

# Parental alienation in divorce cases: a rapid review

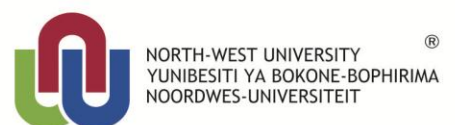
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Dissertation submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for the  
degree *Master of Social Work* in Forensic Practice at the  
Potchefstroom Campus of the North-West University

Supervisor: Prof CC Wessels

November 2016

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I herewith submit to the North-West University, Potchefstroom Campus, in compliance / partial compliance with the requirements set for the MSW in Forensic Practice degree, is my own work, has been language-edited in accordance with the requirements and has not already been submitted to any other university.

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## **DEDICATION**

This study is dedicated to all families affected by parental alienation.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I would like to express my sincerest gratitude to every person that supported me throughout my studies, with special mention to:

- My family and friends for their on-going support and encouragement.
- Prof CC Wessels for her guidance and expertise.
- My fellow Master's student-friend who inspired me to complete my studies.
- Last but not least, God Almighty for giving me strength to complete my studies.

## STATEMENT

I, Martha Margaretha Klinck hereby state that the manuscript titled: “***Parental alienation in divorce cases: a rapid review***” is my own work.

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Date

## DECLARATION OF LANGUAGE EDITING

I, Elizabeth van Rhyn, hereby declare that I have edited the research study with the title:

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Yours sincerely

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# APPROVAL



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Prof CC Wessels  
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Dear Prof Wessels

## **APPROVAL OF YOUR APPLICATION BY THE HEALTH RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (HREC) OF THE FACULTY OF HEALTH SCIENCES**

**Ethics number: NWU-00013-16-S1**

Kindly use the ethics reference number provided above in all correspondence or documents submitted to the Health Research Ethics Committee (HREC) secretariat.

**Study title: Parental alienation in divorce cases: a rapid systematic review**

**Study leader/supervisor: Prof CC Wessels**

**Student: M Klinck**

**Application type: Single study**

**Risk level: Minimal**

You are kindly informed that your application was reviewed at the meeting held on 10/03/2016 of the HREC, Faculty of Health Sciences, and was approved on 01/08/2016.

The commencement date for this study is 01/08/2016 dependent on fulfilling the conditions indicated below. Continuation of the study is dependent on receipt of the annual (or as otherwise stipulated) monitoring report and the concomitant issuing of a letter of continuation up to a maximum period of three years when extension will be facilitated during the monitoring process.

**After ethical review:**

Translation of the informed consent document to the languages applicable to the study participants should be submitted to the HREC, Faculty of Health Sciences (if applicable).

The HREC, Faculty of Health Sciences requires immediate reporting of any aspects that warrants a change of ethical approval. Any amendments, extensions or other modifications to the proposal or other associated documentation must be submitted to the HREC, Faculty of Health Sciences prior to implementing these changes. Any adverse/unexpected/unforeseen events or incidents must be reported on either an adverse event report form or incident report form at [Ethics-HRECIncident-SAE@nwu.ac.za](mailto:Ethics-HRECIncident-SAE@nwu.ac.za).

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Yours sincerely

Dr Wayne Towers

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## SUMMARY

Parental alienation in divorce cases: a rapid review

Key words: Parental alienation; divorce

As a family counsellor employed at the Department of Justice and Constitutional Development, the researcher is responsible for investigations into the welfare and best interest of children in care and contact disputes. In high conflict divorce matters parental alienation is a phenomenon that emerges amidst the conflict. Parental alienation occurs when one parent undermines or prejudices the contact and relationship between the child and the other parent, without justified reasons.

The aim of the research was to explore evidence available regarding how parental alienation is experienced by different family members as well as the effect the experience of parental alienation has on families.

The rapid review method was used to identify 12 articles on parental alienation with a fair to good methodological quality. Data from these articles were extracted, synthesized and 11 themes were identified according to how parental alienation is experienced by families and the effect parental alienation has on families.

The themes are

Theme 1: The child develops a contaminated view of the parent and of himself

Theme 2: Autonomy – intrinsic motivation

Theme 3: False allegations against the alienated parent

Theme 4: The impact of high conflict divorces

Theme 5: Loyalty conflicts

Theme 6: Problems with attachment

Theme 7: Long term effect of parental alienation

Theme 8: Internal and external problems associated with parental alienation

Theme 9: Parental alienation is a form of psychological maltreatment

Theme 10: Therapy and treatment of alienated children and parents

Theme 11: Reinforcement of alienation through courts and prosecuting authorities

It is clear from the study that parental alienation is a phenomenon that escalates in divorce cases. Social workers and legal professionals need to understand the impact on the best interest of children as knowledge may ensure adequate recommendations and decisions for families affected by parental alienation.

## OPSOMMING

Ouerlike vervreemding in egskeidings: 'n "rapid review".

Sleutelwoorde: Ouerlike vervreemding; egskeiding.

As a gesinsraadgewer in diens van die Departement van Justisie en Konstitusionele Ontwikkeling, is die navorser verantwoordelik vir ondersoeke t.o.v die welsyn en beste belang van kinders in sorg- en kontak dispute. In hoë-konflik egskeidings gedinge is ouerlike vervreemding 'n verskynsel wat voorkom te midde van dié konflik. Ouerlike vervreemding is wanneer die een ouer die kontak en verhouding tussen die kind en die ander ouer ondermyn en benadeel sonder grondige redes.

Die doel van die navorsing was om bewyse te ontgin rakende die wyse waarop ouerlike vervreemding deur verskillende gesinslede ervaar word, asook wat die effek op gesinne is wat ouerlike vervreemding ervaar.

Die "rapid review" metode is gebruik om 12 artikels oor ouerlike vervreemding, met redelike tot goeie metodologiese kwaliteit, te identifiseer. Data is vanuit hierdie artikels geëkstraheer, gesintetiseer en 11 temas is geïdentifiseer van die wyse waarop ouerlike vervreemding deur gesinne ervaar word en wat die effek wat ouerlike vervreemding op gesinne het, identifiseer.

Die temas is:

- Tema 1: Die kind ontwikkel 'n gekontameneerde siening van die ouer en van homself
- Tema 2: Outonome-intrinsieke motivering.
- Tema 3: Valse beskuldigings teen die vervreemde ouer.
- Tema 4: Die impak van hoë konflik egskeidings
- Tema 5: Lojaliteitskonflikte
- Tema 6: Probleme met gehegheidsvorming
- Tema 7: Lang termyn effek van ouerlike vervreemding
- Tema 8: Interne en eksterne probleme geassosieer met ouerlike vervreemding
- Tema 9: Ouerlike vervreemding is 'n vorm van psigologiese mishandeling

Tema 10:     Terapie en behandeling vir vervreemde kinders en ouers

Tema 11:     Versterking van vervreemding deur howe en vervolgings-outeite

Uit die studie blyk dit duidelik dat ouerlike vervreemding 'n verskynsel is wat toeneem in egskeidings gedinge. Dit is nodig dat maatskaplike werkers en regs professies die impak van ouerlike vervreemding op die beste belang van kinders sal verstaan, omdat kennis kan verseker dat gepaste aanbevelings gemaak word en die regte besluite geneem word wanneer te doen gekry word met gesinne geaffekteer deur ouerlike vervreemding.

## FOREWORD

This article format was chosen in accordance with regulations A.7.2.3. for the degree MSW in Forensic Practice. The article will comply with the requirements of the journal *Aggression and Violent Behavior*.

## INSTRUCTIONS TO AUTHOR

*Aggression and Violent Behavior, a Review Journal* is a multidisciplinary journal that publishes substantive and integrative reviews, as well as summary reports of innovative ongoing clinical research programs on a wide range of topics germane to the field of aggression and violent behaviour.

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#### *References*

There are no strict requirements on reference formatting at submission. References can be in any style or format as long as the style is consistent. Where applicable, author(s) name(s), journal title/book title, chapter title/article title, year of publication, volume number/book chapter

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If the article includes any Videos and /or Supplementary material, this should be included in the initial submission for peer review purposes.

Divide the article into clearly defined sections.

Please ensure the text of the paper is double-spaced – this is an essential peer review requirement.

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Please ensure the figures and tables included in the single file are placed next to the relevant text in the manuscript, rather than at the bottom or the top of the file.

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To avoid unnecessary errors use the 'spell-check' and 'grammar-check' functions of the word processor.

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Divide your article into clearly defined and numbered sections. Subsections should be numbered 1.1 (then 1.1.1, 1.1.2,...),1.2. etc. ( the abstract is not included in section numbering) . Use this numbering also for internal cross-referencing: do not just refer to 'the text'. Any subsection may be given a brief heading. Each heading should appear on its own separate line.

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Submit tables as editable text and not as images. Tables can be placed either next to the relevant text in the article, or on separate page(s) at the end. Number tables consecutively in accordance with their appearance in the text and place notes below the table body. Be sparing in the use of tables and ensure that the data presented in them do not duplicate results described elsewhere in the article. Avoid using vertical rules.

## *References*

### *Citation in text*

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A concise (no more than 200 words) and factual abstract is required. This should be on a separate page following the title page and should not contain reference citations

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Immediately after the abstract, provide a maximum of 6 keywords, using American spelling and avoiding general and plural terms and multiple concepts

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Collate acknowledgements in a separate section at the end of the article before the references and do not, therefore, include them on the title page. List here those individuals who provided help during the research

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List funding sources in this standard way to facilitate compliance to funder's requirements.

If no funding has been provided for the research, please include the following sentence: This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

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## SECTION A: INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 ORIENTATION

Divorce is a common modern phenomenon and children all over the world are involved in divorce proceedings. Approximately 45 % of all marriages in America will end in divorce (Brown & Lin, 2007:731). Baker (2006:2) explains that close to 40% of all children will experience the divorce of their parents. In South Africa the situation is not much better. According to the Department of Justice's annual report, a 28% increase in divorce matters was reported for the period of 2012/2013. For the period of 2012, 39573 divorces were reported and in 2013, 50 517. The divorce rate stood at 61.2% in 2014 (Preller, 2015). These statistics showed that the divorce rate is inclining and that more children are affected by divorce.

A significant number of these divorces will result in disputes that are resolved through litigation. High conflict divorce is when the parties display mutual verbal and/or non-verbal aggression-, litigation- and care- and contact disputes (Besette, 2008:23; Bosch-Brits, 2014:2). Rand (1997:5) describes high conflict divorce as follows: "high conflict divorce is characterized by intense and/or protracted post separation conflict and hostility between the parents which may be expressed overtly through on-going litigation, verbal and physical aggression and tactics of sabotage and deception".

Research has shown that in divorces with high levels of conflict, children often get caught in the middle of their parents' enduring battles (Besette, 2008:2). One distinct form of parental conflict that can sometimes emerge under high conflict situations has been termed parental alienation (Besette, 2008:23; Ben Ami & Baker, 2012:169). Alienated children are often prevented from or encouraged not to have contact with their non-residential parent (Besette, 2008:2). Bone (2011:1) confirms this and according to him, in some high conflict divorce proceedings parental alienation can manifest following parents' divorce or separation. The psychologist Richard Gardner who introduced the concept of parental alienation, in Moné and Biringen (2012:157), asserts that as many as 90% of disputed care and contact cases show signs of parental alienation. Kelly and Johnson (Baker, 2010:17) state it is a given that some parents engage in behaviours where they try and sometimes succeed, at damaging the child's relationship with the other parent. Literature indicates (Brand et al., 2004: 259; Luftman et al., 2005:334-342) that parental alienation is one of the areas of consideration when assessing the best interest of the child during care and contact investigations and decision making.

In South Africa, courts refer child care and contact disputes to the family advocate: a legal person employed by the Department of Justice and Constitutional Development. In South Africa the best interest of the child must be served before a divorce decree is granted (Kruger, 2004:296). Preller (2013:53) states: "The purpose of the family advocate is to promote and

protect the best interest of minor or dependent children in parental responsibilities and rights disputes". The family advocate consists of lawyers (family advocates) and social workers (family counsellors) that operate in multi-disciplinary teams.

The researcher is employed as a family counsellor at the Office of the Family Advocate. Working with divorcing parents, the researcher has experienced that the parents' feud often leads to one parent carrying out campaigns to disqualify the other parent. Baker (2007:16) indicates parental alienation as part of forensic social work and can be considered a form of emotional abuse, because the strategies the alienating parent uses to effectively alienate a child are emotionally abusive. For example, alienating parents verbally assault, isolate, corrupt, reject, terrorize, ignore and over pressurize the children in order to alienate them. Baker says in this regard that separating a child from a parent also constitutes emotional abuse. The process of forensic social work is conducted during care and contact investigations for the court, by applying scientific knowledge to legal investigations. A child care and contact evaluation, and the expert testimony that flows from it, is based upon scientific knowledge and upon methods and procedures derived from the scientific method (Gould & Bell, 2000:21).

## **1.2 PARENTAL ALIENATION**

A considerable body of research indicates that parental alienation is a reality. According to Baker (2006:63) it happens when one parent deliberately turns a child against the other parent to destroy the relationship between the child and the other parent, primarily in the context of child care and contact disputes. Baker and Darnall (2006:98) define parental alienation as "any constellation of behaviours, whether conscious or unconscious that could evoke a disturbance in the relationship between a child and the other parent". According to Godbout and Parent (2012:35) there is no universally accepted definition of parental alienation, but several researchers describe parental alienation as an alliance between a parent and a child that serves to isolate the second parent. This phenomenon typically occurs in post separation conflict situations. Bernet, et al. (2010:77) describes parental alienation as a mental condition in which a child, usually one whose parents are engaged in high conflict divorce, allies himself or herself strongly with one parent (the preferred parent) and rejects a relationship with the other parent (the alienated parent), without legitimate justifications.

Baker and Darnall in Besette (2008:95) identify a range of 66 different behaviours or actions used by alienating parents and therefore no single act constitutes parental alienation. Behaviours identified as alienating behaviour are, restricting the other parent's access to information about the child, refusing telephonic contact or visitation with the other parent, criticizing the other parent in front of the child, destroying pictures of the other parent or even false sexual abuse accusations against the alienated parent (Baker & Darnall, 2006: 109 -111).

In practice it is not always clear what the difference is between parental alienation and parental alienation syndrome. Therefore the following clarification:

### **1.2.1 PARENTAL ALIENATION SYNDROME (PAS)**

Parental alienation syndrome (PAS) refers to one possible outcome of experiencing parental alienation. The difference between parental alienation and parental alienation syndrome (PAS) is that parental alienation is a more general term whereas parental alienation syndrome (PAS) is a very specific subtype of parental alienation (Gardner, 2002:98; Rueda, 2004:392). Parental alienation is a result of a combination of parental programming and the child's own contribution to the alienation. When a child has been successfully indoctrinated and controlled by an alienating parent, it results in unwarranted fear, hatred and rejection of the targeted parent (Ben-Ami & Baker, 2012: 170).

To expose the detrimental effects children can experience as a result of alienating behaviour by a parent, Richard Gardner calls the phenomenon parental alienation syndrome (PAS) (Moné & Biringen, 2012:158). Parental alienation syndrome (PAS) is a serious mental condition, but is not an official diagnosis or even mentioned in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (Bernet, 2008:349; Bernet et al., 2010:79).

### **1.3 PROBLEM STATEMENT / RESEARCH QUESTION**

Bekker et al. (2004:31) and Bernet et al. (2010:76) state that parental alienation is an important phenomenon that mental health professionals, lawyers and judges should know about and that there is a need for knowledge regarding parental alienation.

Judges, lawyers and mental health professionals struggle to clarify concepts and definitions with regard to parental alienation. These professionals are eager to learn about parental alienation and to assist in a way that poses the least risk for the children (Baker, 2006:12; Bernet, 2008:350; Fidler & Bala, 2010:6-7).

By gaining knowledge about parental alienation, social workers can become aware of the impact of parental alienation on the best interest of the child and that certain behaviour by one parent towards the child and the other parent is alienation. With early acknowledgement they might be able to intervene and many cases may be dealt with in a way that minimizes the harm to children in high conflict separations (Bala et al., 2007:82). Common false beliefs about parental alienation may lead therapists and lawyers to give bad advice to their clients. It may also lead to evaluators giving inadequate recommendations to courts, and judges may reach injudicious decisions (Warshak, 2015:1).

## 1.4 RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY

Parental alienation is a complex situation and presents significant challenges in family courts, dominating the discourse in many family courts (Ellis, 2005:415; Fidler & Bala, 2010:6; Gardner, 2002: 94; Meier, 2009:233). Parental alienation has become a fashionable legal strategy in numerous divorce cases and according to child custody evaluators, attorneys and judges, child care and contact evaluators overlook or minimize this phenomenon (Bow et al., 2009:141). This holds consequences for the family (Bekker et al., 2004:31). Therefore Bala et al. (2007:79) state that it is highly desirable to have an early detection and assessment of parental alienation before attitudes harden and patterns are set.

According to Meier (2009:233) there is heightened public and professional awareness due to growing experience, frustration and failures to intervene effectively with regard to parental alienation. Bekker et al. (2004:31) state that there is a need for knowledge in South-African courts and by professional people regarding parental alienation. Bernet et al. (2010:76) state in this regard that parental alienation is an important phenomenon that mental health professionals should know about and thoroughly understand, especially those who work with children and divorced adults. Court officials and other role-players involved with divorce proceedings, lack sufficient knowledge to make conclusions regarding parental alienation (Churr, 2015:380).

A survey of the research literature on parental alienation indicates that the phenomenon of parental alienation and its related characteristics has been described in literature for over 20 years (Ellis, 2005:416). There is widespread acceptance as well as heated debate regarding the validity of this phenomenon. There is controversy among mental health and family law professionals concerned with the welfare of the children of divorce regarding the concepts parental alienation and parental alienation syndrome (Garber, 2004:50). The majority of books and articles on parental alienation and parental alienation syndrome (PAS) are theoretical, descriptive or proscriptive in describing alienating behaviour (Baker & Darnel, 2008:97; Rand 1997:13). As parental alienation and parental alienation syndrome (PAS) are relatively new constructs, scientific investigations into this phenomenon have been limited (Ben Ami & Baker, 2012:169). The survey of the research literature further indicates that a rapid literature review on parental alienation has not been done.

For the purpose of this study, the researcher will define parental alienation as when one parent undermines the relationship between the child and the other parent, prevents contact with, or influences the child negatively against the other parent without profound reasons.

The question is therefore: What is the best evidence available regarding (i) how parental alienation is experienced by different family members, and (ii) what possible effect the experience of parental alienation has on families.

## **1.5 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Although there are different theories such as the psychodynamic, learning and systems theories, the focus for purposes of this study will be on the Family Systems Theory. The Family Systems Theory attempts to understand the individual as a system of interacting elements. Parental alienation will be examined as a problem that reflects difficulties associated with the family system as a whole, rather than as a disorder diagnosed in the child (Godbout & Present, 2012:35; Warshak, 2015:2).

By means of the Family Systems Theory the researcher looks from a holistic view at parental alienation, since parental alienation stems from a relational dynamic and needs to be viewed from a family system perspective (Moné et al., 2011:644). In order to fully understand a parent's experience when he/she is denied contact with his/her children, or the child's experience when alienated by a parent from another parent, a systemic perspective will be adopted. The child and its family environment are explored and the concept of person-in-environment is brought back into perspective (Robbins et al., 1998:59). With the Systems Theory the researcher can evaluate the impact of the different systems on the child in divorce proceedings. A Family Systems perspective essentially focuses on what happens in the communication patterns of a couple in divorce proceedings as well as in the communication patterns of the parent and child (Besette, 2008:48).

## **1.6 AIM**

The aim of the study was to explore the best evidence available regarding (i) how parental alienation is experienced by different family members and the (ii) possible effect the experience of parental alienation has on families.

## **1.7 OBJECTIVES**

The objectives of the study were

- To synthesize available evidence on how parental alienation is experienced by families.
- To synthesize available evidence on the possible effect parental alienation has on families.

## **1.8 METHODOLOGY**

The researcher conducted a rapid review. According to Bearman et al. (2012:627) a Systematic Review is "a literature review that uses a specific methodology to produce a synthesis of available evidence in answer to a focused research question". The research was done with a deductive approach. Botma et al. (2010:56) explains that following a deductive approach

entails that the researcher embarks upon research with a clear conceptual framework in mind: this may model a theory of typology.

A systematic review aims to collect, examine and report the findings of all relevant individual studies and research articles on parental alienation and parental alienation syndrome, thereby making available evidence more accessible to decision makers. When appropriate, combining the results of several individual studies gives a clearer picture of the current knowledge regarding empirical issues than one study only. According to MRes and Kleijnen (2012:397-399) and Tricco et al. (2015: 224) there was a need in health research for guidance and guidelines for reviews that are able to answer the stipulated research question rapidly, efficiently, competently and satisfactorily. The authors come to the conclusion that "...there is no final definition of what a rapid review is and how exactly the methodology of a rapid review differs from a full systematic review." Although there is still no formal definition for a rapid review they used the following working definition, "a rapid review is a type of knowledge synthesis in which components of the systematic review process are simplified or omitted to produce information in a short period of time".

According to MRes and Kleijnen (2012:397) "...there is no agreed and tested methodology and it is unclear how rapid reviews differ from systematic reviews." In their results they came to the conclusion that there was a significant positive correlation between the number of recommended review methodologies utilised and length of time taken in months. Therefore, for the aim of this study, the design of a systematic review was used.

A systematic review adheres to a strict scientific design and a logical process must be followed. (Stewart, 2014:583). This systematic review process is generally done by at least two reviewers to establish inter-rater reliability (Uman, 2011:58). It involves a number of elements such as:

### **1.8.1 Search for literature and defining the Research Question**

To ensure that a review question is relevant and focused, Crisp (2015:287) and Stewart (2014:583) recommend that it is important to embark upon a broad search of information that is currently available.

The first step in a search strategy is to identify relevant bibliographic databases and search terms. Searches included several relevant electronic databases. Uman's (2011:58) proposed techniques to find additional studies, including hand searching key journals and checking article reference lists, were used. The aim of this step was to identify literature (published and unpublished).

### **1.8.2 Define the inclusion and exclusion criteria**

According to Crisp (2015:287), explicit inclusion and exclusion criteria constrained search strategies. By breaking down the review question into the Cochrane acronym PICO (or PICOC) which stands for participants, intervention, comparison, outcomes (and context) ensured that all key components prior to starting the review were considered (Crisp, 2015: 287; Uman, 2011:58; University of York, 2008:13). However, Crisp (2015:287) and University of York (2008:13) stated that it is acknowledged that some of the PICOS elements may not be relevant in some reviews as not all studies involve comparison groups or interventions.

The publication status and language restrictions for inclusion of studies in the review were also determined at this stage. The inclusion criteria captured all studies of interest, but were practical to apply, because if they were too detailed, screening could have become overly complicated and time consuming (University of York, 2008:10). Stewart (2014:583) suggests that it is possible to do 'mini' systematic reviews often known as rapid evidence assessments. These reviews tend to be less ambitious in scope with a narrower topic focus. Steps were taken to ensure that precision was maintained, although the time frame was limited.

### **1.8.3 Develop the search strategy and locate relevant studies**

In the development of a search strategy, the majority of bibliographic databases enabled the researcher to be more precise and to use more advanced and complex searches.

### **1.8.4 Select eligible studies**

The study selection was done in two stages. First the titles and abstracts of studies identified were screened against the inclusion criteria to identify potentially relevant papers. The full papers of which titles and abstracts may be relevant were then obtained in full text.

### **1.8.5 Extract data from eligible studies**

In this step, the full-text papers were examined by two reviewers to identify whether a study fit the inclusion and exclusion criteria and excluded ones that didn't fit the criteria. An example of a data extraction form from Uman (2015:291) was adapted and used for the extraction of relevant data from each study. The use of this extraction form assisted the researcher to organize information extracted from each study.

### 1.8.6 Assess the quality of the studies through critical appraisal

After the identification all relevant studies for inclusion in the review, these studies were critically appraised for methodological quality. Each full-text paper included was critically appraised for methodological quality. The quality assessment of the articles was assessed using an instrument obtained from Davids & Roman (2014:233) and altered for use in the research.

### 1.8.7 Analyse and interpret the results

At this stage in the review process, the reviewer decided on the basis of heterogeneity assessment, whether non-significant findings were accommodated and if pooling of studies should be perused. The type of evidence synthesis was chosen to fit the type(s) of data within the review

### 1.8.8 Writing up, editing and disseminating the findings

The last step in the review was to summarize the findings and report on the rapid review. Boland et al. (2014:156) explains that when the reviewer writes up the research, it has to be clear about the decisions that have been made as well as how these decisions have impacted the conclusions stated.

## 1.9 Criteria for considering studies for this review

For the purpose of this review, the researcher used the relevant PICOS elements:

Population	The included population should be relevant to the population to which the review findings will be applied. Inclusion criteria should be defined in terms of the study of interest (University of York, 2008:8)	Alienated children, Alienated parents, Alienating parents in divorce cases. Adults who have been alienated as children.
Interventions and comparators	What is being done for the participants, potential participants, or stakeholders? The nature of the interventions explored in the review should be carefully	Not applicable

	defined. The same applies for the comparators.	
Outcomes	A review should explore a clearly defined set of relevant outcomes.	Articles included related to the phenomenon: “parental alienation”.
Study design	Types of studies included in the review may include a range of study designs to address the question of the review. (University of York, 2008:9)	As this review incorporates participants’ experience of parental alienation, qualitative and quantitative studies were included. Observational quasi-experimental studies, surveys

**1.10 Inclusion criteria and exclusion criteria**

- A rapid systematic review has a narrower regional or topic focus and a pragmatic decision to achieve the review (Stewart, 2014:583) In the light of the tight timeframe, only articles published in English and Afrikaans were included in this study. Non English language papers were excluded from the study, because the reviewers can only comprehend English and Afrikaans. Original, peer-reviewed articles from 1 January 1985 until February 2016 were included in this study. Abrami et al. (2010:371) explained that the method for brief reviews uses a strict inclusion criteria, reviewing only a sample of evidence. The researcher included peer reviewed articles to ensure that only high quality research articles are included. The alienation phenomenon was described as early as 1976 by Wallerstein and Kelly (Bow et al., 2009:127), when they suggested that children can become important allies when parties are in dispute regarding the care and contact of the children during divorce proceedings. Richard Garden defined the phenomenon as parental alienation syndrome (PAS) in 1985, when he indicated that children themselves begin to actively participate in the alienation campaign (Viljoen & Van Rensburg, 2014:253). Studies that include a description of identified implications of parental alienation on families; as well as
- studies that include a description of the effect of parental alienation on the parent-child relationship in divorce cases, and
- conference proceedings were included if a full text or extractable summary could be located.

For the purpose of this rapid review:

- Gray literature was not considered for the study and books, book chapters, reviews, editorials, reports, dissertations and other similar publications were excluded.

The time and cost restraints of the proposed study limited the scope of the study and a rapid review was a more suitable way to answer the research question.

### **1.11 Search methods for the identification of studies:**

The initial selection criteria were broad to ensure that as many studies as possible were obtained according to their relativity towards this study. Studies that were irrelevant were excluded in the early stages of the search (for example, on the basis of titles and abstracts presented in electronic catalogues).

#### **1.11.1 Electronic searches**

The researcher did several scoping searches. Key words were identified for the search and these key words were used in searching electronic bibliographic databases. The search terms that produced the most articles were:

#### **1.11.2 Search strategy**

("alienated parent" OR "parent\* alienation" OR "parent\* alienation syndrome")  
AND (experience OR subjective experience OR impact OR effect)

#### **1.11.3 Results for the search**

Total number of articles obtained (n - 1034)

Years included: 1985 – 2016.

Articles in English (n =707)

Articles in Afrikaans (n = 1)

Articles with full text available in English and Afrikaans at North West Library (n = 763)

Databases: Soc Index (n=174); MasterFilePremier (n=43); Expanded Academic ASAP (n=30); Business Source Premier (n=24); PsycholInfo (n = 12); Master File Premier (n=56); CINAHL (n=42); Medline (n=2); Business source Premier (n=15); Science Direct (n=15), Info TracLegalTrac (n=14); Literary Reference Centre (n=12) ERIC (n=12); SAePublications (n=11); SciELO (n=5) Communication and Mass Media Complete (n=4); Social Science Citation Index (n=3); SPORT Discuss (n=2); NWU-IR (n=2); Scopus (n=2); Opposing viewpoints in Content n=2); EBook Collections (n=2); British library Document supply (n=2); Centre Inside Serials and Conference Proceedings (n=2); ERIC (n=1); HTLA Retigan Database with ATLASerials (n=1);

HeinOnline (n =1); SavePub (n=1); Business Insights:Essentials (n=1); Literature Recource Centre (n=1); ScienceCitationIndex (n=1).

#### **1.11.4 Searching other resources**

The reviewer worked through the reference lists of all eligible studies included in the review in order to obtain relevant articles that might have been missed through the electronic searches.

#### **1.12 Reporting study selection**

During the research the researcher made use of a flow chart showing the number of studies remaining at each stage.

University of New York (2009:25) stated that decisions to exclude studies may be reached at the title, the abstract, or at the full paper stage.

#### **1.13 Quality assessment of articles**

The researcher and the study leader reviewed the selected full text studies according to standardized criteria to decide whether each study had a sound scientific base and whether it had been properly designed and appropriately executed. Criteria were based on the criteria provided by an instrument, "Methodological Quality Appraisal Tool" adapted from Davids and Roman (2014:233).

#### **1.14 Data extraction, synthesis and management**

To obtain the necessary information about a study and findings from the included study, data needs to be extracted from the study. Data extraction requirements must be formulated around the review question (University of New York, 2009:28), therefore the researcher extracted data by means of a data extraction form. (Annexure "1")

#### **1.15 Ethical requirements**

The estimated ethical risk level of the proposed study was identified as low. Strydom (2011:114) defines ethics as a set of moral principles which is suggested by an individual or group and it is widely accepted and offers rules and behavioural expectations about the most correct conduct towards experimental subjects and respondents, employers, sponsors, other researchers, assistants and students. Ethics relate to the moral standards that should be upheld by the researcher in all stages of the research.

Ethical issues the researcher considered during the preparation and publishing of this review are:

- According to Wager and Wiffen (2011:131) the researcher must ensure that contributors to the research are properly acknowledged. Both reviewers in the study agreed, prior to the start of the project, on the allocation of authorship.
- Plagiarism was avoided at all times. People's research that was used in the review, was described in the researcher's own words, with appropriate citations.
- The proposal of the study went through HREC of the Faculty of Health and got an Ethics number: NWU-00013-16-S1
- Transparency according to Wager and Wiffen (2011:133) is an important ethical issue during rapid review, therefore the researcher declares any potential conflict of interest. In this case, there was no conflict of interest. Transparency was also ensured through accurate data extraction.
- The decision on what data to include was agreed upon by both researchers. The inclusion of unethical studies was avoided as far as possible. The methodology of each study included in the research was evaluated for ethical irregularities. The inclusion of only peer reviewed articles in the study limited the inclusion of unethical studies.

### **1.16 Limitations of the study**

The following limitations were identified.

Only electronic databases subscribed to by the North-west University were used. Other databases which are not subscribed to by the library of the North-West University could not be searched and therefore this can be considered a limitation. An attempt to overcome the limitation was made by hand search of key journals and references of articles.

Due to the time limit and cost restraints of the study, only articles with a full text in Afrikaans and English were considered and it is possible that relevant studies were missed.

Theses, dissertations and mini dissertations were excluded which can be considered as a limitation as it is possible that relevant studies were missed.

The rapid review was not done in a team and a co-reviewer was only used at certain stages of the search and for the critical appraisal. However, the review was done under the supervision of an experienced researcher and supervisor.

### **1.17 PROVISIONAL CHAPTER DIVISION**

**Section A : Introduction and orientation to study**

**Section B : Literature Review**

**Section C** : Journal article to be sent to *Aggression and violent behaviour*

**Section D** : Final Conclusions, limitations and recommendation  
and bibliography

**Section E** : Addendums

### 1.18 ANNEXURE 1: DATA EXTRACTION FORM

<u>General Information:</u>			
Researcher performing data extraction			
Date of data extraction			
Identification features of the study			
Record number			
Author			
Article title			
Type of publication			
Country of origin			
<u>Study characteristics</u>			
Aim/objective of the study			
Study design			
Recruitment procedures			
Participants			
Sample size			
<u>Outcome date/results</u>			
Unit of Analysis/Outcome			
Statistical techniques used			
Type of analysis used in study			
Result of study analysis			

(themes and findings)			
Additional outcomes			
Note fields			

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## **SECTION B: LITERATURE STUDY**

A Literature study on parental alienation was done. The aim of a literature study is to obtain an understanding of the identified research problem, as well as to clearly describe the problem (Fouché & Schurink, 2011:34).

The phenomenon of parental alienation and its related characteristics has been described in literature for over 20 years (Ellis, 2005:416).

Literature regarding parental alienation is descriptive, theoretical, and empirical research is limited. Although some empirical studies have been reported, research on the parental alienation phenomenon is still in its early stages (Bow et al., 2009:128; Baker & Darnall, 2006:98).

### **2.1 Definitions of main concepts**

#### **2.1.1 Parental alienation**

Bernett (2010:147) defines parental alienation as a mental condition in which a child, usually one whose parents are involved in a high conflict divorce, allies himself or herself with one parent (usually the preferred parent) and rejects a relationship with the other parent (the alienated parent) without legitimate justification.

Parental alienation occurs especially in high conflict divorce, where the parents dispute the primary residency and care of the children (Harris, 2014: 2).

#### **2.1.2 High conflict divorce**

High conflict divorce is described by Rand (1997:5) as when intense and/or lengthened post separation conflict and hostility occur between parents. This may lead to ongoing litigation, verbal and physical aggression as well as tactics of sabotage and deception.

A compendium of research revealed the impact of high conflict divorce on the child and found that the higher the conflict that occurs in the divorce, the more tormenting the consequences are for the child (Harris, 2014:2).

### **2.1.3 Alienating parent**

In this research the alienating parent is the parent who instigates parental alienation and who disturbs the contact and relationship between a child and the target parent, without legitimate reasons (Bennett, 2010:147).

### **2.1.4 Targeted/ Alienated parent**

The alienated parent is the parent whose contact and relationship with the child is disturbed and undermined by the alienating parent (Bennett, 2010:147).

### **2.1.5 The alienated child**

The alienated child is defined as one who expresses negative feelings and beliefs toward a parent. These expressions are made freely and persistently and are significantly disproportionate to the child's actual experiences with that parent. The feelings and beliefs may include anger, hatred, rejection and/or fear of a parent (Kelly & Johnson, 2001:251).

### **2.1.6 Richard Gardner and parental alienation syndrome (PAS)**

Richard Gardner, a psychiatrist in the early 80's, affiliated with Columbo Medical School, gathered data from his counselling of divorcing parents (Meier, 2009:2). He postulated that 90% of children in custody litigation suffer from a disorder he called parental alienation syndrome (PAS). Gardner claimed that when a child rejected a parent, it was commonly based on false abuse allegations by either the mother or the child (Meier, 2009:2).

Gardner (2002:95) defined parental alienation syndrome (PAS) as: " a childhood disorder that arises almost exclusively in the context of child-custody disputes. Its primary manifestation is the child's campaign of denigration against a parent, a campaign that has no justification. It results from the combination of a programming (brainwashing) parent's indoctrinations and the child's own contributions to the vilification of the target parent"

Gardner focused on the child's behaviour when he has been successfully alienated to define the syndrome (Baker & Darnall, 2007:56). He identified eight behaviours of parental alienation syndrome (PAS), namely

- i. A campaign of denigration against the targeted parent. This parent was once loved by the child and suddenly became hated and feared.
- ii. Weak, frivolous and absurd rationalizations for the denigration. The reason for the child's hatred or fear is not of the severity that would lead to hate or fear.

- iii. Lack of ambivalence towards both parents. The child is unable to see the bad in the alienating parent, or the good in the alienated parent.
- iv. The “ independent- thinker” phenomenon. This is when the child claims that the rejection of the one parent is his or her own decision and not that of the alienating parent.
- v. Reflexive support for the alienating parent in the parental conflict. The targeted parent’s view is not considered by the child.
- vi. Absence of guilt over custody and/or exploiting of the alienated parent. The alienated child will have no unease about how the rejected parent feels and displays no gratitude for gifts or financial support provided by the targeted parent.
- vii. Presence of borrowed scenarios. Some accusations against the alienated parent encompass phrases and ideas borrowed from the alienating parent. Sometimes words are used by the child that he or she does not even understand.

Spread of the animosity to the extended family of the alienated parent (Bond, 2008:46).

The parental alienation can be mild, moderate or severe (Gardner, 2004:83).

Mild: The alienation is insignificant and the children mostly cooperate during the visit of the other parent, but occasionally they criticize the parent and are resentful towards the parent (Gardner, 2004:83).

Moderate: In moderate alienation the alienation is more concentrated and the child behaves more disruptive and disrespectful towards the targeted parent. At the time of the visit there are transitional difficulties (Gardner, 2004:83).

Severe: Due to the child’s antagonism towards the alienated parent, visitation becomes impossible. The child constructs serious accusations (abuse, violence) against the parent, but these accusations have no substance. The eight characteristic behaviours of parental alienation are present and the children refuse to visit the parent (Gardner, 2004:83).

### **2.1.7 Critique of Gardner’s parental alienation syndrome (PAS)**

Critique of Gardner’s parental alienation syndrome (PAS) is that it lacks scientific foundation (Bruch, 2001:535). Warshak in Bond (2008:41) stated that parental alienation syndrome (PAS) has not been subjected to the kind of meticulous scientific research upon which social scientists rely, and it has not been included in the official manual of diagnoses. Other authors that criticized Gardner, are Kelly and Johnson who say that Gardner’s parental alienation syndrome (PAS) focuses entirely on the alienating parent as the initiator of the alienation process, and

Bruch who claimed that parental alienation syndrome (PAS) is biased against women (Bow et al., 2009:129).

Although there are critiques against Gardner's parental alienation syndrome (PAS), it has long been recognized that children can become alienated from a parent as a result of the influence of the other parent (Baker & Darnall, 2007:58; Rand, 2011:48).

### **2.1.8 Parental alienation**

Bond (2008:42) indicated that Johnson and Kelly and Darnell prefer the term parental alienation instead of parental alienation syndrome (PAS). They make the distinction that parental alienation focuses on the parents' behaviour, while parental alienation syndrome (PAS) focuses on the child's behaviour. According to them, parental alienation is any group of behaviours (conscious or unconscious) that might evoke trouble in the relationship between the child and the other parent.

Kelly and Johnson defined alienation dynamics as a multi-dimensional process rather than a symptom (Bow et al., 2009:130). They defined a scale for a child's relationship with a parent after separation and divorce with at the one end the child having a positive relationship with the parent and at the negative end the child rejecting the parent and showing no ambivalence about the rejection. Such a child's view of the parent is one-sided and grotesquely negative (Bow et al., 2009:130).

During the alienating process the alienating parent demonstrates some common beliefs: The targeted parent has no value in the child's life, the parent is dangerous (may manifest in false beliefs of abuse) and the targeted parent never loved the child and currently does not love or care for the child (Bow et al., 2009:130).

The alienated parent's behaviour may contribute to the alienation process. Behaviour that can fuel the alienation includes passivity, withdrawal, counter rejection of the child, harsh and rigid parenting, a critical and demanding attitude and diminished empathy for the child (Bow et al., 2009: 130).

Kelly and Johnson constituted that certain vulnerabilities in the child such as age, cognitive capacity, personality and temperament characteristics, sense of abandonment and the lack of external support, may add to the alienating process (Bow et al, 2009: 131).

### **2.1.9 Effect of parental alienation on children**

Parental alienation is a form of emotional abuse as it may alienate a child from a loving parent for his entire life and it may cause psychiatric disturbances in the child (Gardner, 2002:99; Warshak, 2010:51).

Symptoms of parental alienation are that the child rejects or refuses contact with the rejected parent. Over time, the good memories of that parent are forgotten and in the older child's mind the alienated parent is virtually forgotten, or remembered as a bad experience (Lowenstein, 2015:514). The absent parent's looks are not even remembered by the child and in some cases the child's surname has been changed to the favoured parent's new partner's surname (Lowenstein, 2015:514).

In a study by Baker in 20015, with adults who have been alienated, she reported episodes of depression in alienated children, caused by the impression that the child is not loved, low self-esteem and self-hatred. Some respondents in her study felt heartache because they were robbed of a relationship with a loving parent (Hands & Warshak, 2011:433).

Wallerstein found that children are affected for years to come and that they experience rage because they realize that they were used as weapons and they also feel guilty towards the rejected parent for not considering their views (Hands & Warshak, 2011:433).

Lowenstein (2013:664) reported that studies carried out to determine the long-term effects of parental alienation, found that children exposed to alienating behaviour suffer from disciplinary problems at school. They lack the ability to trust, enjoy intimacy in later life and may have serious mental health issues. Through the alienating process, hostile, hateful behaviour are modelled to alienated children and they learn that it is acceptable in a relationship. They are under the impression that deceitfulness and manipulation are normal parts of a relationship and they will therefore practice such tactics themselves. This eventually leads to them being disliked later in their lives.

### **2.1.10 Effect of parental alienation on the alienated parent**

Alienated parents experience alienating circumstances as having serious emotional and financial consequences in their lives (Vassiliou & Cartwright, 2001:186).

It is very difficult for the alienated parent to work against the process of alienation and Vassiliou and Cartwright (2001:187) discovered in their research with alienated parents that they lacked satisfaction with the services rendered by both legal and mental health professionals. The complaints regarding the services by mental health professional were that they lacked

knowledge on parental alienation and that they failed to gather pertinent information in this regard prior to drawing conclusions (Vassiliou & Cartwright, 2001: 188).

The alienated parent is sometimes further alienated from the child through coalitions that are formed around the alienating parent-child dyad. These coalitions may be well-meaning teachers, who assist the alienating parent to keep the child from having contact with the child. Friends and relatives of the alienating parent and child, who buy into the alienation, and even counsellors and psychologists, may contribute to alienating the child. Court delays further strengthen the alienation process (Lowenstein, 2013:661; Vassiliou & Cartwright, 2001: 188).

The alienated parent is not allowed to play any part in the upbringing of the child or to guide that child (Lowenstein, 2015:514). The parent, like the child, feels sad because they cannot spend time together and everyone loses in the situation (Lowenstein, 2013:661).

The parent suffers tremendously from the unjust rejection. The parent must make the decision whether to “give up” the child or to continue with litigation and other strategies to reverse the alienation. If the parent decides to withdraw from the child, he or she must at the same time “keep the door open” for the alienated child, should the child at some stage make contact (Lowenstein, 2015:514).

#### **2.1.11 Effect of parental alienation on the alienating parent**

The alienating parent misses out on a normal relationship with the child. He or she stands the risk of the child’s future hostility if and when the child comes to understand the manipulation and abuse he or she had undergone (Warshak, 2010:53).

#### **2.1.12 Alienating strategies**

Alienating strategies may be subtle or obvious and conveys to the child that the other parent does not deserve the child’s love, respect and loyalty (Lowenstein, 2013:661).

Darnall defines parental alienation as “any constellation of behaviours, whether conscious or unconscious that could evoke a disturbance in the relationship between the child and the other parent” (Baker & Darnall, 2006:98).

In a study done by Baker and Darnall (2006:118) it was found that no single act indicates parental alienation and the number and type of alienating behaviours differ. Parental alienation is therefore more a goal or an outcome than a specific set of behaviours from the alienating parent. Out of the literature available the following alienation strategies were identified by the highest percentage of alienated parents:

(i) Badmouthing

Badmouthing includes telling the child that the targeted parent is a bad person, that the parent is dangerous or a sick person or when the alienating parent confides in the child regarding court cases, child support conflicts, the marital relationship or negative remarks about the extended family of the targeted parent (Baker & Darnall, 2006:107). The child is brainwashed to think that the other parent is untrustworthy, unloving, lacking in care for the child and even cruel (Lowenstein, 2015:514).

(ii) Interfering with parenting time/Visitation and Contact

Strategies for interfering with parenting time are when the alienating parent moves away or hides the child from the other parent, or does not follow through on planned visits. The alienating parent arranges fun activities during planned visits to lure the children away from the targeted parent. The child then has to choose between spending time with the targeted parent or reject the alienating parent's fun activity (Baker and Darnall, 2006:109).

Another strategy is when the parent allows the child to decide whether or not to visit, even if a court order prescribes that the child must not be in the position to make the decision (Baker & Darnall, 2006:109).

(iii) Limiting/interfering with mail and phone contact

The alienating parent may intercept calls, email and phone messages from the targeted parent to the child or eliminates phone and mail contact, by changing the phone number or only allows phone calls on the personal phone of the alienating parent. In some instances the child is not allowed to have a private conversation with the targeted parent as the alienation parent is always present during telephone calls (Baker & Darnall, 2006:110).

(iv) Limiting/Interfering with symbolic contact

This strategy is when the targeted parent's gifts to the child are either sent back or the alienating parent lets the gifts disappear. The targeted parent can be accused of buying the child's love or the past may be rewritten to the child in a distorted way. This includes telling the child that the father was guilty of abusive behaviour when the child was young or that the father was always absent. Other strategies are to not allow the child to talk about the targeted parent and/ or to destroy/ remove any photos of the targeted parent (Baker & Darnall, 2006:111).

(v) Interfering with Information

Targeted parents reported that the alienating parent interferes with information regarding the child, for example information from school, doctors and social activities (Baker & Darnall, 2006:110).

(vi) Emotional manipulation

Emotional manipulation occurs when the alienating parent manipulates the child to reject the targeted parent. Other forms of emotional manipulation are to make the child feel guilty about the relationship with the targeted parent and forcing the child to choose between the parents or express loyalty to the favoured parent. The alienating parent can withdraw love or gets angry if the child visits or displays positive behaviour towards the targeted parent (Baker & Darnall, 2006:113).

(vii) Unhealthy alliance

Unhealthy alliances are created by having the child spy on the targeted parent. This is done through secret telephone calls or messages between the alienating parent and the child when the child visits the targeted parent or when the child's dependency on the alienating parent is nurtured. (Baker & Darnall, 2006:114).

(viii) False accusations

An extreme form of parental alienation is when a child makes false allegations of abuse against the alienated parent. These allegations are consistent with either physical or sexual abuse or neglect (Lowenstein, 2013:663).

### **2.1.13 Diagnosing parental alienation**

Hands and Warshak (2011:432) and Lowenstein (2013:665) clearly state that when a parent-child relationship is damaged due to severe emotional torment or physical or sexual abuse by the alienated parent, the damaged relationship cannot be due to the influence of the other parent.

When true parental abuse and or neglect are present, the child's animosity may be justified and so the parental alienation syndrome explanation for the child's hostility is not applicable (Gardner, 2002:95).

Ellis (2008:57) describes estranged children as children who experience anxiety or resentment toward the targeted parent because of this parent's behaviour in the past, for example alcohol

abuse, domestic violence, emotional abuse or the parent's lack of contact due to geographical distance. There is a clearly identified reason for the child's resistance to visitation.

Ellis (2008:58) recommends that when conducting an evaluation for parental alienation the following questions must be answered:

1. Is there a readily identifiable reason for the alienation?
2. Do the allegations against the rejected parent appear false or/and highly exaggerated?
3. Is the child's rejection of the other parent severe, without acknowledgement of love, affection or positive feelings for that parent?

If the answer is "no" to the first question and "yes" to the second and third question, there is a high possibility of parental alienation (Ellis, 2008:58).

#### **2.1.14 Treatment of parental alienation**

The importance of diagnosing parental alienation, especially in custody evaluations of children, is emphasized by Baker (2005:44) and Lowenstein (2007:85).

Baker and Darnall (2007:58) state that it is important to distinguish between the three levels of alienation to determine the treatment and prognosis of alienation.

According to Lowenstein (2015:514) the effect of the alienation process is extremely difficult to reverse. It is essential for therapists and legal professionals dealing with parental alienation to realize that in parental alienation cases the child is satisfied with the status quo (Ellis & Boyan, 2010:225). The alienating behaviour is not a problem for the child, but a solution as the child does not have to worry about causing harm to the alienating parent, by being disloyal, or being rejected by the parent. The child is released from the choice to determine which information to share with which parent or to live through hostile transitions.

Gardner recommends custodial transfer in many cases of parental alienation, as a remedy for parental alienation syndrome (PAS). He recommends custodial transfer based on the child's degree of alienation, in association with the psychopathology and other paternal deficiencies of the alienating parent as well as the parenting capacity of the alienated parent (Rand, 2011:62). Gardner recommends custodial transfer of the alienated child in cases where severe pervasive psychopathic behaviour on the part of the alienating parent is present. It is also recommended in cases where the child is so intensely pressurized by the parent that the child has a breakdown and needs to be psychiatric hospitalized or/and if there is a pattern of refusal to comply with court orders and court ordered therapy and other pro social expectations (Rand,2011:62).

As Gardner realized that placing a severe alienated older child with a rejected and hated parent, would be difficult, he suggested the use of safe transitional accommodation while the relationship is restored (Rand, 2011:62).

If the effects of parental alienation on the child's relationship with the other parent, as well as the child's overall functioning and development are considered, it becomes essential that intervenors will act decisively to interrupt or prevent alienation while the child is relatively young (Rand, 2011:62).

According to Warshak (2010:49) four options to address parental alienation are followed by court and recommended in professional literature. These options are:

- (i) Award or maintain custody with the favoured parent, with court ordered psycho-therapy or case management (Warshak, 2010:50). This option is recommended when the alienating process is in the early stages and it is emphasized that both the parent and the child must cooperate in the reintegration therapy.

When alienated children reject court-ordered therapy and the alienating parent does not cooperate with the therapy that aims to restore the relationship, and may even sabotage the treatment, an element of compulsion has to accompany the court-mandated therapy. During therapy the child is then forced to have contact with the rejected parent, sometimes out of therapy and the amount of time the child spends with the alienated parent is gradually increased (Warshak, 2010:50). However, Warshak (2010:50) found that the more chronic and severe the child's alienation, the less desirable this option becomes.

- (ii) Award or maintain custody with the rejected parent, in some cases with court-ordered, or parent-initiated therapy. This option is called "structural intervention. The alienated child is placed in the temporary or permanent custody of the rejected parent. Some contact between the child and the alienating parent is allowed. The relationship between the child and the rejected parent is healed through court ordered therapy, or initiated by the rejected parent, or it is left to time to heal the relationship (Warshak, 2010:51). These options are recommended when it is determined that the child's alienation from the rejected parent is caused by the alienation parent's influence or that the child needs protection from physical or emotional abuse, or when the alienating parent sabotages the efforts to repair the relationship between the parent and the rejected parent (Warshak, 2010:51).

This remedy can be recommended when the court determines that the rejected parent is better able to provide an environment that is conducive to the child. Not all children will

adapt to these transfers in custody and this option fails if a child runs away from the rejected parent and is then left in the care of the favoured parent. This option is rejected by people who are of the opinion that children's strong desire to be with the favoured parent must not be ignored (Warshak, 2010:51).

An educational and experiential workshop was developed by Richard Warshak. The workshop was developed to assist severely alienated children to adjust to living with their rejected parent once the court ordered an interim or permanent change in custody. 23 children who participated in the workshop provided positive outcome data Fidler and Bala (2010:7).

- (iii) Place children away from the daily care of either parent. When this option is recommended the child is placed in the home of a third party, a boarding school, a therapeutic residential school or other suitable facility as a safe site where the child is gradually exposed to increasing contact with the parent. This option removes the child from the direct exposure to family conflict and allows the normal development of the child. Psychotherapy, when the child is away from the parents has greater success as a more balanced view of both parents is created. This is viewed as the least detrimental option for adolescents with poor functioning and with whom other interventions failed. Disadvantages of this option is that the child continues to have face-to – face contact with both parents and may not be spared alienation through other communication methods. Another disadvantage is the fact that boarding schools may be too expensive for most families to implement this option (Warshak, 2010:52).
- (iv) Accept the child's refusal of contact with the rejected parent. This option is only recommended as a last resort, when the court and the rejected parent have determined that no resolution is possible without doing greater damage. The rejected parent may realize that the other parent succeeded in sabotaging contact and treatment. The parent may lack sufficient finance for litigation or effective treatment, or is unwilling to force the child to undergo treatment or to invest time in litigation (Warshak, 2010:52).

This option is sometimes recommended by professionals who have attempted for years to resolve the alienation without success, or it may come early in the process when professionals recommend suspended contact between a child and rejected parent. These periods of no contact can either result in renewed contact or became the prelude to total estrangement (Warshak, 2010:52).

If a parent withdraws, the child and the alienating parent may interpret it as parental abandonment and the child's irrational beliefs about the rejected parent could be reinforced.

This may in future prevent the child from understanding the relationship with each parent and it could also result in the child receiving no help (Warshak, 2010:52).

Option four causes the rejected parent to suffer the loss of a child and the parent is not allowed to grieve and get closure on the loss as is the case with the death of a child (Warshak, 2010:52).

Lowenstein (2015:515) however suggests that the alienated parent must continue to seek contact. As a therapist working with alienated parents, he often dictates a letter on behalf of the parent to alienated children, who are now adults. The sadness of the alienated parent and the fact that the child is still loved, is emphasized in the letter. The child is assured of the continuing love of the parent, even if the child does not respond to the letter. A letter explaining to the child in a non-judgemental way, how the alienating unfolded, can in time assist the adult child to consider his rejection and eventually seek contact.

Another treatment option is explained by Ellis and Boyan (2010:226) when they recommend intervention with a parenting coordinator. During this intervention a neutral person, usually a mental health professional, is appointed to work with the high conflict family. It is an effective intervention only if it is backed by strong court orders. The coordinator will develop a common agenda for both parents, for example if the alienated parent's wish is for more contact, the other parent must support regular visits or face the loss of custody.

The reality is that court cases often proceed over years as several evaluations are made, numerous hearings are held, different kinds of family therapy may be ordered and several accusations by the alienating parent must be investigated to ensure that the child is safe (Ellis & Boyan, 2010:226).

Fidler and Bala (2010:7) are of the opinion that judges, lawyers and mental health professionals are eager to learn more about the phenomenon of parental alienation and that knowledge is essential to effectively assist families affected by parental alienation.

The researcher did a rapid review on parental alienation in divorce cases and Section C consists of an article that draws on a body of scientific literature that examines the effect of parental alienation on families.

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## SECTION C: RESEARCH ARTICLE

### PARENTAL ALIENATION IN DIVORCE CASES: A RAPID REVIEW

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#### ABSTRACT

In this study the rapid review method was used to explore evidence available regarding how parental alienation is experienced by different family members as well as the effect the experience of parental alienation has on families. The data from 12 articles, with a fair to good methodological quality was extracted and a summary of the studies was drafted. From the findings it is evident that parental alienation is a form of psychological maltreatment and that experiences of parental alienation relate negatively to the well-being of a person. An important finding is that traditional therapeutic processes do not work to address parental alienation. Education on parental alienation is recommended for psycho and legal professionals as well as for the public.

*Key words:* Parental alienation, divorce cases

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#### **3.1 Introduction**

Divorce is a common modern phenomenon and children all over the world are involved in divorce proceedings. Approximately 45 % of all marriages in America will end in divorce (Brown & Lin, 2007:731). Baker (2006:2) explains that close to 40% of all children will experience the divorce of their parents. In South Africa the situation is not much better. According to the Department of Justice's annual report, a 28% increase in divorce matters was reported in 2013. During 2012, 39573 divorces were reported and in 2013, 50 517. The divorce rate stood at 61.2% in 2014 (Preller, 2015). These statistics show that the divorce rate is inclining and that more children are affected by divorce.

A significant number of these divorces will result in disputes that are resolved through litigation. High conflict divorce is when the parties display mutual verbal and/or non-verbal aggression, litigation, and care and contact disputes (Besette, 2008:23; Bosch-Brits ,2014:2). Research has shown that in divorces with high levels of conflict, children often get caught in the middle of their parents' enduring battles (Besette, 2008:2). One distinct form of parental conflict that can sometimes emerge under high conflict situations has been termed parental alienation (Besette, 2008:23; Ben Ami & Baker, 2012:169).

A considerable body of research indicates that parental alienation is a reality. According to Baker (2006:63) it happens when one parent deliberately turns a child against the other parent to destroy the relationship between the child and the other parent, primarily in the context of child care and contact disputes. Baker and Darnall (2006:98) define parental alienation as “any constellation of behaviours, whether conscious or unconscious that could evoke a disturbance in the relationship between a child and the other parent”. According to Godbout and Parent (2012:35) there is no universally accepted definition of parental alienation, but several researchers describe parental alienation as an alliance between a parent and a child that serves to isolate the second parent. This phenomenon typically occurs in post separation conflict situations. Bernet et al. (2010:77) describes parental alienation as a mental condition in which a child, usually one whose parents are engaged in high conflict divorce, allies himself or herself strongly with one parent (the preferred parent) and rejects a relationship with the other parent (the alienated parent), without legitimate justifications.

The psychologist Richard Gardner who introduced the concept of parental alienation, in Moné and Biringen (2012:157), asserts that as many as 90% of disputed care and contact cases showed signs of parental alienation. Kelly and Johnson (Baker, 2010:17) state that it is a given that some parents engage in behaviours where they try and sometimes succeed, at damaging the child’s relationship with the other parent.

Baker (2007:16) indicates that parental alienation can be considered a form of emotional abuse, because the strategies the alienating parent uses to effectively alienate a child are emotionally abusive. For example, alienating parents verbally assault, isolate, corrupt, reject, terrorize, ignore and over pressurize the children in order to alienate them. Baker says in this regard that separating a child from a parent also constitutes emotional abuse.

Baker and Darnell in Besette (2010:95) identify a range of 66 different behaviours or actions used by alienating parents and therefore no single act constitutes parental alienation. Behaviours identified as alienating behaviour are, restricting the other parent access to information about the child, refusing telephonic contact or visitation with the other parent,

criticizing the other parent in front of the child or destroying pictures of the other parent (Schwartz, 2007:810).

For the purpose of this study, the researcher will define parental alienation as when one parent undermines the relationship between the child and the other parent, prevents contact with, or influences the child negatively against the other parent without profound reasons.

In practice it is not always clear what the difference is between parental alienation and parental alienation syndrome. Therefore the following clarification:

Gardner(2002:98) and Rueda (2004:392) stated that parental alienation syndrome (PAS) refers to one possible outcome of experiencing parental alienation. The difference between parental alienation and parental alienation syndrome (PAS) is that parental alienation is a more general term whereas parental alienation syndrome (PAS) is a very specific subtype of parental alienation. However Bernet et al.,(2010:78) explained that in some research and published literature the term parental alienation syndrome is used, but children who experience parental alienation are almost the same children who manifest with parental alienation syndrome.

Parental alienation is a result of a combination of parental programming and the child's own contribution to the alienation. When a child has been successfully indoctrinated and controlled by an alienating parent, it results in unwarranted fear, hatred and rejection of the targeted parent (Ben-Ami & Baker, 2012: 170). It can therefore be concluded that the term parental alienation describes both the behaviour of the alienating parent and the alienated child. For the reason that the term parental alienation syndrome's focus is on the behaviour of the child, the term parental alienation will be used in the study.

To expose the detrimental effects children can experience as a result of alienating behaviour by a parent, Richard Gardner calls the phenomenon parental alienation syndrome (PAS) (Moné & Biringen, 2012:158). Parental alienation syndrome (PAS) is a serious mental condition, but is not an official diagnosis or even mentioned in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (Bernet, 2008:349; Bernet et al., 2010:79).

Bekker et al. (2004:31) and Bernet et al. (2010:76) state that parental alienation is an important phenomenon that mental health professionals, lawyers and judges should know about and that there is a need for knowledge regarding parental alienation.

Judges, lawyers and mental health professionals struggle to clarify concepts and definitions with regard to parental alienation. These professionals are eager to learn about parent alienation and to assist in a way that poses the least risk for the children (Baker, 2006:12; Bernet, 2008:350; Fidler & Bala, 2010:6-7).

Bekker et al. (2004:31) state that there is a need for knowledge in South-African courts and by professional people regarding parental alienation, especially those who work with children and divorced adults. Court officials and other role-players involved with divorce proceedings lack sufficient knowledge to make conclusions regarding parental alienation (Churr, 2015:380).

The aim of this study was to review and synthesize available evidence regarding parental alienation. Although the phenomenon of parental alienation and its related characteristics has been described in literature for over 20 years (Ellis, 2005:416) no rapid review regarding parental alienation has been done. There is widespread acceptance as well as heated debate regarding the validity of this phenomenon. There is controversy among mental health and family law professionals concerned with the welfare of the children of divorce, on the concepts parental alienation and parental alienation syndrome (PAS) (Garber, 2004:50). The majority of books and articles on parental alienation and parental alienation syndrome (PAS) are theoretical, descriptive or proscriptive in describing alienating behaviour (Baker & Darnel, 2008:97; Rand, 1997:13). As parental alienation and parental alienation syndrome (PAS) are relatively new constructs, scientific investigations into these phenomena have been limited (Ben Ami & Baker, 2012:169). These studies provide available scientific evidence on parental alienation that can be used to inform social workers of the phenomena.

## **3.2 Method: Rapid Review**

### **3.2.1 Eligible criteria**

As the reviewer can only comprehend English and Afrikaans, the review was limited to English and Afrikaans language publications. The researcher considered articles if they were published in peer-reviewed journals.

For the purpose of the rapid review, studies were included if they were published between 01 January 1985 and 31 March 2016.

The reviewer included studies that incorporated a description of identified implications of parental alienation on families as well as studies that include a description of the effect of parental alienation on the parent-child relationship in divorce cases.

Due to the time frame and cost restraints of the proposed study, the scope of the study was limited to articles with full texts available at the North West Library. Books, book chapters, reviews, editorials, reports, dissertations and other similar publications were excluded.

### **3.2.2 Information sources and search process**

A search strategy that consisted of search words, databases and inclusive and exclusive criteria was formulated with the help of experts and a librarian.

Key words were identified for the search and these key words were used in searching electronic bibliographic databases. Different search terms were used to determine which search terms produced the most articles. The search terms that produced the most articles were:

("alienated parent" OR "parent\*alienation" OR "parent\* alienation syndrome") AND (experience OR subjective experience OR impact OR effect).

### 3.2.3 Study selection and data collection process

The titles and abstracts of the studies identified through the search were screened against the inclusion criteria to identify potential relevant papers. For the purpose of this rapid review, the population of interest were: alienated children, alienated parents, alienating parents in divorce cases and adults who have been alienated as children.

A comprehensive list of titles was retrieved by the researcher and the study leader and articles were initially included in relation to the inclusion/exclusion based on the title and abstract of the articles.

The full texts of these articles were obtained and the two reviewers did a more detailed analysis of the full text article in relation to the inclusion/exclusion criteria.

The reference lists of these articles were hand searched and relevant articles that were found were also included in the rapid review.

Information about and the findings from the included studies were extracted by means of a data extraction form.

### 3.2.4 Methodological quality analysis

The methodology quality for the 12 studies included in the Rapid Review was assessed using an instrument (Methodological Quality Appraisal Tool) obtained and amended from Davids & Roman (2014:233).

**Table 3.1: Methodological Quality Appraisal Tool**

1	Sampling method: Was it representative of the population intended in the study?	
A	Non-probability sampling ( including purposive, quota, convenience and snowball sampling	0
B	Probability sampling (including sample random, systematic, stratified, cluster, two stage and multi-stage sampling)	1

2.	Was a response rate mentioned within the study? ( <i>Respond no if response rate is below 60</i> )	
A	No	0
B	Yes	1
3	Was the measurement tool used valid and reliable?	
A	No	0
B	Yes	1

4	Was it a primary or secondary data source?	
A	Primary data source	1
B	Secondary data source	0
5	Was there information generated regarding the effect of parental alienation on families?	
A	No	0
B	Yes	1
6	Was there information generated on how parental alienation is experienced by families?	
A	No	0
B	Yes	1

Scoring: Total score divided by total number of items multiplied by 100

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**Methodological Appraisal Score**

***Bad***

***Satisfactory***

***Good***

0 - 33 %

34 – 66 %

67 – 100%

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**Table 3.2: Methodological Appraisal the articles included in study**

Author(s)	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Total %
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Toren, Bregman, Zohar-Reich Ben Amitay, Wolmer and Laor (2013)	0	1	1	1	1	1	67 -100%
Baker (2010)	0	0	1	1	1	1	34-66%
Moné and Biringen (2012)	0	0	1	1	1	1	34-66%
Baker, Burkhard and Albertson- Kelly (2012)	0	1	1	1	1	1	67-100%
Viljoen and Van Rensburg (2014)	0	1	1	1	1	1	67-100%

Moné, MacPHee, Anderson and Banning (2011)	0	0	0	1	1	1	34-66%
Reay (2015)	0	1	1	1	1	1	67-100%
Baker and Verrocchio (2013)	0	1	1	1	1	1	67-100%
Baker and Verrocchio (2015)	0	1	1	1	1	1	67-100%
Godbout and Parent (2012)	0	1	1	1	1	1	67-100%
Ben-Ami and Baker (2012)	0	1	1	1	1	1	34-66%
Baker and Ben-Ami (2011)	0	1	1	1	1	1	67-100%
1 67-100%							

### 3.3 Results

#### 3.3.1 Selected studies

A total of 1641 articles were found and 12 were added via the hand search method.

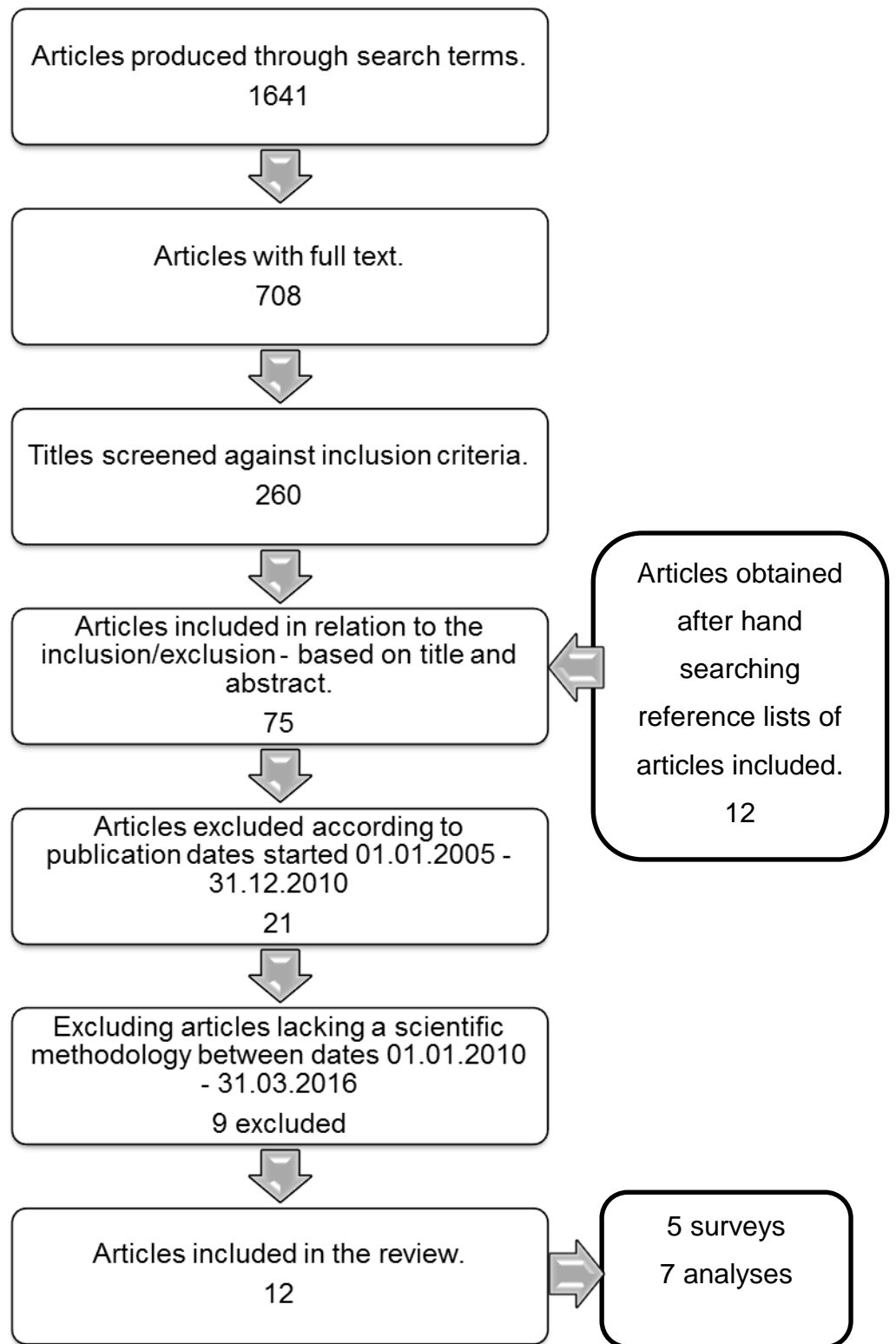
A comprehensive list of 260 titles was retrieved based on the eligibility of titles and abstracts and 85 were excluded after a full- text reading. Two reviewers then initially included 75 articles in relation to the inclusion/exclusion based on the titles and abstracts of the articles.

The full texts of these 75 articles were obtained and the two reviewers did a more detailed analysis of the full text articles in relation to the inclusion/exclusion criteria.

The reference lists of these 75 articles were hand searched and 12 relevant articles were found and also included in the Rapid Review. The two reviewers then excluded articles according to the publication dates starting on 01 January 2005 to 31 December 2010. This excluded another 21 articles.

The reviewers decided to further narrow down the articles by excluding articles that lack a scientific methodology between the publication dates 01 January 2010 to 31 March 2016.

This produced 12 articles. The final sample consisted of 12 articles which were included in the rapid review. See figure 1 for Study Flow diagram.



**Figure 3.1: Flowchart of realisation of search strategies**

### 3.3.2 Study characteristics

The rapid review comprised 12 studies with a fair to good methodological quality from four different countries. Eight studies were conducted in USSA (Baker, 2008; Baker & Ben-Ami, 2011; Baker & Verrochio, 2013; Baker & Verrochio, 2014; Baker et al. 2012; Ben-Ami & Baker, 2012; Moné & Biringen, 2012; Moné et al, 2011), two in Canada (Godbout & Parent, 2012; Reay, 2015;), one in South Africa (Viljoen & Van Rensburg, 2014) and one in Israel (Toren et al., 2013). The studies were published between 2010 (Baker, 2010) and 2015 (Reay, 2015) in peer reviewed journals.

Table 3 shows information about each publication included in the rapid review: First **authors**, title, and aims of each study, included population and the overall quality rating of the research. The research methods of the 12 articles consisted of 5 surveys and 7 analyses.

**Table 3.3: Authors, title, and aims of each study, included population and the overall quality rating of the research**

First Author and year	Title	Aims	Included population	Quality
Toren, 2013:	Sixteen sessions group treatment for children and adolescents with parental alienation and their parents	To present the results achieved by the short-term therapy program for children with parental alienation	9 boys and 13 girls with their 38 parents	Good
Baker, 2010	Adult recall of parental alienation in a community sample: prevalence and associations with psychological maltreatment	To address two questions: (a) What proportion of a convenience sample would report experiencing parental alienation? (b) Which reports of parental alienation were associated with	Primary female, two thirds were married , with a mean age of 41 years	Satisfactory

		standardized measures of psychological maltreatment ?		
Moné, 2012	Assessing parental alienation: Empirical assessment of college students' recollections of parental alienation during their childhoods	To develop valid assessment tools of parental alienation with the focus on the recollections of parental alienation during childhood.	210 women and 17 men with an average age of 21.3 years	Satisfactory
Baker, 2012	Differentiating alienated from not alienated children: a Pilot study.	To determine if it was possible to reliably identify children who were referred for reunification therapy from the other children seen in a child psychological services agency ( not reunification therapy group) and to examine the behaviours of the children once they began to receive services.	Children between 6 and 17 years of age (35% male)	Good
Viljoen, 2015	Exploring the lived experiences of psychologists working with parental alienation syndrome	To shed some light on the experiences of psychologists working with parental alienation in private practice.	8 psychologists registered with the Health Professional Council of South Africa	Good
Moné, 2011	Family member's narratives of divorce and inter parental conflict: implications for	(a) What stories do family members maintain and what meaning, including thoughts and feelings,	Three families: parents – one father and two mothers, ages 37-44 years.	Satisfactory

	parental alienation.	do they derive from their experience with divorce, inter parental conflict and parental alienation? (b) What are family members' responses to parental conflict and parental alienation? (c) How do parents and children view their relationships with one another in the context of divorce, inter parental conflict and parental alienation?	Four children: one son and three daughters, ages 10-14 years	
Reay, 2015	Family reflections: a promising therapeutic program designed to threat severely alienated children and their family system	To explain the gross failure of traditional therapeutic approaches with alienated children	22 children that attended the Family Reunification programme: 14 boys and 8 girls 6 mothers and 6 fathers rejected by their childrenand their children.	Good
Baker, 2013	Italian college students' reported childhood exposure to parental alienation: correlates with well-being.	To determine (a) what the rates of exposure to parental loyalty conflict behaviour in a sample of college students in Italy was. (b) if rates were higher for those students whose parents were separated or divorced than for those who rated	Under graduate psychological students at a University in Chaiti, Italy, 85 % women.	Good

		<p>their parents' relationships as "very bad"</p> <p>(c) If reported exposure to parents' alienation was associated with reports of quality of parenting.</p> <p>(d) If reported exposure to parental alienation was associated with concurrent measures of well-being</p>		
Baker, 2014	Parental bonding and parental alienation as correlates of psychological maltreatment in adults in intact and non-intact families	<p>To determine (a) if recall of parental alienation varies by marital status of parents</p> <p>(b) if recall of parental bonding varies by marital status of parents</p> <p>(c) if recall of psychological maltreatment varies by marital status of parents.</p> <p>(d) If reports of parental bonding and parental alienation were associated with reports of psychological maltreatment.</p> <p>(e) if recall of parental alienation was associated with psychological maltreatment over and above the effects of parental bonding.</p>	759 adults between 18 and 66 years living in Southern Italy	Good

Godbout, 2012	The life paths and lived experiences of adults who have experienced parental alienation: a retrospective study	Parental alienation was examined by analysing the life paths and lived experiences of adults who had been alienated from a parent in the past.  Three specific research questions were explored:  (a) how do children become alienated from their parents?  (b) How is alienation experienced?  (c) How do family relationships evolve over time?	6 respondents, 2 men and 4 woman between 24 and 42 years	Good
Ben-Ami, 2012	The long term correlates of childhood exposure to parental alienation on adult self-sufficiency and well-being	To explore the long term correlates of parental alienation by examining the differences between adult children of divorce that were exposed to parental alienation and adult children of divorce who were exposed to parental alienation of five relevant psychological domains	118 adults ranging in age from 18-66 years. Primarily Caucasians	Satisfactory
Baker, 2011	To turn a child against a parent is to turn a child against himself: the direct and indirect effects of exposure to	To determine the direct and indirect effects of exposure to parental alienation strategies on self-esteem and well-being	118 adults ranging in age from 18- 66 years. Primarily Caucasian	Good

	parental alienation strategies on self-esteem and well-being			
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### 3.4 Discussion

According to the researcher’s knowledge, this is the first rapid review to assess the effect of parental alienation on families and how families experience parental alienation.

Parental alienation is an important phenomenon that mental health professionals, lawyers and judges should know about and there is a need for knowledge regarding parental alienation. By gaining knowledge of parental alienation social workers can become aware of the impact of the phenomenon on the best interest of the child and that certain behaviour by one parent towards the child and the other parent is alienation. With early acknowledgement they might be able to intervene and many cases may be dealt with in a way that minimizes the harm to children in high conflict separations (Bala et al., 2007:82). Common false beliefs about parental alienation may lead therapists and lawyers to give bad advice to their clients. It may also lead to evaluators giving inadequate recommendations to courts and judges may reach injudicious decisions (Warshak, 2015:1).

The purpose of the rapid review was to answer the question; what is the best evidence available regarding (i) how parental alienation is experienced by different family members and (ii) what possible effect the experience of parental alienation has on families?

The following themes are: The child develops a contaminated view of the parent and of himself; Autonomy – intrinsic motivation; False allegations against the alienated parent; The impact of high conflict divorces; Loyalty conflicts; Problems with attachment; Long term effect of Parental alienation; Internal and external problems associated with parental alienation; Parental alienation is a form of psychological maltreatment.

#### **Theme 1: The child develops a contaminated view of the parent and of himself**

Through the process of alienation the child forms his/her own contaminated view of the alienated parent (Viljoen & Van Rensburg, 2014:262). This is produced through the

internalization by the child of the negative messages the alienating parent sends to the child with regard to the other parent (Baker & Verrochio, 2015:3055; Ben Ami & Baker, 2012:178). Messages that are conveyed are: The other parent does not love the child; the parent does not care for the child's well-being; the parent is dangerous; the child is unworthy of the parent's love; The children are viewed by themselves as bad and hated (Godbout & Parent, 2012:42).

In a study done by Baker et al. (2012:188) the results indicate that alienated children display a lack of reality. This is evident in their idealizing of the alienating parent. In the study children subjected to alienation did not report one aspect of the favoured parent that they did not like. At the same time, these children were unable to generate one positive memory of the alienated parent. In a study done by Moné and Biringen (2012:175) the alienated child's idealizing of the alienating parent is supported.

Godbout and Parent (2012:42) found in their study that if an alienated parent detaches from the relationship with the child, the belief that the alienated parent never loved the child, or that the parent is not a good parent, is reinforced in the child. It was further found that through the process of alienation the alienated child develops feelings of hate and anger towards the alienated parent. The fear that the alienating parent instigates in the child for the other parent, can become dominant in the child (Godbout & Parent, 2012:42).

### **Theme 2: Autonomy – intrinsic motivation**

Parental alienation strategies are controlling in nature and do not respond to the child's needs. Therefore through parental alienation the child's autonomy and intrinsic motivation may be hampered (Ben-Ami & Baker, 2012:177). Reay (2015:199) found in this regard that a child's critical thinking is taken away from him when the child is exposed to parental alienation.

It may happen that negative remarks by the alienating parent are based on facts, but the reality is then presented to the child in harsh terms, sometimes grossly exaggerated (Godbout & Parent, 2012:42).

### **Theme 3: False allegations against the alienated parent**

The child with a contaminated view of the parent and his relationship with the parent can willingly and actively participate in the alienated process (Viljoen & Van Rensburg, 2014:262). Reay (2015:199) as well as Viljoen and Van Rensburg (2014:262-263) state that the alienated child's outlook becomes increasingly peculiar and may include accusing the rejected parent of abuse or ridiculous behaviour the parent never did.

These false allegations become a memory to the child; it becomes true to the child and therefore the child believes that the alienated parent abused him (Viljoen & van Rensburg, 2014:262).

False allegations are used by the alienating parent as a strategy to remove the parent from the child's life at any cost. According to Viljoen and Van Rensburg (2014:260) the alienating parent uses the legal system to incarcerate the already estranged parent to achieve his or her goal of alienation. As the litigation continues, or when court proceedings are delayed, the alienation strengthens.

#### **Theme 4: The impact of high conflict divorces**

High conflict divorce is considered a high risk factor for the development of parental alienation and parental alienation may contribute to the child's response to conflict between the parents (Moné & Birigin, 2012:174 ; Viljoen & Van Rensburg, 2014:260). Children were found to be attuned to their parents' conflict and torn between the two conflicting parents (Godbout & Parent, 2012:42; Moné et al., 2011:661). Children cannot handle the ongoing conflict and therefore may feel the pressure to side with one parent over the other (Viljoen & Van Rensburg, 2014:260). They may use detachment to free themselves from this conflict and therefore the child's reaction to parental conflict can be viewed as early stages that precede the ultimate stage when the child forms an alignment with one parent (Godbout & Parent, 2012:50)

Disputes between divorcing parents escalate if the divorce is prolonged. This results in escalation of the alienation of the child from mild to moderate to severe (Viljoen & Van

Rensburg, 2014:262). The growing hostility between the parents might cause the child to become scared of both parents (Moné & Birigin, 2012:174 ).

Alienated children are drawn into conflict between parents that is beyond their developmental levels (Moné et al., 2011:661). These children become the parents' confidants and are often used as messengers or informants between the parents (Godbout & Parent, 2012:242; Moné et al., 2011:661). Role reversal takes place as the child has to "nurse" a vulnerable parent (Godbout & Parent, 2012:242). The alienated child is therefore on both sides of two worlds as he/she remains in the childhood by doing developmentally appropriate tasks like playing with the parent and enjoy spending time with the parent, but at the same time are familiar with and deal with emotions like hate, conflicting loyalties and complex family dynamics (Moné et al., 2011:661).

Parental conflict is found by Baker and Verrochio (2013:624) as damaging to children in that the ongoing demands of loyalty could interfere with the child's individuation process.

### **Theme 5: Loyalty conflicts**

In the studies done by Moné et al. (2011:668) and Viljoen and Van Rensburg (2014:260), it was found that children experienced ambivalent sentiments and loyalty conflicts. Alienated children are uncertain whether to maintain relationships with the extended family of the alienated parent. They also experience stress because they feel it is expected of them to choose between their parents. These findings are consistent with previous research results (Moné et al., 2011:664).

Badmouthing of one parent by the other parent was found to be hurtful to children, even if the child does not openly say so (Moné et al., 2011:664). Alienated children still love the alienated parent, despite the antagonism towards and resentment of the parent, therefore they experience conflicting emotions of anger and resentment with spells of sadness and guilt (Godbout & Parent, 2012:45).

### **Theme 6: Problems with attachment**

Through the alienation process the alienating parent could apply pressure on the child to align with him or her and the child could therefore see no other choice but to develop an exclusive alliance with the alienating parent (Godbout & Parent, 2012:42) The attachment between the alienating parent and the alienated child is not a healthy attachment and the long term consequences are devastating (Reay, 2015:204). According to Baker et al. (2012:188) a parent who alienates a child from the other parent, will encourage the maintenance of the unhealthy alliance with the child at the expense of the child's view of the relationship with the other parent. Baker and Verrochio (2013:623-624) found in their studies with young college students a correlation between parental alienation and a negative well-being. As these students gained a new perspective when they were separated from the family of origin, it caused them increased psychological distress and emotional dysfunction.

#### **Theme 7: Long term effect of Parental alienation**

When alienated children gain insight into the alienation they were subjected to, they feel that they contributed to the alienation process because they were unable or unwilling to consider the alienated parent's side of the story. They then view themselves as unfair and inflexible (Godbout & Parent, 2012:46).

Results of a study by Godbout and Parent (2012:44) indicated that these alienated children have a need to come to terms with their earlier alienating experiences and one major concern for them was their overall view of fatherhood (if the father was the alienated parent) or motherhood (if the mother was the alienated parent).

#### **Theme 8: Internal and external problems associated with parental alienation**

Five adults who experienced parental alienation as a child reported in a study by Godbout and Parent (2012:45-46), that parental alienation contributed to adjustment problems they experienced. Four adults experienced difficulties at school, while two adults reported internal behavioural problems such as sadness, low self-esteem, anxiety and somatization. In this study

three adults reported external behavioural problems including drug abuse in adolescence, hyperactivity and resistance to authority.

Several other studies found that a child's self-esteem is negatively affected by exposure to parental alienation (Ben-Ami & Baker, 2011:485; Baker & Verrochio, 2011:485). The low self-esteem can partly be explained as when a child thinks that one parent does not love him or her because something is wrong with him or her.

Ben-Ami and Baker (2011:483) further found a direct correlation between the degree of exposure to parental alienation and young adults' current educational or employment status and self-esteem as well as an indirect association via self-esteem with depression and attachment.

An association between exposure to parental alienation and depression was also established in studies done by Baker and Verrochio (2013:623) and Ben-Ami and Baker (2012:177-178).

#### **Theme 9: Parental alienation is a form of psychological maltreatment**

Baker (2010:26) conducted a survey with 253 respondents and determined that there is a correlation between exposure to parental alienation and psychological maltreatment. Parents who display parental alienation behaviours are committing a form of psychological maltreatment, because it was found that all APSAC derived variables (isolation, terrorising, and spurning, exploiting and denying emotional responsiveness) correlate with parental alienation.

There is a growing body of research evidence that confirms that parental alienation behaviour is experienced as maltreatment (Baker & Verrochio, 2013:623). Several studies indicate a statistically significant correlation between parental alienation and psychological maltreatment (Baker & Ben-Ami, 2011:483; Ben-Ami & Baker, 2012:180; Baker & Verrochio, 2015:3053; Baker & Verrochio, 2013:623).

Data in the study done by Baker and Verrochio (2015:3053) support the hypothesis that psychological maltreatment is associated with both parental attitudes towards the child (parental care) and the parents' attitude towards the child's relationship with the other parent (parental

alienation). A child experiences himself as psychologically maltreated when one parent is not accepting his relationship with the other parent (Baker & Verrochio, 2015:3054). The parent who brings about, supports or nurtures opposing views of a parent in a child, emotionally abuses that child (Baker et al., 2012:188; Reay, 2015:205).

In the study done by Baker and Verrochio (2013:623) it was found that reported exposure to parental alienation resulted in lower rates of parental care and a lack of nurturance.

### **Theme 10: Therapy and treatment of alienated children and parents**

Moné and Birigin (2012:174) found that children participate in the process of alienation. According to Moné and Birigin (2012:174) as well as Viljoen and Van Rensburg (2014:263), alienation is a sub-conscious process and not always clear. Therefore it is difficult to prove parental alienation as well as the child's participation in the alienation process.

Children of highly conflicted care givers need psychotherapy (Viljoen & Van Rensburg, 2014: 263), but a statistical significant association was found between parental alienation and resistance to therapy (Baker et al., 2012:185). Alienated children do not benefit from conventional psychological or legal interventions (Reay, 2015:200; Toren et al., 2013:94). Reay (2015:199) determined that alienated children and alienating parents do not respond to traditional therapy because they are highly delusional. The alienated child may even respond to treatment with acting out behaviour towards the rejected parent and the mental health professional during treatment (Baker et al., 2012:185). Therapy with the alienated child is further hampered by the fact that the child is very guarded during therapy and therefore gives limited information and protects the alienating parent (Viljoen & Van Rensburg, 2014:263).

According to Reay (2015:200) a reason for failure of treatment therapy is that no attempts are made to remove the child from the alienating environment to which he is subjected to. The one hour a week the therapist spends with the child is not sufficient to change his cognitive beliefs and for him to consider the other side of the story. The child returns to the care of the alienating parent where the intoxication continues.

The findings of a 16 session parallel group therapy program for 22 children with parental alienation and their parents, supports the use of short term group therapy for the treatment of parental alienation (Toren et al.,2013:194). During therapy it is important to involve all the parties concerned in the alienation dynamics, that is the alienated parent, the alienating parent and the alienated child, in the treatment (Moné et al., 2011:664; Toren et al., 2013:194). The duration of therapy is also determined by the duration of the alienating process as well as the extent of active alienation (Viljoen &Van Rensburg, 2014:263).

Burkhard and Albertson Kelly in Baker et al. (2012:191) observed that even severely alienated children can reconnect with the rejected parent in a safe environment, outside the viewing range of the favoured parent. Therefore direct exposure to the alienating parent during therapy must be avoided (Reay, 2015:205; Toren et al., 2013:194). Reay (2015:204) found that when effective transfer in custody occurs, removing the child from the care of the alienating parent is not harmful or traumatic to the child. In his study with families exposed to parental alienation, it was found that once a child was removed from the alienating parent as well as from any other extended family member(s) who contributed to the alienation process, the child felt emotionally safe and the psychological abuse was eased. The alienated child was also able to reconnect with the rejected parent (Reay, 2015:204).

Therefore Reay (2015:205) recommended that if other judicial or mental health remedies failed, an interim reversal of custody in favour of the alienated parent and temporarily suspension of direct or indirect contact between the child and the alienating parent, may be necessary.

Therapists working with alienated children and their parents, should be educated in the dynamics of parental alienation strategies to support these families and to intervene correctly when necessary (Ben-Ami & Baker, 2012:179). Therapists who are not trained in the specialized techniques in working with families affected by parental alienation, may contribute to the problem. They may contribute to the phenomenon of “third party alienation”. This phenomenon occurs when the therapist believes the alienating parent and the alienated child and therefore reinforces the alienation process (Reay, 2015:200).

For a person to realize and understand that he was the victim of alienation dynamics can be painful (Baker & Verrochio, 2013:624). The shame, guilt, sadness and loss that accompany exposure must be handled with the necessary delicacy. The therapist must determine if the client is ready to critically think about the alienating parent and if he/she has the necessary internal and external resources to explore the parent's role (Baker & Verrochio, 2013:624).

Techniques that may change the cognitive beliefs of the child see the other side of the story are to evoke pleasant memories of the alienated parent, assist the child to gain awareness of his ambivalence and to support the child if he or she wants to confront the alienating parent. (Godbout & Parent, 2012:49-51). The child must be assisted to develop skills to resist the pressure to turn against one parent (Ben-Ami & Baker, 2012:179).

In their study on the long term correlates of childhood exposure to parental alienation on adult self-sufficiency and wellbeing, Ben-Ami and Baker (2012:179) found that adult children of parental alienation may also need professional therapeutic assistance and support. They need to understand the alienation dynamics that they have been subjected to. The false beliefs and unrealistic views they held of their parents, must be dismantled. Assistance in dealing with the emotional pain that accompanies parental alienation is important because it prevents the adult from successful self-sufficiency.

#### **Theme 11: Reinforcement of alienation through courts and prosecuting authorities**

If parental alienation is handled in an inappropriate manner by courts, it might reinforce the alienation, for example when the court ordered that the alienating parent must supervise the contact between the alienated child and the alienated parent. This might reinforce the alienation (Baker et al., 2012:190). A form of socio-legal alienation occurs when a child is removed from the care of the alienating parent and placed in neutral custody (Viljoen & Van Rensburg, 2014:263).

Psychologists who participated in the study by Viljoen and Van Rensburg (2014:260), are of the opinion that the South African prosecuting authorities are ineffective in dealing with parental

alienation. Alienating parents are allowed to continue with the alienation as litigation continues in search of a solution to the conflict between the parents. As the litigation process continues, the relationship between the child and the alienated parent deteriorates.

Furthermore, they expressed the view that the involvement in the dispute of lawyers who aim to win and therefore drag out the litigation process, contributes to the child's suffering (Viljoen & Van Rensburg, 2014:264).

### **3.4.1 Methodological aspects and limitations**

In this rapid review, studies published between 2010 and 2015 with a fair to good methodological quality, that included a description of identified implications of parental alienation on families, and studies that included a description of the effect of parental alienation on the parent-child relationship in divorce cases were used.

Gray literature was not considered, which could have significantly increased the number of studies included, but at the same time warranted that the studies included in this review were subject to the evaluation of peers.

Only electronic databases subscribed to by the North-west University were used. Other databases which are not subscribed to by the library of the North-West University could not be searched and therefore this can be considered a limitation. An attempt to overcome the limitation was made by hand search of key journals and references of articles.

Due to the time limit and cost restraint of the study only articles with a full text in Afrikaans and English were considered for the study and it is possible that relevant studies were missed.

The rapid review was not done in a team and a co-reviewer was used at certain stages of the search and for the critical appraisal. However, the review was done under the supervision of an experienced researcher and supervisor.

### **3.5 Conclusions, recommendations and suggestions for future research**

Parental alienation is a reality and it usually occurs in high conflict divorce cases. The study highlighted the effect parental alienation has on children and families. It was found that through parental alienation strategies a child's relationship with one parent is damaged or destroyed.

By means of a rapid review the data from 12 articles with satisfactory to good methodological quality were narratively analysed. These 12 articles were selected after a search term was developed and a rigorous process was followed to obtain all available peer reviewed articles available at the North West library.

In the study insights and information about some of the detrimental effects parental alienation has on children and families were provided. Parental alienation is a form of psychological abuse and it has long term negative effects. The study found that a child's self-esteem is negatively affected by exposure to parental alienation. One of the long term effects of parental alienation is that an alienated child's overall view of parenthood is affected. In young adults it was found that there is a correlation between exposure to parental alienation as a child and a negative well-being.

A critical element is that although therapy is important for these families it was found that families affected by parental alienation have a resistance to therapy and that the alienated child does not respond to traditional therapy. This study provided evidence that education is needed in the dynamics of parental alienation strategies for social workers, psychologists and legal professionals in order to support the families and intervene appropriately.

Public and professional education on parental alienation is recommended by several authors of the articles synthesized in the rapid review (Baker,2010: 31; Toren et al., 2013:193; Viljoen & Van Rensburg, 2014:263; Baker and Ben-Ami, 2011:485; Baker & Ben-Ami, 2011:485). Baker (2010:31) stated in this regard: "The findings in studies lead to the conclusion that greater public and professional education is required for the extent and severity of the problem to be recognized."

By gaining knowledge on parental alienation, social workers can become aware of the impact of parental alienation on the best interest of the child and that certain behaviour by one parent towards the child and the other parent is alienation. With early acknowledgement they might be able to intervene and many cases may be dealt with in a way that minimizes the harm to children in high conflict separations (Bala et al., 2007:82). Common false beliefs about parental alienation may lead therapists and lawyers to give inappropriate advice to their clients. It may also lead to evaluators giving inadequate recommendations to courts, and judges may reach injudicious decisions (Warshak, 2015:1).

Through information obtained from the rapid review the researcher can recommend that education about parental alienation is provided to divorcing families. If divorcing parents are alerted about the impact of parental alienation on children, they can become alert and abstain from inducing alienating strategies. The targeted parent can then be educated to seek intervention sooner than later.

Education of the general public is further recommended. This is necessary as the targeted parent and the alienated child interact with a variety of people on a daily basis. If the public is educated in the alienating strategies, the targeted parent will be believed and understood. At the other end, the child could be gently encouraged to resist the pressure to choose between parents. If the child recognizes the campaign of alienation one parent has against the other parent, the child could be helped to seek and obtain help.

Professional development within the legal and mental health professions regarding the specific forms of parental alienation is essential. These professionals could benefit from training about alienating strategies as well as in therapeutic strategies for assisting or intervening with these families.

Future research on concrete ideas and suggestions for the alienated parent on how to respond when the other parent is alienating, is recommended, as well as educating techniques for children from divorcing families to recognize and resist parental alienating strategies.

### 3.6 Disclosure statement

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## SECTION D: FINAL CONCLUSION, LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### 4.1 Final conclusion

The central research question this study wanted to answer was:

*What is the best evidence available regarding (i) how parental alienation is experienced by different family members and (ii) what possible effect the experience of parental alienation has on families?*

For the final conclusion all data collected in the study was taken into consideration. Parental alienation is a relatively new construct and scientific investigations into this phenomenon have been limited. The majority of books and articles available on parental alienation are theoretical, descriptive or proscriptive in describing parental alienation (Baker & Darnall, 2008:97). Through the data obtained from the 12 articles included in the study, it is evident that the effect the experience of parental alienation has on families was scientifically tested and proved.

Children that are subjected to alienating behaviour, develop a contaminated view of the parent and of themselves (Viljoen & Van Rensburg, 2014:262; Godbout & Parent, 2012:42). This is harmful to the child as he or she believes that the alienated parent does not love him or her, or never loved him or her and thus the child is not worthy to be loved. The fear and hatred of the alienated parent can become dominant in the child's life.

It was found that the controlling nature of parental alienation behaviour does not respond to a child's needs (Ben-Ami & Baker, 2012:177). The child's critical thinking is taken away and he can willingly and actively participate in the alienation process (Viljoen & Van Rensburg, 2014:262). False allegations against the alienated parent can be a result of parental alienation. This has detrimental effects for both the child and the alienated parent.

Studies done on parental alienation have revealed that children in high conflict divorces are more likely to be exposed to parental alienation and as the children are drawn into the conflict, they are adultified, role reversal takes place, and loyalty conflicts are experienced by the children (Moné & Biringen, 2012:174; Godbout & Parent, 2012:242; Moné et al.2011:664).

Parental alienation is a form of psychological maltreatment and a growing body of evidence confirms this (Baker & Verrochio, 2013:623). Exposure to parental alienation is associated with adjustment problems, low self-esteem, sadness and somatization. In one of the studies a link was found between parental alienation and drug abuse in adolescence, hyperactivity and

resistance to authority (Godbout & Parent, 2012:45-45; Ben-Ami & Baker, 2011:458; Baker & Verrochio, 2011:485).

A major concern with regard to parental alienation is that a statistically significant association was found between parental alienation and resistance to therapy (Baker et al.2012:185). Alienated children and alienating parents are highly delusional resulting in the child being guarded during therapy and the alienating parent sabotaging the therapy. The use of short term group therapy, which involves both the parents and the child, was found to be successful for the treatment of parental alienation. Effective transfer into custody was found not to be harmful or traumatic to alienated children and that even severely alienated children can reconnect with the rejected parent (Reay, 2015:199 -200).

In order to successfully address and intervene in families affected by parental alienation, it is of the utmost importance that knowledge about the phenomenon and its effect on families is gained by professionals dealing with care and contact dispensations in divorce. Parental alienation handled in an inappropriate manner by courts might reinforce the alienating process (Baker et al., 2012:190) It is the opinion of psychologists that deal with parental alienation that the South- African prosecuting authorities are ineffective in dealing with parental alienation (Viljoen & Van Rensburg, 2014:260) as they allow alienating parents to continue with the alienating process. Education of the public can contribute to the early detection of parental alienation strategies and ensure that the alienation process is stopped at an early stage.

The rapid review question could thus be answered as sound evidence was found with regard to how parental alienation is experienced by different family members and what effect the experience of parental alienation has on families.

## **4.2 Evaluation of rigour**

The rigour of the study was assessed to determine if the research question was answered rapidly, efficiently, competently and satisfactory: This was done via the use of the framework of Whitemore and Knafl (2005:552) according to the problem identification stage, the data evaluation stage and the data analysis stage.

The researcher used the design of a systematic review to conduct the rapid review as no final definition could be found of how exactly the methodology of a rapid review differs from a full systematic review ( MRes and Kleijnen 2012:397-399; Tricco et al., 2015: 224).

### *Problem identification stage*

A relevant and focused review question was developed and therefore a researchable problem was identified with a clear review purpose. The rapid review had clear boundaries and a focus.

### *Literature search stage*

The rapid review was pre-planned in a protocol, which ensured that this research was conducted with rigour. A broad and comprehensive search was done by compiling clear inclusion and exclusion criteria. A search term was developed with the assistance of a research librarian and by using a combination of key search words.

The search was clearly described and thoroughly documented. Electronic data bases available at the University of North-West library were explored and additional studies were found by hand search of key journals and by checking reference lists.

A co-reviewer reviewed the screening process of the titles and abstracts as well as the screening of full text articles according to the inclusion and exclusion criteria. The inclusion of only peer reviewed articles ensured high quality research articles.

### *Data evaluation stage*

Each study was examined by the researcher and an experienced co-reviewer to critically appraise the quality of the study by using an instrument adapted from Davids and Roman (2012:233). To ensure transparency and replicability of the rapid review, the whole research process is documented in detail (Palm, 2014:40).

### *Data synthesis stage*

An extraction form was developed and used to extract all the relevant data from the selected studies. Data extraction was done by one reviewer, but the findings of the study are reported as completely as possible and reported and presented in a way that minimises bias and ensure understanding (Palm, 2014:41).

### *Ethical issues*

High moral standard were upheld by the researcher in all stages. Plagiarism was avoided at all times, transparency was ensured through accurate data extraction and the inclusion of unethical studies was avoided by the inclusion of only peer reviewed articles in the study.

Ethical Approval was obtained from HREC of the Faculty of Health. (Ethics number: NWU-00013-16-S1)

### **4.3 Limitations of the study**

The following limitations were identified.

Only electronic databases subscribed to by the North-West University were used. Other databases which are not subscribed to by the library of the North-West University could not be searched and therefore this can be considered a limitation. An attempt to overcome the limitation was made by hand search of key journals and references of articles.

Due to the time limit and cost restraint of the study, only articles with a full text in Afrikaans and English were considered for the study and it is possible that relevant studies were missed.

Gray literature was not considered, which could have significantly increased the number of studies included, but at the same time warranted that the studies included in this review were subject to the evaluation of peers.

The rapid review was not done in a team and a co-reviewer was used at certain stages of the search and for the critical appraisal. The review was however done under the supervision of an experienced researcher and supervisor.

### **4.4 Recommendations for further studies**

Research is needed on how to work with high conflict families where parental alienation is involved.

Research is needed on effective ways to educate the public regarding alienation strategies.

Research on what makes a family vulnerable to parental alienation.

### **4.5 Combined Reference List**

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## SECTION E: ANNEXURES

### ANNEXURE 1: DATA EXTRACTION FORM

<u>General Information:</u> Researcher performing data extraction:			
Date of data extraction			
Identification features of the study:			
Record number			
Author			
Article title			
Type of publication			
Country of origin			
<u>Study characteristics</u> Aim/objective of the study			
Study design			
Recruitment procedures			
Participants			
Sample size			
<u>Outcome data/results</u> Unit of Analysis/Outcome			
Statistical techniques used			
Type of analysis used in study			
Result of study analysis (themes and findings)			
Additional outcomes			
Note fields:			