

# **Guidelines for social workers: Detection of parental alienation during separation or divorce**

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## DECLARATION OF RESEARCHER

I, Tanya Kriel, hereby declare that the dissertation entitled *Guidelines for social workers: Detection of parental alienation during separation or divorce* is my own, original work. All the resources that were used and quoted from, have been acknowledged by means of references in the text and in a comprehensive reference list. I further declare that I have not in the past, whether in part or in its entirety, submitted this dissertation to any university to obtain any other qualification.

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*I dedicate this dissertation to my mom,  
who always believed in me, encouraged me to reach higher and achieve more.  
Wish you were here today to share in this moment.*

## **ABSTRACT**

Certain families may experience high conflict due to separation or divorce. This leaves families vulnerable to parental alienation which could have a devastating effect on the family. Parental alienation could have a lifelong impact on the children involved and is damaging to their relationship with their parents and other future relationships due to the long-term impact of parental alienation. It is important to establish guidelines for the detection of parental alienation during separation or divorce. These guidelines would allow social workers to identify parental alienation to assist with the intervention thereof.

The aim of this study was to, through a qualitative descriptive design, develop guidelines for social workers for the detection of parental alienation during separation or divorce. A qualitative descriptive design was used in this study. Data collection consisted of semi-structured interviews with 15 social workers, using an interview schedule. The interview schedule was developed with seven questions to explore the views of social workers on parental alienation and the detection thereof. These interviews with the social workers were voice recorded and transcribed. The data was analysed through content analysis, from which five themes emerged: (1) the social workers' perspectives on parental alienation, (2) the detection and identification of parental alienation, (3) the child involved in parental alienation, (4) perspectives on prevention during parental alienation, and (5) support and legislation.

Based on the literature overview and the data collected, the researcher established guidelines to assist in the detection of parental alienation during separation or divorce. Lastly, a resource, based on the guidelines, was compiled to assist social workers with the detection of parental alienation.

*Keywords:* High-conflict families, guidelines, parental alienation, qualitative descriptive design, separation and divorce, social workers

## OPSOMMING

Sekere gesinne kan as gevolg van skeiding of egskeding hoë vlakke van konflik ervaar. Dit maak gesinne kwesbaar vir ouervervreemding wat 'n vernietigende uitwerking op 'n gesin kan hê. Ouervervreemding kan 'n lewenslange impak op die betrokke kinders hê en is nadelig vir hul verhouding met hul ouers en ander toekomstige verhoudings as gevolg van die langtermyn-impak van ouervervreemding. Dit is belangrik om riglyne op te stel vir die bespeuring van vervreemding van ouers tydens skeiding of egskeding. Hierdie riglyne sal van hulp wees vir maatskaplike werkers om ouervervreemding kan identifiseer en kan help om in te gryp.

Die doel van hierdie studie was om, deur middel van 'n kwalitatiewe beskrywende ontwerp, riglyne te ontwikkel vir maatskaplike werkers vir die bespeuring van ouervervreemding tydens skeiding of egskeding. 'n Kwalitatiewe beskrywende ontwerp is in hierdie studie gebruik. Die data-insameling het bestaan uit semi-gestruktureerde onderhoude met 15 maatskaplike werkers. Dit is met behulp van 'n onderhoudskedule gedoen. Die onderhoudskedule is met sewe vrae ontwikkel om die standpunte en menings van maatskaplike werkers oor die vervreemding van ouers en die bespeuring van hierdie vervreemding te ondersoek. Hierdie onderhoude met maatskaplike werkers is opgeneem en getranskribeer. Die data is deur middel van inhoudsanalise ontleed en vyf temas het na vore gekom: (1) maatskaplike werkers se perspektiewe oor ouervervreemding, (2) die opsporing en identifisering van ouervervreemding, (3) die kind wat by ouervervreemding betrokke was, (4) perspektiewe op behandeling tydens ouervervreemding en (5) ondersteuning en wetgewing.

Die navorser het op grond van die literatuurstudie en ingesamelde data riglyne opgestel vir die bespeuring van die vervreemding by ouers tydens skeiding of egskeding. Laastens is 'n hulpbron aan die hand van die riglyne saamgestel wat maatskaplike werkers kan help sodat hulle vervreemding by ouers betyds kan optel.

Sleutelwoorde: gesinne met erge konflik, kwalitatiewe beskrywende ontwerp, maatskaplike werkers, riglyne, skeiding en egskeding, vervreemding van ouers

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# **CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION AND ORIENTATION TO THE RESEARCH STUDY**

## **1.1 INTRODUCTION**

The researcher identified a gap in current research in terms of guidelines for the detection of Parental Alienation (hereafter referred to as PA), specifically in the South African context. This chapter provides the contextualisation and problem statement for the study and an in-depth discussion of the research methodology, as well as other relevant aspects such as ethical considerations and the trustworthiness of this study.

## **1.2 CONTEXTUALISATION AND PROBLEM STATEMENT**

Due to separation or divorce, families might experience high conflict. According to Anderson *et al.* (2011:13), high-conflict families are characterised by the frequent display of aggression between couples which leads to a lack of physical and psychological well-being. High-conflict families also often experience PA. Gardner (2002:95) initially defined Parental Alienation Syndrome (hereafter referred to as 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”.

According to the Parental Alienation and Hostile Aggressive Parenting Awareness Organisation (2018), PAS differs from PA. PAS refers to the behaviours that a child displays, whereas PA refers to the abusive behaviours of the parent. Social Work Today (2018) described PA as the strategies that a parent uses to create the child’s rejection of the other parent. Should these strategies be successful, PAS develops, and children come to hate, fear, and reject the targeted parent, seeing them as unworthy to have a relationship with. For the purpose of this study the researcher will only focus on PA.

Through the study of literature on this topic, it became evident that not all the children in high-conflict families will encounter a process of parental alienation (Polak & Saini,

2015:221). Approximately 10% to 15% of separated families remain in “high conflict”, which continues for two to three years post-separation. This prevalence could result in PA. According to the literature the term alienation is utilised to show that a child has rejected a parent without reasonable or valid reasoning – that is, for weak, trivial, frivolous or absurd reasons (Bernet *et al.*, 2016:575; Harman *et al.*, 2016:62). According to Bernet *et al.* (2016:575), the parent who is indoctrinating a child to dislike or fear a parent on unjustifiable grounds is known as the preferred or alienating parent; the rejected parent is referred to as the target or alienated parent. According to Baker and Verrocchio (2014:3047), this may lead to parental behaviours that signal to the child that it is unacceptable to have a positive relationship with their other parent. In terms of Section 9 of the Children’s Act (2005) the best interest of a child – referring to the child’s care, protection, and well-being – is of paramount importance. It is not in a child’s best interest to be denied a loving relationship with a parent due to the parents’ separation or divorce.

According to a study done by Harman *et al.* (2016:65), using the percentage of parents in the USA who reported being alienated from their child, 22,211,287 adults have been targets of parental alienation. As most parents have more than one child, this estimation implies that at least 22 million children, but up to 44 million children or even more can be affected by this challenge in the USA alone. Although official numbers for PA are not available for South Africa, PA is prevalent in Gauteng province – as confirmed by, among others, social workers who are forensic experts and skilled in such investigations. This has been confirmed by Bendixen (2017), a social worker in private practice with 30 years’ experience working in the field. She states that hostile divorces are generally dealt with in the High Court and Forensic as well as mediation services are therefore freely available in Gauteng. Malagas (2018) a social worker from Stars Wellness confirms that PA is very prevalent in her practice and according to social workers employed by the company, they estimate 70% of their case load is related to PA.

Gauteng is the smallest province in South Africa, accounting for only 1.5% of the land area. However, the province is densely populated and urbanised (Government of South Africa, 2020). Considering this statistic, and the fact that social workers have a professional

network in Gauteng, the entire province was used as the population for this study. PA cases from surrounding provinces are also dealt with in Gauteng.

Some of the key issues that create high conflict between parents during a divorce or separation are a parent's concern about a child's safety while in the care of the other parent. This results in the child potentially showing resistance to making contact with the other parent or even with new partners (Cashmore & Parkinson, 2011:186). According to Reay (2015:197), when families go through a traumatic separation with high conflict it could lead to the children becoming a bargaining tool for a parent to achieve a more favourable outcome for the parent. As a result, the child's relationship with the targeted parent weakens as the child increasingly sides with the alienating parent. PA is therefore a particularly malicious consequence of fractured or broken family relationships, and it is a growing phenomenon in psycho-legal communities. In South Africa, programmes such as the Child's Voice Toolkit are available to help families deal with the consequences of a divorce or separation (Duchen & Schutte, 2017). However, there are no guidelines for the detection of PA.

Brown (2008:395) stated that social workers and other professionals should educate themselves about the symptoms of PA. In the South African context, the following research has been done on PA:

- Gesinsberaders in die Wes-Kaap se perspektiewe op ouervervreemding tydens egskeiding (Western Cape family counsellors' perspectives on parental alienation during divorce) (Launspach, 2012)
- Fathers' experiences and perceptions of parent alienation in high-conflict divorce (Bosch-Brits, 2014)
- Exploring the lived experiences of psychologists working with parental alienation syndrome (Viljoen, 2014).

During the search of literature, the researcher could not find any research on any clear guidelines for PA undertaken in the South African context.

Guidelines for the detection of PA would contribute to the self-education process of social workers. In this study, it is suggested that the detection of PA could result in earlier intervention with less negative consequences for the child and the family as a whole. Guidelines for the detection of PA will assist social workers to refer the matter to the relevant forensic or specialised social workers for further intervention as soon as possible.

As the interaction between different systems (for example the mother, father, child, siblings) was important for this study, Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Theory (Rosa & Tudge, 2013:244) was utilised as the theoretical framework for the study. According to these authors, the bioecological theory in its current or mature form specifies that researchers should study the settings in which a developing individual spends time, and the relations with others in the same setting, the personal characteristics of the individual (and those with whom he or she typically interacts), the development over time as well as the historical time in which these individuals live, and the mechanisms that drive development. Rosa and Tudge made use of the PPCT model which refers to Proximal Processes, Person Characteristics, Context and Time. The **proximal process** describes the change from an ecological to a bioecological theory, referring to the role a person plays in their own development through the relationships between people and the relationship between people and objects. **Person characteristics** refer to those characteristics that are considered the most likely to influence developmental outcomes, constructive or destructive. **Context refers** to the interaction with objects, symbols or other social partners that occur within systems. **Time** is included in the model as an individual's life is embedded in and shaped by conditions and events during the period of their individual lives. These four elements were taken into consideration in the development of the guidelines in this study.

In South Africa, social workers have no clear guidelines to follow for the detection of PA. By offering such guidelines, social workers may be better equipped to detect PA and ensure earlier intervention in this regard. Such guidelines may also empower parents and subsequently children to deal with PA, potentially preventing a long process (legally and emotionally) that creates more animosity and conflict which, in turn, fuels PA.

### **1.3 KEY CONCEPT DEFINITIONS**

The researcher has identified three main concepts for this study, namely PA, high-conflict families, and social workers. These concepts are defined as follows:

#### **1.3.1 Parental alienation**

Bernet and Baker (2013:99) explained that PA happens when children strongly align themselves with one parent (the preferred parent) and stop having a relationship with the other parent (the alienated parent) without a valid reason. High conflict during separation or divorce between the parents is normally the foundation for the onset of PA. The child typically had a constructive relationship with the parent before this process and now has the view that the same parent has ill intentions or is inherently bad and dangerous.

#### **1.3.2 High-conflict families**

According to Anderson *et al.* (2011:13), high-conflict families are characterised by significant amounts of aggression. In such families, aggression frequently occurs between couples and in turn leads to a lack of physical and psychological well-being. High-conflict families often experience PA.

#### **1.3.3 Social workers**

The global definition of the social work profession was approved by both the International Federation of Social Workers' general meeting and the International Association of Schools of Social Work's general assembly in July 2014. According to this definition, "Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility, and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledge, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance well-being. The above definition may be amplified at national and/or regional levels" (IFSW, 2020).

According to Weyers (2011), social work as a profession is practice-based and an academic discipline where social workers facilitate social change and development, social unity, and the empowerment and freedom of people. Social work is also the practical science that assists individuals to reach a high level of psychosocial functioning, and that facilitates change in society to enhance the well-being of people. In practice, it is the professional activity of helping individuals, groups or communities to develop or restore their capacity for social functioning and create a society where these goals can be achieved.

Flynn (2018) defined social workers as a group of social service professionals who are committed to improving the social and behavioural lives of individuals, families and communities. Social workers seek to provide assistance to at-risk or overwhelmed individuals to locate resources, formulate new coping strategies, resolve problems and conflicts, and secure opportunities. Social workers work with individual clients to decrease the impact, and where possible, to resolve unemployment, poverty, drug and alcohol dependency, homelessness, and domestic abuse. Social workers may work with various client levels such as individuals, families, or targeted populations such as prisoners and the elderly. In the context of this study, the social workers who participated in this research were employed by the Office of the Family Advocate, or they were in private practice and had experience in the field of PA.

#### **1.4 RESEARCH QUESTION AND SUB-QUESTIONS**

The following research question was asked:

What will guidelines aimed at assisting social workers in the detection of PA during separation or divorce entail?

The following sub-questions were asked:

- What were the perspectives of social workers pertaining to the detection of PA during separation or divorce?
- What elements could social workers add to the development of guidelines for the detection of PA during separation or divorce?

## 1.5 AIM AND OBJECTIVES

The aim of this study is to, through a qualitative descriptive design, develop guidelines for social workers for the detection of PA during separation or divorce.

The voices of children and parents who had experienced PA were not included in this study due to ethical reasons and the risk that they might be traumatised through their inclusion in the study.

The objectives of this study are indicated in Figure1-1 below:



**Figure 1-1: Objectives of the study**

## 1.6 LITERATURE OVERVIEW

As part of the study, the researcher conducted a literature overview to identify relevant aspects of the phenomenon being investigated (Maree, 2016:28). It formed the conceptual framework that illustrates the primary concepts and theories of the particular field of research (Tracy, 2013:99). For this study, the literature overview consisted of PA history and development, the prevalence of PA, levels of severity of PA, the detection of PA,

counterintuitive strategies to PA, PA strategies, the definition, role and education of social workers during PA, interventions for PA, a child's view of parents during PA and the restoration of the relationship, the impact of PA on children, and legislation and the theoretical framework that was used for this study.

## **1.7 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

According to Kumar (2018:17), a researcher develops analytical thinking, and applies techniques and the appropriate research methodology to find answers to research questions. The research methodology used in this study is outlined below.

### **1.7.1 Research approach and design**

A qualitative research approach, as described by Bless, Higson-Smith and Sithole (2013:16), was utilised in this study. This approach seemed appropriate as it allows the study participants to share their experiences and views about the phenomenon being investigated, i.e. the detection of PA. According to Botma *et al.* (2010:182), qualitative research describes a story or a meaning behind the numbers that quantitative research provides. They further state that it is a rich explanation of a phenomenon and its characteristics or qualities. Quantitative research provides a broad explanation which will not be suitable for this study as rich information is needed to develop guidelines for the detection of PA.

A qualitative descriptive design was therefore used in this study as this design focuses on discovering the nature of specific events (Lambert & Lambert, 2012:256). According to Sandelowski (2008:78), a qualitative descriptive design will produce findings that are closer to the participants' input which will result in rich data. This design seems appropriate for this study as it allowed the researcher to explore the perspectives of social workers on the detection of PA.

### **1.7.2 Population**

As in other provinces, PA is prevalent in Gauteng province where social workers that are forensic experts are regularly investigating cases of PA. Hence, the population for this study



was Gauteng-based social workers who are working with high-conflict families during divorce or separation, who have specialised in forensic investigations, and who testify in High Courts and Regional Courts.

Some families experience high levels of conflict during separation or divorce. According to Anderson *et al.* (2011:13), aggression occurs frequently between couples in high-conflict families, leading to a lack of physical and psychological well-being. Parental alienation is also often experienced in high-conflict families. Social workers are mandated to do investigations in order to determine the best interest of children in such families, and to make recommendations to the courts based on what has transpired in the family and the result thereof. The social workers also recommend ways to change the family system in order to improve the overall well-being of all family members, with the main focus on the children.

The researcher's initial intent was to only use social workers from the Office of the Family Advocate. During data collection phase it was discovered that the social workers from the Office of the Family Advocate could not attend interviews due to heavy workloads. Also, the number of social workers from the Office of the Family Advocate were not sufficient to reach at least 15 participants or data saturation. Hence, it was decided to include social workers in private practice as well. An amendment was sent to North-West University's Health Research Ethics Committee (HREC), requesting permission for the researcher to also use social workers in private practice as participants (Annexure B).

### **1.7.3 Sample**

The researcher will now discuss how the sample was established for this study. This will be done by describing the sampling method, sample size, and the sample's inclusion and exclusion criteria.

#### **1.7.3.1 Sample method**

For this study, a purposive sampling method was used to recruit social workers from the Office of the Family Advocate. This method of sampling is used in research with a specific purpose in mind (Maree & Pietersen, 2016:198). The researcher selected participants

according to specific inclusion criteria because they can purposefully form an understanding of the research problem (Creswell, 2013:156), namely PA. The participants in this study assisted the researcher to develop a deeper understanding of the detection of PA in order to develop guidelines for the detection of PA. Since the Office of the Family Advocate had fewer than 15 such social workers to participate in the study, it was decided to include social workers in private practice. Once this amendment was approved by North-West University's Health Research Ethics Committee, the data collection phase proceeded promptly. The social workers in private practice were recruited via snowball sampling. Snowball sampling is used when it is difficult to recruit participants (Naderifar *et al.*, 2017:2). Snowball sampling can continue until data saturation is reached. The same inclusion and exclusion criteria were applicable to the social workers in private practice.

#### 1.7.3.2 Sample size

The sample size was determined to be a minimum of 15 social workers, or until data saturation was reached. According to Laher and Botha (2012:88), there are no rules for the most appropriate sample sizes in qualitative research. However, the sample size must produce adequate data to answer the research question (Laher & Botha, 2012:88). Guest *et al.* (2006:74) believed that, in general, 15 social workers would be enough to achieve data saturation. For this study, the proposed sample size would only be concluded once data saturation had been reached. If data saturation had not been reached, more participants would have been included. According to Guest *et al.* (2006), data saturation occurs when no new themes or categories arise from the collected data.

#### 1.7.3.3 Sample inclusion and exclusion criteria

The following inclusion criteria were used to select social workers as participants:

- Social workers residing in Gauteng with a minimum of 10 years' experience in the field of PA (their opinions are valued because of their expertise and experience in the field),
- Social workers who are registered with their relevant professional body (SACSSP), and

- who work with PA on a weekly basis,
- Any culture or gender
- Participating willingly and are willing to be recorded.

Criteria for the exclusion of participants were the following:

- Social workers who indicated they are willing to participate in this study but were not available for an appointment due to time constraints. They were excluded after three attempts to contact them.
- Social workers who have experienced PA in a personal capacity.

#### **1.7.4 Recruitment of participants**

A gatekeeper, mediator, and an independent person assisted with the recruitment of participants for this study. The roles of the gatekeeper, mediator and independent person were as follows:

##### **1.7.4.1 Role of the gatekeeper**

The Chief Family Advocate acted as the gatekeeper for this study. The Chief Family Advocate was requested to provide a name of a suitable mediator who is employed at the Offices of the Family Advocate, who in turn provided a list of participants meeting the inclusion and exclusion criteria of social workers at the Family Advocate's Offices. The researcher scheduled a meeting with the Chief Family Advocate to obtain permission for this study. Goodwill consent (Annexure C) was provided with the following conditions:

- Only information that is relevant to the academic research may be collected.
- The information obtained from the participants must be shared for academic purposes only.
- The researcher shall treat all information obtained from the Department of Justice as strictly confidential.

- The findings will not be published publicly and will be limited to the academic institution's requirements.
- The findings and recommendations of the research must be shared with the Department of Justice.

A gatekeeper was not required for the recruitment process of social workers in private practice.

#### 1.7.4.2 Role of the mediator

The Chief Family Advocate nominated a suitable mediator who is employed at the offices of the Family Advocate. The mediator provided a list of potential participants who met the inclusion and exclusion criteria for social workers at the Family Advocate's Offices as well as for social workers in private practice, where applicable. The role of the mediator was only relevant to the Family Advocate and not to the social workers in private practice.

#### 1.7.4.3 Role of the independent person

The researcher recruited an independent person to contact the identified participants. The independent person works on the same premises as the researcher. The independent person was not a social worker and functioned independently from the researcher.

The independent person signed a confidentiality agreement. She was trained on how to recruit participants, the research process, and the inclusion and exclusion criteria. The independent person contacted all the social workers who were willing to take part in the study, indicating to them who had referred them to be part of the study. The social workers were expected to attend a semi-structured interview of approximately 75 minutes at a venue that was convenient to them. It was also expected that the social workers avail themselves for a follow-up interview, if necessary. No follow-up interviews were scheduled during this study with the participants. Informed consent documents were provided to the participants, which included the aim of the study, why the participants were invited, what will be expected from them, if there was any personal gain or risks involved, the protection of confidentiality,

the dissemination of the results, and cost to partake in the study. The informed consent document is attached as Annexure E.

Once the amendment with HREC had been approved, the social workers in private practice were recruited via snowball sampling. The independent person contacted all the social workers who were willing to take part in the study, indicating to them who had referred them to be part of the study, explaining the research and their role in it, and providing them with the consent documents. The researcher contacted the participants via e-mail to schedule the date and time for the semi-structured interviews.

#### **1.7.5 Informed consent**

According to Katz and Webb (2016:e2), informed consent is the right of individuals to make autonomous decisions guided by the individual's own reasoning. It entails disclosing information that is important before undertaking any interviews with the participants.

The independent person explained that consent was needed, asked the participants if they had experienced PA in their personal capacity (as this was stipulated as an exclusion criterion), and provided the potential participants with consent forms that they had to return within seven days. This gave them sufficient time to consider their participation in the study. Once they had decided to participate, the participants signed the consent documents in the presence of an independent person. After the consent forms had been signed, the researcher was provided with the contact details of the participants. The researcher then contacted the participants and scheduled the interviews. The researcher also provided the potential participants with the contact numbers of the researcher and study leader should they have further questions. The interviews with the social workers were conducted at the rooms of the social workers and took place at a time convenient to them.

#### **1.7.6 Data collection**

Semi-structured interviews were used as a data collection method in this study. Dearnley (2005:22) described semi-structured interviews as interviews that allowed all participants to be asked the same questions within a flexible framework, with the open nature of the questions aimed at encouraging depth and vitality, allowing new concepts to emerge.

According to Niewenhuis (2016:93), semi-structured interviews allowed the researcher to ask specific open-ended questions followed by further probing questions. The intention of these interviews was to gain detailed information about the participants' perspectives of PA and the detection thereof. This method allowed the researcher to ask more questions based on the responses in order to gain deeper insight from the participants.

Semi-structured interviews are not seen as a high-risk data collection method. The social workers are familiar with interviewing processes and therefore neither the researcher nor the participants were put at risk by using semi-structured interviews as a data collection method.

An interview schedule (see Annexure F) was developed by the researcher to conduct semi-structured interviews. Taking into consideration the aim of the study and the research question and sub-questions, the researcher chose seven questions that could assist with the guidelines for the detection of PA.

The seven questions that formed part of the semi-structured interviews are illustrated in Figure 1-2 below:



## **Figure 1-2: The seven questions that formed part of the semi-structured interviews**

All the interviews were audio-recorded on two devices to ensure that no recordings were lost due to technical problems. The audio-recorded data was transferred as soon as possible to the researcher's personal laptop after the interview took place in order to safeguard the data. Next, the recorded data was transcribed by a professional transcriber who signed a confidentiality agreement. Please see Annexure D for the confidentiality agreement.

### **1.7.7 Data analysis and development of guidelines**

The data obtained from all the semi-structured interviews was analysed through content analysis. According to Stemler (as cited by Nieuwenhuis, 2016: 111), content analysis has been defined as a methodical, replicable technique to compress many words into fewer content categories based on rules of coding. Content analysis is therefore a technique that allows the researcher to discover and describe actions, context, people, places, and events (Nieuwenhuis, 2016:112) as extracted from the participants' narratives.

The content analysis process as described by Creswell (2014:247-250) was followed in this study. This process is described as a direct, hierarchical process, with six steps that are interconnected but do not necessarily follow in the order that they are given. First, the researcher organised and prepared the data for analysis by transcribing the interviews with the help of a transcriber. The researcher thoroughly read through all the transcribed interviews to get a wide-ranging sense of the information and possibly the overall meaning. The coding of the data was done manually through organising the data into portions of information and writing a word that represents a category in the margin. Detailed descriptions of the setting or the people involved as well as descriptions of the categories or themes for analysis were also given. The findings of the analysis were presented to the participants for member checking. The participants were satisfied with the themes and did not add any additional information. The data was compared to existing literature to see whether the identified themes corresponded with the scientific information already available.

Five themes were extracted from the analysed interviews. These themes provided the foundation for the guidelines for the detection of PA. The themes were divided into subthemes and categories which allowed the researcher to discuss each theme in detail. The five themes and the literature overview were then used to develop the guidelines. Once the seven guidelines had been developed, a resource was compiled to assist social workers with the potential identification of PA. This resource was based on the seven guidelines.

The guidelines were sent to the social workers (i.e., all the participants) to peruse and confirm the content. The second question that formed part of the interview schedule was: “After perusing the guidelines, what according to your opinion are important components that should be added to the guidelines with specific reference to the detection of PA?”

## **1.8 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

The research proposal for this study was submitted to the Health Research Ethics Committee (HREC) of North-West University for ethical clearance. An ethics committee should assess all ethical issues to ensure that the rights and interests of human subjects are protected (Babbie & Mouton, 2011:528). This research study was approved, confirming that the research complied with the university’s ethical standards and code of conduct, as emphasised by Brynard *et al.* (2014:94). The approval letter from HREC with the ethics number NWU-00057-18-A1 is attached as Annexure A. Regular monitoring reports were additionally submitted to HREC during the study.

Next, the following ethical considerations will be discussed in more detail: risks and benefits, incentives/reimbursement, confidentiality, anonymity and privacy, conflict of interest, dissemination of results, and storage and archiving of data.

## **1.9 RISKS AND BENEFITS**

It was important to assess the risks and benefits of this study. Each risk was individually identified, and the relevant precautions were considered as per Table 1-1 below.



**Table 1-1: Risks associated with participation as well as precautions put in place**

| Risks                                                                                                                                                                                                  | Precautions                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• There is a potential risk that the social workers, participating in this research, could have experienced PA in their personal capacity.</li></ul>             | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The mediator screened the participants through the process of purposive sampling according to specified inclusion and exclusion criteria.</li></ul>                                                                                                                                 |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The interview process involves the discussion of sensitive data, which could result in a loss of anonymity for the client base of the social worker.</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The researcher cautioned the social workers not to disclose the identities of the clients they were referring to during the interviews.</li><li>• The independent person and any other relevant person who assisted with this research signed confidentiality agreements.</li></ul> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The researcher may become aware that the social worker suffers from compassion fatigue during the interview process.</li></ul>                                 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The researcher did not identify compassion fatigue in any of the participants</li></ul>                                                                                                                                                                                             |

There was no direct benefits for the social workers who took part in this study. The indirect benefit of this study was the guidelines produced for the detection of PA during separation and divorce. These guidelines will assist social workers to detect parental alienation when working with families.

#### **1.10 INCENTIVES/REIMBURSEMENT**

The researcher did not offer any reimbursement for the participants. The participating social workers were given a token of appreciation after they completed the interviews. They did

not incur travel costs as the researcher travelled to a venue convenient to the participant at a time that was suitable to them. The researcher offered bottled water to the participants.

### **1.11 CONFIDENTIALITY, ANONYMITY AND PRIVACY**

Whitehead *et al.* (2020:86-87) explained confidentiality, anonymity and privacy in the following way:

- Confidentiality refers to the confidentiality of the research process by not disclosing identifying particulars of the participants.
- Anonymity describes the protection of participants' identities by not identifying them in any form.
- Privacy refers to the invasion of a person's privacy during the research process.

#### *i. Confidentiality*

The researcher ensured confidentiality by not disclosing any identifying particulars of the participants. During the recruitment process, confidentiality was assured by signing confidentiality agreements with the mediator, gatekeeper and independent person involved with the recruitment of the participants (i.e. the social workers). Confidentiality was ensured by not disclosing any identifying particulars of the participants. The researcher allocated numbers to the participants once the data was transcribed.

#### *ii. Anonymity*

The researcher ensured anonymity by allocating numbers to the participants when the data was sent to the data transcriber. Only the mediator, the independent person and the researcher were aware of the participants' identity. Both the mediator and the independent person signed confidentiality agreements.

#### *iii. Privacy*

The interviews were conducted at the participants' place of work. At no point was their privacy violated with any questions related to personal beliefs, cultural background and/ or gender. The use of the offices ensured privacy as office doors were closed and nobody was

able to enter the office. A notice was placed on the office door of the participant indicating that a private interview was in progress.

#### **1.11.1 Conflict of interest and bias**

There was no conflict of interest as the researcher had never experienced PA and could therefore investigate the topic objectively.

#### **1.11.2 Dissemination of results**

The researcher will disseminate the findings of the study. These findings will be given to the participants when the study has been concluded. A copy of this dissertation will therefore be made available to them.

#### **1.11.3 Storage and archiving of data**

The hard copies of the data will be stored in a locked cabinet for the duration of the research. No other parties have had access to the data unless if they were rendering a professional service to the researcher, such as the transcriber. Data that was not relevant was destroyed. The researcher will hand all data, hard copies and soft copies pertaining to this research to the study leader 10 days before graduation. This will include any audio CDs or DVDs, field notes, and transcriptions of the interviews with the participants. The manuscript will be submitted for possible publication.

Once the raw data has been handed to the study leader, it will be stored by an appointed line manager. The data will be stored in a safe at NWU's Wellington offices. The data handed in by the researcher will be destroyed via shredding after a period of five years.

### **1.12 TRUSTWORTHINESS**

Trustworthiness is of the utmost importance in qualitative research. According to Maree (2016:123), four criteria should be considered by qualitative researchers to establish trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

### **1.12.1 Credibility**

Nieuwenhuis (2016:123) stated that a thick description of the phenomenon under scrutiny contributes to credibility. Credibility also refers to how believable the findings are, and whether these findings are in line with reality. Credibility was ensured by using research methods and a fitting research design that complements the research question. After the data analysis, the findings based on the interviews were e-mailed to each participant for member checking. To ensure accuracy, members had the opportunity to verify the information once it had been transcribed and analysed.

### **1.12.2 Transferability**

Nieuwenhuis (2016:123) explained that generalisation is rejected as a goal during qualitative research as it rarely makes use of randomly selected samples. To increase transferability, researchers should focus on how typical the participants are in terms of the context of the research question and the context in which the findings apply. This means that the participants had to be selected for their experience in terms of the topic. Also, the researcher should provide a proper explanation of the topic. This in return will allow the reader to ascertain whether the findings can assist them with their particular situation.

Thick descriptions can also aid transferability. This allows the readers a full account of context, participants and research design, enabling the readers to make decisions based on the transferability to their context. Purposeful sampling also aided transferability as the careful selection of participants in terms of the phenomenon indicated that they represent the population who have experienced this phenomenon (Nieuwenhuis, 2016:124). The participants in the current study, namely social workers, were purposefully selected to optimise the quality of data obtained. To ensure transferability, a dense description of the data, context and research process was provided.

### **1.12.3 Dependability**

According to Nieuwenhuis (2016:124), dependability is closely linked with credibility. The credibility of a study contributes to and ensures dependability. The research design and the implementation thereof, the detail of how data will be collected, and a reflective appraisal

demonstrate dependability. The data analysis process should be clear for the reader to develop an understanding of the decisions that were made by the researcher, how the analysis was done, and how the interpretations contributed to the guidelines (Nieuwenhuis, 2016:124). The researcher provided a dense description of the context of the study in Chapter 2. The researcher furthermore ensured that the research process is coherent, well developed and well documented, and reviewed by the research supervisor.

#### **1.12.4 Confirmability**

Nieuwenhuis (2016:125) stated that confirmability is the degree of objectiveness of the study's findings, which presupposes a researcher that is not biased because of personal motivation or own interest. Confirmability can be established by member checking and an audit trail of the study. The audit trail is established by keeping all communication that has been recorded between the researcher, the mediators, and the participants. During the interviews, the researcher made field notes that contributed to the accuracy of the data analysis. The research process was well documented. The data will be stored at the Centre for Child, Youth and Family Studies in Wellington for five years after which it will be destroyed according to the relevant policies.

#### **1.13 STRUCTURE OF THE FINAL DOCUMENT**

The final document consists of the following chapters:

- Chapter 1: Introduction and orientation to the research study
- Chapter 2: Literature overview of parental alienation and theoretical framework for the study
- Chapter 3: Research findings
- Chapter 4: Guidelines for the detection of parental alienation during separation or divorce
- Chapter 5: Summary, conclusion and recommendations of the research study

## **1.14 CONCLUSION**

Chapter 1 provided the motivation for this study, the problem statement, the aim and objectives, definitions of key concepts, and the context of the research. The research methodology, ethical aspects and trustworthiness of the study were also discussed. In the next chapter, the literature study will focus on an overview of PA and the theoretical framework that was used for this study.

# **CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE OVERVIEW OF PARENTAL ALIENATION AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR THE STUDY**

## **2.1 INTRODUCTION**

The literature review for this study will be undertaken to gain an overview of the research already conducted on the topic (Maree, 2016:28). The literature overview will also provide the researcher with the conceptual framework with the primary concepts and theories underpinning the research (Tracy, 2013:99). A literature overview should ideally refer to both recent and historic studies in order to see what progress has been made – in this case what progress has been made in the field of parental alienation in the context of child, youth and family studies over the years.

The literature overview therefore served as the starting point to gain a proper understanding of the research available on PA and the impact thereof on families. This was important for the researcher whose overall aim was to develop guidelines for social workers for the detection of parental alienation during separation or divorce.

In this chapter, insight will be provided into the phenomenon of PA. It will highlight the importance of educating professionals to identify PA in order to assist families who are exposed to PA. It is also important to note that most of the literature pertain to contexts other than that of South Africa. This is because the South African judiciary system does not acknowledge the term PA and rather describes the phenomenon. In addition, social workers in South Africa have no legislation that dictates the context and consequences of PA. An in-depth understanding of strategies employed by alienating parents, the symptoms that are presented by affected children, and the need for guidelines will therefore be examined. Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Theory is reviewed as the theoretical framework for this study.

## **2.2 PARENTAL ALIENATION**

Studies on PA by authors such as Baker and Darnall (2006), Baker and Verrocchio (2014), Brown (2008), and Eddy (2010) all point to the devastating effects that parental alienation can have. However, limited resources are available on how to limit the impact of parental alienation during the early stages. In the following section, the history of parental alienation, the definition thereof, the distinction between abuse and parental alienation, and the prevalence and detection of parental alienation will be discussed.

### **2.2.1 History of PA**

To understand the history of PA it is important to look at the work of Gardner on PAS. Gardner (1985:3) conceptualised Parental Alienation Syndrome (PAS) as a phenomenon that develops during divorce where a child experiences a psychological disturbance. The phenomenon manifests when a child's relationship with his or her parent disintegrates with a narrative of skewed reality, unfounded complaints and behaviour mirroring that of the parent with whom they align themselves. According to the Parental Alienation Awareness Organization (2018) PAS differs from PA. PAS refers to the behaviours that a child displays, whereas PA describes the abusive behaviours of a parent. Baker (2008) stated that in the event of the successful implementation of these strategies, professionals see the emergence of PAS developing. As a result, children develop feelings of resentment and fear. They reject the targeted parent entirely as they see this parent as being unworthy of having a relationship with them.

#### **2.2.1.1 Criticism of the scientific evolvement of PAS**

The scientific evolvement of PAS happened in the early 2000s when Gardner's theory was reviewed. The main contributing authors were Kelly and Johnston. Kelly and Johnston (2001:249) reviewed Gardner's theory and subsequently disparaged the work based on three factors:

- i. Firstly, they found that the focus was only on the alienating parent being responsible for the alienation of the child, describing the parent as the exclusive etiological agent. This finding was disproved because, during high-conflict divorces, parents can start



with indoctrinating behaviours. However, only a small portion of children who have experienced high-conflict divorce became alienated children. In other studies, it became evident that some children, especially adolescents, develop a dislike in a parent, become fearful of that parent, and have a negative view of the parent without the presence of alienating behaviour from the other parent. This indicates that the alienating behaviour of parents is not the exclusive agent for children to become alienated.

- ii. Secondly, during the formulation of the definition of PAS, Gardner included a hypothesis involving an alienating parent, and a child who is receptive to alienation. Gardner's theory on what causes PAS cannot be proved as false, although it is likely not true.
- iii. Thirdly, according to Kelly and Johnston, there is no "commonly recognized" pattern of PAS in a family, an empirically verified pathogenesis or treatment of PAS, and therefore it cannot be considered as a diagnostic syndrome as defined by the American Psychiatric Association (1994).

Bernet (2015:1) stated that Gardner largely contributed to the description of the features of PA. Yet, his work was criticised due to the use of the term "syndrome". Mental health professionals who assist children whose parents are going through a divorce agree that children from high-conflict families do tend to describe one parent as good and the other parent as bad without good cause.

#### 2.2.1.2 Parental alienation syndrome and the DSM-5

Parental alienation has been described in psychiatric literature for at least 60 years but has never been considered for inclusion in the DSM-5 – the standard classification of mental disorders used by mental health professionals in the USA. Gardner (2003:3) motivated that PAS should be included in the DSM-5 because moderate and severe types of PAS consist of a cluster of symptoms, which can be described and identified in the DSM-5. According to Bernet *et al.* (2010:77-78), the reason for this exclusion from the DSM-5 was given by Daniel Pine who was chairman of the Disorders in Childhood and Adolescence Work Group. Pine believed that the information provided on the validity to classify parental

alienation as a medical condition, the lack reliable diagnostic criteria, and the prevalence of this condition was insufficient.

Bernet (2015:1) indicated that PA was first identified in the United States, and is now described in 35 countries on six continents. However, the DSM-5 has not accepted it as a diagnosis. Although the concept of PA has not been included in the DSM-5 it has been described in diagnoses such as parent-child relational problems, a child affected by parental relationship distress, child psychological abuse and delusional symptoms in the partner of an individual with a delusional disorder (Bensussan, 2017; Grohol, 2018; Stevens, 2013). Social workers cannot make a diagnosis. Therefore, even if the concept of PAS or PA is included in the DSM-5, it cannot be utilised in the current scope of the profession.

#### 2.2.1.3 The scientific evolvement of PA

For this study, the researcher will only focus on PA and not on PAS. More recent literature describes PA as strategies that parents use to create the child's rejection of the other parent (Social Work Today, 2018:26). Should these strategies be successful, PA develops, and children come to hate, fear, and reject the targeted parent and see them as unworthy of having a relationship with.

Bernet (2015:2), Edleson and Williams (2006:52), and Woodall (2015) indicated three main reasons why a child will reject a parent: (i) The accused parent is abusive, and the rejection of the child is validated. This is called estrangement and not PA. (ii) The aligned or other parent is causing the child's rejection and this could cause possible PA. (ii) The child rejects the alienated parent for no valid reason. This may be termed as PA. The most common cause of PA is a parent's indoctrination of a child to fear and dislike the other parent, which can be divided into three categories namely naïve, active or obsessed alienators (Gardner, s.a., Joshi, 2017; Lorandos *et al.* 2013:22).

#### 2.2.1.4 The Alienated Child: A New Formulation

Kelly and Johnston (2001:251) formulated "The Alienated Child: A New Formulation", shifting the focus from parental alienation to the alienated child. They defined an alienated

child as a child who expresses negative feelings such as anger, hatred, rejection and fear on a frequent and persistent basis towards a parent which is not in line with the child's actual experience of that parent. This focus allows professionals to identify the alienated child with the new definition, using a more comprehensive framework to assess why a child is rejecting a parent. This new model was later used by Johnston *et al.* (2005:194) to conclude that both parents and the vulnerabilities in a child contribute to alienation.

Based on the research of Kelly and Johnston, O'Sullivan (2013) created a checklist to distinguish the alienated child from children who reject a parent for valid reasons. The checklist is intended to support the consideration or elimination of PA in a child:

- Was high conflict present in divorce or separation?
- Is the child's anger or hatred a result of a transgression of a parent?
- Did the child have a loving relationship with the rejected parent?
- Is the rejection combined with resistance to visit the rejected parent?
- Does the child ignore the parent in public?
- Are the perceptions of the child black and white without dualism?
- Does it seem that there is only bad in the parent and no gratitude or affection for the parent?
- Are the child's reasons for rejection of a parent coached and lacking detail?
- Has the child added to and exaggerated the script with his or her own contributions to the rejected parent?
- Does the child insist he or she has not been influenced by anyone, and that he or she has independently chosen to reject the parent?
- Does the child protect and idealise the aligned parent?

- Do the actions of the aligned parent suggest an agenda of anger, negativity, or destructiveness towards the rejected parent?
- Does the child appear to be functioning normally in other settings, but problematic interpersonal relationships can be detected during assessments?
- Does the child show a lack of guilt or remorse?

Taking the above views of the reformulation of the alienated child into consideration, as well as the checklist provided by O'Sullivan (2013), it highlights the need for guidelines to detect PA, which is the focal point of this study.

### **2.2.2 Definition of parental alienation**

A high-conflict separation or divorce between parents is normally the foundation for the onset of PA. PA is defined as when a child strongly aligns himself with one parent (the preferred parent) and stops having a relationship, without a valid reason, with the other parent (the alienated parent). The child had a constructive relationship with the parent before this process and now has the view that the same parent has ill intentions or is inherently bad and dangerous (Bernet & Baker, 2013:99; Judge & Deutsch, 2016:98). PA is also described as a mental condition where the child forms a strong alliance with one parent and rejects the relationship with the other parent during high-conflict separation or divorce (Bernet, 2017:507).

PA refers to either the state of the relationship between a child and a parent whom the child rejects unfairly, or to the child's attitudes and behaviours that reflect an unreasonable aversion to a parent with whom he or she formerly had a normal relationship as they enjoyed being in this parent's presence. Even when the child refers to genuine negative behaviour by the parent as the basis of their rejection for this parent, parental alienation only begins to manifest if the degree of rejection is not in proportion to the alleged wrongdoing, particularly when considered in the context of the history of the parent's love and devotion to the child's welfare (Warshak, 2020:55).

### 2.2.2.1 Parental alienation and high conflict

According to Anderson *et al.* (2011:13), high-conflict families are characterised by frequent aggression between couples, which in turn leads to a lack of physical and psychological well-being. High-conflict families often experience PA. According to Eddy (2010:14), when one or both parents have high conflicting personalities it can drive high-conflict divorces. This situation can result in one child or more children being alienated, leading to the child rejecting the alienated parent. A parent can be prone to high conflict when his/her characteristics form part of this state of mind. Eddy further stated that 50% of individuals involved in high-conflict divorce or separation could have some personality traits while the remainder could be due to a personality disorder. The 50% who display traits could still be difficult but could respond more positively to intervention than people with a personality disorder.

Haddad *et al.* (2016:243) stated that in a high percentage of divorces (75% to 80%) marriage partners can stabilise to normality taking into consideration the emotional transition. There is however a percentage of individuals who experience high conflict because they cannot do the transition without long-lasting emotional scarring and turmoil for children and parents. The presence of anger, lack of trust and hostile custody litigation complicate the situation. Also, poor communication between the parties creates obstacles for parents to provide the care children require during a divorce. There are various reasons why high-conflict cases arise, including an argumentative legal system and the “best interest of the child” vagueness. Another contributing factor is when the parents are awarded joint custody. This requires more communication between the parents, with personal reasons for the conflict and the personalities of the parents contributing to high conflict.

#### 2.2.2.2 Parental alienation and abuse

Gardner (1999:2) originally confirmed that there should be a distinction between PA and abuse. His original findings are supportive of the counterintuitive strategies (which will be discussed later in this chapter) as stated by Baker *et al.* (2020:53-55). In his work, he identified eight symptoms of PA exhibited by children which could be utilised as a guideline to assist professionals. These eight symptoms are:

- i. Campaign of denigration
- ii. Not sufficient or weak reasoning deprecation of the other parent
- iii. No ambivalence
- iv. The independent thinker phenomenon
- v. Impulsive support of the alienating parent during conflict between the parents
- vi. Child showing no guilt or shame towards the alienating parent who is being demoralised
- vii. Child presenting scenarios that are not their own narrative
- viii. The child's attitude towards the alienated parent extends to that parents' family and friends.

### 2.3 PREVALENCE OF PARENTAL ALIENATION

Through the study of literature, it became evident that not all the children in high-conflict families will encounter PA (Bernet, 2015; Masson, 2016:253; Polak & Saini, 2015:221; Woodall, 2019; Woodall, 2020). Approximately 10% to 15% of separated families remain in "high conflict" for two to three years after the separation, and this prevalence could result in PA. Other researchers said that the term *alienation* is used to indicate that a child has rejected a parent without a reasonable or valid reason – that is, for weak, insignificant, thoughtless, or illogical reasons (Bernet *et al.*, 2016:575; Harman *et al.*, 2016:62). According to Bernet *et al.* (2016:575), the parent who is indoctrinating a child to unjustifiably

dislike or fear a parent is known as the preferred or alienating parent while the rejected parent is referred to as the target or alienated parent. According to Baker and Verrocchio (2014:3047), this may lead to parental behaviours that signal to the child that it is not acceptable to have a loving relationship with his other parent. In terms of Section 9 of the Children's Act (2005) the best interest of a child regarding his/her care, protection and well-being is of paramount importance. It is not in a child's best interest to not be allowed to have a loving relationship with a parent due to separation or divorce. Children, in general, have balanced relationships with their parents. When this natural balance is disturbed, best interest is compromised which can result in long-term damage. The Children's Act help to protect children's best interest. When PA is identified, it is important to consider the levels of severity of PA.

### **2.3.1 Levels of severity in parental alienation**

Lorandos *et al.* (2013:24), Fidler (2015:1-3), Woodall and Woodall (2017:26-27), and Baker (2010:9) indicated three levels of severity pertaining to the parent's alienating behaviour. Supporting this, Warshak (2020:57) and Kelly and Johnston (2001:252-254) indicated a difference between the levels of severity of a parent's alienating behaviours and the levels of severity of the child's parental alienation. These two aspects will be discussed next.

#### **i. Levels of severity of a parent's alienating behaviours:**

Warshak (2020:57) stated that the alienating behaviours of a parent can be scaled in mild, moderate, and severe.

- **Mild alienating behaviours:** The alienating parent uses naïve strategies and makes derogatory comments about the other parent or about his/her household. However, it is not with serious intent to harm the relationship between the child and the parent.
- **Moderate alienating behaviours:** The alienator uses active strategies to defame or undermine the alienated parent. They are aware that what they are doing is not correct and that it could be harmful to the relationship.
- **Severe alienating behaviour:** The alienator uses obsessive strategies to destroy the parent-child relationship.

ii. Levels of severity of a child's parental alienation:

Warshak (2020:57) indicated that there should be a differentiation between the behaviour of moderately and severely alienated children, and behaviours that could result in alienation. Behaviours that could result in alienation typically depend on the parent-child relationship during an ongoing high-conflict divorce. This may be a child who at times criticises or complains about the parent or expresses a wish not to spend time with a parent, which is not indicative of a child that is being alienated.

- **Mildly alienated child:** When a child is mildly alienated, the child could display conflicting behaviour, i.e. child complains about a parent, shows resistance to spending time with that parent, and objects to making contact with the parent. When such a child spends time together outside of the realm of the aligned parent, the child reconnects with the parent. When the parent with whom the child is aligned returns, the child reverts to the previous state of negativity and rejection of the other parent.
- **Moderately alienated child:** When a child intensely resists contact with the other parent, remains primarily oppositional and withdrawn, and perhaps occasionally treats the parent better, it is an indication of a moderately alienated child.
- **Severely alienated child:** When a child displays hatred towards a parent or at times presents intense fear, then such a child is severely alienated. Contact with the alienated parent is refused or takes place under duress of the child, which results in the courts' being involved at times. Some researchers have indicated that such a child stays in contact with the alienated parent in means that are available to them – such as email, text, social media and telephone (Kelly & Johnston, 2001:252-254; Warshak, 2010:61). Severely alienated children will align with the alienating parent and support such a parent during litigation between the parents.

## 2.4 DETECTION OF PARENTAL ALIENATION

Goldin and Salani (2020:346) indicated that there is no clear guideline for the identification of PA. PA is included in the published guidelines of the National Institute for Health Care Excellence as emotional abuse. This was done to assist with early recognition. Examples of



this abuse include creating unrealistic fears in children, manipulating children on an emotional level, withholding love and affection, other methods of isolating children and other PA strategies. Children who are vulnerable and who have insufficient coping skills can experience trauma that could lead to alterations of the brain.

When the detection of PA is considered, various issues should be taken into consideration. Some of the key issues that create high conflict between parents during a divorce or separation are a parent's concern about a child's safety while in the care of the other parent. This results in a child possibly showing resistance to making contact with the other parent or with a new partner (Cashmore & Parkinson, 2011:186). According to Reay (2015:197), when families go through a traumatic separation with high conflict it could cause children to become a bargaining tool. When this happens, the child's relationship with the alienated parent weakens and the child subsequently sides with the alienating parent. PA is therefore a particularly malicious outcome of fractured/broken family relationships and is a growing phenomenon in psycho-legal communities. Currently, there are programmes in South Africa designed to deal with the effects of alienation after a divorce or a separation, such as the Child's Voice Toolkit (Duchen & Schutte, 2017). However, there are no guidelines for the detection of PA.

Various challenges hamper the detection of PA (Gardner *et al.*, 2006:105; Warshak, 2020; Woodall, 2017). According to Marques *et al.* (2020) and Harman *et al.* (2016:62-63), the lack of ordinary definitions of alienation, difficulty to establish a target population for research and various assessment measures make it challenging to determine the prevalence of PA.

## **2.5 COUNTERINTUITIVE STRATEGIES**

According to Baker *et al.* (2020:53-55) and Els (2019:10), certain counterintuitive aspects can lead to misdiagnoses by professionals if they are not sufficiently trained in the field of PA. For example, mental health professionals can confuse PA with aspects such as first impressions that are incorrect, the enmeshment of children with the favoured parent, and the abuse of children. These counterintuitive strategies could result in the evaluator not

detecting PA. The counterintuitive strategies will be discussed utilising literature from Baker *et al.* (2020:53-55), Child (2015) and Els (2019:10).

### **2.5.1 Counterintuitive strategy 1: First impression of the mental health professional that can be very misleading in PA cases**

Mental health professionals typically rely on the first impression when a matter is introduced to them. Even though first impressions are valuable, this is not the case in PA. The alienated parent, most likely, at this stage, has told his story over and over to many people. That parent will display signs of dismay, and the general functioning of such a parent would not be as optimal as it is under normal circumstances. Such a parent sees the mental health professional as the person who would rectify the situation in which they find themselves. The parent highlights every aspect of his/her perceived situation and is desperate for a professional person to understand what happened to his/her family. The parent is upset and due to this they may be misunderstood or misjudged by other professionals. Hence, they respond defensively. They make a good impression by presenting themselves as calm and charming. As the children expressed a clear preference for such a parent, they appear victorious. The alienating parent subsequently complains that the children's level of rejection against the alienated parent appears to be realistic. Professionals are inclined to view the alienating parent as likeable and consequently could be more sympathetic.

### **2.5.2 Counterintuitive strategy 2: Children are often enmeshed with the favoured parent**

The second counterintuitive aspect is when, in moderate and severe cases, the enmeshment between a child and the favoured parent becomes irrational. This enmeshment can be mistaken for a healthy and loving parent-child relationship. This misjudgement is possible when the observer of the relationship has no expertise in pathological enmeshment. When this mistake happens, the professional does not identify aspects such as dependency, irrational thinking and boundary violations. It can also lead to the health care professional missing important aspects such as a child losing his/her

identity, sense of self, individuality, independence, and critical reasoning skills. The child is therefore not seen as an extension of the parent.

### **2.5.3 Counterintuitive strategy 3: A non-PA specialist is unlikely to know how to differentiate an abused child from an alienated child**

Typical characteristics that present in an alienated child are anger, aggression, and provocative and rude behaviour aimed at the alienated parent. It is seldom that such a child shows any willingness to repair such a relationship and can verbalise that any positive memories of a loving relationship ever existed. This behaviour is also typical of children who are being abused. In general, abused children display protective behaviour towards the parent who have abused them, and they show a willingness to repair the relationship and/or minimise abuse in the past. Contrary to children who have been abused, alienated children do not present with the same behaviour of an abused child, and untrained professionals will not be able to distinguish between the two.

Counterintuitive strategies are closely related to PA strategies. Counterintuitive strategies is relevant to the professional assessing a family and these strategies could possibly lead to PA being undetected. PA strategies are strategies employed by the alienating parent as indicated below.

### **2.5.4 Parental alienation strategies**

PA strategies are the different ways in which a parent influences a child to ensure that the relationship between the child and the other parent is destroyed. These strategies are employed to alter the child's behaviour and thinking towards the alienated parent.

The process called PA consists of the child's attitude toward one parent's repeated negativity about the targeted parent. This can also be brainwashing of the child by the alienating parent. Should parental alienation be proven by the alienated parent after professional experts have confirmed PA, it could result in the re-evaluation of parental responsibilities and rights. It is also possible that the child's feelings and attitude could be the result of behaviours of the other parent. Hence, it is important to protect the child from further trauma (Madden, 2003:114).

According to Baker *et al.* (2020:10), McCullar (2019), Ellis (2012:86) and Gardner *et al.* (2006), alienating parents can employ various parental alienation strategies:

(i) *Badmouthing*

According to Lorandos (2020:417), badmouthing is the strategy most frequently employed by alienating parents. This occurs when one parent speaks in a derogatory way about the other parent when the child can hear them. The children are only exposed to negative comments about the alienated parent. The children therefore become brainwashed or are “being programmed”. The children do not consider that the alienating parent is misleading them. The child then starts to believe that the alienated parent is not a safe person and is not a parent who loves them, and that he/she is unavailable to them. This results in the child believing that everything about the alienated parent is bad, and they terminate their relationship with that parent. Researchers such as the following have confirmed that badmouthing is a prominent strategy in PA: Baker (2010:67), Ellis (2012:86), Drozd *et al.* (2016:383), Gardner *et al.* (2006:24), and Judge and Deutsch (2016:176).

(ii) *Limiting contact*

This strategy goes hand in hand with badmouthing. In the case of badmouthing, the child is exposed to constant negative content about the alienated parent. Subsequently, the child distances himself or herself from the parent (Baker, 2010:69; Baker *et al.* 2020:13). After this, the alienating parent starts to deliberately interfere with the contact between the child and the alienated parent. For example, the alienating parent will say that a child is not available for scheduled contact, or will use early collection and late drop-offs to interfere with contact. The alienated parent’s ability to influence the child positively is now drastically reduced. This then cements the child’s belief that the parent is bad and unsafe, and does not love them (Baker & Sauber, 2013:58; McCullar, 2019).

(iii) *Interfering with communication*

The alienating parent spends the most time with the child and enjoys ongoing communication with the child. This is not the case with the alienated parent. Hence, the child is less receptive to communication from the alienated parent. Alienated parents typically describe phone calls being dropped or calls going to voicemail. Gradually, all

communications are blocked. Memories of the alienated parent, such as cards and letters, are being destroyed until there is no more contact (Baker *et al.*, 2020:13; Judge & Deutsch, 2016:176; Lorandos *et al.*, 2013:7). This strategy limits the time a child can connect and interact with the alienated parent. The alienated parent becomes a less important figure in the child's life due to few opportunities to share time and make memories. This now creates the platform for the alienating parent to "prove" to the child that the alienated parent is indeed not interested in the child (Gardner *et al.*, 2006:156; Haines *et al.*, 2019).

*(iv) Limiting mentions and photographs of the targeted parent*

To maintain a strong relationship between parents and children after separation there is a strong reliance on symbolic communication. This communication includes sharing memories such as thinking about each other and having photographs of each other. Memories and connections are kept alive by children when they think about a parent, talk about them, and look at photographs of them. When this is absent, the child's memories and feelings about this parent could become faded. When the symbolical connection is destroyed by the alienating parent, it is part of a strategy to diminish the relationship with the alienated parent. The alienating parent thus denies the child the opportunity to connect with the alienated parent (Baker & Darnall, 2006:110; Baker *et al.*, 2020:13).

*(v) Withholding love and approval*

The alienating parent vacillates between extreme affection for the child and intermitted rejection. This creates an imbalance where the child constantly seeks approval from the alienating parent. Alienating parents can emotionally reject a child with this strategy and the child will rather reject the alienated parent to avoid this and renounce the relationship with the alienated parent (Baker *et al.*, 2020:13; Lorandos *et al.*, 2013:75; Murphy & Rasmussen, 2020:289).

*(vi) Telling children that the targeted parent does not love them*

This strategy is used to programme a child into believing that the alienated parent never truly loved them, wanted them, or even wanted them to be born (Baker, 2010:96; Murphy & Rasmussen, 2020:289). The children are told that the alienated parent left them and that the parent who left them is the party that wanted the divorce. Children are led to believe that

the alienated parent left the primary residence because they did not care enough to stay, which creates separation in that specific parent-child relationship (Baker *et al.*, 2020:14).

*(vii) Allowing/forcing the children to choose*

According to this strategy, the child is led to believe that he/she should choose between parents. This is achieved by offering the child a reward when they do not see the alienated parent or by making the child feel guilty when they spend time with that parent (Baker, 2010:79). With the child then choosing to stay with the alienating parent it creates hurt, frustration, and anger with the alienated parent (Woodall & Woodall, 2017:101). That parent then gives up, which creates more negativity and conflict in the parent-child relationship. A child would rather avoid contact with the alienated parent in order not to spend time with an angry or depressed parent. The alienated parent feels worthless although this was provoked by the alienating parent (Baker *et al.*, 2020:14; Barclay, 2018).

*(viii) Creating the impression that the targeted parent is dangerous*

The alienating parent shares information with the child which leads the child to believe that the alienated parent is dangerous and can hurt them or other people. This confuses the child as a parent is supposed to protect the child (Baker *et al.*, 2020:15; Bernet & Freeman, 2013:480; Heitler, 2019; Hirschberg, 2019). Alienating parents can plant false memories, implying that the alienated parent has anger problems and that the alienated parent is mentally unstable (Baker *et al.*, 2020:15).

*(ix) Confiding in children*

This occurs when the alienating parent discusses confidential and intimate details of the marital relationship with the child (Lorandos *et al.*, 2013:14). This could include the disappointment and hurt that the alienating parent has experienced and how they were hurt by the alienated parent. Sharing this information creates a closer bond between the alienating parent and child, and supports the perception that the alienated parent must be a person with malicious intent. Content of legal disputes is also shared and could lead to the child feeling hurt and anger towards the alienated parent (Baker *et al.*, 2020:16; William, 2010:89). The alienating parent then convinces the child that they are the victim in this relationship, which the child believes when the opposite – “the alienated parent being the

aggressor” – is more likely the victim. Children, being loyal, feel the need to protect the alienating parent from the alienated parent (Baker *et al.*, 2020:16).

(x) *Forcing the children to reject the targeted parent*

The child feels that he or she should choose between parents. Hence, they actively reject the targeted parent. Alienated children can reject the alienated parent at extramural activities, at school events and in public places. They proactively inform the alienated parent that he or she is no longer welcome (O’Sullivan, 2018). This strategy serves two purposes: firstly, to hurt the alienated parent, and, secondly, for children to reject the alienated parent and actively dissociate themselves from the parent. When a child informs the alienated parent of the rejection, the alienated parent may react with anger and sadness. This affirms the child’s belief that the parent is unsafe having witnessed the misplaced anger (Baker *et al.*, 2020:17).

(xi) *Asking children to spy on the targeted parent*

During high-conflict separation or divorce matters, there is often a need for information about the other parent. This can include new relationship partners, salary increases or intended legal actions. Using the child to secretly obtain this information creates a further stumbling block between the child and the alienated parent (Baker, 2010:237; Baker & Sauber, 2013:58). As the child feels guilty after obtaining this information, the child would make further attempts to avoid the alienated parent. Also, when the child obtains information for the alienating parent, it furthers the belief that the alienating parent is a victim since they are not allowed this information (Baker *et al.*, 2020:18).

(xii) *Asking children to keep secrets from the targeted parent*

The alienating parent can create the perception with the child that information should not be shared with the alienated parent. This can include information related to vacations or rewards. If the child shares this information with the alienated parent, this can be spoiled or interfered with. This forces the child to keep a secret, creating further distance between the child and the alienated parent. Should the alienated parent find out about the secret, they could feel hurt and perceive the child to be betraying them. In return, the negative message about the alienated parent is reinforced (Anderson & Boback, 2019; Baker *et al.*, 2020:19).

*(xiii) Referring to the targeted parent by his or her first name and encouraging the children to do the same*

In a healthy parent-child relationship it is common that children refer to the parent in enduring terms. This is an emotional indicator of the bond. Using this strategy, the alienating parent refers to the alienated parent on first name basis. A child will follow this example, and even be encouraged to do so. An alienated parent intuitively reacts to this form of provocation, which enforces the child's message that the parent must be bad (Baker *et al*, 2020:19; Warshak, 2010).

*(xiv) Referring to the stepparent as mom or dad, and encouraging the children to do the same*

When a child is encouraged to refer to a stepparent as mom/dad and the alienated parent on his/her first name, it leads the way for the child to replace the alienated parent and subsequently remove that parent from the child's life. The child is led to believe that they cannot love both parents, and starts to replace the alienated parent (Baker *et al*, 2020:20; Baker & Sauber, 2013:97).

*(xv) Withholding medical, social and academic information from the targeted parent and removing the parent's name from such records*

The alienated parent's contact details are deliberately removed from platforms such as medical records, and school, sporting and cultural events as well as social commitments. As a result, the alienated parent remains uninformed and excluded, with fewer opportunities to be involved. This helps to enforce the child's belief that the alienated parent has lost interest and no longer wishes to be involved. When a child points this out to the alienated parent it creates a difficult situation for that parent, as many alienated parents do not want to employ counter alienation strategies. An opportunity for the child and alienated parent to spend time together and build memories is lost (Baker, 2008, Baker *et al*, 2020:20; Corneli, 2019).



*(xvi) Changing the children's name to remove the association with the targeted parent*

Alienating parents, during a disassociation process from the alienated parent, would start to refer to themselves using a different name. Mothers will typically use their maiden name or previous surname instead of sharing a surname with the alienated parent. Fathers typically create a new name or nickname. When a person's name is changed, and the child's as well, it signifies belonging to that child, and subsequently aligns the child with that parent (Baker *et al*, 2020:21; Woodall & Woodall, 2017:117).

*(xvii) Undermining the authority of the targeted parent*

Alienated children can only see the good in the alienating parent and therefore speaks highly of them. The alienating parent creates a dependency on themselves, as opposed to the alienated parent who often encourages independence and balance. Alienating parents, through this strategy, keeps control over the child and keeps the child in compliance in an attempt to eliminate the alienated parent. The alienated parent is thus undermined, and the child's loyalty remains with the alienating parent (Baker *et al*, 2020:21-22; Darnall, 2008:5; Spangler, 2018).

## **2.6 DEFINITION, ROLE, AND EDUCATION OF SOCIAL WORKERS REGARDING PARENTAL ALIENATION**

The global definition of the social work profession was approved by both the International Federation of Social Workers and the International Association of Schools of Social Work. According to this definition, "Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility, and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledge, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance well-being. The above definition may be amplified at national and/or regional levels" (International Association of Schools of Social Work, 2014).

According to Weyers (2011), social work as a profession is a practice-based, academic discipline where social workers facilitate social change and development, social unity and the empowerment and freedom of people. Social work is also the practical science helping individuals to reach a high level of psychosocial functioning, and helping society to enhance the well-being of people. In practice, it is the professional activity of helping individuals, groups or communities to develop or restore their capacity for social functioning and create a society where these goals can be achieved. This section aims to define who social workers are, the role that they play in identifying and addressing PA, and the importance of educating social workers on PA.

### **2.6.1 Definition of social workers**

This study recognises the key role that social workers play in the detection of and intervention in parental alienation. In this context, the following definitions of social workers are given:

Based on the definition by Weyers (2011), the traditional role of social workers has always been to uplift communities, to protect the vulnerable and to enhance the functioning of individuals. Social workers are regarded as professionals in the investigation of the phenomenon of parental alienation.

Flynn (2018) defined social workers as a group of social service professionals committed to improving the social and behavioural lives of individuals, families, and communities. Social workers help at-risk or overwhelmed individuals to find resources, develop new coping strategies, resolve problems and conflicts, and secure opportunities. Social workers work with individual clients to lessen the impact, and in some cases resolve, unemployment, poverty, drug and alcohol dependency, homelessness, and domestic abuse. Social workers may work with individuals, families and/or targeted populations such as prisoners and the elderly.

## **2.7 THE ROLE OF SOCIAL WORKERS DURING THE PROCESS OF PA**

According to the Children's Act (38 of 2005), "a social worker means a person who is registered or deemed to be registered as a social worker in terms of the Social Services

Professionals Act, 1979 (Act 110 of 1978)” (Department of Justice, 2005:17). A social worker in South Africa must be a member of the South African Council for Social Services Professionals (SACSSP) which ensures that social workers comply with ethical standards and which acts as an additional support system. SACSSP is a statutory body established in terms of section 2 of the Social Service Professions Act (110 of 1978). The role of SACSSP is to determine, guide and direct social workers and other social service professions in South Africa (SACSSP, 2020).

Social workers employed by the Office of the Family Advocate assist the family advocates to determine the best interest of the children by conducting interviews with the family and the children involved, investigate the information received, and then draw up a report which is used as part of the final recommendation of the family advocate. Social workers in private practice who focus on forensic assessments also undertake investigations, conduct interviews and draw up final reports with comprehensive recommendations which are used by the court which then implements such recommendations in a court order. Forensic social workers also facilitate interventions such as bonding and integration therapy, act as a mediator between parents, and monitor the overall progress of a family in order to help ensure that a court order is executed as it was intended. According to Joubert and Van Wyk (2014:485), social workers do assist the courts as professional experts. This process entails the submission of forensic reports and testifying in the court as expert witnesses. It needs to be noted that a forensic report is produced for each investigation or assessment, which is then followed by the social worker’s detailed report on the investigation. The social worker’s report must be of a high quality.

The social worker’s role in parental alienation includes understanding the relevant legislation that can guide a process, general education, and advocacy of the child’s best interest. This role is aimed at solving problems in the best interest of the child (Madden, 2003:73).

### **2.7.1 Education of professionals**

Brown (2008:395) recommended that social workers and other professionals such as psychologists, psychiatrists and counsellors should educate themselves about the

symptoms, impact and intervention of PA. Guidelines for the detection of PA would contribute to this self-education process.

In this study, it is suggested that the detection of PA could result in earlier intervention with fewer negative consequences for the child and the family as a whole. Guidelines for the detection of PA will assist social workers to refer the matter as soon as possible to relevant forensic or specialised social workers for further intervention. According to Marcus (2020:547-548), social workers believe in their clients and take the plea of children to heart. In matters where the onset of parental alienation has been identified, the social workers should take a firm stance which can contradict general social work practices. A social worker must have sufficient training to be able to identify where parents and children are misguided or manipulated. Training can take place via workshops and practical handbooks.

## **2.8 INTERVENTIONS THAT COULD ASSIST IN COUNTERING PA**

In the following section, intervention strategies that could assist in countering PA will be discussed. The therapeutic process that takes place during PA, the child's voice, the child's view of the parents, and the impact of PA on children will be discussed in detail. All these aspects must be considered in order to determine the type of intervention.

### **2.8.1 Therapeutic process during parental alienation**

According to Gardner *et al.* (2006:299), for a therapeutic process to take place, it should be the therapist's strategy to involve a re-introduction of the child to the alienated parent in a positive fashion. It can only be achieved with the buy-in of the alienating parent. In turn, the alienated parent must also be prepared to deal with the initial struggles and challenges of a child who has been brainwashed and programmed. It would be ideal if a form of mediation can be established to initiate open communication channels between the alienating and alienated parents. This can pave the way for a therapist to facilitate ongoing cooperation between all parties. Smith (2016:500) explained that the structure of family treatment is important, specifically when the goal is to reunify the family. When the treatment starts, the structure and definition should be well defined. If this is not done, the treatment can fail at a later stage. Each individual and the family as a whole should set goals, and a strategy should be developed to reach these goals. Reducing the high levels of conflict will depend

on, among others, the therapist's skill set, the willingness of the parties to cooperate (voluntary or court-ordered), and the willingness of the alienating parent to cooperate with the therapeutic process. Such a process depends on ongoing support from the court, where the court continues to apply pressure in order to ensure the best interest of the child is upheld, and to accommodate the request for reconciliation.

Reay (2015:202-203) designed a therapeutic programme called the Family Reflections Program that can be used to treat severely alienated children in their family system. The programme has eight primary goals:

- i. Promoting healthy child adjustment
- ii. Improving the child's critical thinking skills
- iii. Helping the child to understand how and why the alienation occurred
- iv. Helping the favoured parent to understand how and why the alienation occurred
- v. Working with each family member to create improved and appropriate parent-parent and child-parent roles and to teach them responsibilities and boundaries
- vi. Strengthening the ability of parents to communicate and to resolve conflicts relevant to the parent-parent and parent-child relationships
- vii. Maintaining the reunification process
- viii. Actively promoting relationships between the child and both parents.

This model can be effective during the therapeutic PA intervention. However, from the researcher's perspective, this depends on the buy-in of the alienating parent – referring in particular to the alienating parent's understanding of goal iv, where that parent needs to acknowledge that they did indeed alienate the child.

Lorandos *et al.* (2013:23) referred to various treatments and interventions that have been suggested by experts and that could assist families to deal with PA. Severe parental alienation can destroy the previously healthy relationship between a child and parent, and the child can display intense anger, fear, frustration, and distrust. When these symptoms are present, the intervention level should be intense. Re-unification therapy should take

place soonest and for that intervention to be successful, the courts will have to be approached for assistance to help prevent the deterioration of the relationship.

## **2.8.2 The child's voice during intervention**

Next, the researcher will discuss the importance of the child's voice, the child's view of the parents during PA, and the possibility of restoring the child's relationship with the alienated parent. The child's voice must be noted during intervention, taking into consideration that a child's voice may be limited as a result of PA strategies used by the alienating parent. Section 10 and Section 31 of the Children's Act has been utilized to further provide input to the information below. Section 10 is with regards to "child participation" and Section 31 is on "major decisions involving a child" (Department of Justice, 2020).

### **2.8.2.1 The importance of the child's voice during intervention of PA**

According to Fidler *et al.* (2013:149), all parties involved (parents, professionals, and judges) need to take the child's input and views into consideration when making decisions. The child's wishes do not necessarily determine their best interest, but taking the child's perspective into account remains the duty of parents and courts. This includes wishes expressed by older children and adolescents. In other words, the right of a child to give input does not equate to the right of choice and decision making. Taking the child's voice into account extends further into litigation processes as it is important that even after the intervention took place, the focal point remains how the child feels and think. The legal fraternity and mental health professionals are conflicted about the involvement of a child in these processes. The argument that the child is put in the middle of the process. By asking the child's input in a dispute between the parents during a separation and litigation process, especially when parental alienation is present, could cause harm to the child. The counter-argument is that children should be active participants when decisions are made that will affect their lives after divorce or separation.

Taking the two arguments by Fidler *et al.* (2013:149) into consideration, research indicates that appropriate decision-making by children during separation or divorce can reduce negative effects. It further suggests that most children want to be informed and assured that their views will be considered. However, research also shows that children do not want to

be responsible for making these decisions. Factors such as age, competence, maturity, coping skills, family dynamics and the nature of the parent-child relationship should be taken into consideration when assessing the child's input.

Yasenik *et al.* (2020:760-773) supported the view that having the child's input is an effective way to highlight the child's needs and preferences during a parent coordination process. Without this, the parents can distort the child's views by imposing their own views on the situation. They suggested that a parent coordinator could mediate between the two parents, keeping in mind the child's views (Yasenik *et al.*, 2020:760-773). Research indicates that any decision taken during divorce proceedings will impact the child for rest of their childhood. Still, their views are being disregarded during this process.

### **2.8.3 Child's view of parents during parental alienation**

Not all parental alienation strategies will cause PA. However, those strategies are still damaging to the child and the alienated parent, and can impact how children view their parents. Children who are being alienated from a parent are made to feel guilty by the alienating parent when showing affection or loyalty to the alienated parent. This also impacts the child's view of the alienated parent's extended family (Baker & Darnall, 2006:112-113; Harman & Biringen, 2018:867).

Alienating parents often belittle a child who shows affection to the alienated parent. This results in the child openly rejecting an alienated parent. When this happens, the child stops showing their real emotions and internalises their feelings to please the alienating parent (Dunne & Hedrick, 1994:21-38). According to Fidler *et al.* (2013:188), children who are contact resistant also have emotional issues that should be addressed through counselling. This counselling can benefit the child as well as both parents. Research indicates that it is often beneficial for the family (parents and child jointly) to commit to a counselling process.

### **2.8.4 Possibility of restoring the relationship between the child and alienated parent**

According to Woodall (2015), the relationship between a parent and child can be restored. When a child still has a relationship with the alienating parent, such a child should be assisted to reframe the past in order to create a healthy future. This task of helping the child

to heal without eliminating the alienating parent could be challenging. Below, the researcher outlines this task in stages:

- i. **Stage 1: Disconnection from the alienation:** Assist the child to visualise themselves separate from the alienating parent through discussion and strong affirmation of the capacity to reconnect.
- ii. **Stage 2: Retrieval of their ability to think their own thoughts:** Test the child's reality with statements and questions such as: "Am I the person you thought I am? Am I still here for you"?
- iii. **Stage 3: Suspension of disbelief that the target parent is dangerous:** Hold firm boundaries, follow through on commitments, and allow the child to challenge without reactive responses.
- iv. **Stage 4: Reframing:** Reframe the child's understanding of the past. Help them to see that their behaviours were not based on fact but on what they had been led to believe were facts. Assist the child to reframe their understanding and perception of the past.
- v. **Stage 5: Rebuilding of trust:** Rebuilding trust in the once targeted parent takes time, and requires that the child is given the forgiveness they seek when they seek it. A child who has been alienated knows that their behaviour has been damaging (to the alienated parent), and they do need to feel that they can ask for and be given forgiveness. Hence, it is important to rebuild trust with the alienated parent and to ensure the child of forgiveness.
- vi. **Stage 6: Reframing of the relationship with the alienating parent:** This is when the child must learn how to relate to the alienating parent in ways that are safe for them. This can involve helping the child to understand which of the behaviours that the child encountered in the parent were those that led to them behave as they did when they were alienated. Assist the child to relate to the alienating parent by reframing that relationship.
- vii. **Stage 7: Learning how to live an integrated internal life:** Children need to see people as both good AND bad, and learn how to disappoint people without feeling that the world is going to fall apart. This is a very important task for all children whose



psychological self has been split into seeing the world as good or bad. This can take longer than any of the other tasks above.

According to Kruk (2013), children who have been alienated are capable of quick transformation and can restore a normal parent-child relationship with the alienated parent. The child can also regress to his/her previously alienated position when influenced by the alienating parent. This is supported by Smith (2016:502) who uses family-based therapy for parent-child reunification. Treatment goals are set for the aligned parent, the rejected parent, the child and the family as a whole with an action for each goal. The family is encouraged to reach their goals and complete their actions, and will remain committed to the process until reunification takes place. This type of treatment can be exhausting for a therapist as it is likely that half of the family does not want to participate at the beginning of the process. Balance and objectivity are key until the parties shift their views and participate with less resistance. The therapist's supportive role during the therapeutic interventions could cause concern among some family members who might view the therapist as aligned with a member.

## **2.9 THE IMPACT OF PARENTAL ALIENATION ON THE CHILD**

The possibility of immediate and long-term effects could be devastating to family relationships and could cause emotional damage to children. The effects of PA on children are discussed below.

### **2.9.1 The immediate effects of parental alienation on children**

According to Harman *et al.* (2016), children will live “split lives” to cope with behaving in different ways with the different parents, depending on which parent they are spending time with. This is supported by Lorandos *et al.* (2013:327) who confirmed that alienated children behave differently with each parent during the process of PA. Goldin and Salani (2020:246) stated that the lack of clear guidelines to identify PA allows for undetected emotional abuse such as children having false fears, being manipulated emotionally, isolation from the alienated parent as well as the alienating parent withholding love and affection if the child does not behave in a way they wish.

Baker *et al.* (2020:39) explained that children can hold a negative view of the alienated parent and show no interest in a relationship with the alienated parent. While they only have aggressive and hostile behaviour towards the alienated parent, children may also state that their lives are better off without that parent in it, and they will not make any attempts to form a possible future relationship with the alienated parent. When alienated children are asked to list positive and negative aspects about each parent, the alienated parent's list would consist of only negatives as such a child cannot recall one positive about the alienated parent (Kumari & Brooks, 2004:160). Gardner *et al.* (2006:213) stated that PA has an effect on scholastic achievement, decreased self-esteem, lack of impulse control, adjustment issues, heightened fear and anxiety as well as cognitive and psychological disturbances. The emotional landscape of the child is altered as a result of anxiety and fear, which also impact achievement at school. When a child has no self-esteem and poor impulse control, it could lead to the child withdrawing from social activities and the peer group.

### **2.9.2 Long-term effects of parental alienation on children**

Kruk (2013) mentioned that the child's false belief that the alienated parent is dangerous and disgraceful creates a mental condition as a result of PA. The effects of PA – such as substance abuse, depression, trust issues, low self-confidence and self-hate – are well documented in the literature, and children eventually lose the love that such a relationship can offer. The betrayal and guilt that the child feels towards an alienated parent can cause the child to internalise emotions such as hatred, which results in self-hatred. When a child feels unloved by a parent and is separated from a parent it can cause depression, especially since a child cannot mourn the loss of the alienated parent. An alienated child is at high risk to become alienated from their own children due to them maintaining a conflicted and distant relationship with the alienating parent. They are further prone to post-traumatic stress. Hence, any reunification should be done with sensitivity.

Lorandos *et al.* (2013:18) suggested that the alienation process often results in children developing conduct disorders, mood disorders, prevalence of substance abuse, and personality disturbances. Johnston *et al.* (2005:19) noted emotional and behavioural problems in a clinically significant proportion of alienated children compared to non-alienated children. Johnston (2005:768) indicated that alienated children are prone to more

troubled, emotionally dependent and socially awkward relationships, while having to cope with problematic self-esteem (very low, or defensively high) and poor awareness of reality, and being vulnerable to enmeshment or splitting relationships with others.

In their comprehensive research, Fidler and Bala (2010:12) found that children who are being alienated run a higher risk of emotional distress and adjustment difficulties than children who have experienced litigation without alienation. They too confirmed poor reality testing, illogical reasoning, difficulty in processing information, distorted views of interpersonal perceptions, and disrupted interpersonal functioning which can include self-hate, compromised self-esteem, pseudo maturity, gender identity problems, lack of remorse or guilt, and many more.

## **2.10 LEGISLATION AND POLICY RELEVANT TO PA**

Two key resources that are useful when families are exposed to separation or divorce are the White Paper on Families, and the Children's Act. Both resources are discussed below to indicate their relevance.

### **2.10.1 White Paper on Families**

Family, as defined by the White Paper on Families (2013:11), is a group of persons who interacts with each other and recognises a relationship with each other, be it because of common parentage, marriage and/or adoption. As indicated in the White Paper on Families (2013:15-16), divorce in South Africa showed a fluctuating trend between 2001 and 2010. White families were more inclined to divorce followed by black families. In 2010, 27.3% of divorces that were granted was from relationships that lasted between five and nine years, with most of these divorces from the African, Coloured and Indian cultural groups. The White Paper stated that this statistic was followed by the White population, where 20.9% of the divorces granted were in marriages that lasted fewer than five years. Divorces initiated in South Africa show a consistent pattern in that the divorce is initiated by the woman. Almost half of the divorces in 2010 lasted for fewer than 10 years. This statistic is worrying when considering the duration of the marriages, and the possibility that children were born from these marriages. This means that a significant number of young children are affected by divorce (Department of Social Development, 2013).

The White Paper on Families (2013:36) also discusses response strategies for families. These strategies are strongly underpinned by the systems approach, with the family seen as a social system. By using this approach, service providers will be able to analyse and describe family-based aspects. This systems approach as described in the White Paper on Families also speaks to this study's theoretical framework based on Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Theory.

### **2.10.2 Children's Act, No 38 of 2005**

In the following section, the participation of children and the best interest of children will be deliberated. Specific sections of the Children's Act and how these sections apply to the participation of children and the best interest of children will also be examined.

#### **2.10.2.1 Participation of children**

The purpose of South Africa's Children's Act (28 of 2005) is, among others, to protect children's rights during separation or divorce. As stated in Section 10 of the Children's Act (2005), "every child that is of such an age, maturity and stage of development as to be able to participate in any matter concerning that child has the right to participate in an appropriate way and views expressed by the child must be given due consideration" (Department of Justice, 2005). Section 10 clearly says the input of a minor child should be taken into consideration. However, this Section does not give the child the right of choice (Children's Act, 2005).

The open-ended category of age, maturity and stage of development can also be confusing as the measure of this could be subjectively interpreted. Section 31(1)(a) of the Children's Act reads: "Before a person holding parental responsibilities and rights in respect of a child takes any decision contemplated in paragraph (b) involving the child, that person must give due consideration to any views and wishes expressed by the child, bearing in mind the child's age, maturity and stage of development." Sections 6(2)(a), 7(1)(a) – (n), 10 and 31(1)(a) of the Children's Act speak to the best interest of the child standard and the right of the child to participate and express their views in all matters that affect them, as well as their right to be heard in official proceedings in motion.

Based on the researcher's understanding of the above, children should be allowed to participate in the process and their voices should be heard while keeping in mind the criteria of age, maturity, and stage of development. Referring to PA, social workers need to be mindful that the voice of the child could mirror that of the alienating parent. In this instance, we need to keep in mind the extent to which this may occur by assessing aspects such as language usage and emotion transfer of how the alienating parent feels about the alienated parent, as these emotions are transferred onto the child who then projects these emotions onto the alienated parent. When children are made part of the process, it shows them that their thoughts and feelings are heard and valid, and that their buy-in is important for the success outcome of the visitation and/or reunification process. Despite considering the voice of the child with regard to the participatory process, it is essential to remember that this only aims to provide input for the final ruling. It does not dictate the outcome as the best interest of the child needs to be upheld based on the circumstances surrounding the matter or case.

The UN's Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN Human Rights, 2020), also known as the CRC, emphasises that the best interests of the child are always to be considered in all matters concerning children. Article 12, section 1 of the CRC states that should a child have the capacity to form their own views, they should be given the opportunity to express those views freely. These views should be weighed against the child's age and maturity. This Article therefore ensures that the child's voice is always taken into account with regard to decisions that affect them. The child has the option, according to the CRC, to be heard either through active participation where the child is consulted directly, or through representation where an attorney speaks on their behalf.

#### 2.10.2.2 The best interest of the child

The best interest of the child standard is well known in South African courts and is frequently used by social workers working with separation and divorce. Although the best interest of the child is powerful, it does not mean that other legitimate arguments do not have a place in the assessments undertaken by social workers. Section 28 (2) of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996) says, "A child's best interests are of paramount importance in every matter concerning the child".

When the best interest of the child is being determined, it is essential that the child's wishes are taken into account. Weight is given to the child's preference on grounds of the child meeting the necessary intellectual and emotional maturity. This will help to ensure a genuine and accurate reflection of the child's thoughts and feelings about their relationship with each party (Boniface, 2013).

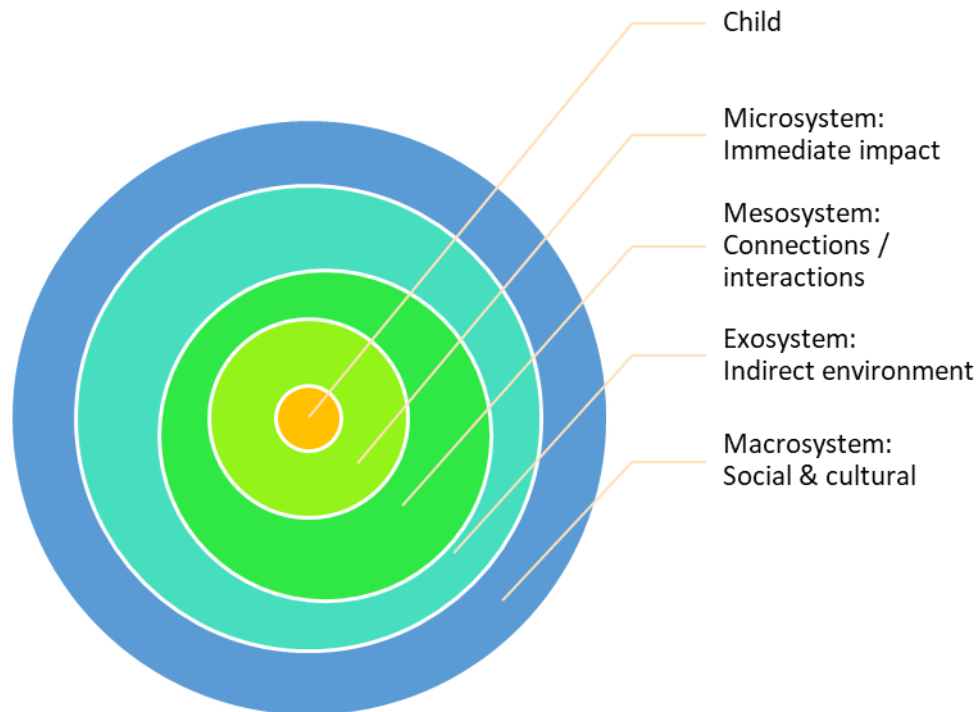
Boniface (2013) stated that there are occurrences where the wishes of children are not mentioned at all, despite the children being teenagers or pre-teens. Additionally, there is case law where the court ignores the wishes of the children for different reasons, such as regarding the children's preferences as immature or unwise, or saying that the children's views are affected by undue parental influence. In some of these cases it is clear that the court could not have said that the children were too young to express their opinions. Even if the child concerned is of a tender age, every effort should be made to hear the child's views.

When considering the above with reference to the best interest of the child, the outcome may not be what the child wants but it will be after careful consideration of all the factors at play. It is also important, especially in PA, that the best interest of a child should be evaluated by an objective person such as a social worker, and not by either of the parents.

## **2.11 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR THE STUDY**

Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Theory was used as the theoretical framework for this study since Bronfenbrenner focuses on systems in the family, such as the microsystems, mesosystem, exosystem and macrosystem, and finally the chronosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979:41; Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994:570; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007:794). The following diagram was developed by the researcher to explain the different levels of the Bioecological Theory.

Bronfenbrenner's systems theory is illustrated by Figure 2-1 below.



**Figure 2–1: Bronfenbrenner's ecological model as adapted from The Psychology Notes Headquarters**

### **2.11.1 Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Theory**

The interaction between different systems (for example the mother, father, child, siblings) is important. According to Rosa and Tudge (2013:244), the Bioecological Theory in its current or mature form specifies that researchers should study the following: the settings in which a developing individual spends time and the individual's relations with others in the same settings, the personal characteristics of the individual (and those with whom he or she typically interacts), both development over time and the historical time in which these individuals live, and the mechanisms that drive development.

#### 2.11.1.1 Development of the Bioecological Theory

Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Theory was developed in three phases. According to Rosa and Tudge (2013:245), as highlighted in Crockett and Carlo (2015:269), Eriksson *et al.* (2018:419-421) and Coscioni *et al.* (2018), Phase 1 took place between 1973 and 1979, Phase 2 took place between 1980 and 1993, while Phase 3 took place between 1993 and 2006.

##### i. Phase 1 (1973-1979)

According to Rosa and Tudge (2013:145), during Phase 1, Bronfenbrenner labelled his theory as an ecological approach to human development or an ecological model of human development. Bronfenbrenner discovered research limitations and he was not able to answer practical questions relating to the lives of children and their families (Bronfenbrenner, 1979:41). This resulted in Bronfenbrenner further advancing the scientific understanding of interpersonal processes that take place during human development, which included the immediate and remote environment in which individuals live. During this phase he described the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem and macro system which are discussed later in this chapter.

##### ii. Phase 2 (1980-1993)

During this phase Bronfenbrenner made changes to his theory with a specific focus on the roles and developmental processes of individuals. The Process-Person-Context (PPC) model was developed during this phase, and it included time as a chronosystem (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994:570; Rosa & Tudge. 2013:254).

##### iii. Phase 3 (1993-2006)

During this final phase, as described by Rosa and Tudge (2013:251-254), the PPC model evolved into the Process-Person-Context-Time (PPCT) model. This model describes the proximal processes, person characteristics, context and time that concurrently influence developmental outcomes of human beings (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007:794). According



to Rosa and Tudge (2013:256), researchers need to indicate the specific version of Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Theory applied in their studies.

#### 2.11.1.2 Bronfenbrenner's Microsystems, Mesosystems, Exosystems and Macro Systems

Bronfenbrenner's framework describes the role of the family and children's social environment to indicate the relationship between a child and their home, family and community. The model is child-focused and consists of four systems.

##### *i) Microsystems*

Roundy (2020), Bornstein and Lamb (2011:40), and Shaffer and Kipp (2010:63) explained the microsystem is the first level of Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecological model. This system described individuals' direct contact with each other. A microsystem includes family, peers, caregivers, school, and work. This most influential microsystem has bi-directional relationships where individuals are treated by people based on the way that they react to people.

In a microsystem, a child will have direct interaction with parents, siblings and extended family. At school, the child also has direct interaction with peers and educators.

##### *ii) Mesosystem*

The mesosystem is the next level of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory. In the mesosystem the interaction between the different aspects of a person's microsystem is described. Microsystems do not function in isolation and therefore relate to each other in the mesosystem (Roundy, 2020; Shaffer & Kipp, 2010:63). An example of a mesosystem is the interaction between a child's parents and the teachers at school.

##### *iii) Exosystem*

The exosystem consists of situations that do not directly involve the individual, but these situations still affect them in one way or the other. Actions or decisions still have an impact on the individual. However, the individual holds no power to participate in this process and

the individual cannot make determinations (Roundy, 2020; Shaffer & Kipp, 2010:64; Bjorklund & Blasi, 2011:69).

#### *iv) Macrosystem*

According to Shaffer and Kipp (2010:64), and Bjorklund and Blasi (2011:69), the macrosystem represents the culture of an individual. This cultural context involves the socioeconomic status of an individual and the family as well as an ethnic group and whether such individual is living in a First World or Third World country. For example, if an individual is from a certain cultural group, that culture will determine norms and values.

### **2.11.2 Bronfenbrenner's PPCT model**

As the interaction between different systems (for example the mother, father, child and siblings) is important in this study, Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Theory was used as a theoretical framework for this research (Rosa & Tudge, 2013:244). According to Rosa and Tudge (2013) as well as Hayes *et al.* (2017:22-23), the Bioecological Theory in its current or mature form specifies that researchers should study the settings in which a developing individual spends time and relates to others, the personal characteristics of the individual (and those with whom they typically interact), development over time and the historical time in which these individuals live, and the mechanisms that drive development. Bronfenbrenner uses the PPCT model which refers to Proximal Processes, Person Characteristics, Context and Time (Bronfenbrenner, 1995:620; Hayes *et al.* 2017:22-23; Rosa & Tudge, 2013:244).

- i. **Proximal process** refers to the change from ecological theory to Bioecological Theory. It refers to the role that a person plays in their own development through relationships between people, and between people and objects (Koller *et al.* 2019:179).
- ii. **Person characteristics** refer to characteristics that are considered the most likely to influence developmental outcomes, constructive or destructive (Bornstein, 2019:14; Bronfenbrenner, 1995:795-796).

- iii. **Context** refers to the interaction with objects, symbols or other social partners that occur within systems (Haegele *et al.* 2020:268; Hayes *et al.* (2017:25).
- iv. **Time** is included in the model as an individual's life is embedded in and shaped by conditions and events spanning their individual lives (Haegele *et al.* 2020:270).

### 2.11.3 Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Theory applied to this study

According to Murphy and Rasmussen (2020:197), the subject matter and the arguments of a specific aspect must be grounded in a suitable theory. Based on this, the researcher determined that parental alienation should be investigated through Bronfenbrenner's framework. The researcher chose Bronfenbrenner's bioecological framework as it effectively indicates how relationships and environments impact a child's life. Because parental alienation has a severe impact on the child and the systems in which they grow up, this theoretical framework can clearly show how parental alienation changes a child's relationship with these systems.

The spheres that are affected by parental alienation and that have a direct impact on the child are:

- **The microsystem:** The parents themselves (alienating and alienated) as well as the extended family (which can also become alienated) can be impacted by parental alienation.
- **The mesosystem:** The relationships between the microsystems can be impacted by parental alienation. For example, parental alienation can lead to social withdrawal from peers and extended family. Another example is school environments as the children isolate themselves from not only their peers in class, but also from extracurricular activities that they may once have enjoyed.
- **The exosystem:** The exosystem consists of situations that do not directly involve the individual, but these situations still affect them in one way or the other. The child does not play any active role in parental alienation. However, one parent can cause the disintegration of the relationship between the child and the alienated parent. Should the

alienating parent be removed, the child may form a closer bond with the targeted parent, or they may develop more resentment as they blame the targeted parent for 'losing' the alienating parent.

- **The macrosystem:** The macrosystem refers to the culture and socioeconomic status of people. In the context of parental alienation, the one parent might be able to afford to fight for their right to see their child and for the alienation to be addressed.

According to Rosa and Tudge (2013:244) and Green (2010:102), the four elements of Bronfenbrenner's PPCT model – namely Proximal Processes, Person Characteristics, Context and Time – are all impacted during the process of parental alienation. These four elements will be taken into consideration in the development of PA detection guidelines for social workers (Rosa & Tudge, 2013:244). The PPCT model, which can be applied to PA and the impact thereof on the children in this study, can be understood as follows:

- **Proximal process:** In this study, the proximal process applies to the everyday activities of the parent-child relationship, including the alienating parent's interaction with a child as well as the lack of interaction of the alienated parent.
- **Person characteristics:** This applies to the alienating parent's attitude which can influence the child affected by PA. The developmental outcomes include the detachment of the child from the alienated parent.
- **Context:** The context can be created by the alienating parent using alienating strategies such as badmouthing to target the alienated parent. This can change a child's memories over time. The alienating parent can also remove objects of a symbolic value to create even more distance between the child and the alienated parent.
- **Time:** Time is applicable where the alienating parent limits or restricts contact with the alienated parent. The alienating parent can influence the child's views of the alienated parent, and instil fear in the child.

## 2.12 CONCLUSION

This chapter provided insight into the phenomenon of PA and explained why it is important that professionals such as social workers upskill themselves on the signs and symptoms of PA in order to facilitate appropriate interventions – the benefit of all parties involved. It is also important to note that most of the literature does not cover the South African context. One reason is because the South African judiciary system does not acknowledge the term *parental alienation* and rather describes the phenomenon.

This literature overview provided an in-depth understanding of the strategies employed by alienating parents, the symptoms displayed by the affected children, and the social workers' need for clear guidelines. Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Theory was discussed and applied as the theoretical framework for this study, using both the systems model and the PPCT model.

The following chapter will provide an overview of the research process and the social workers from the Office of the Family Advocate and from in private practice who participated in the study. This will be followed by a comprehensive discussion of the findings.

## **CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH FINDINGS**

### **3.1 INTRODUCTION**

Chapter 2 provided a conceptual framework for this study. This ensuing chapter will focus on the findings of this study. The purpose of this chapter is to provide detailed findings of the empirical study and to discuss these findings. The findings are important because they provide valuable input for the drawing up of guidelines to contribute to the detection of parental alienation during separation and divorce.

### **3.2 OVERVIEW OF THE RESEARCH PROCESS**

The research process was discussed in Chapter 1. This section will, therefore, only provide an overview of the process followed.

#### **3.2.1 Research question and sub-questions**

The following research question was asked:

What will guidelines aimed at assisting social workers in the detection of PA during separation or divorce entail?

The following sub-questions were asked:

- What were the perspectives of social workers pertaining to the detection of PA during separation or divorce?
- What elements could social workers add to the development of guidelines for the detection of PA during separation or divorce?

### **3.2.2 Research approach and design**

A qualitative research approach – as described by Bless, Higson-Smith and Sithole (2013:16) – was utilised in this study. The use of this approach seemed appropriate as it allowed the study participants to share their views about the phenomenon, i.e. the detection of PA. According to Botma *et al.* (2010:182), qualitative research describes the story or the meaning behind the numbers provided by quantitative research. Qualitative research provides a rich explanation of a phenomenon and its characteristics or qualities (Botma *et al.*, 2010). Quantitative research, on the other hand, provides a broad explanation which will not be suitable for this study as rich information is needed to develop the guidelines.

A qualitative descriptive design was therefore used in this study, as this design focuses on discovering the nature of specific events (Lambert & Lambert, 2012:256). According to Sandelowski (2008:78), the qualitative descriptive design will produce findings that are closer to participants' input in order to provide rich data. This design is appropriate for this study as it allowed the researcher to explore the perspectives of social workers on the detection of PA in order to develop guidelines.

### **3.2.3 Population and sampling**

The population for this study was social workers in Gauteng, who are working with high-conflict families during divorce or separation and who specialise in forensic investigations and testify in High and Regional Courts.

For this study, a non-probability purposive sampling method was used because this study had a specific purpose in mind (Maree & Pietersen, 2016:198). The researcher selected participants according to specific inclusion criteria because they were able to purposefully form an understanding of the research problem (Creswell, 2013:156), namely PA. The researcher's initial intent was to only use social workers from the Office of the Family Advocate. However, due to their heavy workloads, only some of them could find the time to attend the interviews. Since the number of social workers from the Office of the Family Advocate were not sufficient to reach at least 15 participants or data saturation, it was decided to include social workers in private practice as well. An amendment was sent to HREC, requesting that the researcher could use social workers from private practice as

participants as well. The social workers in private practice were recruited via snowball sampling, which can continue until data saturation has been reached (Naderifar *et al.*, 2017:2). Snowball sampling is used when it is difficult to recruit participants. Once the private sector social workers were also on board, the data collection phase proceeded promptly. The participants in this study assisted the researcher to develop a deeper understanding of the detection of PA, which ultimately led to the development guidelines for the detection of parental alienation.

In a qualitative study, the aim is to develop more in-depth insight about a phenomenon. It therefore studies people in their natural context (Bless *et al.*, 2013:162). In this study, the aim was not to generalise the results to the populations but rather to gain knowledge and develop new insights.

The following sample was selected to represent the population group in this study: A total of 15 social workers were selected for this study. Guest *et al.* (2006:74) stated that the sample size of 15 social workers would be sufficient to reach data saturation. It was not necessary to recruit more than 15 social workers as data saturation was achieved. According to Guest *et al.* (2006:74), data saturation occurs when no further new themes or categories arise from the collected data. Data saturation was achieved after the interview with Participant 13 was completed; the data collected after that was repetitive.

### **3.2.4 Data collection**

In this study, semi-structured interviews were used as the data collection method. Dearnley (2005:22) described semi-structured interviews as interviews that allow all participants to be asked the same questions within a flexible framework. The open nature of the questions encouraged depth and allowed new concepts to emerge. These interviews were aimed at gaining detailed information about the participants' perspectives of PA and the detection thereof. This method also allows the researcher to ask more questions based on the responses. This ensures that as much knowledge and insights as possible are elicited from the participants.

Semi-structured interviews of approximately one hour each took place during office hours at the workplace of the social workers. The social workers interviewed were working in both



Johannesburg and Pretoria. The interview consisted of seven questions. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim in order to proceed with data analysis.

### **3.2.5 Data analysis**

The data obtained from all semi-structured interviews was analysed through content analysis. According to Stemler (as cited by Nieuwenhuis, 2016:111) content analysis has been defined as a methodical, replicable technique to compress many words into fewer content categories based on rules of coding. Content analysis enables the researcher to discover and describe actions, context, people, places and events (Nieuwenhuis, 2016:112). Content analysis was therefore an appropriate data analysis method with which to categorise the participants' narratives into content categories.

The process as described by Creswell (2014:247-250) was followed for the content analysis. This process is described as a direct, hierarchical process, with six steps which are interconnected but do not necessarily follow in the order they are given. First, the researcher organised and prepared the data for analysis by transcribing the interviews with the help of a transcriber. The researcher read thoroughly through all the transcribed interviews to get a wide-ranging sense of the information and possibly the overall meaning. The coding of the data was done manually through organising the data into portions of information and writing a word that represents a category in the margin. Detailed descriptions of the setting or the people involved as well as descriptions of the categories or themes for analysis were given. The results of the analysis were presented to the participants. The data was compared to existing literature to see whether the identified themes were congruent with scientific information that is already available.

The analysed data together with the literature study provided the foundation for the guidelines for the detection of PA. The guidelines were developed after all the coding of the data was completed and five themes were identified. These themes were divided into subthemes and categories which allowed the researcher to discuss each theme in detail. The five detailed themes and the literature overview were then used to develop the guidelines. Once the seven guidelines were developed, a resource was compiled to assist social workers with the potential identification of PA.

The findings from the interviews were sent to each participant group via e-mail for member checking. Member checking helped to confirm the accuracy of the qualitative findings. The participants indicated that they were satisfied with the themes extracted from the interviews.

### 3.3 BIOGRAPHIC INFORMATION OF THE PARTICIPANTS

The participants who took part in this study form a well-connected network. Therefore, making the biographic information of the participants known would compromise the anonymity of the participants. Three male and 12 female participants were interviewed for this study. A total of seven participants were from the Office of the Family Advocate while eight participants were in private practice.

The findings from this qualitative study were grouped into five themes. These themes are visually demonstrated in Figure 3-1 below:



**Figure 3-1: Themes from the qualitative study**

### 3.4 DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

Five themes with subthemes and categories were identified from the data analysis. These themes will now be discussed, correlated with the relevant literature and illustrated with verbatim quotes from the participants. The summarised themes are attached as Annexure G, and an example of the quotes for Theme 1 is attached as Annexure H.

#### 3.4.1 Theme 1: Social workers' perspectives on parental alienation

In Theme 1, the researcher discusses the social workers' perspectives on parental alienation. Theme 1 is divided into four subthemes, namely the description of parental alienation, reasons for the onset of PA, the relevance of the history between the parents, and the influence of the alienating parent in parental alienation. This is illustrated in Table 3.1 below.

**Table 3-1: Theme 1: Social workers' perspectives on parental alienation**

| <b>Theme 1: Social workers' perspectives on parental alienation</b> |                                                                             |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Subtheme</b>                                                     | <b>Category</b>                                                             |
| 1.1 Description of parental alienation                              | (i) Defining parental alienation                                            |
|                                                                     | (ii) Use of the term parental alienation                                    |
| 1.2 Reasons for the onset of parental alienation                    | (i) Protection of the children                                              |
|                                                                     | (ii) "Getting back" at the alienated parent                                 |
|                                                                     | (iii) Personal gain and selfish behaviour                                   |
| 1.3 Relevance of history between parents                            | (i) The relationship between the parents and children before the separation |
|                                                                     | (ii) Parent's own hurt after separation or divorce                          |
|                                                                     | (iii) Presence of transgression caused by the other parent                  |

|                                                                   |                                                                                     |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1.4 The influence of the alienating parent in parental alienation | (i) Opinions and perceptions about the alienated parent (which influence the child) |
|                                                                   | (ii) Limiting the relationship between the alienated parent and the children        |
|                                                                   | (iii) Strategies used by the alienating parent                                      |

#### Subtheme 1.1: Description of parental alienation

In this subtheme, the researcher will discuss the description of parental alienation which consists of two categories, namely defining parental alienation, and the use of the term parental alienation.

**Table 3-2: Subtheme 1.1: Description of parental alienation**

| Theme 1: Social workers' perspectives on parental alienation |                                          |
|--------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------|
| Subtheme                                                     | Category                                 |
| 1.1 Description of parental alienation                       | (i) Defining parental alienation         |
|                                                              | (ii) Use of the term parental alienation |

#### Category (i): Defining parental alienation

Based on the data that was analysed, all participants formulated their own definitions of parental alienation. However, the participants have a likeminded understanding of the definition of PA. The likeminded understanding indicates that the social workers share similar opinions. They agreed that the basic foundations of PA consist of restricted contact, an alienating and alienated parent, and a child being influenced by a parent. The researcher will now indicate the different aspects of PA as viewed by the participants.

Participants 4 and 7 agreed that there is a negative influence from a parent, with a child being negatively influenced by a parent who is serving their own agenda. They indicated that in their view, there is no valid reason for keeping the child away from the alienated parent and to create a negative view of the alienated parent. As Participant 4 commented: "... parental alienation is when two parents have a child staying with the other parent. That parent is negatively influencing that child. The child can then view that other parent as a bad person."

Participant 7 said in this regard: "... when one parent tries to keep the minor child away from the other parent. Using devices [methods] that aren't correct – not necessarily because there's a good reason to keep the child away but to protect their own agenda or to have their own way in a separation or divorce situation."

Participant 3 indicated that PA is not gender-specific and that such alienation can be emotional or physical as illustrated by the following quote: "It's coming from a parent, either mom or dad who is specifically alienating the other parent from a child or children. It's not to say it's only physically, I think it can be emotionally, it can be physically..."

Burrill (2002:78) stated that the destructiveness of PA is not linked to the gender of a parent. However, the negative behaviour of the child increases in the same way towards the alienated parent as the alienating hostility and negative behaviour increases during the alienation process.

Participant 15 agreed with Participants 4 and 7, saying that alienated children share the view of the alienating parent, and that the alienating parent's experience becomes that of the child. The child therefore shares the same fears as the alienating parent. This statement indicates that the child reflects the emotions that the alienating parent experiences, which then becomes the child's reality. Lorandos (2020:9) agreed with this statement, saying that some of the children who have been living with the alienating parent for a long period of time became emotionally attached to the alienating parent and experienced overwhelming fear and hatred towards the alienated parent.

Participant 14 mentioned that PA is a subconscious as well as conscious process with one parent restricting contact with the other parent. This participant therefore viewed PA as a

subconscious process. This view was shared by only one other participant in this study. This subconscious vs the conscious process is supported by Bernet and Freeman (2011:481) who indicated that the alienation process resembles “brainwashing” where the alienating parent displays a conscious as well as subconscious component.

These participants’ definitions of PA correspond with the research done by Gardner (2002:95). He initially 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.” An article in *Social Work Today* (2018:26) described PA as a strategy that a parent uses to create the child’s rejection of the other parent. Should these strategies be successful, PAS develops, and children come to hate, fear, and reject the targeted parent and sees them as unworthy of having a relationship with.

#### Category (ii): Use of the term parental alienation

From the study, it was clear that many of the participants did not feel confident enough to use the term parental alienation as there were no clear criteria to define PA and they were cautious about misusing the term. In this regard, Participant 1 mentioned that the term parental alienation is a psychiatric diagnosis, and that social workers are not allowed to make diagnoses. This was supported by Participant 14 who stated: “... the courts are quite harsh on us defining it and identifying it as parental – we’re using the words as parental alienation because the DSM-5 did not recognise or does not recognise it as a diagnosis.” The participant summarised her view, indicating that social workers are not allowed to make diagnoses.

A study done by Mercer (2019:253) indicated that PA is not indicated in any formal diagnostic system; it is therefore not a diagnosis as with other disorders or illnesses. Also, PA does not fall in a conventional diagnostic category. However, there are people campaigning for the inclusion of PA in a diagnostic system.

Participants 2, 3 and 13 were not comfortable using the word PA or parental alienation, and preferred to use a synonym or avoid the term. They preferred to discuss the situation instead of labelling the matter as PA or parental alienation.

It was clear from the interviews that all the participants were hesitant about indicating PA in their final reports. Participant 14's answer (see above) explains why social workers would prefer to use a synonym or alternative description of PA. The reason is that, according to the participant, the courts are harsh on social workers defining PA.

Polak and Saini (2015:222) stated that the phenomenon of children resisting contact with a parent after separation is well documented in research. The authors explained that, although several labels have been given to this phenomenon – such as Parental Alienation Syndrome and Parents Alienation, it has caused controversy among professionals and divided opinions among researchers, attorneys and mental health professionals. The authors suggested that it is more beneficial to use descriptive strategies than a definition of PA.

#### 3.4.1.2 Subtheme 1.2: Reasons for the onset of parental alienation

Subtheme 1.2 consists of three categories. These categories are indicated in Table 3-3 below. In this subtheme, the researcher will discuss the reasons for the onset of parental alienation, namely (i) protection of the children, (ii) 'getting back' at the alienated parent, and (iii) personal gain and selfish behaviour. This is illustrated in Table 3-3 below.

**Table 3-3: Subtheme 1.2: reasons for the onset of parental alienation**

| <b>Theme 1: Social workers' perspectives on parental alienation</b> |                                             |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|
| <b>Subtheme</b>                                                     | <b>Category</b>                             |
| 1.2 Reasons for the onset of parental alienation                    | (i) Protection of the children              |
|                                                                     | (ii) "Getting back" at the alienated parent |
|                                                                     | (iii) Personal gain and selfish behaviour   |

### Category (i): Protection of the children

The participants believed that there is indeed a need to protect children in certain cases during separation and divorce. However, this need for protection is not part of a PA strategy. The participants' view of considering protection as a strategy is explored below.

Participant 1 indicated that it is difficult to distinguish between the protection of children and the onset of parental alienation. It could be an allegation that the parent wants to protect the child. The participant indicated that this can be taken to the extreme and that it is difficult to test the severity of the allegation, as indicated by the following quote: "... make allegations because they [parents] truly want to protect the child and then they would get matters where it's extreme. Sometimes it's difficult for us because we can't test the veracity of what they're saying, of the allegations they're making."

Not all the participants viewed protection as an alienation strategy, as indicated by Participant 6 who regarded the protection of children as simply protection and not as an alienation strategy. Participant 6 commented as follows: "It is the protection itself. So, if I'm [parent] protecting somebody from something to happen from them [children], that should not be viewed as alienation, it is a protection, pure protection." Also, "She's [mother] not necessarily alienating; she is protecting the interest of the child ..."

There should be a clear distinction between protection, and protection as an alienation strategy. Failing to understand the difference could result in PA not being detected and identified, as described in Baker *et al.* (2020:53-55) referring to the difference between an abused child and parental alienation, which they described as counterintuitive strategy 3. The authors indicated that an abused child and an alienated child may display similar symptoms, such as aggression and rude behaviour. However, a child who is abused is willing to repair the relationship with the parent who abused them and often appears to be protective over that parent. In contrast, an alienated child does not want a relationship with the alienated parent. Not many participants shared the views of the participants who were quoted in this category.



### Category (ii): “Getting back” at the alienated parent

Many of the participants indicated that this category is highly relevant. They all shared the view that “getting back” at the other parent is a significant reason for the onset of parental alienation due to the hurt, embarrassment, and anger that parents feel. Participant 4 is quoted as saying: “Parents want to hurt the other parent by influencing the child negatively against that parent...” Participant 5 commented as follows: “They [parents] mostly use children as a tool to fight their own battles...” This indicates that the children are being used as tools in the battle between the parents, which also points to the presence of high levels of conflict (i.e. fighting).

According to Participant 7, “getting back at the alienated parent” is a conscious and mala fide attempt to nullify the role of the other parent, destroy the relationship between the child and the alienated parent, and change the child’s perception of the alienated parent into a negative narrative. This can be described as selective attention where a child’s view of the alienated parent is skewed by the constant comments and criticism from the alienating parent and the lack of any positive personality traits or positive influence that the alienated parent had on the child (Warshak, 2020:55). Based on the quotes and the relevant literature, “getting back at the alienated parent” is deemed as one of the reasons for the onset of parental alienation.

### Category (ii): Personal gain and selfish behaviour

In this category, the participants agreed that personal gain and selfish behaviour are indicated in the onset of parental alienation. Participant 4 stated clearly that, “That parent is influencing that child for his or her gain so that the child can’t have that relationship with that other parent ... person [parent] is selfish, wants everything to be done on his or her terms, that person can do a parental alienation.” The participant used words such as ‘his or her gain’ and ‘the parent is selfish’, which indicated that such a parent’s personal agenda is being served without considering the child’s view of the other parent. Participant 6 shared this view by saying that it is done to spite the other parent, and it is done “so deliberately” to satisfy their own needs.

According to Participant 8, personal gain and selfish behaviour are characteristic of adults who have not resolved their own issues about the separation or divorce. Therefore, for selfish reasons, or the lack of emotional intelligence, they use the child to fulfil their own needs, losing sight of the child's best interest. None of the other participants made mention of the lack of emotional intelligence in parental alienation – a field that calls for further studies as no literature could be found on this topic. Nichols (2014:664) described personal gain as a strategy. Selfish behaviour can also be a label given to the alienated parent when the alienating parent indicates to the child that the alienated parent is “selfish” (Baker & Darnall, 2006:104).

#### 3.4.1.3 Subtheme 1.3: Relevance of history between parents

This subtheme describes the participants' views on the relevance of the history between the parents. The subtheme consists of three categories, namely the relationship between the parents and the children before the separation, the parents' own hurt after separation or divorce, and the presence of transgressions caused by the other parent. This is illustrated in Table 3-4.

**Table 3-4: Subtheme 1.3: Relevance of the history between the parents**

| <b>Theme 1: Social workers' perspectives on parental alienation</b> |                                                                             |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Subtheme</b>                                                     | <b>Category</b>                                                             |
| 1.3 Relevance of the history between the parents                    | (i) The relationship between the parents and children before the separation |
|                                                                     | (ii) Parents' own hurt after separation or divorce                          |
|                                                                     | (iii) Presence of transgression caused by the other parent                  |

Category (i): The relationship between the parents and children before the separation

In this category, there were two different views from the participants. Some of the participants said that the previous relationship between the child and the parent should be considered, especially when such a relationship suddenly disintegrates. Other participants focused on the role of the parent and whether this role was significant or not.

Participants 2 and 7 both commented on the constructive relationship that could have existed between the parent and the child before PA and the sudden disintegration of the relationship. The participants indicated that in such a case, the professional will have to look at PA as a possible explanation. In contrast, Participant 9 focused on the role that the parent played in the child's life before the separation or divorce in order to determine whether the relationship allowed for co-parenting or whether one parent was taking full responsibility for the parenting. Participant 9 suggested that if one parent was absent and the other parent was responsible for all the parenting, then this history should be taken into consideration when a social worker assesses for PA.

It is important that the professional takes the attitude and behaviour of the alienating parent towards the alienated parent into consideration in order to determine whether the allegations are rational and aligned with facts, or whether they are perceptions of the alienating parent. The relationship between the child and the parent before the separation should be considered as well as the involvement of that parent in the child's life to ensure blame is not projected onto the alienated parent (Johnson, 2017:264). Utilizing Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Theory (Rosa & Tudge, 2013:244), this can be applied when looking at the relationship between the child and the alienated parent as this forms part of the microsystem as they had direct interaction with each other before the relationship was being alienated.

Category (ii): Parents' own hurt after separation or divorce

Parents' own hurt plays a significant part in social workers' assessment of potential parental alienation. The parents' experience could be so painful that they find it difficult to move beyond this. At times, they do not realise the impact of their hurt on the child or how they use the child as a way to cope in case of revenge.

Participant 4 described the hurt of seeing the other parent move on with his or her life, and then taking revenge or fighting back by influencing the child. According to Participant 8, parental alienation is a result of unresolved issues where the parent cannot process the issues in an adult way. The parent then uses the children to cope with their issues. As Participant 8 commented: "... parental alienation is a lot of the adults with unresolved issues, and they cannot deal with their issues in an adult way, so they will use their children to deal with it."

Participant 11 explained that hurt can make parents blind to the fact that they are alienating their child. If the parents do not attempt to resolve their own hurt, it could lead to PA: "Sometimes it comes into the fact that you hurt so much that you don't really see that that's what you're doing. But it comes to a point where you know what you're doing, and you just keep on doing it, and I think that's where the parental alienation part kicks in."

Brandon (2019) explained that, as a result of the parent's emotional mindset, they would communicate with their previous partner in front of the children. The parent might communicate anger because the other parent is in a new relationship, or they might talk about the resentment they have experienced during the marriage, or fight about financial matters such as maintenance.

Category (iii): Presence of transgression caused by the other parent

This category focuses on the importance of the history between parents, with specific reference to the presence of transgression caused by the one parent. The participants mentioned addiction, violence, abuse and psychiatric conditions as possible examples of transgression that a parent could have. The participants had different perceptions about why these transgressions led to the withholding of contact.

As an example of a transgression, Participant 5 mentioned incidents – such as domestic violence – that happened between the parents and that calls for the protection of the child in order to serve the child's best interest. Participant 6 said parents might not want to expose a child to a parent due to domestic violence, aggression or the parent posing a threat to the child. Participant 14 looked at the presence of any other restrictions, such as alcohol abuse, drug abuse or a psychiatric condition.

Most of the participants did not view transgression as a reason for the onset of PA. However, they do believe that a parent's behaviour can be the cause of alienation. Contrary to the view of the participants, Baker and Darnell (2206:121) found in one of their studies half of their participants – fathers – believed that the other parent was making false allegations of abuse, domestic violence or being crucified in front of authorities without supporting evidence. According to Baker and Darnell (2206:121), the ability to distinguish between true and false allegations of abuse will continue to be a challenge until a valid and standardised protocol has been developed. To date, the researcher has not found such a protocol.

#### 3.4.1.4 Subtheme 1.4: The influence of the alienating parent in parental alienation

The fourth subtheme describes the influence of the alienating parent in parental alienation. This subtheme consists of three categories: (i) opinions and perceptions about the alienated parent (which influence the child), (ii) limiting the relationship between the alienated parent and the children, and (iii) strategies used by the alienating parent. This is summarised in Table 3-5 below.

**Table 3-5: Subtheme 1.4: The influence of the alienating parent  
in parental alienation**

| <b>Theme 1: Social workers' perspectives on parental alienation</b> |                                                                                     |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Subtheme</b>                                                     | <b>Category</b>                                                                     |
| 1.4 The influence of the alienating parent in parental alienation   | (i) Opinions and perceptions about the alienated parent (which influence the child) |
|                                                                     | (ii) Limiting the relationship between the alienated parent and the children        |
|                                                                     | (iii) Strategies used by the alienating parent                                      |

*Category (i): Opinions and perceptions about the alienated parent (which influence the child)*

In this category, the participants give their views on how the alienating parent's reality becomes the child's reality. The participants agreed that the child's reality becomes that of the alienating parent. In the following quotes they elaborate on why this happens.

Participant 7 commented as follows: "... it's not necessarily a conscious attempt by a parent. Still, if a parent constantly displays a negative attitude in front of the child towards the other parent or makes negative comments about the other parent or his or her family, the child sooner or later will start to internalise that negative attitudes and perceptions towards that parent. It will become part of the child's self-concept and how they view the other parent." This quote indicates that the negativity of the parent is not necessarily a conscious attempt by a parent; it could be conscious as well. This quote corresponds with a quote by Participant 14 who also indicated the possibility of "a subconscious or conscious process". Fidler *et al.* (2013:30) stated that the conscious or unconscious conduct of an alienating parent is not always the primary reason why a child rejects a parent.

Two participants referred to the alienating parent's perspective becoming the reality of the child:

- Participant 9: "Usually it comes from the parent that they are staying with to say, for example, 'Mom says dad is a monster'" (Participant 9)
- Participant 15: "The perception of the alienating parent becomes the reality of the child..."

Boyan and Termini (2005:291) stated that when the child becomes completely embroiled with the alienating parent, it can lead to severe alienation. This occurs because children only have a few resources to resist the influences of an adult. The child then starts to share the alienating parent's narrative of anger and hatred, causing a disconnect with the alienated parent.

Participant 7 referred to one of the parents who said the following in terms of influencing the child against the alienated parent: “I just do enough so that the fingers do not get pointed to me, but I don’t do enough that the situation is normal or that the relationship can grow as normal...”

López *et al.* (2014:227) mentioned that the alienating parent shares personal information or information relating to the legal process with the child, which has an impact on the child. Referring to Bronfenbrenner’s Bioecological Theory, the alienating parent as well as the perceptions and views that this parent shares form part of the child’s microsystem. This makes the PPCT model applicable in terms of proximal process (the role of the alienating parent) and person characteristics (alienating parent influencing an outcome for the child).

*Category (ii): Limiting the relationship between the alienated parent and the children*

The participants confirmed the detrimental impact of the alienating parent limiting the relationship between the alienated parent and the child, indicating that it is extremely difficult to rebuild a relationship when contact is being curbed by the alienating parent. The participants mentioned that the risk of PA increases if the child does not spend time with the alienated parent to build a relationship. This happens when the alienating parent limits this relationship by not creating time for the child and alienated parent to see each other, or by taking up the time that the other person used to fill. Participant 1 referred to this in the following way: “So, it would be one parent trying to limit a relationship or contact or involvement with the other parent.”

Participant 10 talked about one parent taking on both parental roles. This closes the space that the alienated parent used to fill, making the child more dependent on the alienating parent: “... you do not realise that now you’re closing the space for the other parent because now you’re there, every time you’re there, everywhere, you occupy...” (Participant 10).

It is difficult for the alienated parent and the child to build a relationship if they do not spend time together. In this regard, Participant 15 said that in his/her experience, the risk of PA “increases rapidly” the more time the child spends with the alienating parent and the less time the child spends with the alienated parent.

When a parent limits the relationship between a child and the other parent, the relationship has no opportunity to grow. This is indicated as a strategy used by parents where they limit the alienated parent's contact by interfering with or blocking phone calls and stopping visitation (Harman *et al.*, 2016:867). Time, as described by Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Theory, is relevant as the alienated parent does not have any control over how the child is shaped. When contact is limited, the alienated parent is removed from the child's microsystem.

*Category (iii): Strategies used by the alienating parent*

Much research has been done on the strategies employed by the alienating parent to influence the child. The participants identified various of these strategies.

Participant 3 highlighted "the power struggle between the parents: It's like a power balance because it's – I'm fighting for power, I'm the best, I'm better than the other parent ... power struggle revolves around eliminating a parent almost out of the race, as such, for the benefit of the children or the self-benefit..." Woodall (2017) indicated that power and control are present between parents during parental alienation.

The social workers who took part in this study could identify different strategies used by the alienating parent to influence the children. Participant 8 referred to the lack of emotional intelligence when one parent attacks the other parent without keeping the child's interest in mind. Participant 5 referred to the strategy of planting a seed or influencing a child not to believe anything positive about the alienated parent. According to Baker and Darnall (2006:105-106), alienating parents can also use strategies such as limiting or interfering with symbolic contact (such as refusing to put up photographs or not allowing items to be brought from the alienated parent's home), beating the targeted parent in front of the child, and interfering with the child's counselling.



### 3.4.2 Theme 2: Detection and identification of parental alienation

The second theme is the detection and identification of parental alienation. Here, the researcher discusses four subthemes: information about the parents, indicators of possible parental alienation, possible indicators in children, and symptoms of parental alienation that are difficult to recognise. This is illustrated in Table 3-6 below.

**Table 3-6: Theme 2: Detection and identification of parental alienation**

| <b>Theme 2: Detection and identification of parental alienation</b> |                                                                                     |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Subtheme</b>                                                     | <b>Category</b>                                                                     |
| 2.1 Information about the parents                                   | (i) Background and history of the parents                                           |
|                                                                     | (ii) Behaviour of parents                                                           |
|                                                                     | (iii) Gender of parents                                                             |
| 2.2 Indicators of possible parental alienation                      | (i) Presence of conflict                                                            |
|                                                                     | (ii) Onset of parental alienation: prior / post separation                          |
|                                                                     | (iii) Accusations and allegations                                                   |
|                                                                     | (iv) Belittling of the alienated parent                                             |
|                                                                     | (v) Contradictory behaviour of the child                                            |
|                                                                     | (vi) Additional indicators to identified deliberate action of the alienating parent |
| 2.3 Possible indicators in children                                 | (i) Fear of expressing emotions                                                     |
|                                                                     | (ii) Negative script and intensive                                                  |

|                                                                     |                                                  |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|
|                                                                     | phrasing and description of the alienated parent |
|                                                                     | (iii) Coaching of child by parent                |
| 2.4 Symptoms of parental alienation that are difficult to recognise | (i) Emotional symptoms                           |
|                                                                     | (ii) Behavioural symptoms                        |

#### 3.4.2.1 Subtheme 2.1: Information about the parents

This subtheme covers information about the parents in three categories: (i) Background and history of the parents, (ii) the behaviour of the parents, and (iii) the gender of parents. This is illustrated by Table 3-7 below.

**Table 3-7: Subtheme 2.1: Information about the parents**

| Theme 2: Detection and identification of parental alienation |                                           |
|--------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|
| Subtheme                                                     | Category                                  |
| 2.1 Information about the parents                            | (i) Background and history of the parents |
|                                                              | (ii) Behaviour of parents                 |
|                                                              | (iii) Gender of parents                   |

#### *Category (i): Background and history of the parents*

The background and history of the parents are relevant as it could help to detect and identify parental alienation. The participants indicated that the alienating parent's past could help to explain why a parent will alienate children from the other parent.

Participant 3 said the history of the parent is relevant when discussing PA, alluding to the parent's skills or capacity and insecurities. When the participants suspected PA, they would explore the history of the parents. Participant 7 described in great detail why this background information is necessary: "It's important to have some background, you know, about that person's past, their own childhood because if a child has been exposed to similar – or if a person has been exposed to similar behaviour by a parent when they went through a divorce, they might – it might just be learned behaviour ... there's definitely a link, I feel, between adult survivors of sexual abuse, okay, and women specifically that alienates, using the allegations of sexual abuse because, for them, they are sometimes oversensitive towards things which they perceive as danger signs or warning signs, and sometimes they overreact and even with, when faced with contradictory evidence, they will still maintain, you know, their belief that the father is sexually abusing the child..." Participant 7 alluded to victims of sexual abuse could do transference of their own trauma to their children, resulting in the parent making allegations of sexual abuse due to being oversensitive. The participant also felt that if an alienating parent were an alienated child themselves, it could be learned behaviour – which means these parents are repeating the pattern of alienation. Participant 14 believed that when a psychological disorder is already present within a high-conflict relationship between the parents, or perhaps when other factors are involved that have not been diagnosed, the parents lack insight in understanding their own predicament.

According to the Coalition Ending Gender-Based Violence (2020) based in Seattle, Washington State, the legal system and professionals take into consideration four factors when allegations are made by survivors of domestic violence: (i) domestic violence survivors are guilty of parental alienation, (ii) domestic violence is not a priority when custody is decided, (iii) children who are not being co-parented are vulnerable, and (iv) domestic violence survivors are prone to make false allegations of child abuse. The history of a parent could dictate behaviours which, in the context of this study, could cause the onset of PA.

#### *Category (ii): Behaviour of the parents*

For social workers, the behaviour of the parents was an important aspect in the detection and identification of PA. The participants highlighted that some alienating parents believe

that they are encouraging contact while they are doing everything possible to prevent the relationship between the alienated parent and child from growing.

Participant 1 believes that the behaviour of both the parents and the child should be looked at to determine the severity of the alienation: "... they [parent] believe that they're encouraging contact, but in actual fact in action, everything that they are doing is to prevent – for relationship establishment contact..." Participant 1 also stated that: "Then we should have identifying behaviour of both parents and the child as well. Because we need to determine the severity of the alienation." The behaviour of the parent was also described by Participant 11 who referred to the hurt of a parent in the following quote: "I'm hurting you by not giving you that access ..."

Writer and researcher Amy JL Baker explained that the message children may get from the alienating parent is that only this parent loves and supports the child because the alienated parent is dangerous and does not support the child. Should the child continue to seek a relationship with the alienated parent, the relationship with the alienating parent is at risk (Baker, 2011).

#### *Category (iii): Gender of parents*

During the interviews, the participants frequently indicated that the gender of the alienating parent is female, referring to the mother. Some participants stated that they are only referring to the mother because they are using that role as an example, while others indicated clearly that mothers are more prone to alienate children from fathers.

Participant 1 identified control as a possible reason why mothers are prone to alienate. Mothers may use their children to control a situation because they have no other form of control. Participant 11 felt that most mothers kept the fathers away from the children, while Participant 13 mentioned that the mother often blamed the father for the divorce, which is not necessarily the case. Only Participant 14 stated that "... parental alienation is not only mothers, the fathers as well".

Harman *et al.* (2016:872) also believed that mothers are more prone to alienate children by testing different alienating behaviours. This includes increasing the child's loyalty to one

parent because the child is viewing the other parent in a negative way, and limiting the time the child is spending with the other parent in order to restrict that relationship. These behaviours are in no way or form acceptable. Yet, it was indicated that when the mother employs these strategies, it is more acceptable than when the fathers does so. According to Bernet and Freeman (2011:47-48), both genders (i.e. the mother and the father) can initiate PA. In addition, they indicated that the gender of a child has no bearing on PA.

### 3.4.2.2 Subtheme 2.2: Indicators of possible parental alienation

According to Goldin and Salani (2020:346), there are no clear guidelines for the identification of PA. In this subtheme, the indicators of possible parental alienation are divided into six categories: (i) the presence of conflict, (ii) the onset of parental alienation prior or post-separation, (iii) accusations and allegations, (iv) belittling of the alienated parent, (v) contradictory behaviour of the child, and (vi) additional indicators to identify the deliberate action of the alienating parent. This is illustrated in Table 3-8 below.

**Table 3-8: Subtheme 2.2: Indicators of possible parental alienation**

| <b>Theme 2: Detection and identification of parental alienation</b> |                                                                                   |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Subtheme</b>                                                     | <b>Category</b>                                                                   |
| 2.2 Indicators of possible parental alienation                      | (i) Presence of conflict                                                          |
|                                                                     | (ii) Onset of parental alienation: prior or post separation                       |
|                                                                     | (iii) Accusations and allegations                                                 |
|                                                                     | (iv) Belittling of the alienated parent                                           |
|                                                                     | (v) Contradictory behaviour of the child                                          |
|                                                                     | (vi) Additional indicators to identify deliberate action of the alienating parent |

### *Category (i): Presence of conflict*

The participants identified the presence of conflict as an indicator of possible parental alienation. Various studies have shown that high-conflict divorce can put children at risk for trauma such as PA.

All the participants believed that conflict could be an indicator of parental alienation. Participant 15 made it clear that the higher the conflict the more the likelihood of PA. Participant 1 indicated that if conflict was not dealt with correctly, it opened the door for the parents to interpret a situation in their own way. Participant 1 used the phrase “reasonable contact” as an example to indicate how an open-ended recommendation could be misinterpreted by a parent in a high-conflict environment. This leads to further frustration for the alienated parent as “reasonable” cannot be quantified in the context of how often a child can visit a parent.

Participant 14 said that the combination of high conflict and other PA indicators, especially if mentioned by the children, will be seen as an indicator of parental alienation and will form part of the participant's investigation: “... if I detect some parental alienation statements that the child would say, say for instance ‘Mommy said something about daddy’ or I see there is high conflict, so already be part of my investigation would see or be elimination or confirming it or refuting it...” Participant 14 also indicated that high conflict and the lack of trust between parents during separation or divorce can cause the parents to rely on information provided by the child, who could be misinformed. This opens the door for the child to manipulate and establish an alliance with a parent.

According to Nichols (2014:664), high-conflict matters may involve claims of abuse and domestic violence, and children are placed in the middle of the conflict between the parents. This phenomenon can include the brainwashing of children to manipulate the process for personal gain. High-conflict divorce is highly destructive and has long-term effects on children, parents, extended family, and friends.

Such a divorce can be compared to physical and sexual abuse, with negative outcomes for the child. During a high-conflict divorce or separation, a parent can become so involved in the conflict that they neglect their parenting role, such as setting boundaries and showing

love to children. Children in return can suffer from trauma and stress, poor academic performance, suicide ideation, self-harm and aggressive behaviour, which impacts the psychological development of the child (Haddad *et al.*, 2016:244).

*Category (ii): Onset of parental alienation: prior or post separation*

The participants said that the actual onset of PA could not be determined. Participants 9, 12 and 14 took into consideration the relationship dynamics before and after separation, the alliances before separation, and contact resistance as an indicator of something that was wrong in the marriage before separation. They all believed that the onset of parental alienation started to happen before the separation.

Participant 15 indicated that the onset of PA can happen at any time during the relationship but probably starts to happen when the parties realise that the relationship is over: “I think it can be at any time. It can be in the – during the relationship, still during the marriage and then also I think when it becomes real, I think when I now I understand that, you know what, this is final, my marriage is over, and he or she is leaving me now. I’m going to go into a family system that is that of a divorced family.”

The researcher could not find any references substantiating the onset period of parental alienation. Gardner (2002:95) could define parental alienation, Polak and Saini (2015:221) could explain the prevalence of PA, and Baker *et al.* (2020:10) could elaborate on the detection of parental alienation strategies. However, none of the resources indicated whether the onset of PA is prior or post the separation.

*Category (iii): Accusations and allegations*

Accusations and allegations between parents have been highlighted by the participants as a criterion to identify the possibility of PA. These allegations can be generalised or specific and may include psychiatric diagnoses, false memories or a child making allegations (negative script) against a parent that is not true.

According to Participants 12 and 14, parents can accuse each other with direct accusations – such as accusing the other parent of a personality disorder and/or of parental alienation.

Participant 2 indicated that the child could be part of the accusations and allegations by providing the social worker with a negative script. This participant explained: “The negative script of the child, a child who speaks in the third person ... I don’t, I like, I want to do a relation – this it is always what the mother or father said ... negative script in the third person, this is what stands out.” A child speaking in the third person gives the social worker a negative script of an alienated parent's actions which are not in line with the truth. The alienating parent can encourage a child to have false memories of the alienated parent, for example, stating that the alienated parent sexually abused them. According to therapists, false allegations of sexual abuse are indicative of severe parental alienation (Bernet *et al.*, 2016).

According to Harman and Bernet (2019:3), children’s negative view of the alienated parent can be the result of the alienating parent repeatedly cementing the negative narrative for the child, i.e. creating a narrative where the child is led to believe that the alienated parent sexually abused them or even that the alienated parent made an attempt to end the child’s life. These accusations and allegations are fictitious and intended to destroy the parent-child relationship.

#### *Category (iv): Belittling of the alienated parent*

The participants believed that belittling could be a possible indicator of PA. They said belittling is where a parent is breaking down the other parent, criticising their abilities and capabilities, and attacking that parent's sense of self where the child can hear this, or the parent makes these statements directly to the child.

It is important to note this comment from Participant 3, who indicated that when a parent is being belittled, it could cause trauma with the child: “... if you belittle the father or the mother, you must remember that half of this child is mom and half of the child is dad”. Lorandos (2014:2) found that alienation strategies can include the belittling of the other parent through constant criticism aimed at the alienated parent. The child then shows disrespectful or rude behaviour towards the alienated parent as well as to the extended family of the alienated parent. The combination of the belittling and the limited contact strategies makes the child believe that the alienated parent does not love them and that the



child should choose between the parents. This corresponds with some of the strategies of parental alienation identified by Baker *et al.* (2020:10). The authors stated that one parent typically speaks in a derogatory way about the other parent where the child can hear them. The children are exposed to only negative statements about the alienated parent and nothing positive about him/her.

*Category (v): Contradictory behaviour of the child*

Only three participants mentioned the contradictory behaviour of the child as a possible indicator of PA. The other participants in this study mainly observed that the child was already “brainwashed” or programmed, and could not report on this behaviour.

Participant 8 explained in this regard: “... the child will say ‘I don’t want anything to do with my dad’ but the moment that the child sees the dad you can see but, something is – you know, what she’s saying and what she’s doing is different. So then you can already see, but there’s – in front of the mom she feels she needs to say a certain thing or she’s been told to act in a certain way and then when you’re in practice, and you spend enough time in supervision services you will see that this is not the way the child really feels or experience...”

This was supported by Participant 9 who mentioned the example of children saying something in a certain way while their actions contradict what they initially said. Harman *et al.* (2016) indicated that children will live “split lives” and behave in different ways depending on which parent they are spending time with. This is supported by Lorandos *et al.* (2013:327), mentioning that alienated children behave differently with each parent.

Participants 8 and 9 explained that once a trust relationship has been built between the social worker and the alienated child, and “you spend enough time” with the child, the contradictory behaviour can be identified and can serve as an indicator of parental alienation. Participant 12, however, referred to an immediate contradiction: “... the mother will tell you something or the father will tell you something, whichever the alienating parent and the child will have a completely different story.” The child displays behaviour that immediately contradicts the information provided by the parent and indeed shows affection

towards the alienated parent. Jaffe *et al.* (2017) stated that parental alienation is present when a child no longer has contradictory views and behaviour with mixed feelings.

*Category (vi): Additional indicators to identify deliberate action of the alienating parent*

The quotes used in this category are valuable as they identify the indicators that can help to detect parental alienation. Participant 1 noted the following in this regard: "... but the other parent will do everything to obstruct any process that can facilitate some kind of relationship." This quote corresponds with the strategy of limiting contact between the parent and the child. Referring to the conscious or subconscious activation of PA, Participant 5 stated that PA is activated where there is a deliberate action by the alienating parent, or where a parent is unaware of their actions and cause PA. The participant's view is that the parent can do it deliberately, or the parent can be so consumed by their own emotions that they are genuinely not aware that they are causing PA.

Manipulation of the child's emotions was the focus point for Participant 12: "... where a mother wouldn't give her child money to buy the father a Father's Day present and the child was so upset, he came into my office crying because he said now he thinks dad doesn't love him".

The possibility of PA can be identified through the behaviour of the alienating parent, which can include the manipulation of the child by the alienating parent. This manipulation can cause a child to not want to spend time with the alienated parent, and it can leave the child feeling guilty if they do want to spend time with the other parent (Baker & Darnall, 2006:112). Warshak (2020:63) stated that the manipulation could result in the child feeling guilty to leave the alienating parent and constant worrying about the alienating parent's state of mind. To resolve this conflict and to avoid this turmoil, the child would rather stop the contact or interaction with the alienated parent.

### 3.4.2.3 Subtheme 2.3: Possible indicators in children

In this subtheme, the researcher discusses possible indicators of PA in children. The indicators have divided into three categories: (i) Fear of expressing emotions, (ii) negative

script and intensive phrasing and description of the alienated parent, and (iii) coaching of the child by a parent. This is illustrated in Table 3-9 below.

**Table 3-9: Subtheme 2.3: Possible indicators in children**

| <b>Theme 2: Detection and identification of parental alienation</b> |                                                                                     |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Subtheme</b>                                                     | <b>Category</b>                                                                     |
| 2.3 Possible indicators in children                                 | (i) Fear of expressing emotions                                                     |
|                                                                     | (ii) Negative script and intensive phrasing and description of the alienated parent |
|                                                                     | (iii) Coaching of a child by a parent                                               |

*Category (i): Fear of expressing emotions*

When considering the possible indicators of PA in children, it is important to acknowledge that children might be fearful of expressing their emotions. Withholding of love and approval by the alienating parent could be the cause of this fear. The alienating parent vacillates between extreme affection for the child and intermitted rejection. This creates an imbalance where the child constantly seeks approval from the alienating parent. Alienating parents can emotionally reject a child with this strategy, and the child will rather reject the alienated parent to avoid this and renounce the relationship with the alienated parent (Baker *et al.*, 2020:10).

The fear of expressing emotions was highlighted by Participant 1 who indicated that a child could be fearful of saying something about the alienating parent since it could be damaging for their relationship with that parent. This was also confirmed by the other participants. Participant 4 said that the fear a child feels can be detected. This fear is can be directed at the alienating as well as the alienated parent as the child's narrative is that the alienated parent is no longer part of his or her world since he is bad and dangerous. According to

literature, when a child displays hatred towards a parent this can be accompanied by intense fear, which is a sign of a severely alienated child (Kelly & Johnston, 2001:252-254; Warshak, 2010:61). The participants also indicated that this fear of the alienated parent is often unjustifiable and based on the reality of the alienating parent. In a study done by Goldin and Salani (2020:346), the fear a child feels towards the alienated parent is often caused by manipulation of the child where false fears are created for the child. The alienated parent can withhold love and affection for a child and use bullying tactics to emotionally manipulate the child. PA has therefore been linked with trauma which could permanently alter the brain and disrupt the natural development of a child.

*Category (ii): Negative script and intensive phrasing and description of the alienated parent*

According to the participants it is important to detect the negative scripts of alienated children as soon as possible. Children typically have only a negative view of the alienated parent, with few or no positive or fun memories.

The presence of a negative script, where the child only has a negative narrative about the alienated parent, is a clear indication of PA according to Participant 2. The reason for this script is mostly the child's constant exposure to negative and derogatory comments about the alienated parent (Baker *et al.*, 2020:11). Other participants also supported this view:

- Participant 15: "They [children] hate their father, they don't want to spend time with their father, their father is bad, their father is not supporting them financially ..."
- Participant 5: "Then the child will have only the negative, the dislikes, and then they find it very difficult to identify something positive about the parent ..."

Baker *et al.* (2020:39) stated that children typically only hold a negative view of the alienated parent and show no interest in a relationship with the alienated parent. These children will display aggressive and hostile behaviour towards the alienated parent, saying that their lives are better off without that parent. Kumari and Brooks (2004:160) pointed out that when alienated children are asked to list positive and negative aspects about each parent, the alienated parent's list would consist of only negatives.

### *Category (iii): Coaching of the child by the parent*

During the interviews, the participants used various examples of children being coached by parents as a potential indicator of PA.

Participant 13 explained that children are often coached to make only negative statements about a parent. Social workers can detect when a child appears to have been prepared or coached for the interview, which means that possible contamination of the child took place. This view is shared by Participant 6 who commented: "... children that will be so influenced or coerced by the other parent to lie about the whole situation, you know, children will be prepared before an interview to say today we are going to see a social worker or a Family Advocate. These are the things that you should say in your responses ..."

According to Participant 3, when children are being prepared for an interview with a social worker or Family Advocate, the coaching of the child by the parent can be spotted in the way in which they relay the information – typically point by point and precisely aligned with the information provided by the parent. Participant 7 stated that it sounds as if a child has prepared a speech and has been groomed for the interview. These children will continue with the negative script about the one parent, while the other parent can do nothing wrong in their eyes.

According to Wood (2013:1-2), coaching takes place when a child is given a narrative and that narrative is enforced until the child makes the narrative their own. The author noted that there are two types of narratives: (i) one is where the child is instructed what to do when he/she sees the alienated parent, such as scream or cry, and (ii) the other is a concealed action, where the child refuses to accept gifts from the alienated parent or shows fear towards that parent. The author identified signs that a coached child will display:

- Displaying hatred towards the alienated parent
- Copying the alienating parent
- Not wanting to spend time with the alienated parent
- Displaying irrational beliefs

- Not being intimidated by the court process
- Providing reasoning that is based on a given narrative
- Displaying ambivalent feelings
- Aligning with the alienating parent
- Showing no signs of remorse or guilt
- Presenting as normal until they are asked to talk about the alienated parent.

#### 3.4.2.4 Subtheme 2.4: Symptoms of parental alienation that are difficult to recognise

This subtheme covers symptoms of parental alienation that are difficult to recognise. This subtheme is divided into two categories, namely (i) emotional symptoms and (ii) behavioural symptoms. This is illustrated in Table 3-10 below.

**Table 3-10: Subtheme 2.4: Symptoms of parental alienation that are difficult to recognise**

| Theme 2: Detection and identification of parental alienation        |                           |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------|
| Subtheme                                                            | Category                  |
| 2.4 Symptoms of parental alienation that are difficult to recognise | (i) Emotional symptoms    |
|                                                                     | (ii) Behavioural symptoms |

#### *Category (i): Emotional symptoms*

Emotional symptoms are difficult to recognise in an alienated child that comes across as aggressive, rude and ruthless. Because the emotional symptoms are well disguised, they are often not treated which can cause long-term emotional damage for a child.

Participant 15 strongly felt that the emotional impact of alienation on a child should be considered and made part of the guidelines on the detection of PA as it is the emotional

abuse that highlights the plight of children who are victims of PA. Participant 1 also indicated that emotional stability and functioning cannot be remedied with therapy if such a child remains with the alienating parent.

Parents should be educated so that they can explain to their children that the separation or divorce does not only revolve around the parents. As Participant 5 said, the children also need to process the separation or divorce as well as the physical and emotional separation. Children observe the emotions that their parents experience during a divorce – such as sadness, fear, guilt, anger, and grief. Children also experience loss when a divorce takes place, for instance when a parent leaves the home, or when the children need to leave a loved pet behind (Pedro-Carroll, 2010).

#### *Category (ii): Behavioural symptoms*

Behavioural symptoms in this category refer to the behaviour of both children and parents. Professionals must be educated to know the difference between bad or delinquent behaviour and behaviour that is a symptom of PA.

Participant 1 stressed the importance of looking at the behaviour of both the child and the parents as possible symptoms pointing to PA: “Then we should identify the behaviour of both parents and the child as well because we need to determine the severity of the alienation. Because if it is early stage, you know, it’s something that can be possibly done at later stages.” Participant 6 referred to the socialisation of children and how this can change as a result of PA – for example when the child loses interest in sporting activities, self-isolates, does not share emotions and finally withdraws from all socialisation.

PA in the context of divorce has a devastating impact on children in particular, leading to, among others, social isolation and the absence of trust. Gardner *et al.* (2006:213) cited the effects of PA as poor academic performance, decreased self-esteem, lack of impulse control, adjustment issues, heightened fear and anxiety, and cognitive and psychological disturbances. Newman and Newman (2014:361) said that the process of alienating a child can affect their mental health, academic performance, and friendships or peer relationships.

According to Participant 1, the behaviour of the parents and the children should be considered in combination with the family's social circumstances and background. This speaks to the systems approach and Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Theory underpinning this study. The parent-child relationship forms part of the family's microsystem, which also impacts the ever-widening systems of which they form part.

### **3.4.3 Theme 3: The child involved in parental alienation**

The third theme on the child involved in parental alienation will be unpacked using three subthemes as illustrated by Table 3-11 below.

**Table 3-11: Theme 3: The child involved in parental alienation**

| <b>Theme 3: The child involved in parental alienation</b>               |                                                                           |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Subtheme</b>                                                         | <b>Category</b>                                                           |
| 3.1 The impact of parental alienation on the vulnerability of the child | (i) Disregard for the child's choices and input                           |
|                                                                         | (ii) The susceptibility of a child at different ages                      |
| 3.2 The effect of parental alienation on the child                      | (i) The emotional impact of parental alienation on the child              |
|                                                                         | (ii) The exposure of the child to information that is not age-appropriate |
| 3.3 Aspects influencing the parent-child relationship                   | (i) The perception of the alienating parent becoming the child's reality  |
|                                                                         | (ii) The alienated parent withdraws from the process                      |



### 3.4.3.1 Subtheme 3.1: The impact of parental alienation on the vulnerability of the child

This subtheme about the impact of parental alienation on the vulnerability of the child is divided into two categories: (i) Disregard for the child's choices and input and, (ii) the susceptibility of the child at different ages. This is illustrated in Table 3.12 below.

**Table 3-12: Subtheme 3.1: The impact of parental alienation on the child's vulnerability**

| Theme 3: The child involved in parental alienation                      |                                                      |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------|
| Subtheme                                                                | Category                                             |
| 3.1 The impact of parental alienation on the vulnerability of the child | (i) Disregard for the child's choices and input      |
|                                                                         | (ii) The susceptibility of a child at different ages |

#### *Category (i): Disregard for the child's choices and input*

In the South African context, the voice of the child is acknowledged in terms of Section 10 of the Children's Act (38 of 2005). The Section refers to the right of input from children when a decision is made as these decisions directly affects their lives. The input from the child will take into account the child's age, maturity and stage of development, using an appropriate platform. Social workers are equipped to do such assessments and then make recommendations in terms of the child's best interest.

Participant 2 believes that children are not always taken into account when decisions are made about relocation associated with divorce and separation. These decisions also affect children. Participant 6 said that relocation – including relocating to a new country, province or city – should be discussed with the child as this could jeopardise the child's ability to have a relationship with the other parent and make the child vulnerable to losing a

relationship with a parent. The participants were also of the opinion that changing a child's school can increase the child's vulnerability, especially if both parents were involved in the school before and now only one parent will be involved. Based on the social workers' comments, parental alienation can leave children even more vulnerable when these children's input and choices are ignored.

In the South African context, the participation of a child in matters that affect them is mandatory according to the Children's Act (38 of 2005). The legal system uses the terms "best interest of the child" and "the voice of the child" to develop an understanding of the child and to determine the capacity of a child to give input in the legal process. The voice of the child is determined to gain an understanding of the child's world, the roles of people in their lives and the child's socio-emotional functioning with these systems, and also to observe and interpret the child's emotional experience of the different systems. Sections 6(2)(a), 7(1)(a) – (n), 10 and 31(1)(a) of the Children's Act deals with the best interest of the child standard and the right of the child to participate and express their views in all matters that affect them, including the child's right to be heard in official matters.

In this context, Section 10 of the Children's Act reads: "Every child that is of such an age, maturity and stage of development as to be able to participate in any matter concerning that child has the right to participate in an appropriate way and views expressed by the child must be given due consideration". This right to input is again confirmed in Section 31(1)(a) of the Children's Act: "Before a person holding parental responsibilities and rights in respect of a child takes any decision contemplated in paragraph (b) involving the child, that person must give due consideration to any views and wishes expressed by the child, bearing in mind the child's age, maturity and stage of development."

When a professional is mandated to perform a voice of the child assessment, the child's world should be seen through the eyes of the child. All factors involved in the child's life should be understood and explored. The child's views must also be communicated to the parents, ensuring that they understand the child's view. Lastly, to affect the change, the parents must be informed of the child's decision-making process and subsequent solution to the challenging situation.

According to the article titled 'Child participation' on World Vision International's website (2019), child participation is one of the core principles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. In essence, it allows children to express their views. These views should be considered in matters such as family, school and judicial procedures. Children and young people can play a role in transformation when they are capable of taking part in decision-making processes. Children develop a sense of belonging and responsibility together with justice and solidarity when they learn to communicate alternatives, be accountable for them and make decisions (Corneli, 2019).

*Category (ii): The susceptibility of a child at different ages*

Participants 9 and 10 mentioned that the susceptibility of a child at different ages is an important aspect of coping with parental alienation. Younger children (pre-school) and children under six years of age are more susceptible to parental alienation. This is because children at this age are over-reliant on a parent, and it is easy to influence these children. In contrast, older children will question the motivation: "I think under six. If I look at my children, I've got an eight-year-old and a four-year-old turning five, and my eight-year-old will definitely say 'Why can't I see daddy? or whatever whilst my younger one...' Participant 6 stated that children will verbalise their feelings when they are older; however, some children will also refuse to talk.

Participant 12 said some parents think they can have more influence over an older child because older children are often the children that protect the parent's feelings. During this interview, it was also suggested that, by the age of 12 years, most children have formed their own narratives and hold their own truths. This makes it more difficult for older children to accept the narrative of the alienating parent.

According to Goldstein (2020), children's cognitive-developmental stages should be taken into consideration in the handling of parental alienation. The author stated that three-year-old to five-year-old children can contribute with comments such as when a parent yells, that parent must hate the other parent. Four-year-old to eight-year-old children can understand and process only one parent's point of view and not both parents' views, which leaves space for a child to form alliances. Seven-year-old to nine-year-old children are capable of

viewing both perspectives of the parents, and can feel conflicted when their loyalty is affected. Ambivalence cannot be endured for long periods of time by the nine-year-old to 12-year-old group. Hence, they will form alignments to avoid this. This group can reject or exclude a parent while the age group 12 and older can experience pressure to decide and play an active role in the dynamics.

Bütz (2020:262) stated that children between the ages of seven and eight are at risk in terms of PA, but the vulnerable age group would be those aged nine to 15 years. Kelly and Johnston (2001:260) do not deem younger children as valuable allies as they do not follow the narrative of the parent or their agenda. Johnston and Campbell (1988:55) indicated that the age group nine to 12 are at risk to form unhealthy alliances. In addition, Ludolph and Bow (2012:52) reported that children under the age of seven and nine are deemed vulnerable. Drozd and Olesen (2010:258) stated that children between the ages of nine and 18 can reject a parent, and gender could influence the child rejecting a parent. Baker *et al.* (2012:181) stated that children between the ages of six and 17 are deemed vulnerable to PA. From the above, it is clear that the authors acknowledge that noticeably young children are not affected. However, most children who have formed a cognitive understanding and who can form alliances can reject a parent.

#### 3.4.2.5 Subtheme 3.2: Effect of parental alienation on the child

This subtheme, which covers the impact of alienation on the child, is divided into two categories, namely (i) the emotional impact of parental alienation on the child, and (ii) the exposure of the child to information that is not age appropriate. This is illustrated in Table 3-13 below.

**Table 3-13: Subtheme 3.2: Effect of parental alienation on the child**

| Theme 3: The child involved in parental alienation |                                                              |
|----------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------|
| Subtheme                                           | Category                                                     |
| 3.2 Effect of parental alienation on the child     | (i) The emotional impact of parental alienation on the child |

|  |                                                                           |
|--|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|  | (ii) The exposure of the child to information that is not age appropriate |
|--|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|

*Category (i): Emotional impact of parental alienation on the child*

The participants in this category described the emotional impact of PA with words such as fear, damaging emotions, withdrawal, parentification, and children feeling like an elastic band between the parents. According to Goodman (2020), parentification takes place when the roles of the child and the adult are reversed, or where a child steps into a position to parent siblings.

Participant 1 and Participant 7 described the fear aspect of a child who refused to say anything about the alienation process as it might lead to repercussions from the alienating parent. Participant 7 also identified a fear aspect by stating, "... a parenting role that a child will sometimes have over his own parent because that child might believe that now he or she must protect that parent". This indicates that the child sees a reason to protect a parent from harm from the alienated parent, showing the role reversal that can take place during PA.

Participants 5 and 12 referred to the emotional effect of PA on children saying that, based on their observation, a child can be destroyed in the process of PA, and that the child's emotions and mental health can be damaged. Participant 12 likened the alienated child to an elastic band being stretched between the parents, indicating an internal struggle within the child. The researcher found this image to be a particularly good metaphor of how children are being pulled in different directions during the process of PA.

Participant 6 commented as follows on the emotional impact of PA: "The sadness that comes with the whole situation, stress levels, performance at school will deteriorate – socialisation with children changes. You know, if children – they have their own interest, like maybe in sports, children would no longer find sports as interesting because maybe they want to isolate themselves from other children. They don't want other children to know what they are going through and the only way to do that is maybe to withdraw from socializing..."

The emotional impact of PA that participant is describing is significant, especially in terms of the child's withdrawal from all interests and friends, leading to increased stress levels and poor school performance.

According to Kruk (2013), PA can result in children having poor confidence, a disrupted sense of self, low self-esteem, self-hate, absence of trust in people, hopelessness, and addiction. Alienated children lose their resilience to accept love from a parent or to give love. They internalise their emotions and experience feelings of guilt. Due to these factors, they have conflicting relationships with the alienating parent. Also, they are at risk of becoming alienated from their children when they are adults.

Fernandes (2020) described the effects of PA as disturbed sleeping patterns, trauma, lack of self-control, poor academic performance, social isolation, absence of empathy, mirroring the alienating parent's character later in adulthood, the presence of anxiety and no emotional intelligence, as well as fear, bitterness and lost childhood. Bronfenbrenner's ecological model can be applied to the emotional impact of PA on children. The child's microsystem is disrupted (the child becomes an elastic band being played between the parents; emotional aspects such as the child withdrawing socially). The exosystem is impacted as the child who is affected by PA has not been offered a choice in the matter. Yet, there is no escape from PA for them.

*Category (ii): The exposure of the child to information that is not age appropriate*

The information that is given to a child during PA, such as court documentation and conversations using words that are not age-appropriate, has an influence on such a child. The child does not have the maturity to understand the information, and is often not presented with the full context associated with the information.

The information provided by Participants 8 and 11 was about the age-appropriate behaviour of children by looking at the child's age and the words they use. The participants used an example of a three-year-old child who said the father was a bully. Participant 7 described a situation in which the parent exposes a child to court documentation and discusses the court process with them, portraying themselves (the alienating parent) as a victim in the matter and using this to prove to the child how the other parent is terrorising them.

Haines *et al.* (2019) supported this view when they stated that a parent discusses and/or shows children the legal documentation to ensure the child's negative view of the alienated parent remains in place. Gottlieb (2012:258) referred to a matter where a father successfully turned the children against their mother after he shared court documentation that contained false allegations and fabricated truths.

#### 3.4.2.6 Subtheme 3.3: Aspects influencing the parent-child relationship

This subtheme about the aspects that influence the parent-child relationship is divided into two categories: (i) Perception of the alienating parent becoming the child's reality, and (ii) alienated parent withdraws from the process. This is illustrated by Table 3.14 below.

**Table 3-14: Subtheme 3.3: Aspects influencing the parent-child relationship**

| Theme 3: The child involved in parental alienation    |                                                                      |
|-------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Subtheme                                              | Category                                                             |
| 3.3 Aspects influencing the parent-child relationship | (i) Perception of the alienating parent becoming the child's reality |
|                                                       | (ii) Alienated parent withdraws from the process                     |

#### *Category (i): Perception of the alienating parent becoming the child's reality*

The perception of the alienating parent becomes the child's reality when the child is constantly exposed to the views and opinions of the alienating parent and does not have any additional information to corroborate the alienating parent's perception. The alienating parent's perception therefore becomes the child's narrative as well.

Participant 1 indicated that the child only shares the view of the alleged alienator and not that of the alienated parent. This results in the child believing the alienating parent. The participant also believed that should the child get the opportunity to spend time with the

alienated parent, observing his or her behaviour, this would lead to new insights for the child. Emery (2005) stated that in certain matters, a child can hold a belief that it was his or her choice to reject the alienated parent without any encouragement, and subsequently side with the alienated parent.

There is no literature to suggest that the child spending more time with the alienated parent will eventually change his or her view. As discussed further on, this may only be the case after successful therapeutic intervention. Without intervention, forcing the child to spend more time with the alienated parent could be more detrimental to the relationship.

The perception of the alienating parent can also cause the child to constantly look for validation from the alienating parent. Participant 9 was of the view that when a child spends time with the alienated parent, they will seek validation from the alienating parent by interrupting the time spent with the alienated parent.

The perceptions of the alienating parent are consciously or subconsciously imprinted on the child, which influences the parent-child relationship. This is highlighted by the following comment from Participant 14: "It is a subconscious and a conscious process of one parent to alienate or to restrict contact with the other parent ... The subconscious and the conscious manipulation process ..." This has been covered in the previous themes as well. However, Woodall and Woodall (2017:39) stated that the conscious and subconscious behaviour of the alienating parent can be understood only when a full psychological or psychiatric assessment has been done. The child's memories and views of the alienated parent are thus all based on the views of the alienating parent. Using Bronfenbrenner's PPCT model, the alienating parent plays a role in the relationship between people. The characteristics of the alienating parent influence the developmental outcome of the child. The child has no context other than the view of the alienating parent, and over time, the perceptions of the alienating parent become those of the child.

#### *Category (ii): Alienated parent withdraws from the process*

The alienated parent can withdraw from the process even though they tried their best to connect with the child. Through all of this, the attitude, narrative, and willingness of the child



to participate remained unchanged due to PA. The parent-child relationship has been destroyed beyond repair, and the alienated parent loses hope.

As described by Participant 12, the endpoint is reached when the alienated parent gives up hope of having a relationship with the child. Lowenstein (2020) stated that after years of consistent effort to contact the child and to build a relationship, the alienated parent aborts the relationship and gives up. Woodall (2014) described a situation where a parent was frustrated with the perceived rejection of a child withdrawing from that parent as a result of the parent's actions. Such a parent then blames the other parent, citing alienation without correcting their own behaviour.

#### **3.4.4 Theme 4: Perspectives on interventions during parental alienation**

The fourth theme – perspectives on interventions during parental alienation – will be discussed based on two subthemes, as illustrated in Table 3-15 below.

**Table 3-15: Theme 4: Perspectives on interventions during parental alienation**

| <b>Theme 4: Perspectives on interventions during parental alienation</b> |                                                                    |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Subtheme</b>                                                          | <b>Category</b>                                                    |
| 4.1 Therapeutic intervention                                             | (i) The therapist as a trusted, neutral party                      |
|                                                                          | (ii) The therapist's need for training in parental alienation      |
|                                                                          | (iii) Restoring the child's relationship with the alienated parent |
|                                                                          | (iv) Education of the parents                                      |
|                                                                          | (v) Therapeutic intervention for the parents                       |

|                                                                                           |                                                                                                                          |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                                                                                           | (vi) Therapeutic intervention for the children                                                                           |
| 4.2 Reversal of the primary residence, supervised visitation, and professional assistance | (i) Change of primary care from one parent to the other, or a neutral professional facility specifically dealing with PA |
|                                                                                           | (ii) Duration of the assessment process and final recommendations                                                        |
|                                                                                           | (iii) Supervised visitation                                                                                              |

#### 3.4.2.7 Subtheme 4.1: Therapeutic intervention

This subtheme about therapeutic intervention is divided into six categories: (i) The therapist as a trusted, neutral party, (ii) the therapist's need for training in parental alienation, (iii) restoring the child's relationship with the alienated parent, (iv) education of the parents, (v) therapeutic intervention for the parents, and (vi) therapeutic intervention for the children, as illustrated in Table 3.16 below.

**Table 3-16: Subtheme 4.1: Therapeutic intervention**

| Theme 4: Perspectives to the intervention during parental alienation |                                                               |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|
| Subtheme                                                             | Category                                                      |
| 4.1 Therapeutic intervention                                         | (i) The therapist as a trusted, neutral party                 |
|                                                                      | (ii) The therapist's need for training in parental alienation |
|                                                                      | (iii) Restoring the child's relationship                      |

|  |                                                |
|--|------------------------------------------------|
|  | with the alienated parent                      |
|  | (iv) Education of the parents                  |
|  | (v) Therapeutic intervention for the parents   |
|  | (vi) Therapeutic intervention for the children |

*Category (i): The therapist as a trusted, neutral party*

The importance of the therapist being an objective, neutral professional has been stressed by all the participants. The therapist should be mindful that the therapeutic PA-related intervention is neutral and not challenging.

The professional facilitating the intervention must not be appointed by one party only. Instead, the appointment should be a joint decision. This will assist the child, as the professional will have no interest in the parents and will only have the best interest of the child at heart, as indicated by Participant 7. This will also help the child to form his or her own perspective of the parents. Templer *et al.* (2016:16) referred to the statement made by Rait (2000) that mental health professionals must be non-judgemental in matters and build a good relationship with all members of the family. It is important that each family member feels supported in this process, and that the professional remains neutral during the process of exploring the issues at hand.

Trust and relationship building are especially important in any therapeutic intervention. The participants focused on these aspects by saying that a child will not give you information if there is no trust, and that the professional should not take the first thing the child says as factual. Instead, the professional must build the relationship to ensure it is truly the voice of the child and not the voice of a parent that is being heard. Attention should therefore be given to building a trusted relationship with the child. Honesty with a child should be a priority. This will help to build trust with the child in order to explore why the child is contact

resistant. Once that has been established, the therapist can assist the child in building a relationship with the alienated parent (Darnall, 2010:93).

According to Participant 11, a team approach should be followed, using the same professional for the parents and the child in order to obtain the full picture. The participant did, however, take into consideration that it could be problematic to have one professional as it could result in a trust issue where the one parent will object to using the same therapist as the other parent. According to Gardner *et al.* (2006:99), a multi-disciplinary team approach is good for two reasons: It can help professionals to share the emotional strain they perceive with a team member, and it can help the professionals to remain empathetic towards the alienating parent and a child who has a view of their own. It is therefore constructive to have more than one professional to assist.

*Category (ii): The therapist's need for training in parental alienation*

It was indicated by the participants that they received no formal training on PA. Training is important as a therapist needs to be able to identify PA correctly and to have the knowledge to use the correct therapeutic process for each family's specific needs.

Supporting the need for training in PA, Participant 2 indicated that although they do have cases where PA is present, they look at all the facets of the case, have discussions with other professionals in the field, and finally compare their findings to research available on the internet. Participant 3 was of the opinion that social workers do not have the skill, qualifications, or tests to determine the presence of PA. This view was supported by Participant 7, indicating that training is important to be able to identify PAS. Participant 14 commented as follows in this regard: "We [social workers] are so far behind international literature that we need to be so sure of what you see, and within our South African environment you are seeing it, you are detecting it, but to link that with literature is at sometimes not good enough for our courts, even you are seeing it and you – remember, we're a social worker – so I am talking out about a social worker and sometimes the social worker, and a psychologist doesn't see things the same way, so they may differ from me." This view is supported by the fact that in the South African context, no law or official

document is providing guidance on PA. According to Heitler (2019), more therapists with the correct skill set in PA are needed.

*Category (iii): Restoring the child's relationship with the alienated parent*

Restoring the child's relationship with the alienated parent can be challenging and complex. Bonding therapy should take place between the alienated parent and the child. However, individual therapy should be available to all parties to ensure the situation does not repeat itself.

According to participant 2, the restoration of the child's relationship with the alienated parent should happen slowly, and bonding therapy should take place during the therapeutic process. Participant 12 shared this view by stating that an improved parental relationship should initially be facilitated in order for the parents to act in the best interest of the child they share. Participant 15 stated that the alienated parent works much harder to maintain a relationship with a child than the alienating parent, and that the perception of the alienating parent becomes the reality of the child. This makes it difficult for the alienating parent to rebuild a relationship with the child.

According to Gardner *et al.* (2006:299), for a therapeutic process to take place, it should be the therapist's strategy to include a re-introduction of the child to the alienated parent in a positive fashion. This can only be achieved with the buy-in of the alienating parent. In turn, the alienated parent must be prepared to deal with the initial struggles and challenges of a child who has been brainwashed and programmed. The restoration of the relationship can take place when both parents are committed to the therapeutic process.

*Category (iv): Education of the parents*

The social workers who took part in this study viewed their role as the professionals who should educate the parents on the eventual effects of PA on children, and on the fact that a balanced child needs both parents to function. Parents should also be guided to act in the best interest of children, and by prioritising that, set their own agendas aside.

Supporting the above, Participants 4 and 5 stated that the parents should be educated that a divorce or separation does not revolve only around the parents. It should be taken into account that the children are also processing this change and that the children need their parents to guide them emotionally. Participant 11 took a more confrontational stance, saying that the professional needs to confront the parent who is alienating the child and have a working agreement with the professional to include all parties to find a solution: “As professionals, we should also attempt to address the hurt and hatred that caused them to keep the child away from the other parent and create insight into what effects such an action will have on a child”. Heitler (2019) stated that the parent who alienates should take part in a therapeutic process where the dysfunctional behaviour is confronted in a therapeutic environment, ensuring the behaviour is changed. Heitler (2019) made mention of a therapeutic model developed by Dr Inbal Baron, which places both parents in the therapeutic environment where they can develop an understanding of their own needs and that of their child. The devastating effects of PA can be highlighted in such an environment, which could result in the behaviour being terminated without the involvement of a court.

Parental guidance is needed, especially with the alienated parent on the impact that the alienation has on the child and how to help the child going forward. Participant 15 noted that parental guidance on PA is important for both the child and the alienated parent to address the frustration caused by the PA dynamics. According to Baker (2008), social workers should focus on the educational aspect of PA while providing support and guidance. The education should assist the alienating parent to establish what behaviours can make a child contact resistant, and what the consequences of this will be for the child. If it has been established that PA is present, the alienated parent should be equipped with skills on how to respond to PA and not to be reactive. Alienated parents will need support while they are confronted with PA for them to cope with the devastating effects of PA.

#### *Category (v): Therapeutic intervention for the parents*

The therapeutic intervention for the parents should not be neglected and could assist to resolve PA. Divorce and separation can create tremendous hurt and the parents should be guided through that in order for them to function optimally again.

Participants 1, 7 and 10 believed that a psychotherapy professional can assist a person to obtain insight into their behaviour. The therapeutic approach should address how PA impacts a child and how damaging it is, and help to create insight into their behaviour in order to serve the best interest of the child. Participant 10 said that the parents should realise this is not only about them, and that they as parents have to take into consideration that the children are also hurt. The participant further stated that it is important to attempt to address the parents' hurt and anger as they are going through a divorce and as the situation can escalate quickly and cannot be controlled.

Participant 11 observed that, should the parents not have a therapeutic intervention, their hurt and anger can start to spill over to the children, with the children becoming pawns in their PA-related fights. Anger is often the first emotion that presents itself when a relationship ends. According to Adams (2020), when a parent feels that they have been treated unfairly, they can use the children as a weapon to get back at the other relationship partner. This can impact the children significantly.

#### *Category (vi): Therapeutic intervention for the children*

Children who are victims of PA need therapeutic intervention to assist them with the damage that has been caused during the process of PA. They must be assisted to build a relationship with the alienated parent. The alienating parent forms an important part of this intervention for the child.

The therapeutic process with the child is important as well as the rebuilding of the relationship between the alienated parent and the child. Participant 1 is quoted as saying: "It's not up to the child, it's the parent who needs to change their perspective." This indicates that the parent's perspective is important during the therapeutic intervention of the children. Participants 6 and 7 focused on the role of the therapist in reassuring the children that they can cope with separation or divorce. If the child attends therapy on a willing basis, the therapist can establish when a child is ready to have contact with the alienated parent.

According to Von Boch-Galhau (2020), to only start a therapeutic process with the child will not resolve the alienation and will possibly enforce the alienation. Therapy with the child and the alienated parent will hold more success. The alienating parent should also undergo

therapy to encourage them to change their behaviour. It would be ideal if parents can be assisted to resolve their issues with each other. However, in more severe matters, the assistance of a court will be required. Von Boch-Galhau (2020) believed that early intervention improves the prognosis, and that the potential of assisting all parties is more favourable in less severe cases. This view is supported by Adams (2020) who indicated that PA can be stopped in various ways, which include a court order to reverse primary care, individual therapy for children, family therapy with the child and alienated parent, individual parental guidance, phasing in contact between the child and the alienated parent, and at the end of this process, therapy for the children and the alienating parent where the children can confront the alienating parent.

#### 3.4.2.8 Subtheme 4.2: Reversal of the primary residence, supervised visitation, and professional assistance

This subtheme will focus on the reversal of the primary residence, supervised visitation, and professional assistance. This subtheme is divided into three categories, namely (i) change of primary care from one parent to the other, or a neutral professional facility specialising in PA, (ii) the duration of the assessment process and final recommendations, and (iii) supervised visitation. This is illustrated in Table 3-17 below.

**Table 3-17: Subtheme 4.2: Reversal of the primary residence, supervised visitation, and professional assistance**

| <b>Theme 4: Perspectives on interventions during parental alienation</b>                  |                                                                                                                         |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Subtheme</b>                                                                           | <b>Category</b>                                                                                                         |
| 4.2 Reversal of the primary residence, supervised visitation, and professional assistance | (i) Change of primary care from one parent to the other or a neutral professional facility specifically dealing with PA |
|                                                                                           | (ii) Duration of the assessment process and final recommendations                                                       |



|  |                             |
|--|-----------------------------|
|  | (iii) Supervised visitation |
|--|-----------------------------|

*Category (i): Change of primary care from one parent to the other, or a neutral professional facility specifically dealing with PA*

According to the Children's Act (38 of 2005), Section 9, the child's best interest should, in all matters, remain of paramount importance. When considering changing primary care from one parent to the other, professionals should not lose sight of the best interest of the children.

Participant 3 mentioned a case where it was decided that the child would stay with both parents, on an equal basis, as this would serve the best interest of the child. The participant also said that it would be ideal to swop residences and that there were treatment programmes to assist the child and the parents. Participant 7 shared the view of placing the child in a new and neutral environment with both parents having equal access, while Participant 15 stated that the courts can change the primary residency from one parent to the other, or order that the parents implement shared residency. However, the participant was unsure how often this has happened. Gordon *et al.* (2008:49) stated that the child should be separated from the alienating parent in order to allow the child and the alienated parent to receive treatment in a facility away from the negative influence. This therapeutic approach will assist the child to develop a relationship with the alienated parent without any intimidation from the alienating parent.

*Category (ii): Duration of the assessment process and final recommendations*

The participants indicated that there is a time-lapse of up to eight months before the families are seen by the Family Advocate, and then an investigation still needs to take place, which includes assessments and final recommendations. While the assessment process grinds on, PA can create significant damage within a vulnerable system.

According to Participants 3 and 7, families can wait for up to a year for their reports. During this waiting period, the relationship between the child and the alienated parent can stop

growing due to contact being stopped and due to allegations of sexual abuse and other allegations. Participant 3 stated that, "... they [stop contact between alienated parent and child] just stop [the alienating parent frustrating the process] ... sometimes there's a combination of alienating and also when you have a more intelligent person that knows how to manipulate the system, makes it even more difficult because they, you know, they just drag on the matters forever and it never comes to fruition ..."

### *Category (iii): Supervised visitation*

To help find a solution for PA during the lengthy assessment process, Participant 7 indicated that it could help to start with supervised visitation immediately. However, some parents cannot afford the services of a social worker, which can result in months passing by before social workers can resolve the contact with the child. According to the participants, the duration of each matter is judged on a case-by-case basis.

In PA-related cases, supervised contact needs to be arranged to preserve the parent-child relationship while disputes are being settled. In the context of this study, supervised visitation was viewed as an intervention to assist families who are taking strain as a result of PA.

Supporting the reversal of the primary residency, Participant 1 stated that it might not be in the child's best interest to remain with the aliening parent if this parent does not seek help or acknowledge the problem. Another option would therefore be to change the child's residence to that of the alienated parent and recommend supervised contact between the child and the alienating parent. In this context, the supervision would take place after the primary residence has been changed, and between the alienating parent and child to help ensure that PA does not continue.

Supervised services, according to Participant 8, can consist of various interventions. In case of a volatile relationship between the parents or the family, contact should be supervised in the beginning in order to restore the relationship between the parent and the child. According to Participant 15, supervised visitation is a safety measure to protect the child from, among others, addiction or abuse. Participant 15 also commented that: "... supervised contacts sometimes gets drawn out for six months and eight months and nine

months and I feel that if both parties [parents] are needed or are ordered to contribute towards the cost of these supervised contacts. It won't be misused as it sometimes is misused in these cases because it sometimes feels to me – and that's maybe also detection of the parental alienation is that the one party almost has to work extra hard to have a relationship with the child and the other party can almost sit back in a position of power, and the financial impact is not that heavy on that person..." The cost associated with supervised visitation should be shared, and can prevent the alienating parent's misuse of the services and possibly hasten the process. Adams (2020) stated that supervised visitation could result in the alienating parent ceasing the alienation behaviours and can also provide a platform where the alienating parent can assess what happened to the children because of PA.

### 3.4.3 Theme 5: Support and legislation

In the fifth theme that the researcher discusses the support and legislation. This theme will be discussed in three subthemes. This is illustrated by Table 3-18 below.

**Table 3-18: Theme 5: Support and legislation**

| Theme 5: Support and legislation                          |                                                           |
|-----------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|
| Subtheme                                                  | Category                                                  |
| 5.1 Support systems being impacted by parental alienation | (i) School                                                |
|                                                           | (ii) Family                                               |
|                                                           | (iii) Cultural context                                    |
| 5.2 Professional support systems                          | (i) The involvement and role of a multi-disciplinary team |
|                                                           | (ii) Family and Marriage Society of                       |

|                                        |                                 |
|----------------------------------------|---------------------------------|
|                                        | South Africa (FAMSA)            |
|                                        | (iii) The Family Advocate       |
| 5.3 Legislation regulating the process | (i) Children's Act (38 of 2005) |

#### 3.4.3.1 Subtheme 5.1: Support systems being impacted by parental alienation

This subtheme pertains to support systems being impacted by parental alienation. The subtheme is divided into three categories: (i) school, (ii) family and (iii) cultural context. This is illustrated by Table 3.19 below.

**Table 3-19: Subtheme 5.1: Support systems being impacted by parental alienation**

| Theme 5: Support and legislation                          |                        |
|-----------------------------------------------------------|------------------------|
| Subtheme                                                  | Category               |
| 5.1 Support systems being impacted by parental alienation | (i) School             |
|                                                           | (ii) Family            |
|                                                           | (iii) Cultural context |

#### *Category (i): School*

School as a support system is an important aspect of a child's life. The participants discussed the school as possibly contributing to PA, or as a support system to assist with initial assessments or changing schools without sufficient reason as PA strategies. Bronfenbrenner considered the school to be a microsystem and a mesosystem where school forms part of the direct interaction of the child as well as the parents' interaction with the school.

Participant 2 described how the school can support families affected by PA through the school, teachers, doctors and other help professionals. Schools can also withhold information from a parent since they maintain a better relationship with the one parent. Participant 13, on the other hand, sees the school as a resource to assist with the initial assessment of the child. The participant, before assessing the child, ask both parents to consent to an interview or session with the relevant teacher of the child.

Participant 6 referred to a third view where changing schools forms part of the PA strategy. If both parents had a relationship with the school, and one parent is changing the school to another school, it can be viewed as an alienation strategy. According to the Voice of the Child organisation (2017), all educational establishments' staff must be aware of all forms of abuse in order to identify children who need additional help and support from this platform. This support includes supporting children who are taking strain due to separation or divorce. Woodall and Woodall (2017:52) found that the alienating parent wants to limit the involvement of the alienated parent in the child's educational environment. However, the involvement of the alienating parent at the school can become an unbearable emotional situation for the child, resulting in the alienating parent not being able to engage with the school.

#### *Category (ii): Family*

In this category, the participants indicated that family can help to resolve or aggravate the parental alienation. Various forms of PA interventions have been discussed by Participant 8, in particular the role of family members where family members are keeping the child from a parent. This quote from Participant 8 corresponds with what Warshak (2010) viewed as the alienating parent extending the alienation towards the alienated parents' extended family, indicating that the alienated parent and their extended family are bad by mere association with the alienated parent (Baker, 2010:76).

According to Participant 9, there is a need for mediation and for the involvement of extended families to help the family work through divorce and separation. There is also

room for a level-headed person to become involved. Here, Participant 9 had a father figure in mind – referring to the elders in the family or possibly a grandfather.

According to Haines *et al.* (2019), when children have been alienated from the extended family, it can lead to damaged relationships between the child and the alienated parent, and between the child and the extended family. The authors indicated that the role of the extended family during PA has not been well studied (Haines *et al.*, 2019).

### *Category (iii): Cultural context*

Most of the participants made no reference to the cultural context of the support system. However, Participant 7 highlighted the role of the traditional family where it is believed that the children should grow up with their mother and that the father did not play any significant role in the raising of the children. This traditional upbringing is in stark contrast to the school of thought where parents have equal rights in modern South Africa.

Participant 9 referred to the concept of the community raising the child, as it mostly happens in black communities. According to this participant, PA is rare in such communities. The participant added that there are forums available in the black communities where problems can be addressed and where the entire family will assess the situation and find a solution to move forward. The participant viewed the Indian community to be the opposite of the black community, explaining that in the Indian community there is no intervention from extended family members such as grandparents, uncles or aunts.

Sager (2017) stated that cultural context should not prevent a child from having a relationship with a parent. The assumption that the mother is the best parent has been replaced with the best parent is both parents. Baker (2010:284) explained that the value of each parent should be understood when communities and cultural beliefs are also taken into account. The author cited the example of a community where children mostly reside in households headed by mothers. If the community takes the stance that it is the norm for mothers to head the households, they will be excluding the fathers and two-parent families, creating a platform for PA.

### 3.4.5.2 Subtheme 5.2: Professional support systems

This subtheme will focus on professional support systems. This subtheme is divided into three categories, namely (i) the involvement and role of a multi-disciplinary team, (ii) the Family and Marriage Society of South Africa (FAMSA), and (iii) the Family Advocate. This is illustrated in Table 3-20 below.

**Table 3-20: Subtheme 5.2: Professional support systems**

| Theme 5: Support and legislation |                                                           |
|----------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|
| Subtheme                         | Category                                                  |
| 5.2 Professional support systems | (i) The involvement and role of a multi-disciplinary team |
|                                  | (ii) Family and Marriage Society of South Africa (FAMSA)  |
|                                  | (iii) The Family Advocate                                 |

#### *Category (i): The involvement and role of a multi-disciplinary team*

When several professionals are assisting a family to deal with PA, these professionals can combine their efforts and form a multi-disciplinary team. This approach can prove to be successful, as indicated by the participants.

Participants 1, 9, 11 and 14 supported a multidisciplinary team approach involving psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers, and organisations such as child protection organisations. Participant 11 stated that preventative services should also be valuable, which means the whole community would contribute.

According to Participant 8, early intervention could start with the school therapist. Looking at how a multi-disciplinary team can assist, Participant 14 voiced the need for therapy plans

that are system orientated and are drawn up in close collaboration with legislation and the courts. Marcus (2020) recommended that when contact failure or PA is present, a multi-disciplinary team or holistic approach between mental health professionals and the legal system is preferable to investigate every aspect of such a matter. Taking this into consideration, judges should also be educated on the impact of PA, and the courts should have all the relevant resources instantly available, including social workers.

#### *Category (ii): Family and Marriage Society of South Africa (FAMSA)*

As a support system for families, FAMSA can offer guidance and support to families struggling to cope with PA. Most of the participants identified FAMSA as an organisation that can provide support when PA has been detected. At the same time, FAMSA is also ideally placed to assist with mediation and to educate parents.

Participant 6 mentioned in this regard: “FAMSA is one of the organisations that I know that will normally do the mediations and in such mediations, they will also try to make parents aware that involving the children in their differences will have unintended consequences ...” Participants 12 and 14 supported this view by saying the social workers at FAMSA can assist families to deal with PA.

According to FAMSA’s webpage (2020), the organisation strives to provide a one-stop service where the family is supported holistically. FAMSA’s services include counselling, mediation, and divorce support. Their mission is to promote and maintain healthy relationships with individuals, families, and the community. The organisation preserves and builds relationships by providing therapeutic and educational interventions.

#### *Category (iii): The Family Advocate*

The Family Advocate (FA) was identified as a platform to resolve the conflict between parents using roundtable discussions. The role of this office can be defined as follows: “The Family Advocate is an unbiased family law specialist and advisor to the court in cases of legal disputes over custody and parental rights. The office also drafts parenting plans, conducts child psychological evaluations together with social workers and mediates between families where the welfare of a child is at stake.”



One drawback of the FA is the lengthy waiting period for an appointment. This can be problematic in cases where PA is involved.

Most participants mentioned the support of the Office of the FA. Participant 6 stated that the FA is a platform where parents can sit at the table and express themselves in the presence of professionals. This is where parents can give their point of view in front of each other to alleviate their frustrations, and also where FA professionals can make them aware of how their views could impact a child. Families are typically referred to the FA when custody negotiations start.

#### Subtheme 5.3: Legislation regulating the process

This subtheme focuses on legislation regulating the PA process. This subtheme consists of one category, namely the Children's Act (38 of 2005).

**Table 3-21: Subtheme 5.3: Legislation regulating the PA process**

| Theme 5: Support and legislation       |                                 |
|----------------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Subtheme                               | Category                        |
| 5.3 Legislation regulating the process | (i) Children's Act (38 of 2005) |

#### *Category (i): Children's Act (38 of 2005)*

The Children's Act (38 of 2005) is currently the only piece of legislation that could assist with PA. According to Participant 2, a dynamic and flexible set of guideline would be helpful. However, this guideline must complement the Children's Act. The participant was of the view that there is a long road ahead before legislation would change to accommodate PA.

Participants 13 and 14 stated that they are unaware of any specific legislation pertaining to PA, except for the Children's Act (38 of 2005). To get the legal process going, a parent

should obtain a Form 2 from the Children's Court, complete the form and allow a magistrate to look into the matter. Form 2 is the application form to open Children's Court enquiries.

### **3.5 CONCLUSION**

The findings of the data analyses were discussed in this chapter. Based on the interviews with social workers and a literature review on parental alienation and related topics, five themes were extracted from the data, namely (i) social workers' perspectives on parental alienation, (ii) the detection and identification of parental alienation, (iii) the child involved in parental alienation, (iv) perspectives on interventions aimed at countering parental alienation, and (v) support and legislation. The interviews as well as the literature review showed that PA is indeed a serious phenomenon as it can have a long-lasting psychological impact on children and parents alike. It also became clear that not much research has been done to gain a better understanding of parental alienation and to help solve PA-related challenges. Guidelines for the detection of PA could assist to minimise the impact of parental alienation on families.

The following chapter will discuss guidelines for the detection and identification of parental alienation.

# **CHAPTER 4: GUIDELINES FOR THE DETECTION OF PARENTAL ALIENATION DURING SEPARATION OR DIVORCE**

## **4.1 INTRODUCTION**

The focus of this chapter is a discussion of the guidelines that could potentially assist social workers and related professionals with the detection of parental alienation in case of separation or divorce. The development of the guidelines will be explained in detail. Better PA detection can lead to timely interventions and better outcomes for everybody involved.

## **4.2 DEVELOPMENT OF THE GUIDELINES FOR THE DETECTION OF PARENTAL ALIENATION DURING SEPARATION OR DIVORCE**

A literature overview of PA was discussed in Chapter 2. This overview described PA with reference to the history and various definitions of PA. The prevalence of PA was discussed by indicating the levels of severity of PA. Detection of PA consists of counterintuitive strategies and PA strategies. The literature study also looked at the role and education of social workers involved in PA-related cases. PA intervention strategies were explored with reference to the therapeutic process during PA and the child's voice during intervention. Attention was also given to the child's view of parents during parental alienation, and the possibility of restoring the relationship between the child and the alienated parent. The immediate and long-term impacts of PA on the child were also discussed, with reference to the need for guidelines to help detect PA in good time. The available legislation and policies were also highlighted.

Bronfenbrenner's ecological framework indicates how relationships and environments impact a child's life. Because parental alienation has a severe impact on the child and the systems in which they grow up, this theoretical framework can clearly show how parental alienation influences a child's relationship with these systems. By adding Bronfenbrenner's

PPCT model, it became possible to determine how Proximal Processes, Person Characteristics, Context and Time concurrently influence the development human beings.

In Chapter 3, the five themes extracted from the data were discussed (see Table 4-1 for a summary). This ultimately contributed to the development of the guidelines provided in this chapter.

**Table 4-1: Summary of themes after data analysis**

| <b><i>Theme number</i></b> | <b><i>Theme title</i></b>               |
|----------------------------|-----------------------------------------|
| Theme 1                    | Social workers' perspective of PA       |
| Theme 2                    | Detection and identification of PA      |
| Theme 3                    | The child involved in PA                |
| Theme 4                    | Perspectives on interventions during PA |
| Theme 5                    | Support and legislation                 |

The above-mentioned five themes were discussed in Chapter 3, corroborated with themes from the literature review and illustrated with quotes from the participants. The information gathered during the literature overview and empirical study was then used to develop the guidelines for the detection of PA during separation or divorce. Each theme identified during the empirical study was used to develop a guideline and to systematically identify which aspects should be included in the guidelines to detect PA. Finally, seven guidelines were developed. These guidelines were sent to the participants for their comments and input on whether any other components should be added. The participants therefore had the opportunity to comment on the guidelines. Only one participant added to the guidelines stating that it will be important to know if the parents came from a divorced family and if they themselves had experience PA or signs thereof as their behaviour could be learned behaviour. All comments were considered by the researcher before the guidelines were finalised. The other participants were satisfied with the guidelines and offered no further input.

The guidelines could be a valuable resource for social workers. The aim of the guidelines is to help professionals to identify important aspects of PA that should be considered when a family is assessed after divorce or separation. Social workers can use the guidelines when assessing families and, more specifically, when they suspect PA is present. As part of the guidelines, a resource was created that social workers can use during assessments. This resource indicates all the important aspects of PA, making it easier to detect PA.

Each of the seven guidelines focus on an aspect of PA:

- (i) Guideline 1: Description of PA
- (ii) Guideline 2: Aspects to consider when suspecting PA
- (iii) Guideline 3: Indicators and symptoms to assist with the detection and identification of PA
- (iv) Guideline 4: Understanding the child involved in PA
- (v) Guideline 5: Perspectives on interventions for PA
- (vi) Guideline 6: Support systems and professional support systems
- (vii) Guideline 7: Legislation to take into consideration when working with PA

The seven guidelines will now be discussed in more detail in the following section.

### **4.3 THE GUIDELINES FOR THE DETECTION OF PARENTAL ALIENATION DURING SEPARATION OR DIVORCE**

The first four guidelines focus on the detection and identification of PA while the last three guidelines focus on the intervention aspect of PA, support systems, and legislation. Next, the guidelines will be discussed.

#### **4.3.1 Guideline 1: Description of PA**

When a social worker works with PA, it is important to consider the definition of PA. *Social Work Today* (2018, 26) referred to PA as strategies that a parent can use to create the child's rejection of the other parent. Should these strategies be successful, PA develops, and the child comes to hate, fear, and reject the targeted parent, seeing them as unworthy of having a relationship with. PA can also be described as a mental condition where the child forms a strong alliance with one parent and rejects the relationship with the other

parent in high-conflict separation or divorce cases (Bernet, 2019). According to Warshak (2020, 55), PA refers to the state of the relationship between a child and a parent, where the child rejects the alienated parent without good cause.

PA therefore refers to a process where the child is alienated from the parents while the parents are in the process of separating or getting a divorce. The roles of the alienating and alienated partners are not gender specific. PA affects people on both an emotional level and a physical level. PA can be a subconscious or conscious process for the alienating parent. This means that PA can manifest deliberately or unknowingly on the side of the alienating parent. A combination of brainwashing (programming a child to accept the alienating parent's point of view) and campaigning against the alienated parent is done by the alienating parent.

#### **4.3.2 Guideline 2: Aspects to consider when suspecting parental alienation**

Three aspects could be considered by social workers when assessing families where PA is suspected. They are possible reasons for the onset of PA, the relevance of the history between the parents, and the influence of the alienating parent in PA.

##### *(i) Reasons for the onset of parental alienation*

Social workers should be aware of the possible reasons for PA. The need for the protection of the child can serve as a possible strategy to alienate the child. However, protection could be necessary as a result of transgressions (addiction, domestic violence, psychiatric conditions, abuse, etc.). The need for the protection of the child can be taken to the extreme by the alienating parent, making it difficult to test whether the need for protection is true or not. There should be a clear distinction between the protection of children (i.e. protecting children against abuse and domestic violence) and protection as an alienation strategy. Failing to understand the difference could result in PA not being detected and identified, as described in Baker *et al.* (2020: 53-55) where the authors indicate the difference between an abused child and parental alienation which they describe as a counterintuitive strategy.

When parents separate they can revert to a strategy of “getting back” at each other, which could be another reason for the onset of PA. This may include hurting the alienated parent,

using the children as a tool to fight their own battles and calling it a *mala fide* attempt to nullify the role of the other parent, and destroying the relationship between the child and the alienated parent. This can be described as a deliberate action where a child's view of the alienated parent is skewed by the constant influence and criticism of the alienating parent and the lack of any positive personality traits or any positive influence that parent had on the child (Warshak, 2020:55).

Another reason for PA could be the alienating parent's personal gain and selfish behaviour. This can be attributed to an adult who has not resolved their own emotions regarding the separation or divorce. The lack of emotional intelligence associated with this selfish behaviour can be an indication that the alienating parent is losing sight of the child's best interest and is only fulfilling their own needs. Personal gain was described as a strategy by Nichols (2014:664). Selfish behaviour can also serve as a label for the alienated parent when the alienating parent indicates to the child that the other parent is "selfish" (Baker & Darnall, 2006:104).

*(ii) Relevance of the history between the parents*

The importance of the history between the parents should be considered in the possible detection of PA.

Firstly, the relationship between the parent and the child before the separation should be considered when PA is present. Hence, the quality of the relationship between the child and alienated parent should be considered. Was the alienated parent actively involved in the child's life, or was the alienated parent absent in the everyday life of the child? When a constructive relationship between a parent and a child existed before PA and that relationship suddenly disintegrates, PA could be present. The relationship between the child and the parent before the separation should also be considered as the involvement of that parent in the child's life will help to ensure that blame is not being projected onto the alienated parent (Johnson, 2017:264).

Secondly, the parent's own hurt after separation or divorce is a big contributing factor towards the onset of PA. These hurtful experiences can include the one parent witnessing the other parent moving on with his/her life, and the alienating parent showing revenge and

fighting back to influence the child in a negative way. Brandon (2019) explained that, as a result of the parent's emotional mindset, they would communicate with their previous partner in front of the children. The parent might communicate anger because the other parent is in a new relationship, or they might talk about the resentment they have experienced during the marriage, or fight about financial matters such as maintenance.

The history between the parents is also important with specific reference to transgressions during the relationship. Factors such as addiction, violence, abuse as well as psychiatric conditions should be taken into consideration before a social worker can identify the transgression as PA, as these transgressions can be valid. Baker and Darnell (2206:121) stated that to distinguish between true and false allegations of abuse will continue to be a challenge until a valid and standardised protocol has been developed.

### *(iii) The influence of the alienating parent in PA*

The influence of the alienating parent is significant during PA. The alienating parent influences the child and subsequently becomes over-involved in the child's life.

Boyan and Termini (2013:291) stated that when a child becomes completely embroiled in the life of the alienating parent, it can be described as severe alienation. This occurs because children only have a few resources to resist the influence of an adult. This results in the child sharing the alienating parent's narrative of anger and hatred, causing the disconnect with the alienated parent. The alienating parent's opinions and perceptions become the reality of the child. The alienating parent's attitude or negative comments influence the child's perception of the alienated parent, and the alienating parent's perspective becomes the reality of the child.

Another aspect to consider is when the alienating parent restricts the relationship between the alienated parent and the child. This is indicated as a strategy used by parents to restrict the alienated parent's contact by interfering with or blocking phone calls and stopping visitations (Harman *et al.*, 2016:867). The impact of limiting the relationship between a parent and a child is extremely damaging to the relationship, as it is extremely difficult to rebuild such a relationship when contact is being curbed by the alienating parent. Another



PA indicator to consider is when one parent takes on both parental roles while the alienated parent is actually a competent parent.

According to Gardner (1999:2), the child presents with the independent thinker phenomenon. This happens when a child's independent thought process is taken over by the alienating parent and the child depends on the parent's thinking. The child thus aligns his or her thinking with that of the parent and does not explore reality independently.

General strategies such as a power struggle, attacking the alienated parent and the lack of emotional intelligence should also be considered. According to Baker and Darnall (2006:105-106), limiting or interfering with symbolic contact (denying photographs and items brought from the alienated parent's home), beating the targeted parent in front of the child, and interfering with the child's counselling.

#### **4.3.3 Guideline 3: Indicators and symptoms to assist with the detection and identification of PA**

The aspects involved in the detection and identification of PA will be identified below.

##### *(i) Information of the parents*

The background and history of the parents are important to take into consideration when detecting and identifying PA. An individual's journey can dictate the behaviour patterns of a person. The alienating parent's past could help to explain why they alienate the child from the other parent. It is important to consider if the parents themselves came from a divorced family and if they themselves had experience PA or signs thereof as their behaviour could be learned behaviour.

The history of the parent is relevant as well as the alienated parent's skills or capacity and even insecurities when detecting PA. Factors to consider would be the parents' own childhood, whether they were exposed to similar behaviour by a parent when they got divorced or separated, whether they are displaying learned behaviour, or whether are survivors of sexual and other forms of abuse.

The behaviour of the parents plays a key role in the detection and identification of PA. This includes parents alleging that they are encouraging contact while they are actually preventing contact. The alienating parent can also hurt the alienated parent by preventing contact.

The gender of the parent who alienates is not relevant. The general assumption is that mothers are more prone to PA. However, there is no literature suggesting that the gender of a parent can be an indication of PA.

*(ii) Indicators of possible parental alienation*

High conflict during separation and divorce is a good indication that PA could be present. The onset period of PA is not always clear; however, it could be before the separation or divorce takes place. According to Van der Wal *et al.* (2019:474), a high-conflict divorce can put children at risk for trauma. The higher the conflict the bigger the possibility of PA.

Accusations and allegations between parents are a possible indicator of PA. Accusations made by a parent, such as accusing the other parent of having a personality disorder or being inherently a bad person can be a strategy of PA and could assist with the detection of PA. These accusations can also be relayed to the child by telling the child the alienated parent sexually abused them or did not want them as part of their life. The presence of unfounded accusations and the false narratives of children are possible indicators to consider in order to detect PA. According to Harman and Bernet (2019:3), children's negative views of the alienated parent can be the result of the alienating parent repeatedly feeding the child with negative narratives, i.e. creating a narrative to make the child believe that the alienated parent sexually abused them or even made an attempt to end the child's life.

When a parent speaks about the other parent in a derogatory way or when they belittle the other parent, this should be considered as a possible indicator of PA. Examples of belittling include a parent breaking down the other parent, criticising their abilities and capabilities, and attacking the other person's sense of self. Lorandos (2014:2) found that alienation strategies include the belittling of the alienated parent through constant criticism.

Contradictory behaviour of children – i.e. where alienated children behave differently with each parent – could be a possible indicator of PA (Lorandos *et al.*, 2013:327). This is difficult to assess, and can only be identified once a trusted relationship has been formed between the alienated child and the social worker.

Additional possible indicators to identify deliberate actions of the alienating parent include obstructing the process, not allowing the child to buy small gifts and cards for special days by withholding money, or manipulating the child emotionally. It can also include manipulating the child to not want to spend time with the alienated parent, and making the child feel guilty if they do want to spend time with the other parent (Baker & Darnall, 2006:112).

### *(iii) Possible indicators of PA in children*

According to Warshak (2020:27), there should be a differentiation between indicators in children and indicators in parents. The possible indicators of PA in children are discussed below.

It is important to consider that the child might be fearful of expressing his or her emotions. A child can be afraid to say anything negative about the alienating parent because of possible consequences or punishment. Fear can also be present due to the borrowed narrative from the alienating parent where the child believes that the alienating parent can be a bad person who will cause harm to the child. The child can be fearful of the consequences of expressing themselves, especially if the alienating parent is guilty of PA (Baker *et al.*, 2020:10). The child can also be fearful of the alienated parent without any factual evidence supporting that fear (Warshak, 2016:61).

When a child has a negative script, intensive phrasing and a description of the alienated parent, it is a possible indicator of PA. The presence of a negative script as well as the intensity of such a script are very important when assessing the possibility of PA. Statements such as “The alienated parent is bad”, not supporting the family financially and only negative memories being accessed are important indicators in the possible detection of PA. According to Kumari and Brooks (2004:160), the alienated parent’s list would consist of only negatives. Such a child cannot recall one positive of the alienated parent.

The coaching of children by the alienating parent should be considered a possible indicator of PA in children. This coaching consists of children being prepared for an interview with a social worker, and being told to say certain things. They will be given a narrative that they will have to accept as their own (Wood, 2013:1-2). The child's input will be very similar to that of the alienating parent, if not identical.

*(iv) Symptoms of parental alienation that are difficult to recognise*

Two groups of symptoms that are difficult to recognise are emotional symptoms and behavioural symptoms. The emotional and behavioural symptoms that are present are discussed below.

Emotional symptoms are difficult to identify when the child is presenting with an aggressive, rude, and ruthless attitude which disguises his or her true emotions. According to Goldin and Salani (2020:246), undetected emotional abuse does take place. This includes false fears, manipulating the child on an emotional level, withholding love from the child, and isolating the child from the alienating parent. The emotional symptoms should be taken into consideration for possible detection of PA.

Behavioural symptoms are equally important. Social workers should be trained to differentiate between the delinquent behaviour of a child and behaviour that is indicative of PA. The negative behaviour of the child toward the alienated parent increases in the same way as the alienating hostility and negative behaviour increases during the alienation process. Children can suffer from trauma and stress, and their behaviour will indicate this through poor academic performance, suicide ideation, self-harm, withdrawing from activities and no interest in social activities. They will also prefer social isolation and aggressive behaviour, which will impact the psychological development of the child (Gardner *et al.*, 2006:213; Haddad *et al.*, 2016:244).

#### **4.3.4 Guideline 4: Understanding the child involved in parental alienation**

To understand a child involved in PA, the vulnerability of the child as well as the effect of PA on the child should be taken into account. Aspects that impact the parent-child relationship during PA should also be considered. These aspects are discussed in more detail.

*(i) Vulnerability of the child affected by parental alienation*

Children affected by PA are vulnerable as there is no regard for their choices and input. In the South African context, the voice of the child should be considered according to Section 10 of the Children's Act (38 of 2005). The power of children is removed, and decisions are made by the alienating parent which directly impacts the child – such as moving schools and relocation without the input of the child. To detect the possibility of PA, the vulnerability of the child should be considered by the social worker, indicating how the voice of the child and child participation were taken into consideration. When a child does not take part in decision-making processes, it will hinder the development of a sense of belonging and responsibility together with justice and solidarity (Corneli, 2019).

It is important to take the vulnerability of children into consideration. It is usually younger children that are exposed to PA because older children have already formed their own view of a parent and are not as easily alienated. The vulnerability of the child should be assessed from a developmental perspective, according to Bütz (2020:262). The child at a younger age will be able to form a cognitive understanding of the alienating parent's view and subsequently form an alliance with the alienating parent and reject the alienated parent. When age is considered, it is indicated that younger children are more vulnerable. Hence, age and developmental stage should be further investigated.

*(ii) Effect of parental alienation on the child*

The emotional impact of PA is described as severe by Fernandes (2020). The effects of PA include disturbed sleeping patterns, trauma, lack of self-control, poor academic performance, social isolation, the absence of empathy, mirroring the alienating parent's character later in adulthood, the presence of anxiety and no emotional intelligence. It can also include fear, bitterness and lost childhood. According to Kruk (2013), the impact of parental alienation has been documented as poor confidence, sense of self-being disrupted with low self-esteem, self-hate, absence of trust in people, hopelessness, and addiction. Alienated children lose their resilience to accept love from a parent or to give love, they internalise their emotions and experience feelings of guilt. Due to these factors, they have conflicting relationships with the alienating parent. Also, they are at risk of becoming alienated from their children when they are adults.

A child who has been alienated is described with words such as fearful, damaged emotions, withdrawn, parentified, and feeling like an elastic band between the parents. A child will not oust the alienating parent due to fear of consequences. These effects on a child should be considered as a possible detection of PA. The presence of fear, withdrawn behaviour, parentification, and lack of trust on the side of child are possible indicators of PA.

During the process of PA, the child is typically exposed to information that is not age appropriate. When the child is using a vocabulary that is not age appropriate it could be a possible indicator of PA. Children are normally not exposed to legal documentation. However, when they say they know the legal process, it is considered not age-appropriate information.

### *(iii) Aspects influencing the parent-child relationship*

The aspects influencing the parent-child relationship should be viewed from the alienating parent-child relationship as well as the alienated parent-child relationship. These are discussed in more detail below.

The relationship between the alienated parent and child is embroiled. The perception of the alienating parent becomes the child's reality when the child is constantly exposed to the views and opinions of the alienating parent. The child does not have any additional information against which to check the alienating parent's perception. The alienating parent's narrative therefore becomes the child's narrative as well. A borrowed narrative can be detected and therefore it should be included in the guidelines for the detection of PA. According to Emery (2005), a child can come to believe that it was his or her choice to reject the alienated parent without any encouragement from the alienating parent. The borrowed narrative of a child is a possible indicator of PA.

The parent-child relationship is severely damaged during PA. The withdrawal of the alienated parent from the process will influence the parent-child relationship. Although this can also confirm the presence of PA at a later stage, this behaviour from the alienated parent does not take place during the onset of PA.

#### **4.3.5 Guideline 5: Perspectives on the intervention of PA**

Perspectives on the intervention will be discussed as therapeutic intervention and the reversal of the primary residence, supervised visitation, and professional assistance.

##### *(i) Therapeutic intervention to PA*

The need for therapeutic intervention is important.

It is important that the therapist is an objective and neutral professional. This aspect is especially important pertaining to the interventions for PA. According to Gardner *et al.* (2006:299), for a therapeutic process to take place, it should be the therapist's strategy to re-introduce the child to the alienated parent in a positive fashion.

Once PA has been detected, it is important to restore the relationship between the child and the alienated parent. Bonding therapy should be considered as a therapeutic intervention, and the buy-in of both parents would be important. The perspective of the alienating parent, which becomes the alienated child's perspective, should be addressed. The correction thereof is important to restore the balance for the child. According to Lorandos *et al.* (2013:23), reunification therapy will possibly only take place with the assistance of a court.

The education of parents is an important aspect. A possible intervention strategy is to refer the parents for training on the impact of PA on children. Parents also need to understand that a balanced child needs both parents. Therefore, parents should set aside their own agendas and prioritise the children's best interest. According to Baker (2008), social workers should focus on the educational aspect of PA while providing support and guidance. The training should assist the alienating parent to establish what behaviours can make a child contact resistant.

When the possibility of PA is detected, it is important that the parents also undergo a therapeutic intervention. This intervention should address their own hurt and anger after separation and divorce. Resolving this hurt and anger could empower the parent to not use the child as a tool for revenge. It will also help the child to have a relationship with the alienated parent.

A child who has been exposed to possible PA would also need therapeutic intervention to restore their view of the alienated parent. This therapeutic intervention should focus on the relationship of the child with both parents as the child will also need the alienating parent to correct the narrative that was given to the child. This is supported by Adams (2020), indicating that PA can be stopped in various ways. This includes a court order to reverse primary care, individual therapy for children, family therapy with the child and alienated parent, individual parental guidance, phasing in contact between the child and the alienated parent, and therapy for the children and the alienating parent where the children can confront the alienating parent.

*(ii) Reversal of the primary residence, supervised visitation, and professional assistance*

The reversal of primary care should be carefully considered as it might interfere with the child's best interest and could do more damage over and above the damage that was done by the PA process. According to the Children's Act (38 of 2005), Section 9, the child's best interest should, in all matters, remain of paramount importance.

Reversal of the primary residence as an intervention should be carefully considered and placed as a possible intervention strategy. However, it should not be considered without considering every aspect of the child. This is not an intervention strategy that has been used in the South African context and should only be considered once every possible avenue has been exhausted. Gordon *et al.* (2008:49) stated that the child should be separated from the alienating parent by allowing the child and the alienated parent to receive treatment in a facility away from the negative influence. This therapeutic approach will assist the child to develop a relationship with the alienated parent without any intimidation from the alienating parent.

When assessing the family to determine possible PA, the duration of the process should be taking into consideration. Taking the duration of this process into consideration, it is necessary to include supervised visitations as an intervention strategy to initiate the reconstruction of the relationship between the alienated parent and child. Supervised visitation can facilitate contact between the alienated parent and child in a controlled environment to ensure that the child's best interest is served at all times. The view on the



cost aspect of supervised visitation is that costs should be shared, which can help to prevent the alienating parent's misuse of the service and possibly hasten the process. Adams (2020) stated that supervised visitation could result in the alienating parent ceasing the alienation behaviour and can also provide a platform where the alienating parent can assess what happened to the children because of PA.

#### **4.3.6 Guideline 6: Support systems and professional support systems, and legislation**

Support systems play a pertinent role in PA. Support does not only indicate support for the families affected by PA, but also support for the social workers who work with PA. A discussion of these aspects follows.

##### *(i) Support systems being impacted by parental alienation*

Bronfenbrenner (1979:41) described the importance of systems and the interaction of individuals in these systems. Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Theory can be applied to support systems that have been impacted by PA.

Schools are identified as a microsystem (direct contact for child) and as a mesosystem (parents' contact with school about the child). The school can either be part of an alienation strategy where a child is moved to a different school or as part of a support system in that the school knows the child and observed the different behaviour of the child, i.e. withdrawal of the child from sport and social activities or the perspective of involvement of the alienated parent in the school before the onset of possible PA. According to Woodall and Woodall (2017:52), a possible indicator of PA should be the school in that alienating parents strive to limit the involvement of the alienated parent in the child's educational environment, preventing contact with the school and the child while at school. Should the involvement of the alienating parent at the school become an unbearable emotional situation for the child, the alienating parent should not engage with the school.

At the intervention level, the family may assist in resolving the PA or contribute to the alienation. Haines *et al.* (2019) stated that extended family can worsen the alienation, leading to more damage between the child, the alienated parent and the extended family.

The cultural context should also be taken into consideration in an effort to resolve PA. This may include involving elders in the community. Culturally, the assumption that the mother is the best parent has been replaced with the best parent is both parents. It is further important that the cultural context should not determine where a child should primarily reside. This is confirmed by Baker (2010:284) who states that the value of each parent should be understood when communities and cultural beliefs are at play.

(i) Professional support systems

Professional support systems are available for PA interventions. Ideally, this should be a multi-disciplinary team approach where several professionals are involved in the therapeutic process. This may include FAMSA, the Office of the Family Advocate and other organisations specialising in family interventions. These professional support systems will assist during a referral process to assess the family and provide ongoing support. Multi-disciplinary teams can assist the entire family once PA has been detected. The family will then be treated by a team who can address each family member's need. FAMSA consists of a group of social workers who can intervene during PA. They can also provide crucial information and training to families. The Office of the Family Advocate can assess families from an objective point of view and determine whether PA is present in the family.

#### **4.3.7 Guideline 7: Legislation to take into consideration when working with PA**

In South Africa, the only piece of legislation with a bearing on PA is the Children's Act. The White Paper on Families should also be considered when a family shows signs of PA. These two aspects are discussed below:

*(i) Legislation regulating the process*

The Children's Act (38 of 2005) can assist with PA. The legal standing of the parties – being the alienated parent, the child, and the alienating parent – could be determined by taking the following Sections of the Children's Act into consideration:

Sections 6(2)(a), 7(1)(a) – (n), 9, 10 and 31(1)(a) of the Children's Act speak to the best interest of the child standard, and to the right of the child to participate and express their views in all matters that affect them, as well as their right to be heard in official proceedings

in motion. Boniface (2013) stated that there are occurrences where the wishes of the children are not taken into account, despite the children being teenagers or pre-teens. Additionally, there is case law where the court ignores the wishes of the children for different reasons, such as that the children's preference is regarded as immature or unwise, or the child's views are said to be affected by undue parental influence. In some of these cases it is clear that the court could not have said that the children were too young to express their opinion. Even if the child concerned is of tender age, every effort should be made to hear the child's views.

The Children's Act does not specifically address the aspect of PA. However, the effects thereof, for instance when PA interferes with the best interest of children, are described and can be used by social workers.

#### *(ii) Policies regulating families*

The White Paper on Families (2013:11) describes the family as a group of individuals who interact with each other and recognise a relationship with each other, be it because of common parentage, marriage and/or adoption. The Paper elaborates on the statistical findings of divorce between 2001 and 2010, finding that white families are more inclined to divorce, followed by black families, and that there is a consistent pattern of woman initiating the divorce. The White Paper on Families (2013:36) also discusses response strategies for families. This includes regarding the family as a social system. By using this approach, service providers will be able to analyse and describe family-based aspects.

## **4.4 RESOURCE TO ASSIST WITH THE POSSIBLE DETECTION OF PA**

After developing the guidelines as described in 4.3, the researcher compiled a resource that can be used by social workers. The resource discussed in this section incorporates all the guidelines that were developed and can therefore assist with the possible detection of PA. The resource starts with identifying details of the parents, biological children, and children from previous relationships. Following this, there is a description of possible factors that can assist in identifying PA, the onset of PA and a comprehensive history of the parents. Support systems (personal and professional) are listed, followed by possible interventions and, lastly, legislation available to regulate PA.

The resource to assist with the possible detection of PA is provided in Table 4.2.

**Table 4-2: Resource to assist with the possible detection of parental alienation**

| Identifying the particulars of parents: Parent 1 |         |          |
|--------------------------------------------------|---------|----------|
|                                                  | Details | Comments |
| Name                                             |         |          |
| Race                                             |         |          |
| Age                                              |         |          |
| Address                                          |         |          |
| Primary caregiver (Y/N)                          |         |          |
| Shared residency (Y/N)                           |         |          |
| Duration of relationship                         |         |          |
| Current relationship status                      |         |          |
| Children from previous relationships (Y/N)       |         |          |
| Employed (Y/N)                                   |         |          |
| Highest qualification                            |         |          |
| Income bracket                                   |         |          |
| Religion                                         |         |          |
| Date of separation                               |         |          |

| Identifying particulars of Parents: Parent 2 |         |          |
|----------------------------------------------|---------|----------|
|                                              | Details | Comments |
| Name                                         |         |          |
| Race                                         |         |          |
| Age                                          |         |          |
| Address                                      |         |          |
| Primary caregiver (Y/N)                      |         |          |
| Shared residency (Y/N)                       |         |          |
| Duration of relationship                     |         |          |
| Current relationship status                  |         |          |
| Children from previous relationships (Y/N)   |         |          |
| Employed (Y/N)                               |         |          |
| Highest qualification                        |         |          |
| Income bracket                               |         |          |
| Religion                                     |         |          |
| Date of separation                           |         |          |

| Identifying particulars of children |          |
|-------------------------------------|----------|
| Child 1:                            | Child 2: |
| Name                                | Name     |
| Age                                 | Age      |
| Race                                | Race     |
| Religion                            | Religion |
| Address                             | Address  |
| Child 3:                            | Child 4: |
| Name                                | Name     |
| Age                                 | Age      |
| Race                                | Race     |
| Religion                            | Religion |
| Address                             | Address  |

| Children's particulars from previous relationships |          |
|----------------------------------------------------|----------|
| Child 1:                                           | Child 2: |
| Name                                               | Name     |
| Age                                                | Age      |
| Race                                               | Race     |

|                 |                 |
|-----------------|-----------------|
| Religion        | Religion        |
| Address         | Address         |
| <b>Child 3:</b> | <b>Child 4:</b> |
| Name            | Name            |
| Age             | Age             |
| Race            | Race            |
| Religion        | Religion        |
| Address         | Address         |

| Description or possible aspects that can assist in identifying PA                                                                                                          |  |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--|
| <b>1. High conflict present</b><br>(Yes / No – before separation, during separation, or after? Physical or verbal?)                                                        |  |
| <b>2. Shared/borrowed narrative</b><br>(Does the child's / children's narrative mirror that of the possible alienating parent or lack independent thinking? Explain.)      |  |
| <b>3. Manipulation</b><br>(Is there evidence of manipulation and, if so, elaborate on the history and the current manipulation techniques.)                                |  |
| <b>4. Contact resistance</b><br>(Is the potentially alienating parent refusing contact? Is the child/ren resistant to having contact with the potential alienated parent?) |  |

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |  |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--|
| <p><b>5. Previous existing relationship and duration</b><br/>(What was the child's relationship with the potential alienated parent before the separation? For how long was the relationship positive? For how long has it been negative? This can indicate the possible timeframe of PA.)</p>                                        |  |
| <p><b>6. Child's attitude towards both parents</b><br/>(How does the child view each parent? Provide examples of verbal comments made and body language observed.)</p>                                                                                                                                                                |  |
| <p><b>7. Need to protect the child and why?</b><br/>(Elaborate on comments made by the potentially alienating parent, whether they feel they need to protect the child's mental, emotional and/or physical well-being by making accusations about the potential alienated parent's transgressions.)</p>                               |  |
| <p><b>8. School interference</b><br/>(Is there possible interference of one parent limiting contact with the school and another parent? Is one parent excluded from making decisions about the school including reports, AGM meetings, choice of school, and so on?)</p>                                                              |  |
| <p><b>9. Contact interference</b><br/>(Is there evidence of interference with contact, e.g. dropped phone calls /calls not answered, plans being made during one parent's contact time, the child being asleep all the time without evidence provided, etc.? Include examples and tangible evidence as well as accusations made.)</p> |  |



| Onset of PA                                                                                                                                                                                  |  |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--|
| <b>1. Protection need - valid or not?</b><br>(Elaborate on whether the need for protection mentioned above is valid or not. Is there evidence? Can fact be separated from possible fiction?) |  |
| <b>2. Retribution</b><br>(Is the possible alienating parent justifying their behaviour? What are they possibly doing to 'get back' at the other parent?)                                     |  |

| History of the parents: Parent 1                                                                                                                                                                                |  |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--|
| <b>1. Name of parent</b>                                                                                                                                                                                        |  |
| <b>2. The quality of the relationship before separation</b><br>(Was the parent actively involved or absent? Any known stressors on the relationship or was it 'positive/healthy'?)                              |  |
| <b>3. Emotional mindset of parent</b><br>(Anger, sadness, happiness, complacency, etc.?)                                                                                                                        |  |
| <b>4. History of the parent</b><br>(Did the parent come from a divorced family, did the parent experience PA or signs thereof.?)                                                                                |  |
| <b>5. Transgressions</b><br>(Have there been any transgressions – specify whether this is confirmed as factual or accusatory. Examples include addiction, domestic violence, psychiatric conditions and abuse.) |  |
| <b>6. Parent's perspective on the other parent</b><br>(How does this parent view the other parent? Is their verbal statement congruent with their body language?)                                               |  |

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |  |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--|
| <b>7. Limiting the relationship</b><br>(Does this parent feel that their relationship with their child/ren is being limited/interfered with? Provide examples of what they have stated as well as what you have observed.)   |  |
| <b>8. Power struggle</b><br>(Is there a power struggle between the parents – obvious or not? Does this parent appear to have more power than the other parent? Does this parent appear to place importance on having power?) |  |

| History of the parents: Parent 2                                                                                                                                                                           |  |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--|
| <b>1. Name of parent</b>                                                                                                                                                                                   |  |
| <b>2. The quality of the relationship before separation</b><br>(Was the parent actively involved or absent? Any known stressors on the relationship, or was it 'positive/healthy'?)                        |  |
| <b>3. Emotional mindset of parent</b><br>(Anger, sadness, happiness, complacency, etc.?)                                                                                                                   |  |
| <b>4. Own history of the parent</b><br>(Did the parent come from a divorced family, did the parent experience PA or signs thereof.?)                                                                       |  |
| <b>5. Transgressions</b><br>(Were there any transgressions – specify whether this is confirmed as factual or accusatory. Examples include addiction, domestic violence, psychiatric conditions and abuse.) |  |
| <b>6. Parent's perspective of the other parent</b><br>(How does this parent view the other parent? Are their verbal statements                                                                             |  |

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |  |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--|
| congruent with their body language?)                                                                                                                                                                                         |  |
| <b>7. Limiting the relationship</b><br>(Does this parent feel that their relationship with their child/ren is being limited/interfered with? Provide examples of what they have stated as well as what you have observed.)   |  |
| <b>8. Power struggle</b><br>(Is there a power struggle between the parents – obvious or not? Does this parent appear to have more power than the other parent? Does this parent appear to place importance on having power?) |  |

| Support systems                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |  |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--|
| <b>1. Family support</b><br>(Are extended family members making a positive or negative impact on the potential alienation? Are extended family members possibly being alienated? Include tangible evidence and accusations made where possible.)                                                                                 |  |
| <b>2. Cultural intervention</b><br>(Does culture play a role – whether positive or negative? Do cultural norms dictate parental roles or where the child/ren should reside?)                                                                                                                                                     |  |
| <b>3. School system</b><br>(Is there tangible evidence, or have accusations been made, where the school is enabling possible alienation e.g. believing the narrative of one parent and therefore limiting communication with the other parent? Has the school noticed changes in the child/ren, e.g. behaviour in class when the |  |

|                                                                                                                         |  |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--|
| child/ren visited one parent vs the other parent, social isolation, withdrawal from activities, change in personality?) |  |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--|

| Intervention when PA is suspected |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1.                                | <b>Possible interventions:</b> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li></li> <li></li> <li></li> <li></li> </ol>                                                                                                                       |
| 2.                                | <b>Interventions undertaken (list all interventions based on the above, as well as any additional ones you have utilised, and explain whether these were successful or not by making mention of any challenges and achievements):</b> |
| Professional support systems      |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
| 3.                                | <b>Possible support systems:</b> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li></li> <li></li> <li></li> </ol>                                                                                                                               |

|                                                                                                                                                                                           |                                                                                                                                                                                    |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| d.                                                                                                                                                                                        | <p><b>4. Support systems approached/utilised (list support systems approached/utilised and state their role. Ensure to state whether the outcome was positive or negative)</b></p> |
| <p><b>5. Legislation</b></p> <p><b>The following legislation should be referred to:</b></p> <p><b>a. The Children’s Act (38 of 2005)</b></p> <p><b>b. The White Paper on Families</b></p> |                                                                                                                                                                                    |

## 4.5 CONCLUSION

This chapter discussed the development of the guidelines and the compilation of a resource that could assist social workers in the possible detection of PA. The foundation for the development of the guidelines was the literature overview and the five themes extracted from the interviews conducted with the social workers. The seven guidelines are: (1) the description of PA, (2) aspects to consider during PA, (3) indicators and symptoms to assist with the detection of PA, (4) understanding the child involved in PA, (5) perspectives to intervention of PA, (6) support systems and professional support systems, and (7) legislation to take in consideration when working with PA.

The first four guidelines focus on the detection and identification of PA. The last three guidelines focus on the intervention aspect of PA, the support systems and legislation. Each

guideline provides information necessary for social workers to assist with the detection of PA.

The development of guidelines was the focal point of this study conducted by the researcher. The following chapter will provide the summary, conclusions and recommendations of the study.

## **CHAPTER 5: SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE RESEARCH STUDY**

### **5.1 INTRODUCTION**

This chapter provides a summary of the completed study in the context of the research question for the study. An overview is provided of how the research question, sub-questions, aim and objectives were reached as well as the trustworthiness that fortified this study. Conclusions and recommendations for practice will be discussed pertaining to the themes and guidelines for possible detection of PA. These guidelines can possibly contribute to social workers mandated to assess families after a separation or divorce. This chapter will include further recommendations for training, research, and policy, followed by the limitations and contribution of this study.

### **5.2 SUMMARY OF THE RESEARCH QUESTION, AIM AND OBJECTIVES**

This section will explain how the research question and sub-questions, aim and objectives of this study were achieved as the research components guided the direction of this research.

#### **5.2.1 Research question**

The primary research question guiding this study was: What will guidelines aimed at assisting social workers in the detection of PA during separation or divorce, entail? This question was composed based on the research of PA where no guidelines for the detection in separation and divorce could be found. The research question was answered by achieving the research aim and objectives of this study. The research question was answered by identifying five themes indicated in Table 5-1.

**Table 5-1: Summary of the five themes**

| <b><i>Theme number</i></b> | <b><i>Theme title</i></b>           |
|----------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Theme 1                    | Social worker's perspective on PA   |
| Theme 2                    | Detection and identification of PA  |
| Theme 3                    | The child involved in PA            |
| Theme 4                    | Perspectives to interventions of PA |
| Theme 5                    | Support and Legislation             |

The five themes and literature were used to develop a guideline that could assist social workers with the detection of PA. After the guidelines were established, a resource was created for social workers to use when PA is suspected.

### **5.2.2 Aim and objectives**

The aim of this study was to through a qualitative descriptive design, develop guidelines for social workers for the detection of PA during separation or divorce.

A qualitative descriptive design used in this study allowed the researcher to explore the perspectives of social workers on the detection of PA to develop guidelines. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 social workers residing in Gauteng. The audio recorded data was transcribed and analysed with thematic analyses. The aim of this study was achieved by uncovering the five main themes, sub-themes and categories to describe the guidelines for the detection of PA during separation or divorce.

#### **The three objectives of this study were to:**

- (i) To conduct a literature study to develop a conceptual framework on PA
- (ii) To explore and describe the perspectives of social workers pertaining to the detection of PA by conducting semi-structured interviews
- (iii) To develop and finalise guidelines for the detection of PA by social workers in separation or divorce



Object one was achieved by conducting a literature study on PA as reported in Chapter 2. The history, development and definition of PA were discussed followed by the prevalence of PA and the levels of severity of PA. The detection of PA and challenges was emphasised, considering counterintuitive strategies to identify PA as well as PA strategies that influence a child. The definition, role and education of social workers were important to understand the importance of social workers concerning PA as well as the lack of education on PA. This was followed by interventions that could assist during PA, with a focus on the therapeutic process during PA, the importance of the child's voice during intervention, the child's view of parents during PA and the possibility of restoring the relationship between the child and the alienated parent. The impact of PA on the child was reflected in two sections, the immediate effects of PA on children and the long-term effects of PA on children. The White Paper on Families and the Children's Act was described to indicate legislation and policies relevant to PA and finally, the theoretical framework was explained and applied to this study.

The second objective was reached by conducting semi-structured interviews with 15 social workers. The interview schedule consisted of seven open-ended questions which allowed for more explorative questions assisting to explore and describe the views of social workers on the detection of PA. The findings of the data collected during interviews were discussed in the empirical study, Chapter 3.

The third objective was achieved by developing guidelines for the detection of PA during separation or divorce. The guideline in Chapter 4 was developed by using the information in the literature overview combined with the data from the empirical study. A resource was created based on the guidelines to assist social workers when they suspect PA.

### **5.3 TRUSTWORTHINESS**

As discussed under section 1.8 in Chapter 1, trustworthiness was proven by applying the four principles of trustworthiness in this research study, namely credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was ensured by using sound research methods as well as a fitting research design that complimented the research question. When the data analyses were completed, the findings of the interviews were sent to the participants

for member checking. The participants had the opportunity to verify the information that was transcribed and analysed to ensure accuracy. Transferability was guaranteed by selecting 15 social workers who had experience about the topic of PA. Dependability was achieved by ensuring this process was coherent, documented and well developed under the guidance of a research supervisor. Confirmability was ensured by creating an audit trail and keeping field notes. The research process was well documented, and the data will be stored at the Centre for Child, Youth and Families Studies, Wellington for 5 years after which it will be destroyed.

## **5.4 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

In this study, the guidelines for the detection of PA during separation or divorce by establishing guidelines were explored. After analysing the data, five themes emerged in this study. Based on the themes of this study, conclusions and recommendations will be represented. The recommendation for practice focus on the social work field. Recommendations on training, future research, legislation, and policy as well as summative recommendations will be made.

### **5.4.1 Conclusions according to the themes with recommendations for practice**

*Theme 1: Social worker's perspectives on PA.*

The conclusions for this theme are the following:

- i. The description of PA by defining PA, the reasons for the onset of PA, the relevance of the history between parents and the influence of the alienating parent in PA were identified as important sub-themes in this study.
- ii. The description of PA was done by defining the term PA and the use of the term PA. Social workers had a firm idea of the definition of PA; however, it was clear that they were not confident enough to use the term PA and rather described the phenomenon or used a synonym for PA.
- iii. The reasons for onset of PA were summarized with the protection of children where this could be used as a PA strategy rather than protection in the normal sense of the

word. "Getting back" at the alienated parent was identified as a strategy that is frequently used by the alienating parent which linked up with the personal gain and selfish behaviour on behalf of the alienating parent.

- (i) The relevance of the history between the parents was underpinned with the relationship between the parents and children before the separation with a focus on the relationship between the alienated parent and the child, the parent's own hurt after separation or divorce which has not been resolved and the presence of transgressions such as domestic violence and addiction caused by the other parent.
- (ii) The influence of the alienating parent in PA was summarized with the opinions and perceptions about the alienated parent which influence the child, that the relationship between the alienated parent and child are being limited and strategies used by the alienating parent.

Recommendations for practice are the following:

- i. Social workers should be trained in the field of PA for them to be able to use the term with knowledge and confidence.
- ii. Social workers should attend workshops to understand the guideline for the detection of PA during separation or divorce to be able to identify and elaborate on the history of parents and the influence of the alienating parent on the child.

#### *Theme 2: Detection and identification of PA*

The conclusions for this theme are the following:

- i. The information of the parents, indicators of possible PA, possible indicators in children and symptoms of PA that are difficult to recognize were identified as important sub-themes.
- ii. The information of parents is indicated by the background and history of the parents where a parent could have been abused as a child or comes from a family where alienation took place. The behaviour of the parents is important taking into consideration their skills, capacity and insecurities. The gender of a parent should be noted although it is not an aspect that influences PA according to this study.

- iii. Indicators of possible parental alienation should take into consideration the presence of high conflict between the parents. The onset of PA could not be determined if it were prior to or post the separation. The presence of accusations and allegations are a possible indicator of PA as well as the belittling of the alienated parent. Contradictory behaviour of the child is an important aspect where the child's behaviour and action are different in different settings. Additional indicators to identify deliberate action of the alienating parent such as the obstruction of the process and the manipulation of the child.

Recommendations for practice are the following:

- i. Social workers should do a comprehensive background investigation in the history of the parents and then consider the current behaviour of parents in the early stages of the assessment.
- ii. Social workers should be trained to identify the possible indicators of PA especially if high conflict is present to not to confuse PA with other prevalent issues such as abuse and domestic violence.

### *Theme 3: The child involved in PA*

The conclusions for this theme are the following:

- i. The vulnerability of the child affected by PA, the effect of PA on the child and aspects influencing the parent-child relationship should be considered by social workers when PA is present was identified as important sub-themes.
- ii. The vulnerability of the child affected by PA is shown with the disregard for the child's choices where a child is offered no opportunity to be heard i.e. change of schools and relocation. The input and the susceptibility of a child at different ages indicated that younger children are more vulnerable and will be at high risk of PA.
- iii. The effect of PA on the child was the emotional impact of PA on the child, the immediate impact, and the long-term effect on children. The exposure of children to information that is not age-appropriate was highlighted and a cause for concern as

children are not able to comprehend and understand information that is not age-appropriate.

- iv. Aspects influencing the parent-child relationship was the perception of the alienating parent becoming the child's reality, the child only had borrowed scenarios and no positive memories of the alienated parent. Out of desperation and hopelessness it was indicated that the alienated parent withdraws from the process.

Recommendations for practice are the following:

- i. Social workers should be mindful of the vulnerability of children, especially when it is about the voice of the child.
- ii. When social workers consider intervention for PA, they need to recommend intervention to address the impact that PA had on the child.

#### *Theme 4: Perspectives to the intervention of PA*

The conclusions for this theme are the following:

- (i) The therapeutic intervention and the reversal of primary residence, supervised visitation, and professional assistance was identified as important sub-themes.
- (ii) Therapeutic intervention is the therapist as a neutral third party is important to not only remain objective, but to also be a safe space for children and parents to work through their emotions. The therapist's need for training in PA is relevant as currently, in the South African context social workers indicated a lack of training. The restoration of the child's relationship with the alienated parent is possible with the cooperation of both parents and could be a slow process. The education of parents is important as this could enable them to assist children during separation or divorce and to understand the best interest of the child, thus putting their own agendas aside. Therapeutic intervention for the parents and therapeutic intervention for the children is important to assist parents and children to heal from PA.

- (iii) Reversal of primary residence, supervised visitation, and professional assistance involves the change of primary care from one parent to the other or a neutral professional facility specifically dealing with PA. The duration of the assessment process and final recommendations could be a lengthy process and supervised visitations could be used to preserve the parent-child relationship whilst these assessments take place.

Recommendations for practice are the following:

- i. Social workers should consider the entire family system during intervention ensuring that all individuals are receiving therapy and not only the child.
- ii. Social workers should be mindful of the impact of the reversal of primary residence on the minor child.

#### *Theme 5: Support and Legislations*

The conclusions for this theme are the following:

- i. Support systems being impacted by PA, professional support systems and legislation regulating the process as important sub-themes.
- ii. Support systems being impacted by PA are school and family. Schools can either be a support system, identifying the need of the child and emotional turmoil, or a school could form part of a PA strategy where they do not communicate with both parents and subsequently isolating one parent from the school progress of a child. Likewise, the family can either correct the alienating parent's behaviour or facilitate PA in the extended family, isolating the alienated parent. The cultural context is important especially in the black culture where the community raises a child together with the strong guidance of the elders. Other cultural groups do not hold the same value and therefore could form part of the alienation process.
- iii. Professional support systems such as a multi-disciplinary team can be constructive to both the family and the therapist as it is a strong support system. FAMSA is well

placed to assist families with education, mediation and therapy and the Family Advocate as a body can do independent investigations and assessments for families.

- iv. Legislation regulating the process is the Children's Act, Act 38 of 2005. No other legislation could be found to regulate PA.

Recommendations for practice are the following:

- i. Social workers should utilise support systems for the family such as school and family to obtain the best possible outcome for the family.
- ii. Social workers should use the services of professional support systems in their area to create a constructive outcome for the family.
- iii. The Children's Act is important legislation to use during PA and social workers should familiarise themselves with the Act and attend training where possible.

#### **5.4.2 Recommendations for training**

Recommendations for training include the following:

- i. Social workers should be trained in the field of PA for them to be able to use the term with knowledge and confidence.
- ii. Social workers should attend workshops to understand the guideline for the detection of PA during separation or divorce to be able to identify and elaborate on the history of parents and the influence of the alienating parent on the child.
- iii. Social workers should be trained in the aspects of the Children's Act pertaining to PA.

#### **5.4.3 Recommendations for future research**

Recommendations for future research include the following:

- i. The study was conducted in Gauteng where there is an awareness of PA, the study should be conducted in other provinces to be able to make recommendations in the different provinces.

- ii. The study indicated that PA is a phenomenon that takes place without consideration of the consequences. Future research can explore the emotional intelligence present during PA and if that could prevent the phenomenon to an extent.
- iii. The impact of the child affected by PA should be researched, both from the child's view of the alienated parent and from the view of the child's fear towards the alienating parent by disappointing them.
- iv. Lastly, the impact of the reversal of primary residence versus the impact of PA on a child can be researched.

#### **5.4.4 Recommendations for policy and legislation**

Recommendation for policy and legislation include the following:

- i. It is recommended that the guidelines for the detection of PA in separation and divorce be included in policies when PA is investigated to assist the social workers with more resources in the identification, but also to use their findings with confidence in the courts.
- ii. It is recommended that the Children's Act include sections to assist in addressing the PA for social workers to be able to implement these sections during intervention to PA.

### **5.5 CONTRIBUTION OF THE STUDY**

This study may contribute to the detection of PA during separation or divorce with guidelines in the following ways:

- i. This study was done in the South African context, thus adding to the literature available in South Africa for future research.
- ii. This study provides guidelines for the detection of PA during separation and divorce which is the first guideline in South Africa.

### **5.6 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY**

The findings of this study to provide a guideline to assist with the detection of PA during separation or divorce, the following limitations should be noted:



- i. In hindsight, the interview schedule should not have included question seven being “What elements should be included in guidelines for the detection of PA during separation or divorce?” into the interview schedule. Most participants responded to indicate that they will rely on the researcher to provide this information.
- ii. The researcher should have taken the workload and schedule of the social workers employed by the Family Advocate into consideration before deciding to use them as the only population group.

## **5.7 FINAL WORD**

The researcher found the plight of children affected by PA and the lack of resources available to social workers to be concerning. The literature and findings of this study highlighted PA as concerning and damaging. That is why these guidelines for the detection of PA during separation or divorce can serve as the starting point to address this phenomenon in South Africa.

It was important to establish guidelines for the detection of PA during separation and divorce as no guidelines have been established in the South African context yet. The guidelines are formulated in order for social workers to understand PA and to identify PA during the assessment of families. Based on the guidelines, a resource was developed to assist social workers when PA is suspected in a family.

The role of social workers in addressing PA is pertinent. This study has made it clear that PA is well known. However, social workers were hesitant to address the issue of PA due to professional consequences. This study serves as the start of the research that should be done to assist both families and social workers who are in the front lines, fighting for the rights of society and the best interest of children.

***NON NOBIS*** – Not for ourselves

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# ANNEXURE A: ETHICAL CLEARANCE FROM NORTH-WEST UNIVERSITY



Private Bag X1290, Potchefstroom  
South Africa 2520

Tel: 018 299-1111/2222  
Fax: 018 299-4910  
Web: <http://www.nwu.ac.za>

**Research Ethics Regulatory Committee**  
Tel: 018 299-4849  
Email: [nkosinathi.machine@nwu.ac.za](mailto:nkosinathi.machine@nwu.ac.za)

## ETHICS APPROVAL LETTER OF STUDY

Based on approval by the North West University Health Research Ethics Committee (NWU-HREC) on 22/11/2018, the NWU Health Research Ethics Committee hereby approves your study as indicated below. This implies that the North-West University Research Ethics Regulatory Committee (NWU-RERC) grants its permission that, provided the special conditions specified below are met and pending any other authorisation that may be necessary, the study may be initiated, using the ethics number below.

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |   |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |              |   |                                                                                 |   |      |   |        |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |             |  |  |              |  |  |  |      |  |        |  |  |  |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------|---|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---|------|---|--------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|-------------|--|--|--------------|--|--|--|------|--|--------|--|--|--|
| <b>Study title: Guidelines for social workers: Detection of parental alienation during separation or divorce.</b>                                                                                                                                                |   |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |              |   |                                                                                 |   |      |   |        |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |             |  |  |              |  |  |  |      |  |        |  |  |  |
| <b>Study Leader/Supervisor (Principal Investigator)/Researcher: Dr C van Wyk</b>                                                                                                                                                                                 |   |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |              |   |                                                                                 |   |      |   |        |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |             |  |  |              |  |  |  |      |  |        |  |  |  |
| <b>Student: T Kriel</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |   |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |              |   |                                                                                 |   |      |   |        |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |             |  |  |              |  |  |  |      |  |        |  |  |  |
| <b>Ethics number:</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |   | <table border="1"> <tr> <td>N</td><td>W</td><td>U</td><td>-</td><td>0</td><td>0</td><td>0</td><td>5</td><td>7</td><td>-</td><td>1</td><td>8</td><td>-</td><td>A</td><td>1</td> </tr> <tr> <td colspan="3">Institution</td> <td colspan="4">Study Number</td> <td colspan="2">Year</td> <td colspan="4">Status</td> </tr> </table> |              |   |                                                                                 |   |      |   |        | N | W | U | - | 0 | 0 | 0 | 5 | 7 | - | 1 | 8 | - | A | 1 | Institution |  |  | Study Number |  |  |  | Year |  | Status |  |  |  |
| N                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                | W | U                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 | -            | 0 | 0                                                                               | 0 | 5    | 7 | -      | 1 | 8 | - | A | 1 |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |             |  |  |              |  |  |  |      |  |        |  |  |  |
| Institution                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |   |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   | Study Number |   |                                                                                 |   | Year |   | Status |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |             |  |  |              |  |  |  |      |  |        |  |  |  |
| <u>Status:</u> S = Submission; R = Re-Submission; P = Provisional Authorisation; A = Authorisation                                                                                                                                                               |   |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |              |   |                                                                                 |   |      |   |        |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |             |  |  |              |  |  |  |      |  |        |  |  |  |
| <b>Application Type: Single study</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |   |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |              |   |                                                                                 |   |      |   |        |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |             |  |  |              |  |  |  |      |  |        |  |  |  |
| <b>Commencement date: 2018/11/22</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |   |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |              |   | <b>Risk: <span style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px;">Medium</span></b> |   |      |   |        |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |             |  |  |              |  |  |  |      |  |        |  |  |  |
| <b>Expiry date: 2019/11/30</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |   |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |              |   |                                                                                 |   |      |   |        |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |             |  |  |              |  |  |  |      |  |        |  |  |  |
| <b>Approval of the study is initially provided for a year, after which continuation of the study is dependent on receipt and review of a six-monthly (or as otherwise stipulated) monitoring report and the concomitant issuing of a letter of continuation.</b> |   |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |              |   |                                                                                 |   |      |   |        |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |             |  |  |              |  |  |  |      |  |        |  |  |  |

### Special in process conditions of the research for approval (if applicable):

- The interview schedule should be submitted to the HREC for approval, if it changes following the pilot testing of the schedule, before implementation in the study.
- Please provide the HREC with copies of the signed confidentiality agreements with the co-coder, transcriber and the mediator, when they become available.

### General conditions:

While this ethics approval is subject to all declarations, undertakings and agreements incorporated and signed in the application form, the following general terms and conditions will apply:

- The study leader/supervisor (principle investigator)/researcher must report in the prescribed format to the NWU-HREC:
  - annually (or as otherwise requested) on the monitoring of the study, whereby a letter of continuation will be provided, and upon completion of the study; and

- without any delay in case of any adverse event or incident (or any matter that interrupts sound ethical principles) during the course of the study.
- The approval applies strictly to the proposal as stipulated in the application form. Should any amendments to the proposal be deemed necessary during the course of the study, the study leader/researcher must apply for approval of these amendments at the NWU-HREC, prior to implementation. Should there be any deviations from the study proposal without the necessary approval of such amendments, the ethics approval is immediately and automatically forfeited.
- Annually a number of studies may be randomly selected for an external audit.
- The date of approval indicates the first date that the study may be started.
- In the interest of ethical responsibility the NWU-RERC and NWU-HREC reserves the right to:
  - request access to any information or data at any time during the course or after completion of the study;
  - to ask further questions, seek additional information, require further modification or monitor the conduct of your research or the informed consent process;
  - withdraw or postpone approval if:
    - any unethical principles or practices of the study are revealed or suspected;
    - it becomes apparent that any relevant information was withheld from the NWU-HREC or that information has been false or misrepresented;
    - submission of the annual (or otherwise stipulated) monitoring report, the required amendments, or reporting of adverse events or incidents was not done in a timely manner and accurately; and / or
    - new institutional rules, national legislation or international conventions deem it necessary.
- NWU-HREC can be contacted for further information or any report templates via [Ethics-HRECAppl@nwu.ac.za](mailto:Ethics-HRECAppl@nwu.ac.za) or 018 299 1206.

The NWU-HREC would like to remain at your service as scientist and researcher, and wishes you well with your study. Please do not hesitate to contact the NWU-HREC or the NWU-RERC for any further enquiries or requests for assistance.

Yours sincerely

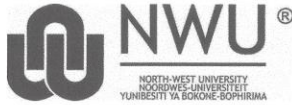


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Prof Wayne Towers  
Chair NWU Health Research Ethics Committee

Current details: (22351930) M:\DSS1\8533\Monitoring and Reporting Cluster\Ethics\Certificates\Templates\Research Ethics Approval Letters\9.1.5.4.2 HREC Ethical Approval Letter.docm  
3 December 2018  
File reference: 9.1.5.4.2

# ANNEXURE B: APPROVAL OF AMENDMENT REQUEST BY THE NORTH-WEST UNIVERSITY



Dr C van Wyk  
Social work  
COMPRES

Private Bag X6001, Potchefstroom  
South Africa 2520

Tel: 018 299-1111/2222  
Web: <http://www.nwu.ac.za>

Health Sciences Ethics Office for Research,  
Training and Support

North-West University Health Research Ethics  
Committee (NWU-HREC)  
Tel: 018-285 2291  
Email: [Wayne.Towers@nwu.ac.za](mailto:Wayne.Towers@nwu.ac.za)

25 November 2019

Dear Dr van Wyk

## APPROVAL OF YOUR AMENDMENT REQUEST BY THE NORTH-WEST UNIVERSITY HEALTH RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (NWU-HREC) OF THE FACULTY OF HEALTH SCIENCES

**Ethics number: NWU-00057-18-A1**

Kindly use the ethics reference number provided above in all future correspondence or documents submitted to the administrative assistant of the North-West University Health Research Ethics Committee (NWU-HREC) secretariat.

**Study title: Guidelines for social workers: Detection of parental alienation during separation or divorce**

**Study leader/Researcher: Dr C van Wyk**

**Student: T Kriel-10770585**

You are kindly informed that your amendment request (change in the population to be sampled and the sampling method) to the aforementioned project has been approved. Any future amendments to the proposal or other associated documentation must be submitted to the NWU-HREC, Faculty of Health Sciences, North-West University, prior to implementing these changes. These requests should be electronically submitted to [Ethics-HRECAApply@nwu.ac.za](mailto:Ethics-HRECAApply@nwu.ac.za), for review BEFORE approval can be provided, with a cover letter with a specific subject title indicating, "Amendment request: NWU-XXXX-XX-XX". The letter should include the title of the approved study, the names of the researchers involved, the nature of the amendment/s being made (indicating what changes have been made as well as where they have been made), which documents have been attached and any further explanation to clarify the amendment request being submitted. The amendments made should be indicated in **yellow highlight** in the amended documents. The *e-mail*, to which you attach the documents that you send, should have a *specific subject line* indicating that it is an amendment request e.g. "Amendment request: NWU-XXXX-XX-XX". This e-mail should indicate the nature of the amendment. This submission will be handled via the expedited process.

We wish you the best as you conduct your research. If you have any questions or need further assistance, please contact the Faculty of Health Sciences Ethics Office for Research, Training and Support at [Ethics-HRECAApply@nwu.ac.za](mailto:Ethics-HRECAApply@nwu.ac.za).

Yours sincerely

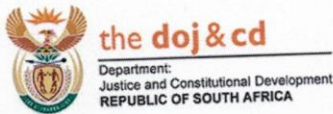
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Bester  
Date: 2019.11.27  
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Chairperson: NWU-HREC

Current details: (23239522) G:\My Drive\9. Research and Postgraduate Education\9.1.5.3 Letters Templates\9.1.5.4.1\_Approval\_letter\_Amend\_Req\_HREC.docm  
30 April 2018

File reference: 9.1.5.4.1

# ANNEXURE C: GOODWILL CONSENT FROM THE NATIONAL OFFICE OF THE FAMILY ADVOCATE



**NATIONAL OFFICE**  
PRIVATE BAG X81, PRETORIA, 0001. Momentum Centre, 329 Pretorius Street  
PRETORIA Tel (012) 315 4840,

Ref: HRD/07/2018

Enq: (012) 315 1068

E-mail: MLebaka@justice.gov.za

## TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

This serve to confirm that the Department of Justice and Constitutional Development has granted Ms T Kriel permission to conduct Academic Research in the Department.

Ms T Kriel's research topic is: **"Guidelines for social workers: Detection of parental alienation during separation or divorce"**.

Ms T Kriel's approval is on condition that:

- (a) She only collects information that is relevant to her academic research.
- (b) She share the information obtained from the Department for academic purpose only.
- (c) She maintains, uphold and stick to strict confidentiality on all information obtained from the Department.
- (d) She should not publicly publish the findings and recommendations of the research without prior approval of the Department. The publishing should only be limited to the Academic Institution's requirements.
- (e) She must share her findings and recommendations of her research with the Department.

Best regards,

Dr M Lebaka

Director: Human Resource Development

20/07/2018

Date



# ANNEXURE D: CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT



NORTH-WEST UNIVERSITY  
YUNIBESITHI YA BOKONE-BOPHIRIMA  
NOORDWES-UNIVERSITEIT

## CONFIDENTIALITY UNDERTAKING

entered into between:

I, the undersigned

Prof / Dr / Mr / Ms \_\_\_\_\_

Identity Number: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

hereby undertake in favor of the **NORTH-WEST UNIVERSITY**, a public higher education institution established in terms of the Higher Education Act No. 101 of 1997

Address: Office of the Institutional Registrar, Building C1, 53 Borchard Street, Potchefstroom, 2520

(hereinafter the “NWU”)

### 1 Interpretation and definitions

**1.1** In this undertaking, unless inconsistent with, or otherwise indicated by the context:

**1.1.1** “Confidential Information” shall include all information that is confidential in its nature or marked as confidential and shall include any existing and new information obtained by me after the Commencement Date, including but not be limited in its interpretation to, research data, information concerning research participants, all secret knowledge, technical information and specifications, manufacturing techniques, designs, diagrams, instruction manuals, blueprints, electronic artwork, samples, devices, demonstrations, formulae, know-how, intellectual property, information concerning materials, marketing and business information generally, financial information that may include remuneration detail, pay slips, information relating to human capital and employment contract, employment conditions, ledgers, income and expenditures and other materials of whatever description in which the NWU has an interest in being kept confidential; and

**1.1.2** “Commencement Date” means the date of signature of this undertaking by myself.

**1.2** The headings of clauses are intended for convenience only and shall not affect the interpretation of this undertaking.

## **2 Preamble**

**2.1** In performing certain duties requested by the NWU, I will have access to certain Confidential Information provided by the NWU in order to perform the said duties and I agree that it must be kept confidential.

**2.2** The NWU has agreed to disclose certain of this Confidential Information and other information to me subject to me agreeing to the terms of confidentiality set out herein.

## **3 Title to the Confidential Information**

I hereby acknowledge that all right, title and interest in and to the Confidential Information vests in the NWU and that I will have no claim of any nature in and to the Confidential Information.

## **4 Period of confidentiality**

The provisions of this undertaking shall begin on the Commencement Date and remain in force indefinitely.

## **5 Non-disclosure and undertakings**

I undertake:

**5.1** to maintain the confidentiality of any Confidential Information to which I shall be allowed access by the NWU, whether before or after the Commencement Date of this undertaking. I will not divulge or permit to be divulged to any person any aspect of such Confidential Information otherwise than may be allowed in terms of this undertaking;

**5.2** to take all such steps as may be necessary to prevent the Confidential Information falling into the hands of an unauthorised third party;

**5.3** not to make use of any of the Confidential Information in the development, manufacture, marketing and/or sale of any goods;

**5.4** not to use any research data for publication purposes;

**5.5** not to use or disclose or attempt to use or disclose the Confidential Information for any purpose other than performing research purposes only and includes questionnaires, interviews with participants, data gathering, data analysis and personal information of participants/research subjects;

**5.6** not to use or attempt to use the Confidential Information in any manner which will cause or be likely to cause injury or loss to a research participant or the NWU; and

**5.7** that all documentation furnished to me by the NWU pursuant to this undertaking will remain the property of the NWU and upon the request of the NWU will be returned to the NWU. I shall not make copies of any such documentation without the prior written consent of the NWU.

## **6 Exception**

The above undertakings by myself shall not apply to Confidential Information which I am compelled to disclose in terms of a court order.

## 7 Jurisdiction

This undertaking shall be governed by South African law be subject to the jurisdiction of South African courts in respect of any dispute flowing from this undertaking.

## 8 Whole agreement

**8.1** This document constitutes the whole of this undertaking to the exclusion of all else.

**8.2** No amendment, alteration, addition, variation or consensual cancellation of this undertaking will be valid unless in writing and signed by me and the NWU.

Dated at Potchefstroom this \_\_\_\_\_ 20\_\_\_\_

Witnesses:

1 .....

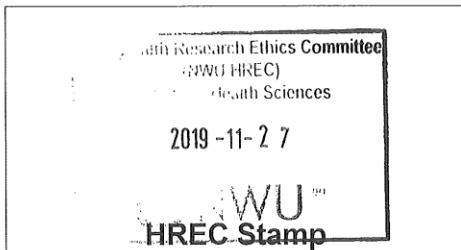
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*(Signatures of witnesses)*

.....

*(Signature)*

# ANNEXURE E: INFORMED CONSENT FORM



## INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENTATION FOR SOCIAL WORKERS

### TITLE OF THE RESEARCH STUDY

Guidelines for social workers: Detection of parental alienation during separation or divorce

**ETHICS REFERENCE NUMBERS:** NWU-00057-18-A1

**PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR:** Dr C van Wyk

**POST GRADUATE STUDENT:** T Kriel

**ADDRESS:** Centre for Child, Youth and Family Studies, PO Box 1083, Wellington, 7654

**CONTACT NUMBER:** +27 21 8643593

You are being invited to take part in a **research study** that forms part of a Masters' degree in Social Work. Please take some time to read the information presented here, which will explain the details of this study. Please ask the researcher or person explaining the research to you any questions about any part of this study that you do not fully understand. It is very important that you are fully satisfied that you clearly understand what this research is about and how you might be involved. Also, your participation is **entirely voluntary**, and you are free to say no to participate. If you say no, this will not affect you negatively in any way whatsoever. You are also free to withdraw from the study at any point, even if you do agree to take part now.



This study has been approved by the **Health Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Health Sciences of the North-West University (NWU-00057-18-A1)** and will be conducted according to the ethical guidelines and principles of Ethics in Health Research: Principles, Processes and Structures (DoH, 2015) and other international ethical guidelines applicable to this study. It might be necessary for the research ethics committee members or other relevant people to inspect the research records.

#### **What is this research study all about?**

- *This study will be conducted at the participant's place of employment in a private room and will involve a semi-structured interview with an experienced health researcher trained in social work with 21 years of working experience. At least 15 participants will be included in this study.*
- *We plan to explore and describe the perspectives of social workers pertaining to the detection of parental alienation by conducting semi-structured interviews. This will assist the researcher to develop and finalise guidelines for the detection of parental alienation by social workers in cases of separation or divorce.*

#### **Why have you been invited to participate?**

- *You have been invited to be part of this research because you are an experienced social worker and your expert opinion would be valued.*
- *You also fit the research because you are a registered social worker residing in Gauteng and have minimum of 10 years' experience in the field of social work.*
- *You also work with parental alienation on a weekly basis which makes you a suitable candidate.*
- *You can be of any culture and gender.*
- *Your participation is willingly, and you are willing to be recorded.*
- *You will not be able to take part in this research if you have experienced parental alienation in your personal capacity or if you do not have sufficient time to part take.*
- *You would also not be able to take part in this study should you suffer from compassion fatigue.*
- *Social workers who indicated they are willing to participate in this study, but due to time constraints not available for an appointment will be excluded after 3 attempts to contact them.*

#### **What will be expected of you?**

- *The independent person will be in contact with you to explain the research study and your role. The independent person will explain that consent is needed and will provide the possible participants with a consent form that will need to be returned within 7 days during which participants can consider their participation. Should you decide to partake voluntarily, you will need to sign the consent document in the presence of the independent person.*
- *The researcher will contact you and schedule the interview. You will be expected to attend a one-hour interview and if need be, be available for a follow up interview. Before the interview commences, you will have the opportunity to ask questions regarding the study. The interview will consist of seven questions. The*

*interview will be at your place of employment and will take place at a time of your convenience.*

**Will you gain anything from taking part in this research?**

- *There will be no direct gain for you in this study.*
- *The other gains of the study are that guidelines for the early detection of parental alienation for social workers will be developed and finalised. These guidelines will enable social workers to detect parental alienation when working with families. This could result in earlier intervention with less negative consequences for children and families.*

**Are there risks involved in you taking part in this research and what will be done to prevent them?**

- *The risks to you in this study are:*
  1. *There is a potential risk that you, as a participant in this research, could have experienced parental alienation in your personal capacity. The mediator will be screening the participants through the process of purposive and snowball sampling according to certain inclusion and exclusion criteria. Although social workers are trained to deal with high conflict situations daily, should you experience any discomfort during the interview process, the researcher, at her own cost, will refer you to a social worker in private practice for 3 sessions as this will be sufficient for emotional support if it should be necessary.*
  2. *During the interview process discussions of sensitive data will take place and could result in a loss of anonymity of your clients. The researcher will caution you not to disclose any identities of your clients that you may refer to during your interview. Other professionals, such as the co-coder, the transcriber, the independent person and any other relevant person who assists with this research will sign a confidentiality agreement to ensure your confidentiality.*
  3. *Should the researcher become aware that you suffer from compassion fatigue during the interview process, the interview process will be terminated, and you will no longer be considered for participation in the study. The interview process will be terminated, and the participant will no longer be considered for the study. The researcher, at her own cost, will refer the individual to a social worker in private practice for 3 sessions as this will be sufficient for emotional support in this regard.*
- *There are more gains for you in joining this study than there are risks.*

### **How will we protect your confidentiality and who will see your findings?**

*Anonymity of your findings will be protected by using a pseudo names when transcribing the data. Your privacy will be respected by conducting the interview in a private room. Your results will be kept confidential by not disclosing any identifying particulars of the participants. During the recruitment confidentiality will be assured by signing confidentiality agreements with the mediator involved with the recruitment of participants, namely social workers.*

*Only the researcher, co-coder and the transcriber who signed a confidentiality agreement, will be able to look at your findings. Findings will be kept safe by locking hard copies in locked cupboards in the researcher's office and for electronic data it will be password protected. (As soon as data has been transcribed it will be deleted from the recorders.) Data will be stored for 5 years in a safe in NWU's offices in Wellington, after which it will be destroyed.*

### **What will happen with the findings or samples?**

- *The findings will only be used for this study.*

### **How will you know about the results of this research?**

- *We will give you the results of this research when the data analysis is completed by publishing the results in a pamphlet format and electronic written feedback will also be provided.*
- *You will be informed of any new relevant findings via email correspondence.*

### **Will you be paid to take part in this study and are there any costs for you?**

*This study is funded by the researcher.*

*The participating social workers will be given a token of appreciation after they completed the interview.*

*Travel expenses will only be for the researcher as you will be interviewed at your workplace.*

*Bottled water will be available during your interview.*

*There will thus be no costs involved for you, should you decide to voluntarily take part in this study.*

### **Is there anything else that you should know or do?**

- *You can contact Tanya Kriel at 011 791 5060 or [tanyakriel@mweb.co.za](mailto:tanyakriel@mweb.co.za) if you have any further questions or have any problems.*
- *You can also contact the Health Research Ethics Committee via Mrs Carolien van Zyl at 018 299 1206 or [carolien.vanzyl@nwu.ac.za](mailto:carolien.vanzyl@nwu.ac.za) if you have any concerns that were not answered about the research or if you have complaints about the research.*

- You will receive a copy of this information and consent form for your own purposes.

#### **Declaration by participant**

By signing below, I ..... agree to take part in the research study Guidelines for social workers: Detection of parental alienation during separation or divorce.

I declare that:

- I have read this information/it was explained to me by a trusted person in a language with which I am fluent and comfortable.
- The research was clearly explained to me.
- I have had a chance to ask questions to both the person getting the consent from me, as well as the researcher and all my questions have been answered.
- I understand that taking part in this study is **voluntary** and I have not been pressurised to take part.
- I may choose to leave the study at any time and will not be handled in a negative way if I do so.
- I may be asked to leave the study before it has finished, if the researcher feels it is in the best interest, or if I do not follow the study plan, as agreed to.

Signed at (*place*) ..... on (*date*) ..... 20....

.....  
**Signature of participant**

.....  
**Signature of witness**

#### **Declaration by person obtaining consent**

I (*name*) ..... declare that:

- I clearly and in detail explained the information in this document to  
.....
- I did/did not use an interpreter.
- I encouraged him/her to ask questions and took adequate time to answer them.
- I am satisfied that he/she adequately understands all aspects of the research, as discussed above

- I gave him/her time to discuss it with others if he/she wished to do so.

Signed at (*place*) ..... on (*date*) ..... 20....

.....  
Signature of person obtaining consent

.....  
Signature of witness

#### Declaration by researcher

I (*name*) ..... declare that:

- I had it explained by an independent person, who I trained for this purpose.
- I did not use an interpreter.
- I was available should he/she want to ask any further questions.
- The informed consent was obtained by an independent person.
- I am satisfied that he/she adequately understands all aspects of the research, as described above.
- I am satisfied that he/she had time to discuss it with others if he/she wished to do so.

Signed at (*place*) ..... on (*date*) ..... 20....

.....  
Signature of researcher

.....  
Signature of witness

# **ANNEXURE F: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE FOR SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS**

**Title:** Guidelines for social workers: Detection of parental alienation during separation or divorce

## **1: Interview schedule for the social workers**

These semi-structured interview questions form part of this research study to explore and describe the perspectives of social workers of PA in their case load / practice.

1. From your perspective, what is PA?
2. How do you detect and identify PA?
3. Which symptoms of PA are specifically difficult to recognise?
4. At what point in the divorce or separation process can one expect PA to surface?
5. What are your perspectives to intervention of PA during separation or divorce?
6. Which individuals, organisations, community or legislation assist individuals in the early stages of PA?
7. What elements should be included in guidelines for the detection of PA during separation or divorce?

## **2: Schedule to be mailed to the participants after the guidelines were established:**

This question form part of this research study to explore and describe the perspectives of participants on the guidelines for detection of PA.

1. After perusing the guidelines, what according to your opinion are important components that should be added to the guidelines with specific reference to the **detection** of PA?

## ANNEXURE G: SUMMARY OF THE THEMES, SUB-THEMES AND CATEGORIES

| Theme 1: Social worker's perspective on parental alienation       |                                                                                 |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Sub-Theme                                                         | Category                                                                        |
| 1.1 Description of parental alienation                            | (i) Defining parental alienation                                                |
|                                                                   | (ii) Use of the term parental alienation                                        |
| 1.2 Reasons for the onset of parental alienation                  | (i) Protection of the children                                                  |
|                                                                   | (ii) "Getting back" at the alienated parent                                     |
|                                                                   | (iii) Personal gain and selfish behaviour                                       |
| 1.3 Relevance of history between parents                          | (i) The relationship between the parents and children before the separation     |
|                                                                   | (ii) Parent's own hurt after separation or divorce                              |
|                                                                   | (iii) Presence of transgression caused by the other parent                      |
| 1.4 The influence of the alienating parent in parental alienation | (i) Opinions and perceptions about the other parent (which influence the child) |
|                                                                   | (ii) Limiting the relationship between the alienated parent and the children    |
|                                                                   | (iii) Strategies used by the alienating parent                                  |

| Theme 2: Detection and identification of parental alienation        |                                                                                     |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Sub-Theme                                                           | Category                                                                            |
| 2.1 Information about the parents                                   | (i) Background and history of the parents                                           |
|                                                                     | (ii) Behaviour of parents                                                           |
|                                                                     | (iii) Gender of parents                                                             |
| 2.2 Indicators of possible parental alienation                      | (i) Presence of conflict                                                            |
|                                                                     | (ii) Onset of parental alienation: prior / post separation                          |
|                                                                     | (iii) Accusations and allegations                                                   |
|                                                                     | (iv) Belittling of alienated parent                                                 |
|                                                                     | (v) Contradictory behaviour of the child                                            |
|                                                                     | (vi) Additional indicators to identified deliberate action of the alienating parent |
| 2.3 Possible indicators in children                                 | (i) Fear of expressing emotions                                                     |
|                                                                     | (ii) Negative script and intensive phrasing and description of the alienated parent |
|                                                                     | (iii) Coaching of child by parent                                                   |
| 2.4 Symptoms of parental alienation that are difficult to recognize | (i) Emotional symptoms                                                              |
|                                                                     | (ii) Behavioural symptoms                                                           |



| Theme 3: The child involved in parental alienation               |                                                                          |
|------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Sub-Theme                                                        | Category                                                                 |
| 3.1 Vulnerability of the child affected by parental alienation   | (i) Disregard for the child's choices and input                          |
|                                                                  | (ii) The susceptibility of a child to at different ages                  |
| 3.2 Effect of parental alienation on the child                   | (i) Emotional impact of parental alienation on the child                 |
|                                                                  | (ii) The child being exposed to information which is not age appropriate |
| 3.3 Aspects influencing the parent-child relationship            | (i) Perception of the alienating parent becoming the child's reality     |
|                                                                  | (ii) Alienated parent withdraws from the process                         |
| Theme 4: Perspectives to intervention during parental alienation |                                                                          |
| Sub-Theme                                                        | Category                                                                 |
| 4.1 Therapeutic intervention                                     | (i) The therapist as a trusted neutral party                             |
|                                                                  | (ii) The therapist's need for training in parental alienation            |
|                                                                  | (iii) Restoring the child's relationship with the alienated parent       |
|                                                                  | (iv) Education of the parents                                            |
|                                                                  | (v) Therapeutic intervention for the parents                             |
|                                                                  | (vi) Therapeutic intervention for the children                           |

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| 4.2 Reversal of the primary residence, supervised visitation, and professional assistance | (i) Change of primary care from one parent to the other or a neutral professional facility specifically dealing with PA |
|                                                                                           | (ii) Duration of the assessments process and final recommendations                                                      |
|                                                                                           | (iii) Supervised visitation                                                                                             |
| <b>Theme 5: Support and Legislation</b>                                                   |                                                                                                                         |
| <b>Sub-Theme</b>                                                                          | <b>Category</b>                                                                                                         |
| 5.1 Support systems being impacted by parental alienation                                 | (i) School                                                                                                              |
|                                                                                           | (ii) Family                                                                                                             |
|                                                                                           | (iii) Cultural context                                                                                                  |
| 5.2 Professional support systems                                                          | (i) The involvement and role of a multi-disciplinary team                                                               |
|                                                                                           | (ii) Family and Marriage Society of South Africa (FAMSA)                                                                |
|                                                                                           | (iii) The Family Advocate                                                                                               |
| 5.3 Legislation regulating the process                                                    | (i) Children's Act (38 of 2005)                                                                                         |

## ANNEXURE H: ORIGINAL QUOTES FOR THEME 1

| Theme 1: Social workers' perspectives on parental alienation |                              |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
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| Sub-Theme                                                    | Category                     | Quotes                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
| Description of parental alienation                           | Defining parental alienation | <p>"... it's coming from a parent, either mom or dad who is specifically alienating the other parent from a child or children and it's not to say it's only physically, I think it can be emotionally, it can be physically..." (Participant 3)</p> <p>"... parental alienation is when there are two parents and the child is staying with other parent and that parent is influencing that child in a negative way so that that child can view that other parent as a bad person..." (Participant 4)</p> <p>"... when one parent tries to keep the minor child away from the other parent by using devices(?) that aren't correct and not necessarily because there's a good reason to keep the child away but more to protect their own agenda or to have their own way in a separation or divorce situation." (Participant 7)</p> <p>"... a subconscious and a conscious process of one parent to alienate or to restrict contact with the other parent." (Participant 14)</p> <p>"I experience parental alienation as when the alienating parent's view and experience becomes the reality of the child. So how the alienating parent experienced the spouse or the ex-spouse, the fears that that person has towards the ex-spouse, those fears becomes the child's reality and that is in short, how I perceive what parental alienation is ..." (Participant 15)</p> |
|                                                              | Use of the term parental     | <p>"... we cannot use the term parental alienation because</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |

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|                                              | alienation                             | <p>it's a psychiatric diagnosis ..." (Participant 1)</p> <p>"As ons 'n verslag kry van 'n maatskaplike werker of 'n sielkundige en sy sê <i>parental alienation</i>, nou sy is mos nou ons ekspert <i>witness</i> nou, maar ons is baie huiwerig om dit gebruik, hulle sê vervang dit met 'n sinoniem." (Participant 2)</p> <p>"... myself, are very cautious to say it's parental alienation. I will always try to, you know, to work around that." (Participant 3)</p> <p>"...it sounds maybe strange that I don't name it [PA] that, so I'm discussing it but I don't..." (Participant 13)</p> <p>"... the courts are quite harsh on us defining it and identifying it as parental – we're using the words as parental alienation due to the fact that the DSM-5 did not recognise or does not recognise it as a diagnosis. And social workers, we can't make diagnoses." (Participant 14)</p> |
| Reasons for the onset of parental alienation | Protection of the children             | <p>"...make allegations because they [parent] truly want to protect the child and then they would get matters where it's extreme. Sometimes it's difficult for us because we can't test the veracity of what they're saying, of the allegations they're making." (Participant 1)</p> <p>"It is the protection itself. So, if I'm [parent] protecting somebody from something to happen from them [children], that should not be viewed as alienation, it is a protection, pure protection." (Participant 6)</p> <p>"She's [mother] not necessarily alienating; she is protecting the interest of the child..." (Participant 6)</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
|                                              | "Getting back" at the alienated parent | <p>"... parents want to hurt the other parent by influencing the child negatively against that parent..." (Participant 4)</p> <p>"... they [parents] mostly use children as a tool to fight</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |

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|                                      |                                                   | <p>their own battles..." (Participant 5)</p> <p>"... you get extreme cases where there's very clearly a conscious and <i>male fide</i> attempts to negate the role of the other parent, to you know, break up the relationship or destroy the relationship with the other parent and to completely change the child's perception of that other parent for the negative..." (Participant 7)</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
|                                      | Personal gain and selfish behaviour               | <p>"That parent is influencing that child for his or her gain so that the child can't have that relationship with that other parent..." (Participant 4)</p> <p>"... person [parent] is selfish, wants everything to be done on his or her terms, that person can do a parental alienation." (Participant 4)</p> <p>"Some parent will do it deliberately because they want to spite the other parent. They will do deliberately because of they want to satisfy their own needs." (Participant 6)</p> <p>"... it is mostly an adult that hasn't dealt with the issues and then they would like to, for their own selfish reasons, or inability of having emotional intelligence use the child to fulfil a certain need in their life," (Participant 8)</p> |
| Relevance of history between parents | The relationship between the parents and children | <p>"Ons sal sien gewoonlik het die kinders op 'n vroeër ouderdom 'n goeie verhouding met die ouers gehad en ewe skielik het nou het die kinders nie 'n goeie verhouding nie..." (Participant 2)</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |

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|  | before the separation                         | <p>“What was the quality of the relationship with the child and the parent before the separation because if there was a very good relationship and now suddenly everything is bad and it can’t really be explained then you most certainly have to look at PAS as a possible explanation...” (Participant 7)</p> <p>“... looking at the relationship between the parents in the sense of whether they – within the relationship there was co-parenting or there was only one parent who took the brunt of parenting between them.” (Participant 9)</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
|  | Parent’s own hurt after separation or divorce | <p>“... seeing that other party moving on with his or her life, so it is when hurt comes in and she wants – he or she wants to fight back by influencing the child...” (Participant 4)</p> <p>“... parental alienation is a lot of the adults with unresolved issues and they cannot deal with their issues in an adult way, so they will use their children to deal with it...” (Participant 8)</p> <p>“... sometimes it comes into the fact that you hurt so much that you don’t really see that that’s what you’re doing but it comes to a point where you know what you’re doing and you just keep on doing it and I think that’s where the parental alienation part kicks in...” (Participant 11)</p> <p>“... one of the biggest fears is that I’m going to lose my children or I have to share my children...” (Participant 15)</p> |
|  | Presence of transgression                     | <p>“... there could be valid previous experience between the parties that like certain incidents that have happened</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |

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|                                                               | caused by the other parent                                                  | <p>between the parties and then the other party decides that no, this one is not in the best interest of the child for this one to be in touch or to interact with the child.</p> <p>“(Participant 5)</p> <p>“They [parent] are of the view that I do not want to expose my child to this person maybe because of domestic violence that happened while they were still together or maybe because this person is aggressive or maybe this person will pose a danger to the child or maybe to the other parent...” (Participant 6)</p> <p>“... the mother is saying I do not want this person to have contact with my child because there are allegations, there is something that I have identified – or maybe the child has verbalised that my father is doing this to me.” (Participant 6)</p> <p>“Are there any other restrictions, alcohol abuse, drug abuse, psychiatric, you know, condition?” And they answer not then I know that there is some question about parental alienation and the possibility to investigate that...” (Participant 14)</p> |
| The influence of the alienating parent in parental alienation | Opinions and perceptions about the other parent (which influence the child) | <p>“... you do not realise that now you’re closing the space for the other parent because now you’re there, every time you’re there, everywhere, you occupy...” (Participant 10)</p> <p>“... it’s not necessarily conscious attempt by a parent but if a parent constantly displays a negative attitude in front of the child towards the other parent or makes negative comments about the other parent or his or her family, the child sooner or later will start to internalise that negative</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |

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|  |                                                                         | <p>attitudes and perceptions towards that parent and it will become part of the child's self-concept and how they view the other parent." (Participant 7)</p> <p>"Usually it comes from the parent that they are staying with to say, for example, Mom says dad is a monster..." (Participant 9)</p> <p>"I just do enough so that the fingers do not get pointed to me, but I don't do enough that the situation is normal or that the relationship can grow as normal..." (Participant 11)</p> <p>"... the perception of the alienating parent becomes the reality of the child..." (Participant 15)</p>                                                                            |
|  | Limiting the relationship between the alienated parent and the children | <p>"So, it would be one parent trying to limit a relationship or contact or involvement with the other parent" (Participant 1)</p> <p>"... you don't realise that now you're closing the space for the other parent because now you're there, every time you're there, everywhere, you occupy..." (Participant 2)</p> <p>"... relationships cannot be built if there is no time between a parent and a child and it's my experience that usually the alienating parent is the one that has more time with the child that is alienated." (Participant 15)</p> <p>"... opinion that if a parent does not have enough time with a child, the risk for alienation becomes bigger and</p> |



|  |                                          |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
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|  |                                          | bigger..." (Participant 15)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
|  | Strategies used by the alienating parent | <p>"... it's like a power balance because it's – I'm fighting for power, I'm the best, I'm better than the other parent..." (Participant 3)</p> <p>"... power struggle revolves around eliminating a parent almost out of the race, as such, for the benefit of the children or for the self-benefit..." (Participant 3)</p> <p>"... if you don't have the emotional intelligence you will use parental alienation to attack the adult and not bear the child in mind..." (Participant 8)</p> <p>"... parental alienation that like maybe the other parent is planting or influencing the child, planting certain ideas to the child and then the child ends up, you know, suppressing the positives that he or she has about the other parent..." (Participant 5)</p> |