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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Examining the Prevalence and Impact of Parental Alienating Behaviors (PABs) in Separated Parents in the United Kingdom

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Abstract

Purpose There is limited research on the prevalence of parental alienating behaviors (PABs), with previous studies limited to the United States and Canada. It is critical that such research is conducted in and expanded to various countries and jurisdictions to further support the identification of alienating behaviors as a serious form of domestic abuse that is experienced by a significant proportion of separated or divorced parents.

Methods Using a sample of 1005 separated or divorced parents in the United Kingdom, this study examined the prevalence of PABs, the manifestation of behaviors in children and their contact refusal (as measured by the five-factor model), and the relationship between PABs and mental health and other forms of abuse.

Results Results showed that, depending on how they were asked, between 39 and 59% of the sample had experienced PABs, with 36.5% identified as non-reciprocal targeted parents. This percentage dropped to 3.5% when assessed in the context of other factors (i.e., prior good relationship). Nearly all (96.7%) of participants reported manifestations of alienation in their children, but this again dropped (to 2.9%) when taking other factors into account. Finally, parents reporting higher levels of PABs also reported greater mental health issues (i.e., depression, PTSD, suicide ideation) and higher levels of other forms of abuse.

Conclusions It is argued that these results add to a growing body of evidence suggesting that PABs are a form of abuse and a significant public health emergency, but that further debate on how alienation is measured in relation to the process (i.e., PABs) versus the outcome (i.e., contact rejection).

Keywords Parental Alienation · Domestic Abuse · Mental Health · Suicide

Introduction

Abusive behavior has been widely documented in the context of relationship separation. Studies on both separated women (Spearman et al., 2022, 2024) and men (Bates, 2019), including as mothers (Hay et al., 2023) and fathers, (Hine et al. in press) have revealed numerous abusive strategies employed by ex-partners following the end of a relationship (Francia et al., 2019). These behaviors include emotional/psychological abuse, coercive and controlling behaviors, stalking and harassment, and, although less frequently, physical abuse (Bates, 2019; Spearman et al., 2022, 2024).

Parents have also specifically reported the use of children as a conduit for abuse, as the child presents a (if not *the*) reason for ongoing contact between ex-partners. Indeed, both mothers (Monk & Bowen, 2021) and fathers (Bates & Hine, 2023) have reported how their ex-partners have targeted their relationship with their child as a form of abuse, for example, by threatening to remove or disrupt contact or by denigrating the 'targeted' parent. These behaviors, known as parental alienating behaviors (PABs), are coercively controlling, psychological forms of abuse (Harman & Matthewson, 2020) that can result in what is known as 'parental

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alienation' (PA). They are defined as "one type of contact refusal when a child— typically whose parents are engaged in a high-conflict separation or divorce—allies strongly with one parent and resists and rejects contact and a relationship (i.e., contact refusal) with the other parent without legitimate justification" (Bernet et al., 2022, p. 5). In other words, PA refers to the actions and attitudes manifested by the child when there is a coercively controlling and psychologically abusive dynamic in the family system that utilizes a child as a weapon of abuse.

Research on PA has expanded rapidly over the last decade, with over 40% of empirical research on this topic published since 2016 (Harman et al., 2022). This has partly been in response to significant critique of both the concept of parental alienation (Milchman, 2019) and its measurement (Garber & Simon, 2023). However, there is now a robust evidence base detailing many aspects of PA (Harman et al. 2019b), including how it is enacted (i.e., the identification of PABs), its impact on both alienated parents and children, and pathways to intervention (Harman et al., 2022; Hine, 2024). This research has been expounded upon in a recent review by Hine (2024), which clearly outlines the extensive impact it has on alienated parents (Lee-Maturana et al., 2022), children (Miralles et al., 2023), and other family members (Bounds & Matthewson, 2022). This is in addition to a more detailed discussion on the complex application of PA in legal disputes regarding custody and child contact (Harman & Lorandos, 2021; Paquin-Boudreau et al., 2022; Sharples et al., 2023).

One recent critical development in this scientific field is how PA can be characterized as a form of family violence in and of itself (Harman et al., 2018; Kruk, 2018). This conceptualization has linked PA to several specific frameworks, including coercive control, psychological abuse, post-separation abuse, and even child abuse. In some instances, the alienating parent may exploit legal and social services to marginalize the targeted parent further, thus situating PA within discussions around so-called legal and administrative abuse (Tilbrook et al., 2010). These academic positionings are supported by the testimony of alienated parents themselves who describe PA as a form of violence and who describe PA as taking place as part of a broader pattern of abuse (Bates & Hine, 2023; Lee-Maturana et al., 2022). Moreover, evidence from both self-report studies of IPV victims in the United States (Rowlands et al., 2023) and legal case reviews in Canada (Sharples et al., 2023) show high levels of co-occurrence between PA and other forms of intimate partner violence (IPV). This has led authors recently to be clear and robust in their assertion that PA does indeed constitute a form of family violence (Kruk & Harman, 2024) despite arguments to the contrary (Mercer, 2021), underpinned by rampant misinformation (see Bernet & Xu, 2023). The complexities of PA and its clear overlap with other forms of abuse not only demonstrates its severity but also the necessity of robust responses and interventions from legal and social systems.

So far, accurately assessing the prevalence of PA has proven difficult for several reasons. One significant challenge has been a historical lack of consensus around its definition, making identifying and measuring behaviors characteristic of PA inconsistent (though, as demonstrated above, this has improved as the scientific field has evolved). Moreover, given the covert nature of this complex phenomenon, it frequently remains unreported or unrecognized by those enduring its effects. However, research conducted in the US does suggest a high incidence rate, with approximately one in three separated parents (32–39%) having reported being the target of PABs and at least 1.3% of the U.S. population having been moderately to severely alienated from one or more children (Harman et al., 2016; Harman et al. 2019b). Such statistics underscore the widespread nature of this issue, marking it as a significant area of concern for both parents and professionals engaged in family welfare and dispute resolution.

Given the initial context provided by US research, there is now a compelling case for replicating such research in the UK (and indeed around the world). Specifically, if the findings from the above research were replicated in the UK at their lower estimate, this would equate to over 768,000 families and potentially 1.1 million UK children (8.5% of the UK child population) experiencing PABs during separation (Department for Work & Pensions, 2020). Figures of this magnitude would represent an urgent and critical public health crisis that is currently invisible to both society and the institutions designed to help separating families. The exploration and potential confirmation of the prevalence of these behaviors is also critical in a UK context to help inform discussions as to how these behaviors are effectively managed within private family law cases. Indeed, there is currently much debate as to the role allegations of alienation play within family court proceedings within the UK (Barnett, 2020; Bates & Hine, 2023; Hunter et al., 2018; Silberg & Dallam, 2019), to which arguably an indication of the scale of the problem would be significantly helpful.

The present study utilized newer measurement tools for PA, alongside other established measures of violence and abuse, and related issues (such as financial difficulties and mental health) to conduct the first-ever UK study on the prevalence of PABs and PA. Using a specialist research panel service, a sample of over 1,000 separated and divorced parents in the UK were surveyed and asked questions used in previous prevalence research on this topic (Harman et al., 2016; Harman et al. 2019b) to create directly comparable UK data. This study, therefore, aimed to (a) establish

the prevalence of abusive behaviors targeting the parent-child relationship, otherwise known as Parental Alienating Behaviors (PABs) in the UK, and (b) highlight the impact of such behaviors on the mental health of divorced parents and their children in the UK.

Table 1 Participant demographic information

	Freq	% Total Sample
Age		
18–24	36	3.6
25–34	246	24.4
35–44	318	31.6
45–54	152	15.1
55–64	125	12.4
65–74	94	9.4
75+	47	4.7
Ethnicity		
White	857	85.3
Asian/Asian British	78	7.8
Black/Black British	57	5.7
Mixed/Multiple	18	1.8
Other	5	0.5
Sexual Orientation		
Heterosexual	949	94.4
Bisexual	31	3.1
Lesbian/Gay	18	1.8
Other	7	0.7
Household Income		
Less than £10,000	64	6.4
£10,001-£20,000	141	14.0
£20,001-£30,000	189	18.8
£30,001-£40,000	157	15.6
£40,001-£50,000	128	12.7
£50,001-£60,000	95	9.5
£60,001-£60,000	52	5.2
£70,001-£60,000	70	7.0
£80,001-£60,000	33	3.3
£90,001-£60,000	31	3.1
£100,001 or above	45	4.5
Level of Education		
Secondary School	249	24.8
A-Level/Equivalent	225	22.4
Bachelor's degree	300	29.9
Master's degree	169	16.8
Doctoral degree	29	2.9
Postdoctoral degree	33	3.3
Relationship Status		
Married/Civil Partnership	444	44.2
Cohabiting	114	11.3
Remarried or in another Civil Partnership	53	5.3
Legally Separated	46	4.6
Divorced	173	17.2
Widowed	17	1.7
In a committed relationship (not cohabiting or married	31	3.1
Single	125	12.4
Other	2	0.2

Method

Sample

Participants were 1,005 residents of the UK, all aged over 18 years old, and who had separated or divorced from a partner with whom they had had at least one child. The average age for the sample was 45.18 years ($SD = 14.91$), with nearly half of the sample (436 or 43.4%) identifying as male and most of the sample identifying as White (857 or 85.3%). Other demographic frequencies are shown in Table 1, showing that most participants identified as heterosexual and that the most frequently reported household income as £20,001-£30,000. Based on available national figures for gender, sexual orientation, and ethnicity distributions, this sample can be classified as representative of the UK population.

Contextual Information

On average, it had been around 12 years since the relationship with the ex-partner with whom they had children was reported to have ended ($M = 11.79$, $SD = 11.78$). While in this relationship, 89.1% of the sample lived with their partner, with most in a single-family home (551, 54.8%) or apartment (159, 15.8%). When the relationship ended, 56.4% of the sample remained in the home, whilst 29.1% reported their ex-partner remained, and 13.6% reported both moving out. All values can be seen in Table 2. Interestingly, a Chi-Square analysis demonstrated that mothers were more likely to report remaining in the home than fathers, with the opposite effect true for the likelihood of the ex-partner remaining, χ^2 (3, 895) = 36.02, $p < 0.001$ (see Table 3). The average age of the first child at the time of separation was just over 7 years old ($M = 7.25$, $SD = 7.19$). Most participants reported at least some post-separation conflict (see Table 4).

In relation to child contact arrangements, over a third of parents reported having 100% parenting time and decision-making (39.2%), 23.1% reported equal parting time, 14.1% reported having the majority (with the other parent having around a third contact time), and 8% reported the opposite. 12% of the sample reported their ex-partner having most of the parenting time. A gender effect was again found, with mothers more likely to report sole parental contact than fathers and fathers more likely to report that mothers had sole contact (see Table 5). Mothers were also more likely to report they had most of the contact with their ex-partner (30%), with the opposite effect for fathers. There was a roughly equal reporting rate for shared parenting, but

Table 2 Participant contextual information

	Freq	% Total Sample
Living Arrangement with Ex-Partner		
Lived with	895	89.1
Did not live with	110	10.9
Domicile Type		
Single-family home	551	54.8
Condominium	37	3.7
Apartment	159	15.8
Townhouse	83	8.3
Cottage	14	1.4
Multi-family home	37	3.7
Other	14	1.4
End of Relationship Living		
I remained in the home	505	56.4
My ex remained in the home	260	29.1
We both moved out of the home	122	13.6
Other	8	0.9
Child contact arrangements		
Primarily have/had 100% parenting time	394	39.2
Other parent has/had 100% parenting time	126	12.5
Equal/shared time	232	23.1
Have majority of parenting time	142	14.1
Ex-partner has majority of parenting time	80	8.0

Table 3 Frequencies and percentages for living location of mothers and fathers after separation

	I remained in the home	My ex remained in the home	We both moved out of the home
Male	183 (48.2%)	151 (39.7%)	46 (12.1%)
Female	322 (63.5%)	109 (21.5%)	76 (15.0%)

Table 4 Level of conflict between ex-partners

Level of Conflict	Frequency	Percentage
A great deal	204	20.3
A lot	229	22.8
A moderate amount	249	24.8
A little	138	13.7
None at all	185	18.4

Table 5 Frequencies and percentages for contact arrangements by parent gender

	Sole contact (Them)	Sole contact (Ex-partner)	50:50 Contact	Majority Contact (Them)	Majority Contact (Ex-partner)
Male	112 (26.5%)	85 (20.1%)	131 (31.0%)	27 (6.4%)	68 (16.1%)
Female	282 (51.2%)	41 (7.4%)	101 (18.3%)	115 (20.9%)	12 (2.2%)

this was statistically significantly higher for fathers than mothers.

Measures

Parental Alienation and Parental Alienating Behaviors

Self-Report

Three questions were asked to directly assess participants' self-reported experiences of PABs and PA. Specifically, they were asked:

1. Do you feel that the other parent has engaged in parental alienating behaviors towards you to harm or damage your relationship with your child(ren)?
2. On a scale of 1 to 3, where 1 is mild, 2 is moderate, and 3 is severe, how would you rate the alienating behaviors you are facing (or faced in the past)?
3. Do you feel that you have been alienated from one or more of your children by the other parent? In other words, have the alienating behaviors of the other parent been successful in harming your relationship with your child(ren)?

The Five-Factor Model

One of the most important recent developments that may aid assessments of prevalence has been in the effective measurement of PA, with the introduction of the five-factor model (Bernet & Greenhill, 2022). This model outlines how five factors must be identified for PA to be determined, as opposed to other forms of contact refusal, such as justified estrangement (i.e., where a child rejects a parent for justified reasons such as abuse or extreme neglect) or parental gatekeeping (i.e., where a parent discourages parental contact due to wishes to protect the child from negative parental behavior). The development of the five-factor model, along with other robust empirical measures of manifestations of parental alienation (e.g., lack of ambivalence; Bernet et al., 2020; Blagg & Godfrey, 2018), has now provided researchers with robust tools for assessing the presence of these behaviors, though it should be noted that whilst this model demonstrates good reliability (Morrison & Ring, 2023), some question whether this is the most effective way to assess the presence of PABs and PA (Garber & Simon, 2023). Whilst these discussions continue, the authors argue that the five-factor model currently presents the most effective way to identify these behaviors.

The Five Factor Model is based on an examination of five integral areas: the child's behaviors, the alienating parent's behaviors, the targeted parent's behaviors, the child's relationship with the targeted parent, and the overall family context. This model has not yet been translated into a quantitative measure, so this project serves as the first attempt to do so.

1. Factor 1, Contact Resistance or Refusal, involves the child's refusal or resistance to having a relationship with the rejected parent, a common feature of PA. Understanding the causes of this refusal is crucial in determining if it stems from a coercively controlling abusive dynamic that resulted in the child's alignment with the abusive parent. In this study, this was assessed via one question - whether there is a presence of contact refusal (yes or no).
2. Factor 2, Child's Relationship with Targeted Parent, assesses the child's relationship with the targeted parent before the onset of alienation. It considers the quality of the parent-child bond and any evidence of a loving and secure attachment. In this study, this was measured by a question asking about the quality of the relationship before contact refusal began on a scale of 1 (Extremely Bad) to 5 (Extremely Good).
3. Factor 3, Targeted Parent's Behaviors, recognizes the role the targeted parent might play in their rejection. Evaluating their actions, including any history of neglect, abuse, or poor parenting practices, helps distinguish between justified parental estrangement and PA. In this study, this was ascertained by asking participants whether there (a) had been a claim of domestic violence and abuse (DVA) made against them (yes or no), and most importantly, (b) whether this had been substantiated in court or by some investigative party such as the police (yes or no).
4. Factor 4, Parental Alienating Behaviors (PABs), pertains to the actions of the alienating parent that contribute to the child's alienation. These include behaviors intended to make the child believe their other parent never loved them, abandoned them, or is unsafe or unfit, such as denigrating the targeted parent, interfering with communication (e.g., gatekeeping), making false allegations of abuse, and encouraging the child's rejection of the targeted parent. Baker and Darnall (2006) identified 17 common alienating behaviors that may be seen in high-conflict divorce situations, all of which were asked in this study. Crucially, participants were asked about these as both recipients and perpetrators to establish a group of non-reciprocally alienated parents (NRAPs). Cronbach's alpha for reporting receipt of these behaviors was 0.93, and for perpetration, this was 0.93 also.
5. Factor 5, Child's Behaviors, emphasizes the child's behaviors and attitudes towards the rejected parent. Bernet has detailed eight specific behavioral manifestations of PA in children that may help professionals identify PA (Bernet & Greenhill, 2022). In this study, these manifestations were assessed using the Rowlands Parental Alienation Questionnaire (RPAQ), an extensive tool used to measure the occurrence and severity of parental alienation, a process where a child becomes alienated from a parent due to the psychological manipulation of another parent. Developed by Rowlands (2019, 2020), the RPAQ significantly builds upon previous parental alienation scales by offering a more detailed analysis of both overt and covert alienating behaviors. The questionnaire comprises 42 items, each falling under one of five categories: Poisonous Messages, Active Undermining, Denigration, Emotional Manipulation, and Withdrawal of Love. Each item captures the frequency of specific behaviors over the past year on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (Never) to 5 (Very Often). The RPAQ focuses on both subtle and blatant alienating tactics, provides a more nuanced understanding of the multifaceted dynamics of PA, and has been normed for use with alienated parents. The Cronbach's alpha for this scale was 0.97.

Across these five factors, parents were only designated as having been alienated from their child if they:

- Factor 1: Answered Yes for Factor 1.
- Factor 2: Answered 'Neither Good or Bad' or better for Factor 2.
- Factor 3: Answered No to the first question and/or No to the second question.
- Factor 4: Had been the non-reciprocal recipient of PABs based on RPAQ Scores.
- Factor 5: Had reported any level of manifestations of alienation in the child (i.e., had a mean of above 1).

Domestic Abuse

Participants were directly asked, 'When thinking about the relationship with your ex-partner, do you consider yourself to be a victim or survivor of domestic abuse?' and answered yes or no. Aside from this one-item measure, participants also completed the Conflict Tactics Scale 2 (CTS2), which is a comprehensive instrument used to measure the occurrence of various conflict resolution tactics within relationships, including negotiation, psychological aggression, physical assault, injury, and sexual coercion. Developed by Straus et al. (1996), CTS2 significantly improves on its predecessor

(CTS1) by expanding the scale to cover a broader range of behaviors and incorporating a focus on both self and partner behavior. Seventy-eight items are grouped into five main categories: Negotiation, Psychological Aggression, Physical Assault, Sexual Coercion, and Injury. Each item measures the frequency of specific behavior within the past year on a seven-point Likert scale, ranging from 0 (Never) to 6 (More than 20 times). In the present study, the Cronbach's alpha for this scale was 0.99.

Legal and Administrative Abuse

The Legal and Administrative Aggression Scale is a twelve-item measure developed by Hines et al. (2015). It includes a six-item sub-scale assessing "threatened legal and administrative aggression" and a six-item sub-scale assessing "actual legal and administrative aggression." The "threatened LA" sub-scale asked participants to indicate how often they and their partner threatened each of the following acts: (1) make false accusations to authorities that the partner physically or sexually abused the other; (2) make false accusations to authorities that the partner physically or sexually abused the children; (3) leave and take the children away; (4) leave and take all the money and possessions; (5) ruin the partner's reputation at work; and (6) ruin the partner's reputation in the community. Participants indicated on a scale from 0 to 7 how many times they experienced each of the acts: 0 = never; 1 = 1 time in previous year; 2 = 2 times in previous year; 3 = 3–5 times in previous year; 4 = 6–10 times in previous year; 5 = 11–20 times in previous year; 6 = more than 20 times in previous year; 7 = did not happen in the previous year, but has happened in the past. To obtain an approximate count of the number of times each act occurred in the previous year, the original items were re-coded in the following way: 0 = 0 acts in previous year (includes never and did not happen in the past year but has happened before); 1 = 1 act in the previous year; 2 = 2 acts in the previous year; 3 = 4 acts in the previous year; 4 = 8 acts in the previous year; 5 = 16 acts in the previous year; 6 = 25 acts in the previous year. We also re-coded each item according to whether it ever happened during the relationship, where 0 = no and 1 through 7 = yes. The "actual LA aggression" sub-scale was a set of six dichotomous yes/no questions asked after the "threatened" items and assessed whether the participant and/or his partner ever engaged in any of the six acts outlined in the "threatened LA aggression" sub-scale. The scale was scored by counting the number of "actual" acts of LA aggression the participant and his partner engaged in and indicating whether the participant and/or his partner engaged in any of the six acts listed (1 = yes, 0 = no). In the present study, Cronbach's alpha for this scale was 0.85.

Mental Health

We assessed post-traumatic stress symptoms using a shortened version of the PTSD Checklist (Weathers et al., 1993). Seven problems were selected from the original item list of 17 due to concerns about survey fatigue, and respondents were asked to indicate how much each of the seven problems had bothered them in the last month (using a 5-point scale with not at all and extremely serving as anchors). The items formed a reliable scale ($\alpha = 0.95$), and they were averaged together.

We also administered a 20-item depression screening tool published by the Centre for Epidemiological Studies (Radloff, 1977) to assess depressive symptoms. Respondents rated how often in the last week they felt certain ways (e.g., I was bothered by things that usually don't bother me), and respondents answered with rarely or none of the time (less than a day), some or a little of the time (1–2 days), occasionally or a moderate amount of time (3–4 days), and most or all of the time (5–7 days). The scoring of the measure is a summed score across the 20 items (4 of which are reverse scored) so that the range of scores is between 0 and 60, with higher scores indicating greater levels of depression. The reliability score for this scale was 0.90.

We assessed suicidality by asking respondents whether and how often they have thought about suicide in the last year (never, rarely [1 time], sometimes [2 times], often [3–4 times] and very often [5 or more times]). For those participants who did not answer "never" for whether they have thought about suicide in the last year, we then asked whether their thinking about suicide in the last year was related to conflict around their child contact situation with their ex (using a 5-point scale with *strongly disagree* and *strongly agree* as endpoints). Finally, we asked participants who had contemplated suicide in the last year whether they knew anyone who committed suicide due to child contact issues with their ex-partners (Yes, No, I don't know/Don't care to say).

Procedure

The study was conducted through an online, mixed-methods survey facilitated by Atomik Research—an independent creative market research agency accredited with Market Research Society (MRS)-certification and adherence to the MRS code. The survey was administered over two weeks, from the 30th of May to the 12th of June 2023. Participants for this study were recruited from an online consumer panel known as the 'Power of Opinions.' They were selected based on specific criteria: being adults over 18 years old, residing in the UK, willing to consent to the study requirements, and

having one or more children from a relationship that has since ended.

The sample was drawn using a probability sampling approach, with the initial survey distributed to a nationally representative (nat-rep) general population sample of 10,000 respondents based on Office for National Statistics (ONS) data for gender, age, and regional distribution in England and Wales. From this broader sample, 1,005 respondents who met the criteria of being divorced or separated with children participated in the study. This approach ensured that the sample was balanced and avoided the overrepresentation of specific demographic groups while capturing a "natural fallout" of divorced individuals within the general population. It is important to note that while the survey is not a weighted nat-rep sample of divorced parents in the UK, the demographic composition of respondents closely aligns with national distributions for gender, age, and ethnicity within this subgroup, ensuring a robust representation. Indeed, due to a lack of available statistics on the demographic characteristics of separated and divorced parents in the UK, it would be hard to fully establish whether this population is fully representative of this group at large. However, the approach taken has ensured that a robust attempt to provide such a sample.

The data collection process entailed the use of self-report questionnaires administered online. These questionnaires were divided into multiple sections, such as qualification, socio-demographics, and areas related to harmful and abusive behaviors. Upon completion of the study, qualified respondents were rewarded with a £5 incentive for their participation. Throughout the research, strict adherence to ethical guidelines was maintained, ensuring confidentiality and anonymity of participants' responses.

It is acknowledged that defining a nat-rep sample of divorced parents specifically is complex, as the ONS does not provide such a detailed breakdown. Instead, the study relied on the principle of natural fallout within a random nat-rep sample and that, given the balanced nature of the survey demographics, significant skewing would be unlikely.

Table 6 Frequencies and percentages for different PAB group categorizations

Classification	Frequency	% Total Sample
Self-identified	394	39.2
Mild	98	
Moderate	227	
Severe	69	
Receipt Only	594	59.1
Not Targeted	310	30.8
Non-Reciprocal Targeted	254	25.3
Non-Reciprocal Alienating	161	16.0
Reciprocal	280	27.9

Results

Prevalence of PABs

When asking participants directly whether they felt that the other parent had engaged in alienating behaviors towards them to harm or damage the relationship with their children (hereby Group A), **394 (39.2%) replied yes.** Of those, 98 described this experience as mild, 227 as moderate, and 69 as severe. Over a quarter (269 or 26.8%) of the sample said that these behaviors had then resulted in harm to their parent-child relationship.

When calculating PAB receipt based on answers to a standardized measure, two other groups were formed. When scores were calculated based solely on the behavior of the ex-partner (hereby Group B), **594 (59.1%)** of participants reported being the target of PABs. When categorizing participants based on both their and their ex-partner's behaviors, we mirrored the process used by Harman et al. (2019a, b). Specifically, we tallied the total number of behaviors for self and other parent to create an index of the numbers of PABs that were reported to be enacted by both parties. We then created dummy codes for participants based on how many alienating behaviors they reported the other parent as having perpetrated and on how many they admitted to perpetrating themselves. If the parent stated that neither they nor the other parent engaged in any of them, they did not receive a code. If they reported doing twice as many or more than the other parent, they were given a "1" and were labeled "alienating parent." If the parent reported being the target of PABs more than twice the number that they admitted to doing, they were coded "2" and labeled "targeted parent." If the parent reported that both they and the other parent perpetrated alienating behaviors to a similar degree (less than twice as much as the other), they were coded "3" and labeled "reciprocating parent." Using these categories, 30.8% of parents reported no PABs at all. Over a quarter of parents **(25.3%)** were categorized as non-reciprocal **targeted** parents (hereby Group C), **16.0%** were categorized as non-reciprocal **alienating** parents (admitting to engaging in the sole perpetration of these behaviors), and **27.9%** were categorized as reciprocal parents (See Table 6). Excluding the 30.8% that reported no PABs, these percentages change to 36.5%, 23.2%, and 40.3%, respectively. This first figure for non-reciprocal targeted parents is only slightly smaller than that reported in the U.S. by Harman et al. (2019a, b; 39.1% of their sample). All three of these calculations reveal a high level of UK adults experiencing PABs within the sample, with some also returning these behaviors.

When comparing those in Groups A and B, 71% of participants were aligned (i.e., they had answered similarly across the two measurement types: 348, 35% Yes, and 365, 36%

Table 7 Frequencies and percentages across differing classifications of experiences of PABs

		Classification			
		None	Non-Reciprocal Alienating Parent	Non-Reciprocal Alienated Parent	Reciprocal Alienation
Self-Report	Yes	30 (7.6%)	36 (9.1%)	158 (40.1%)	170 (43.1%)
	No	280 (45.8%)	125 (20.5%)	96 (15.7%)	110 (18.0%)

Table 8 Comparisons between groups A, B, and C and the rest of the sample across various mental health and abuse measures

	Group A	General Population	t value	Group B	General Population	t value	Group C	General Population	t value
Depression	2.21 (0.59)	1.82 (0.54)	10.88**	2.13 (0.56)	1.75 (0.56)	10.60**	2.01 (0.54)	1.95 (0.60)	1.55
PTSD	2.76 (1.10)	1.87 (0.99)	13.23**	2.54 (1.09)	1.76 (0.99)	11.56**	2.32 (1.12)	2.18 (1.13)	1.78*
Lifetime Suicide Ideation	2.58 (1.55)	1.79 (1.28)	8.86**	2.40 (1.46)	1.67 (1.26)	8.15**	2.26 (1.51)	2.03 (1.41)	2.31*
Future Suicide Ideation	2.75 (1.78)	1.71 (1.20)	11.06**	2.44 (1.69)	1.64 (1.14)	8.36**	2.17 (1.51)	2.09 (1.55)	0.71
Ideation in the Past Year	2.04 (1.19)	1.41 (0.87)	9.66**	1.88 (1.14)	1.35 (0.81)	8.08**	1.71 (1.12)	1.64 (1.03)	1.04
Relation of Ideation to Child contact Proceedings	4.13 (1.21)	3.19 (1.51)	10.85**	4.23 (1.14)	3.43 (1.48)	9.24**	3.74 (1.42)	3.81 (1.38)	0.78
Domestic Abuse	118.60 (173.47)	53.97 (112.56)	7.16**	104.68 (162.39)	42.64 (98.56)	6.91**	62.70 (123.06)	86.08 (150.04)	2.35*
Legal and Administrative Aggression	31.32 (27.15)	13.05 (16.43)	13.31***	27.79 (25.72)	9.26 (11.77)	13.65**	20.04 (18.58)	20.28 (24.63)	0.15

No). However, some participants reported being a recipient of behaviors but who did not report these on our specific behaviors measure (46, 5%), and almost a quarter of participants who self-reported as not receiving alienating behaviors but did report behaviors on our specific measure (246, 24%). Harman et al. (2019a, b) found similar discrepancies, indicating that there may be misunderstandings among the general public as to what PA and PABs are.

When comparing the overlap between participant self-reports and their formal classification (i.e., Groups A and C), only 40.1% of participants identified as experiencing PABs and were classified as non-reciprocal alienated parents (See Table 7). This result suggests that participants' understanding of their role in abusive behavior may vary greatly. As with previous studies (Harman et al., 2016, 2019a, b), prevalence did not differ between any of the key sociodemographic groups, including gender, age, or income.

Mental Health Outcomes

When comparing the mental health outcomes of those who reported PABs (in any group) and those who did not, there were statistically significant differences, but these varied depending on the way PAB receipt was calculated (See Table 8). For example, all groups had significantly higher levels of PTSD symptoms, depression, and lifetime suicide ideation than those who did not report PABs, but effects were much greater for Groups A and B than Group C. For future suicide ideation, ideation in the past year, and the relationship of this ideation to child contact proceedings, only Groups A and B had significantly higher endorsement than non-PAB recipients.

Relationship To Other Forms of Abuse

Like mental health outcomes, those who identified as alienated (in any group) had significantly higher CTS2 scores, indicating a higher level of domestically violent experiences with their ex-partner (See Table 8). Again, this effect was larger for groups A and B than C. Interestingly, for legal and administrative abuse, differences were only found for groups A and B, not C, where alienated parents experienced higher levels of this type of abuse.

Manifestations in Children

Across the entire sample, the average rating for children's manifestation of alienating behavior averaged across all questions was 2.04 (SD=0.82, 2 = 'Rarely'). Most (941, 96.7%) participants had a score over 1 for this factor (i.e., that some manifestation in the child had at least occurred). This mean was statistically and significantly higher for Group A (M=2.43, SD=0.85, t (710)=12.84, p<0.001), Group B (M=2.32, SD=0.81, t (984)=15.19, p<0.001) and Group C (M=2.03, SD=0.74, t (260)=7.24, p<0.001). However, it should be noted that this is one of the hardest elements of PA to assess, as alienated parents may not have sufficient contact with their children to report on their behaviors.

The Five-Factor Model

When assessing PA using our new quantitative adaptation of the five-factor model, the number of parents that are classified as ultimately alienated from their child(ren) decreased (see Table 9). For Factor 1, contact resistance or refusal, 228

Table 9 Frequency and percentage of parents meeting the criteria of successive factors

Factor	No. Meeting Factor	% Total Sample
Factor 1– Contact Resistance	228	22.7
Factor 2– Previous Good Relationship	164	16.3
Factor 3– Absence of Abuse	86	8.6
Factor 4– Receipt of PABs	31	3.1
Factor 5– Manifestation in the Child	30	2.9

participants (22.7%) reported that this occurred. For Factor 2, 164 of 228 participants (71.9%, 16.3% of the total sample) reported that their previous relationship with their child prior to contact refusal had been 'OK/Average,' 'Good,' or 'Extremely Good.' For Factor 3, 77 (47.0%, 7.6% of the total sample) had never been accused of domestic abuse. Of those who had been accused, 74 (85.1%, 3.9% of the total sample) self-reported that they were found guilty of those accusations. This elimination process left 86 participants not accused or found guilty of domestic violence.

For Factor 4, we examined how many of the 86 participants left had perpetrated PABs and been the recipients. Just above a third (32, 37.2%) reported not performing any PABs, whilst the rest had perpetrated at least one. Conversely, 19 participants (22.1%) said they had not been the recipient of any such behaviors. Consequently, the number of participants who were categorized as non-reciprocal **targeted** parents within this group was 31 (36.0%; 3.5% of the total sample).

For Factor 5, 30 participants had an average score of above 1 (i.e., demonstrating that some manifestation of alienation within the child had occurred). This means the total number of parents classified as alienated, according to the five-factor model, was 30 or 2.9% of the total sample. Interestingly, when this group of parents was compared to the rest of the sample, there were no significant differences in mental health measures, suggesting that it is possibly the experience of the abusive behaviors rather than the outcome that is most damaging.

Discussion

In a concerted effort to understand the complex dynamics of parent-child relationships following divorce, this study examined the prevalence and consequences of PABs situated within the broader context of other abusive behaviors. Surveying a diverse pool of participants intended to be representative of the UK general population, the research revealed both a high prevalence of PABs and a relationship between mental health outcomes and PAB exposure. This is the first study in the UK to examine the prevalence of PABs and their outcomes.

Our study found that 39.2% of the sample felt the other parent of their child(ren) engaged in PABs that harmed their parent-child relationship. This finding mirrors research from North America, where 32–39% of separated parents reported experiencing these behaviors (Harman et al., 2016; Harman et al. 2019b) and underscores the widespread nature of this issue. This data significantly advances prior studies, offering a robust UK-centric perspective. Specifically, these findings suggest that thousands of families may experience PABs during separation every year (Department for Work & Pensions, 2020). Indeed, based on divorce estimates for 2020, these figures equate to over 44,000 adults and 22,000 children per year. Notably, and similar to prior research, our study found no significant differences in the experience of PABs across demographic groups like gender, age, or income, emphasizing that PA can affect a wide range of individuals.

Our findings demonstrate a strong relationship between experiencing PABs and adverse mental health outcomes, including PTSD symptoms, depression, and lifetime suicide ideation. This finding aligns with the substantial evidence base that details the profound effects of PA on parents (Hine, 2024; Lee-Maturana et al., 2022) and further supports the contention that PABs, by definition, are psychologically distressing and can have far-reaching consequences on mental health. The prevalence of IPV among those who identified as alienated supports the understanding of PA as a continuation of coercive and controlling behaviors post-separation (Francia et al., 2019; Spearman et al., 2022). Moreover, the co-occurrence of PABs and other forms of abuse supports the positioning of PA as part of a broader pattern of IPV as described by researchers (Harman et al., 2018) and by parents themselves (Lee-Maturana et al., 2022).

When using the five-factor model to contextualize the experiences of PABs and look further into categorizing parental alienation versus other forms of estrangement, we see a complex picture arising. Using the first three factors to contextualize the behaviors (i.e., establishing a good prior relationship, etc.), a much lower percentage of the sample qualified to be categorized as alienated (8.6%). This then impacted the number of parents we could categorize as non-reciprocal alienated parents– down to 3.5% from 35%. Contact refusal is likely an outcome in more severe parental alienation cases, while resistance to physical contact and distanced psychological attachment and connection to an alienated parent could capture children who are mildly to moderately alienated. Similarly, severely alienated children may not entirely refuse contact with an alienated parent to prevent negative consequences for them (e.g., contempt for violation of parenting time court orders). By limiting our

cases to only those parents who reported physical contact refusal, we likely overly restricted our sample of alienated parents. Future research measuring the five-factor model should include measures of relationship quality and closeness to the alienated parent to better capture the full spectrum of parental alienation severity in children.

A similar discussion results when examining child manifestations of alienating behaviors. When using the five-factor model, excluding parents who don't meet the contextual criteria and only using parents who are non-reciprocal alienated parents, only 30 participants (2.9%) reported alienation outcomes in children. However, if we just look at how many children were reported to show manifestations of alienation in the sample overall, this figure was much higher (96.7%). These figures align with previous estimates that 1–4% of children in the US are alienated from a parent (Harman et al. 2019b) and demonstrates that many more children will have experienced alienating behaviors without then rejecting/resisting physical contact with the parent. Our measure of factor 1 failed to capture the psychological effects on the quality of the parent-child relationship. Put into context against other critical childhood issues with lower or similar prevalence rates (e.g., childhood autism), these figures strengthen arguments for PABs to be seen as a public health emergency (Vezzetti, 2016).

Implications and Future Research Directions

The implications of this study emphasize that a nuanced understanding and multifaceted approach is necessary in addressing PABs within the framework of broader family violence. By reinforcing the conceptualization of PABs as a distinct form of family violence, this research highlights the necessity for targeted interventions that consider PABs within the broader spectrum of familial conflicts. Moreover, by again showing that *both* separated men and women experience PABs, these results further debunk gendered interpretations of this abuse type and its application to the legal system. The urgency for UK policymakers and legal systems to systematically address these behaviors is further underscored by their profound mental health impacts and interconnections with other forms of abuse. Such legislative and policy advancements, inspired by our findings, could serve as the foundation for crafting comprehensive interventions, guidelines, and policies aimed at mitigating PABs for all separated parents.

Moreover, the clinical implications of this study are significant, with a call for mental health professionals to be adequately informed about the effects of PABs on parents' mental well-being. Given the association of PABs with severe psychological conditions such as PTSD and depression, there is a clear need for these professionals to receive specialized training in recognizing and treating the psychological aftermath of PABs. This finding underscores the importance of integrating clinical support with legal and educational efforts to form a robust support system for affected families.

Furthermore, the recommendations from this study advocate for a broad-based educational and awareness initiative. By designing comprehensive public awareness campaigns and educating those involved in family court proceedings about PABs, there is the potential to foster a more informed community and judiciary. Such efforts should aim to demystify the complexities of PABs, highlighting their implications and available support avenues through schools, community centers, and media outreach. Additionally, the establishment of support groups and counseling services specifically tailored for parents and children experiencing PABs is essential. This approach not only addresses the immediate psychological needs but also fosters a collaborative network among therapists, legal professionals, and educational institutions, ensuring a holistic support mechanism.

Lastly, the call for enhanced research methodologies underscores the necessity for a more sophisticated approach to studying PABs and indeed domestic violence more broadly. It has long been noted that domestically violent behaviors are hard to capture and assess due to their sometimes-covert nature, the overlap between different abuse and behavior types, and the subjective interpretations of reporters (in relation to several factors– perceived severity, gender of reporter, etc.) For PABs, addressing the discrepancies between self-reported and behaviorally indicated PABs will require refinement of the tools and methodologies employed in research. However, by adopting a combination of qualitative and quantitative measures, future studies can perhaps offer a more comprehensive understanding of PABs and explore the underlying reasons for these discrepancies, which may include cognitive biases, societal perceptions, or a general lack of awareness.

Limitations

This study, while shedding light on the complex dynamics of PABs, is subject to several limitations that merit consideration. Primarily, the reliance on self-reported data introduces potential bias, as respondents may be influenced by memory inaccuracies or a propensity to portray themselves in a favorable light. This concern is particularly pertinent in the context of discussing sensitive issues like abusive behaviors, prompting the study to explore PABs through various lenses, such as beliefs and behaviors, to mitigate this limitation. To minimize self-presentation biases, all survey responses were anonymous, and most of the validated self-report measures that were used presented time-limited

items (e.g., reports of behaviors over the last year) to minimize memory decay effects. Another significant constraint is the cross-sectional design, which only captures a snapshot of data at a single point in time. This approach limits our ability to trace the evolution and dynamics of parent-child relationships and the longitudinal impact of abusive behaviors, underscoring the necessity for longitudinal studies to comprehensively understand these phenomena. Additionally, the covert nature of PABs and associated societal stigma may lead to underreporting of such behaviors. This issue suggests that the prevalence and impact of PABs could be more significant than reported, highlighting a gap in capturing the full spectrum and prevalence of these behaviors.

There are also issues with the measurement and categorization of PABs, many of which are unavoidable due to the complex relationship dynamics that often contextualize these behaviors. For example, in this study, we decided to focus purely on those in receipt of behaviors according to various measures. However, exploration of the outcomes of parents who either (a) solely perpetrate PABs or (b) are reciprocal in their perpetration would be valuable in the future. Moreover, in this study, and true to the five-factor model, we measured contact refusal as a yes or no question. This led to a small number of children being fully classified as alienated according to this model. However, there are levels of contact resistance/refusal manifestation, and future research should perhaps seek to expand this factor to provide a more nuanced assessment. In addition to this, when asking participants to self-report on whether they had received PABs towards them using this term, we purposefully did not provide them with a definition. In the future, we would consider doing so to measure a third categorization– those who identified with the accepted current definitions of the behavior.

This study also acknowledges the challenges in measuring the severity and differential impact of Parental Alienation Behaviors (PABs). The subjective nature of perceived severity means that individuals may interpret the effects of these behaviors differently, and our current methodology, which identifies the presence of specific PABs rather than assessing their intensity, has limitations. This applies not only to the use of a cumulative total of PABs to establish relationships with other variables but to the categorization of parents based on their proportional receipt and perpetration of PABs and the thresholds to determine this. Additionally, while we quantify PABs to explore their association with mental health outcomes, this approach does not capture variations in harm across different contexts or account for the complex dynamics in cases of reciprocated behaviors. Future research should consider methods that examine the differential harm of individual PABs, including their cumulative impact and potential legal and administrative effects, to provide a more nuanced understanding.

Lastly, while the study considers demographic factors such as gender, age, and income, it does not extensively explore the potential influence of deeper cultural and socioeconomic variables or the intersectionality of these factors. For example, Wang et al. (2023) discuss how cultural differences in familial roles and the adultification of children in Chinese culture potentially leads to greater parental alienation when the behaviors occur. These types of factors could significantly shape parental behaviors and children's responses, indicating a need for future research to delve into these dimensions to provide a more nuanced understanding of PABs.

In summary, the limitations of this study underscore the challenges in researching sensitive and complex phenomena like PABs. The limitations highlight the need for methodological advancements, including longitudinal research, deeper cultural and socioeconomic analyses, and innovative approaches to mitigate self-report bias and underreporting, and thus enhance our understanding of the dynamics and implications of parental alienation behaviors.

Conclusion

In conclusion, our research underscores the pervasive nature of PABs in the UK, highlighting their profound mental health outcomes and their association with broader forms of abuse. This data serves as a testament to the urgency of the situation, suggesting that if estimates from prior research are accurate, millions of UK adults and children in separated families may be suffering from post-separation abuse targeting the parent-child bond.

Our findings not only promote greater societal awareness of PA but also illuminate the path for significant policy change. The visibility of the issue ensures that affected parents and children are empowered to vocalize their experiences and seek the support they need. Consequently, it becomes challenging for legislators to neglect this significant population.

Recognizing the scale of the problem demands a multipronged approach: (a) fostering increased community support for separating couples, (b) instigating legislative amendments concerning parental responsibilities, and (c) initiating system reforms that allow for the identification of this type of abuse and the necessary safeguarding measures. Furthermore, the insights from this research will lay the foundation for training service providers and the judiciary. Such training will enhance the survivor experience and ensure that this pressing issue gets the attention it warrants.

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Data Availability Data and apparatus for this study are available on request.

Declarations

Ethical Approval Ethical approval for this study was provided by the lead author's institution by the school ethics board.

Conflict of interest There are no conflicts of interests or declarations for this work.

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