

# The Cult of Parenthood: A Qualitative Study of Parent Alienation - *by Amy J. L. Baker, PhD*

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## **Abstract**

Forty adults who were alienated from a parent as a child participated in a qualitative research study about their experience. A content analysis was conducted on the transcripts and a comparison was undertaken to identify similarities between alienating parents and cult leaders. Results revealed that adults whose parents alienated them from their other parent described the alienating parent much the way former cult members describe cult leaders. The alienating parents were described as narcissistic and requiring excessive devotion and loyalty, especially at the expense of the targeted parent. The alienating parents also were found to utilize many of the same emotional manipulation and persuasion techniques cult leaders use to heighten dependency on them. And, finally, the alienating parents seemed to benefit from the alienation much the way cult leaders benefit from the cult: they have excessive control, power, and adulation. Likewise, the participants reported many of the same negative outcomes that former cult members experience such as low self-esteem, guilt, depression, and lack of trust in themselves and others. These findings can provide a useful framework for conceptualizing the experience of parental alienation and should also be useful for therapists who provide counseling and treatment to adults who experienced alienation as a child.

Each year approximately one million couples divorce. Many of these divorces involve children. Research has consistently shown that children whose parents divorce suffer emotionally and psychologically, especially when the divorce is contentious and the children are exposed to ongoing conflict between their parents (e.g., Amato, 1994; Johnston, 1994, Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1996; Wallerstein & Lewis, 2004). Amato (1994), building on an earlier meta-analysis of 92 studies, concluded that children who experienced divorce, compared to samples of children in continuously intact two-parent families, had higher rates of negative outcomes including conduct problems, psychological maladjustment, and poorer self-concepts. Using a qualitative approach, Wallerstein and Lewis (2004) also found long-term negative consequences of children's experience of parental divorce.

One subset of children of divorce considered most at risk for negative outcomes are those experiencing ongoing post-divorce conflict (Garrity & Baris, 1994, Turkat, 2002). The children in these families are at risk of being subjected to some form of parental alienation in which one parent turns the child against the other parent through powerful emotional manipulation techniques designed to bind the child to them at the exclusion of the other --targeted -- parent (Darnall, 1998; Gardner, 1998; Garrity & Baris, 1994; Warshak, 2001). These alienating parents undermine the independent thinking skills of their children and cultivate an unhealthy dependency designed to

satisfy the emotional needs of the adult rather than the developmental needs of the child (Warshak, 2001).

According to Gardner (1998) children can experience three levels of the parental alienation syndrome: mild, moderate, and severe (although Turkat, 2002 outlined conceptual issues with this scale). Mild cases are characterized by some parental programming against the targeted parent but visitation is not seriously affected and the child manages to have a reasonably healthy relationship with both parents. In cases of moderate parental alienation there is significant parental programming against the targeted parent and considerable struggle around visitation. The child often has difficulty during the transition but eventually adjusts. The child who is severely alienated is adamant about his or her hatred of the targeted parent. The child usually refuses any contact and may threaten to run away if forced to visit. The alienating parent and the child have an unhealthy alliance based on shared distorted ideas about the targeted parent. When this happens and the child wholly adopts the views of the alienating parent and severs all ties with the targeted parent, the child is living in something akin to a cult, the cult of the alienating parent.

According to West and Langone (1986) a cult (1) is a hierarchical social group in which there is a leader who requires excessive devotion, (2) has a leader who uses emotional manipulation and persuasion techniques to heighten dependency on him or her, and (3) furthers the aims of the leader at the expense of its members as well as others.[1] Utilizing this definition provides a useful basis for comparing cults to the characteristics of families in which parental alienation occurs.

Of course, most families in western cultures are hierarchical social groups. Power is not evenly distributed among the members of the family. Parents have legal, physical, moral, and psychological control over their children. Even parents who respect their children's individuality and aim to promote competence and autonomy retain some authority over their children. In some families, however, parents exploit their inherent authority in order to alienate the child from the other parent. The focus of the current study was to determine whether these alienating parents resemble cult leaders; that is, do they (1) require excessive devotion, (2) use emotional manipulation techniques to heighten dependency, and (3) garner psychological benefits at the expense of the well being of the child. This analysis was accomplished through the current study of interviews with adult who – when they were children – were turned against one parent by the other.

## **The Study**

A qualitative retrospective study was conducted in the Fall of 2004. Guidelines for conducting qualitative research developed by Berg (1998) were utilized throughout the study. Subjects were recruited from word of mouth and from postings on the internet. People who responded were asked to briefly describe their situation in order to ensure that the alienation was at least in part due to the behaviors and attitudes of the other parent. Appointments were made with people who met this criterion. At the beginning of each appointment it was explained that the interview was voluntary, for research purposes, and could be stopped at any time. It was also explained that although I am a psychologist I am not a clinician and would not be able to provide counseling. Informed consent was obtained and the audiotape was turned on. Only one person declined to

participate after the study was explained. The recruitment flyer called for people who had been turned against one parent as a child due to the attitudes and behaviors of the other parent. In this way, only people who were aware that the alienation was engineered by the other parent were included in the study. This allowed for an examination of the process by which the individual became aware that he or she had been manipulated to become alienated, which was one important focus of the study.

## The Sample

Forty-two adults participated in the interview process (2 were subsequently removed from data analysis because of faulty tapes). An additional two people agreed to participate but did not follow-up. Thus, data for 40 participants are presented. Participants were between 19 and 67 years of age ( $M=40.4$ ,  $SD=11.4$ ); 15 were male and 25 were female. For three fourths ( $n=30$ ) the parents divorced during the participant's childhood and in all but six cases the alienating parent was the mother. Basic information about the 40 participants is provided in Table 1.

ID	Gender	Age at Interview	Age at Separation	Custodial Parent	Alienating Parent
1	Female	40	3	Mother	Mother
2	Female	47	NA	Both	Mother
3	Female	35	12	Mother	Mother
4	Female	44	NA	Both	Mother
5	Female	30	13	Mother	Mother
6	Female	30	Birth	Mother	Mother
7	Male	40	9	Mother	Mother
8	Female	33	3	Mother	Mother
9	Male	38	5	Mother	Mother
10	Female	32	2	Father	Father
11	Male	43	NA	Both	Mother
12	Female	50	NA	Both	Mother
13	Female	33	NA	Both	Mother
14	Female	36	2	Mother	Mother
15	Male	67	NA	Both	Father
16	Male	43	5	Mother	Mother
17	Male	28	11	Father	Father
18	Female	26	2	Mother	Mother
19	Female	51	NA	Both	Mother
20	Male	48	12	Mother	Father
21	Female	44	12	Mother	Mother
22	Male	39	NA	Both	Mother
23	Female	28	3	Mother	Mother
24	Male	32	NA	Both	Mother
25	Female	43	12	Mother	Mother
26	Male	57	2	Mother	Mother
27	Female	19	8	Mother	Mother
28	Female	32	NA	Both	Father
29	Male	63	NA	Both	Mother
30	Male	39	2	Mother	Mother
31	Female	60	Birth	Mother	Mother

32	Female	50	11	Mother	Mother
33	Female	21	2	Mother	Mother
34	Male	39	4	Mother	Mother
35	Female	19	1	Mother	Mother
36	Female	41	3	Mother	Father
37	Male	52	8	Mother	Mother
38	Male	46	2	Mother	Mother
39	Female	37	Birth	Mother	Mother
40	Female	50	5	Mother	Mother

## The Interview Schedule

Interviews followed a semi-structured protocol which ensured that the same information was obtained from all participants while allowing each person to “tell their story” in full. The interview schedule was developed in order to capture the 12 aspects of the qualitative research interview as outlined in Kvale (1996, p. 27). That is, the interview aimed to understand in a focused way the subject’s every day life world as it related to parental alienation and the meaning of the alienation for them, in a qualitative rather than quantitative form, with an emphasis on description of specific experiences. This information was obtained through a sensitively conducted interpersonal exchange that because of the deliberate naiveté of the interviewer allowed the subject to express ambiguous statements and come to new and/or changed understandings. The interview was conducted in such a manner as to produce a positive experience for the participant.

The interview had five major sections. The first section of the interview obtained basic demographic information including age, gender, place of birth, and so forth. Section two focused on memories of the marriage, the participant’s relationship to each parent up until the time of the separation/divorce, how the participant was told about the separation, who moved out of the house and a description of the custody/visitation schedule through the age of 18.[2] The third section of the interview focused on the alienation, beginning with which parent was the alienating parent and which was the targeted parent. Participants were asked to list all of the different strategies used by the alienating parent and to provide examples of each. The participant was asked to describe his/her relationship to the targeted parent and how that changed over time, as well as the participant’s relationship to the alienating parent during this period. This section ended with a discussion of how the targeted parent tried to counter the alienation, whether the participant knew about these attempts at the time, and the perceived motivation of the alienating parent. In the fourth section of the interview, the participants were asked about when his or her thinking eventually changed about the targeted parent. They were queried about when they began to realize that their feelings and thoughts about the targeted parent were induced by the alienating parent rather than based wholly in reality. Whether or not the alienating parent was ever confronted, whether the targeted parent was told about the realization, and what, if anything, could the targeted parent have done to mitigate the alienation were discussed. Any reunification with the targeted parent was described in full including who initiated it and what happened. The final section of the interview entailed a conversation about the person’s life at the present, including what kind of relationship he or she had with each parent and what the impact of the alienation has

been. At the end of the interview a checklist was reviewed in order to ensure consistency of data across participants.

## Analysis

Audiotapes were transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were then submitted to a content analysis in which each unique unit of thought was separated from the transcript and taped onto an index card. Content analysis was guided by an inductive grounded theory approach (Berg, 1998; Straus, 1987) in which the texts were read in order to identify the major themes. Cards were then coded according to its essential idea (i.e., relationship with targeted parent prior to the alienation, strategies utilized by the alienating parent, impact of the alienation). In all there were 11 major categories including a category on the strategies utilized by the alienating parent. These “strategy” cards were further coded into sub-categories that produced the major findings presented in the current paper. This paper also draws on the data collected pertaining to their relationship with the alienating parent. All quotes are attributed to the participant number so that the reader can determine the age and gender of the speaker as well as whether his or her parents separated/divorced, age of that event, and who the custodial parent was.

## The Findings

### *A Leader who Requires Excessive Devotion*

Cults are organized around a leader, typically described as a charismatic individual who maintains ultimate power and authority over the group. Within the cult the leader is designated as worthy of devotion and awe because of his or her superior capacity to comprehend the true nature of reality. Due to this supposed unique and valuable knowledge, leaders are presented as able to understand members better than they understand themselves. It is held that through great personal sacrifice, cult leaders are willing to share this knowledge on behalf of the members who require the wisdom and the guidance of the leader in order to function. In return, members are expected to reserve their love and devotion exclusively for the leader, who has earned an elevated place at the center of their emotional lives. Cult leaders have been compared to both psychopaths (Tobias & Lalich, 1994) and narcissists (Shaw, 2003) because of their lack of humility in presenting themselves as superior to others and because of their willingness to use their charm and persuasion skills in order to exploit and unduly influence others.

The adult children who participated in the interviews described the alienating parent in similar terms. In particular, they perceived the alienating parent as needing to be the center of attention at all times and insisting on being the center of the child’s emotional life. “She was the center and everything revolved around her.” (31) Another participant said, “Mainly I think she always wants to be your everything. She wants to be your center of attention. And so she liked the fact that by making me hate him all I had was her.” (27) In fact, many of the interview subjects described their parents as narcissistic, either using that label or using precise descriptors that called that term to mind.

In cults, it is not enough to feel devotion to the leader; members are expected to demonstrate their devotion on a regular basis. Expressions of devotion include putting the needs of the leader first, never questioning the authority of the leader, confessing imperfections, allowing the leader to make all important decisions, and making public declarations of faith and love. These actions reassure the leader that the member is fully indoctrinated and further solidify the member's commitment to the cult (Lifton, 1989). In many cases the expressions of devotion are public, with the aim of turning a public declaration of devotion into an inner desire to be loyal to the leader. By requiring such public assertions of faith and trust in the leader, cult leaders are exploiting the natural tendency in people to want their beliefs to be consistent with their actions (e.g. Festinger, 1957). In this way saying becomes believing.[3]

This process also occurred in the families of alienation. The participants reported feeling pressured to show their devotion to the alienating parent. Many described their relationship with the alienating parent as one in which their parent's needs were felt as more real and urgent to them than their own. They recalled staying home from social activities to tend to their parent, to keep them company, to take care of younger siblings, or to perform household duties. "I did what I could do to make her life easier because her life was so hard because of my father. That was my mantra, mom's life is hard. I have to try to help her. (40)" They chose friends, hobbies, and eventually careers and spouses to please their parent. Others reported that they grew up believing that it was their job to satisfy the needs of their parent, exemplified in the statement, "I was there to help her. It would make me want to try harder to please her. I learned how to be amusing at a very young age." (27) In general, they experienced themselves as extensions of their parent, their primary function in life being to take care of, please, admire, reassure, and be devoted to them.

A particularly important expression of devotion was an allegiance to and preference for the alienating parent over the targeted parent. Some of the participants recalled being asked to spy on the targeted parent and keep secrets from him or her. Many participants said that they had made negative reports to the alienating parent about the targeted parent such as saying that they did not have a good time during visits, exaggerating small infractions or hurts, and making false claims of harm. Joining the alienating parent in the belittling of the targeted parent was another means of showing devotion. A few participants recalled mocking the targeted parent, and one told of being encouraged to spit, hit, and sexually humiliate his mother at the behest of his father. Devotion also took the form of making accusations against the targeted parent for real and fabricated allegations, including stealing the child's personal items and shirking financial obligations such as child support payments.

As with cults, loyalty and devotion in alienating families was extracted either through sweet seduction or through wrathful commands (and usually an alternating sequence of both). An example of the former was provided by a woman who described her mother and stepfather as being "nicer than nice," doing everything for her until she eventually believed, "that they were the only ones we could rely on, that we had to be with them. (1)" In her family, demonstrations of loyalty took the form of hiding from her father when he came to visit and being rude to people in the neighborhood that her mother and stepfather singled out as being worthy of contempt. Another woman recalled her mother saying, "Don't you want to stay here with me and your sister? Your

sister understands that to go over there is to go with people who don't like me. I am your mother don't you want to like me? (33)" Through a combination of rhetorical skill and guilt inducement this mother compelled her daughter to reject her father.

At the other end of the spectrum of strategies for extracting loyalty was a young man who grew up with a raging drunken father. He explained that, "There was a constant ritual everyday. He would come in my room in the middle of the night and make me profess my faith to him and if I didn't and if I didn't stay away from everybody else that he was going to kill himself. He would do this and I would have nobody." (17) And one woman reported that her father wanted her to profess her exclusive love for him, and would beat her until she did so. Many participants reported having to constantly reassure their alienating parents that they loved them best of all, and that they did not in fact have positive feelings for the targeted parent. "She'd start crying and say we didn't love her and that's just how she is." (36)

The ultimate sign of devotion and loyalty to a cult leader entails renouncing all other sources of influence. Just as cult leaders require an exclusive place in the hearts and minds of the members, these alienating parents seemed to want to have sole claim on their children. Allegiance to the other parent was not allowed in these families and the participants understood that there was to be an exclusive and all encompassing relationship with only one parent. They were made to feel that any contact with the targeted parent was a betrayal of the worst kind. One man said of his mother, "If I talked about my dad it was like sticking a knife in her back." (9) Another said he felt like a traitor when he came back from a visit. Ultimately, many of the participants were encouraged if not coerced to renounce their relationship with the targeted parent. Loving both parents would have been unthinkable, just as belonging to two cults at the same time is not possible. And in this way, many of the participants felt that they had to make a choice between their parents. Naturally, they chose the parent whom they believed really loved them and was able to take care of them, the one who had been telling them all along that the other parent was unsafe, worthy of contempt, and did not even love them in return (see section beginning on page 14 below). In time, most of the participants were turned against the targeted parent completely, withdrawing their love and natural affection for them. More than one made a comment such as, "I remember thinking he should go ahead and die. I wish he'd just go get in a car accident. I wish he'd die. I didn't want him to come home." (22) Another said, "I did believe her that he was a terrible rotten person who beat my mother and thank god she divorced him." (16) The intensity of these and other similar statements reflect the utter lack of ambivalence, (one parent is all good while the other is all bad), which is a hallmark of parental alienation syndrome (Gardner, 1998).

Thus, in these families, the normal love and respect that children naturally feel for a parent appeared to be insufficient to satisfy the narcissistic demands of the alienating parent. What they seemed to want from their children was a level of adulation and exclusivity typically reserved for cult leaders. They seemed to garner that level of devotion in much the same way that cult leaders do: through a range of emotional manipulation and persuasion techniques. The strategies employed by the alienating parents – as described by their adult children -- are described below.

## *Use of Emotional Manipulation and Persuasion Techniques to Heighten Dependency on the Leader*

The second characteristic of cults is that leaders manipulate the thoughts and feelings of its members in order to promote a sense of dependency on them (e.g., Hassan, 1988; Lifton, 1989; Singer, 1996). This too was borne out in the interviews of adults who as children were alienated from a parent due to the actions and behaviors of the other parent. There were five primary mechanisms for manipulating the thoughts and feelings of the children: (1) relentless bad mouthing of the character of the other parent in order to reduce their importance and value (2) creating the impression that the targeted parent was dangerous and planned to hurt the child in order to instill fear in and rejection of that parent (3) deceiving children about the targeted parent's feelings for them in order to create hurt, resentment, and psychological distance (4) withdrawing love if the child indicated affection or positive regard for the targeted parent in order to heighten the need to please the alienating parent and (5) erasing the other parent from the life and mind of the child through minimizing actual and symbolic contact. Each of these is discussed in turn.

### *Relentless Badmouthing of the Character of the Other Parent to Reduce Their Importance and Value*

When participants were asked about what the alienating parent did to try to turn them against the other parent, the first and most frequently mentioned strategy was badmouthing. It may have featured so prominently in their minds because it was an overt and not particularly subtle behavior and because it was so pervasive. Most participants remarked on the constant litany of negative comments made about the targeted parent to the child and to others in front of the child. Many of the comments were general statements about the lack of worth of the person as a whole such as being a piss poor dad, a whore and a slut, not the man you think he is, a good for nothing drunk probably in jail right now. Common complaints were that the person was a cheat, an alcoholic, and someone who did not care about his or her family. One woman recalled her step-mother complaining about how lazy her mother was because she used instant oatmeal in the mornings. The alienating parent seemed to operate under the assumption that if an individual is told something enough times it becomes true in their minds, and that did seem to be the case. When asked if they believed the badmouthing, they responded, "Oh absolutely! At no time did I ever think my mom wasn't telling the truth." (38), "All of it. She was my mother. She was God." (34), "All of it! I believed her for a really long time." (35), "I became really angry at my father. I believed her." (29) The barrage of negative statements was noteworthy for its apparent one-sidedness (nothing good was recalled being said about the other parent to balance out the complaints) and its lack of appropriateness. Even if true these things should probably not be said to a child (although there might be certain circumstances in which explaining negative aspects of the other parent could be beneficial, Warshak, 2001). Participants recalled that their alienating parents explained concepts and/or used words such as abortion, womanizer, rape, alcoholic well before the children knew or needed to know what these concepts meant.

Badmouthing of the other parent seemed to serve the same function as bad mouthing the “outside world” for cults: promotion of dependency (Kent, 2004; Lifton, 1989; Shaw, 2003). Badmouthing creates in cult members a belief that the leader is the only person who truly cares and can be trusted; everyone else is contemptible and/or dangerous. The alienating parents -- through badmouthing -- seemed to convey to their children that they were the only parent who loved and cared for them, who could be trusted. Many of the participants recalled their parents explicitly inducing dependency with comments such as, “I did everything for you and he did nothing.” (40) “Basically everything good that happened was because of her.” (29) One participant explained that after a long litany of complaints were spewed about the targeted parent the alienating parent would then comfort the child by telling her, “I shouldn’t be too upset because I had her.” (39) Another participant explained that, “He told me he was the only one who cared about me, the only one who wanted me, that no one else cared about me over and over and over again.” (17) Another participant said of her mother, “In my mind she was everything. She was all I had.” (27) The constant badmouthing created in the child the belief that the targeted parent was not worthy of love and respect, much the way cult leaders aim to diminish all other authority figures in the eyes of members.

### *Creating the Impression that the Targeted Parent was Dangerous and Planned to Hurt the Child in order to Instill Fear and Rejection of the Parent*

Sometimes the badmouthing took on a decidedly darker tone and the child was led to believe that the targeted parent was capable of inflicting great harm to them. Participants were told that the targeted parent had beaten them, wanted to abort them, planned on throwing them in the river, were reckless with them when they were babies, didn’t have their best interest at heart, and were intent on kidnapping them. One participant remembered the first time she saw her father and stepmother in five years, “Up to the point they drove up into the driveway my mom was sitting there telling me, ‘You better watch it because they are going to take you and they are never going to bring you back. They are going to kidnap you. That lady is from Ohio. Do you know anybody in Ohio? Do you know how to get back home?’” (23) In all, the participants were made to feel unsafe at the thought of contact with the targeted parent. “I remember her always telling me how mean and angry he was. If I needed help with homework she would say, ‘Don’t ask your daddy, he will yell at you.’ I was scared of him. It was like a landmine.” As a boy he avoided being in the same room with his father and lived in constant fear of being beaten by him, despite the fact that this had never actually occurred. “I felt like he was hitting me all the time in my head. It was a constant barrage of how incompetent and how dangerous my father was.” (22)

Badmouthing in order to instill fear of the targeted parent seemed to serve at least two purposes. Because the interviews were conducted with the adult children and not the parents themselves, the motivations of the alienating parents cannot really be known. However, based on the participants’ descriptions of their experiences with the alienating parent, the following analysis is offered. First, badmouthing seemed to make the child want to avoid the targeted parent and thus furthered the alienating parent’s goal of severing that relationship. In addition, it seemed to heighten the child’s

need for a protector, a role the alienating parent was probably only too willing to play. In this way the bond between the alienating parent and the child was further strengthened and reinforced. As attachment theorists have found (Bowlby 1969, Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978), when a child senses fear (real or imagined) his or her desire to be near and comforted by the attachment figure/caretaker is activated. This is a biologically determined protective mechanism designed to ensure the safety of the vulnerable within any species. Alienating parents exploited this innate mechanism in order to artificially induce their child's desire to be near them.

Creating fear in order to activate dependency needs is a strategy that has also been used in cults. False scenarios of doomsday and threat from external forces have been fabricated in order to heighten members' dependency on the leader. Jonestown, Branch Davidians, and Heaven's Gate are just a few examples of cults that have propagated a sense of imminent danger and, therefore, a belief that the end was near (either from natural or social forces) in order to further a dependency on the leader. Muster (2004) reports that in the International Society for Krishna Consciousness the leaders announced that a nuclear war was impending, which resulted in a reorganization of the members into a crisis mode of dependency and fear. In this sense cult leaders behave like insensitive parents who instill fear and dependency rather than encourage independence and competence.

### *Deceiving the Child about the Targeted Parent's Feelings in Order to Create Hurt, Resentment, and Psychological Distance*

Many of the participants were told that the targeted parent did not love them or want them. "She said he didn't love nobody but himself. He didn't care about us." (36) Another participant said, "That's another thing my mother told me was that my dad didn't want anything to do with us boys. He just walked away from us." (34) One woman said "She told me that my father wasn't my friend at all, that he had contempt for 'a lout like you.'" (12) Another was told, "I was not important to him. His other kids came first. I was last on his list." (39) In many cases the alienating parent actually engineered situations to make it appear as if the targeted parent did not care and then used that very situation to convince the child that the parent did not love them. For example, one mother threw away letters the father was sending and then asked her daughter to explain how her father could love her if he did not even bother to write. Other parents refused to accept phone calls, moved away without providing contact information, and told the targeted parent that the child did not want to see them. Because the alienating parents eliminated communication with the targeted parent and controlled all information, the participants had no means with which to question the veracity of what they were being told. Eventually, they capitulated under the weight of the "evidence" and concluded that the targeted parent did not love them after all, further fueling their hurt and resentment. In addition, once they accepted this as "fact," the alienating parent became even more important to them as their sole source of parental love, support, and care. In cults the use of black/white and us/them thinking promotes the belief that anyone outside the cult is necessarily wrong and/or does not really love or care for them (Tobias & Lalic, 1994).

### *Withdrawing Love if the Child Indicates Affection or Positive Regard for the Targeted Parent*

A classic cult technique is to create a sense of psychological imbalance and anxiety in members so that they are preoccupied with winning back the praise and acceptance of the leader. Sometimes this is accomplished through the unpredictable use of rewards and punishments (Goldberg & Goldberg, 1988). One particularly potent form of punishment is for leaders to withdraw their love and acceptance of a member in order to create a sense of insecurity. Panic ensues as the member scrambles to get back in the leader's good graces. Almost everything else becomes secondary to regaining approval and equilibrium and considerable effort is expended figuring out how to avoid expulsion from the leader's realm of acceptance.

Many of the study participants described this same experience. They recalled experiencing withdrawal of love by the alienating parent if they indicated any positive regard for the targeted parent. They learned to pretend they had a poor visit with the targeted parent in order to avoid rejection upon return home. "She was always in a bit of a mood or temper when we came back." (5) Many spoke of getting the cold shoulder, of being emotionally cut off from their parent. "She'd shut me out. It would be just silence." (31) There was an emotional price to pay if they had contact with the targeted parent. "She would make life rotten for us." (2) "She couldn't stand to see me actually get on with my father. She'd make her disapproval evident if I so much as spoke to him in a civilized way. This disapproval was in the form of throwing sour looks my way, and then turning her back and ignoring me." (12) Another participant said, "She'd treat me like the enemy." (37) Some mothers accused their children of not loving them if they went to visit the other parent, some threatened to abandon their children, and one woman recalled her mother pointedly serving her an inferior portion of food upon returning from a visit. When asked what it was like to come home from a visit to his father, one participant responded, "Oh it was very cold. She would give me the cold shoulder." (10) Several said their alienating parent would not speak to them for several hours or the rest of the evening following returning from a visit. Because of the child's profound dependency on the alienating parent, participants found it very hard to tolerate their disapproval and subsequent withdrawal of love. "I was scared to disagree with my mother. Any disagreement on my part would cause her to either turn her venom against me or threaten that 'things would never be the same again after an argument like that', which left me heartbroken and devastated." (12) When imagining what it would feel like to experience the disapproval of the alienating parents, others spoke of feeling "lost," "terrified," and "all alone." Many said that when the alienating parent withdrew their love, they became preoccupied with winning that parent back. "It was scary. It made me want to try harder." (40) Thus, fear of withdrawal of love was a powerful threat that was used by the alienating parents to control their children and reduce their affection towards and relationship with the targeted parent.

### *Erasing the Other Parent*

Cults tend to be exclusive social environments in which members are surrounded by like-minded people. Lifton (1989) described the totalistic nature of cults as milieu control. The likelihood of contact with alternate viewpoints and perspectives is almost nonexistent. The leader controls the

reality of the members by controlling the flow of information in and out of the cult. There is little opportunity for countervailing opinions and points of view to be expressed to members. There is only one shared reality, which must be accepted in order to be a member of the cult. All other ideas are excluded. Newspapers are not read, television is not viewed, contact with outsiders who might question or introduce members to other ways of thinking and believing is strictly forbidden (e.g., Muster, 2004).

The alienating parents of the study participants were described as operating the family in much the same way, particularly as it related to the targeted parent. Participants were forbidden to have contact with anyone who might speak well of the targeted parent, especially extended family members. Most importantly, contact with the targeted parent was minimized or eliminated all together. In this way, the child did not have any independent experiences of the targeted parent and the parent him/herself had no opportunity to explain his/her side or counter the campaign of lies. Few of the participants had pictures of the targeted parent, and none were allowed to talk about him or her. Any mention of the targeted parent was felt to be taboo, something to be avoided at all costs in order to keep the peace in the family. "My mother would get so mad she'd almost start shaking if the subject of my father came up." (18) One woman was shoved down the stairs when she mentioned her father; and a young man recalled, "Every time I mention my dad all hell breaks loose. It was almost as if I knew if I mentioned that I wanted to go see my dad I would be brow beaten into submission." (9) Another study participant recalled that when she said she wanted to see her father her mother jumped up from the dinner table and went into her room crying. A few moments later her stepfather informed her that she would be thrown out of the house if she mentioned her father again. One woman recalled not being allowed to bring home gifts received during visits with her mother because, "It wasn't fair to the other kids. I wasn't allowed to talk about it." (10) In all these ways, the presence of the targeted parent was minimized and their place in the hearts and minds of the children was diminished.

Through these five strategies, the alienating parents elevated themselves into an esteemed place in their children's eyes and cultivated in their children a profound dependency on their approval and acceptance. The third characteristic of cults – the ways in which this dependency benefits the leader and harms the members – is explored next.

### *Cults Further the Aims of the Leader at the Expense of the Needs of its Members as Well as Others*

The third feature of cults is that they operate for the benefit of the leader and at the expense of its members. While they claim to exist for the benefit of the members -- who are in need of the wisdom and guidance of the leader -- the reality is just the opposite: The leader benefits from the experience much more than the members. The benefits of cults to their leaders are both financial and psychological. Leaders of cults have unlimited access to the money and assets accumulated, and often spend disproportionately on themselves, justifying such expenses as the minimum compensation for all their sacrifice and hard work on behalf of the members (Singer, 1996). The psychological rewards of cult leadership are also plentiful. Leaders become all-powerful, all-knowing, worshipped individuals who can exercise control and authority at their whim.

Similarly, the alienating parents seemed to benefit from the lofty place they held in their children's lives and from the elimination of the targeted parent. First, they appeared to have benefited by not having to share parenting time, by avoiding the complications of coordinating schedules, and by not having to deal with the cooperation and compromise entailed in sharing a child with someone they no longer lived with or loved. As Johnston (1994) has noted, concerns about the other parent's ability to care for the children is pervasive in high conflict divorces. For the most part the alienating parents described in this study had the opportunity to raise their child as they pleased without the interference of another parent. Because many remarried, they did not suffer the financial and emotional difficulties of single-parenthood (e.g., Teachman & Paasch, 1994). Second, they seemed to benefit by exacting revenge on a person whom they believed harmed and/or rejected them. By having the child reject the other parent, the alienating parent likely had the satisfaction of the last laugh, so to speak. They had the opportunity to reject the parent in a way that was designed to maximally inflict pain and suffering. And, finally, they seemed to benefit from the narcissistic satisfaction of being the most important person in their child's life. Through the strategies described above, these parents extended the natural idealization of their children well into the later teens and for some on into adulthood. By cultivating dependency on them, these parents delayed or avoided all together the natural separation and de-idealization of their children. Thus, they warded off the natural feelings of loss and sadness that typically accompany the process of children individuating and living their own lives.

As the benefits to the cult leaders are many, so too are the costs to cult members. Much has been written about the loss of identity, the loss of time with family, and the loss of dreams that result from extended participation in cults (Langone, 1993; McKibben, Lynn, & Malinoski, 2002; Singer, 1996; Tobias & Lalich, 1994). The costs of cult participation are many, both psychological and financial. Many cults require hefty membership fees while others encourage if not require members to turn over all their assets and belongings to the leader or produce economic dependency on the cult. In addition to the financial costs associated with cult membership, former members describe the emotional harm done to them as the worst part of the experience (Singer, 1996). The emotional costs include (1) diminished self-esteem from excessive dependence (2) guilt from having hurt friends and family, (3) depression and sadness over time lost with friends and family, and (4) difficulties trusting self and other (Tobias & Lalich, 1994). The participants in the study experienced each of these negative emotional outcomes as a result of being alienated from one parent due to the actions and behaviors of the other.[4]

### *Low Self-Esteem*

Former cult members report low self-esteem and shame from having been duped and manipulated by the leader. They feel foolish for having believed the lies and half-truths and for not questioning what was told to them. They also suffer from low self-esteem due to the cultivation of excessive dependence on the leader. They were led to believe that they could not function outside the authoritarian confines of the cult, and that they were incapable of knowing what is in their own best interest.

Adults whose parents alienated them from the other parent also reported problems with self-esteem. Some expressed the belief that they should have questioned more what they were being told about the targeted parent, while others recognized that as a child they really had no reason to doubt what their parents were telling them. "Of course I believed my mother. She was god." (34) This was not the primary source of their reduced self-esteem. For them, it came from the internalization of the hatred of the targeted parent. When the alienating parent denigrated the targeted parent to the child, the child assumed that he too was bad and worthy of contempt because that person was at least in part inside him (genetically and from an early relationship). This sentiment was exemplified in the following statement, "Any parts that I did feel were like my father made me feel bad about myself because she berated him so. If I was like him how could that be good?" (39) Thus, the alienating parent's rejection of the targeted parent was experienced as a rejection of that part of the child that was like the targeted parent. In psychoanalytic terms, the "bad object" was internalized (e.g., Greenberg & Mitchell, 1983).

Self-esteem problems in former cult members also results from leaders fostering a belief that parents, friends, and family did not really love and care for them. Only the cult leader loves the person the way they deserve to be loved. This experience was also seen in adults whose parents alienated them from their other parent. Many recalled being told that the targeted parent did not really love or want them. Over and over it was explained that the targeted parent left them, did not care about them, did not really love them. This too resulted in diminished self-esteem because the child assumed that if the targeted parent did not love them, they must be unworthy of love. When parental love is lacking the child will naturally assume himself rather than the parent to be the cause, resulting in an unrealistically negative self-image. It is much too frightening to think that the parent is at fault (e.g., Golomb, 1992; Peck, 1983). Thus, the study participants believed themselves to be unlovable because they were told that their parent did not love them.

### *Guilt*

Former cult members often feel guilty about the harm their cult involvement has caused to their loved ones. Once they realize that they have squandered their money and assets and that they have treated badly those who really love them, they feel ashamed that they were capable of behaving so callously towards people who did not deserve it. Former cult members recall the times that they were rude or belittling or rejecting of their friends and family and feel embarrassed at their own behavior.

Participants in the study also experienced guilt at having betrayed the targeted parent. One man who was made to verbally abuse his father on the telephone worried about what impact that had on his father, "I don't know if he believed we really felt that way or not because we were saying these things to him. I am hoping in my heart that he knew but it must have hurt like hell anyway." (7) He described his own feeling at the time as being like "slicing his wrists." Another woman said she was a "horrible horrible person" (19) for joining her mother against her father.

## *Depression*

Depression is a common experience for former cult members. They feel saddened about the time they lost with their friends and family on the outside and for the fact that they gave up their personal life dreams, aspirations and goals. Depression was also prevalent in the adults interviewed for this study. Like former cult members, they too felt badly about the time they lost. "I missed many years with my father. Many wonderful years I could have had with him." (31) explained one participant. One man who did not find his father until much later in life said he fully expected to meet him for the first time standing over his grave." (38) The participants expressed the belief that their depression was also due to feeling rejected by the targeted parent, in addition to the time they lost with them. An older woman whose mother died when she was just two-months-old provided a particularly poignant example of this. At the time of the mother's death, her father was having difficulty caring for five children while holding down a full-time job that required him to be away from the home on alternating weeks. For this reason, he agreed to let his sister raise the baby. This aunt, whom the participant called mommy, subsequently alienated her from her father. She prevented visitation, denigrated him to her, and let it be known that any preference for the father would be disloyal, hurtful, and not tolerated. Thus, the participant only saw her father a few times a year despite the fact that he lived less than an hour away. Not only did she lose her mother from an early death but she lost her father as well. Because the loss of her father was unnecessary, she was particularly bitter. "You lose your mother and you lose your father and you're alone. I always felt alone." (31) Another man explained his experience with depression, "I feel like I have a hole in my soul. And it is not something you can physically point to and say here it is but you know it is there." (38)

The impact of the loss of the targeted parent was exacerbated by the fact they were not allowed to openly mourn this loss. In general the participants were discouraged from talking about and/or expressing interest in their relationship with the targeted parent. Their loss was not acknowledged and they received no emotional support in dealing with it. In fact, quite the opposite message was conveyed, that it was a positive event for the targeted parent to be out of their lives, essentially a "good riddance to bad rubbish" message. Inability to mourn a loss or significant life change is believed to be associated with subsequent depression (Bowlby, 1980; Kubler-Ross, 1997) and this was certainly borne out in the lives of the participants.

## *Lack of Trust*

Lack of trust in themselves and others is a recurrent theme in interviews with former cult members. They know that they were manipulated once and worry that it can happen again. They realize that what they believed about the cult and the leader was actually not the case, and therefore, do not trust themselves to be good judges of other's motives and character. This theme was also common among the study participants. They did not trust their own perceptions of people because from a young age they were told by one parent that the other parent (whom most had positive memories of) was bad, dangerous, or in some other way worthy of fear or contempt. Once they realized that they had been manipulated and that what they been led to believe their whole lives about the targeted parent was not the truth (or at least not the whole truth) they became even

more unsure of what to believe and whom to trust. "Everything I believed is not so true." (5) In addition, some women who were alienated from their fathers reported not being able to trust that men would be able to love them. They assumed that if their father (their first male love) did not love them enough to stay involved in their lives no man would find them worthy of love and commitment. One woman continually created conflict in her romantic relationships; she tested them to see how much they could take before they eventually rejected her. When they did finally leave, she concluded that of course that would happen, all men eventually leave her as her father did.

## **Conclusion**

The 40 adults who participated in this study described their parents in much the same terms that cult leaders are described. These parents required excessive devotion and utilized a range of strategies in order to cultivate their children's dependence on them. The perceived impact of the alienation as described by the participants matched many of the outcomes associated with cult involvement. These findings should provide a useful framework for adults who were alienated from a parent as a child and for clinicians working with this population.

## *Limitations of Study*

Several methodological limitations need to be noted. First, a retrospective design was utilized which did not allow for a determination of causality. That is, although the participants described the outcomes of the alienation from their perspective, it cannot be known whether in fact such associations exist. In particular, many of the outcomes described (low self esteem, lack of trust) may be due to the divorce per se rather than the alienation more specifically. Without a comparison group of adult children of divorce who did not experience parental alienation, it is not possible to determine the alienation-specific outcomes. However, to the extent that the study aims to describe the participants' felt experience, the findings can be considered valid. Another limitation is that the participants varied in their age at the time of the interview. Thus, some had not had a chance yet to experience all of the possible negative outcomes described above. For example, a nineteen year-old participant had less time to experience depression or guilt than say a 60-year-old participant. In that respect, the findings may under-represent the negative outcomes of parental alienation. Additionally, it is quite likely that there are many adults who were alienated from a parent and were not aware of the fact that they had been manipulated by their parent. There is no way to ascertain the outcomes for these adults. Thus, part of the outcomes described above may be due to the awareness of the experience rather than to the experience itself. And, finally, the motivations and experiences of the alienating parent were not directly assessed. The only source of data was the perceptions, beliefs, and memories of the adult children. For example, it is possible that the alienating parents suffered as well and that there may have been some justification for the negative statements made about the targeted parent.

## *Future Research and Practical Implications*

Despite the limitations noted above, the findings presented in this paper represent the first glimpse at the felt experience of adults who experienced parental alienation as children. To that extent they can be used to develop hypotheses that can be tested in future research. In particular, three directions for future research suggest themselves. First, a longitudinal study of divorced families would be very helpful for determining the proportion in which alienation occurs. To date, there are no empirically-based estimates of this phenomenon. Gauging the magnitude of the problem could attract more researchers to the field as well as lead to increased funding opportunities. Second, a large-scale quantitative study of adults who were alienated as children could be undertaken to extend the outcome findings reported here. Standardized measures of depression, drug use, self-esteem and other outcomes could be administered in order to determine the rates of these experiences in the sample. A third direction for future research would be a study of the adults (both targeted and alienated) in order to understand the phenomenon from their perspective. For example, it is likely that targeted parents are aware of a broader range of strategies used against them than the children.

In the meantime, these findings may be useful to clinicians working with adults who experienced parental alienation as a child. The participants in this study seemed to believe that what they experienced was so unusual and idiosyncratic as to defy classification or categorization. It is possible that utilizing the heuristic of cults may provide them with a framework for understanding their experience and their response to it. A body of knowledge has been developed about cult leaders and the strategies they use which may help the adult children of parental alienation feel connected to a larger group and may provide them with a way to think about their parents and themselves that facilitates recovery and growth. Parents who are currently losing a child to an alienating parent may also find this framework useful for understanding the changes they see in their children. For these reasons the current findings should be used to spur future research and could inform practice as deemed useful by clinicians currently working with those affected by parental alienation.

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[1] Other definitions of cults exist although none is definitive. See Langone (2004) and McKibben, Lynn, and Malinoski, (2002) for a discussion of definitional issues.

[2] This section was eliminated for the participants whose parents never separated/divorced.

[3] Although Ofshe (1992) argues that the beliefs adopted may be situationally based and discarded once the person is removed from the environment.

[4] They also experienced other outcomes that may be unique to parental alienation (Baker, 2004).