

# Developmental Psychology

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# Developmental Psychology and the Scientific Status of Parental Alienation

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Theory and research have described developmental processes leading to damaged parent–child relationships, such as those that occur during a divorce. However, scholars dispute the scientific status of the literature on children who form unhealthy alliances with one parent against the other—termed parental alienation (PA). This comprehensive literature review tests competing descriptions of the PA literature. Accessing four electronic databases, we identified 213 documents with empirical data on PA published in 10 languages through December 2020. The results confirmed that the current state of PA scholarship meets three criteria of a maturing field of scientific inquiry: an expanding literature, a shift toward quantitative studies, and a growing body of research that tests theory-generated hypotheses. Nearly 40% of the PA literature has been published since 2016, establishing that PA research has moved beyond an early stage of scientific development and has produced a scientifically trustworthy knowledge base. This literature review documents the value of multiple research methodologies to this knowledge base. In addition, the growing body of research described in this review enhances our understanding of the association between interparental conflict and the breakdown of parent–child relationships in families where conflict differentially affects children’s relationship with and behavior toward each parent.

*Keywords:* systematic review, parental alienation, research synthesis, child abuse, parental conflict

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Developmental psychology contributes to our understanding of the origin and progression of parent–child relationships, the processes that impinge on parent–child relationships, and the impact of such relationships, or their absence, on subsequent development. Robust research has linked the quality of the relationship between parents to children’s psychopathology and the quality of their relationship with their parents. Specifically, chronic exposure to poorly managed interparental conflict is a known risk to children’s psychological development (Buchanan et al., 1991; Copeland et al., 2009; Cui et al., 2005; Cummings & Davies, 2010; Davies & Cummings, 1994;


Davies & Martin, 2014; Harold & Sellers, 2018; Hetherington et al., 1998; Ramos et al., 2022; van Eldik et al., 2020).

## Interparental Conflict and Children’s Psychological Development

Various conceptual models have been developed to explain how and why interparental conflict impairs parent–child relations and leaves children more vulnerable to affective, behavioral, and cognitive problems and to identify factors and processes that mediate these links. Mediating factors include spillover and compensatory processes (Ramos et al., 2022), children’s appraisals of conflict (Grych et al., 2003), fear of abandonment (O’Hara et al., 2021), parenting quality (DeBoard-Lucas et al., 2010; Sandler et al., 2008), attachment security (Brock & Kochanska, 2016; Constantine, 2006), and emotional security (Davies & Martin, 2014). A gap in the literature on mediating processes is that, with few exceptions, studies report global effects, such as a decline in parent–child relationship quality or an increase in children’s aggressive behavior, without separately analyzing the child’s relationship and behavior with each parent.

Triangulation is one mediating process that has been studied in detail, and it leads to changes in how a child relates to their parents. This process occurs when the parents involve the child in their conflict, such as by sharing inappropriate information

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This project was not preregistered; however, the materials associated with this project are accessible on the Open Science Framework: [https://osf.io/h9r38/?view\\_only=24fa3c312051470ca2ebe36e7b1cf676](https://osf.io/h9r38/?view_only=24fa3c312051470ca2ebe36e7b1cf676).

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with them and pressuring them to show more empathy toward their position than the other parent. Triangulation of children in their parents' disputes leaves children feeling "caught in the middle" between their parents (Amato & Afifi, 2006; Bowen, 1978; Buehler & Welsh, 2009; Dallos et al., 2016; Garrity & Baris, 1994; Jacobvitz & Bush, 1996; Minuchin, 1985), particularly when the parents have separated or divorced.

The fifth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* introduced the term "child affected by parental relationship distress" (CAPRD) to refer to children who observe or are caught in the middle of their parents' conflict. The term applies "when the focus of clinical attention is the negative effects of parental relationship discord (for example, high levels of conflict, distress, or disparagement on a child in the family)" (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p. 716). The CAPRD term encapsulates the involvement of the children in multiple forms of parental conflict that range in severity from mild to abusive and violent, and this conflict has been linked to internalizing and externalizing symptoms in children (Brock & Kochanska, 2016; Koss et al., 2013; Wozencraft et al., 2019). When parents draw children into their disputes, children may experience an internal loyalty conflict (Hetherington, 1999), or they may form a coalition with one parent against the other (known as the rejected or alienated parent; Bernet et al., 2016). The conflict can be primarily driven by one individual as part of a pattern of abuse, such as in cases of coercively controlling abuse/violence (also known as intimate terrorism or battery), or the conflict can involve more situational uses of abuse or violence (e.g., yelling, shoving) as a means to an end, such as to stop an argument (Johnson, 2008). The latter form of conflict tends to be more reciprocal and reactive in nature and much less predictable than the former. When children are exposed to family conflicts such as these, it can create distress. However, when the child becomes involved with the conflict directly, it can affect them more detrimentally, depending on the nature of the parental conflict.

### Triangulation Versus Alignment

When children are initially triangulated, or "stuck in the middle" of parental conflict, they often seek to maintain relationships with both parents and experience a loyalty conflict. As triangulation becomes more polarizing, children may distance themselves from both parents as the conflict and stress are too difficult to manage (Parmiani et al., 2012). Alternatively, or even over time, the child may ultimately "pick a side" and then align with one parent (Bernet et al., 2016), creating a very different family dynamic than triangulation.

The term parental alienation (PA) is generally used to refer to what happens when children align with one parent against the other. When this happens, the child harbors an unreasonable aversion toward a parent they are aligned against (Bernet et al., 2022). In order to create this alignment, the alienating parent engages in behaviors (parental alienating behaviors; PABS) to alter the child's thoughts and feelings about the other parent, such as by convincing the child that their other parent is a bad parent and a bad person, undeserving of their love and respect. The alienating parent promotes negative themes that focus on the other parent's real, exaggerated, or imagined deficiencies and wrongdoings. Common themes are that the other parent is to blame for breaking

up the family or that the other parent is dangerous, does not really love the children, or prioritizes other things—for example, work, money, a new partner—over the children (Harman et al., 2022; Harman & Matthewson, 2020). These PABS increase the child's vulnerability to forming a cross-generational coalition and are thought to mediate the path between destructive interparental conflict and children's negativity toward the rejected parent (Harman et al., 2018). The PABS also result in the child developing negative thoughts, feelings, and behavior toward the rejected parent that are unwarranted by the history of the parent's treatment of the child.

For children caught up in such alignment processes, the impact of interparental conflict is more complicated and looks markedly different from the findings of much of the interparental conflict and triangulation literature. For example, O'Hara et al. (2021) discussed mediating variables in families with triangulation, such as children worrying they will become involved in conflicts, dreading harm to a parent, fearing a parent's abandonment, and worrying about the stability of their relationship with their parents. But children who align with one parent against the other parent appear to welcome being involved in parental disputes. They wish harm on the parent whom they are rejecting. And rather than fear the parent's abandonment and the stability of their relationship with the rejected parent, alienated children want to end contact with them (Warshak, 2015b). One conundrum of research in these circumstances is that when measures of behavior toward each parent are combined, the dramatic differences between aligned and triangulated children are obscured, and we lose valuable information that could inform our understanding of how to help children involved in this form of family conflict.

Despite a growing body of literature on children suffering PA and on the PABS that influence children to form unhealthy alliances with one parent against the other (Harman et al., 2018), a small but vocal group of critics challenge the validity of the PA concept (e.g., Benjamin et al., 2018, p. 36). Some of these challenges are driven by lawyers and laypeople rather than psychologists and are papers published in reviewed university repositories (e.g., Meier et al., 2019) or lower-tiered professional journals (e.g., Mercer, 2021). Some of these authors believe that large numbers of abusive fathers are granted custody because they levelled false allegations of PA against the children's mother (Meier et al., 2019; Milchman, 2019).

To bolster their claims, critics of the PA concept rely on a literature review by Saini et al. (2016) that, for reasons discussed below, we consider inadequate. For example, Milchman (2019) cited Saini et al. for her conclusion that "the research designs in PA studies to date have been shown to have serious, even fatal, methodological flaws" (p. 123). And Benjamin et al. (2018) claimed there is little evidence that a parent can alienate their children against the other parent (see p. 36). Opposing viewpoints about whether a child can be manipulated to reject a parent without adequate justification have played out in thousands of family law courtrooms throughout the world. Decisions often hinge on the extent to which the parent with whom the child is aligned contributed to the child's rejection of the other parent. These courts do not countenance the complete dismissal of the possibility that a child could reject a parent without good cause, and yet some authors persist in this idea (Lorandos, 2020).

We believe it is misguided and cursory to dismiss the merits of PA research and that doing so risks inhibiting a line of scientific inquiry

that develops a more nuanced and expanded understanding of the impact of interparental conflict on children. Thus, the current review investigated the scientific status of the PA concept, incorporating a wider range of studies than previous reviews. Our purpose was to determine if PA scholarship is valuable in the context of current knowledge about children exposed to interparental conflict, to lay a foundation for subsequent work in the field, and to counter confusion generated by critics who allow confirmatory biases to undermine confidence in the science supporting the validity of the concept of PA.

### Processes Underlying Children's Maladaptive Responses to Interparental Conflict

Process-oriented models have been proposed to explain variations in children's responses to interparental conflict. While these models are useful in understanding some aspects of PA and its causes, they are, in and of themselves, insufficient.

#### Family Systems Theory

Within family systems theory, the spillover model suggests that negative emotions and behaviors between parents infuse parent-child interactions with anger and tension, thus eroding parenting quality (e.g., parental detachment, harsh discipline, or scapegoating), which then leads to children's adjustment problems (Gerard et al., 2006; Ramos et al., 2022; Stroud et al., 2015). To date, studies of the spillover process have not separately analyzed the manner and extent to which each parent transfers affect from the interparental relationship to the child and the way the child responds to each parent. With a child who aligns with one parent against the other, we would expect to see internalizing and externalizing symptoms with one parent but not with the other.

In addition to spillover processes, Ramos et al. (2022) studied compensatory processes in which parents in conflict with each other invest more in their relationship with their child to make up for the drawbacks of the interparental conflict. To this model we would add *alienation processes*, in which a parent expresses interparental conflict by drawing the child into an alliance against the other parent, essentially weaponizing the child against them. This process accommodates PA research that shows interparental conflict has a differential effect on children's relationship with and behavior toward each parent.

#### Emotional Security Theory

Perhaps the most fruitful model explaining why interparental conflict compromises children's adjustment is emotional security theory (EST) and its cousin, an evolutionary reformulation of EST (EST-R; Davies & Martin, 2014). According to EST-R, chronic witnessing of parental conflicts with escalating hostilities and violence erodes a child's emotional security in the relationships with each parent. This model posits that parental conflict creates an environment in which the parents are a source of threat to the child rather than a comfort. The child's responses are organized by the social defense system, aimed at defusing and defending against threats.

EST-R posits that common adaptations for children include fear, vigilance, aggression, appeasement, and disengagement. To this model, PA adds explanations of why the child might use these strategies with one parent and not the other. The alienated child appeases one parent's desire for the child to reject the other parent

but does not appease the other parent's desire for an affectionate relationship. The child then disengages from one parent but maintains a close alliance with the other.

### Additional Models and Processes Relevant to PA

Several other fields of study within psychology inform our understanding of the pathways between interparental conflict and PA, and specifically between a parent's alienating behaviors and a child's succumbing to PA. In addition to research on children's exposure to interparental conflicts, Warshak (2020) discussed intrusive parenting (Barber et al., 2005), gatekeeping (Ahrons, 1983; Austin et al., 2013; Ganong et al., 2016; Saini et al., 2017), social influence and persuasion (Cialdini, 2001; Zimbardo & Leippe, 1991), cognitive dissonance (Egan et al., 2007; Festinger & Carlsmith, 1959; Hart et al., 2009; Jonas et al., 2001), ingroup inclusion and exclusion and intergroup conflict (Pickett & Brewer, 2005; Swann et al., 2014), selective attention (Chabris & Simons, 2010), boundary problems and parents with personality disorders (Dentale et al., 2015; Eddy & Kreger, 2021; Macfie et al., 2017), and family violence (Beeble et al., 2007; Drozd & Olesen, 2004; Jaffe et al., 2008; Kelly & Johnson, 2008). Additionally, research on authoritarianism (Altemeyer, 1988), parental influences on prejudice (e.g., Gabriel, 2009), cult recruitment and membership (Castaño et al., 2021), brainwashing of children (Clawar & Rivlin, 1991, 2013), grooming for sexual abuse (e.g., Agazue, 2016), confirmation bias (Nickerson, 1998), and ambiguous loss (Boss, 2006) can help explain specific processes involved with the alienation of a child from a parent.

#### Children's Suggestibility

The child development literature includes robust and methodologically rigorous experimental research on children's suggestibility and the induction of false memories (Huffman & Lorandos, in press). For example, Ceci and Huffman (1997) demonstrated the ease with which adults can induce negative stereotypes in children. Repeated interviews, bad-mouthing, and leading suggestive questions resulted in 72% of a preschool sample falsely reporting that a stranger, called Sam Stone, behaved badly, thus falsely incriminating the stranger. When questioned, the children embellished their accounts of Sam Stone's bad behavior, and experts who viewed recordings of the children's accounts could not detect which events had actually occurred. In another study on the induction of false memories, children were simply asked to repeatedly think about whether suggested events had ever happened to them, such as getting their finger caught in a mousetrap and going to the hospital to get the trap off (Ceci et al., 1994). After 10 sessions, more than half the children told false stories about fictitious negative events in their lives. Their stories were so elaborately embellished with details that, as in the Sam Stone study, experts could not detect which events were real and which were not.

Given the ease and potency with which children can be induced to develop unwarranted negative attitudes about a person and false memories that bad events happened to them, it is reasonable to infer that children's memories are malleable by suggestions from one parent that the other parent did bad things or is unworthy of the children's positive regard, particularly if the child has less (or very little) parenting time with the rejected parent. Critics opposing the concept of PA have questioned the

relevance of suggestibility studies to children who are manipulated by a parent, as opposed to being manipulated by a researcher, to develop a false memory of a parent's (as opposed to a stranger's) misdeeds (Blizard & Shaw, 2019; Milchman et al., 2020).

The argument that suggestibility studies are irrelevant to parents' alienating behavior is contradicted by early misinformation studies that used parents to induce children's false reports of past events (e.g., Loftus & Pickrell, 1995; Pezdek & Hodge, 1999; Poole & Lindsay, 1995, 2001, 2002) and a wealth of studies that have documented the extent to which mothers can create and mold false and error-laden reports from their children (e.g., Klemfuss et al., 2016; Lawson et al., 2018; Principe et al., 2013, 2017, 2022; Thomas, 2020 [18% of the sample were fathers]). Some studies found that children recall little or nothing about conversations with their mother that induced false memories (Principe & London, in press; Thomas, 2020). These studies are relevant to the observation that alienated children insist they are rejecting a parent on their own initiative and have not been influenced by the other parent—known in the PA literature as the “declaration of independence” or the “independent thinker phenomenon” (Warshak, 2021).

### Previous PA Literature Reviews

Aside from the extensive theoretical and scientific work on processes involved with PA reviewed above, a separate but related body of research has focused directly on the topic. For example, much of the research subsumed under the label “gatekeeping” can be conceptualized as studies demonstrating the negative impact of PABs on children. Consequently, the research literature on PA appears to be less substantial than the volumes of related studies that capture the same phenomena using different terminologies. This problem is compounded by conclusions that have been drawn from previous attempts to review the extant PA literature that have been deficient and/or narrowly focused.

For example, Saini et al. (2016) advanced the position that the PA concept has “little empirically validated evidence about cause, prognosis, or treatment” (p. 422). The basis of Saini et al.'s (2016) opinion was the application of a medical evaluation tool GRADE (Grading of Recommendation, Assessment, Development and Evaluation; Higgins et al., 2021). GRADE is used in medical and clinical research when clinical trials and tightly controlled laboratory experiments are the subject (Guyatt et al., 2008). The medically oriented GRADE system prioritizes research designs that randomly assign participants to treatment conditions. As such, applying GRADE to the diversity of approaches in developmental psychology research and the scientific inquiry regarding PA brings a bias by improperly narrowing the field. While using GRADE to review PA literature may appear rigorous, GRADE is not suited to evaluate the field of developmental psychology or the range of PA research.

Randomized controlled and matched trials and random assignment are not feasible or ethically acceptable in real-world circumstances such as in the study of family violence. Furthermore, scholars have argued that categorizing methodological styles as either strong or weak overlooks the reality that different research methods (e.g., qualitative research) offer their own strengths and weaknesses (Sandelowski et al., 2012; Torrance, 2017). By classifying studies and rating their quality using a medical tool such as GRADE, researchers exclude highly informative and valuable

research on a problem, particularly if a significant segment of the research relied on qualitative methods. Also, none of the critics who cited Saini et al. (2016) to argue that qualitative or correlational studies are inadequate in demonstrating the validity of PA have offered even one peer-reviewed study, using any methodology, that disputes the validity of PA. Instead, they seem to have relied on conjecture, unsupported opinions, and anecdotes.

In another review, Marques and colleagues (2020) identified 43 research studies on PA published through 2018. For unknown reasons, the authors stated that they excluded foreign language publications, samples using judicial records, samples with fewer than 10 participants, samples with caregivers other than parents (e.g., grandparents), studies examining intervention effects, and case studies. The authors noted that PA research has progressed productively but acknowledged that their inclusion criteria favored quantitative studies (Marques et al., 2020). Excluding or deemphasizing much of the PA literature decreases the chance of reaching accurate conclusions about the state of the scientific literature on this topic.

A number of other reviews of PA research have focused on more narrow and specific topics, such as reviews of interventions for alienated children (Templer et al., 2017), evidence for it being a form of family violence (Harman et al., 2018), and the losses that alienated children experience (Harman et al., 2022). In two chapters oriented toward providing information for lawyers and experts facing challenges to the admissibility of PA evidence in court, Baker (2013, 2020) provided overviews of studies useful for professionals who work in that context. Each of these narrow and specific reviews, however, do not capture the entire scope of the research on PA, and so the scientific status of research focusing on PA has remained unclear.

Harman et al. (2019) took a fundamentally different position from Saini et al. (2016) and Marques et al. (2020) regarding the status of the scientific literature on PA, instead relating the state of knowledge to how scientific advancement occurs more generally. These authors explained that at the early stages of a scientific discipline (the “greening”), research focuses on “what is happening”—the work is largely descriptive and qualitative in nature so as to formulate ideas, bring important issues into sharp relief, and generate theories (Simpson & Campbell, 2013). The main modes of inquiry at this stage of the research maturation process are a focus on estimating population characteristics, understanding simple relationships, and the description of the specific contexts where the phenomenon occurs. Harman et al. (2019) posited that as the field discovers this information, a search for causes begins. In fields of study where experimentation is not feasible or ethical, the search for systematic effects, the use of multiple methods, and comparisons of qualitative studies helps to rule out alternative explanations for effects (National Research Council, 2002). Qualitative studies lead to the generation and testing of scientific ideas about the mechanisms and processes behind causal relationships. This advancement moves the field into a “blossoming stage” characterized by greater development and integration of theories and hypothesis testing (Simpson & Campbell, 2013). Harman et al. (2019) argued that PA research has moved beyond a greening stage of development to a blossoming stage.

## The Current Review

The purpose of this work was to provide a systematic and comprehensive review of the published literature with empirical data on PA. Our first goal was to test Harman et al.'s (2019) conclusion that PA research has advanced to a blossoming stage and is not in a stage of "infancy" as claimed by Saini et al. (2016, p. 428). Our second goal was to delineate the contributions of PA research to our understanding of the developmental processes and effects on children when interparental conflict leads to their alignment with a parent and rejection of the other parent. Without establishing the scientific status of the field, investigators interested in advancing knowledge of PABs and their impact on children face institutional obstacles to the recognition and support of the legitimacy of their research endeavors. Such obstacles risk truncating and aborting a fruitful line of inquiry in the developmental psychology of interparental conflict. Moving the field beyond red herring debates about the scientific status of the PA concept would clear a path for studies that refine our understanding of this phenomenon.

The present study improves upon previous reviews by capturing the widest range of knowledge about PA. Scholars studying PA have used a range of qualitative and quantitative methods reflecting different epistemological approaches, but these have not been captured in previous reviews of the scientific literature on PA (e.g., Marques et al., 2020; Saini et al., 2016). For example, the GRADE-based review by Saini et al. (2016) overlooked or undervalued qualitative and descriptive research conducted in the green phase of the development of the field. This exclusion is unfortunate because it has misinformed public policy and court decisions that affect families. Developmental psychology understands that qualitative research is an essential part of the "arch of knowledge" (Oldroyd, 1986) and is fundamental to all scientific enterprises because it uses structured and theoretically based procedures, both inductive and deductive (e.g., Sale & Thielke, 2018). In developmental psychology, qualitative research has generated some of the field's seminal theories—consider work by Erikson, Piaget, Kohlberg, and Vygotsky.

In pursuing the goals of this review, we were also interested in examining the diversity of methods (samples, measures, data collection procedures) used to study PA. Each method has strengths and limitations, and studies that have used different methods (within and across studies) generally provide a clearer sense of a phenomenon than a single approach because different methods offset the weaknesses of others. For example, if one survey study reports statistically significant correlations between an alienating parent's bad-mouthing the other parent and a child's resisting contact with the target of the bad-mouthing, that finding, albeit informative, is limited by the method and sample (e.g., sampling selection). However, if four or five independent studies using different methods and samples report the same association, scientists can place more trust and confidence in the finding. Diversity of methods, measures, and samples provides direct evidence that the field in its entirety is not seriously or even "fatally" flawed as has been alleged by critics such as Milchman (2019).

## Method

The approach to our systematic review does not fit one model perfectly, but the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic

Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) 2020 guidelines come closest to our procedures for collecting and evaluating the literature on PA. This approach, specifically designed to assess health interventions irrespective of the design of the review's component studies (Page et al., 2021), is more flexible than GRADE because it applies to and values studies, typically done in developmental research, which use both quantitative and qualitative methods.

## Sample of Studies

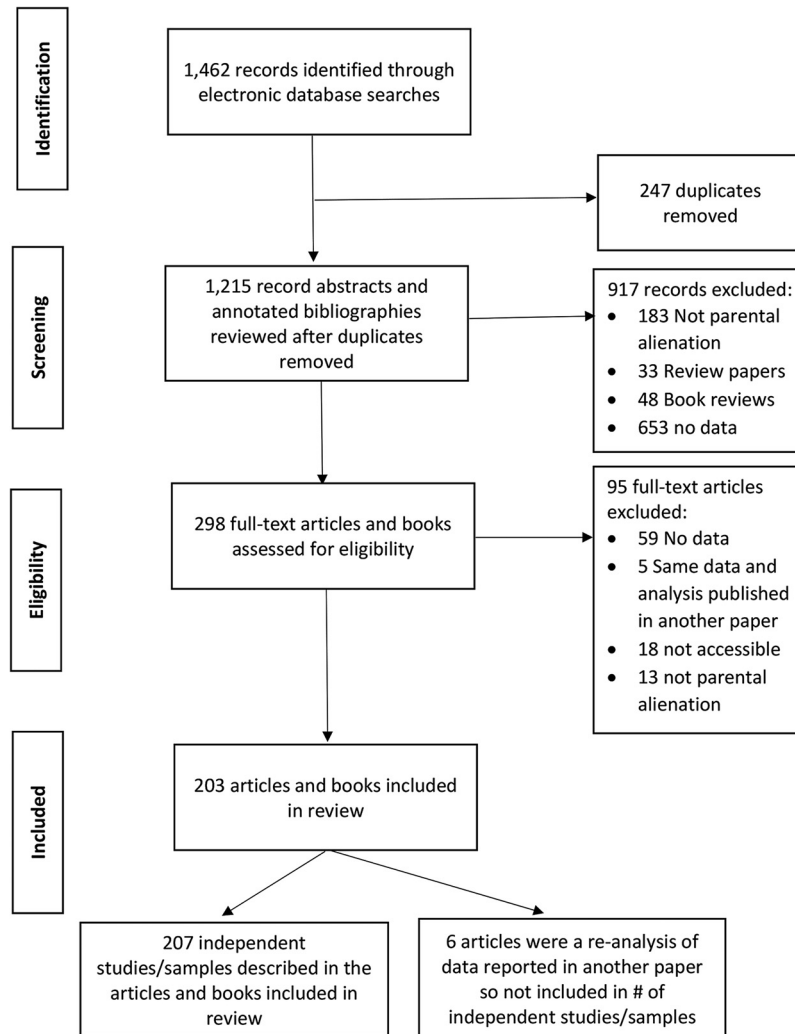
We relied on four data sources to identify the sample of studies for this review. Three of the data sources were the PsycINFO, Medline, and WestLaw electronic databases because research on PA has been published by scholars across multiple disciplines. The reason these databases were selected is because APA PsycINFO has more than five million interdisciplinary bibliographic records across the full spectrum of behavioral and social sciences (including psychology, law, social work, and medicine), Medline has over 28 million references to articles in the life sciences, and WestLaw is a large database of legal cases, treatises, and commentary. The search terms used were "parental alienation" or "parental alienation syndrome" for any publication prior to January 1, 2021. Although many processes and specific outcomes associated with PA have been studied with other terms (e.g., brainwashing, gatekeeping), we narrowed the search to only these two terms to address claims of critics about the status of research on PA specifically.

The fourth data source was a large, publicly available bibliography of more than 1,200 publications related to PA that was jointly developed by the Eskind Biomedical Library of Vanderbilt University Medical Center and the Parental Alienation Study Group (<https://ckm.vumc.org/pasg/>). We used this source to locate publications not captured in the electronic database searches. Our initial search using these four databases resulted in 1,462 records.

Each record was entered into an Excel spreadsheet. Although this project was not preregistered, we made all materials publicly available on the Open Science Framework (OSF; [https://osf.io/h9r38/?view\\_only=24fa3c312051470ca2ebe36e7b1cf676](https://osf.io/h9r38/?view_only=24fa3c312051470ca2ebe36e7b1cf676)). After duplicates were removed (247 total), the remaining 1,215 abstracts were reviewed by the authors. The only inclusion criterion for this review was that the document or publication had to contain empirical data about PA (e.g., survey data, interview data). Empirical data were not limited to data derived from experimentation and observations—we also included narratives, case studies, and qualitative studies. Opinion pieces were excluded (e.g., forensic articles, legal texts, or legal opinions with no data), as were reviews (e.g., book reviews, literature reviews) and studies unrelated to PA (e.g., alienation from society). The authors had nearly 100% agreement on the sources that were excluded, with one abstract being missed as an oversight. After discussion, this abstract was reincluded for full-text review. Figure 1 presents details on the articles (917 total) that were excluded based on this initial abstract review.

The remaining 298 full-text articles, books, theses, and dissertations were then reviewed by each of the first three authors independently for their inclusion eligibility. After discussion, 95 of these sources were excluded because they contained no data (59), they rereported statistics already reported in another paper (5), they were not related to or about PA (13), or the original paper or thesis/dissertation was inaccessible (18, most from non-English sources). The final sample included 203 articles, books, theses, and dissertations.

**Figure 1**  
*Selection and Screening Procedures*



We recognize that personal narratives and some clinical accounts may not technically classify as independent sources of empirical data; however, the writings do contain important qualitative data—the type of data that generate a “broader form of meaning that is essential for applying the scientific method to human studies” and “solidify” the arch of knowledge in a field (Sale & Thielke, 2018, p. 132). Within this sample, there were 207 independent published documents, some containing 2–3 separate studies, and there were six articles that analyzed data reported in another article to test different hypotheses. Ultimately, this review encompasses published materials containing 213 unique studies with empirical data on the topic of PA, 34 (15.9%) of which were published in nine languages other than English: Finnish, Korean, Russian, French, Czech, German, Italian, Portuguese, and Spanish. See the OSF page ([https://osf.io/h9r38/?view\\_only=24fa3c312051470ca2ebe36e7b1cf676](https://osf.io/h9r38/?view_only=24fa3c312051470ca2ebe36e7b1cf676)) for the database of the references.

The authors, all of whom were already familiar with most of the published literature on PA, reviewed the documents and pulled

methodological and analytical information from them, as well as a general description of the findings reported by the original authors. The majority of published documents were peer-reviewed articles, academic master’s theses, and doctoral dissertations ( $k = 166$ ), and the remaining were books written by alienated parents and adults alienated as children, as well as professionals working with these parties ( $k = 48$ ). The first author entered details from each published document into a database, which was then reviewed and edited for accuracy by the other authors. Details about the sample’s characteristics are presented in Table 1.

### Coded Categories

#### *Publication Type, Year of Publication, First Author’s Discipline, and Location of Samples*

The type of study was coded as a peer-reviewed journal, a book or book chapter written by a professional (professional accounts) or an alienated parent or an adult alienated as a child (personal narratives), a master’s thesis, or a dissertation. More than half of the

**Table 1**  
*Characteristics of the Studies Included in Review*

Characteristic	Type	N of studies	%	
Publication type	Peer-reviewed journal article	135	63.4%	
	Book	47	22.1%	
	Dissertation or master's thesis	30	14.1%	
	Book chapter	1	0.005%	
Year of publication	Prior to 2001	17	8.0%	
	2001–2005	28	13.1%	
	2006–2010	34	16.0%	
	2011–2015	49	23.0%	
	2016–2020	85	39.9%	
Discipline first author	Psychology	124	58.2%	
	N/A, personal experience	23	10.8%	
	Law	21	9.9%	
	Social work/human services	12	5.6%	
	Human development/family studies	8	3.7%	
	Sociology/criminal justice	8	3.7%	
	Psychiatry/medicine	7	3.3%	
	Communications	3	1.4%	
	Anthropology	2	0.01%	
	Unknown	5	2.3%	
	A priori hypotheses or research questions	Yes	67	31.5%
		No	146	68.5%
	Theoretical framework applied/tested	Yes	27	12.7%
No		186	87.3%	
Comparison group used	Yes	47	22.0%	
	No	166	77.9%	
Unit of analysis	Individuals	175	82.2%	
	Dyads/families	18	8.5%	
	Unknown	20	9.4%	
Research method <sup>a</sup>	Interview	42	—	
	Survey	71	—	
	Archival research	52	—	
	Case study	26	—	
	Personal narrative	23	—	
	Ethnography	1	—	
	Research data <sup>b</sup>	Qualitative	119	—
Quantitative		87	—	
Mixed method		6	—	
Type of analysis <sup>c</sup>	Descriptive statistics only <sup>b</sup>	90	—	
	Chi-square or other nonparametric test	35	—	
	Logistic or linear regression	25	—	
	<i>t</i> tests, ANOVA, ANCOVA, or MANCOVA	58	—	
	Factor analysis, reliability testing, SEM	18	—	
	Correlation	28	—	
	Content or case analysis	18	—	
	Grounded theory/thematic analysis	13	—	
	Other qualitative analysis (e.g., polyvocal, contrapuntal)	8	—	

*Note.*  $k = 213$ . ANOVA = analysis of variance; ANCOVA = analysis of covariance; MANCOVA = multivariate analysis of covariance; SEM = structural equation modeling.

<sup>a</sup> Studies that used the same sample as another study were not included in this count. The percentages were not calculable as some studies had multiple sources, methods, types of data, and analyses. <sup>b</sup> This refers to studies that only reported descriptive information (e.g., percentages or frequencies of cases, personal account of experience) and did not perform any other form of analysis. <sup>c</sup> Percentages were not calculable for this characteristic as most studies included multiple forms of data analysis.

documents were published in peer-reviewed journals (63.4% of 213), 22.1% were books, and one was a book chapter. The book chapter contained empirical data and was not categorized as a professional account. There were also 30 master's theses and doctoral dissertations (14.1% of the sample). While dissertations and theses are not always viewed as being of the same caliber as blind peer-reviewed publications and can vary in quality depending on the graduate training program, they do pass a stringent peer-review with academic faculty constituting a review committee as part of the graduate examination process. The studies conducted as part of

the dissertation process were also approved by the committee a priori, which is similar to the open science practices of the preregistration of a study's hypothesis, research design, and analytic plan. In addition, many recently minted degree holders enter fields of practice (e.g., clinical social work) where publishing their graduate research is not always a priority. Nevertheless, the research, whether in the thesis or dissertation form, is still a valuable contribution to the relevant scientific literature.

The date of the publications was also recorded, as was the discipline of the first author of the work. The majority of the first authors



of these works were from the field of psychology (58.2%), but there was great diversity in discipline among the remaining first authors, from authors writing about their personal experience (e.g., narratives) to law and social work professionals, psychiatrists, sociologists, and human development/family therapy specialists. The 213 documents included samples of participants from 32 countries across six continents (see Table 2). We made the details of each study available in an Excel database on the OSF ([https://osf.io/h9r38/?view\\_only=24fa3c312051470ca2ebe36e7b1cf676](https://osf.io/h9r38/?view_only=24fa3c312051470ca2ebe36e7b1cf676)). The remaining categories were coded and analyzed only for the studies that were not personal narratives or professional accounts.

### *Qualitative or Quantitative Method*

We coded each document as being either qualitative or quantitative. The qualitative or quantitative code was determined by the types of analyses reported by the study authors. Descriptive studies (e.g., reporting of percentages of cases only) were, by default,

**Table 2**  
*Countries From Where Samples Were Drawn for Studies in Review*

Continent/area	Country	Number of studies	Total number of studies per continent/area
North America	United States	105	Total North America: 127
	Canada	20	
	Mexico	2	
Europe	Italy	13	Total Europe: 68
	England/Wales	12	
	Spain	7	
	Germany	7	
	The Netherlands	5	
	Sweden	5	
	France	4	
	Romania	4	
	Ireland	3	
	Czech Republic	2	
	Scotland	1	
	Portugal	1	
	Austria	1	
	Slovenia	1	
	Belgium	1	
Finland	1		
Oceania	Australia	11	Total Oceania: 14
	New Zealand	3	
South America/ Caribbean	Brazil	7	Total South America: 9
	Chile	1	
	Trinidad & Tobago	1	
Asia	Israel	3	Total Asia: 9
	India	1	
	Saudi Arabia	1	
	Hong Kong	1	
	Russia	1	
	China	1	
	Korea	1	
Africa	South Africa	2	Total Africa: 2

*Note.* The percentage of cases for this characteristic was not calculated because numerous studies reported the sample being from multiple countries, so the number of studies for each country does not add up to 100%. This table does not include the six studies that were a reanalysis of data as that would duplicate the details. Seven studies did not specify the countries from which their sample was drawn.

coded as qualitative because they presented data that described some feature of PA (e.g., the sample, processes involved). Studies that used qualitative analytic approaches such as formal content or case analysis, grounded theory or thematic analyses, or some other form of qualitative analysis (e.g., contrapuntal analysis) were also coded as “qualitative.” Studies that reported the use of some other statistical analytic approach, such as *t* tests and/or (multivariate) analysis of (co)variance, nonparametric tests (e.g., chi-square), linear or logistic regression, and factor analysis were coded as quantitative. Studies that used both methods were coded as two separate studies for the test of our second hypothesis.

### *Theory or Hypothesis Testing*

Studies were also coded as to whether a scientific theory (e.g., attachment theory) was used as a rationale and basis of the research and/or whether there were explicit tests of hypotheses. Some scholars posed both research questions and hypotheses in their study, so the study was coded as having a hypothesis test if there was at least one hypothesis tested.

### *Methods, Sampling Strategies, and Measurement Approaches*

**Research Tool.** The authors of the peer-reviewed articles, dissertations, and master’s theses used several research tools. It is outside the scope of the current review to describe all the merits and limitations of each research tool—we believe all have the potential to provide a unique view of the topic of inquiry and, when combined, offset the weaknesses of each other and add clarity and depth to our understanding of the concept of PA.

**Interviews.** Studies that used in-person or virtual (e.g., phone, Zoom) interviews with individuals, families, or professionals were coded as “interviews.”

**Case Studies.** Studies that reported details about one or several children, parents, or families were coded as “case studies.”

**Surveys.** Studies that used surveys, whether paper-pencil or computer administered, were coded as “surveys.”

**Archival Research.** Studies that used archival research tools such as legal case reviews and clinical and forensic reports about families submitted to the court or part of a family’s clinical record were coded as “archival research.”

**Assessment Approach.** We also coded the assessment approach for determining PA and PABs. When feasible, it appeared that investigators attempted to determine PA or assess PABs based on approaches other than self-report, but, depending on the research design and sample, this was not always possible.

**Self-Report.** When the study reported that PA or PABs were based on the sample’s self-report alone, the study was coded as “self-report.” When other approaches were used to verify the self-report, the study was coded as having used those methods.

**Clinical Assessment or Court Judgment.** Studies or data sources that used a clinical assessment, or when a court determined PA was occurring/had occurred, were coded as “clinical assessment or court judgment.” These studies were grouped together because the determiners had access to information from both parents (and most likely the children), rather than just one-sided opinions (i.e., self-report) about whether PA had occurred. The determination was presumably more objective than self-report and based on multiple sources of information. When an independent expert (e.g., the

investigator) evaluated cases or data and determined that PA had occurred, we also coded these studies as belonging to this category.

**Measurement Tool.** Studies that used a measurement tool to assess PA or the use of PABs were coded as “measurement tool.” These studies included validated measures of PA in children from a clinical perspective (e.g., Sirbu et al., 2020) and the child’s attitudes toward their parents (e.g., Bernet et al., 2020).

**Sample Source.** The sample source in each study was coded for this review because this dimension adds diversity of opinions and perspectives on PA. When the sample contained children (alienated or not) or adults who had been alienated as children, the sample source was coded “children.” If the sample was parents (alienated or not), the study was coded “parents.” When both parents and children from families, or entire families, were the sample source (e.g., legal case records or clinical reports for the family), the study was coded as “family.” If the study involved data collected from mental health or legal professionals, or some other third party involved with families, the study was coded as “professionals.”

## Results

We first reviewed the personal narratives and professional accounts published on PA. While the personal narratives are not scientifically acquired data, it would be a mistake to dismiss their importance in the study of PA as the experiences described by these individuals often provided a basis for later systematic inquiry and verification by scientists. There were 23 books written by alienated parents and adults alienated as children. These authors were from eight countries (and one unknown) writing in three languages. While one individual’s experience is limited in its generalizability, it is notable that these individuals, from many parts of the world, separately detailed very similar experiences.

The writings of these authors may not be entirely independent and may have been influenced by work or stories written by others. Nevertheless, such influence, if any, likely reflected the inferences they drew from their experience, rather than their description of the experience itself. The authors described the PABs they were subjected to and how the children’s alienation unfolded and affected the children’s development over time. They detailed their perceptions of the alienating parent’s motives and the contributions from other people (e.g., extended family) and situations. Their accounts described institutional responses to the PA, abuse they experienced, and the impact the PABs and the PA process had on them and their family members.

Many professionals working with families affected by PA have also written books about their impressions of this problem or reported data that they have collected but did not publish in a scholarly journal. We identified 25 such books that provided descriptive data about PA and the factors that cause it, and none invalidated the concept. The authors of these books were professionals across a wide range of disciplines (e.g., anthropology, psychology, law, sociology) and countries (e.g., United States, Sweden, Italy) who drew their samples from clinical caseloads, interviews, surveys, and archival case analyses that were not published elsewhere. These books varied widely in focus. They included details of children’s manifestations of PA over time and the impact this alienation had on their development. They also included descriptions of PABs that directly affected the alienated parent,

children, and extended families and discussions of research and clinical outcome data on interventions designed to address the problem.

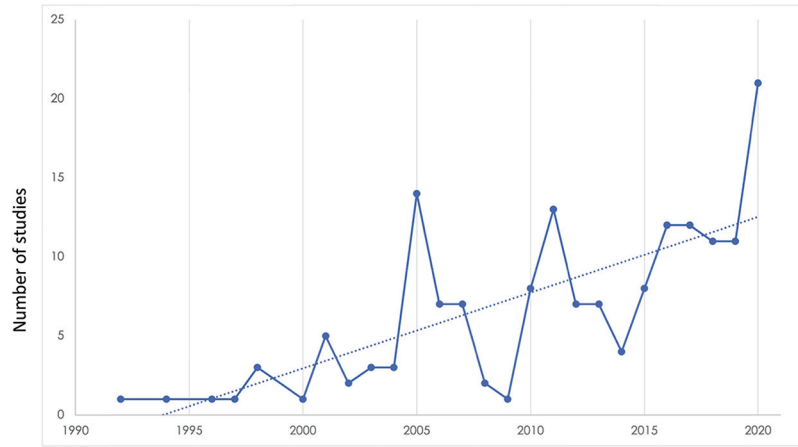
As with the personal narratives, the data reported by the professionals are limited in generalizability, but it is notable that their independent reports of the experiences of families affected by PA are largely consistent with each other and reflect, from a different perspective, the same experiences reported by the authors of the personal narratives. The correspondence between the professionals’ observations—from several disciplines and countries—and the first-hand accounts by PA victims lends more credibility to the reality and components of PA. We did not include these narratives and accounts in the remaining analysis as we wanted to restrict our analysis to the published peer-reviewed papers, dissertations, and theses using scientific methods. Nevertheless, the rich and profound descriptions in these publications provide useful data in their own right and serve as a backdrop or general outline of the scope of PA. These data also provided direction and served as a springboard for further empirical inquiry and theoretical development.

## Goal #1

The first goal of this review was to determine whether the research (excluding the books described above) on PA is “blossoming” and not in a stage of “infancy” as claimed by critics of PA. To test these two competing perspectives on the status of the field, we first looked at whether the research on PA is generative, meaning there is growth in the numbers of studies published about PA over time. The evolution of any scientific discipline, including the scientific study of PA, is neither smooth nor consistent. “Fits and starts” typify the process, but sustained inquiry and the accumulation of scientific evidence acquired with multiple methods lead to trustworthy results that gradually “improve the certainty with which one can claim to understand something” (National Research Council, 2002, p. 29). We looked to see whether there is a positive trend over time in the number of publications with empirical data about PA. Figure 2 illustrates the number of studies published each year, and this figure provides support for the blossoming hypothesis. Fits and starts were evident, but the number of studies published with empirical data about PA has been increasing each year, with 39.9% of the entire sample of studies ( $k = 166$ ) having been published since 2016.

Another way to assess the blossoming hypothesis is to determine whether there has been a shift from primarily qualitative to more quantitative studies over time. Figure 3 illustrates how the proportion of qualitative and quantitative studies has changed over time. As with any blossoming field of scientific inquiry (see Harman et al., 2019), much of the early research on PA was qualitative. Between 2005 and 2015, the cumulative numbers of studies used both methods to a similar degree. After 2016, the accumulated research tipped in favor of quantitative studies. Likewise, we also examined whether there has been an increase in the development and application of theory and hypothesis testing over time. While there has been variability in the numbers of studies that have applied theories or tested hypotheses each year, there is a general positive linear trend over time. Figure 4 illustrates this trend. Across multiple indicators, the scientific status of PA research is not underdeveloped: It is at a blossoming stage and is continuing to develop.

**Figure 2**  
*Numbers of Peer-Reviewed Studies, Master's Theses, Dissertations, and Book Chapters Published Each Year About PA (k = 166)*



*Note.* See the online article for the color version of this figure.

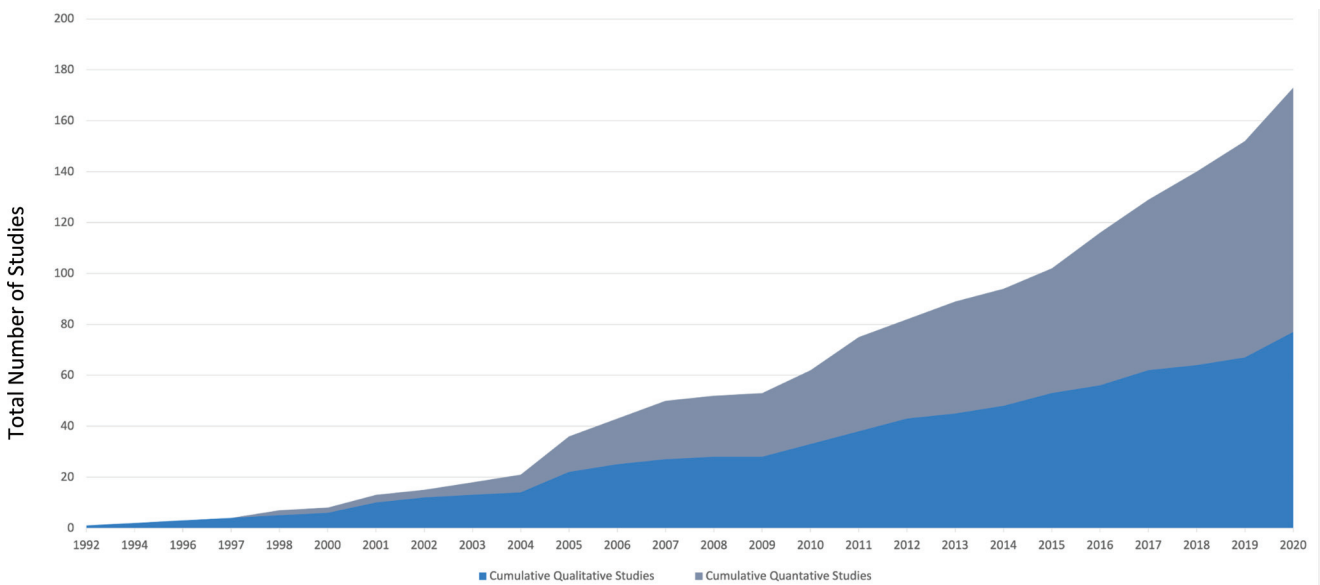
**Goal #2**

The second goal of this review was to delineate the contributions of PA research to our understanding of the developmental processes and effects on children when interparental conflict leads to their alignment with a parent and rejection of the other parent. The peer-reviewed studies, theses, and dissertations on PA have focused on 16 general areas, briefly summarized below. Figure 5 illustrates the concepts and pathways that have been studied so far,

as well as the moderators/mediators that have been studied. General study details, including sample sizes, are presented in the online supplemental materials. It is outside the scope of the current review to describe all the studies in each area and the finer-grained nuances of the findings.

While we found great consistency in findings across studies in each area, one or two studies in some areas reported findings that did not support the larger consensus of results reported by other scholars. The purpose of this review was to assess the generativity and

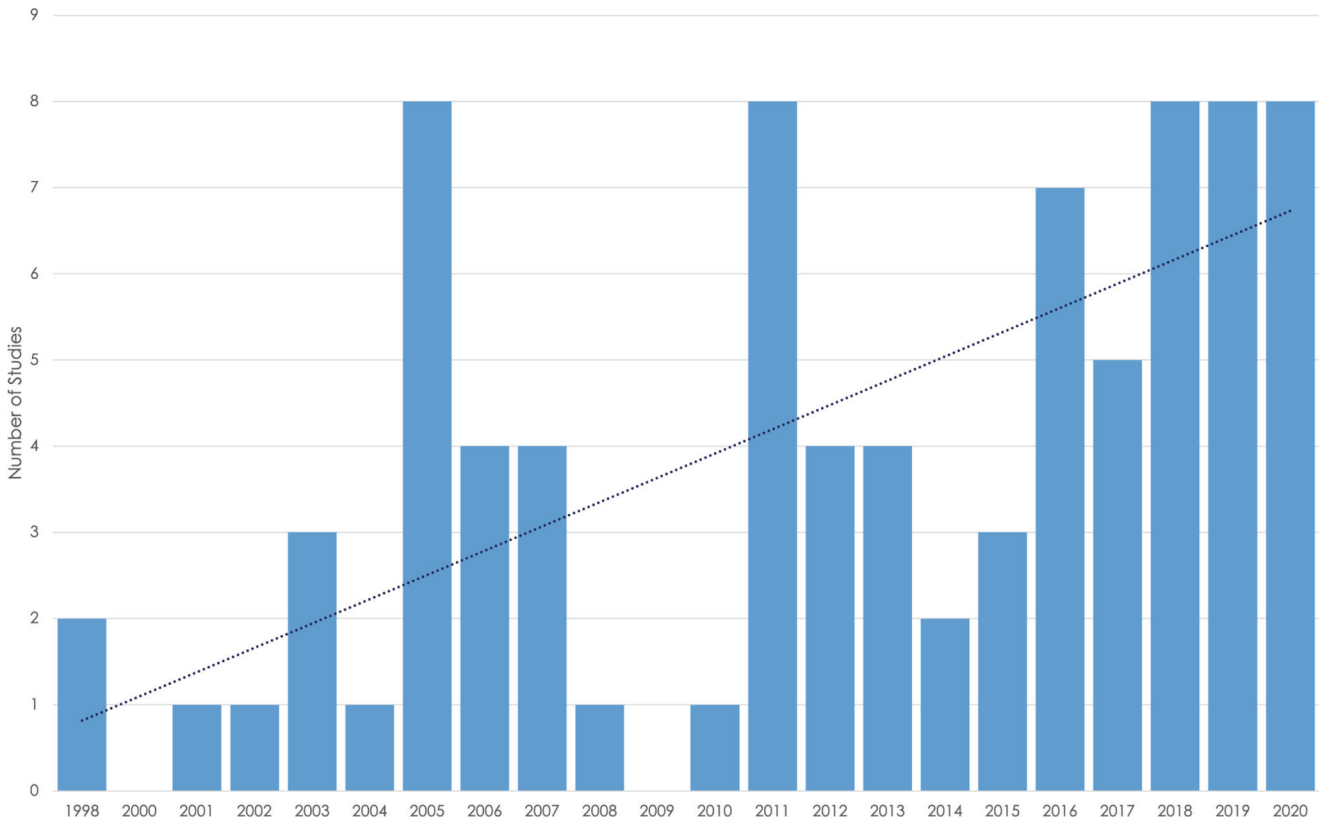
**Figure 3**  
*Cumulative Qualitative and Quantitative Research on PA Over Time*



*Note.* The graph presents peer-reviewed studies, dissertations, master's theses, and a book chapter (k = 166). Other books published on this topic by professionals and alienated parents and children are not included. Six studies used both quantitative and qualitative research methods and were coded as both types of studies. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

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**Figure 4**  
*Numbers of Studies That Referenced or Applied Theory or Tested Hypotheses (k = 166)*

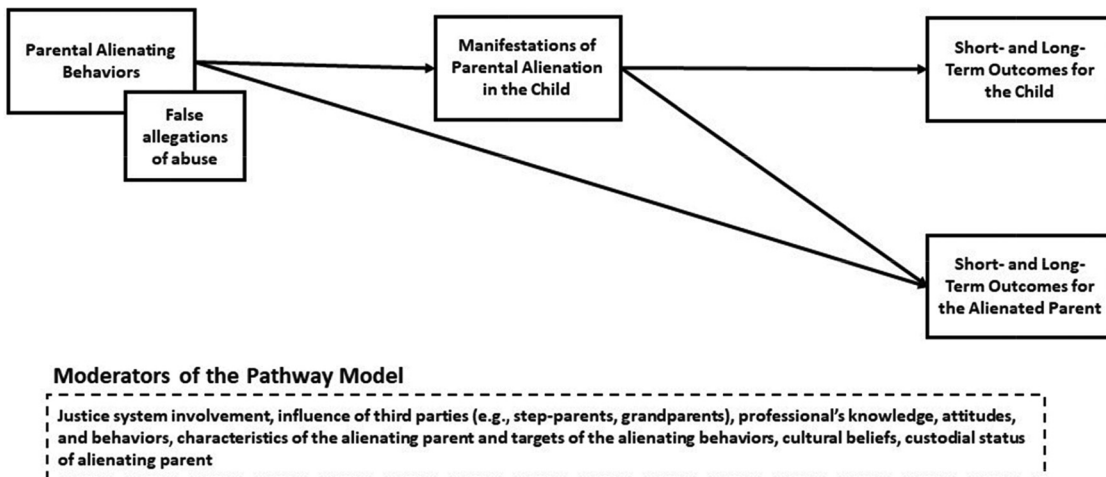


*Note.* This sample included the peer-reviewed studies, book chapter, master’s theses, and dissertations about PA. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

development of this field of study, not to explore and discuss these differences. We argue that discrepancies in findings promote more scientific investigation and therefore increase the generativity of scientific fields of study. Therefore, rather than view discrepancies in

research findings in a handful of studies as contributing to the “controversy” that PA is not real or worthy of study, we view these studies as important for further scientific refinement and advancement. We refer the reader to the OSF project page for the Excel database

**Figure 5**  
*Pathway Model of Research Evidence on the Parental Alienation of Children*



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with the studies and their more thorough summaries ([https://osf.io/h9r38/?view\\_only=24fa3c312051470ca2ebe36e7b1cf676](https://osf.io/h9r38/?view_only=24fa3c312051470ca2ebe36e7b1cf676)).

### ***Parental Alienating Behaviors (k = 52)***

One area that has received the most research attention is the types of PABs that alienating parents use. The studies described many categories of PABs, such as parental denigration (aka bad-mouthing the alienated parent to portray them as evil, dangerous, or undesirable), gatekeeping and interference with the alienated parent–child’s communication, child abduction, undermining the authority of the alienated parent, brainwashing the child, legal and administrative aggression, emotional manipulation of the child, creation of an unhealthy alliance between the alienating parent and child, adultification and parentification (treating the child like an adult or another parental figure in the family), limiting symbolic contact (e.g., not allowing photographs of the alienated parent in the child’s room), limiting the alienated parent’s access to information about the child, denial by the alienating parent of responsibility for the problem, and enlisting third parties such as therapists to reinforce the child’s alienation (e.g., Baker & Darnall, 2006).

False allegations of abuse (including PA,  $k = 18$ ) have been reported as a specific form of PAB and were therefore categorized separately from general PABs. Nearly all studies reported evidence that some of the parents in their samples, regardless of gender, weaponized unsubstantiated allegations of some form of abuse as a way to gain advantage over the other parent—allegations of domestic violence, child physical and sexual abuse, neglect, or PA. A few studies found gender differences in the use of false allegations, with fathers being more likely to be the target of false claims of sexual abuse (e.g., Sarrió, 2016) and mothers being more likely to be the target of false allegations of neglect (e.g., Johnston et al., 2005; Kopetski et al., 2006). While a few studies found evidence that some parents falsely claimed PA, one sample of professionals indicated there were many more cases where the allegations of PA were true than untrue (e.g., Baker, 2007).

### ***Manifestations of PA in Children (k = 36)***

Not all children who are exposed to PABs become alienated from a parent (Harman et al., 2019); however, the children who do become alienated manifest several behaviors and attitudes not commonly found among children who have been abused in other ways: campaign of denigration, lack of ambivalence, absence of guilt, borrowed scenarios, spread of animosity, independent thinker phenomenon, frivolous rationalizations for the complaint, and automatic/reflexive support of the alienating parent (see Gardner, 1985). The studies indicated that as the alienation became more severe, children manifested more of the symptoms to greater degrees. Several studies compared alienated children to children who have been abused in other ways and found that manifestations such as lack of ambivalence were unique for the alienated children (e.g., Bernet et al., 2020; Blagg & Godfrey, 2018).

### ***Direct Relationship Between PABS and PA (k = 13)***

Thirteen studies looked at the direct relationship between PABs and PA—the more PABs and frequency with which they were used, the more severely alienated the children were found to be from a parent. Some studies focused on specific behaviors, such as interference with contact and abduction, being related to greater PA (e.g., Vilalta Suárez, 2011; Waide, 2011), and others focused

on longer-term frequencies of multiple behaviors over time on the alienation of the child (e.g., Baker & Eichler, 2016).

### ***Other Outcomes Associated With PA for Children (k = 29)***

A large number of outcomes were examined across the studies, and similar to other forms of child abuse (e.g., Yule et al., 2019), there was variability in how alienated children were affected. Long-term consequences such as anxiety, depression, posttraumatic stress disorder symptoms, emotional dysregulation, identity development disruption, substance abuse, and poor peer and romantic relationships were reported, as well as externalizing behaviors (e.g., attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, oppositional defiance disorder). Some studies reported negative academic and occupational impacts. No studies indicated the absence of short- or long-term effects associated with PA.

### ***Other Outcomes Associated With PA for Alienated Parents (k = 24)***

The impact of PA has been studied among alienated parents as well. The outcomes for alienated parents were similar to those experienced by victims of other forms of coercive controlling violence (e.g., Balmer et al., 2018; Spencer et al., 2019). Alienated parents were found to have considerable anxiety, depression, stress, and physical symptoms, and they reported feeling powerless, hopeless, and socially isolated. Several studies found that these individuals felt like they lost a part of their identity due to losing their role as parent, and they felt intense negative emotions associated with the loss of their children. Four studies reported high levels of suicidality among the alienated parents (e.g., Harman et al., 2019).

### ***Direct Relationship Between PABS and Other Outcomes for Alienated Parents and Children (k = 9)***

Nine studies reported direct associations between level of exposure to PABs (e.g., denigration) and depression, lower life satisfaction, and posttraumatic stress disorder symptoms for children and alienated parents. Several studies also reported a connection between PABs and anxiety. One study also found a relationship between PABs and psychological maltreatment by the alienating parent (Verrocchio et al., 2016).

### ***Third Parties and Institutions***

**Justice System Involvement (k = 22).** The majority of studies that examined judicial involvement reported parent perceptions that professionals working within the judicial system were not knowledgeable about PA or failed to intervene when it was raised or found to be an issue, and some professionals were more interested in maximizing their profits than in helping the family. Several studies found that courts revealed no gender bias in PA cases (e.g., Bala et al., 2010; Harman & Lorandos, 2021; Lorandos, 2020).

**Professional Knowledge and Attitudes (k = 13).** A number of studies examined whether professionals believed in the concept of PA and how they came to understand it. Across the studies, professionals reported learning about PA through their professional practice, books, articles, and conferences but not in their graduate or professional training. Professionals in several studies felt that intervention for PA cases was challenging and that legal involvement often exacerbated the problem.

### ***Direct Relationship of Third Parties and Institutions on Alienated Parent and Child Outcomes (k = 6)***

Findings from the studies examining the direct relationship between third-party involvement (e.g., courts, child protection services, police) and outcomes indicated that many courts did not intervene effectively, left alienated parents financially destitute, increased their anxiety and depression, and exacerbated the child's alienation from the alienated parent. In contrast, other studies found that court orders giving more parenting time with an alienated parent reduced the child's alienation under certain circumstances (e.g., Warshak, 2019).

### ***Interventions (k = 27)***

The findings across the interventions were similar to those reported by Templer et al. (2017) in an earlier systematic review. For severe PA, transfer of child custody to the alienated parent was reported as being very effective, along with structured interventions in coordination with court oversight. Less invasive interventions such as mediation were reported as working in milder cases, and participation in structured interventions improved not only the alienated parent-child relationship but also the mental health symptoms of the alienated children. Failures in treatment were documented as being due to an alienating parent's noncompliance with court orders (e.g., breaking the no-contact order). Outcome studies of programs such as Family Reflections (Reay, 2015) and the Family Bridges program (Warshak, 2010, 2019) for severely alienated children are examples of some effective treatment interventions.

### ***Characteristics of Parents Who Have Alienated Their Children***

**Gender of the Alienating Parent (k = 20).** Ten studies, four of which used population-based sampling methods (Harman et al., 2016, 2019), found no gender differences in who was likely to be an alienating parent. The other studies that reported gender differences either used smaller sample sizes (Cartié et al., 2005), reported some proportional differences (68% mothers; Bala et al., 2010), or sampled from a select population (e.g., appellate court cases; Lorandos, 2020) where there may be explanations for differences other than gender of the parent (e.g., income).

**Personality and Behaviors of Alienating Parents (k = 19).** Alienating parents were reported as being defensive (e.g., using "primitive" defenses), lacking in self-control, lacking boundaries with their family and in other interpersonal relationships, using their children to meet their own needs, being motivated by revenge and jealousy against the alienated parent, and feeling a loss of control over their children when the children were with their other parent. Several studies reported that alienating parents had Axis II disorders (e.g., narcissism, borderline) or a mood disorder (e.g., bipolar), while several other smaller sample studies found no differences in pathology between alienating and nonalienating parents based on court documents. These latter studies did, however, find revenge and an inability to let go of the relationship with the alienated parent were common among alienating parents (e.g., Lavadera & Maurizio, 2005). Alienating parents were also reported as being more likely to have custody of the children,

having feelings of self-righteousness, desiring power, and having a history of unresolved family trauma.

Two studies examined the link between an alienating parent's psychological characteristics and their use of PABs. One study used qualitative interviews with 14 alienating parents (Snow, 2002). This study found that alienating parents who were struggling to preserve their self and their parental identity were more likely to engage in financial abuse, gatekeeping behaviors, alliance building with their children, and litigation. Another study using clinical observations found that some alienating parents on the surface acted in positive ways toward the alienated parent, but often engaged in indirect and more subtle forms of PABs (e.g., loyalty inducing behaviors; Cartié et al., 2005). These preliminary studies indicate that more research is needed to understand the direct pathways between alienating parents' psychological characteristics and behaviors.

### ***Prevalence/Scope of the Problem***

Prevalence has been examined two ways: prevalence of PA in children (k = 13) and prevalence of families where a parent was engaging in PABs (k = 12). Using a parent self-report measure of manifestations of PA (Rowlands, 2019), Harman and colleagues (2019) found that among a sample of separated/divorced parents who were selected to reflect the U.S. population on demographic characteristics, nearly a quarter indicated that at least one of their children was moderately to severely alienated from them. This finding generalizes to about 3.8 million children in the United States. Using other estimation procedures, Bernet (2010) and Warshak (2015a) have derived similar, although slightly smaller, estimates. Among clinical samples, professionals reported higher percentages of cases where PA had occurred (e.g., 12%–43% of court cases; Campbell & Lorandos, 2020; Kopetski et al., 2006; Lavadera et al., 2012).

The studies that examined PABs have reported much higher numbers of parents and children being exposed to them than children ultimately becoming alienated. These behaviors were reported as being more common in families who had divorced/separated, and between 13.4% and 38.7% of parents across five different studies reported that they were on the receiving end of PABs. Nearly all (35 of 36) custody evaluators in one study had, at some point, observed PABs in their cases (Morrison, 2006). Few studies have examined other demographic variables beyond gender. Four polls in the United States and Canada using different sampling strategies failed to find statistically significant differences across demographic categories such as race, ethnicity, income, or education.

### ***Demographics of Alienated Children (k = 7)***

The few studies examining demographic characteristics of alienated children did not indicate any statistically significant differences on variables such as race, ethnicity, gender, or age. For example, of the studies that looked specifically at gender, three found no gender differences among alienated children, two found that girls were alienated more often than boys, and one study found the opposite.

### ***Measurement and Assessment***

Numerous studies focused on the development of valid and reliable assessment tools for PA in children. Four quantitative survey studies of mental health and legal professionals indicated there

were high levels of interrater reliability in the classification of family cases in which PA was occurring. One of these studies (Baker, 2020) found that professionals were accurate in their assessment of PA, particularly when PABs and PA symptoms were evident, when four factors were present in a case: previous good relationship between the alienated parent and child, lack of abuse or neglect, presence of PABS, and manifestations of PA. Thirteen studies focused on the assessment of PA in children. The measurement tools varied according to who used the tools, such as parents who identify as alienated responding to a measure of symptoms in their children (e.g., Rowlands, 2019) or clinicians using the tool (e.g., Sîrbu et al., 2020). Studies consistently found at least four attributes across all measures (e.g., Machuca, 2005), with most studies identifying eight attributes (e.g., Sîrbu et al., 2020). The difference may be accounted for by the degree of severity of the problem or due to the participants in the sample that was investigated (e.g., professionals vs. alienated parents). Five studies reported on measures of PABs. The measures captured a variety of behaviors, such as influencing children to express a parenting time preference. Factor analyses have found that PABs load onto one reliable factor (e.g., Carvalho et al., 2017). Two studies examined how mental health and legal professionals assessed alienating parents.

### **Other Studies**

A handful of studies examined relatively neglected aspects of PA. One study found a positive association between the severity of parentification of a child (where a parent treats a child as another parent or adult in the family system) and poor mental health status of the alienating parent (Kraus, 2016). Another study explored the experience of grandparents who were alienated from their grandchildren due to a parent's alienating behavior (Sims & Rofail, 2013), and three studies examined the quality of family time and positive parenting skills of parents before custody became an issue and PA occurred (e.g., Morrison, 2006). Several studies also examined the etiology of PA over time, reporting that PA started before the end of the parent's relationship and that once PABs began, they were unlikely to cease (Verrocchio et al., 2018; Zander, 2012).

### **Diversity of Methods, Sampling Strategies, and Measurement Approaches**

We also examined whether there has been diversity in the methods, sampling strategy, and measurement approaches across the studies published on PA. Table 3 presents details on the studies. Across all 166 peer-reviewed studies, dissertations, master's theses, and book chapters (books are excluded in this analysis), there were proportional and balanced numbers of studies using different research tools, assessment approaches, and sample sources. This proportionality reveals that our understanding of PA as a concept has been informed by many studies within each dimension (research tools, assessment approaches, and sample sources), each offsetting the weaknesses of the other—the overall body of this research is not “fatally flawed” as alleged by some critics of PA research.

## **Discussion**

A purpose of this review was to examine whether the trajectory of empirical evidence about PA supports a perspective that the

field of study has entered a “blossoming” stage of development (Harman et al., 2019) or whether the work in this area is still largely underdeveloped (Marques et al., 2020; Saini et al., 2016). Our review is the most comprehensive review of the empirical data on PA to date and is the first to include studies published in languages other than English. Using four separate databases, one of which is a publicly accessible archive of publications on PA, we identified 213 published documents containing empirical data on the concept of PA, which is more than 4 times the number of studies included in the Saini et al. (2016; 39 studies) and Marques et al. (2020; 48 studies) reviews. We used only two search terms in our literature review (“parental alienation” and “parental alienation syndrome”) because we wanted to examine the research directly studying PA to accommodate the criticism that research in other fields of knowledge (e.g., false memory induction) are too far removed from PA itself to be material and relevant (e.g., Milchman et al., 2020).

The results of our analysis of the scientific research on PA indicate that it has been generative, meaning there have been increases in the numbers of studies published on the topic over time. Indeed, about 40% of what is known about PA at the end of 2020 was published since 2016 in peer-reviewed articles, dissertations, and theses (and one book chapter). The timing of this increase in knowledge is important to note as the Saini et al. review was published in 2016 and would not have included the large number of studies published since then. In addition, the Marques et al. (2020) review included only studies published prior to 2018.

Consistent with the development of other areas of scientific inquiry, such as the causes and consequences of physical abuse, we also found that much of the early research on PA was qualitative and descriptive in nature, and over time there has been a shift toward a greater use of quantitative methods—a tipping point that also occurred around 2016. The Saini et al. (2016) review did not capture this increase in quantitative studies due to the year it was published, and it excluded many of the qualitative studies before that date. We also found that over time there has been an increase in the application of theory and hypothesis testing. These indicators of a maturing field—an expanding literature and the shift toward quantitative studies that test hypotheses generated by theory—support the position that PA research has moved beyond an early stage of scientific development and is now blossoming.

Across the studies on PA, which have focused on 16 different topical areas, we also found a variety of research tools used, diversity in the types of participants who were sampled, and variability in the assessment approaches used to determine PA or PABs. This multidimensionality indicates that PA has been examined from many angles and has not been plagued by a common method bias (e.g., Kock et al., 2021), and the weaknesses of one method, sample source, or measurement tool have likely been offset by the strengths of another. Thus, as a field of study, PA is not methodologically flawed and makes an important contribution to our understanding of how this specific form of parental conflict affects children.

### **Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

Research synthesis strategies differ in how, why, and when different synthesis methods can be correctly applied (Sandelowski et al., 2012). Reliable systematic reviews require comparing and

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**Table 3**  
*Research Dimensions of Peer-Reviewed Studies, Master's Theses, and Doctoral Dissertations*

Topic	Research tool				Assessment approach				Sample source		
	Survey	Interview/clinical observation	Archival records	Case studies	Self-report	Clinical assessment or court judgment	Measurement tool	Children	Parents	Families	Professionals
All topics ( <i>k</i> = 166)	73	51	35	33	31	59	49	46	50	50	19
PABs ( <i>k</i> = 52)	15	23	8	9	14	19	16	11	22	18	1
False allegations of abuse ( <i>k</i> = 18)	4	3	9	2	0	11	2	1	2	11	4
PA manifestation ( <i>k</i> = 36)	17	8	6	7	6	14	15	14	9	11	3
PABs → PA ( <i>k</i> = 13)	4	5	3	1	3	3	7	8	—	4	—
Child outcomes ( <i>k</i> = 29)	14	10	4	1	10	5	13	16	5	7	1
Alienated parent outcomes ( <i>k</i> = 24)	9	15	—	—	14	4	5	3	19	2	—
PABs → outcomes ( <i>k</i> = 9)	8	1	—	—	—	—	9	5	4	—	—
Justice system involvement ( <i>k</i> = 22)	5	8	5	4	9	8	3	1	9	10	2
Professional attitudes/knowledge ( <i>k</i> = 13)	8	3	2	—	n/a	4	n/a	—	1	2	10
Third parties → outcomes ( <i>k</i> = 6)	2	3	—	1	2	2	2	—	4	1	1
Interventions ( <i>k</i> = 27)	6	7	10	4	2	20	1	9	2	15	1
Gender of alienating parent ( <i>k</i> = 20)	8	1	11	—	5	9	5	3	6	10	—
Personality and behaviors of alienating parent ( <i>k</i> = 19)	2	9	9	1	3	11	5	1	8	11	—
Prevalence/scope of PA ( <i>k</i> = 13)	6	2	5	—	—	6	4	1	2	5	5
Prevalence/scope of PABs ( <i>k</i> = 12)	11	—	1	—	4	1	7	2	7	1	2
Demographics of alienated children ( <i>k</i> = 7)	1	2	4	—	2	2	3	4	1	2	—
Measurement/assessment ( <i>k</i> = 22)	19	4	2	—	n/a	n/a	n/a	8	5	3	6

*Note.* Numbers reported for each category of studies do not always equal the overall total as some studies used multiple methods or samples and some did not report the information. When children are listed as the sample, this includes minors and adults who were alienated when they were children. PABs = parental alienating behaviors; PA = parental alienation.



interpreting findings and then analyzing and presenting the information obtained (e.g., content or thematic analysis, plotting or diagramming data) to answer specific research questions. Our goal was to determine whether the development of the field of study of PA has followed a growth trajectory expected of any productive scientific discipline.

Therefore, it is outside of the scope of the current review to evaluate research quality of the individual PA studies. Determinants of research quality for qualitative and quantitative research are vastly different (e.g., sample size, how validity is defined), and we believe that to evaluate the quality of both types of studies by the same standard values one type of research over another and does an injustice to the arch of knowledge that both forms of research provide. For example, meta-analyses that synthesize and pool together quantitative data from similar and comparable studies can provide precise estimation of effects; however, they omit the richness of the early and foundational, qualitative scientific research on the topic (Solesbury, 2002). Mixed-methods research synthesis approaches (e.g., Critical Appraisal Skills Programme, 2021) would be useful to bridge the gap between quantitative and qualitative syntheses as such approaches summarize research evidence, identify or develop theory, and identify the strength of links between different factors, policies, and programs that may have been factors associated with the phenomena under study (Pawson, 2006). Efforts are currently underway to use this approach to evaluate the quality of the accumulating research on PA.

Our search terms did not identify a number of studies on PA known previously to the authors. This failure to identify some studies using our limited search terms may be due to the study not being published in a journal indexed by the search engines used (e.g., an unreviewed university paper series; Meier et al., 2019) or the study lacking keywords that would have pulled it into the literature search results (e.g., Lorandos, 2013). In order to prevent biases in adding only those studies that the authors are aware of, we adhered to our search process and inclusion/exclusion criteria tightly, which meant excluding such known articles from our review. Our review also did not include unpublished studies or professional presentations of unpublished empirical data (e.g., Braver et al., 2007). Future reviews should use additional search terms and solicit unpublished manuscripts from scholars in the field to determine whether there are potential publication biases favoring studies with statistically significant results (i.e., the “file drawer problem”; Rosenthal, 1979).

The scope of our review also did not include dimensions that may add to our understanding of the research, such as sampling strategies (e.g., internet recruitment). The vast majority of studies on PA have used a cross-sectional method, which is appropriate for the types of research questions that have been asked. Moving forward, research questions related to the etiology of the problem and the longer-term impact of specific patterns of PABs on children and parents would benefit from using longitudinal research designs (Harman et al., 2018).

### Judicial and Legal Applications

Given the accumulation of research about PA, as well as the vast amount of research from related fields that explain different PA processes, scholars have raised concerns about why widespread recognition of the problem has eluded the field of

psychology (Harman et al., 2018; Lorandos, 2020) and why there has been an absence of better legal protections and remedies for families experiencing this form of abuse. Of particular concern, critics of PA research have seized upon Saini et al.’s (2016) conclusions to argue against the admissibility of PA evidence in family law cases (e.g., Milchman, 2019). When admitting scientific evidence in the judicial system, the most common admissibility standard in the United States is the Daubert threshold test (Daubert v. Merrell Dow Pharmaceuticals, Inc., 1993). Daubert asks several key questions to help determine if the proffered evidence is reliable and relevant to the case, as well as how much the court can rely on the evidence to assist in its decision (Lorandos & Domitrovich, in press; Zervopoulos, 2015). In almost 1,200 trial and appellate records in the United States between 1985 and 2018, the concept of PA was found to be “material to the proceedings, probative of important facts, relevant to the court’s deliberations, admissible, and worthy of discussion” (Lorandos, 2020, p. 332). Thus, the question about whether PA scientific evidence is admissible has already been answered in the judicial record.

Laws have been created to protect individuals from other types of abuse based on considerably less research than what was reviewed here. For example, the State of New Jersey passed an act in 2017 to protect victims of “predatory alienation,” the definition of which is very similar to how PABs are defined:

[Predatory alienation is] extreme undue influence on, or coercive persuasion or psychologically damaging manipulation of another person that results in physical or emotional harm or the loss of financial assets, *disrupts a parent-child relationship* [emphasis added], leads to deceptive or exploitative relationship, or isolates the person from family and friends. (Cronin et al., 2017, p. 6)

We searched the term “predatory alienation” using the same four databases used for the current review and identified only two articles, neither of which were actually about predatory alienation. In addition, a group of investigators from the Center on Violence Against Women and Children at Rutgers University reported there was a sparse amount of research evidence to support the types of abuse that meet the legal definition of predatory alienation (e.g., cults, sexual abuse; Cronin et al., 2017). Despite the sparse body of research on predatory alienation, children and adults suffering this form of abuse have recourse to legal protections. There are no similar legal protections for children and families affected by PA in most of the world.

### Conclusion

Given that nearly 40% of the studies on PA have been published since 2016, it falls to scholars and practitioners to update their knowledge about PA and incorporate these scientific advances. It is no longer tenable to dismiss the field as lacking in scientific status. Only by recognizing the legitimacy of PA scholarship will developmental psychology sustain and enhance understanding of how and why parent-child relationships break down in the wake of interparental conflict, separation, and divorce.

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