

ARTIKEL PENELITIAN

Mothers' Experience with Parental Alienation Across Different Cultures

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ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi pengalaman ibu yang mengalami *parental alienation* (PA) dalam konteks lintas budaya. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain studi kasus terhadap empat ibu dan tiga *significant others*. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam daring dan dianalisis secara tematik. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan lima tema utama: navigasi pengalaman alienasi, tantangan emosional dan struktural, pemaknaan pengalaman, mekanisme koping, dan adaptasi identitas. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa PA dipengaruhi oleh konstruksi sosial, misogini, dan bias institusional.

Kata kunci: *parental alienation, misogini, konstruksi sosial, keibuan, budaya, penelitian kualitatif*

ABSTRACT

This study explores mothers' lived experiences of parental alienation (PA) across different cultural contexts. Using a qualitative case study design, this research involved four mothers and three significant others. Data were collected through in-depth online interviews and analyzed thematically. Findings revealed five major themes: navigating alienation, emotional and structural challenges, meaning-making, coping mechanisms, and identity adaptation. The results indicate that parental alienation is socially constructed through misogyny and institutional bias.

Keywords: parental alienation, motherhood, misogyny, social constructionism, qualitative study

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, rising rates of marital dissolution and post-divorce custody disputes have become a significant social phenomenon across both Eastern and Western societies. Global shifts in marriage patterns, including delayed marriage, changing gender roles, and evolving legal frameworks, have contributed to increasing divorce prevalence (Our World in Data, 2023; United Nations, 2022). While many Western countries report crude divorce rates between 2.0 and 3.5 per 1,000 population, several collectivist and Eastern societies have experienced steady increases over the past decade (Our World in Data, 2023; United Nations, 2022). In the United States, although divorce rates declined from approximately 3.6 per 1,000 population in 2012 to 2.4 in 2022, high-conflict separations and custody disputes remain structurally significant within family courts (CDC, 2023; U.S. Census Bureau, 2024). Conversely, countries in East and Southeast Asia, including China, South Korea, and Indonesia, have reported rising divorce trends associated with rapid socio-economic change and shifting marital expectations (United Nations, 2022).

Indonesia illustrates this pattern clearly. National data indicate that registered divorce cases increased from approximately 408,000 in 2018 to over 516,000 in 2022, before declining to around 463,000 in 2023 (BPS, 2024; Data Indonesia, 2023). This growth reflects expanded legal access to divorce and increased exposure of families, particularly children, to post-divorce conflict. Although divorce itself does not necessarily result in relational harm, high-conflict post-separation contexts often generate prolonged emotional and psychological strain, in which children may be pressured to align with one parent while distancing themselves from the other. Such conditions provide fertile ground for the emergence of parental alienation as a relational process embedded in post-divorce power dynamics.

Parental Alienation (PA) refers to a psychological and relational phenomenon in which children develop unjustified rejection or hostility toward one parent while strongly aligning with the other, typically in high-conflict custody disputes (Bernet et al., 2010). The concept originated with Gardner's (1985) formulation of Parental Alienation Syndrome (PAS); however, his work relied on a highly gender-skewed sample, contributing to enduring misconceptions. Subsequent scholars have identified major conceptual and empirical limitations in Gardner's model (Johnston & Kelly, 2004) and demonstrated how PAS has been used to dismiss women's and children's abuse disclosures (Dallam, 1998; Meier, 2018, 2020). Further research suggests that PA frameworks are often embedded in misogynistic cultural beliefs, leading to systematic discrediting of mothers (Milchman, 2017; Saunders, 2017; Barnett, 2020). International studies similarly show how PA discourse has been weaponized to reinforce paternal authority and institutional bias (Zaccour, 2021; Lapierre et al., 2024).

Contemporary scholars increasingly conceptualizes PA as a form of psychological maltreatment involving coercive influence over children's perceptions and attachments (Dang & De Sousa, 2022). Longitudinal research indicates that exposure to alienating behaviors is associated with emotional distress, loyalty conflicts, and long-term relational difficulties (Baker, 2014; Harman et al., 2018). Although PA is not formally recognized in the DSM-5, its features overlap with patterns of emotional abuse, attachment disruption, and coercive control (Bernet et al., 2010).

Despite the growing literature, research focusing specifically on mothers as targeted parents remains limited. This gap is significant given evidence that gender assumptions shape institutional responses to PA claims. Mothers who report abuse, establish boundaries, or advocate for their children are frequently portrayed as manipulative or unstable, reflecting broader patterns of institutional misogyny (Milchman, 2017; Meier, 2020). In legal contexts, PA allegations are often misapplied against mothers, particularly when they raise concerns about child safety or domestic violence (Barnett, 2020; Saunders, 2017).

Cultural and religious norms further shape how PA is interpreted and evaluated. In Indonesia, ideals of female compliance and maternal sacrifice may frame autonomous mothers as deviant during custody disputes (Drew, 2021). In Pakistan and other Muslim-majority contexts, custody regulations influenced by Islamic jurisprudence may reinforce paternal authority over time (Jaffe et al., 2017). Even in Western jurisdictions, courts frequently rely on gendered narratives that disproportionately disadvantage mothers in alienation claims (Zaccour, 2021; Lapierre et al., 2024).

Accordingly, parental alienation must be understood not only as a psychological phenomenon but also as a sociocultural and gendered process shaped by power relations, cultural scripts, and institutional practices. Weigel and Donovan (2006) emphasize that alienation functions as a form of emotional abuse whose interpretation is inseparable from social context, while Barnett (2020) conceptualizes PA as a “meaning-making system” embedded in narratives about gender, authority, and motherhood. Guided by these perspectives, the present study adopts a cross-cultural approach to examine mothers’ lived experiences of parental alienation, integrating the perspectives of close figures such as children, relatives, and significant others. By situating personal narratives within broader cultural and institutional frameworks, this research seeks to illuminate how parental alienation is constructed, experienced, and sustained across diverse sociocultural settings.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore mothers’ lived experiences of parental alienation across different cultural contexts. Guided by a social constructionist perspective, the design enabled in-depth examination of how parental alienation is constructed, experienced, and interpreted within sociocultural and institutional settings.

Participants

Participants consisted of four mothers who had experienced parental alienation and three significant others (e.g., children, relatives, or trusted individuals) who were familiar with the mothers’ experiences. Mothers were selected based on their involvement in custody-related conflict and prolonged relational disruption with their children. Significant others were included to provide complementary perspectives and support data triangulation. All participants were recruited through purposive sampling.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth online interviews. This method allowed participants to articulate their experiences in their own terms while enabling systematic exploration of cultural, gendered, and institutional influences. Interviews were conducted with informed consent, audio-recorded, and transcribed verbatim. Field notes were used to capture contextual and non-verbal information when relevant.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis within a qualitative case study framework. Analysis followed iterative stages of familiarization, open coding, category development, and theme construction. Both within-case and cross-case analyses were conducted to identify shared patterns and contextual variations. Themes were interpreted in relation to social constructionist and feminist theoretical perspectives.

Validity

To enhance research rigor, several strategies were employed. Credibility was strengthened through source triangulation between mothers and significant others and through member checking. Dependability was supported by maintaining an audit trail of methodological and analytical decisions. Confirmability was ensured through reflexive journaling and systematic coding procedures. Transferability was addressed by providing detailed contextual descriptions of participants and research settings.

RESULTS

Five major themes emerged: (1) Navigating Parental Alienation, (2) Challenges in Experience, (3) Meaning-Making, (4) Coping Mechanisms, and (5) Adaptation. Participants described emotional distress, social stigma, and institutional barriers. Meaning-making processes involved moral and spiritual interpretations. Coping strategies included emotional regulation and selective social support. Adaptation reflected identity reconstruction.

Navigating Through Parental Alienation

Mothers consistently attempted to maintain emotional connections with their children despite restricted access, surveillance, and interference by the alienating parent. Participants described engaging in persistent communication efforts, emotional self-regulation, and creative strategies to remain present in their children's lives. These efforts were often constrained by legal barriers and relational manipulation, requiring continuous emotional and psychological adjustment.

Challenges in the Experience of Parental Alienation

Participants experienced substantial emotional distress, including grief, anxiety, and feelings of powerlessness. Legal obstacles, social stigma, and gendered judgments further intensified vulnerability. Mothers frequently reported being perceived as less credible than fathers, with emotional expression interpreted as instability or manipulation. Cultural norms and institutional practices reinforced unequal power relations, limiting access to validation and support.

Meaning-Making

Mothers and significant others constructed meaning through moral, spiritual, and cultural frameworks. Experiences of alienation were often reframed as personal trials, acts of sacrifice, or tests of resilience. This meaning-making process enabled participants to preserve self-worth and moral identity despite relational loss and social delegitimization.

Coping Mechanisms

Participants employed multiple coping strategies, including emotional regulation, selective disclosure, boundary-setting, engagement with social and religious support, and maintenance of daily routines. Children and significant others commonly used cognitive distancing, observation,

and strategic silence to manage family conflict. While these strategies offered short-term psychological protection, they were also shaped by cultural expectations of emotional restraint and compliance.

Adaptation Mechanisms

Over time, mothers engaged in identity reconstruction by redefining motherhood beyond traditional standards of compliance and sacrifice. Participants emphasized values such as emotional integrity, resilience, and ethical commitment to their children. Although alienation often persisted, mothers developed alternative self-narratives that reduced dependence on institutional validation and supported psychological continuity.

Cross-Cultural Patterns

Cultural context influenced how parental alienation was experienced and interpreted. In collectivist settings, heightened moral surveillance and expectations of sacrifice intensified guilt and self-blame. In more individualistic contexts, institutional bias and adversarial legal processes were more prominent. Despite these differences, there are shared patriarchal norms that consistently shape maternal credibility.

DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that parental alienation is a socially constructed phenomenon shaped by gender norms, institutional practices, and cultural narratives rather than a purely interpersonal conflict. Across the five superordinate themes, mothers' experiences were framed by dominant ideals of "good motherhood" that emphasized patience, self-sacrifice, and emotional restraint. Expressions of distress or resistance were frequently reinterpreted as instability or manipulation, reflecting how misogyny operates within patriarchal systems. These gendered assumptions were reproduced across legal, psychological, familial, and community contexts, supporting the view of parental alienation as a meaning-making system embedded in sociocultural power relations.

Cultural context influenced how alienation was experienced and evaluated, with collectivist settings intensifying moral surveillance and self-blame, and Western contexts reproducing bias through institutional practices. Despite these differences, shared patriarchal logics continued to regulate motherhood. Mothers demonstrated agency through meaning-making, culturally shaped coping strategies, and adaptive redefinitions of motherhood based on resilience and integrity. Overall, the findings extend social constructionist and feminist critiques by showing how parental alienation is produced and sustained through intersecting systems of culture, misogyny, and institutional bias, underscoring the need for gender-sensitive and culturally informed approaches in research and practice.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated the lived experiences of mothers affected by parental alienation across diverse cultural contexts, focusing on the role of misogyny and socially constructed ideals of motherhood in shaping these experiences. Using a qualitative approach, the research examined the

psychological, relational, and institutional processes that contribute to alienation and influence both mothers and their significant others.

The findings demonstrate that parental alienation extends beyond interpersonal conflict between separated parents and functions as a complex social phenomenon shaped by unequal power relations, patriarchal structures, dominant motherhood ideals, and culturally embedded values related to family, obedience, and gender roles. Participants consistently encountered restricted communication, character undermining, emotional control, and lack of institutional support, all of which increased vulnerability and disrupted sustained relationships with their children.

Five overarching themes were identified. First, in navigating alienation, mothers persistently sought to maintain emotional bonds with their children despite limited access, monitoring, and interference, relying on emotional discipline, perseverance, and adaptive strategies. Second, the experience of alienation was marked by psychological strain, legal obstacles, social labeling, and gender-based evaluations that reinforced structural inequalities, often positioning fathers as more legitimate or authoritative. Third, through meaning-making, mothers and close figures interpreted their experiences using moral, cultural, and spiritual frameworks, reframing suffering as endurance, commitment, and maternal devotion. Fourth, coping involved emotional self-regulation, selective communication, boundary-setting, engagement with social and spiritual support, and maintenance of daily structure, while children and significant others employed distancing, observation, and strategic silence. Fifth, adaptation was reflected in identity transformation, as mothers redefined motherhood beyond conventional standards and accepted practical limitations, while children and close figures integrated their experiences into personal development and boundary formation.

In conclusion, parental alienation is embedded within broader gendered and familial discourses that shape how mothers and families are perceived and treated. Recognizing these sociocultural influences is essential for developing more compassionate, culturally responsive, and gender-aware practices within psychological, legal, and social service systems.

DEDICATION

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DECLARATION OF POTENTIAL CONFLICT OF INTEREST

Qay Azneen Wardhana and Valina Khiarin Nisa, S.Psi., M.Sc., declare that they do not work for, act as consultants to, hold shares in, or receive funding from any company or organization that may benefit from the publication of this manuscript.

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