienated children have a tendency to excessively endorse items due to their prior exposure to negative messages about the other parent, as well as their feelings of obligation to respond in a way that the alienating parents would approve. There are other alienated children who are prone to underrespond. Their lack of item endorsement could be due to a lack of insight about their emotions or extreme guardedness about the potential consequences that could result from expressing their inner emotions. In either case, counselors can use the underresponse and hyperresponse scales to gain awareness about the child's emotional state to better determine the course of treatment. For example, the author once worked with a 7-year-old child who had been alienated from his mother. The mother traveled frequently with her job and often had to miss her weekend visitation due to her job responsibilities. When she had to travel with work and knew she would miss her visitation, she asked the father to change weekends. But he always refused. The mother reported that when her son came to visit, he seemed angry and oppositional. He wanted to play video games during the time that he was there. If she set

limits on his video game usage, he said, “You can’t take away my Game-Boy. This isn’t yours. My Dad bought it for me. And I don’t have to listen to you!” The author administered the *TSCC*, and the child had clinically significant scores on the anxiety and depression scales but not on the anger scale. He also had a tendency to underrespond to test items.

Although the child had frequent outbursts of anger and freely discussed his feelings of resentment and rage toward his mother, he never mentioned feeling anxious or depressed. His tendency to underrespond was likely related to his desire to hide his emotions from others. When the author discussed the results of the instrument with the child, he shared his feelings of sadness and worry. He also reported that he felt guilty for being “mean” to his mother, but he did not want his father to know. In this particular case, the *TSCC* was a useful tool for the author not only to gain information about the child’s emotions but also to facilitate discussion with the child. However, some children will remain resistant to verbalizing their emotions, even after the results of standardized instruments are disclosed. In such cases, projective assessment measures can be implemented to gain additional insight.

Projective Assessment Instruments

As previously mentioned, children who are involved in high-conflict divorces often have difficulty expressing their emotions (Fidler et al., 2013; Moore et al., 2013). Projective assessment instruments can be useful in determining the nature and severity of the child’s emotional and behavioral symptoms (Cash, 2001). Such instruments are particularly useful with young children who may have limited cognitive and verbal abilities, as well as with severely alienated children who are reluctant to verbalize their thoughts and feelings (Cash, 2001). The use of projective instruments can facilitate emotional expression without the child having to personalize the disclosure, which can cause additional emotional stress (Cash, 2001). Projective measures also provide non-invasive ways to obtain information as compared to direct questions and interviews (Cash, 2001). The authors have found the *House-Tree-Person* (Buck, 1981) and *The Family Assessment Drawing* (Landgarten, 1987) to be effective instruments with alienated children.

The House-Tree-Person. The *House-Tree-Person* (Buck, 1981) is a projective assessment instrument designed to measure an individual’s personality. The individual is asked to draw a house, a tree, and a person, and is then asked questions about each of the drawings. The drawings are suggested to be a projection of the individual’s inner, emotional world.

The authors have not found any studies conducted using the *House-Tree-Person* (Buck, 1981) with children involved in divorce. However, there have been studies where the *House-Tree-Person* has been successfully used to identify sexual abuse among children (Blain, Bergner, Lewis, & Goldstein, 1981; Riordan & Verdel, 1991). The authors have found the *House-Tree-Person* to be useful with children involved in high-conflict divorces because they can talk about their emotional worlds without having to own their feelings. The first author once worked with an 11-year-old child whose parents were going through a divorce. The mother brought the child to counseling because she wanted to “be sure she adjusted okay” to the upcoming divorce. The mother did not mention that the father had filed a motion for full custody of the child, and she was quite

angry about it. The child was highly resistant to discussing her parents' divorce. The author administered the *House-Tree-Person*. She drew the house with black marker and colored the entire house black. The windows were colored red, and there was fire coming from the chimney. The author asked, "Who lives in this house?" The child said, "My dad." The author asked, "Do people visit this house?" The child responded, "Not if they don't have to." Thus, while the child was resistant to making verbalizations in her counseling sessions, the author was able to get a sense of her feelings of anger and resentment toward her father. During the course of therapy, she discussed feeling angry at her father for not attending several of her school functions. And while her feelings of anger and resentment were justified, her mother's anger was influencing the intensity of the child's anger. The mother made frequent comments about the father loving "his job more than us." The child began insisting that she did not want contact with her father, even when her father expressed a desire to work less and to be more involved in her extracurricular activities. Thus, while the *House-Tree-Person* lacks reliability and validity studies (Buck, 1981), the authors feel that it can be an effective tool when working with high-conflict divorce cases.

The Family Assessment Drawing. *The Family Assessment Drawing* (Landgarten, 1987) is an assessment activity that can be conducted in an initial counseling session or a later session. Landgarten (1987) stated that activity should be conducted in three parts after dividing the family into teams. However, the authors have modified this activity when conducting assessments with alienated children and their targeted parents.

The parent and child are asked to select a marker or crayon and to use the same color throughout the activity (Landgarten, 1987). They are instructed to create a drawing on the same page; however, they are not allowed to communicate during the activity (Landgarten, 1987). After completing the first part of the activity, they are asked to create a second drawing. The parent and child are informed that they can communicate throughout the creation of the drawing. Counselors can use this activity to observe the level of involvement of the parent and child, their physical boundaries with one another, symbolic content of the drawing, and the overall interaction between the parent and child (Landgarten, 1987). The first author used this activity with an 11-year-old child and her father who had not had contact for 6 months due to parental alienation. The Court ordered that the child resume visitation to the father and that he father and child attend family counseling. The author conducted the *Family Assessment Drawing* (Landgarten, 1987) in the first session. The father began drawing a family on the paper. The child scribbled over his drawing. The father continued to work on his picture of the family and ignored the fact that she was scribbling on his paper. The child became more frustrated and continued to scribble on his drawing. During the second part of the activity, they both remained fairly quiet, even though they were told that they could communicate when creating the drawing. The father said, "What do you think we should draw?" The daughter rolled her eyes and said, "Like I care!" The father stated, "Why don't we draw flowers? You like tulips." The child said, "No I don't." The father started drawing tulips, and the daughter drew a tulip on the opposite side of the page. The father and child were asked to share their thoughts about the activity. The child said, "This is how it always is. He gets what HE wants, and I have to do what HE wants!" The father responded, "She always disrespects me." The daughter yelled, "And you just ignore me! You've done that

all my life!” The father and the child were able to identify destructive patterns that existed in their relationship. Interestingly, both felt that the activity was easier to complete when they were asked not to communicate. When asked to elaborate, the father stated, “Sometimes its best if we just don’t talk.” The daughter responded, “Yep.” Thus, *Family Assessment Drawing* (Landgarten, 1987) can be highly useful when working with children involved in high-conflict divorces.

Problems in Assessing Parental Alienation

There have been few studies which measure the interrelationship between high-conflict divorce and parental alienation. Most of the studies conducted in the area of divorce are related to children’s overall level of adjustment or lack a strong theoretical base (Portes, Brown, Saylor, & Sekhorn, 2005). Many of the studies have also relied on interviews and observations as the primary source of data, or the instruments used lacked reliability and validity studies (Macie & Stolberg, 2003; Portes et al., 2005). Portes et al. (2005) discussed the paucity of valid standardized assessment instruments designed to measure the effects of divorce on children’s behavior and adjustment.

Macie and Stolberg (2003) mentioned further challenges with the use of standardized instruments, as many of the instruments rely on parents’ reports of their children’s behaviors and are not designed to reflect the dynamics of divorced families. In cases of parental alienation, each parent often has a drastically different perception of the child’s behavior (Macie & Stolberg, 2003). Parents may also be more apt to present themselves in a favorable light and, as a result, may over-exaggerate or minimize the child’s symptoms. Moreover, if psychopathology is present among one or both parents, the results of many assessment instruments would be inaccurate.

The authors believe that the *Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory-2-Restructured Form (MMPI-2RF)* (Ben-Porath & Tellegen, 2008) can be a useful instrument in determining if psychopathology is present among parents involved in high-conflict divorces. If a counselor is working with a child where parental alienation is suspected, the counselor may recommend that both parents receive a comprehensive psychological assessment. While the assessment of parents involved in high-conflict divorce cases is beyond the scope of this article, it is noteworthy that such evaluations are routinely used in the context of forensic custody evaluations and can provide helpful information when determining the best course of treatment for the child and family. The presence of psychopathology among parents can serve as a possible indicator, although not concrete evidence, of parental alienation.

Projective tests in general have been criticized for their lack of reliability and validity studies (Medoff, 2003). Although projective tests may generate information that is useful in comprehensive evaluations, they often yield inconsistent results (Bow, 2006). Many projective instruments lack consistent scoring methods, which limits the generalizability of the results. Moreover, there are few studies that support the use of projective instruments in the assessment of parental alienation. In fact, the use of projective assessments has been highly criticized, especially in custody proceedings (Medoff, 2003). For example, the authors previously mentioned that they use the *House-Tree-Person* with children involved in high-conflict divorces. The authors found where the instrument had been used in identifying abused children; however, those studies were

outdated. Furthermore, Buck (1981) stated that there is no data supporting the reliability of the *House-Tree-Person*. Thus, while projective tests can be beneficial in facilitating emotional expression among children, there are limitations when using these measures, particularly with children involved in high-conflict divorce cases.

The Need for Further Research

Assessing for parental alienation can be quite challenging. Research in this area is limited, largely because many professionals disagree about how parental alienation should be defined. Other professionals disagree about whether or not parental alienation is an actual syndrome. And while many professionals recognize that parental conflict and alienation from a parent can cause damaging effects to children, especially when the alienation is expressly driven by the other parent, there is no established symptom-profile that exists among alienated children (Baker & Darnall, 2007; Kelly & Johnston, 2001). Parental alienation is not identified as a disorder in the *DSM-V*, despite substantial lobbying efforts for formal recognition and inclusion (Carrey, 2011; Houchin et al., 2012; Rand, 2011). The controversy associated with whether parental alienation exists underscores the importance and need for objective and empirically-based assessment. Nevertheless, there is a need for psychometrically sound assessment tools to be used with children of divorce (Portes et al., 2005), particularly children involved in high-conflict divorces (Fidler et al., 2013). Reliable and valid assessment tools, as well as further research, would help counselors provide evidence-based treatment that is effective with parental alienation.

Before reliable and valid assessment tools can be developed, researchers must first determine which factors need to be identified in parental alienation cases. Fidler, Bala, Birnbaum, and Kavassalis (2008) offered a series of questions to be considered by clinicians when evaluating all sources of information and assessing for parental alienation. Fidler et al. (2013) expanded on this work and identified four distinct areas that instruments should measure when assessing for parental alienation. First, the authors suggested the need for instruments that screen for parental alienation in order to separate those cases from the general population of separating and divorcing individuals. The instrument should also determine if parental alienation exists when allegations have been made and whether there is a legitimate safety or parenting concern that warrants attention. Moreover, the authors reported the need for an instrument to assess the risk of continued alienation once it has been substantiated, as well as the need to identify the potential risk of alienation before a child resumes contact with a parent after separation when there have been previous alienating behaviors by that parent.

Ellis (2007) established a checklist of criteria that can be used when conducting an assessment with the presenting child. Garber (2007) created the *Hierarchical Decision Tree for Alienation*, which considers developmental and environmental factors when determining whether the estrangement between parent and child has been caused by actual alienation or is due to some other issue. Several measurement scales have also been developed, including the *Alienating Parenting and Supportive (Co) Parenting Scales (APSPS)*, which has been more recently adapted to allow individual family members to assess one another (Johnston, 2004, as cited in Fidler et al., 2013). Johnston's *APSPS* has been tested in several studies and seems to have demonstrated some initial

validity (Fidler et al., 2013). *The Relationship Distancing Questionnaire (RDQ)*; Mone' & Biringer, 2006) to determine if there was a correlation between adults feeling alienated in relationships as adults and parental conflict and resulting alienation experiences as children. The researchers found a correlation and noted that parental conflict, not whether the parents were divorced or in an intact family unit, appeared to be the key variable (Mone & Biringer, 2006). *The Baker Parental Alienation Syndrome Questionnaire (BPASQ)* is a 28 item instrument designed to assess children by focusing on the perception each child has of each parent and any alignments that emerge on the part of the children when the parents argue (Baker, 2010, as cited by Fidler, et al. 2013). Preliminary testing on the utilization and validity of this instrument has proven fruitful, as this is the first instrument of its kind designed to identify and categorize behaviors as estrangement or alienation (Fidler et al., 2013). The *Co-Parenting Behavior Questionnaire* (Mullett & Stolberg, 1999) is an assessment tool which is designed to measure "specific parenting and co-parenting behavior, including inter-parental conflict, triangulation, inter-parent respect/cooperation, inter-parent communication, parental discipline, parental monitoring, parental warmth, and parent-child communication" (Macie & Stolberg, 2003, p. 91). Thus, while future research in the area of parental alienation looks hopeful, more reliability and validity studies are needed to determine the effectiveness of these instruments in identifying parental alienation and those children most at risk. Such assessment tools are needed when conducting empirical studies investigating the dynamics and trends among high-conflict families.

Conclusion

According to the United States Census Bureau (2012), 1.2 million marriages end in divorce, and the divorce rate is as high as 60% in some states. In knowing these statistics, the authors believe that counselors will continue to encounter cases of parental alienation in their practices, whether they identify them or not. Parental alienation can have devastating, long-term effects on children (Baker, 2010; Ben Ami & Baker, 2012). The dynamics that exist among high-conflict families are quite complex, and untrained counselors can unintentionally make family conflicts more severe (Moore et al., 2013). Children who are experiencing parental alienation need to be involved in individual and family counseling to prevent emotional and behavior difficulties from occurring, especially knowing that such problems could otherwise continue into adulthood. In order for treatment to be successful, counselors must first be able to identify those children who are most at-risk. Thus, more research is needed to determine if existing instruments, like the *Trauma Symptom Checklist* or *The Baker Parental Alienation Syndrome Questionnaire* (Baker, 2010, cited by Fidler et al., 2013), can be effective in identifying children who are experiencing parental alienation and in determining the severity of their symptoms. There is also a need for the development of a reliable and valid assessment measure that is specific to the issues pertinent to alienated children.

The *American Counseling Association (ACA) Code of Ethics* (2005) states that counselors should practice within their boundaries of competence and take steps to gain knowledge and skills in working with diverse populations (C.2.a). Counselors should also monitor their effectiveness as counselors and take the initiative to improve (C.2.d, ACA, 2005). Thus, the authors feel strongly that counselors should get additional training in the

dynamics of high-conflict divorce and conduct research to determine the effectiveness of current treatment approaches.

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