



## **Relationship between Parental Alienation and Interpersonal Relationships: A Case of Adolescents' in Selected High Schools in Kiambu County, Kenya**

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### **Abstract**

*A conducive environment that is associated with thriving of children enhances parental behaviours towards their children. In family environments, where conflicts abound, each parent strives to absolve himself/herself of being in the wrong by providing explanations to children the meaning of the conflict, and obviously blaming the other marital partner. In this regard, post-divorce parental alienation creates an unfavourable environment which may disorganise the adolescents from adaptive living. The purpose of the study was to examine the relationship between parental alienation and adolescents' interpersonal relationships among adolescents in selected high schools in Kiambu County, Kenya. PERMA wellbeing theory of flourishing guided this study. The study employed a descriptive survey design. Multistage sampling, comprising of inclusion and exclusion criteria and cluster sampling techniques, which were used to select the 240 adolescents from a population of 3776. Data was collected using Baker strategy questionnaire (BSQ) and the PERMA-Profiler. Descriptive statistics included frequencies and percentages, while Chi-square analysis was used to test for the hypotheses. The computer software SPSS version 25 aided in analysis. The findings revealed that post-divorce parental alienation affects adolescents' interpersonal relationships. The study recommends that intervention measures be implemented in consideration of factors as follows. Firstly, divorcing parents take an interest in understanding adolescence stage and its challenges. Secondly, parents who are intending to divorce ought to seek counselling services for their adolescents from a mental health practitioner. Lastly, marriage and family therapists should spearhead campaigns for the welfare of children coming from divorced families, the context in which parental alienation takes place.*

**Keywords:** Adolescents, Alienation, Divorce, Separation, Target Parent, Well-being

### **INTRODUCTION**

The environment in which children are brought up is very important as far as their wellbeing is concerned (Baig et al., 2021; Morawska & Sanders, 2017). These authors assert that the home atmosphere that is beneficial to the flourishing of the children is found where parents are mutually supportive, have nourishing relationships with their children, and are collaborative in parenting. Additionally, Davids et al. (2017) found that there is current evidence specifying that a diversity of parental contribution such as parental warmth, compassionate parenting, parental reassurance, and generally parental contribution were positively associated with improved wellbeing among adolescents. Moreover, Thomas et al. (2020) postulate that the quantity and type of association a parent shares with their offspring can have either a positive or undesirable effect on their adolescent's bodily, mental as well as social development. In this regard, Thomas et al. (2020) argue that parents need to strive

to have affirmative influence in their adolescents' lives while satisfying the adolescents' requirement for self-sufficiency. Additionally, such an environment ensures that the children have positive emotions, have enriching relationships both with parents and peers, and are able to make positive meanings of what is happening to them in times of difficulties. These children are also likely to have feelings of accomplishments (Kun et al., 2016). Moreover, where a conducive environment exists, there is a high likelihood of parents interconnecting every day in matters concerning raising of their children.

However, when a separation occurs, parenting of children can turn out to be challenging. This is affirmed by the findings of a study by Marzullo (2021) that when parents, maintain a toxic climate, it undermines peaceful co-parenting. As Marzullo (2021) pointed out, crusade of vilification by one parent against the other is common during post-divorce and which complicates parenting. This may point to the phenomenon of parental alienation which was the focus of the study. Parental alienation denotes the manipulation or indoctrination of children by one parent with an intention of turning them against the other parent (Warshak, 2020; Verhaar et. al., 2022). One of the reasons parental alienation occurs in post-divorce periods is the extension by ex-spouses of the very conflicts that led to the breakup in post-divorce period (Brits et al., 2018). In addition, Warshak (2020) and Verhaar et. al (2022) posit that conflicts centre around the welfare of the children and could last for long periods of time. The duration of these conflicts implies that the children have to contend with the toxic environment for a long period of time which further jeopardizes their wellbeing. It has been observed that during parental alienation a hostile or toxic environment is created between the two ex-spouses where the alienating parent (AP) would like to be seen as all blameless by the children while the targeted parent (TP) is depicted as all wicked. With this toxic environment the parents cannot effectively meet the needs of their children. These needs include emotional, physical, psychological and social needs among others. With the children indoctrinated and being turned against the (TP) there is the development of poor parent-child relationship which is associated with a hampered wellbeing among adolescents.

The term interpersonal relationships incorporate all interactions individuals have with the following; associates, friends, household members, bosses (teachers) and in the case of adolescents, guides and superiors at the places of work, and the community at large. According to Seligman (as cited by Ryff, 2022) there are five pillars for blossoming or wellbeing whose mnemonic is PERMA. The five pillars are: positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning and accomplishment. PERMA wellbeing theory of wellbeing was used in this study. Positive interpersonal relationships in the PERMA model (Seligman, 2011) which is largely adopted in this study refer to feeling supported, treasured, and appreciated by others (Kun et al., 2016). Further, Seligman (2016) maintains that incorporating relationships in the PERMA model is important because humans are essentially social beings. Additionally, Ryff and Singer (as cited by Sagone & De Caroli, 2014) suggest that positive interpersonal relations with others denotes an individual's capability to enjoy warm, intimate, satisfying, and trusting give-and-take relationship with family members, associates, neighbours, and community members. In the current study interpersonal relationships with others will refer to the ability of adolescents to form long lasting associations with significant family members, peers and other members of the society.

All human beings have a fundamental need to belong (Karaman & Tarim, 2018). These authors posit that those whose needs to belong are met, are satisfied and have increased mental and physical well-being. In addition, Allen et al. (2022) maintain that social interactions play a dominant role in people's lives right from infancy to adulthood. Infants rely on parents and other care givers for basic needs like nourishment, housing, security, and emotional care. Furthermore, as these authors report, the caregivers provide company,

sanctuary and pleasure to infants and adolescents. Relationship with parents play a pivotal role in ensuring a child is not socially isolated (Loades et al., 2020; Standard et al., 2019). These authors discovered that when parents meet the requirements of their offspring, they are essentially regulating their children's fondness, behaviour and even their functioning. Also, Gunnar (2017) asserts that the involvement of the child with a sensitive caregiver can shield a child from developing stress. In addition, Gasser-Haas et al. (2021) stated that quality parental backing and companionship is an important factor required by children in order to thrive. These authors argue that parental support and comradeship translates to a healthy concept of self, societal proficiency as well as less incidents of undesirable behaviour.

Research carried out in North America, on the prevalence of parental alienation occurring in post-divorce era revealed that 35.5 % of the parents and 32% of Canadian parents felt they were the targets of alienating behaviours by a partner and ex-partner. Nearly 60 % of the respondents' report reported that such behaviours had adversely affected their relationship with their children. The impaired parent –child relationship hampers adolescents' wellbeing (Harman, et al., 2019; warshak, 2020) as discussed below. This injured parent- child relationship leaves the children at the risk of developing physiological, psychological, behavioural, social and mental challenges. These challenges may make it difficult for the adolescents to flourish. Parent- child relations are key, in that they govern to a great degree the child's behavior during infancy and adolescence. Silva and Sandstrom (2018) noted that children's psychological wellbeing, mental health, behavioural adjustment in difficult situations and the capability to establish positive relationships with others are closely related to the level of parental competence during early stages of maturation. Nonetheless, it is important to note that in parental alienation progressions the Targeted Parent (TP)-child interactions are seriously weakened and the positive emotional bonds are damaged (Aloia & Strutzenberg, 2019; Harman et al., 2018).

Parent–Child Relational Problems mentioned above are positively associated with behavioural problems among adolescents. Diagnostic and Statistical Manual TR (2022) lists behavioural difficulties which emanate from parent-child relational difficulties. These include: insufficient parental control, management and involvement with the child, excessive parental protection or gate keeping, extreme parental pressure, squabbles that escalate to intimidations of physical aggression and evasion of problems as opposed to getting solutions to problems. In addition, Parent –Child Relational Problems is associated with Cognitive Challenges. Among the cognitive complications listed in DSM -5- TR (2022) as emanating from parent-child relational problems are negative ascriptions of the other person's intents, aggression toward or scapegoating of the other and unjustified feelings of separation. This negative ascription by the children implies that their relationship with the parents is marked with distrust and suspicion. In addition, parent-child relational difficulties have been associated with development of psychopathology. Studies have widely documented the negative impact of parental alienation on children. Some of the common psychopathology reported include: depression, anxiety, substance abuse and conduct disorders (Verrochio et al., 2018). This psychological influence has been documented as one factor that undermines children's wellbeing (Platt & Bedwell, 2022; Verhaar, 2022). Moreover, parent –child relational Problems which occur in parental alienation have been responsible for social exclusion or social marginalization among alienated children (Martos Martinez et al., 2021; Silva, 2022) which is detrimental to the wellbeing of children. According to Martos Martinez et al. (2021), social marginalization has the effect of causing broad mental and behavioural alterations in governing a person's sense of belonging. The authors further assert that the need to belong to significant others and peers has existed since the evolution of mankind. Additionally, Silva (2022) informs that parental alienation affects

children and is largely responsible for the difficulties adolescents experience as far as future interactions with peers is concerned.

Studies done in the developed countries have thus demonstrated that parental alienation has detrimental effects on children's wellbeing. However, despite having widespread incidents of parental alienation emanating from divorce and separation, there is limited literature on the effects of parental alienation and adolescents' interpersonal relationship, in Kiambu County, Kenya. This study intends to address this gap in knowledge by investigating the relationship between parental alienation and interpersonal relationships among adolescents' in selected high schools in Kiambu County, Kenya.

### **Statement of the Problem**

There has been a steady increase in divorce statistics globally, regionally and locally (Kiplagat, 2020; Olofson, 2019; World Bank, 2017). Studies conducted on the effects of an injured parent-child relationship on a child, shows a positive correlation between the damaged relationship and social exclusion or social marginalization (Silva, 2021). Social exclusion is detrimental to the wellbeing of children (Martos Martinez et al., 2021). The high rates of divorce imply higher rates of parental alienation because parental alienation is about parental conflicts arising after divorce and separation (Harman et al., 2019). Parental alienation has also been associated with injured relationships with peers, anxiety, substance misuse among those alienated (Jafee, 2017; Sirbu et al., 2020). Furthermore, Harman et al. (2019) found that separation of children from a parent has long-lasting outcomes on adult behaviours of persons where it is manifested in a variety of ways. Although parental alienation through childhood has been documented as the cause of psychological problems and social problems such as damaged parent-child interpersonal relationships, limited studies have been conducted in Kenya to affirm or deny the existence of the same despite different population characteristics between these studies and the Kenyan context. Consequently, despite the findings those children of divorce suffer so much damage there has been few studies conducted using a sample drawn from Kenya to find out if these undesirable outcomes emanate from and are maintained by parental alienation. If this phenomenon is left unidentified and unaddressed there is a possibility of many adolescents having a compromised psycho-social wellbeing which could in turn undermine their interpersonal relationship with, peers, teachers, authority figures, adults, parents among other people in the society.

### **Objective of the Study**

To investigate the relationship between parental alienation and adolescents' interpersonal relationships in selected High Schools in Kiambu County.

### **Hypothesis**

H0: There is no statistically significant relationship between parental alienation and adolescents' inter-personal relationships in selected public County High Schools in Kiambu County.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The study was conducted in public secondary schools in Kiambu County, Kenya. The study employed a descriptive survey research design and was informed by PERMA theory of well-being. The target population comprised of all the 3776 students in public day secondary schools. Multistage sampling comprising of inclusion and exclusion criteria and cluster sampling were used in the selection of the sample. Rationale behind the use of inclusive/exclusive criteria was the fact that the target population was unknown. In addition, all students who met the inclusion criteria were included in the sample. This is because in

Kiambu County the Ministry of Education did not have a census of students whose parents had divorced or separated. Accordingly, all female and male adolescents aged between 13-19 years who were identified as coming from divorced families were selected and included in the study. Three hundred students met the inclusion criteria and were provided with questionnaires. Of the 300 administered questionnaires, 240 were dully filled and returned; this represented a response rate of 67.91% which was a good representation.

Baker strategy questionnaire (BSQ) was used to collect data on parental alienation strategies. The participants rated each item on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (never) to 4 (very often). The PERMA-profiler, which is a brief multidimensional measure of flourishing by Butler and Kern (2016) was employed to assess levels of inter-personal relationships among the adolescents. The measure employs Likert –type responses where questions are on an 11-point scale ranging from 0-10 where 0 means not at all and 10 means completely. Data was analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

In order to establish the relationship between parental alienation and adolescents' interpersonal relationships, information was sought from the adolescent in relation to the parental alienation strategies they had been subjected to by their parents. In addition, these findings were subjected to the chi-square test to identify their inter-personal relationships. The findings are presented and discussed in reference to PERMA -wellbeing theory of flourishing as shown in table 1. It had been hypothesized (H0) that parental alienation was associated with interpersonal relationship. Parental alienation was rated using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (never) to 4 (very often). Adolescent wellbeing which consisted of three construct interpersonal relationships, sense of accomplishment and purpose was measured using 11-point scale ranging from 0-10 where 0 meant not at all and 10 meant completely. Bivariate analysis consisting of chi-square, odd ratio at 95% confidence interval were used in drawing an association between parental alienation (IV) and adolescents' wellbeing, (DV). An odds ratio (OR) was used to measure the level of association between an exposure and an outcome. The Chi Square statistic compares the tallies or counts of categorical responses between two (or more) independent groups. To interpret the Chi Square statistics, the conventional p-value is used where, if the p-value is less than 0.05 then we deduce that there is a relationship between parental alienation (IV) and adolescents' wellbeing, (DV) (interrelationships, sense of accomplishment, and purpose) was not by chance. The findings are as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1: Parental Alienation and Adolescents' Interpersonal Relationships**

| PERMA wellbeing Score | 0-3 |      | 3-5 |      | 5-7 |      | >7 scores |      | Odd Ratio | Chi-Square | P Value |
|-----------------------|-----|------|-----|------|-----|------|-----------|------|-----------|------------|---------|
|                       | F   | %    | F   | %    | F   | %    | F         | %    |           |            |         |
| PA Baker Score        |     |      |     |      |     |      |           |      |           |            |         |
| Severe >3             | 34  | 14.0 | 48  | 20.0 | 62  | 26.0 | 96        | 40.0 | 9.2       | 54.2       | 0.00    |
| Moderate (2-3)        | 72  | 30.0 | 72  | 30.0 | 67  | 28.0 | 29        | 12.0 | 6.0       |            |         |
| Mild (1-2)            | 86  | 36.0 | 101 | 42.0 | 24  | 10.0 | 24        | 10.0 | 4.2       |            |         |
| Mild (0-1)            | 130 | 54.0 | 62  | 26.0 | 29  | 12.0 | 19        | 8.0  | 1.0       |            |         |

The findings presented on Table 1 show the observed and expected values for each category of the variable. The overall findings were that there was a significant association between

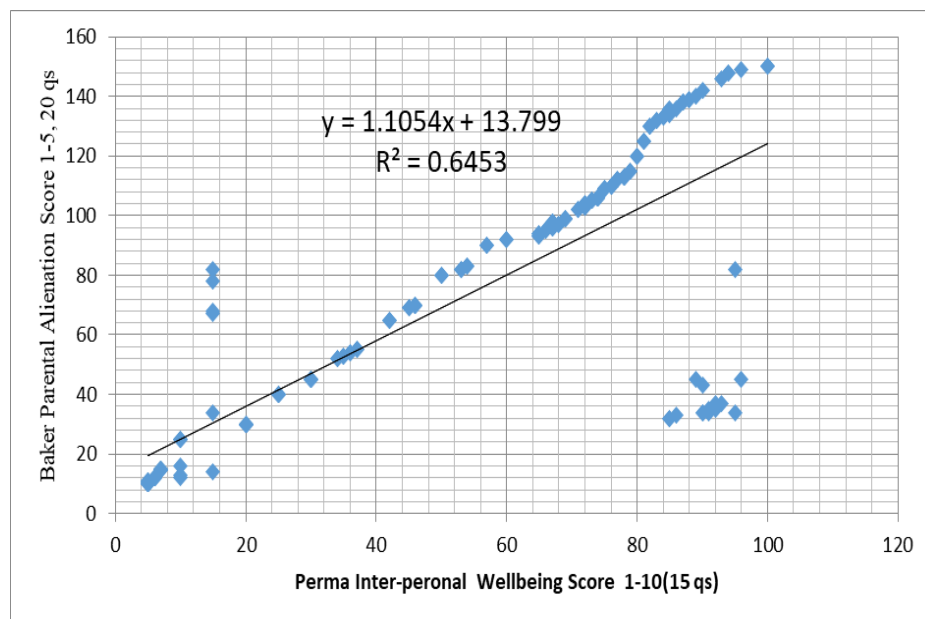
parental alienation (IV) and adolescents' relational construct likelihood of  $\chi^2 = 54.2 < 0.5$ , which indicated that students who reported being exposed to high level of alienation were also found to be the ones reporting high level of PERMA wellbeing score. Students who reported having been exposed to severe level of parental alienation (above 3 Baker Likert scale) were 9.20 times more likely to have high score of above 7 in the PERMA wellbeing scale (OR 7.42, 95%, than any of moderate Baker Score (2-3) (OR 6.0, 95% or mild (1-2) (OR 4.2, 95% or Mild (0-1) (OR 1.0, 95%). This study finding considerably concurred with those of Warshak (2020) who established that parental alienation affects children and is largely responsible for the difficulties adolescents experience as far as future interactions with parent/s and with peers is concerned.

### Testing Hypothesis Analysis

The null hypothesis stated thus;

*H0: There is no statistically significant relationship between parental alienation and adolescents' inter-personal relationships in selected public county high schools in Kiambu County.*

The study sought to establish the degree of association between two or more variables. The test yields correlation coefficient statistics ( $r$ ) whose values lies between -1 and +1. ' $r$ ' measures the strength and direction of a linear relationship between two variables (Sekeran & Bougie as cited by Mutisya et al., 2022). A value closer to +1 shows a strong positive relationship whereas a value closer to -1 shows a strong negative relationship. In this objective the independent variable of the study was parental alienation and the dependent variable adolescents' inter-personal relationships. Hypothesis testing was done using regression analysis where the score of parental alienation and the students' interpersonal relationship were correlated. The findings were represented using scatter-plot as shown in Figure 1.



**Figure 1: Parental Alienation and Interpersonal Relationships**

The findings in Figure 1, show that there was a significant association between parental alienation (IV) and adolescents' relational construct and therefore the null hypothesis was rejected ( $R^2 = 0.645$ ,  $p$  value  $< 0.05$ ). This implies that parental alienation scores accounted

for 64.5% of PERMA relational wellbeing scores. Holding all other factors constant, a unit increase of parental alienation scores was attributed to an increase of 13.799 PERMA scores in adolescents' interpersonal construct. The more the scores of parental alienation, the more the scores of the interpersonal relationship damage. The likelihood of this relational disturbance seemed to increase in line with severity of parental alienation.

The study findings revealed that parental alienation behaviours affect relationships between adolescents and parents as well as adolescents and their peers. The findings concur with González (2019), Harman, et al., (2019) and Sirbu, et al. (2021) who found that parental alienation as associated with a damaged parent-child association. These authors maintained that in parental alienation progressions the target parent (TP)-child interactions were seriously weakened and the emotional bonds were damaged. A similar view was shown by Silva and Sandstrom (2018) who noted that the adolescents' psychological welfare, mental well-being, ability to adjust behaviour in problematic situations and the competence to create positive relations with other persons are closely related to the level of parent competence during the early stages of maturing. In this study, adolescents 13-14 years were the most affected by parental alienation behaviours and it can be argued these are the early stages of maturation. In view of this, this study was consistent with Silva and Sandstrom (2018). These high scores of sore interpersonal relationships emanating from parental alienation behaviours are associated with persistently disturbed parenting processes from the two parents (Silva, 2022).

Similarly, Bernet et al. (2016) underscored the significance of parental relationship distress noting that it is associated with acceleration of psychological indications, bodily complaints, and internal loyalty struggle emanating from forcing a child to choose between one parent or the other, which further damaged a parent-child association. Moreover, Warshak (2020) postulated that, the severely estranged child both loathes and dreads the TP. Giving examples of this behaviour, this author mentioned that the child may stubbornly refuse to have any connections with the TP or may do it with bitterness. In addition, findings that parental alienation adversely affects interpersonal relationships of adolescents echo Bosch-Brits et al. (2018) study which established that parental alienation was responsible for decreased self-worth and that survivors preferred social isolation. Based on the study findings and taking into consideration the literature, the following approaches could be taken into consideration in order to enhance interpersonal relationships among adolescents subjected to parental alienation strategies.

## **CONCLUSION**

The findings of this study established that parental alienation affected the adolescent's interpersonal relationships with the TP or even with both parents in some instances. The distrust that the adolescents developed for the TP was extended towards peers and other authority figures like teachers. Most of the adolescent participants reported feeling anxious, had poor image of self, and did not feel they mattered as far as their inter-personal relationships with parent or with others was concerned. In addition, while most of the participants reported feeling lonely and isolated among others. This fall out with the parent and lack of meaningful relationship with peers impended adolescence inter-personal relationships.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

In order to lessen the adverse effects of post-divorce parental alienation on adolescent's inter-personal relationships the study took into consideration the involvement of different shareholders namely; the divorcing parents, religious leaders, ministry of education,

marriage and family therapists as well as policy makers. These recommendations were based on the findings of the study.

The study recommends that the divorcing parents take an interest in understanding adolescence stage and its challenges. This is aimed at having these parents understand that dragging their children in post-divorce conflicts puts a heavy weight on their children who are already going through a difficult period.

The study also recommends that parents who are divorcing seek counselling services for their adolescents from the following; mental health practitioner, a minister or priest for the teenager or a trusted adult for the child to confide in the event the child does not feel comfortable talking to the parents about how alienation behaviours affect them. This way the adolescents will be helped to cope with the aftermath of parental alienation behaviours.

The study recommends that marriage and family therapist spearhead campaign for the welfare of children coming from divorced families, the context in which parental alienation takes place. The study suggests that these professions use the findings of the study to understand commonly employed parental alienation tactics and how the children are affected in order to help them cope.

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