ME, WE, AND THEE: A HERMENEUTIC PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE TARGETED PARENT’S LIVED EXPERIENCE

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Education
by
Teresa Marie Walters

Liberty University, Lynchburg, VA
2020
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ABSTRACT
Parental alienation (PA) is an extreme form of couple conflict in which one parent (the alienating parent) attempts to damage or destroy the relationship of the child(ren) with the other parent (the targeted parent). Research on PA has principally been based on the 1980s model of Richard Gardner. Inquiry into the lived experience of the targeted parent has been sparse. The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to understand better the lived experience of parental targeting and the role, if any, intergenerational patterns of marital conflict and social structure play in the formation of parental alienating behaviors as well as the effect of alienating behaviors on the relational well-being of targeted parents. This study examined parental targeting as a multifactor systemic phenomenon. This study utilized a collaborative integration of Bowen family systems theory, hermeneutic phenomenology, and the theological concept of Shalom as a means for understanding the phenomena of parental targeting and the implications of parental alienating behaviors for Christian leaders and educators. A two-phase interview process was used to collect data from self-identified targeted parents. Collected data was thematically analyzed using Heidegger’s hermeneutic phenomenological model and then further reviewed through the lens of Van Manen’s four “existentials” model of reflective analysis (Van Manen, 2015). Thematic analysis revealed that participants generally define targeted parenting as a form of familial violence that impacts relational, emotional, physical, and spiritual well-being. Intergenerational patterns of marital conflict, fusion, and emotional reactivity may contribute to the development and maintenance of parental targeting. Relevant topics for further study include research on the alienating parent and the prevalence of PA in other forms of couplehood.

Keywords: Parental Alienation, Targeted Parent, Family Violence, Relational Well-being
Dedication

This work is dedicated to God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ, the Messiah, Who yielded Himself up to atone for our sins, and to save and sanctify us, in order to rescue and deliver us from this present wicked age and world order, in accordance with the will and purpose and plan of our God and Father — To Him be ascribed all the glory through all the ages of the ages and the eternities of the eternities! Amen.

~ Galatians 1:4, 5, Amp.
Acknowledgments

Having dedicated this work to the Author and Finisher of our faith, I now wish to express my thanks to all of the people who helped bring this work to fruition. This list must undoubtedly begin with my ever faithful and supportive husband, Paul, without whose help this work would never have found completion. For being there for every milestone, every dark moment, and every celebratory accomplishment, I want to say thank you. Your strength, your encouragement, and your never wavering support have meant more to me than I will ever be able to express.

I especially want to thank Dr. Brian Pinzer, whose moment of inspiration provided the study’s theological cornerstone. The wisdom contained in the concept of God’s shalom peace continues to be an ongoing, revelatory experience. I also want to express my profound thanks to Dr. Gary Bredfeldt and the faculty of the Doctor of Education in Christian Leadership program at the Rawlings School of Divinity at Liberty University. The support and guidance I have received during this journey has been extraordinary.

In addition, I offer a humble thank you to all of the participants who willingly shared their most personal experiences with me in order to better understand the lived experience of targeted parenting. Your honesty, candor, and transparency provided great insight into how the phenomenon of targeted parenting has impacted your life and your relationships. I pray for your continued healing and the comfort of God’s shalom peace in all of your comings and goings. Lastly, I want to lift up all of those who continue to hope for the healing of their parental bond. It is for you, your children, and your families that this work began, and it is for your healing and restoration that this work will continue. Thank you!
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List of Abbreviations

Alienating Parent (AP)
Bowen Family Systems Theory (BFST)
Differentiation of Self (DOS)
Family of Origin (FOO)
General Systems Theory (GST)
Interpretive Hermeneutic Phenomenology (IHP)
Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist (LMFT)
Parental Alienation (PA)
Parental Alienation Syndrome (PAs)
Parental Targeting (PT)
Targeted Parent (TP)
Thematic Analysis (TA)
CHAPTER ONE: RESEARCH CONCERN

Introduction

“Therefore, what God has joined together, let no one separate.”
~ Matthew 19:6

The marital bond and the intact family unit are foundational aspects of American culture and social structure (Fagan & Rector, 2000; Kynes, 2007). For decades the road to couplehood and marriage has been defined by a set of sequential steps that begin with attraction, dating, and engagement and culminate with marriage and children (Rhoades & Stanley, 2014). However, cultural shifts in beliefs, perceptions, and ideologies about marriage, couplehood, and the family unit have resulted in a redefining or shifting in social norms about relational and familial systems (Axinn & Barber, 1997; Eickmeyer & Manning, 2018; Manning & Cohen, 2012; Rhoades & Stanley, 2014; Smock, 2000).

The systematic normalization of divorce, remarriage, and blended families punctuate the impact relational discord has on shaping the familial system and its cultural expression. Research inquiry into how these shifts in values and social norms develop, the beliefs and perceptions that undergird these dynamics, and the relational impact of familial reorganization have become increasingly commonplace. (Axinn & Barber, 1997; Collardeau & Ehrenberg, 2016; Eickmeyer & Manning, 2018; Guzzo, 2014; Manning & Smock, 2002; Rhoades & Stanley, 2014; Smock, 2000). Research on dyadic conflict has confirmed that discord between bonded partners increases the probability of distress in all members of the family unit (Amato & Patterson, 2017; Fagan & Rector, 2000; Raley & Wildsmith, 2004). This distress is especially impactful on children (Fagan & Rector, 2000; Raley & Wildsmith, 2004).

Preliminary research has noted that children who experience parental instability, divorce, and familial restructuring are more likely to repeat the patterns to which they are exposed
(Amato & Patterson, 2017; Fagan & Rector, 2000; Ongaro & Mazzuco, 2009; Rhoades & Stanley, 2014; Wolfinger, 2000). These children are also more likely to experience relational, emotional, behavioral, and spiritual difficulties than children who experience stable, intact family units (Fagan & Rector, 2000; Raley & Wildsmith, 2004; Rhoades & Stanley, 2014; Marquardt, 2005). As a result, children and young adults exposed to behaviors associated with marital conflict, separation, divorce, and familial restructuring tend to perpetuate these familial patterns and ideologies across intergenerational lines (Marquardt, 2005; Wolfinger, 2000). In short, behavior, mindsets, and experiences beget similar behavior, mindsets, and experiences (Willoughby et al., 2012).

A particularly troubling aspect of familial discord is the phenomenon known as parental alienation (PA). While there is no universally accepted definition for parental alienation, the most salient factor is the intentional effort of one parent (known as the alienating parent) to systemically damage or destroy the relationship of the child(ren) with the other parent (known as the targeted or rejected parent) (Balmer et al., 2017; Saini et al., 2016). Historically the phenomenon has been documented in a number of research inquiries dating back to the early to mid-1950s (Harman at al., 2019; Meier, 2009; Polak & Saini, 2015). However, based on the work of a clinical psychiatrist named Richard Gardner, the phenomenon has taken a more dominant cultural role due to its perceived applicability to high conflict divorce proceedings (Meier, 2009; Shaw, 2016).

Framed by the diagnostic criteria Gardner developed in the mid to late 1980s, parental alienation became a subject of great interest to legal professionals and subsequently, the court and social services systems (Ellis, 2005; Polak & Saini, 2015; Meier, 2009; Shaw, 2016). This uptick in interest resulted in a number of research studies based on Gardner’s work and
observational data. As a result, much of the research on the phenomenon of parental alienation has been based on Gardner’s preferred child-focused model (Ellis & Boyan, 2010; Meier, 2009; Shaw, 2016).

Few if any research studies have attempted to understand the phenomenon as an extreme form of couple conflict. Even fewer studies have attempted to understand the phenomenon of parental alienation by soliciting the lived experience of either the alienating parent or the targeted parent (Balmer et al., 2017; Lehr & MacMillan, 2001; Finzi-Dottan et al., 2011; Poustie et al., 2018). A deeper understanding of the meaning men and women attribute to parental alienation and targeted parenting would provide needed insights about the role intergenerational patterns of marital discord play in relational well-being and influence shifting social perceptions of marriage, divorce, and family systems (Balmer et al., 2017; Maturana et al., 2018).

Such research would be especially relevant to Christian leaders and educators who wish to better understand the phenomenon of parental alienation and parental targeting. Insight into the perceptions and beliefs of both the alienating and targeted parent could lead to and support the development of effective pro-marriage and pro-family programs, educational curriculum, counseling, and family-focused services (Balmer et al., 2017; Maturana et al., 2018).

This opening chapter provides a contextual background for the phenomena of parental alienation and targeted parenting. Included is a historical overview of how marital conflict, divorce, and family restructuring have become normalized aspects of our current social structure and the role, if any, intergenerational familial patterns of marital conflict play in the phenomenon of parental alienation and targeted parenting. The theological concept of Shalom will be explored as a frame for understanding the impact parental alienation has on the relational well-being of the targeted parent. Theoretically, this qualitative inquiry embraced an interpretive hermeneutic
design supported by Bowen family systems theory, which helped provide an additional level of insight about the phenomenon.

A statement of the specific problem this study will address is provided, followed by a purpose statement and the individual research questions that framed the parameters of the study. Assumptions representing the presumed facts that guided the study and the delimitations or parameters that further shaped the study are clearly outlined. This chapter identifies a gap in the literature and provides an expanded explanation of how this study contributes to the current knowledge base. A detailed outline of the study design follows.

**Background to the Problem**

It is no secret that divorce is a common occurrence in American culture. According to the American Psychological Association (APA), of the 90% of Americans who marry, between 40 and 50 percent will end their marital relationship by divorce (American Psychological Association, 2020). In a similar manner, the pew research group estimates that one in five children will experience the breakup of the parental unit through divorce (Livingston, 2018). Supported by the institution of no-fault divorce laws, conflicted couples can, in some states, dissolve their marital bonds in as little as sixty days.

For couples with children, however, the presence of a child acts as a caveat to marital dissolution due to the court’s responsibility to provide for the best interest of the child(ren). While the majority of divorcing couples are able to process through the divorce protocol, develop a suitable custody arrangement, and effectively co-parent post-divorce, a percentage of couples will find this protocol difficult due to the nature of their highly conflicted relationship (Jaffe et al., 2017; Polak & Saini, 2015). Efforts to manage this conflict can result in one parent forming an alliance with the couple’s child(ren), which subsequently relegates the rejected or
targeted parent to an outside or alienated position (Donley, 2003; Rauseo, 2012). Thus, the resulting restructuring of the familial unit, known as parental alienation, shifts the alienating parent into a favored position while placing the rejected or targeted parent in the more vulnerable or rejected position (Ellis & Boyan, 2010; Rauseo, 2012).

In the absence of a universally accepted definition of parental alienation, this study defined parental alienation (PA) as a child-focused form of marital conflict in which one parent, referred to as the alienating parent (AP), intentionally attempts to damage or destroy the relationship of the child(ren) with the other parent, referred to as the targeted (TP) or rejected parent (Balmer et al., 2017; Jaffe et al., 2017; Kruk, 2011; Saini et al., 2016). While PA is not a new dynamic, the phenomenon of parental alienation has become an increasingly common feature in the family court system and contemporary research studies (Ellis & Boyan, 2010; Meier, 2009; Shaw, 2016).

Current theories about PA reinforce the child-focus model and avoid exploration of the parental dyad as a precipitating factor. Subsequently, parental alienation has historically been defined in terms of the child(ren)’s behavior, reactions, emotional distress, and experiences. These definitions have gone as far as to suggest the emotional trauma sustained by the child(ren) is a form of mental illness (Childress, 2015; Lorandos et al., 2013). Postulations about the parental partners have similarly attempted to pathologize the behaviors of the parental dyad (Balmer et al., 2017; Childress, 2015; Lorandos et al., 2013).

Partner dissatisfaction and discord can often lead couples to seek separation or divorce as a means of alleviating their conflict. Emotional divorce, as well as literal divorce, can be seen as a solution through which to resolve conflict and restore emotional stability. Unfortunately, such measures seldom bring the type of relief desired (Donley, 2003). While divorce does restructure
the relational dynamic, the dissolution of the marriage does not automatically resolve the conflict or fusion between the couple. It is not uncommon for the stress of the divorce process to exacerbate an already conflictual situation (Meier, 2009; Johnston, 2005). A conflicted couple can quickly escalate into a state of extreme conflict once the rigors of custody and financial agreements are added to the already tense system (Johnston, 2005).

It is within the context of extreme parental/couple conflict that the dynamic of parental alimentation is birthed. Highly fused marital couples (with children) who seek divorce as a means for distancing themselves from the conflict are often surprised to discover that the divorce process tends to exaggerate anxieties and conflict as opposed to providing resolution. Add the dynamic of extreme child-focus to the mix, and the propensity for parental alienation is even more likely.

**Historical Significance**

Parental alienation came to the attention of the mental health field during the 1980s when child psychiatrist Richard Gardner developed criteria for a phenomenon; he dubbed parental alienation *syndrome* (PAs) (Gardner, 1987). While the attempted alienation of one parent by the other (PA), is not a new dynamic, Gardener’s work re-conceptualized the phenomena of PA as the child-focused dynamic he named PAs (Gardner, 1987, 2002). This shift in focus provided a platform or voice to the growing number of conflicted/divorcing couples experiencing the phenomena within the context of the legal and social services community (Johnston, 2005; Meier, 2009).

As an observational investigator, Garner developed several postulations about his newly developed PA syndrome (PAs) that quickly became a type of manuscript or lens through which to interpret the behaviors, actions, and outcomes associated with child-focused marital conflict.
(Gardner, 1987; 1991; 2002). As a result, Gardner’s PAs model successfully shifted the focus of the PA phenomenon away from the conflicted parents and onto the symptomatic child. (Gardner, 1991, 2002).

In its more contemporary form, Gardner’s PAs model contends that the child should be the focus of clinical intervention (Gardner, 2002). Subsequently, Gardner’s PAs model identifies the child’s behavior as the key to understanding the phenomena of parental alienation and parental targeting and provides eight specific criteria for “diagnostic” purposes (Gardner, 1987, 2002). Based on these eight criteria, Gardner’s model frames the child’s reactionary behaviors as a manifestation of mental incapacity, illness, or syndrome in the child (Gardner, 2002; Maturana et al., 2018).

Because the legal and mental health communities have strongly embraced Gardner’s concepts, the PAs model has become a foundational aspect of a plethora of research studies about how children are impacted by the behaviors of highly conflicted parents. (Lorandos et al., 2013; Meier, 2009; Shaw, 2016; Saini et al., 2016). This body of research has mushroomed over the past several years. It has become the basis for several assertions about the characteristics and mental status of the entire familial unit, including not only the child but the mother and father as well.

It is important to note that despite the growing number of research studies about parental alienation syndrome (PAs), such research is predicated upon accepting an unsubstantiated and invalidated theory as an empirical fact (Meier, 2009; Johnston, 2005; Shaw, 2016; Saini et al., 2016; Walker & Shapiro, 2010). While there is a significant amount of observational data linking patterns of dyadic conflict, fusion, triangulation, and other behaviors with alienation, to assert
such a dynamic as scientifically validated is an overreach based on assumptions rather than empirical inquiry (Harman et al., 2018; Johnston, 2005; Meier, 2009; Saini et al., 2017).

The rush to frame the PAs model as a mental disorder and embrace Gardner’s observational data as a criterion for “diagnosis” has limited research on the phenomenon of parental alienation as a multidimensional systemic issue brought about by multiple factors (Johnston, 2005; Saini et al., 2017). Few, if any, studies have explored the phenomena of parental alienation as a family system dynamic influenced by multigenerational family patterns or as an emotional trauma response (Johnson, 2005; Saini et al., 2016). The urgency to pathologize and categorize parental alienation as a form of deviance, mental illness, or disorder-driven dynamic has resulted in a lack of reflection about the role of relational dysfunction, emotional and mental trauma, and embedded multigenerational patterns (Dallam & Silberg, 2016; Johnston, 2005; Polak, & Saini, 2015; Saini et al., 2016). Research studies seeking data from family members, including face-to-face interviews or focus group inquiry, is virtually non-existent. In the swirl of legal, psychiatric, and research opinions, the voices of the family have gone unheard. Current research studies that inquire about the impact parental alienation have on the relational, emotional, and spiritual health and well-being of the child, the mother, and the father are few at best (Balmer et al., 2017; Kruk, 2011).

Because current research is highly focused on defining and utilizing the PAs dynamic as a diagnostic tool and has mainly been relegated to the legal, social services, and mental health communities, there is a definitive need for input from the children and couples with lived experience (Maturana et al., 2018; Poustie et al., 2018). As a relational issue, the phenomenon of parental alienation is both a relevant and poorly understood dynamic that requires additional inquiry (Saini et al., 2016). The lived experience of the parental figures is a necessary element in
better understanding the multidimensional issues that facilitate and maintain parental alienation (Balmer et al., 2017; Maturana et al., 2018; Saini et al., 2016).

**Sociological Significance**

All family systems are broken to some extent. As the most basic relational system, the family emotional unit, and the intergenerational patterns that flow through the family, provide the backdrop against which all human function is developed (Bowen, 1978; Kerr & Bowen, 1988; Friedman, 1991; Kerr, 2019; Thomas, 2002). Children that are exposed to open conflict, divorce, and marital discord tend to perpetuate these dynamics in their relational connections and function according to the familial processes to which they are accustomed (Amato, 1996, 2009; Amato & Patterson, 2017; Larson & Wilson, 1998; Manning & Cohen, 2012).

The degree to which the brokenness in the family unit impacts the relational and emotional health of the family members can be mitigated by increasing the functionality of the marital dyad. Marital partners who can mediate their collective conflict functionally improve the outcomes for themselves and their children (Johnston, 2005; Larson et al., 1998; Mahrer, O’Hara et al., 2018; Saini et al., 2017).

In some cases, however, marital conflict becomes the catalyst for an especially distressing form of familial discord known as parental alienation in which one parent attempts to damage or destroy the relationship of the child(ren) with the other parent (Balmer et al., 2017; Maturana et al., 2018; Saini et al., 2016). This phenomenon can and often does evolve over time and subsequently manifest as emotional distress in the child(ren) (Johnston, 2005; Polak & Saini, 2015).

Current interventions tend to be child-focused and attempt to frame the child as the primary problem going as far as to suggest that the reaction of the emotionally traumatized child
Interventions that include the parental figures tend, in a similar fashion, to frame the conflicted couple in terms of pathological behaviors and disorders (Lorandos et al., 2013). While it is undoubtedly relevant to explore the outcomes of parental conflict and discord, including the impact such a dynamic has on the child(ren), adverse outcomes are seldom reversed without a thorough understanding of the dynamics that acted as the catalyst for the discord (Harman et al., 2018).

Existing interventions are primarily framed by the work of Gardner, who asserted that court-enforced unification of the alienated child with the rejected parent is the most effective method for resolving the familial conflict (Lorandos et al., 2013; Johnston, 2005; Saini et al., 2017). This tendency to focus on the child and define the child’s reaction to the emotional trauma of parental alienation as a form of mental illness continues to be a dominant narrative among legal and mental health professionals (Lorandos et al., 2013; Gardner, 2002; Saini et al., 2017). Efforts to explain the parental role in the PA dynamic also tend to define the parents as defective parents struggling with mental health issues or personality disorders (Balmer et al., 2017).

Recent research has postulated that the most effective intervention for parental alienation is prevention and programs that support strong couplehoods and resilient, intact family systems (Harman et al., 2018). Children raised in stable, calm, and supportive homes with stable, calm, and loving parents tend to enter adulthood better equipped to manage the demands of life and less likely to pass destructive multigenerational patterns into the next generation (Amato, 1996; Amato & Patterson, 2017; Bowen, 1978). Families already impacted by parental alienation benefit from therapeutic interventions that work with all members of the family and are designed
to address the multiple problems that lead to couple conflict, marital discord, and exaggerated child-focus (Harman et al., 2018; Johnston 2005; Saini et al., 2016; Saini et al., 2017).

Theological Significance

The desire to belong, to be connected and acknowledged by others, is a normal and natural human need. As relational beings created by a relational God, the human drive to bond with another undergirds the interpersonal interactions that define our individual and collective need for an “other.” This sense of connectedness and relational bonding is the epitome of God’s original and perfect design for humankind. Within the context of God’s love, the human heart experiences a sense of acceptance, rightness, and expansive peace known as God’s Shalom (Jones, 2014).

The theology of Shalom is the most perfect expression of this inward sense of completeness or wholeness. It contends that God’s nature is most accurately reflected in God’s desire for an intimate and relational bond between God and God’s creation (Brueggemann, 1976). Conceptionally, Shalom encompasses a sense of completeness or wholeness with one’s self, with others, in community, in health, in financial matters, and most importantly, with God (Jones, 2014).

As expressed by the Christian philosopher, Dr. Nicholas Wolterstorff, “Shalom is the human being dwelling at peace in all his or her relationships: with God, with self, with fellows, with nature” (Wolterstorff, 1983, p. 69). It is a process that begins in the reconciliatory power of Christ and brings close those things which have been afar off. “But now in Christ Jesus, you who once were [so] far away, through (by, in) the blood of Christ have been brought near” (Ephesians 2:13, Amp.).
In the absence of God’s Shalom peace, however, the human heart can experience disconnection, division, and a deep, unfulfilled longing to belong. Nowhere is the pain and trauma of emotional detachment and conflict more acute than when it develops in a marital union. When husband and wife become conflicted and disconnected, the resulting emotional and mental pain reverberates throughout the relational systems of which they are a part. Current research studies confirm that intimate partner conflict has a direct impact on the relational, emotional, and mental well-being of the entire family system, which is not erased through spousal separation or divorce (Amato, 1996; Amato & Patterson, 2017; Collardeau & Ehrenberg, 2016; Donley, 2003). Conflicted marital partners and parents carry the unresolved issues of their relationship into their post-divorce, co-parenting relationships, as well as the stepfamily systems that often follow (Dennison et al., 2014; Kerr, 2019; Manning & Cohen, 2012).

However, when a home is framed as a reflective entity of God’s image and through which each successive generation is discipled as students and reciprocating teachers of God’s word and God’s Shalom peace, it becomes a transformational force for growing mature, Christ-like disciples, leaders and educators (Thomas, 2002). Through the power of God’s Shalom peace, the marital union and home become, as expressed by Plantinga (1995), “the way it was supposed to be” (Plantinga, 1995).

**Theoretical Framework**

According to Dr. Murray Bowen, the familial system provides a comprehensive backdrop for understanding the interlocking, interdependent, and transgenerational characteristics or patterns of human functioning (Bowen, 1978; Kerr & Bowen, 1988; Gilbert, 2004). Coupled with general systems theory, which is based on the premise that the collective whole is greater than the sum of the parts, Bowen family systems theory (BFST) provides an effective language
for understanding the systemic makeup of the family unit and the role each individual member
plays in the collective whole (Von Bertalanffy, 1972).

An especially relevant aspect of BFST, for this research study, is the study of the
mutigenerational or intergenerational transmission of behavioral patterns in the family unit
through the use of genograms. These intergenerational “trends” develop over the course of
several generations and act as markers or patterns of behavior that transfer to future generations
(Freidman, 1991; Kerr & Bowen, 1988). Examination of these patterns can help researchers
understand how these intergenerational patterns or trends influence subsequent generations and
predict likely relational outcomes (Freidman, 1991).

Research studies designed to make meaning of specific societal phenomena, such as this
qualitative study, often employ a phenomenological template. For the purposes of this study, this
phenomenological template was further enhanced by utilizing an interpretive hermeneutic
philosophy that recognizes the cyclic, non-linear, and revisionary process of making meaning
within the context of experienced reality and the relational influence of the parts on the whole
and the whole on the parts (Dreyfus, 1991; Gadamer, 1989; Heidegger, 1962). This perpetuating
process of constant revision, in which the researcher revises his/her understanding of the whole
while simultaneously grasping the individual parts of the whole, allows movement from the
phenomena to personal understanding and back to the phenomena (Dreyfus, 1991; Gadamer,

By integrating general system theory, Bowen family systems theory, and a hermeneutic
phenomenological perspective, this researcher attempted to clarify and add new meaning to the
current literate on parental alienation and parental targeting. Thus, the narrative of Bowen’s
therapy provides a relative backdrop for understanding the interconnected and interdependent
nature of the family unit and the role the individual and collective members of the system play in relational and emotional well-being.

**Researcher’s Relationship to the Problem**

This researcher’s interest in the topic of parental alienation and parental targeting is a combination of both lived and clinical experience. As a licensed marriage and family therapist (LMFT), licensed addiction counselor (LAC), certified domestic mediator, and parenting coordinator, the researcher’s clinical work has mainly been focused on the relational, emotional, behavioral, and spiritual implications of human interactions. These experiences and interactions with the individuals, couples, partners, and parents who make up these familial systems has increasingly developed into curiosities about how intergenerational patterns influence the family structure, act as catalysts for social change, and impact relational well-being.

The frequency with which the phenomena of parental alienation and parental targeting present in the therapy room has fueled this researcher’s desire to better understand parental alienation as a multidimensional form of marital and familial discord. As a survivor of parental targeting, 25 years post-divorce, it is this researcher’s current position that the lived experience of the targeted parent is an often misunderstood and under-researched aspect of the parental alienation dynamic. The apparent lack of research on the lived experience of the targeted parent, along with this researcher’s professional and personal knowledge of the need to be heard, seen, and validated, provides a unique backdrop for inquiry into the phenomenon of parental alienation. As both a peer and a profession, this research study provides an opportunity to reflectively consider the lived experience of parental targeting through the lens of both the participant and the researcher.
The duality of the researcher’s relationship with the subject of parental alienation and targeted parenting meshes well with an interpretive hermeneutic framework. Through this lens, the researcher’s pre-understandings become part of the synergetic interplay between what is known and what is yet to be known. As asserted by Heidegger, the interpretive hermeneutic phenomenological process embraces the researcher’s prior knowledge as a valuable aspect of the analytic process that cannot or should not be bracketed off (Heidegger, 1962; Lauterbach, 2018).

Underwritten by an affinity for a systemic orientation to relational issues and informed by a foundational background in Bowen family systems theory and general systems theory, this researcher continues to seek out and explore new ways of understanding the complexities of human relationships. Such information provides support for the researcher’s efforts to build strong marital, familial, and relational systems that enhance life and maintain emotional, mental, behavioral, and spiritual well-being for individuals, couples, and families in both secular and spiritual communities and systems.

**Research Gap**

Current research studies on parental alienation are largely constructed in light of a Gardnerian PAs perspective (Harman et al., 2019; Lorandos et al., 2013; Saini et al., 2017). Because much of the current research on the phenomenon of parental alienation and parental targeting is framed within the context of Gardner’s purported PAs model, the impetus for inquiry into the phenomenon of parental alienation has been dominated by legal and mental health professionals as well as social service providers who base their understanding on Gardner’s suppositions and observational experiences (Dallam & Silberg, 2016; Meier, 2009; Shaw, 2016; Vassiliou & Cartwright, 2001; Saini et al., 2016). Few studies attempt to make meaning of the phenomenon of parental alienation or targeted parenting as a result of inquiry into the lived
experience of the mothers, fathers, and children at the heart of the phenomena (Balmer et al., 2017; Lehr & MacMillan, 2001; Maturana et al., 2018).

While some research studies have sought out adult children who historically report childhood experiences of parental alienation, the vast majority of current research studies are framed against the PAs criteria developed by Gardner (Vassiliou & Cartwright, 2001). To date, few, if any, studies have sought out the lived experience of the mothers and fathers with first-hand knowledge and understanding (Balmer et al., 2017; Harman et al., 2016; Lehr, & MacMillan, 2001). Thus, within the context of the current literature, there is a significant lack of inquiry into the lived experience of targeted parenting and the role marital discord and intergenerational family patterns play in the phenomenon of parental alienation.

Statement of the Problem

Marital conflict, separation, and divorce have become increasingly common aspects of family life. Conflicted couples attempting to redefine their parental roles, post-divorce, often carry their conflict into their co-parenting relationships (Ellis & Boyan, 2010; Jaffe et al., 2017; Polack, & Saini, 2015). A percentage of highly conflicted couples will attempt to manage their collective anxiety by redirecting their emotional couple distress onto the child(ren) (Jaffe et al., 2017; Polak & Saini, 2015). The phenomenon of parental alienation and the resultant targeting of the rejected parent is a contemporary form of unresolved marital conflict that has taken on a child-focus.

Contemporary research studies have been defined mainly by the work of child psychiatrist Richard Gardner, and the framing of the parental alienation phenomenon as a mental condition of the child Gardner dubbed parental alienation syndrome (PAs) (Lorandos et al., 2013; Saini et al., 2017; Shaw, 2016). Expanded versions of Gardner’s postulation have framed
all the members of the distressed family unit as mentally ill or disordered (Houchin et al., 2012; Walker & Shapiro, 2010). Because much of the research on the phenomenon of parental alienation and parental targeting is based on the observations and experiences of legal, mental health, and social service professionals, few studies have attempted to understand the dynamic by exploring the lived experience of the mother, father, and child (Poustie et al., 2018; Vassiliou & Cartwright, 2001). Research on the lived experience of the targeted parent is especially scarce (Harman et al., 2016). Increased knowledge and understanding about the phenomenon of parental alienation and targeted parenting, as experienced by mothers and fathers, is a needed and necessary aspect of increasing the knowledge base on parental alienation and parental targeting.

**Current Research Studies**

Recent research on parental alienation and parental targeting highlights the interest legal and social service professionals have in this subject (Saini et al., 2016). As a result, the phenomenon has been framed within the context of the family court system as a child custody issue (Meier, 2009; Shaw, 2016; Saini et al., 2016). Research has focused on legal interventions that promote the court system’s child custody agenda. Supported by the efforts of research professionals who embrace Gardner’s PAs model, these studies have postulated a series of assumptions that frame all of the members of the family unit as emotionally distressed and possibly mentally disordered.

Few studies have attempted to explore the phenomenon as a multidimensional or multifactor family system problem manifesting as a relational issue between parent-parent, child-parent, and parent-child. There is a definitive gap in the literature concerning the lived experience of all members of the family unit, including the mother, father, and child. However,
research into the lived experience of the targeted parent, both men, and women, is remarkably limited and incomplete (Saini et al., 2016).

**Insufficiencies in the Current Research**

Existing research has been limited with regard to its direct engagement with the conflicted couples at the heart of the parental alienation dynamic. Inquiry into the dynamics that precipitate parental alienation and parental targeting, including studies that explore the intergenerational patterns of the family system and the dynamics through which these couples develop the beliefs and perceptions that guide their decisions and form their ideologies about couplehood, marriage, divorce, and parenting are infrequent (Johnston, 2005).

Because current research studies have historically relied on data collected by means of national surveys and longitudinal methods, data collected using personal interview and direct survey would provide new insights into the phenomena of parental alienation and parental targeting (Balmer et al., 2017; Saini et al., 2016). Research into the lived experience of all of the familial members, including the mothers, fathers, and children who constitute the familial unit, would provide much-needed insights. Such studies would increase knowledge and understanding about the processes through which marital couples develop their dominant ideologies about marriage, the marital bond, divorce, remarriage, and co-parenting.

**Relevance**

While research on the prevalence of parental alienation and parental targeting and the impact of PA and PT on the construction of social structure and cultural norms, as they pertain to the familial system, is both relevant and necessary, the implications for Christian leaders and educators are especially poignant. Because marriage and family unity is a foundational aspect of the Christian faith and because marriage and the familial unit provide a logistical and metaphoric
example of God’s concern for the well-being of God’s creation, preserving and reestablishing marriage and the familial unit as a dominant theme in the body of Christ is a vital aspect of Christian leadership and education (Kynes, 2007; Ortlund, 2016).

Current research has confirmed that lower levels of dyadic conflict, increased interdependent relationships, and relational warmth and intimacy between parental figures increase the likelihood that children will develop into relationally healthy individuals and spouses (Mahrer et al., 2018; Saini et al., 2017). Such research suggests a link between satisfying marital relations and sound parenting, while marital conflict, separation, and divorce tend to result in high levels of emotional distress and pain for all members of the family unit (Mahrer et al., 2018; Polak & Saini, 2015).

As the phenomenon of parental alienation and parental targeting become increasingly prevalent and common in American culture, it is imperative that Christian leaders and educators better understand how targeted parents experience the phenomenon of parental alienation and the role, if any, intergenerational patterns or marital conflict and social structure play in the formation of parental alienating behaviors as well as the effect of alienating behaviors on the relational well-being of targeted parents (Mahrer et al., 2018). Such understandings may help church and para-church organizations increase their ability to provide practical and comprehensive support to conflicted marital partners and subsequently support the development of more effective pro-marriage and pro-family leadership programs, educational curriculum, and family-focused services (Wolterstorff, 2002).

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to understand the lived experience of parental targeting and the role intergenerational patterns of marital discord and
social structure play in the formation of parental alienating behaviors, as well as the effect of alienating behaviors on the relational well-being of targeted parents. This study utilized a collaborative integration of Bowen family systems theory as a means through which to understand better the phenomenon of parental targeting and the role intergenerational patterns of marital conflict play in the formation of alienating behavior and the implications of parental alienating behaviors for Christian leaders and educators.

Because there is presently no universally accepted definition of parental alienation, this research study generally defined parental alienation as a form of dyadic conflict in which one parent (known as the alienating parent) attempts to damage or destroy the relationship of the child with the other parent (known as the targeted parent) (Saini et al., 2016). Parental alienating behaviors were defined as those intentional behaviors and actions that support or result in a relational breach between the targeted parent and the child(ren) (Darnell, 1998; Harman et al., 2016).

This study was framed within the context of Heidegger’s interpretive hermeneutic phenomenological model, which espouses the ongoing revision of understanding as a means for making sense of one’s lived or being-in-the-world experiences (Heidegger, 1962). This study also utilized Bowen family systems theory (Bowen 1978; Kerr & Bowen, 1988; Kerr, 2019; Gilbert, 2004), which embraces a multigenerational transmission process in which relational patterns and experiences in one’s family of origin influence and perpetuate along generational lines (McGoldrick et al., 2005; McGoldrick, Gerson, & Petry, 2008). The research study was undergirded by a theology of Shalom, which delineates God’s desire for harmonious relational peace and well-being with one’s self, with others, with God, and with nature (Jones, 2014; Wolterstorff, 1983).
Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

RQ1. What is the meaning ascribed to the experience of parental alienation by targeted parents?

RQ2. What are the characteristics and dominant themes associated with parental targeting?

RQ3. What role, if any, do intergenerational patterns of marital conflict and social structure play in the phenomenon of parental targeting?

RQ4. What impact, if any, does parental targeting have on relational well-being?

This qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological study was designed to facilitate learning, make meaning of, and further define the phenomenon of parental alienation and parental targeting. This study subsequently explored and attempted to understand better the role intergenerational patterns in one’s family of origin and social structure play in the formation of parental alienating behaviors. Each research question was designed to provide an open and unbiased platform through which to communicative the participant’s thoughts, ideas, insights, beliefs, and perceptions.

Assumptions and Delimitations

The following assumptions and delimitations were noted in an effort to define the shared understanding and parameters of this study more clearly.

Research Assumptions

1. Because this study focused on 5-6 individuals with lived experience as a targeted parent from a region defined as the greater Indianapolis metropolitan area and did not select individual participants based on race, ethnicity, religious, sexual orientation, or social status, results cannot be generalized to the larger population, to a specific ethnicity, race, gender, religious or sexual orientation or social status.

2. Participants were interviewed using open-ended interview questions so that partners will have the greatest opportunity to convey their beliefs, perceptions, and experiences to the researcher.
3. Participants actively engaged in any type of relational therapy or family court proceedings may have been influenced by current relational difficulties.

4. It was assumed that all couples utilized their personal lived experiences and memories as a basis for their beliefs and perceptions about parental alienation and parental targeting, and as such, these answers were subjective and cannot be considered a factual account of events that may or may not have taken place.

Delimitations of the Research Design

Participants for this study were selected using a non-probability, criterion sampling technique in which the participants were identified based on several distinct conditions and characteristics. Participants selected for this study met the following set of established criteria.

1. Divorced individuals at least 18 years of age, who were married a minimum of five years and are at least two years post-divorce.

2. Individuals who reside within the mid-western state of Indiana.

3. Individuals who were willing and able to make themselves available for two separate online interview sessions lasting between 1 hour and 1.5 hours each.

4. Individuals who were willing and able to complete both phases of the interview process within a two-week time frame.

5. Individuals who have lived experience as a targeted parent (i.e., parents who self-identify as a targeted parent based on their personal belief and perception of having been subjected to the intentional efforts of a marital partner who engaged in alienating behaviors in order to damage or destroy the relationship of the targeted parent with children born or acquired during the marital relationship).

6. Individuals who could provide rich, descriptive, and self-reflective narratives of the lived experience of parental targeting.

In addition, this study did not address individuals who experienced the phenomenon of parental targeting while maintaining a marital relationship with the alienating parent. This study likewise did not consider experiences of parental targeting that took place in never married or cohabitating couplehoods. This study was further delimited by not exploring the experience of parental targeting in blended family units and other forms of familial restructuring, such as those
defined by remarriage. This study did not take into consideration the perspective of the alienating parent or the alienated child or attempt to differentiate between the experiences of men and women who have lived experience as a targeted parent. While such conditions and experiences provide an impetus for future studies, this study did not delimit its focus to the specific parameters as outlined above.

**Definition of Terms**

The following definitions were used to clarify further or make meaning of the terms, procedures, and characteristics of the research study.

1. *Parental alienation:* A general or generic term found in the literature to describe an extreme form of marital conflict that manifests as the effort of one parent (known as the alienating parent) to damage or destroy the relationship of the child(ren) with the other parent (known as the rejected or targeted parent). The influenced rejection of one parent by the child(ren) is a key element of the majority of postulated definitions (Balmer et al., 2017; Darnell, 1998; Saini et al., 2016).

2. *Parental alienating behaviors:* Those behaviors and actions that support or result in a relational breach between the targeted parent and the child(ren). As defined by Darnell (1998) and quoted by Harman et al., (2016) “Parental alienating behaviors describe actions that a parent takes to intentionally, or unintentionally, distance a child (or children) from the other parent, regardless of the impact that these behaviors have on the child.”

3. *Targeted Parent:* The marital partner and parent relegated to an outside position by the alienating parent. Also known as the rejected, alienated, unfavored, or erased parent. As defined by Maturana et al. (2018), the targeted parent” is the parent alienated from their children without reasonable justification. (p. 2).

4. *Parental Targeting:* The act or phenomena of attempting to damage or destroy (target) the parent-child bond between the rejected parent and the child(ren).

5. *Child-focus:* A dynamic in which a conflicted marital couple attempts to reduce or avoid the anxiety in their relationship by diverting their focus away from the dyadic conflict and onto the child(ren) (Rauseo, 2012).

6. *Interpretive Hermeneutic Phenomenology:* A qualitative research design in which the researcher attempts to capture, in language, the lived experience of another. It is a process of collecting, inquiring, and interpreting an aspect of human experience within the context of the whole of human experience (Van Manen, 2015).
7. **Lived Experience:** A reflective awareness of one’s own life and self. As expressed by Van Manen, lived experience “involves out immediate, pre-reflective consciousness of life” (p. 36).

8. **Lifeworld:** The lived world as experienced in everyday situations and relations (Van Manen, 2015, p. 101).

9. **Triangulation:** A three-person emotional unit, the basic building block of any emotional system. Triangles have two close individuals in the inside positions and one that is in the outside position (Titelman, 2012, p. 20).

10. **Parental alienation syndrome:** A specific term or phrase proposed by child psychiatrist Richard Gardner in the 1980s. Gardner (2002) coined the phrase parental alienation syndrome to describe a “childhood disorder” comprised of a cluster of eight (8) symptoms that occur together and characterize a specific disease (p. 96).

**Significance of the Study**

Over the past several decades, parental alienation and parental targeting have become increasingly prevalent aspects of marital conflict, separation, divorce, and familial restructuring (Harman et al., 2016; Harman et al., 2019). While contemporary research efforts have considered a variety of explanations about how and why parental alienation and parental targeting have become a more prevalent and integrated part of our social structure, few studies have attempted to elicit data directly from targeted parents (Balmer, 2017; Maturana et al., 2018). Such data would provide a greater understanding of the beliefs, perceptions, experiences, and ideologies that contribute to the phenomenon of parental alienation and parental targeting and offer insights into shifting social perceptions about marriage, divorce, and familial systems (Johnston, 2005; Maturana et al., 2018). This data would be especially significant for Christian leaders and educators who wish to support biblical concepts of marriage and family through the development of pro-marriage and pro-family leadership programs, educational curriculum, and family-focused services (Wolterstorff, 2002).
Summary of the Design

This study utilized a qualitative, hermeneutic phenomenological design supported and informed by a family systems perspective and undergirded by the theological concept of Shalom. The study sought to better understand the lived experience of several individuals who self-identify as a targeted parent and who were at least two years post-divorce. All participants lived within the Indianapolis metropolitan area or surrounding counties. Participants were willing and able to provide rich and contextually sound narratives about their lived experience as a targeted parent.

A qualitative methodology was chosen for this study in order to gain a better understanding of the lived experience of parental targeting and the role intergenerational patterns and social structure play in the formation of parental alienating behaviors. This study also sought to understand the effort of alienating behaviors on the relational well-being of targeted parents.

Data was collected, transcribed, and coded using a content analytic method as a means for extrapolating meaning units and themes, which were then interpretively reflected upon utilizing Van Manen’s lifeworld themes or “existentials,” (Van Manen, 2016, p. 101). This study employed a hermeneutic phenomenological approach, which asserts a revisionary form of interpretation that moves interdependently between the essence of a lived experience and the researcher’s own experiences (Capobianco, 2015; Heidegger, 1962; Laverty, 2003).

This study was also supported by a Bowen family systems theory perspective that recognizes the systemic interplay between the individual and collective members of a familial system and the intergenerational patterns that support the proliferation of these patterns across generations (Bowen, 1978). Special attention was given to the creation of an intergenerational
genogram representation of each participant’s lived familial and social experiences (McGoldrick et al., 2008).

Potential participants were pulled from the greater Indianapolis metropolitan area and surrounding counties. Potential participants were solicited through a variety of outreach methods, including informational fliers and letter solicitations widely distributed in the Indianapolis, metropolitan area, and surrounding communities. Potential participants were considered without regard to social/economic background, race, gender, religious affiliation, ethnicity, or sexual orientation.

All data was collected during online interviews between the researcher and the participant. The interviews took place in a safe, comfortable, and inviting online setting designed to provide the participant with an environment conducive to the telling of their experiential or lifeworld story. During the first interview, the participant was asked to participate in the creation of a multigenerational genogram. During the second interview, participants were asked to bring a written (previously prepared) letter to share. During this second interview, participants were also given an opportunity to share additional media forms such as poetry, artwork, or photos that express their lived experience as a targeted parent. All submitted data had to be in a form conducive to digital transmission. Participants were also asked to share how they felt their lived experience impacted their relational lifeworld and what they believed were the most salient aspects of the lived phenomenon of parental targeting.

This research study concluded with sections outlining the thematic patterns identified through analysis of the collected data as they relate to the research questions. Suggestions for possible replication and expansion of the study were discussed, and identified areas of oversight and possible further studies were considered. Special consideration was provided about the
implications of the study for Christian leaders and educators serving in church and para-church organizations and ministries.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

The purpose of this research study was to explore the lived experience of targeted parents with a particular focus on how parental targeting affects the relational well-being of the targeted parents and the subsequent implications of parental targeting for Christian leaders and educators. This chapter provides a review of the literature on the phenomena of parental targeting within the context of the parental alienation dynamic. This literature review provides a history of parental targeting, differentiates between its conceptualization as a form of systemic breakdown, syndrome, mental illness, domestic violence, and abuse, and explores the major research contributors. This review provides significant space for the development of both a theological and theoretical framework. It progresses through the development of the study rationale and the identified gap in the current literature as it pertains to the lived experience of parental targeting and the effect of parental targeting on the relational well-being of the targeted parent. The literature review concludes with a section addressing the implications of parental targeting for Christian leaders and educators.

Theological Framework

At the heart of every theological consideration is the desire to know God, God’s nature, God’s wisdom, God’s design, and God’s will. It only makes sense for the creation to desire a full and complete understanding of the Creator. As the apostle, Paul declared to the Philippian church, “…my determined purpose is that I may know Him (that I may progressively become more deeply and intimately acquainted with Him, perceiving and recognizing and understanding the wonders of His Person more strongly and more clearly) …” (Philippians 3:10). The inherent need to know and be known by God, to be at peace with God, one’s self, others, and the world in
which we live is most fully conceptualized in the Hebraic construct of Shalom (Freedman, 2016; Jones, 2014; Holt, 2013; Wolterstorff, 1983).

Through the scriptural lens of Shalom, relational well-being is a concept of completeness and wholeness that extends far beyond the basic parameters of conflict resolution and reconciliation (Hemphill, 2001). Shalom provides a framework for understanding the love of God for His creation and the fullness of the relational experience He intended humankind to enjoy with God, with self, with others, and the larger systems of which all humankind is a part (Brueggemann, 2001; Cafferky, 2014; Jones, 2014). Shalom is a reflection of the unity and oneness God intended for the marital union and a measure by which to evaluate the emotional and mental trauma of marital separation and loss of Shalom in the home (Slough, 2015).

The Heart of God

The Hebrew word Shalom is an expansive term that defines peace as a state of being with self and others that goes well beyond the basic westernized understanding of peace (Brueggemann, 2001; Hemphill, 2001; Holt, 2013). As defined in its most literal and contemporary sense, peace is a term that denotes the absence of conflict (Peace, 2003). Those who find themselves in a relative state of agreement or accord could be described as being at peace with one another. Thus peace, in its most unembellished form, is defined by what it is not, most notably conflicted.

Through the lens of Shalom, however, peace takes on a much richer and more profound meaning that emphasizes the presence or experiential quality of completeness or wholeness (Brueggemann, 2001; Wolterstorff, 1983). To experience Shalom peace means to experience a sense of safety, prosperity, well-being, satisfaction, and contentment (Strong et al., 2001). It is a
state of being in right relationship with God, self, others, and the communities and broader social systems of which we are a part (Brueggemann, 2001; Corbett & Fikkert, 2012; Hemphill, 2001).

The concept of Shalom also provides insight into the nature of God and God’s heart for reconciliation and harmony with his creation. As delineated by Vine (2005), Shalom refers to the general qualities of harmony and wholeness. In essence, the “harmonious state of the soul and mind” that finds expression both externally and internally (Vine, 2005, p. 272). To experience Shalom, one would be at peace with God, within one’s self, and with others.

**Yahweh - Shalom**

The book of Judges recounts the story of Gideon and the scriptural assertion of God as “the Lord is Peace” (Judges: 6:23). Gideon’s pronouncement highlights God’s desire for the well-being, safety, and prosperity of His creation and the extent to which God is willing to go to facilitate relationship and connectedness (Hemphill, 2001). As the everlasting Father seeking reconciliation and relational connection with his creation, God’s desire and purpose, as expressed by Hemphill (2001), “has always been for us to be at peace with God, ourselves, and others” (p. 145).

Having been separated from God, by sin, and estranged from the state of peace in which He intended humankind to live, humankind was once again brought close to God through the sacrifice and propitiation of Christ. Having been reconciled to God through Christ, humankind was once again privy to God’s peace and original plan for completeness.

Now may the God of peace [Who is the Author and the Giver of peace], Who brought again from among the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepard of the sheep, by the blood [that sealed, ratified] the everlasting agreement (covenant, testament), strengthen (complete, perfect) and make you what you ought to be and equip you with everything good that you may carry out His will… (Hebrews 13:20-21, Amp.).
Thus, the heart and desire of the God of peace, Yahweh-Shalom, is to heal that which is broken, reunite that which is far apart and bring into right relationship all aspects of His creation.

...And God purposed that through (by the service, the intervention of) Him [the Son] all things should be reconciled back to Himself, whether on earth or in heaven, as through Him, [the Father] made peace by means of the blood of His cross” (Colossians 1:20, Amp.).

To Know and Be Known.

An equally powerful force is the inherent desire of humankind to be at peace. This desire for security, safety, prosperity, and happiness, while deeply embedded in the heart of humankind, can only be fully satisfied within the context of humankind being brought near to and being known of God (Brueggemann, 2001). This need to know and be known of God speaks to humankind’s basic need and lament to find right relationship with God, right relationship with self, right relationship with others, and right relationship with the world and communities in which they live (Hemphill, 2001; Fisher, 2017; Wolterstorff, 1983).

Shalom - Right Relationship with God

As the crowning achievement of God’s creative nature, humankind, at the moment of creation, represented the epitome of completeness or wholeness (Brueggemann, 2001). In intimate relationship with God, humankind enjoyed God’s presence and lived in a perpetual state of rest and peace. This state of rest and relationship, however, was disrupted when humankind disobeyed God’s instructions, and as a result, sin sullied humankind’s spiritual connection with God. In short, the spirit of humankind darkened and lost its intimate connection with God. Sin ushered in a state of spiritual death or separation from the Creator that could only be repaired and made right through the shedding of blood (Smith, 2002).

Throughout the Old Testament, the atonement for sin was provided through blood sacrifices, offerings, and obedience to the Law. As expressed by Smith (2002), “The first
response of God to the sin of man was to give them the gift of animal sacrifice, in which the sacred lifeblood of the animal was shed in death, being poured out on behalf of the sinner…” (p. 101). It was not until the establishment of a new covenant of grace and the gospel of Peace (Christ) that humankind could fully experience the regenerative work of the Holy Spirit and the rebirth of spiritual oneness with their Creator.

As outlined in 1 Corinthians 6:17, “…the person who is united to the Lord becomes one spirit with Him.” This setting things right, by the sacrifice of the Prince of Peace, provided a means through which humankind could re-establish a right relationship with God and once again be privy to the full representation of God’s Shalom peace.

For our sake He made Christ [virtually] to be sin Who knew no sin so that in and through Him we might become [endued with, viewed as being in, and examples of] the righteousness of God [what we ought to be approved and acceptable and in right relationship with Him, by His goodness]. (Corinthians 5:21, Amp.)

It is from this position of right relationship with God that right relationship with self, with others, and with the world at large flows (Corbett & Fikkert, 2012). Being set right with God provides the fullness from which the ability to develop a sense of positive self-regard, a heart for and connection with others, and a deeply held concern for both the individual parts and collective whole of the world.

**Shalom - Right Relationship with Self**

The concept of Shalom encompasses more than an external experience lacking in conflict or separation (Brueggemann, 2001). Shalom provides for an internal sense of rest, safety, and well-being with one’s self (Corbett & Fikkert, 2012). This internal, personal sense of peace or wholeness acts as a foundation of calm and non-reactive being that translates into a calm and non-reactive way of being with others. This oneness with self is indicative of a heart at rest and confident of rightness with God through Christ. “For he who has once entered [God’s]
rest also has ceased from (the weariness and pain) of human labors, just as God rested from those labors peculiarly His own” (Hebrews 4:9, Amp.).

Spiritual rest within one’s self is a by-product of being in a state of rest and peace with God. As expressed by Freedman (2016), “God is the source of peace; the inner peace that quiets the soul” (p. 58). From such a position, external turmoil has a limited ability to influence one’s internal experience of well-being and serenity. Thus, an external demonstration of confidence and positive self-regard is generally indicative of an internal sense of contentment and intimate relationship with God through Christ.

And God’s peace [shall be yours, that tranquil state of a soul assured of its salvation through Christ, and so fearing nothing from God and being content with its earthly lot of whatever sort that is, that peace] which transcends all understanding shall garrison and mount guard over your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Philippians 4:7, Amp.).

**Shalom - Right Relationship with Others**

The ability to be in right relationship with others is the next step in the progressive flow of peace that emanates from a right relationship with God and sequentially with self. It is challenging to maintain a healthy and peaceful relationship with others if one cannot develop and maintain a peaceful and content inner experience. As expressed by Fisher (2014), “Through love of God, people are more likely to love self and others (p. 14). Taken in conjunction with the communities and larger systems to which individuals are exposed, these three relationships, God, self, and others, coalesce into an awareness of relational and spiritual well-being (Fisher, 2014).

This connection between internal experience and external expression seems to come full circle in Paul’s assertion in the book of Romans, which reads, “If possible, as far as it depends on you, live in peace with everyone” (Romans 12:18, Amp.). One could conclude that peace with others is a direct result of peace within one’s self and one’s determined effort to demonstrate that peace in a relationally right manner.
Shalom - Right Relationship with Community

According to Fisher (2014), spiritual health is a dynamic state of being in which individuals live in relational harmony not only with God, oneself, and others but also with the larger communities of which they are a part. This sense of harmony with one’s environment (domestic and social harmony, economic success, spiritual well-being) supports the individualized experience of being connected, safe, and part of a unified whole (Cafferky, 2014; Fisher, 2014). This interdependent connection or wholeness between and among the collective members of a community or group, as described by Brueggemann, is not only the “supreme will of the biblical God” it is the “outgrowth of a covenant of shalom, in which persons are bound not only to God but to one another in a caring, sharing, rejoicing community with none to make them afraid (Brueggemann, 2001, p. 15).

Covenant Relationships

The concept of a covenantal bond is best described as the ceremonial joining of two persons through the “inter-commingling of their blood” (Trumbull, 1998, p. 5). A covenant relationship is considered one of the most enduring and sacred of relational bonds and one that is based on a mutual agreement that the bond is meant to last a lifetime (Cafferky, 2014; Smith, 2006; Trumbull, 1998). Within the context of the covenant bond, two entities come together to form an interdependent union through which their respective strengths are utilized reciprocally, and their weaknesses are mitigated (Copeland, 2012).

Scripturally, the concept of the covenantal bond is used to describe the symbiotic relationship between God and His creation through Christ. It is a biblical principle that speaks to God’s commitment to His creation and the reciprocal commitment of the creation to the Creator (Smith, 2006; Cafferky, 2014). This everlasting commitment and desire for relational connection
are highlighted in God’s plan to bring those who “once were [so] far away” near through the blood of Christ (Ephesians 2:13, Amp.). “And He came and preached the glad tiding of peace to you who were afar off and [peace] to those who were near” (Ephesians 2:17, Amp.).

The bond of a rightly aligned relational unit or covenantal pledge provides a strong metaphor for the degree to which God desires and seeks after relationship with His creation (Smith, 2006; Cafferky, 2014; Freedman, 2016). It also acts as a model for unity and fidelity in and among the members of the body of Christ. “Be eager and strive earnestly to guard and keep the harmony and oneness of [and produced by] the Spirit in the binding power of peace” (Ephesians 4:3, Amp.). Bound and held together by God’s Shalom, the relational, interdependent, and covenantal body of Christ becomes a powerful force through which God’s plan for reconciliation finds expression.

**Reconciliation and Unity**

The concept of reconciliation in the Bible speaks to the heart of God to be joined in relational intimacy with His creation. Having been spiritually separated from His creation, God’s longing for reconciliation was satisfied through Christ’s sacrifice on the cross, … “to make atonement and propitiation for the people’s sins” (Hebrews 2:17, Amp.). With this singular act of perfect love, the spiritual divide between God and humankind was bridged, and God was once again able to commune, spirit to spirit with those for whom His heart yearned.

Having been reconciled to God through Christ, those now belonging to the body of Christ were charged with the ministry of reconciliation and established as Christ’s personal representatives and agents of peace to bring the good news of the gospel to the nations (2 Corinthians 5:17-21). As a unified whole, the body of Christ became the primary method through which humankind could learn of God’s gift of reconciliation and have their darkened spirits
restored to right relationship with their Creator. The establishment of God’s covenant of peace was designed to restore humankind to their original status of completeness, whole, safety, and rest with God through Christ, most notably a state of Shalom.

**Shalom Byit – Peace in the Home**

The term Shalom byit, or peace in the home, refers to the biblical concept of peace and harmony in the marital union (Kelley et al., 2018). Generally used as a term to describe the mutual duty of each marital partner to offer love and respect to one another, the term can also be used to signify the duty of parents to model a healthy relational bond for their children (Kelley et al., 2018).

As a biblical model for a healthy and harmonious home, shalom byit offers a striking contrast to the conflict and emotional distress associated with marital dysfunction and divorce. As delineated by Kelley et al. (2018), Shalom byit is more than a lack of conflict between the marital partners or rules of marital conduct; it is a sacred duty or transcendent experience that involves God, the marital partners, and children born of the marital union. With God as the ultimate model for relational health and harmony, shalom byit epitomizes the successive flow of right relationship with God to right relationship with self, to right relationship with one’s marital partner and with one’s children. Thus, shalom byit is a vision of the familial unit as defined by peace, safety, prosperity, contentment, and well-being.

**Broken Relationships and Familial Conflict as a Loss of Shalom**

God’s original intention for humankind was a state of completeness and wholeness in spirit, soul, and body (1 Thessalonians 5: 23). Created to live in a perpetual state of peace with self, one another, and God, humankind reflected God’s nature or image as a relational, connected, and peace affirming creation. However, as a result of humankind’s disobedience, this
state of peaceful unity and relational connection between humankind, one another, and God became a distorted and less than perfect reflection of God’s original design. This loss of peace or loss of God’s perfect Shalom, resulted in all manner of disconnected, conflicted, and broken relationships.

The marital relationship provides an expansive depiction of the intimate relationship God desires with His creation. As an archetype of Christ’s love for the body of Christ, the marital union acts as an example of unity, covenant commitment, and oneness (Cafferky, 2014; Mason, 2005; Ortlund, 2016). As the propitiation for sin, Christ’s sacrifice offers those who accept Him as Lord, a spiritual rebirth and unification process that restores humankind’s connection with the Creator Father.

The breakdown of the marital union demonstrates a loss of God’s Shalom peace in one or all four foundational relationships (Corbett & Fikkert, 2012). A loss of Shalom in one member of the familial unit correspondingly equates to the loss of Shalom for all members (Harper, 2016). As an interdependent or symbiotic unit, a breakdown or loss of peace in one member’s relationship with God, self, others, or the familial system can quickly become a lack of connection, safety, and loss of Shalom in the collective’s well-being. These ruptures in relational rightness diminish the ability of both the individual member and the collective to feel connected and whole (Kynes, 2007). In the absence of peace (shalom), frantic efforts to resolve conflict may result in behaviors of blaming, stonewalling, criticism, defensiveness, and rejection.

**Parental Alienation**

At the heart of the parental alienation phenomenon is the loss of relationship connection and intimacy in the marital system. This breakdown, or loss of Shalom, acts as the catalyst for a variety of emotional, mental, and relational problems (Collardeau & Ehrenberg, 2016). Fueled by
strong emotional reactions and woundedness, marital partners often seek the support of legal and social service professionals in their attempts to re-establish some type of internal and external peace and stability (Beal, 1998).

Because these entities are, by design, oriented toward identifying wrongs and determining judiciously sound outcomes for a client, as opposed to the well-being of the entire system, the needs of the client often supersede the need to resolve the underlying relational issues driving the collective conflict. Because the court system is inherently an adversarial entity, it is a less than ideal platform from which to address the deeply held and emotionally charged issues represented by conflicted couples (Beal, 1998; Ellis, 2005; Maturana et al., 2018).

Efforts to deliberately damage or destroy the relational bond of a parent with their child, whether perpetrated by the alienating parent or through the vicarious support of legal and social service providers, are misguided attempts to restore peace to a highly conflicted and broken system (Vassiliou & Cartwright, 2001). Such efforts fall short of the restoration and wholeness under which the marital union was designed to function.

**Parental Targeting**

The targeted or rejected parent is faced with an untenable level of emotional and relational brokenness, having been separated from their child and unwillingly cast in the role of an unfit or unsafe parent (Kruk, 2010, 2011). From such a position, the targeted parent is often faced with the task of attempting to remove the shadow of doubt that has been hung over their relationship with their child(ren). This loss of Shalom is a grievous burden highlighted by a loss of self and a re-conceptualizing of the targeted parent’s relational bond with God, self, and others.
Implications for Christian Leaders and Educators

Parental alienation is a familial phenomenon that strikes at the heart of what it means to be a peace-filled and biblically reflective model of Christ’s love for the body of Christ. With the ever-diminishing number of intact family systems, the societal acceptance of the broken home has become an all too familiar reality among communities of faith and Christian believers. Because parental alienation is such an egregious form of familial division and loss of Shalom, the need to increase the church’s knowledge and ability to minister to families impacted by this dynamic is great.

The ability to be sensitive to the needs, woundedness, and failings of all members of the broken family is an essential element of effective ministry and the restoration of God’s peace in the home (Shalom byit). Thus, familiarity increased awareness, and training in effective ways to reduce conflict, find agreement, and rebuild relational bonds in conflicted family systems is a relevant and needed aspect of Christian leadership and education (Slough, 2015). Efforts to increase the body of Christ’s ability to minister to hurting families, repair marital bonds, and shelter children from separating and divorcing parents seem to highlight the reconciliatory nature of God and God’s Son.

The Ministry of Reconciliation

As personal representatives of Christ charged with the ministry of reconciliation, Christian leaders and educators are often well-positioned to address breakdowns in the family unit directly. While such efforts can only be as effective as the willingness of the family members to engage, inviting families into restorative and peacemaking communities that directly address the relational needs of struggling families is a peace affirming method for healing and restoration.
Safety, support, and resources

The development of marriage-affirming parenting programs, based on biblical principles and values, could serve as a valuable and practical model for maintaining strong families. Such efforts in church and parachurch organizations could help safeguard families against the Shalom damaging process of marital conflict, familial breakdown, and parental targeting.

A Community of Shalom

The call to strengthen the family unit, support healthy parental relationships, and reduce toxic conflict is a needed and relevant ministry (Finzi-Dottan et al., 2017). Building upon Brueggemann’s assertion that Shalom is rooted in a “theology of hope…that the world can and will be transformed and renewed,” Christian leaders and educators are presented with an opportunity to speak a word of hope into family systems void of connection, safety and wholeness (Brueggemann, 2001, p. 76). Ministries designed to address the distressing phenomena of parental targeting can begin this journey of hope by educating and leading those in positions of authority into a greater understanding of the nature and destructive capacity of marital disruption and toxic parenting. As Christian leaders and educators become more familiar with these issues, the need to develop and support a biblical response to the phenomena of parental targeting will require intentional efforts to build communities of Shalom, reconciliation, and unity (Finzi-Dottan et al., 2017; Holt, 2013).

Let the word [spoken by] Christ (the Messiah) have its home [in your hearts and minds] and dwell in you in [all its] richness, as you teach and admonish and train one another in all insight and intelligence and wisdom [in spiritual things, and as you sing] psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, making melody to God with [His] grace in your hearts (Colossians 3:16, Amp.).

At the end of Christ’s ministry on earth, during the last supper, Christ tells His disciples that He is giving them a new commandment. “I give you a new commandment: that you should
love one another. Just as I have loved you, so you too should love one another” (John 13:34, Amp.). Shortly thereafter, Christ tells his disciples, “Peace I leave with you; My [own] peace I now give and bequeath to you” (John 14:27, Amp.). This peace, as expressed by Strong, Kohlenberger & Swanson (2001), and translated as Eirene in Greek, follows the same meaning and usage of the Hebrew word Shalom in the Old Testament. This endowment of peace, God’s peace, God’s Shalom given through Christ reinforces God’s desire for His creation to live in a state of harmony, tranquility, safety, health, and at “peace with God. In its full measure, God’s Shalom is the promise of right relationship with God, self, others, and the communities and larger systems of which all humankind is a part.

The phenomenon of parental alienation and the experience of parental targeting are distressing examples of a relational loss of Shalom in the home and among the marital partners. This loss of shalom impacts not only the lives of the marriage partners, their children, and their communities but their fundamental ability to be at peace with their Creator and their internal sense of self. The degree to which parental targeting impacts the relational well-being of the targeted parent is an important consideration for Christian leaders and educators and a relevant field of study for all those charged with the ministry of reconciliation.

**Theoretical Framework**

The systems thinking mindset is an orientation that attempts to understand the world in terms of its organizing patterns. As articulated by Friedman (1991), “Systems thinking is all about understanding components in terms of their structures” (p. 137). The ability to see the interdependent nature of relational objects and to recognize the symbiotic dance that occurs in and among the various parts of the collective whole is a key feature in a systems approach.
While Ludwig Von Bertalanffy is generally referred to as the father of systems thinking, general systems theory is represented by a number of different models and theories that highlight various aspects of systemic thought. Supported by the Aristotelian dictum of the whole that is more than the sum of its parts, systems theory has become a rich and multidimensional matrix for understanding the interdependent nature of mathematical, mechanical, ecological, biological, and psychological dictums (Von Bertalanffy, 1972).

Bowen family systems theory is a relative departure from the traditional individualistic therapeutic focus that attempts to identify, label, and treat specific symptoms in the individual (Bowen, 1978; Nichols, 2005). Within the context of family systems theory, the family or system becomes the focus of therapeutic inquiry, and as such, symptoms in the individual members of the collective are viewed as manifestations of systemic breakdown. Thus, Bowen family systems theory seeks to understand and address emotional and mental distress within the context of the family unit by exploring the multigenerational and interdependent patterns of the collective whole (Bowen, 1978; Nichols, 2005).

**Bowen Family Systems Theory (BFST)**

Bowen Family Systems Theory (BFST), developed by Dr. Murray Bowen, is a branch of systemic thought that delineates the family as the primary unit of study and the most basic and naturally occurring system for enlarging systemic inquiry (Bowen, 1978, Kerr & Bowen, 1988). As a natural systems theory, BFST is based on the ideology that living systems provide an effective and naturally occurring medium for understanding the organizational patterns that govern systemic function. Developed by Dr. Murray Bowen as a new way of thinking about the human phenomenon, Dr. Bowen’s primary goal was to bring the study of the human experience into the realm of science (Gilbert, 2006; Kerr & Bowen, 1988).
In total, Bowen theory consists of eight interlocking or interdependent constructs that influence how the various aspects of the family unit act and react with the various parts of the systemic whole (Bowen, 1978; Friedman, 1991: Gilbert, 2006; Kerr & Bowen, 1988). Because systems thinking is first and foremost an attempt to understand the whole or wholeness of an organized set of parts, its use as a complementary theoretical framework, juxtaposed against the theological framework of Shalom, provides a consistent structure for understanding the phenomena of the parental targeting within the context of parental alienation and familial dysfunction. To understand the whole, one must first understand the impact and nature of the individual parts that make up the whole and support “wholeness” (Von Bertalanffy, 1972, p. 415).

**The Four Foundational Constructs**

The four primary constructs that act as the foundation for Bowen theory include differentiation of self, the nuclear family emotional system, the emotional triangle or triangulation, and the mutigenerational transmission process (Bowen, 1978; Friedman, 1991; Gilbert, 2006; Kerr & Bowen, 1988). These four constructs act as a foundation upon which the other four constructs layer.

**Nuclear Family Emotional System**

Dr. Bowen went to great length to differentiate between the family relational system and the family emotional system. While it would be correct to identify the various members of the family by means of their relational bonds, it would be even more accurate to define what happens between the members of the family unit as the emotional system that undergirds or drives their behaviors (Kerr & Bowen, 1988).
As defined by Butler (2015), the concept of the family as an emotional unit is the seminal feature of BFST (p. 59). As such, the BFST concept of the family emotional system emphasizes the interdependent nature of the family and the manner in which the beliefs, perceptions, and behaviors of each individual member of the family directly impact the other members of the family unit.

**Differentiation of Self**

If the concept of the family as an emotional system is the seminal feature of BFST, differentiation of self is the indispensable concept or linchpin that maintains the structural integrity of the theory (Gilbert, 2014). As expressed by Richardson (2010), differentiation of self can be defined as the ability of each part to stay true to “its own identity and function while remaining connected to the whole” (p. 36). In short, a well-differentiated person has developed the ability to define and maintain one’s sense of self while being intimately connected to another. It is the ability to define and maintain a *me* while simultaneously defining and maintaining a *we*; both/and, not either/or.

**Triangles and Triangulation**

The triangle has been described in BFST as the smallest stable unit in the emotional system (Bowen, 1978; Gilbert, 2014). When two members of the family emotional system experience some type of conflict or tension, the tendency is to focus on a third member of the system. This focus allows the unresolved dyadic anxiety to be rerouted or directed at the third member (Klever, 1998; Richardson, 2010).

A common triangle in the family unit is the off-loading of unresolved parental tension or anxiety onto the child (Rauseo, 2012). While this focus tends to relieve some of the tension (anxiety) in the parental dyad, the child, who unconsciously becomes a container for the anxiety,
often becomes symptomatic and subsequently labeled as the identified problem (Gilbert, 2014; Klever, 1998; Rauseo, 2012; Richardson, 2010). This tendency of the conflicted dyad to draw a third party into the conflict is the essential feature of triangulation.

**Multigenerational Transmission Process**

A unique and often defining quality of BFST is the depth to which the intergenerational patterns of the family unit are utilized as a paradigm for understanding the functionality of the familial system in the present. While many theorists will concede that the patterns of the past play a role in the development of present-day problems, BFST purports that these patterns are embedded ways of being that are passed down through successive generations (McGoldrick et al., 2008). Thus, the past does not merely influence the present but is actually present in the here and now. As expressed by Friedman (1991), both the nature and the degree of the intensity of the family unit’s emotional responses “are passed down from generation to generation” (p. 147).

**The Remaining Four Constructs**

The four remaining constructs of BFST further define the parameters of the theory. Because it is difficult to understand any single construct in BFST without some knowledge of the other seven, basic familiarity with each provides a more in-depth understanding of the interconnected nature of the Bowenian constructs.

**Emotional Cutoff**

The emotional cutoff is an aspect of Bowen theory that helps explain how members of the family unit attempt to manage anxiety in the system (Friesen, 2003). When tension develops between any two members of the family, one or both of the members may enter a state of emotional and sometimes physical disconnection. While the distance of the cutoff helps to relieve the experience of anxiety in the moment, the emotional and physical distance created by
the cutoff tends only to galvanize the conflict (Bowen, 1978; Friesen, 2003). Paradoxically, the resulting symptoms, including increased anxiety and depression, may never be consciously attributed to the emotional cutoff. 

**Family Projection Process**

A common dynamic in the family unit is the projection of the unresolved anxiety and conflict that exists in the parental dyad onto the children (Gilbert, 2008). This unresolved anxiety, conflict or immaturity is then reflected in the child(ren) as differing levels of differentiation of self (Rauseo, 2012). Because each child in the home will have a different experience of their parent’s anxiety, conflict, or immaturity, each child will develop a level of differentiation of self that mirrors their unique experience in the family system (Gilbert, 2008; Rauseo, 2012).

These patterns, once established, tend to become enduring ways of being that are passed on to subsequent generations (Gilbert, 2014; Larson et al., 1998). Low levels of differentiation of self in the parents tend to translate into lower levels of differentiation in successive generations, while higher levels of differentiation of self tend to promote increased levels of differentiation of self in future generations (see multigenerational transmission process).

**Sibling Position**

The Bowen construct of sibling position offers a rich understanding of how sibling birth order or sibling position impacts one’s beliefs, perceptions, and relational patterns. Having been deeply influenced by Toman’s (1961) extensive research on the nature of sibling interactional patterns, Bowen recognized the complementary nature of Toman’s work and utilized the contribution in the development of the sibling position construct (Gilbert, 2006; Richardson, 2010).
As an aspect of BFST, the sibling position construct emphasizes the unique nature of each child’s familial experience with other siblings and with their parents. Because each child in the family unit will have their own personal experience with each parent and with each sibling, their overall experience of the family will be an exclusive event different than that of any other member of the family (Gilbert, 2006; Richardson & Richardson, 2000; Richardson, 2010). As with other aspects of BFST, these experiences become enduring ways of being that influence relational interactions and interdependencies on a multigenerational level (Gilbert, 2006; Klever, 1998; Richardson, 2010).

Societal Regression or Societal Emotional Process

The construct of social regression is a reflection or extension of the emotional process found in the familial unit. Just as its emotional structure defines the family unit, so too is the larger social system and culture (Kerr, 2019). As social anxiety grows, BFST purports a fundamental and corresponding drop in the ability of the social structure to maintain emotional congruence or stability (Bowen, 1978; Kerr, 2019). This regression in differentiation or societies’ ability to manage dichotomous issues results in a collective decline in which emotional reactivity replaces or subdues rational thought and gives way to “rigidity, concreteness, and lack of imagination” (Friedman, 1991, p. 166).

Bowen’s Ninth Construct

While Murray Bowen did not officially design or establish a ninth construct that explored or explained the spiritual nature of human relational connections, he did, just prior to his death, begin an inquiry into the nature and function of what he termed “The Supernatural” (Gilbert, 2006). Since his death, a number of researchers, educators, and therapists have adopted a similar
interest in the supernatural with a particular curiosity in the connection between theory, theology, religion, and spirituality (Koenig et al., 2001).

Inquiry into the role spirituality plays in the relational bondedness of family systems adds another dimension to efforts to understand the interdependent nature of familial function and interpersonal connection. Recent studies have provided support for the connection between relational and emotional well-being and spirituality (Fisher, 2014; Jankowski & Sandage, 2011; Pargament, 2007). As articulated by Fischer (2014), “Spirituality affects each person’s relationship with themselves, and others, as well as the environment in which we live and move, and have our being” (Fisher, 2014, p. 9). As most succinctly stated by Koenig et al., (2001), “In the vast majority of studies, religious involvement was positively correlated with greater well-being” (p. 117).

**Chronic Anxiety - The Glue that Holds it Together**

If the eight interlocking constructs of Bowen family systems theory provide the structure for the theory, chronic anxiety acts at the metaphoric “glue” that holds the theory together. Chronic anxiety, as conceptualized by BFST, seeks to highlight the process of automatic, emotional reactivity as the “primary promoter of all symptoms” in the family system (Friedman, 1991 p. 140). The remedy or antidote of chronic anxiety, as further delineated by Friedman, is differentiation of self (Friedman, 1991; Smith 1998). Thus, through the lens of BFST, chronic anxiety is the root of all familial symptomology, and differentiation of self is the corrective solution to be applied (Friedman, 1991; Smith 1998).

In BFST, it is important to differentiate chronic anxiety from acute anxiety. Acute anxiety is the type of anxiety that humans experience when they are faced with some type of imminent danger (Kerr, 2019). Such anxiety acts as a survival mechanism designed to facility
survival and safety. Chronic anxiety is better understood as a free-floating kind of ever-present anxiety that often exists outside of the family’s conscious awareness (Kerr, 2019). BFST postulates that each family has a consistent level of chronic anxiety that is unique to their system, with some families having higher levels of chronic anxiety and other families having much lower levels of chronic anxiety. As differentiation in the family increases, chronic anxiety decreases (Bowen, 1978; Kerr, 2019; Smith, 1998). Families with higher levels of chronic anxiety tend to have lower levels of differentiation of self (Kerr, 2019; Smith, 1998). Family systems tend to transmit their level of chronic anxiety (and differentiation of self) foreword onto successive generations (Bowen, 1978; Kerr, 2019; Smith, 1998).

The Familial System as the Unit of Inquiry

From a system perspective, the family unit is comprised of several distinct parts that make up the collective whole. Each part plays a particular role and interacts in dynamic ways with the other parts of the system. The reciprocating patterns of behavior that exist in and among the various members of the system create a perpetuating force of mutual influence or circular causality that sustain the system’s basic homeostatic state and relative stability (Nichols, 2005). Attempts to change the systemic dynamic are generally met with intense efforts to resist the change and maintain the homeostasis to which the system is habituated (Nichols, 2005).

The Three Main Components of the Nuclear Family System

The family system can be broken down into three primary components, most notably the marital relationship, the individual, parental partners, and the child(ren) (Friedman, 1991). A healthy or successful marital relationship, according to Friedman (1991), could be defined by ‘the extent that the nuclear family is symptom-free in all three locations” (p. 137).
Because symptomatic members of the system are indicative of some type of systemic breakdown, correcting the underlying sources of emotional and mental distress in any one of the primary components has the potential to calm the system’s chronic anxiety, reduce emotional reactivity and encourage connection.

**The Marital Relationship**

Marital partners, as defined by Bowen (1978), are “two people in the same generation with a life commitment to each other” (p. 311). As with all relational systems, the management of each partner’s respective need for togetherness and individuality set the stage for the amount of conflict, emotional reactivity, and anxiety the couple will experience (Bowen, 1978; Glad, 1999). Partners that are able to balance these “powerful emotional forces” tend to experience more stability, less reactivity, and increased intimacy (Bowen, 1978, p. 311). To the degree to which they are not able to balance their individuality and togetherness needs, they are likely to experience higher levels of conflict, reactivity, and chronic anxiety (Kerr, 2019).

Higher levels of differentiation of self are generally indicative of the ability to successfully balance the togetherness and individuality needs of both the individual partners and the larger system of which they are a part (Sandage & Jankowski, 2010). Lower levels of differentiation of self tend to lead to an inability to balance togetherness/individuality and generally result in marital distress, conflict, disconnection, and eventually, marital separation and divorce (Bowen, 1978; Glad, 1999; Skowron et al., 2008).

**The Parental Partners**

The individual health, both emotional and mental, of each partner, plays a significant role in the quality of the marital relationship (Dennison, Koerner & Segrin, 2014). Partners who have developed the ability to be self-aware, self-defined, and self-regulatory, manage their
togetherness and individuality needs, and separate their thinking process from their feeling process are more likely to experience a more satisfying and mutually respective marital relationship (Dennison et al., 2014; Glad, 1999; Kerr, 2019; Peleg, 2014; Richardson, 2010). In short, partners who have a more fully differentiated sense of self are less likely to become emotionally reactive and conflicted within the context of their marital relationship (Kerr, 2019; Sandage & Jankowski, 2010; Skowron, 2000).

To the extent to which the partners fuse (sacrifice self) or remain simultaneously autonomous and connected acts as a general predictor of marital satisfaction and longevity (Larson et al., 1998; Kerr, 2019; Richardson, 2010). While couples can and do experience traumatic life or nodal events, higher levels of maturity, differentiation, and a non-reactive sense of self act as insulators against relational breakdown (Kerr, 2019; Peleg, 2014; Richardson, 2010).

**The Children**

Children that live within the context of the parental unit are subject to the relational health, or lack thereof, of the individual and collective couplehood (Amato & Patterson, 2017; Beal, 1998). When disruptions in the marital relationship or an individual parent impact the family unit, children often become the symptom bearers for the collective system (Bowen, 1978; Rauseo, 2012). While many treating professionals and counselors attempt to separate the treatment of the symptomatic child from the family unit, such efforts generally offer limited long-term benefit as they do not position the child within the context of the parental conflict, distancing, or dysfunction (Beal, 1998; Bowen, 1978; Richardson, 2010).

Because symptomatic children are a direct result of partner breakdown, conflict, or disconnection, efforts designed to focus on the individual child or children seldom bring about
long-lasting or systemic change (Beal, 1998; Bowen, 1978; Donley, 2003). While the projection of systemic anxiety to a child is a common dynamic, the downloading of the system’s chronic anxiety and lack of differentiation becomes a perpetuating cycle that has long-lasting ramifications for both the child and any future relational connections of which the child is a part (Amato & Patterson, 2017; Beal, 1998; Dennison et al. (2014); Kerr, 2019; Peleg, 2014; Richardson, 2010; Wolfinger, 2000).

**Bowen Family Systems Theory and Parental Targeting**

Current research studies on the phenomena of parental alienation and parental targeting have focused on the child or adult child’s experience of the alienation process (Balmer et al., 2017; Harman et al., 2016; Maturana et al., 2018). A few studies have attempted to understand parental partners on an individual basis. To a large extent, these studies have attempted to understand the behaviors of either the mother or father by means of a mental illness model or diagnostic label (Balmer, 2017; Childress, 2015). To-date the majority of these efforts have identified the assumed presence of narcissism, personality disorders (borderline, narcissistic), pathogenic parenting, and other forms of pathology as a paradigm through which to understand the phenomena (Bernet & Baker, 2013; Bernet et al., 2010; Childress, 2015).

Parental alienation and parental targeting, as evaluated by BFST, identifies the family system and the parental dyad at the centralized feature(s) of inquiry (Bowen, 1978). Within the context of BFST, focus on the behavior or symptoms of the child is diminished in favor of a better understanding of the dyadic partnership and the processes that facilitate ongoing dyadic conflict, dysfunction, and emotional reactivity (Bowen, 1978; Kerr, 2019; Peleg, 2014). By shifting the subject of inquiry to the parental dyad within the context of the family unit and subsequent analysis of the family system within the context of the larger social systems (legal
and social services) to which they are embedded, BFST provides an effective and non-pathologizing model for understanding parental alienation and parental targeting (Peleg, 2014; Vassiliou & Cartwright, 2001; Maturana et al., 2018).

BFST provides a solid theoretical stance for inquiry into the lived experience of parental targeting and supports the need for qualitative analysis of how parental targeting affects the relational well-being of parents who have experienced parental targeting. Based on the assumption that “family narratives organize and make sense of experience,” a family systems mindset offers the best theoretical basis for exploring the lived experience of the targeted parent (Nichols, 2005, p. 67). Because few, if any, research studies have been conducted on how the phenomena of parental targeting affect the relational well-being of the targeted parent, this study will significantly add to the knowledge base of the parental targeting phenomena and its effect on relational well-being.

**Related literature**

Attempts to better understand the phenomenon of parental alienation and parental targeting have resulted in a variety of ontological perspectives. The following section will explore several of the more dominant viewpoints. While this section does not offer an exhaustive record of the theories and postulations surrounding the phenomena of parental alienation and parental targeting, it does provide a backdrop for understanding the complexities and the multiplicity of ideas currently reflected in the literature.

**Parental Targeting Within the Context of Parental Alienation**

An essential facet of systemic thinking is the ability to locate a system of inquiry within the context of the larger systems of which it is a part. Like rings on an onion, systems form an interconnected pattern of ever-expanding influence. The individual person exists within the
context of their familial system, and the familial system exists within the context of their community, which exits within the context of their city, which exits within the context of their state or nation. Similarly, parental targeting is a phenomenon that exists as part of the larger social construct of parental alienation.

Parental alienation (PA) has been defined as the deliberate attempt of one parent to disrupt, impede, damage, or destroy the relationship of the child(ren) with the other parent (Balmer et al., 2017; Baker, 2006; Darnell, 1998; Saini et al., 2016). The parent attempting to alienate is known or referred to as the alienating parent or favored parent, while the parent who is being alienated is known or referred to as the rejected or targeted parent (Darnell, 1998, Baker, 2006; Ellis, 2005). The experience of the child, as defined by Dr. Robert Gardner, has become known as parental alienation syndrome (PAs), which refers to the impact of PA on the alienated child and the behaviors the alienated child develops (Gardner, 1987, 1991, 2002). The distinction between parental alienation and parental alienation syndrome is essential as one speaks to the experiences of the parents (PA) while the other speaks to the reactive experience of the child(ren) (PAs).

For this study, a background on how the governing ideologies about parental alienation and parental alienation syndrome developed and how they relate to the phenomena of parental targeting is needed in order to further define the relevance of the lived experience of the targeted parent. It is also essential to establish the role the larger systems in which the phenomena of parental alienation, parental alienation syndrome, and targeted parenting takes place and establish the part these systems have played in further developing and perpetuating the parental alienation construct. Additional insight about the systemic dynamics of parental alienation, parental alienation syndrome, and targeted parenting, as provided by BFST, will support a deeper
appreciation for the interplay and context of parental targeting as an aspect of the larger parental alienation dynamic.

**Parental Alienation as a Systemic Breakdown**

The term parental alienation has come to have many meanings and has, over several decades, been defined in light of a variety of mindsets, viewpoints, affiliations, and orientations (Bernet & Baker, 2013; Gardner, 1998, 2002; Jaffé et al., 2017; Meier, 2009; Maturana et al., 2018; Harman et al., 2019). Researchers, psychiatrists, therapists, lawyers, judges, social service providers, and advocacy groups have all attempted to bring their particular beliefs and perceptions to the construct known as parental alienation (Grohol, 2018; Harman et al., 2018). These attempts have resulted in a number of different orientations and explanations about what parental alienation is, what constitutes an appropriate response, and whether or not the phenomenon known as parental alienation actually exists, is a form of domestic violence, or is simply an overly sensationalized version of co-parenting problems (Grohol, 2018; Harman et al., 2018).

To some degree, these various groups seem to find consensus on the following points, (1) the phenomena of parental alienation, if it accepted as an existing phenomenon, is harmful, (2) requires interventive measures, and (3) includes both parental partners and the child(ren) over which the parents share and maintain parental rights, legal guardianship, and an intimate relational bond. Children are generally defined as children born of the parental union, legally adopted, related by marriage, bonded through guardianship, or other legal or relational connection.

Based on the common consensus that the system of inquiry is that of a familial unit consisting of two parents and at least one child, it seems responsible to contend that the
discussion or debate about parental alienation can be most succinctly be located within the context of the familial system (Childress, 2015; Grohol, 2012; Johnston, 2005). This system, comprised of two parental figures and a child or children, is then located within the context of the larger systems of which they are a part, most notably local places of employment, communities of faith, social service organizations as well as legal and law enforcement agencies (Bowen, 1978).

When familial systems breakdown, i.e., the parental figures decide to dissolve their union through separation or divorce; they must petition the court system in order to be granted a legal dissolution of their marital status. Marital dissolutions that do not include children typically consist of financial and property settlement agreements that attempt to divide the marital assets between the two partners. However, when marital dissolution involves child(ren), the court must approve some form of parenting agreement that outlines how the parental figures intend to provide for the needs of their children (Carter, 2011). Ideally, this parenting agreement will allow for the involvement of both parents or shared parenting (Carter, 2011). Such shared parenting plans assure that the child(ren) will be allowed to maintain a close and nurturing relationship with both parents.

Historically, marital dissolution involved the designation of both legal and physical custody rights (Carter, 2011). Joint legal custody agreements assure both parents a voice in the major decisions concerning their child’s welfare, while joint physical custody establishes one parent as the primary custodian for the child and provides for visitation for the noncustodial parent (Baker, Bone, & Ludmer, 2014; Carter, 2011). Such arrangements have historically favored the mother as the primary custodial parent (Carter, 2011).
In light of recent research on the value of the father’s involvement in the child’s day-to-day life, both legal and physical custody has increasingly become a shared endeavor that involves equal time and equal involvement (50/50) or shared custody/parenting frameworks (Carter, 2011; Lowenstein, 2010). By nature, these types of custody agreements require divorcing parents to reframe their spousal relationship in favor of a co-parenting mindset. For many parents, this shift from spouse to co-parent partner evolves into a mutually respectful and effective means through which to co-parent their child(ren) (Lowenstein, 2010). However, for a number of conflicted parents, the shift from marital partner to effective co-parent becomes a contentious and sometimes volatile process. In such cases, the tension and inability of the combatant partners to set aside past conflicts and emotional wounds results in less than ideal attempts at co-parenting.

When faced with the adverse outcomes associated with less than ideal co-parenting, these conflicted couples tend to seek assistance from the broader social systems of which they are a part (Bowen, 1978; Carter, 2011; Friedman, 1991; Kerr & Bowen, 1988; Peleg, 2014). These systems, which include social service providers, legal, and law enforcement agencies, are designed to resolve conflicts and work for the “best interests of the child” (Carter, 2011). They are designed around a model that supports problem-solving through judicial and authoritative power. Such entities are not designed or equipped to address or meet the relational needs of either the parental figures or the child(ren). As a branch of government, these entities seek to solve problems, make judgments, and enforce consequences when rules are broken, and directives are left unfulfilled.

Families struggling with the aftermath of a divorce can become locked in patterns of disruptive behaviors that exacerbate their already conflicted dynamic (Beal, 1998). These
conflicts and the resulting anxiety between the parental figures quickly become the anxieties of the child(ren) (Kerr & Bowen, 1988; Rauseo, 2012). The resulting triangle between mother, father, and child forms the basis for the parental alienation dynamic and the phenomena of parental targeting.

As a family system construct, an emotional triangle occurs when a dyad, in this case, the parental figures, becomes conflicted and seeks to reduce the collective anxiety by focusing, inviting, or drawing another person into the relationship (Bowen, 1978; Friedman, 1991; Kerr & Bowen, Rauseo, 2012; 1988; Peleg, 2014). Triangulation or the propensity for two people to triangle with a third person or entity is, according to Bowen, (1978), “the molecule or the basic building block of any emotional system, whether it is in the family or any other group” (p. 373).

This tendency to manage overwhelming anxiety by seeking or drawing in other people can quickly become a series of interlocking triangles that perpetuate the stress and anxiety throughout the system (Bowen, 1978; Friedman, 1991). Conflicted parents focus or draw the child into a triangulated relationship in an attempt to reduce their collective anxiety. As the tension in the triangle builds, one or more of the members of the triangle seek or invite outside entities, such as legal and social service professionals, into the triangulation, which results in a series of interlocking and stress holding, anxiety perpetuating triangles, which then duplicate in kind (Bowen, 1978; Friedman, 1991). As expressed by Bowen (1991),

When tensions are very high in families, and available family triangles are exhausted, the family system triangles in people from outside the family, such as police and social agencies. A successful externalization of the tension occurs when outside workers are in conflict about the family while the family is calmer (Bowen, 1978, p. 374).

When conflicted parents find themselves unable to manage the anxiety and tension in their post-divorce relationship, these tensions inevitably interfere with their ability to co-parent effectively. In such cases, one parent or the other may seek assistance or triangle with an outside
entity. This outside entity helps more evenly distribute the stress, anxiety, and tension in the system, which is initially experienced as an increased sense of calmness or control (Bowen, 1978; Kerr & Bowen, 1988). However, the chaos of the family system, the anxiety, can quickly be taken up by the larger systems (mental health, legal, and courts), amplified, and then focused back on the family in a perpetuating state of interlocking triangulations (Kerr & Bowen, 1988, p. 141).

Framing the phenomena of parental alienation as interlocking and perpetuating mother-father-child, mother-child-outsider, or father-child-outsider triangles provides a deeper understanding of both the nature of the conflict and possible therapeutic methods for dismantling the systemic dynamic and detriangling the family members from one another and the larger systems of which they are a part (Beal, 1998; Rauseo, 2012). Viewed through the lens of BFST, parental alienation becomes a matter of systemic breakdown that results in poor outcomes for all members of the familial system that is often inadvertently supported and magnified by external social and legal systems (Kerr & Bowen, 1988).

**Parental Alienation as a Legal Matter**

Parental conflict is not a new development. Parental conflict that results in either emotional or physical disconnection is also not a new development; neither are behavioral problems in children who have been exposed to parental conflict and disconnection (Harman et al., 2018; Meier, 2009). Numerous studies have documented the role of dyadic conflict and instability as predictors of relational, emotional, mental, and spiritual issues in children (Amato, 1996; Hardy et al., 2015; Wolfinger, 2011).

Before marital separation and divorce became a normative process, conflicted parents attempted to manage their conflict, emotional reactivity, and marital tensions within the context
of their family unit, with the help of extended family members, with the help of their church, and with other social affiliations. Before the divorce revolution, children exposed to the parental conflict were still impacted by their parent’s attitudes (both positive and negative) about marriage, conflict, intimacy, and other forms of being with one’s self and others. These experiences, beliefs, and perceptions contributed to the child’s propensity to pass those assimilated traits forward through the multigenerational transmission process (Amato, 1996; Wolfinger, 2011). Thus, parents with lower levels of differentiation of self helped to promote lower levels of differentiation of self in their children and subsequent generations while parents with higher levels of differentiation of self helped promote higher levels of differentiation of self in their children and subsequent generations (Bowen, 1978; Friedman, 1991; Gilbert, 2006; Kerr & Bowen, 1988; Kerr, 2019; Richardson, 2010).

As the prevalence and level of social acceptance for divorce swelled, however, these conflicted couples began to increasingly turn to the court systems in an attempt to manage their unresolved problems, which continued to cause emotional distress in their post-divorce interactions and attempts to co-parent. Specialized branches of the legal system and courts, known as the family court system, provided high conflict couples a method through which to find legal remedies for their familial and parental problems. Over the past several decades, the variety of legal services available to conflicted couples has blossomed into a variety of interventive services. It is not unusual for divorcing partners to utilize a variety of services, including an attorney or law firm (one for each partner), some type of mental health professional, mediators, parenting coordinators, child evaluators, expert witnesses, and other outside entities in their pursuit of an equitable co-parenting arraignment.
As social awareness has grown, concerning the variety of services available to separating or divorcing parents, a number of parents became skilled at using these systems to achieve their preferred outcomes. Parents who desire an equitable division of assets, parental involvement, and parenting time have been able to utilize the family court system in ways that allow for the least contentious and mutually respective dissolution possible. Conversely, a growing number of highly conflicted couples, privy to the same services, have attempted to “weaponize” the family court system in an attempt to gain an outcome that favors one parent over the other (Lowenstein, 2010).

Some parents have gone as far as to implicate or accuse their former partner of a number of nefarious acts in an attempt to intentionally “erase” the other parent. In such cases, false allegations of neglect or abuse have resulted in a loss of parental participation for the unflavored parent (Harman et al., 2018). In the context of this dynamic, the family court system has been tasked with attempting to prove the validity of such allegations and making judgments about co-parenting issues based on the testimonies, opinions, and historical accounts presented by each parent’s attorney.

As sometimes unwitting members of the parental conflict, legal professionals have taken to making decisions about the lives of countless mothers, fathers, and children through the rigid lens of evidence, witnesses, testimony, and subjective opinion. Predictably, this dynamic has resulted in a polarization of viewpoints and effectively divided the problems associated with the decoupling of highly conflicted parents into a variety of dichotomous constellations. Some of these constellations, as represented by the literature, include (1) A parent seeking full legal and physical custody of the child(ren) based on allegations of neglect or abuse by the other parent (domestic violence or child abuse did happen) (2) A parent seeking full legal and physical
custody of the child(ren) based on allegations of neglect or abuse by the other parent (domestic violence or child abuse did not happen) (3) A parent in contempt of agreed-upon custody or co-parenting arrangements (4) A parent intentionally attempting to damage or destroy the relationship of the child with the other parent (a form of child abuse/domestic violence by proxy, parental alienation/parental alienation syndrome).

While these categories do not represent a complete listing of the types of cases that come before the family court system, they are indicative of the complexity family systems represent and the difficulty of attempting to resolve these familial issues through the court system (Beal, 1998). Although the court system does attempt to consult with a variety of social service organizations and treating professionals as they endeavor to apply the law to these complex family dynamics judiciously, these cases generally end up pitting one side against the other (Harman et al., 2018; Kruk, 2011). A common scenario includes the mother’s attorney fighting it out with the father’s attorney, the father’s attorney fighting it out with the mother’s attorney while the child becomes a type of chattel or prize to be awarded to the winner.

In an attempt to make informed and legally sound judgments in cases that involve complex family dynamics, family law courts routinely collaboration with and seek testimony from mental health experts. These experts, it is believed, provide needed clarity about how family systems work and help bolster the court’s ability to make determinations with regard to parental rights, custody, co-parenting plans, and “the best interests of the child” (Lowenstein, 2010).

However, as expressed by Kruk (2011), the family court system has increasingly assumed responsibility for determining the outcome of both child and spousal abuse allegations. As further delineated by Kruk, “family courts should not function as ‘quasi-criminal’ courts; family
violence is a criminal matter that must be dealt with in criminal court” (p. 100). Perhaps, as outlined by Kruk, much of the impetuous for parental alienation is triggered by an adversarial family court system that promotes a “winner takes all” mentality that ultimately pits parent against parent and encourages rather than discourages conflict, loss of parental rights, and strategic allegations of abuse (Kruk, 2011, p. 101).

**Parental Alienation as a Syndrome**

One such professional, Richard A. Gardner, a child psychiatrist in the mid-1980s, became one of the most noteworthy contributors to the ongoing debate about parental rights and co-parenting issues both in and out of the court system. Dr. Gardner is well known for having developed the parental alienation syndrome paradigm as a result of his work with children who were experiencing the separation or dissolution of the parental union (Gardner, 1987, 1991, 2002). Gardner, upon noticing a disturbing pattern of child behavior in which a child demonstrated fear, disrespect, and even hostility towards a parent, coined the phrase “parental alienation syndrome” in his attempt to identify specific markers he believed identified this behavioral pattern in children (Gardner, 1987). His work, as a child psychiatrist and child custody evaluator, has profoundly influenced how the phenomena of parental alienation and parental targeting have been defined, adjudicated, and researched for almost 30 years (Meier, 2009).

The debate or controversy over parental alienation and parental targeting generally fall into two camps. Those who believe the phenomena of parental alienation and parental targeting, as defined as the intentional efforts of one parent (the alienating parent) to destroy or damage the relational bond of the child with the targeted or unflavored parent exists and is a valid dynamic, and those who believe that the parental alienation syndrome is a non-scientific, unverified, and
potentially harmful model developed as a way of helping actual abusive parents avoid the consequences associated with child abuse (Bernet et al., 2010; Harman et al., 2018). The need to place the complex issues represented in this debate on a dichotomous scale of true or false ignores the variations and complexities of the family dynamic of decoupling highly conflicted parents.

Much of the research conducted on the phenomena of parental alienation and parental targeting have done so based on the acceptance of Dr. Gardner’s work and delineated syndrome as a valid theory (Bernet et al., 2010; Baker, 2005, 2006). A significant number of research studies have attempted to delineate Dr. Gardner’s work as a form of junk or pseudoscience (Grohol, 2012; Houchin et al., 2012; Meier, 2009; Pepiton et al., 2012; Walker & Shapiro, 2010). To date, the American Psychiatric Association (APA) has refused to support Gardner’s postulation of a parental alienation syndrome or, after extensive lobbying, add parental alienation syndrome to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) (Grohol, 2018). According to Dr. Darrel Regier, vice chairman of the task force tasked with drafting the newest edition of the DSM-5, parental alienation “is not a disorder within one individual; it’s a relationship problem – parent-child or parent-parent. Relationship problems per se are not mental disorders” (Cary, 2012; Grohol, 2018).

Dr. Regier’s statement highlights a significant aspect of the debate about the validity of parental alienation and targeted parenting. The rejection of the proposed DSM-5 definition of parental alienation as “a mental condition in which a child, usually one whose parents are engaged in a high-conflict divorce, allies himself or herself strongly with one parent, and rejects a relationship with the other parent, without legitimate justification” does not dismiss or deny the reality of parental alienation and parental targeting as a relationship problem that exists within
the context of the parent-child/parent-parent dyad. Such a rejection serves to clarify the phenomena of parental alienation and parental targeting as a relational issue between and among family members, not a child-specific mental disorder (Grohol, 2018).

The rejection of Dr. Gardner’s proposed syndrome by the APA and his assertion that children who have been impacted by emotionally distraught and highly conflicted parents are suffering from a diagnosable mental disorder, and the subsequent definition of parental alienation and parental targeting as a relational dynamic provides for a dynamic shift in how the phenomenon is defined, treated and researched. Because much of the research on parental alienation and parental targeting have presupposed the validity of Gardner’s syndrome and because researchers based much of their inquiry on definitions provided by mental health, social service, and legal entities, the lived experience of those actually impacted by the phenomena of parental alienation, including the alienating parent, the alienated parent, and the child(ren), has been interpreted and overshadowed by the syndrome mentality or ignored altogether (Harman et al., 2018; Johnston, 2005).

Conceptualizing parental alienation and parental targeting as a form of systemic breakdown, in which emotional and mental trauma, distress, and disruptions exist and manifest within the context of the relational bond of the mother, father, and child and who are collective members of a familial system, provides a valid and therapeutically accurate paradigm and phenomenologically sound orientation for research and inquiry (Johnston, 2005). As a systemic dynamic, the relational breakdown of the mother/father/child relationship along with the ensuing interwoven triangles, alliances, anxieties, emotional reactivity, and cutoffs represented by the family’s fusion with the family court system become more understandable, predictable, and treatable when viewed through the lens of family systems theory. As expressed by Beal (1998),
“…the concepts of differentiation, emotional cutoff, and nuclear family emotional system, with a specific emphasis on child focus, illuminate the current divorce phenomenon” (p. 352).

Research that begins with exploring a phenomenological aspect of human interactional patterns, including the lived experience of those who have personally experienced the phenomenon of interest, provides a sound foundation for the development of detailed quantitative studies that provide the basis for the correlation of common attributes to the general population. While the legal system and social services agencies have much to contribute to the understanding and treatment of familial distress and conflict, such entities are not sound representatives of the intergenerational and relational dynamics of the family system (Johnston, 2005).

Further research of the family system breakdown known as parental alienation and parental targeting by those skilled at understanding and treating familial distress and dysfunction, offer a practical and effective means for reducing, preventing, and healing the relational ruptures that contribute to ongoing family conflict and trauma (Johnston, 2005; Polak & Saini, 2015). Through the lens of a family systems orientation, both the collective and individual needs of all of the family members can be identified and effectively addressed (Johnston, 2005; Polak & Saini, 2015).

**Parental Alienation is a Form of Domestic Violence**

The cycle of domestic violence and abuse is a well-documented phenomenon that finds expression in a number of human relational constellations (Harman et al., 2018). A most egregious form of abuse is the abuse of a child, especially when the perpetrator of the abuse is a parent. Society has long recognized child abuse as a destructive and unacceptable form of human interaction. Those who are found guilty of child abuse are generally subjected to harsh
consequences and social rejection. However, social perception of what constitutes child abuse tends to vary. Because child abuse can encompass such a wide array of behaviors, situations, age-groups, levels of severity, and outcomes, a definitive definition of child abuse is a challenging undertaking (Harman et al., 2018).

Because parental alienation entails the “aggressive” intent of one parent to damage or destroy the relational bond of the child with the other parent and because such efforts can and do result in emotional and mental distress, trauma, and decompensation in both the child and the targeted parent, PA has been increasingly defined as a form of domestic violence and child abuse (Harman et al., 2018, p. 1278). In a similar manner, parental alienation, or more specifically parental targeting, as a vehicle through which to emotionally and mentally harm the other parent, can be regarded as a form of intimate partner violence or IPV (Kruk, 2010; Harman et al., 2016).

It is interesting to note that the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th edition (DSM-5), supports the definitions as mentioned earlier. Despite its traditional use as a device to identify and classify mental disorders, the DSM-5 delineates a number of “relational problems” (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p. 715). According to the DSM-5,

Key relationships, especially intimate adult partner relationship and parent/caregiver-child relationships, have a significant impact on the health of the individuals in these relationships. These relationships can be health promoting and protective, neutral, or detrimental to health outcomes. In the extreme, these close relationships can be associated with maltreatment or neglect, which has significant medical and psychological consequences for the affected individual (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p. 715).

Additional relevant content includes the efforts the DSM-5 exerts to expressly point out that these relational problems “are not mental disorders” (APA, 2013, p. 715). Of specific interest, under the heading Problems Related to Family Upbringing, the DSM-5 lists V code, V61.29 – Child Affected by Parental Relationship Distress, which is defined as “the negative
effects of parental relationship discord (e.g., high levels of conflict, distress, or disparagement) on a child in the family” (p. 716). Under the heading of *Child Psychological Abuse*, the DSM-5 defines the psychological abuse of a child as the “nonaccidental verbal or symbolic acts by a child’s parent or caregiver that result, or have reasonable potential to result, in significant psychological harm to the child” (p. 719). Under the Spouse of Partner Abuse, Psychological section, the DSM-5 defines the psychological abuse of a spouse or partner as “nonaccidental verbal or symbolic acts by one partner that result, or have reasonable potential to result, in significant harm to the other partner” (p. 721).

The inclusion of both spouse and child psychological abuse in the DSM-5 as relational problems provides support for two crucial delineations of the parental alienation debate. The first being the acknowledgment that parents can and do intentionally and “non-accidentally” abuse their child in ways that psychologically harms them, and second, spouses can and do intentionally and “non-accidentally” abuse their partners in ways that psychologically harm them. While not an exhaustive or final declarative statement of PA, these assertions provide an additional layer of support and validation for the phenomena of parental alienation and parental targeting as forms of intimate partner abuse and child abuse (Harman et al., 2016; Harman et al., 2018).

**Major Contributors: Parental Alienation & Parental Targeting Literature Base**

**Dr. Richard Gardner**

At the heart of the parental alienation debate and subsequently, the phenomena of parental targeting are the suppositions and postulations of Dr. Richard Gardner. Dr. Gardner’s most defining work, the parental alienation syndrome or PAs, was developed as a direct result of his clinical experiences and observations as a child psychiatrist (Gardner, 1987, 1991, 2002). A
prolific writer, Dr. Gardner self-published a plethora of books, articles, and statements that outline and support his beliefs and suppositions about the relational and behavioral patterns of divorcing parents and the impact of those patterns of behavior on their children.

The development of the PAs modality provided Dr. Gardner with a platform for defending what he believed were false allegations of child abuse designed to sway the courts and secure child custody cases that favor the alleging parent (Meier, 2009). Because the alleging parents were disproportionately mothers, Dr. Gardner asserted that mothers have a propensity to file false allegations of child abuse in order to punish or otherwise remove an undesirable partner from the parenting equation (Dallam & Silberg, 2016; Johnston, 2005).

The proliferation of the PAs modality in the court system, as a method through which fathers could counter allegations of child abuse, spearheaded a dramatic shift in how the family court system handled allegations of child abuse. Dr. Gardner himself became an intricate part of the court system providing expert testimony about the PAs modality and interventions he asserted was appropriate in cases of PAs (Gardner, 1987, 1991, 1992).

As a result of the court’s acceptance of Dr. Gardner’s PAs modality, divorce proceedings began to heavily focus on the child(ren), or more specifically, the behaviors of the child(ren), rather than the allegations of abuse or the divorcing parents. Based on the eight criteria Dr. Gardner developed as a means through which to identify the presence of PAs, in the child, legal professionals including lawyers, child custody evaluators, social workers, and guardian ad litem began basing their finding on whether or not the child in question fit the profile of an alienated child as defined by Dr. Gardner’s eight criteria (Meier, 2009). If a child met the criteria, or at least the two identified “dominate” features of the “syndrome,” the child was assumed to have a mental condition or disorder as a direct result of having been brainwashed or unduly impacted by
a parent (typically the mother) who was attempting to destroy the relationship of the child with the parent.

The relevance of the court’s acceptance of Dr. Gardner’s proposed syndrome is immense. Despite Dr. Gardner’s, and a barrage of court, social service and mental health professionals, acceptance of the PAs modality as a legitimate and scientifically sound syndrome or disorder, much of the current research on PAs is based on an unsubstantiated belief that Gardner’s eight criteria provide a valid measure for asserting mental illness in a child and making legal determinations of custody (Meier, 2009). The subjective and conclusory nature by which PAs is measured speaks to its lack of validity (Johnston, 2005; Pepiton et al., 2011; Walker & Shapiro, 2010). Presumptive at best, the PAs modality relies on the ability of a legal, social, or mental health entity to judge whether or not a child meets Dr. Gardner’s criteria.

If it is determined PAs exists in the child, a cascade of additional conclusions follows. According to Gardner (1987), the presence of parental alienation syndrome in the child acts as a criterion for distinguishing between false and valid claims of abuse (p. 109). Using this logic, the PAs criteria act as a measure for determining the presence of parental alienation syndrome, which according to Gardner, disproves allegations of abuse while the presence of abuse nullifies the presence of parental alienation syndrome. This approach represents the problems inherent with this type of circular argument, which postulated that if PAs exists, the abuse allegation is false, but if PAs does not exist, the abuse allegation is true (Johnstone, 2014; Meier, 2009). Used within the context of subjective diagnostic criteria that utilize thoughts, feelings, and behaviors as determinate factors, such a “diagnosis” is not reliable, replicable, or correlational (Johnstone et al., 2018; Johnstone, 2014; Meier, 2009). Taken one step further, a PAs diagnosis alleged that
the child, the mother, and the father were all suffering from some form of mental illness or mental disorder (Balmer et al., 2017).

Since the years since its inception, the parental alienation syndrome modality has been faced with a number of substantive problems. One of the most notable being the rejection of PAs from the most recent version of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Illness. The rejections of PAs as a mental condition and the assertion by several members of the DSM task force committees that PAs represents a relational problem in the child-parent and parent-parent relationship helped support attempts to separate the phenomena known as parental alienation from Gardner’s syndrome. While several major contributors continue to utilize Gardner’s eight criteria as a primary and reliable measure of alienating behaviors, a few researchers and mental health clinicians have offered alternative explanations for the phenomena of intentional parental targeting and rejection (Polak & Saini, 2015; Walker & Shapiro, 2010).

**Dr. Amy J. L. Baker**

Amy Baker is considered a leading expert in the field of parental alienation. As the director of research at the Vincent J. Fontana Center for Child Protection and a specialist in parent-child relationships, Baker regularly lectures and provides her services as an expert witness. She is a prolific researcher and author who have written countless articles on the subject of PAs. Dr. Baker is a strong advocate of Dr. Gardner and often utilizes Gardner’s eight criteria to support her research and literary works.

**Dr. C. A. Childress**

Dr. Childress, a licensed clinical psychologist who specializes in child and family therapy and parent-child relationship conflict, is well-known for his postulation of an attachment-based model of parental alienation (Childress, 2015). According to Childress (2015), the phenomena of
parental alienation and its subsequent offshoot parental targeting is best understood as a manifestation of “pathogenic parenting” (Childress, 2015, p. 7). The pathogenic parenting dynamic is, according to Childress, (2015), a result of the child’s triangulation into a parental dyad defined by pathological dysfunction, most notably narcissistic personality disorder and borderline personality disorder, which presents in the mother and father as the result of developmental trauma or attachment trauma in childhood (p. 8).

While Childress does emphasize the relational dynamic of triangulation, he strongly asserts that parental alienation is the result of an underlying attachment wound or trauma that results in a fused parental alliance between two personality disordered partners. Childress further asserts that the parental alienation dynamic is best understood within the context of diagnostic criteria. As such, Childress utilizes the DSM-5 diagnostic criteria to diagnosis the family system dysfunction known as parental alienation as the convergence of the child and their personality disordered parents who draw their child(ren) into their dysfunction, which, in turn, results in various forms of child abuse, neglect, or psychological damage to the child (Childress, 2015).

Childress’ use of attachment theory as an explanatory media through which to understand the importance of a child’s relationship with their parents highlights the importance of utilizing such theories in ways that are true to their original intent. As expressed by Lowenstein (2010), attachment theory “is a two-edged sword” that has increasingly been used as a rationale for denying contact of the child with one parent or the other (p. 166). Used in this manner, attachment theory becomes a weapon wielded in support of the best interests of the client as opposed to the best interests of the child. In its most authentic sense, attachment theory recognizes the importance of the child’s attachment to both parents. In cases where there is no evidence of abuse, the child should be allowed to maintain their attachment bond with both their
father and mother, and efforts should focus on helping the parents develop healthier ways of co-parenting (Lowenstein, 2010; Carter, 2011).

**Dr. Richard A. Warshak**

Dr. Warshak, a clinical, research, and consulting psychologist in private practice, is part of a movement committed to ongoing research and education about the phenomenon of parental alienation. Warshak’s work highlights a growing tendency to de-emphasize labeling the experience of parental alienation, which he defines as the process of a child being influenced by one parent to turn against the other, as a syndrome, disorder, condition, or problem (Warshak, 2018). This trend to refocus research and educational endeavors toward a better understanding of the phenomenon of parental alienation and parental targeting and effective ways to prevent or intervene is a cause championed by a number of researchers, mental health, social service, and legal professionals.

**Dr. Jennifer J. Harman**

Dr. Harman, an associate professor of psychology at Colorado State University, has widely researched the phenomenon of parental alienation and parental targeting and provides another example of a resolution focused approach to understanding and resolving familial conflict and alienation. Harman and several associate researchers have helped clarify parental alienation and parental targeting as a type of domestic violence (Harman et al., 2016; Harman et al., 2018; Harman et al., 2019).

Harman et al. (2018) frame the phenomena of parental alienation as a form of “hostile and instrumental human aggression…that has been controversial and largely overlooked by many social science researchers” (p. 1275). The efforts to establish parental alienation… “as a form of emotional abuse and domestic violence” highlights a definitive shift in the research and
provides a basis for increased understanding as well as an increased focus on developing ways to both prevent and intervene in cases of parental alienation and parental targeting (Harman et al., 2018, p. 1276).

**Rationale for Study and Gap in the Literature**

Few experiences in life are more painful than the end of a marriage. The tearing of the marital bond can produce extreme experiences of emotional and mental distress. For the child of divorcing parents, the pain of divorce can be equally distressing and immobilizing. In marital dissolutions, the well-being of the child(ren) is directly related to the quality of the re-organized relationship that the former spouses are able to achieve. Partners that are able to set aside their differences, and provide a supportive environment with shared parenting are likely to see their children heal and develop a healthy regard for self and others. In such cases, the emotional and mental pain of the family disruption can be mitigated, to some extent, by the efforts of the parents to provide a safe and supportive space for their child(ren) to enjoy a loving and constructive relationship with both parents.

The unfortunate reality, however, is that a percentage of divorcing parents, by design, are highly conflicted and unable to work through their differences in a productive or supportive manner. By the time the marital partners begin to seek assistance from outside sources, the relational resources of the marital partners are usually running thin or are nonexistent. Often, the first resources divorcing couples seek out are those in the court system. As an inherently adversarial system, family courts are designed to provide structure and resolutions to individuals who have not been able to achieve a mutually satisfying agreement through their efforts (Meier, 2009).
A Growing Social Problem

The growing social acceptance of divorce as a satisfactory way to manage marital conflict and discontent has contributed to the swelling family court docket and helped fuel the need for the court system to make determinations about how divorcing couples will manage the parenting of their collective children (Harman et al., 2016). Such a dynamic lends itself to the establishment of a number of relational triangulations that exacerbate an already inflamed mother-father-child triangle (Bowen, 1978). These interconnected triangles tend to exponentially expand as they fold in a variety of lawyers and law firms, mediators, social service, and mental health professionals, guardian ad litem, and expert witnesses.

In such a dynamic, the ability for one parent to initiate a campaign of disconnection and alienation of the couple’s child(ren) from the other parent is greatly enhanced. Divided parenting time offers opportunities for the alienating parent to begin building a negative narrative about the other parent and disrupt the relationship of the child with the targeted parent. In a relatively short, time the insidious phenomena of parental alienation and parental targeting can become a deeply rooted dynamic that is often unwittingly supported by the legal and social service entities with whom the parents have become fused (Harman et al., 2016).

The phenomenon of parental alienation and parental targeting is a field of inquiry struggling to find unity and structure. As research continues to more fully define the phenomenon and explore the underlying causes and contributing factors and develop effective ways to interrupt and reduce the destructive fallout of this form of domestic violence and child abuse, it is imperative to hear from those individuals who are at the center of the experience; the mothers, fathers, and children who are locked in disintegrating triangles of emotional and mental pain.
The Lived Experience of the Targeted Parent

To date, research on the lived experience of the familial triangle has been primarily focused on the child(ren) or adult children of parental alienation. While Baker (2005, 2006) has provided a wealth of information on the impact of parental alienation on children (including adult children), the research on the lived experience of the targeted parent and the alienating parent remains limited at best (Balmer et al., 2017; Maturana et al., 2018; Saini et al., 2016; Poustie et al., 2018; Balmer, 2018).

Because the current field of inquiry around parental alienation was largely birthed in the observations and postulations of Gardner and was initially defined as a problem located in the child, the experiences of both the mother and father have been largely set aside. This is unfortunate from a BFST perspective, which defines dysfunction in the child as a direct result of dyadic conflict and unresolved anxiety and emotional reactivity (Bowen 1978). As Bowen exerted, symptomatic children are best understood in the light of the parental dyad and the efforts of the parents to invite or draw the child into a triangled position (Bowen 1978; Freidman, 1991).

While the court system has contributed to the identified plight of the targeted parent in cases where one parent is attempting to damage or destroy the relational bond between the child and the other parent, parental alienation remains an intensely debated subject. In a relative pushme/pullyou dynamic, divorce lawyers have used the PAs platform as a way to defend against false allegations of abuse while simultaneously using the PAs modality as a way to define pathology in the mother, father, and child.

Currently, targeted parents have few resources from which to draw support. Typically, these resources are confined to those available through social media or advocacy groups. It is not unusual for targeted parents to experience a profound sense of loss, grief, isolation, stigma, and
hopelessness (Kruk, 2010). Suicide among targeted parents is an increasingly reported event; however, additional studies will need to focus on how the lived experience of parental targeting is linked to suicidal ideation.

**The Literature Gap**

An examination of the literature base on parental targeting demonstrates a significant lack of information or study on the lived experience of the targeted parent (Balmer et al., 2016; Ellis, 2005; Maturana et al., 2018). At the time of this study, this researcher was not able to find any studies that directly explored the effect of parental targeting on the relational well-being of the targeted parent.

Because the vast number of research studies on parental alienation and parental targeting have been based on the experiences and opinions of legal, social services, and mental health professionals, the need to increase the knowledge base about parental alienation and parental targeting is great (Balmer et al., 2017; Ellis, 2005).

**Implications for Christian Leaders and Educators**

Leadership has been broadly defined as the ability or art of influencing others. This concept of influence has been used as a backdrop for a number of leadership and educational development programs (Wilke et al., 2015). However, the relevance of developing the ultimate sphere of influence, leadership, and educational development in the home, is a field of inquiry ripe for exploration and study (Wilke et al., 2015). The home or family as the central unit or system within which leadership and education are most fully expressed is a concept that finds support as both a systemic and organizational construct (Fox & Baker, 2009; Gilbert, 2014).

As expressed by Gilbert (2006), parents are naturally occurring leaders and educators whose sphere of influence is the nuclear family. By identifying the familial unit as the primary
unit of study for systemic thinking, the concept of parental influence acts as a model establishing a set of guiding and enduring life principles for effective leadership in the home and larger social and organizational systems (Gilbert, 2006; Wilke et al., 2015). Because the family unit and the level of relational maturity (differentiation of self) one develops within the context of the home “forever influences” adult behavior, individuals who emerge from their family of origin with higher levels of differentiation (relational and emotional maturity) are more likely to become effective leaders and educators (Fox & Baker, 2009, p. 107).

The implications of a family leadership model that frames the parental dyad as the primary unit of influence are significant. Research has shown that higher levels of differentiation are linked to increased ability to relate well with others, manage emotional reactivity, maintain perspective and navigate difficult life experiences with better results than those with lower levels of differentiation (Bowen, 1978; Fox, & Baker, 2009; Kerr & Bowen, 1988; Kerr, 2019). Parents with low levels of differentiation generally experience more conflict, emotional reactivity, and chronic anxiety, while parents with higher levels of differentiation generally experience a more connected, respectful, and mutually satisfying relationship (Beal, 1998; Bowen, 1978; Kerr & Bowen, 1988; Kerr, 2019). According to BFST, the degree of differentiation expressed in the parental dyad are indicative of the level of differentiation that will be passed to their children (Bowen, 1978).

In short, the patterns, life principles, values, virtues, and level of differentiation in the parents predict the child’s ability to navigate the challenges of life effectively. This dynamic emphasizes the importance of a strong parental dyad equipped to act as agents of positive influence. As the primary source of influence in a child’s life, the role of the parental leader and
educator becomes an extraordinary opportunity to instill the guiding life principles and values that will define the child’s ability to lead self and others (Wilke et al., 2015).

The breakdown of the family unit is a concern for a number of social, spiritual, and organizational systems. The disruption, chaos, and emotional pain of marital discord and divorce is a reverberating experience that impacts the lives of hundreds of mothers, fathers, and children each year. For the Christian leader and educator, these broken familial systems present a number of complex challenges. Parental alienation and parental targeting are twin phenomena that represent an especially confusing, although important aspect of leadership and education.

The distressed family unit represents an opportunity for healing, relational realignment, support, and spiritual assistance by Christian leaders and educators (Slough, 2015). However, those with a heart for a biblical orientation to family structure may find direct interventions in conflicted and distressed familial systems poorly defined or lacking altogether. Thus, the development and implementation of biblically-based methods for providing support to the family unit are essential and relevant fields of service. Within the context of parental alienation and parental targeting, the concept of God’s Shalom peace, as a process for healing ruptured relationships between mothers, fathers, and children, provides a template for restoring the foreseeable loss of relationship with God, self, others, and community in those who experience domestic violence and abuse (Slough, 2015).

As expressed by Slough (2015), communities of faith can provide significant healing support for troubled families by bearing witness to their story, validating their experiences, providing needed support services, and providing the basis for renewed hope. This type of caring support in an invaluable way Christian leaders and educators can provide needed support to those experiencing parental alienation and parental targeting.
Ultimately, however, the most effective way to deal with parental alienation and parental targeting is to provide direct intervention in homes that demonstrate a propensity for high levels of conflict, emotional reactivity, fusion, and other forms of diminished differentiation. Such efforts, if directed at helping parents conceptualize their role as that of a parent leader and educator, provide an effective means through which mothers, fathers, and children can increase their respective levels of differentiation and reduce their tendencies for emotional reactivity, conflict, and disconnection.

Family leadership programs designed to support the role of the parent leader and parent educator offer the hope of transforming the family unit by reducing conflicting patterns of emotional reactivity and building increased levels of differentiation and spiritual maturity in all of the members of the family system. The vision of the family system and the parental dyad as the genesis of leadership and educational development provides a theological and theoretically sound agreement for the establishment of a family leadership model. Such an initiative could serve as the basis for helping the mothers, fathers, and children impacted by parental alienation and parental targeting find hope and healing within themselves, with others, with God, and in the larger systems and organizations of which they are a part.

Profile of the Current Study

Parental alienation and the subsequent phenomena of parental targeting is a growing social and spiritual concern. Having mainly been defined by the legal, social service, and mental health professionals with whom they interact, the mothers, fathers, and children impacted by parental alienation and parental targeting have rarely been given the opportunity to have their stories heard, validated, and recorded as the lived experiences they represent. This research study is an attempt to provide a platform for those whose lives have been deeply impacted by parental
targeting in the hope that their lived experiences will provide the basis for greater understanding and ultimately more opportunities for relational health, healing, and well-being as well as add to the current literature base and reinforce ongoing research.

Parental alienation and parental targeting are constructs that reflect the impact of systemic relational failure on the lives of the collective members of the familial unit. As the primary parental dyad is overtaken by ever-increasing tension and anxiety, their efforts to invite their children into an emotional triangle often offer a sense of temporary stability and reduced conflict (Beal, 1998; Bowen, 1988; Gilbert, 2014). However, once the triangle becomes unable to manage all of the chronic anxiety in the system, various members of the triangle will invite or draw additional entities into the system in an attempt to establish a sense of equilibrium (Bowen, 1998).

As the role of the legal, social and mental health systems become an embedded part of the parental alienation and parental targeting debate, controversies about the validity of the parental alienation phenomena have led to a variety of views and assertions about PA and its ability to adequately describe the phenomena of one parent’s intentional effort to damage or destroy the relational bond of the child with the other parent. Recent research has demonstrated the effort to better define the phenomena as a form of domestic violence and child abuse (Kruk, 2010; Harman et al., 2016).

The dynamic of parental alienation and the subsequent development of parental targeting is a phenomenon with significant implications for Christian leaders and educators. Limited resources for targeted parents necessitate opportunities for many forms of biblical support and interventions. For Christian leaders, these opportunities open the door for establishing God’s
Shalom peace in the lives of the mothers, fathers, and children who have experienced ruptures in their relationship with God, self, others, and the larger systems of which they are a part.

The dynamic of parental alienation and parental targeting also provide opportunities for Christian leaders and educators to recognize parents as naturally occurring leaders and educators with the capacity to influence the relational health and well-being of their children through reciprocating patterns that predict future relational and occupational success. The concept of a family leadership model designed to highlight the power of parental influence is a relevant and needed field of inquiry.
CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

“It is the glory of God to conceal a matter, But the glory of kings is to search out a matter.”
~ Proverbs 25:2 (Amp.)

As a philosophy of understanding, interpretive hermeneutic phenomenology is a reflective process that attempts to understand the essential meaning of a phenomenon or lived experience (Van Manen, 2015). It is a process that invites new understanding by encouraging the interplay of what is previously known (fore-projections) with what is newly known (Heidegger, 1962; Holroyd, 2007). This study utilized an interpretive hermeneutic phenomenological methodology to explore the lived experience of targeted parents and attempt to make meaning of the role intergenerational patterns of marital conflict and social structure play in parental alienating behaviors.

The study was guided by the theological concept of Shalom and parental targeting as a resultant loss of Shalom. Additional support was provided through the theoretical framework of Bowen family systems theory, which provided additional insight into the familial system and the role intergenerational patterns play in the phenomenon of parental targeting.

To accomplish the research objective, a qualitative research design was used to assess the self-reported perceptions and beliefs of targeted parents as they attempt to make meaning of the phenomena known as parental alienation. Using a dual interview process, verbal, written, and observational representations of the lived experience were gathered and divided into “structures of experience” or themes that were reflectively analyzed (Van Manen, 2015, p. 79). This chapter will include an outline of the research design, the sample selection process, details of the dual interview and data collection process, ethical considerations, as well as sections on how the collected data was processed and subsequently analyzed for thematic content. The chapter will
conclude with a detailed description of how the thematic content was further differentiated into transferable units of understanding.

**Research Design Synopsis**

**The Problem**

The phenomenon of parental alienation (PA) is not a new or uncommon problem (Rand, 2013). As a familial dynamic, marital discord has historically played a role in the quality of the relational bond in and among the various members of the family unit, most notably parent-parent, parent-child, and child-parent relationships (Amato & Patterson, 2017; Bowen, 1978; Campbell, 1992; Frost, 2015). Research on the role marital conflict plays in familial discord highlights the enduring nature of parental conflict and discord on the relational well-being of both the parental partners and children (Peleg, 2014; Wolfinger, 2000). Marital conflict has been linked to a number of adverse outcomes, including relational, emotional, behavioral, and spiritual difficulties (Fagan & Rector, 2000; Raley & Wildsmith, 2004; Rhoades & Stanley, 2014; Marquardt, 2005). However, the phenomenon of parental alienation is an especially troubling form of marital discord that is becoming increasingly prevalent (Harman et al., 2016; Meier, 2009).

A number of contemporary research studies portray parental alienation as a form of pathology that exists in all members of the family unit, including mother, father, and child(ren) (Baker, 2005; Baker, Burkhard, & Albertson-Kelly, 2012; Baker et al., 2014; Bernet & Baker, 2013; Childress, 2015; Gardner, 2002; Lorandos et al., 2013)). Because of the tendency for parental alienation to come to light during the divorce process, the phenomenon of parental alienation has become a familiar child-focused schema fostered by legal and social services.
authorities attempting to manage marital conflict and discord by relegating its resolution the
family court system (Meier, 2009; Johnston, 2005).

Contemporaneously, the phenomenon known as parental alienation has been defined by a
number of well-published psychiatrists, legal experts, and researchers who embrace the work of
2002) proposed an experience in which one parent (known as the alienating parent) deliberately
attempts to damage or destroy the relationship of the child with the other parent (known as the
rejected or targeted parent). As a result of Gardner’s observations, Gardner developed criteria
for “diagnosing” what he termed parental alienation syndrome or PAs (Gardner, 1987, 1992,
2002). According to Gardner, parental alienation syndrome or PAs is a form of mental illness
that develops in the child as a result of parental alienating behaviors (Gardner, 1987, 1991, 1992,
2002).

In the ensuing years, a plethora of legal, psychological, and research professionals have
used Gardner’s PAs criteria as a basis for understanding parental alienating behaviors and the
resultant emotional trauma of the child (Baker et al., 2012; Baker & Fine, 2014; Darnell, 1998;
Jaffe et al., 2017; Johnston, 2005). As a result, much of the historical research on the
phenomenon of parental alienation is based on Gardner’s proposed PAs model, which was
developed as a result of observational and subjective assumptions and hypotheses void of
scientific validity (Grohol, 2018; Meier, 2009; O’Donohue et al., 2016; Johnston, 2005; Walker
& Shapiro, 2010). As delineated by Johnston (2005) Gardner’s PAs model “can be viewed as
‘iatrogenic,’ meaning that it provides a psychiatric prescription that causes its own disease!” (p.
774).
In recent years, however, research on parental alienation has separated into two camps. Most notably, allegiances have divided between those who embrace Gardner’s PAs model and those who define parental alienation and parental alienating behaviors as relational issues. While some researchers continue to use the terms PA and PAs interchangeable, there is a decisive move to categorize the phenomenon of parental alienation and targeted parenting as relational rather than a form of pathological disorder (Grohol, 2018; Pepiton et al., 2012; Walker & Shapiro, 2010).

The ongoing effort to frame parental alienating behaviors as either a mental illness or disorder in the child, the mother, the father or a combination thereof, provides the backdrop against which a growing number of divorce and child custody cases are based (Maturana et al., 2018; Walters & Shapiro, 2010). The extensive use of the PAs model in the legal and social service’s systems has helped push the narrative of disorderedness and mental illness and reduce research into the role of dyadic conflict and discord play in setting up and maintaining the child alienation process (Pepiton et al., 2012; Walker & Shapiro, 2010).

This research study maintained that much of the confusion about parental alienation and parental targeting developed due to the limited amount of inquiry of the lived experience of parental alienation. According to Crist and Tanner (2003), qualitative research is often used as a starting point for “understanding human experience” (p. 203). Within the context of qualitative inquiry, studies framed as hermeneutic and phenomenological, are designed to work “with” the data to provide deeper insight and awareness about shared phenomena (Crowther et al., 2017, p. 829).

To date, few research studies focus on the lived experience of families who experience parental alienation or targeted parenting (Balmer et al., 2017; Finzi-Dottan et al., 2012; Maturana
et al., 2018). According to Balmer et al. (2017), “much of the historical literature that does exist focused on the perceived or postulated characteristics of the alienating parent and the targeted child” (p. 1). Therefore, this study attempted to provide additional insight and understanding of the lived experience of parental alienation from the perspective of the targeted parent. By experientially engaging targeted parents, the study provided a more comprehensive picture of the lived experience of parental targeting, how intergenerational patterns of marital conflict influence the alienation process and impact relational well-being across the familial unit. The implications of parental alienation and parental targeting were considered within the context of Christian leadership and educational endeavors.

**Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to understand the lived experience of parental targeting and the role intergenerational patterns of marital discord and social structure play in the formation of parental alienating behaviors, as well as the effect of alienating behaviors on the relational well-being of targeted parents. This study utilized a collaborative integration of Bowen family systems theory as a means through which to understand better the phenomenon of parental targeting and the role intergenerational patterns of marital conflict play in the formation of alienating behavior and the implications of parental alienating behaviors for Christian leaders and educators.

Because there is presently no universally accepted definition of parental alienation, this research study generally defined parental alienation as a form of dyadic conflict in which one parent (known as the alienating parent) attempts to damage or destroy the relationship of the child with the other parent (known as the targeted parent) (Balmer, el a., 2017; Darnell, 1998; Saini et al., 2016). Parental alienating behaviors were defined as those behaviors and actions that
support or result in a relational breach between the targeted parent and the child(ren) (Darnell, 1998; Harman et al., 2016). This study was framed within the context of Heidegger’s interpretive hermeneutic phenomenological model, which espouses the ongoing revision of understanding as a means for making sense of lived experiences (Heidegger 1962; Dreyfus, 1992; Van Manen, 2015). This study also utilized Bowen family systems theory (Bowen 1978; Kerr & Bowen, 1988), which proposes a multigenerational transmission process in which relational patterns and experiences in one’s family of origin influence and perpetuate along generational lines. The study was undergirded by a theology of Shalom, which delineates God’s desire for harmonious relational well-being in one’s self, with others, with God, and with nature (Plantinga, 1995).

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

RQ1. What is the meaning ascribed to the experience of parental alienation by targeted parents?

RQ2. What are the characteristics and dominant themes associated with parental targeting?

RQ3. What role, if any, do intergenerational patterns and social structure play in the phenomenon of parental alienation and parental targeting?

RQ4. What impact, if any, does parental targeting have on relational well-being?

This qualitative, hermeneutic phenomenological study was designed to facilitate learning, make meaning of and further define the phenomenon of parental alienation and parental targeting, and subsequently explore and better understand the role intergenerational patterns in one’s family of origin and social structure play in the formation of parental alienating behaviors. Each research question was designed to provide an open and unbiased platform through which to communicate the participant’s thoughts, ideas, insights, beliefs, and perceptions.
Research Design and Methodology

This qualitative research study utilized an interpretive hermeneutic phenomenological (IHP) framework to explore the lived experience of targeted parents as expressed in the phenomena of parental alienation. Because qualitative research approaches are designed to explore or make meaning of human experience or phenomena, a qualitative research approach attempts to make meaning of a particular human experience or phenomena as it is express in the lived experience of the participants (Creswell, 2014; Van Manen, 2015). It is a progressive process that attempts to “capture and study” the complexities of the phenomena as it occurs in its natural setting (Leedy & Ormrod, 2019).

Qualitative research is generally used to expand the current knowledge base of an un-researched or under-researched subject and set the stage of further inquiry. Because qualitative research tends to be less structured and more malleable by design, its inherent flexibility allows the researcher to follow the flow of information being gathered and restructure in light of increased knowledge in a reciprocating and hermeneutic fashion (Stolorow, 2011; Van Manen, 2015).

Interpretive hermeneutic phenomenology is a specific method of qualitative design, based on the works of Martin Heidegger (Neubauer et al., 2019; Sloan, & Bowe, 2014). Heidegger was a student of Edmond Husserl, who is generally considered the father of phenomenology (Kafle, 2011). While both Husserl and Heidegger embraced phenomenology as a philosophy or method for studying human phenomena, Husserl postulated a descriptive or transcendental version of phenomenology inquiry while Heidegger was oriented to an interpretive or hermeneutic approach.
A hermeneutic phenomenological research approach, based on Heidegger’s philosophy of interpretive methodology, is geared toward understanding human experience and increasing “sensitivity to human’ ways of being-in-the-world (Dreyfus, 1991). It is an inherently interpretive process, as expressed by Crist & Tanner, (2003), “used when the research question asks for the meaning of a phenomenon with the purpose of understanding the human experience” (p. 1). As succinctly defined by Dreyfus (1991), hermeneutic phenomenology “is an interpretation of human beings as essentially self-interpreting thereby showing that interpretation is the proper method of studying human beings” (p. 34).

As an interpretive process, the hermeneutic phenomenological design is, by nature, a nonlinear and interactive progression of the interplay between the researcher, the data, and the interpretive method. As such, the process can be described as an evolving method of inquiry that adjusts, realigns, and overlaps with each new line of investigation.

Interpretive hermeneutic phenomenological studies begin with a desire to know more about the lived experience of a particular group. Care is taken to develop criteria through which to identify and ensure a consistent sample (Crist & Tanner, 2011). An adequate sample size is reached when interpretations are clear and visible, no new findings are revealed by new informants, and narratives become redundant (Benner, 1994 Creswell, 2014).

The traditional method of data collection in interpretive hermeneutic phenomenology has been the qualitative, in-depth interview (Leedy & Ormrod, 2019; Lopez & Willis, 2004). However, as expressed by Holroyd (2007), “it is not enough” to ask each individual what is it like to live within the context of their experience because each individual’s understanding of an experience …has a deep connection with his or her history and culture. …to really engage in the topic, there needs to be a sharing of his or her experiences – a storytelling of sorts – and it is in these stories that meaning and understanding are disclosed (p. 7).
Because this study was an attempt to understand better the lived experience of individuals who have experienced targeting parenting, within the context of the parental alienation phenomena, interpretive hermeneutic phenomenology offered an appropriate framework for allowing these individuals to find their voices and tell their stories. This method of inquiry provided an effective means for making meaning of the lived experience of targeted parents.

A significant aspect of interpretive hermeneutic phenomenology is Heidegger’s concept of one’s “lifeworld” or “being-in-the-world, which postulates that one’s experiences in life are intrinsically linked to the meaning people make of their particular life circumstances and contexts (Gorichanaz et al., 2018; Van Manen, 2015). These lifeworld experiences become the backdrop through which people make meaning of their lives and against which the researcher must interpret the phenomenon. As expressed by Neubauer et al. (2019), interpretive phenomenologists attempt to translate the narratives provided by the research participants in light of their social, cultural, and political contexts.

For targeted parents, the context of parental alienation is the backdrop or lifeworld, that defines the being-in-the-world experiences this research study attempted to uncover. Because the dynamic of parental alienation reflects the social, cultural, and political ideologies that currently contribute to the broader understanding of the alienation process, these contributions were factored into the interpretive hermeneutic phenomenological process.

Correspondingly, interpretive hermeneutic phenomenology does not “negate the use of a theoretical orientation or conceptual framework as a component of inquiry” (Lopez & Willis, 2004, p. 730). Because this study utilized a family systems framework, as postulated by Murray Bowen, and used Bowen family systems theory (BFST) as an orienting framework through which to better understand how multigenerational patterns impact the lived experience of
parental targeting within the context of parental alienation, the integrated use of Bowen family systems theory and interpretive hermeneutic phenomenology reflects the congruence of IHP and BFST as interpretive measures through which to better understand the lived experience of targeted parenting.

This study began with identifying a sample population that represents a group of people who have lived experience as targeted parents. These sample participants were invited to participate in a dual online interview process that began with a study of the individual’s multigenerational family system known as a genogram. The genogram provided a three-generational map of the demographic, relational, perceptual, emotional, and spiritual patterns of the participant’s lifeworld. Phase two of the online interview process asked each participant to write a letter to either their alienated child, the alienated parent or a social service, mental health, or legal professional who played a significant role in their alienated experience. Participants were asked to complete their letter before attending the final interview. This final interview included an invitation for the participant to express what they would want others to know about the lived experience of parental targeting. Participants were encouraged to share these descriptive narratives through storytelling, poetry, artwork, photos, or other forms of media. All media was in a form conducive to digital submission.

The data collected from the dual interview process included verbal, written, and observational data. Both online interviews were audio and video recorded. The researcher’s field notes were also utilized as a source of data representative of the participant’s lived experience. The collected data were transcribed verbatim and subjected to an analytic process designed to isolate certain commonalities, codes, and theme clusters of experience, which were subsequently
analyzed and reported. Examples of the participant’s comments were then linked to their corresponding thematic clusters.

The results were utilized to further develop and define the meaning participants make of targeted parenting and to define universal essence that is transferable to individuals with similar lived experience. Overarching themes identified within the context of the analysis were explored for possible theological ideas related to the concept of Shalom and relational well-being. Implications for Christian leaders and educators were considered in an attempt to identify possible interventive and supportive roles for the congregational church and para-church organizations. Such understanding could provide the basis for the development of pro-family programs and curriculum that emphasize intact family units, reconciliation, and relational healing.

**Setting**

The proposed setting for the dual interview process was a private, online therapeutic setting or platform. The interview setting was designed to provide a safe, discreet, and confidential location for participants to engage in the two-phase online interview process. This setting provided the advantage of flexible scheduling to optimize convenience for the identified participants. Participants were able to choose daytime, evening, or weekend times for completing the interview process. Due to the sensitive nature of the data to be collected, the private and discreet nature of the online therapeutic setting provided the participants with a comfortable, safe, and supportive venue for discussing their experiences as targeted parents.

This setting provided for both video and audio recording capabilities as well as secure and confidential storage of collected data. The online video conferencing venue, *Doxy.me*, is a HIPPA secure, encrypted platform designed to provide professional security and ensure against
any unauthorized access to stored data. All collected data will be archived for three years or until such time as the data is deemed obsolete and destroyed in a manner consistent with the confidential disposable of participant data. Data collected were categorized according to traditional thematic analysis and was only used for the purposes outlined in the research design and as authorized by the institutional review board (IRB) approval and the informed consent of the participants.

**Participants**

The goal of this research study was to understand better the lived experience of individuals who have experienced parental targeting. Participants for this study were selected using a non-probability, purposive, or criterion sampling technique in which the participants were identified based on several distinct conditions and characteristics. Participants selected for this study met the following criteria, which was used as a measure to ensure each participant could give voice to the lived experience parental targeting.

All participants met the following set of established criteria.

1. Divorced individuals at least 18 years of age, who were married a minimum of five years and were at least two years post-divorce. These parameters are designed to assure the capacity of each participant to meet adult consent requirements and provide objective feedback.

2. Individuals who resided within the mid-western state of Indiana.

3. Individuals who were willing and able to make themselves available for two separate online interview sessions lasting between 1 hour and 1.5 hours each.

4. Individuals who were willing and able to complete both phases of the interview process within a two-week time frame. This time frame allowed for congruence and consistency between the two phases of the interview process.

5. Individuals who have lived experience as a targeted parent (i.e., parents who self-identify as a targeted parent based on their personal belief and perception of having been subjected to the intentional efforts of a marital partner who engaged in
alienating behaviors in order to damage or destroy the relationship of the targeted parent with children born or acquired during the marital relationship).

6. Individuals who could provide rich, descriptive narratives of the lived experience of parental targeting. In order to assure the participant’s capacity for providing a detailed account of their lived experience, participants were encouraged to provide a short one to two paragraph narrative about why they found the study subject interesting and why they would like to participate in the study. One open-ended question was included in the initial inquiry questionnaire to facilitate this aspect of the process.

Perspective participants who expressed a desire to be included in the study were asked to complete and submit a short online questionnaire to establish their status as a qualified participant. Participants who met the criteria for inclusion were invited to join the study. Qualifying participants were notified by email and provided with a link to a secure online scheduling system where they were able to schedule appointments for both interviews.

Once scheduled, the participant received an email verification of their scheduled appointments, instructions and information about the nature of the interviews, an online link to a pdf of the informed consent document as well as a list of professional support services to be utilized at the participant’s discretion. The interview process began with the selection and scheduling of the first participant and continued until an adequate sample had been established.

In studies that employ an interpretive hermeneutic phenomenological method, sample size is based on the emergence of new data. Because IHP studies rely on a lengthy interview process to provide data, the dual online interview design of the study produced a large amount of textual data (Leedy & Ormrod, 2019). Thus, the intended sample size for the study was 5-6 participants; however, participants were added to the study until procured narratives became redundant, and no new findings or meanings could be identified (Creswell, 2014). Once it was determined that the narratives had become redundant, and new participants were providing no
new data, the sample size was considered adequate. The interview process continued until the requisite standard of saturation has been met (Creswell, 2014).

Potential participants were pulled from the greater Indianapolis metropolitan area and surrounding counties. Potential participants were solicited through a variety of outreach methods, including informational fliers and letters distributed by the USPS and email. Distribution sites included counseling or therapeutic centers and agencies, law firms, churches, and other potential gathering sites such as community centers and social service agencies. Potential participants were considered without regard to social/economic background, race, gender, religious affiliation, ethnicity, or sexual orientation.

**Role of the Researcher**

“The opportunity to engage in hermeneutic understanding is likely to arise when individuals undergo any experience that serves to disrupt the ordinary, taken-for-granted aspects of existence” (Holroyd, 2007, p. 2). This type of “negative dialectical experience” tends to shift or even negate previous ways of being and knowing with our self, with others and with God (Gadamer, 1960, 1989). Interpretive hermeneutic phenomenological study acts as a bridge between old ways of understandings and new ways of knowing, thinking, being, and understanding. It is a process defined by humility and a readiness to set aside presuppositions in favor of new, richer, and more meaningful understandings about self, others, and the world in which we live.

According to Heidegger (1962), hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry can never be free of presuppositions. For the researcher who embraces an interpretive hermeneutic method, the identifying of these “fore-having” or “fore-conceptions, helps identify a critical part of the hermeneutic process (Heidegger, 1962, Dreyfus, 1991). The knowing of one’s own pre-
formulated understandings is a necessary and productive aspect of a not-knowing or collaborative learning experience. In this sense, interpretive, hermeneutic study is an interconnected process between the researcher and the researched.

The phenomena of parental alienation and targeted parenting are, for this researcher, defined by two dominant orientations or contexts. As a licensed marriage and family therapist (LMFT), licensed addiction counselor (LAC), certified domestic mediator, and parenting coordinator who regularly works with conflicted couples either in the process of divorce or attempting to recover from a divorce, this researcher can attest that the impact of alienating behaviors on all members of the family unit is significant. Exposure to the phenomena of parental alienation has expanded this researcher’s knowledge base and created a desire to understand better the dynamics that lead to this type of familial discord. Engagement with the phenomena of parental alienation has helped solidify this researcher’s belief that knowledge of an experience does not equate to the ability to understand the experience. In essence, the clinical aspect of this researcher’s experience with alienating behaviors supports the supposition that there is a great deal about the phenomena of parental alienation that is unknown and misunderstood. This seems especially true with regard to the experience of the targeted parent.

The other relevant context from which a number of pre-suppositions emanate is the researcher’s personal experience of parental targeting. As a targeted parent, 25 years post-divorce, the lived experience of parental targeting provides ample opportunity for reflection on those things that “existed in advance” as an “already decided way of conceiving that which we are interested in” (Holroyd, 2007, p. 3). The need to “work the fore-structure” as a method for reducing the impact of projected meanings is a necessary element in interpretive hermeneutic inquiry (Heidegger, 1962; Gadamer, 1989).
Thus, the pre-suppositions or fore-knowings of the researcher are not seen as problematic ideologies that need to be bracketed off, but rather utilizes as “valuable guides to the inquiry” (Neubauer et al., 2019, p. 95). The intersection of the researcher’s pre-assumptions with the subject of inquiry begins the process of ongoing revisionary meaning between the individual parts and the collective whole (Heidegger, 1962). As proposed by Heidegger, this hermeneutic circle of revisionary interpretation, is not a “ciculus vitiosus” to be avoided but a vital element in building understanding (Heidegger, 1962, p. 194). The key, according to Heidegger, is to “come into it in the right way” because within the circle “is hidden a positive possibility of the most primordial kind of knowing” (Dreyfus, 1991, p. 195).

This working of the fore-structure, as proposed by Heidegger, is best accomplished through the dynamic of the hermeneutic circle, which according to Heidegger, helps reorient presuppositions in a collaborative manner with interpretations in the present, which subsequently interact and produce new meanings of understanding in an interdependent and interdependent manner (Heidegger, 1962; Crist & Tanner, 2003). Within the context of the hermeneutic circle, interpretation is a constant revisionary process through which the researcher revises his/her understanding in light of newly acquired information. This new information is synthesized with previous understanding in a non-linear process in which pre-understandings or fore-conceptions modify understanding in a constant process of renewed projection (Gadamer, 1989).

Because interpretive hermeneutic phenomenology does not require researchers to bracket their pre-conceptions or theories and acknowledges that people are “inextricably situated” in their worlds, the “recognizing assumptions” of the researcher are typically utilized as the forward arc of the hermeneutic circle while interpretations act as the return arc of the circle (Packer & Addison, 1989, p. 275). According to Gadamer (1960) and as restated by Crowther, Ironside,
Spence, and Smythe, 2017), the hermeneutic researcher is charged with “articulating the pre-understandings and power relations” they bring to the listening and interpretation of stories, always being open to the impact of their already-there prejudices (p. 829). Such transparency is an essential part of the interpretive hermeneutic phenomenological process.

Through the lens of interpretive hermeneutic inquiry, understanding begins with a self-reflective review of one’s own fore-projections and pre-assumptions. Assuming the role of the researcher requires a delineation of these forms of fore-knowledge and the understandings that spring from this researcher’s lived experiences as both a professional psychotherapist, domestic mediator, parenting coordinator, and targeted parent.

The following fore-projections are reflections of the experiential horizons, lifeworld, or state of being-in-the-world of the researcher. As such, these horizons of understanding include but are not limited to

1. A biblical orientation of God as the originating Author of all Truth.

2. All human beings as intrinsically valuable and image-bearers of the creative God even in their fallen state.

3. All Truth is God’s Truth. God’s Truth can be found in every field of inquiry. (Pearcey, 2005).

4. People make sense in the context of their lived experiences.

5. Behavior is an external manifestation of a person’s internal beliefs, perceptions, thoughts, and emotions.

6. Painful emotional experiences are perceived as unendurably traumatic when they occur outside of the context of the person’s known lifeworld or context and in the absence of a secure relational and emotional attachment to others (Stolorow, 2011).

7. Emotional and mental pain are not illnesses or disorders to be treated or from which to recover.

8. Emotional and mental pain are trauma responses to be validated, shared, and relationally healed in self, with others, through Christ.
Ethical Considerations

Participants accepted into the study were provided with an informed consent form, as approved by the Liberty University Institutional Review Board, that outlined the structure of the research design and outlined any inherent risks associated with their participation. The assumed risk for participant harm was compared to that which would be expected of a normal psychotherapy process. However, due to the sensitive nature of the subject matter, care was taken to provide each participant with a list of licensed professionals who are qualified to provide any type of therapeutic support the participant desired or needed during or following participation in the study.

All data collected from the participants were categorized by means of a pseudonym name and numbering system designed to maintain anonymity and confidentiality. Hard copy, textual data generated throughout the study were stored in locked file cabinets at a secure location protected by both on-site and off-site security. All computer-generated files and data, video, and audio recordings were maintained on an encrypted, external hard-drive to avoid any opportunity for cloud or internet security failures or “hacks.”

All needed aspects of the research study were designed to meet or exceed traditional standards for informed consent and secure storage. These standards included a statement that identified the research study as a voluntary event, provided the purpose, duration, and procedural aspects of the study, outlined the reasonable, foreseeable risks or discomforts associated with the study, the potential benefits of the participant’s voluntary participation, and any alternative procedures or course of treatment associated with the study. All participants were required to sign a consent form verifying receipt of notification and attesting to their ability to understand and choose to participate in the research study.
Data Collection Methods and Instruments

According to Creswell (2014), qualitative researchers typically gather “multiple forms of data…rather than rely on a single data source” (p. 185). In this study, participant data was gathered through a variety of data sources, including (1) an assessment questionnaire, (2) the collaborative creation of a multigenerational genogram, (3) written narratives expressed through letter writing, and transcribed textual data of collaborative interactions and (4) video and audio recordings. See attaches appendices for examples of the questionnaire, participant solicitation, and interview protocols.

Collection Methods

All data were collected during online encounters between the researcher (interviewer) and the participant. The interviews took place in a safe, comfortable, and inviting online video conferencing setting designed to provide the participant with an environment conducive to the telling of their experiential story. During the first of two interviews, the participant was asked to participate in the creation of a multigenerational genogram. The genogram or family map is a collaborative and interactive process between the researcher and interviewee designed to outline and explore salient and nodal familial events, relational patterns, and other patterns of functioning (McGoldrick et al., 2005; McGoldrick et al., 2008). During the second interview, participants were asked to provide a written (previously prepared) letter to share. Participants were also given an opportunity, during the second interview, to share how they felt their lived experience had impacted their relational lifeworld and what they believe are the most salient aspects of the lived phenomenon of parental targeting. Collected video and audio data were secured via an encrypted, HIPPA compliant database. Hard copy transcripts were coded to ensure confidentiality and stored in a security-protected, professional office space.
Instruments and Protocols

The initial assessment questionnaire was defined by the criteria established for inclusion in the study. Once the first participant was approved, both of the interviews were scheduled via a secure online scheduling software. Subsequent interviews were scheduled and completed until such time as saturation had been assessed.

Inquiry Questionnaire

Potential participants who expressed a desire to be included in the study were asked to complete a brief online questionnaire that was managed by Survey Monkey. Participants who fell within the parameters of the study criteria were sent an acceptance email outlining the parameters of the study as well as a link which through which participants could schedule two interview appointments via an online scheduling system. The online scheduling process was provided by Full Slate, which is a secure and encrypted online scheduling service that does not require users to create an account or register. To schedule, participants only needed to enter the same email through which they received their acceptance into the study.

Once scheduled, participants received an email confirming their appointment times as well as a link to the informed consent document (as approved by the Liberty University IRB), which they were asked to read and submit during their first online interview. Participants were given an opportunity to address any concerns they had about the process before signing the document. The confirmation email also included a list of licensed professional health care agencies and individuals qualified to provide support should the participant feel such support would be helpful. Participants were additionally provided with contact information for the researcher. A finalized copy of the questionnaire protocol has been placed in the attached appendices section.
Interview One

The first online interview was framed by the collaborative construction of a genogram, which was used to identify salient aspects of the participant’s familial life and the intergenerational patterns that informed the participant’s relational, emotional, mental, and spiritual experiences. The genogram, according to McGoldrick et al. (2008), is an established and “practical framework for understanding family patterns” (p. 1). As delineated by McGoldrick et al. (2008), genograms typically record information about family members and their relationships over at least three generations. As a fundamental aspect of Bowen family systems theory, the genogram is a well-known inquiry instrument used to gather information of a person’s immediate and extended family members that influence their relational, emotional, behavioral, and spiritual well-being. A copy of the finalized genogram protocol was placed in the appendices section.

The genogram inquiry used in this research study focused on several salient aspects of the participant’s life and broadly included

- Demographic information or historical facts
- Dates of births, marriages, marital separations, co-habitations, divorces, illness, deaths, etc.
- Sibling position
- Ethnic, class, and religious background
- Occupation and education
- State of current relationships
- Patterns of functioning
- Contextual factors
- Religious, Spiritual and Transcendent Experiences and Orientations

Because the construction of a genogram is a collaborative and evolving process, questions are generally fashioned in response to the shared narratives of the interviewee. As a tool for eliciting individual and family narratives about specific events, such information is typically revealed as a result of attempting to understand the individual within the context of the
larger system. For this study, the genogram was utilized to explore a specific lived experience, parental targeting, and its impact on the relational, emotional, behavior, and spiritual well-being of the individual and the familial unit. Specific areas of inquiry sought to understand the role intergenerational patterns of marital conflict play in parental targeting. Questioning followed a natural progression from questions about the problem to who was involved and how the experience impacted the participant (McGoldrick et al., 2008). Examples of specific questions included

- Marital conflict and discord are normal aspects of a marital relationship. What kinds of conflict, discord, or problems did you experience in your marriage?
- During your marriage, how would you describe your relationship with your partner?
- Can you identify a time or event during the marriage that significantly changed the dynamic of the marital relationship?
- During your marriage, how would you describe your relationship with your child/children?
- Have any extended family members had particular marital or parenting problems or concerns?
- Are there certain family members who have more power to define what will happen in a relationship?

**Interview Two**

The second online interview was a letter-writing exercise in which the participants were asked to write a letter to either the child(ren) from which they are currently alienated, the alienating parent, or a social service, legal, or mental health professional they believe significantly impacted their lived experience as a targeted parent. The participants were asked to write the letter “as if” the intended party would be reading the letter. The participants were asked to complete the letter before the interview session. The letter was in a form conducive to digital submission. Participants who felt inclined to engage with the subject of their letter-writing experience were asked to consult a qualified therapist or counselor for guidance.
Additionally, the participants were encouraged to explain how the experience of parental alienation had impacted their lives, their relationship with self, others, and the God of their understanding. The participant was also provided with an opportunity to share what they wanted others to know about the experience of parental targeting. Participants were encouraged to submit any additional forms of lived expression in the form of poetry, written word, journal entries, statements, photo, artwork, etc., they believed will facilitate the interview process (Van Manen, 2015). All such submissions were in a form conducive to digital submission. A copy of the second interview protocol has been placed in the appendices section.

**Video and Audio Recordings**

Observational forms of data, including the video and audio recording made during the two interviews, were screened for information that would add to the depth of the research inquiry. Such notations were documented and included in the content analysis process. As expressed by Morse (2012), observational data collected through video and audio recordings provide the researcher with opportunities to capture intricate aspects and details of the interview process (changes in facial expression, emotional shifts, voice inflections, etc.) that might be missed through other means of interaction and data collection. Video and audio recordings will be considered additional forms of the IHP reflective interpretive process.

**Field Journal**

The researcher utilized and maintained a field journal that provided an additional level of recursive data. These notes, observations, and insights acted as a background for preliminary organizing and thematic coding of data. Such inquiry also provided insight into the ways “*my* experiences could be *our* experiences.” (Van Manen, 2015, p. 57). As expressed by Van Manen, reflective awareness of “one’s own experiences of a phenomenon may provide the researcher
with clues for orienting oneself to the phenomenon and thus to all the other stages of phenomenological research” (p. 57). The field journal was considered confidential in nature, and care was taken to secure all collected data in a secure manner.

**Procedures**

This qualitative research study utilized an interpretive, hermeneutic phenomenological method designed to elicit data about the lived experience of parental targeting. As an aspect of the phenomena of parental alienation, parental targeting was isolated as a specific element of the phenomena and a subject worthy of exploration in its own right.

To accomplish the research goal of increased understanding of the lived experience of parental targeting, participants were asked to engage in a two-part, online interview process. Participants chosen for the study self-identified as a targeted parent, be at least 18 years of age, and at least two years post-divorce.

In order to assure the safety and well-being of the participants and mediate any risk associated with participation in the study, each participant was dually informed of any foreseeable risk factors. Participants were asked to complete an informed consent form and were provided with a comprehensive list of qualified professionals who could provide needed support should the participant feel such support is warranted.

A proposed consent form and professional service provider list were submitted for the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Liberty University for evaluation and approval. A copy of the assessment questionnaire, the questions proposed for each phase of the interview process, and solicitation documents were also be submitted for review by the IRB. Other documents submitted for review by the IRB was an outline of the proposed safety measures that will be implemented in order to assure the safety of the participant’s confidentiality and anonymity. Care
was taken to make sure all documents submitted for IRB review contained all required elements and conformed to the IRBs delineated standards as documented on the website and in provided templates.

Data Analysis

Qualitative research has been described as a process through which researchers attempt to extrapolate meaning from the lived experience (Roberts, 2010). It differs from quantitative research in that the researcher is considered the primary research instrument (Roberts, 2010). Qualitative research is also unique in that the data produced are words and observations that represented the ideas, perceptions, beliefs, and understandings of those who have experienced the phenomena of interest.

The process through which qualitative data is analyzed can be complex due to the quantity of data collected. As explained by Erlingsson & Brysiewicz (2017), “The objective in qualitative content analysis is to systematically transform a large amount of text into a highly organized and concise summary of key results” (p. 94). Through the process of qualitative thematic analysis, large amounts of text can be coded, categorized, and thematically explored as a way of making meaning out of human experience.

Analysis Methods

The majority of the data produced as a result of this qualitative study, by utilizing an interpretive, hermeneutic phenomenological methodology, came from transcribed audio-recorded interviews, field journal or interview entries, visual observations, and participant letters. To process this data into units of understanding, a thematic analysis (TA) method was utilized, similar to the models expressed by Clark, Braun, and Van Manen (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Clarke & Braun, 2017; Clarke, Braun, & Hayfield, 2015; Van Manen, 2015). Procedural insights were
also be gleaned from the work of Erlingsson and Brysiewicz (2017) concerning coding and thematic developmental procedure.

This process began with the transcription of all collected data. Analysis of the raw data from verbatim transcribed interviews, interview notes, and participant submissions were systematically coded and then grouped into themes to be further developed into overarching themes, interpretation, and meanings (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Clarke & Braun, 2017; Clarke et al., 2015; Van Manen, 2015). Through the use of thematic analysis, data was progressively broken down the whole of the text into smaller parts, which according to the hermeneutic circle, simultaneously maintain the reflection of the whole while further delineating the perceptive parts that emerge from the data. In short, “each part should reflect the whole, and the whole should be reflected in each part” (Heidegger 1962).

While the steps of thematic analysis are not linear in nature, the progression included the following.

1. Analysis began by reading and rereading the transcripts, listening to the audio recordings, and observing the video recording in order to facilitate familiarization with the data (Clarke et al., 2015).

2. The data was then divided into smaller units that identified relevant features of the data. This process of identifying patterns in the data (coding) helped group together similar data segments that related to the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Clarke & Braun, 2017; Clark et al., 2015). These smaller units of meaning were coded or labeled in such a way as to distinguish the meaning of the text in a one or two-word form (Erlingsson & Brysiewicz, 2017).

3. The researcher grouped together codes (that capture the key aspects of the data) into categories that could be further explored as expressed themes that attempt to add additional understanding and meaning to the text (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Clarke & Braun, 2017; Clark et al., 2015).

4. Potential themes were reviewed to ensure they were relevant to the research questions and reflected the content of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Clarke & Braun, 2017; Clark et al., 2015).
5. Identified themes were further defined by a short descriptive narrative or commentary that provided a brief summary of each theme. Thematic names were designed to capture the essence of the theme (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Clarke & Braun, 2017; Clark et al., 2015).

6. The researcher wrote a report that explained why the researcher chose to use thematic analysis as well as the specific themes, descriptive narrative, and commentary of each theme (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Clarke & Braun, 2017; Clark et al., 2015).

7. As new information entered into the process, revisions took place, and new meanings correspondingly emerged (Erlingsson & Brysiewicz, 2017).

As a final step of the thematic analytic process, the researcher further analyzed the themes developed by the first phase of the analytic process through the lens of Van Manen (Van Manen, 2015). This final phase of analysis attempted to explore the fundamental lifeworld themes or “existentials” of the targeted parent (p. 101). The four fundamental lifeworlds or existentials that served as guides to this reflective and interpretive phase of the analysis process included lived space, lived body, lived time, and lived human relation (Van Manen, 2015, p. 101). Because these four existentials or lifeworlds represent universal aspects of the human experience, they were an appropriate lens through which to further expand this phenomenological study of the lived experience of parental targeting (Van Manen, 2015, p. 102).

More clearly defined, the four fundamental lifeworlds include

**Lived Space (spatiality)**

The existential lifeworld of lived space can be defined as felt space or the spaces that affect the way a person feels. As a category of inquiry, the lived space existential provides a frame for understanding how day-to-day life is experienced. Thus, lived space represents the places, landscapes, and settings where people can “be” at home with their authentic self (Van Manen, 2015, p. 102).
**Lived Body (corporeality)**

The existential lifeworld of lived body can be defined as the experience of being bodily in the world. It represents the physical or external experiences of life or bodily presence. Expressions of lived body experiences could include physical manifestations of internal experiences i.e., blushing, drooping shoulders, tears, flushing, etc.

**Lived Time (temporality)**

The existential lifeworld of lived time can be defined as subjective time as opposed to clock time or objective time (Van Manen, 2015, p. 104). Lived time represents the various “horizons of a person’s temporal” or earthly landscape and can be generally be defined as simultaneously having an experiential past, present, and future (p. 104).

**Lived Other (relationality)**

The existential lifeworld of lived other can be defined as the experience of relational connection between two people. It is the experience of the other that often begins as a corporal or physical awareness and deepens because of a sense of connectedness, bond, or relationship. It is the ability to transcend self by connecting to an other. (Van Manen, 2015, p. 105).

The interconnected existentials of lived body, lived space, lived time, and lived other form an intricate and interwoven unity of human experience through which to better understand the lifeworld of the targeted parent. As a final interpretive phase of this hermeneutic phenomenological study, Van Manen’s model provided a method for disseminating the dominant themes of the targeted parent’s experience (Lauterbach, 2018). This final process helped bring forth the universal and transferable essence of the phenomenon and thus provided a frame for understanding the fundamental meaning of the targeted parent’s lived experience.
It is important to note that while this study utilized a thematic analysis format as a method through which to identify key categories and themes that arose from the narratives of the participants, this undertaking acted as a supportive force for conceptualizing and producing “meaningful concepts that reflect” the lived experiences of the participants (Leedy & Ormrod, 2019, p. 236). As an interpretive, hermeneutic phenomenological study, a core goal was to better understand the lived experience of parental alienation by integrating the dominate themes that arise from the data and developing a “typical” narrative about the targeted parent’s lived experience (Leedy & Ormrod, 2019, p. 236).

As expressed by Van Manen (2015), reflections pulled from the participant’s lived space, lived body, lived time, and lived human relation “can be differentiated but not separated” (p. 105). The cumulative value and meanings extrapolated from these various parts of the participant’s lived experience all form an “intricate unity” or depiction of their being-in-the-world experience or lifeworld (Van Manen, 2015, p. 105). It was postulated that these identified existentials are transferable to the lived experience of other targeted parents and as a basis for more effective interventions and supportive programs and curriculum (Van Manen, 2015; Lauterbach, 2018).

**Trustworthiness**

Because qualitative researcher does not focus on numbers and statistics as a method for making correlational links between variables, the concepts of validity and reliability are not viewed as appropriate measures for evaluating the rigors of qualitative research and design (Leedy & Ormrod, 2019). As such, qualitative research is generally assessed according to the study’s perceived trustworthiness, as expressed in its credibility, dependability, conformability,
and transferability (p. 239). This research study strove to adhere to the following aspects of trustworthiness.

**Credibility**

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), credibility is demonstrated by an inquiry conducted in such a fashion as to “ensure the topic was accurately identified and described” (p. 31). Similarly, Beck (1993) defined credibility as a measure of how vivid and faithful the resulting narrative is to the expressed lived experience of the participant. To ensure credibility, this study strove to depict the lived experience of parental targeting in “in all of its complexity” (Leedy & Ormrod, 2019, p. 251). Thus, care was taken to diligently transcribe and reflect the meanings expressed by the participants, by extrapolating and preserving the delineated essence of the targeted parent’s lived experience or lifeworld.

**Dependability**

To be dependable, a study must outline all of the steps and procedures taken to select the participants, collect the data, analyze the data, and make conclusions about the data. This study strove to provide a clear and replicable path for others who wish to confirm or expand on the work. Such detail ensured that the work completed in this study could be elaborated upon or recreated through similar methods. Care was taken to incorporate an auditable path as a means through which to facilitate replication and expansion of these research methods.

**Conformability**

While it was assumed that all of the data collected in this study would not be presented in the final version, the data will be held in trust for a period of time, not less than five, to ensure future studies or efforts to replicate the study will not be hindered. However, because it is the nature of interpretive hermeneutic phenomenology to embrace the presuppositions of the
researcher, the data did, to some extent, reflect the horizons, context of mindsets of the researcher/interviewer as well as those of the participants.

Transferability

Because the phenomenon of parental targeting has been devoid of extensive investigation and because much of the current understanding of parental targeting has been formed on the opinions and ideologies of a variety or social services, legal and mental health professionals, the lived experience of the targeted parent is currently an understudied and poorly understood experience. Further investigations into the lived experience of targeted parents will increase the literature base and provide a better understanding of the phenomena of parental targeting through the lens of the targeted parent. Additional research into the lived experience of the child(ren) and the alienating parent would provide even more insight into the familial dynamic known as parental alienation.

While interpretive hermeneutic phenomenological studies are not designed to provide generalizable data, such studies can produce postulations, commonality, and other forms of data that is transferable to persons with similar lived experiences. Such studies provide the foundation upon which reliable understandings can be formed, possible correlations can be developed, and future inquiry can be framed.

Chapter Summary

This chapter described the research methodology that was employed in this qualitative research study. Included was a synopsis of the research problem, the purpose statement, and the research questions that framed the study. A description of the proposed research site, participants, and the role of the researcher was followed by a segment about the ethical considerations that were utilized in the study. An outline of the data collection method and
proposed instruments and protocols included a detailed description of each type of data
collection method. This chapter concluded with a discussion of the data analysis process and the
manner through which trustworthiness was established.
CHAPTER FOUR: ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this study was to better understand the lived experience of parental targeting and the role intergenerational patterns of marital discord and social structure play in the formation of parental alienating behaviors as well as the effect of alienating behaviors on the relational well-being of targeted parents. This chapter will begin with an outline of the specific protocol and measures that framed the data analysis, provide a demographic and contextual overview of the study participants, identify the dominate themes and sub-themes extrapolated from the dual interview process, present salient excerpts of the participant narratives, as they relate to the identified themes and sub-themes, and provide a response to the research questions. This chapter will conclude with an evaluation of the research design.

Compilation Protocol and Measures

A basic premise of this study was the lack of data in the literature, reflecting the lived experience of the targeted parent. The protocols presented below outline the procedures and processes utilized in this study to secure data that accurately reflects the phenomenon of parental targeting as experienced by the targeted parent. Potential participants for the study were recruited through contact with a variety of referral sources such as counseling offices, mental health agencies, law firms, mediation practices, and other resources that would likely have contact with the identified population. Interested participants were asked to complete a brief questionnaire, and those individuals who met the criteria for the study were invited, via email, to join the study.

Participants took part in a two-phase, online interview process that resulted in a collective 16 hrs. of fully transcribed, interactive dialogue, video and audio recordings, multigenerational genograms, and a letter-writing exercise complete with participant commentary. This data was
further enhanced by the researcher’s field journal, observations, and hermeneutic reflections. Collected data were thematically analyzed and managed within the context of a reflective, recursive hermeneutic process. The identified themes and subthemes were additionally analyzed in light of Van Manen’s “existential” lifeworld framework and narratively interpreted to produce a representative narrative of the targeted parent’s lived experience (Van Manen, 2015, p. 101). Data analysis concluded with detailed responses to the research questions that guided the study.

**Demographic and Sample Data**

Five individuals participated in a semi-structured, dual interview process designed to elicit rich, experiential narratives about the lived experience of parental targeting. All of the participants self-identified as a targeted parent over the age of 18, two years post-divorce, with an ability to provide a dense empirical narrative of their lived experience. Each participant was randomly assigned a pseudonym of common origin in an effort to maintain anonymity, confidentiality, and reduce the possibility of social, cultural, or other presumptive inferences. All of the participants were selected according to a non-probability, purposive, or criterion sampling technique in which the participants were identified based on several distinct conditions and characteristics.

Participants were invited into the study on a first-come, first-serve basis. Once a participant completed the questionnaire, and it was confirmed that they met the criteria for the study, they were informed of their status and invited to schedule two online sessions. All participants were asked to sign an informed consent document and complete both interviews within two-weeks. A demographic chart (Table 1) of the participants and a descriptive summary of each participant follows as well as an orientating selection of their narratives. The participants are listed and numbered in the order they were added to the study.
### Table 1

**Demographic Data**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Marital Status</th>
<th>Years Post-Divorce</th>
<th>Religion</th>
<th>Contact with Children</th>
<th>Education</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ANN</td>
<td>White female</td>
<td>49 yrs.</td>
<td>Married 25 yrs.</td>
<td>3 yrs.</td>
<td>Non-practicing Christian</td>
<td>No contact with children</td>
<td>Graduate level education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DAN</td>
<td>White male</td>
<td>48 yrs.</td>
<td>Married 27 yrs.</td>
<td>4 yrs.</td>
<td>Non-practicing Christian</td>
<td>No contact with children</td>
<td>Undergrad level of education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JAMES</td>
<td>White male</td>
<td>34 yrs.</td>
<td>Married 5 yrs.</td>
<td>10 yrs.</td>
<td>Non-practicing Christian</td>
<td>No contact with children</td>
<td>Graduate level of education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BETTY</td>
<td>White female</td>
<td>52 yrs.</td>
<td>Married 5 yrs.</td>
<td>16 yrs.</td>
<td>Practicing Catholic</td>
<td>No contact with children</td>
<td>Graduate level of education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KEITH</td>
<td>White male</td>
<td>51 yrs.</td>
<td>Married 25 yrs.</td>
<td>3 yrs.</td>
<td>Practicing Christian</td>
<td>No contact with children</td>
<td>Graduate level of education</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All participants were assigned pseudonym names to ensure anonymity and confidentiality.

### Participant 1: Ann

Ann is an articulate 49-year-old woman whose 25-year marriage produced five children. Her deep devotion to her children stood out as a dominant aspect of her character as did her affinity for truth, honesty, and her compassionate concern for others. Her presentation was that of a soft-spoken woman with an engaging laugh. Ann reported a history of “intimate partner abuse” and a desire to reconnect with her children. She currently has a tentative but disconnected relationship with four of her children. Ann reported no contact with one of her son’s, at his request. She holds a master’s degree and maintains a professional affiliation with an agency that provides mental health services. She has been divorced from her children’s father for three years. The couple was married for over 27 years.
Ann reported being a homemaker during the first part of her marriage. She eventually returned to college and earned her graduate degree once the children were in school. Ann talked at length about the history of sexual assault by her husband but described their inability “to repair after disagreements” as “the most corrosive aspect of the relationship.”

…we fought. I found lots and lots of ways to talk myself out of having problems with him. I would excuse my feelings as long as I could, and then I couldn’t anymore. I would want to talk to him about things, you know…I’m feeling something, and I want to tell you about it. He didn’t handle that very well. He would become defensive and argumentative and typically walk away during conversations, and then I was just kind of left with feeling bad. I couldn’t bring it up. If I would let something drop and we didn’t complete the conversation or find a resolution, and I brought it up a day later, a week later, a month later, a year later, five years later, it would just escalate all the way to a 10-level conflict again. He just couldn’t have conversations.

Ann maintained that she grew up in a secure home (family-of-origin). She described her father as a warm, albeit a somewhat unavailable parent. Ann described her mother as an anxious woman preoccupied with food. She reported being the oldest of four siblings, and while cordial with one another, the siblings have remained fairly disconnected. Ann described her childhood home as being very focused on the church. According to Ann, “everything revolved around the church…the church was our community.” However, in light of her life experiences and despite having once held a pastoral position in their community church, Ann now reports having very little desire for church or spiritual practice. “I haven’t felt a need to recover some aspect of faith or religious practice. It’s just not important to me anymore. I still need community, and that is something I’m still working on building.”

Ann described her decision to end her marriage as a moment of clarity that took place following a final act of sexual violation.

…I even though there wasn’t any emotional repair after the conflicts we had, there always had to be sex…like that was the signal that the conflict was over. That just always felt violating, just constantly violating…so, there was an incident with sex that I was like, I’m
never doing this again. I’m never ever doing this again. I am just not doing it again, and that was the day I packed my bags and left.

Ann went on to explain that once she left the marital home, her relationship with her children quickly deteriorated.

It got really bad, really quick. He cut me off from all of the credit cards…he broke a bunch of my furniture and put it into the kid’s cars and had them drive it to me at the house where I was living…it was terrifying for a while. The kids would tell me that their dad would cry openly with them and talk about how much pain I had caused him. He started accusing me of having affairs and sleeping around and going out and hooking up with people, and it wasn’t just with the kids, it was like with the full extended community…a campaign to kind of make me look like a lunatic with serious character-logical problems.

When asked about the current state of her relationship with her children, Ann replied,

…the way my relationships are with my kids is not at all, remotely in any way, the shape I thought it would be. When I left, it never occurred to me…I knew our relationship would change, but it didn’t occur to me that we could feel so distant from each other. I thought that our relationships were solid enough that he (ex-husband) wouldn’t be able to really tear that apart, but really for at least a year after I moved out, the kids would rarely speak to me or want to be around me.

She continued by saying,

I was really naive; I didn’t think he (ex-husband) would use them like that. I really didn’t know the type of situation I was in until after I left. I was really afraid; I didn’t really understand how afraid I could be of him, not even being in the same house. So, I mean, I’m primarily sad, and the reasons for me being sad are just so unfair. It is just unjust. So, I’m angry about that. It is just so unjust that in order for me to get out of a really corrosive and abusive relationship with their father, I had to lose connection with my kids…some of that has come back but not in the same way. I didn’t know what it would look like, but I didn’t expect that they would seem to take sides. I just wish at all five of… (tears, long pause, choking) …if we could just sit at the same table.

**Participant 2: Dan**

Dan is a 48-year-old retired military veteran who served in the United States Air force for twenty-one years. Dan and his wife were married for twenty-five years. Their 25-year union produced seven children; four daughters and three sons. Following his retirement, Dan worked in a variety of jobs that included an HR position, parts manager, and training to be a helicopter
pilot. Dan maintained a top-secret clearance throughout his military service and was stationed around the world at several military installations. Dan and his wife and their children were able to live together as a family during the majority of his military assignments. Neither his wife nor children were able to be with him during his extended periods of deployment.

Dan’s presentation is that of a personable but somewhat deflated man struggling to find meaning in life and resist the temptation of becoming a bitter and resentful person. He openly displays a sense of ambiguity between a strong belief in justice and principled living and the pain of feeling unjustly burdened with the loss of his children. It has been four years since Dan has had any contact with any of his children. He currently expresses little hope in ever having a meaningful relationship with his children and has recently adopted a narrative about never having had children as a way of avoiding difficult conversations about how and why he became alienated from his children.

Dan reported being caught off guard by his wife’s decision to end their marriage and remove the children from his life, although in hindsight, he believes some indicators that should have caused him concern. As he explained,

It wasn’t until 2010 that (ex-wife) wanted a divorce, which caught me completely blindsided. There were no arguments; there was never any violence; there was never any police called on us ever, there was never any broken dishes or things thrown; we never had those types of things. We never had arguments. Uhm…we had disagreements, but it never turned into a big thing, you know, she thought one thing, I thought another thing, and we talked about it for a little bit and came to an understanding one way or another. Today I still don’t know why she wanted a divorce because everything she claimed was a lie. …she claimed I beat her up. I’ve never hit a woman in my life…ever…let alone my wife.

Dan reported that he now believes his ex-wife had been planning the divorce for years and had been using his long workdays while in the military and deployments as an opportunity to build a negative narrative about the marriage and his character.
My kids were homeschooled. All-day long while I was at work for 12 hours a day, while I was gone for six months at a time, while I was gone for a year at a time…she was there. She had their ear. It’s just, it’s not just a snap. It’s somebody who has manipulated for years. Whenever you isolate the child, you can start rewriting their memories. You know, you can start “reminding” them of how bad it was. “Reminding” them of how they always lived in fear. You can start planting absolutes in their mind that were never there. The only way you can rewrite memories is to isolate them and then “remind” them of everything they had “forgotten” about. My kids won’t be able to remember me coming in and covering them up and kissing them good night and playing with them because she wants them to “remember” cowering in a corner.

Currently, Dan reports having little hope for the future. After extensive engagement with the legal system, thousands of dollars in legal fees, and years of emotional distress, Dan has resolutely decided to step back from his efforts to reengage with his children.

…and in spite of the tears, in spite of the depression, in spite of the broken heart and the rejection…the only thing I can do is me. And so, the only thing that I’m doing is just living my life and loving my life. I don’t tell the story because people will judge me. I know it. I don’t tell the story because people will judge me based on stuff that did not happen. And I’ve tried, and I’ve tried so many times, and people don’t want to hear the truth. They don’t want to believe the truth; they can’t fathom the truth. So, I stopped telling the story.

I’m angry that I can’t help my own kids. You know, because I know what’s been done and I know the seeds of hate and bitterness and rejection that have been planted in them by their mother and the seeds of hate and bitterness and rejection don’t bring peace. I can’t bring them peace. I can’t talk to them and bring peace and kindness and comfort, you know, there can’t be peace in my kids’ lives, and I can’t do anything about that…

**Participant 3: James**

At 34 years of age, James was the youngest participant in the study. He was also the parent who has gone the longest amount of time without any type of contact with his children.

Having been incarcerated for a non-violent, drug-related charge, James was unable to see his children during his incarceration. This absence from his children’s life exacerbated the alienation process that had already taken hold with his children. Now, after his release from prison, James is in the process of regaining his relationship with his two sons. James has not had any contact with his children for ten years.
During those ten years, the children have largely been raised by their maternal grandparents. His efforts to secure visitation were reportedly unfruitful, expensive, and emotionally draining. James attributes much of his ability to manage the stress of this unification process to the counseling support services he received while in prison. James explained that counseling made him stronger and better able to understand and stand against his ex-wife’s attempts to turn his sons against him. James reported that he and his ex-wife married young and quickly had their first child.

We were both excited, and we wanted to believe that it was going to be great and that we would do a good job, and we were going to do it together. It soon became evident that wasn’t going to be the case.

After the birth of the couple’s second child, the couple separated, and his ex-wife began seeing other people. At first, James was able to see his sons; however, not long after the separation,

…she cut me out of the picture. Our relationship wasn’t that bad. We had our fair share of arguments and fights… but overall it was not bad. We spent time with each other, but once I left, she made me out to be someone I wasn’t. I just didn’t know the extent of that until I started getting my life back on track and started putting the pieces together and going through everything to see my children.

For several years now, James has been engaged in a legal battle to regain access to his children. He hopes to one day have a normal visitation schedule that will allow him to form a relationship with his sons, who are now twelve and eleven years of age. Recently, James learned that his ex-wife claimed that he attempted to flee with the children.

… that I told her that if I can’t have the children, then no one could. She said she feared for her life and called the police department… but they don’t have a single police report ever made by her… she also said I told her, that if she didn’t let me back in the kids’ lives, I was going to take the children from her. I’ve been told that my children are terrified of me.

Reflecting on the current state of his relationship with his sons and his desire to build a strong parental relationship with them, James described being taken aback by his ex-wife’s
allegations and attempts to taint his relationship with his sons. His sense of shock and disbelief were reflected in his facial expressions and gestures, which included looks of surprise, astonishment and confusion.

All of this has left a foul taste...I mean...for her to just completely turn the way she did and do the things she did and keep my children from me...this is like...it shocks me...because you are with somebody for a good period of time, especially as a young adult, and you would think you would see that side of them and like even when I saw things about her when we first got together... when you think your relationship is great...I didn’t ever see anything that prepared me for how she would be since then. That really shocks me...the things she has accused me of.

**Participant 4: Betty**

As a devout Catholic, Betty was perhaps the most hopeful of all of the participants. She credited her faith with much of her ability to manage the pain of being without her son. At the age of fifty-two, she is currently remarried and attempting to live as normal a life as possible within the context of the loss of her now eighteen-year-old son. It has been four years since Betty has had any type of contact with her youngest child.

Betty and her ex-husband have been divorced for sixteen years. Much of that time has been spent in a difficult co-parenting dynamic that ultimately ended with the complete breakdown of her relationship with her son.

He left my house on September 8, 2016; he was just shy of his 15th birthday. So, I’ve pretty much missed out on his entire high school experience. We had a 50/50 arraignment for custody, but getting my ex to follow that was a constant struggle and eventually (Son) was kind of fighting it as well. My ex always said from the very beginning, by the time he is fourteen years old, I’m going to have him, and you will have no contact. And I said no, that will never happen, but it did happen.

Betty’s marriage to her son’s father was her second marriage. She has two older children from her first marriage that are now 32 and 28 years of age, a daughter and son, respectively. Betty reports having a close relationship with these children. She also has several stepchildren with whom she is close.
She describes the alienation process as one that escalated over the years and reached a crescendo when she married her current husband.

My ex…when I went through the divorce everybody was like…we are so glad you got rid of him, we couldn’t understand why you married him, we are so glad you got rid of him but then when I started to get serious with my current husband, he had been able to flip them. He has consistently, from the time of our divorce until I remarried, been telling them a whole series of different stories and lies to the point that they flipped and were now supporting him. He turned from harassing me directly, to harassing me through my family, to harassing me through the police and DCS.

Betty described her ex-husband as an alcoholic who came from a wealthy family and for whom approval from his father became an ever-present but unattainable goal. She postulated that her ex sought connection with their son as a way of offsetting the rejection of his father and older siblings.

I remember that (son) had a meltdown about something…probably about school because he was not good in school. Homework was always a button for him, and he would meltdown a lot, and one time, he was probably eleven or twelve. I remember him crying, and he said, mom, I have to be with dad. I have to because he has nobody in his life but me. I’m the only one in his life, and I have got to be there for him. And I just broke for this little boy, and I said, honey… your dad shouldn’t be telling you some of these things. But every time we would go to court, his dad would show him the court papers and he would walk him through all of that. Just thing after thing, incident after incident. But for him to say that he was the only person in his life because dad had nobody in his life just broke my heart. It just really scared me for (son).

Describing her last memories of her son, Betty recalled.

It was tough. I saw my child change. I saw this very happy, loving, wonderful kid with this hilarious loud laugh…great hugs, just loved families, just couldn’t get enough of the hugs from all of us, to within a year or two, by twelve or thirteen years of age…he was not a happy kid. You could just see it in his face. You could see it in all of the school pictures. Everything…you could just see it, pain, tons of pain. And as a mom, to not be able to fix it, not be able to ease that was really tough. I do love him so much, and it just seemed everything I did to try and help…just pushed him further away.

**Participant 5: Keith**

Keith was perhaps the most tentative of the participants; however, as he warmed to the interview process his ability to be more open and transparent increased substantially. His need to
be heard and seen, within the context of his experience, seemed to progressively override any latent fears, which resulted in a very authentic and honest recounting of his lived experience. At the time of his interview, Keith had contact with two of his five children; the oldest daughter and the youngest son. He is currently alienated from his three middle children. The children range in age from twenty-five to fourteen years of age. Keith described his relationship with his oldest daughter as a normal, bonded father and daughter relationship. He attributes this relational bond to the fact that his daughter had already moved out of the familial home when the marriage began to fail. His ongoing contact with his youngest child, a son, is largely facilitated by his ex-wife’s need for parenting assistance. Keith believes this willingness is based on his youngest son’s tendency to be a difficult child to parent and his ex-wife’s frustration with attempting to manage his behavioral problems on her own.

Keith described himself as a “right fighter.” As a right fighter, Keith explained, “I want justice, so when I feel wronged or see wrong, I want acknowledgment for that.” He reported that this was most likely the reason he enjoyed his job as the Vice President of a missions-driven organization that worked to meet the humanitarian needs of impoverished people. The job required a lot of travel, and in early 2010, Keith reported leaving that position due, in large part, to the job becoming an ongoing source of conflict between him and his wife. Soon after, the couple moved to Indiana to be near family.

I loved my work. It was passionate about it. It was easy for me. It was not a hard job because of that. We came to Indiana to be near my brother, who is a pastor in Indy. It was a better family situation, and I took a sales job instead to make that sacrifice. So, I gave up the job and moved here. Around 2012 or 2013, I feel like I hit a wall depression wise. I placed a lot of self-worth in my career, and I had lost it. I was doing a job I really hated…to get up every day and go do, and I sort of sunk emotionally. During this time, it also came to light that I had been unfaithful to my wife. She said she forgave me, and we would start over together…we went to some counseling for a while…here in Indiana. And things were ok for a while. It did feel like a clean start for a while. Part of my depression was linked to my own personal failure in that…in letting her down as well as
myself. I had this weird feeling like I was getting what I deserved with a really crappy job that I really hated. I had a stiff upper lip for a while. I was glad I still had my wife, and I was committed to her, but eventually, I just…I had a hard time getting out of bed and being happy anymore. (Ex-wife) and I met at a Christian college…the same thing my parents did…we always missed feeling like we were in love. What she always complained about is that we never felt in love. So, in our everyday lives…in the marriage itself…we very much kind of lived apart.

Keith reported that the marriage counseling they received was provided by Keith’s brother, who was also the pastor of the church they were attending. Keith’s brother placed Keith on a strict accountability program.

I have a graduate degree in music, so I was helping out with the music in his church, I was very involved, but I was very watched. It was…it felt like it was…in the beginning I welcomed it…it was like yeah let’s do this…but in the end it felt more like a noose instead of being free to live a new life. My brother’s wife was also (ex-wife)’s best friend. They have always been very close. She confided a lot of things in her and my brother. It created a wedge between my brother and I. My brother in this independent church has set himself up as a king. Everybody bows down to him. He never listens to anyone. He is my younger brother, he used to listen to me, but he doesn’t now.

Eventually, Keith reported moving out of the marital home. The couple did not divorce until two years later.

I ended up deciding to move out of the house for a little while to relieve some of the tension. When I did…it sort of became a firestorm of problems at that point. It was a mishandling of everything from the start. Because we didn’t start out to be divorced or sit down to talk to the kids about how it was going to go, I really sabotaged myself in my ability to be…a father essentially. We never discussed any type of shared custody arraignment.

Keith described the divorce as a shock; however, as Keith explained, it was even more shocking to learn that his brother (the couple’s pastor and counselor) encouraged his wife to file the divorce papers on the grounds of abandonment.

Up to the very last minute, I was begging her to not go through with the divorce. You know, together we just said, I mean I told her I was not going to be mean to her at all and she believed me, and I wasn’t. We decided to play nice and we did. The only thing is in the agreement, I just didn’t get enough as far as time. All of our agreements went in her favor. The only enforcement of that documents that she has been willing to do is with my youngest who, has been a nightmare for her discipline wise. He’s a handful. So, she has
always been glad to give him to me on my weekends. The older kids…it just never happened. At this point, I am willing to say whatever I have to say…to make a difference. To move towards me having a relationship with my kids. I am not looking for utopia with them. I just want to have family. I’m isolated…I’m completely isolated.

Keith, in attempting to describe what it is like to live without his children, he shared…

It’s worse than death. The fact that we could, we could be having life together…and we are not is worse. I don’t have anything with my kids. Those kinds of things are just haunting…they haunt me all the time.

Data Analysis and Findings

Data Analysis

Data collected during the study consisted of sixteen hours of audio/video recordings, two hundred pages of transcription, five, three-generational genograms and field journal entries. Once the data demonstrated saturation, the data was subjected to a thematic analytic process. Because the most basic aspect of hermeneutic phenomenological research is to “let the texts speak,” the thematic analytic process utilized in the study was a recursive process of reading and rereading verbatim transcripts of the interviews, viewing and reviewing the audio/video recordings and genograms, reviewing and reflecting upon field journal entries and impressions, identifying and pulling the recurring units of meaning or codes from the data, clustering these codes into similar categories and eventually extracting the dominate themes and subthemes (Crowther et al., 2017, p. 833).

The data was then further examined, as recommended by Van Manen (2016) through the collective lens’ of lived temporality, lived spatiality, lived corporeality, and lived relationality. This reflective, recursive process of reading, rereading, reflection, writing and interpretation helped to illuminate the lived experience of the participants further and produce a “typical” narrative of the targeted parent’s lived experience. Succinctly stated, a narrative that honors and
accurately reflects both the individual parts and the collective whole of the lived experience targeted parenting (Erlingsson & Brysiewicz, 2017).

Because the participant narratives were especially rich and thick, and due to the consistency and multiplicity of the types of data collected, the researcher was able to confirm saturation, which, as defined by Creswell, is the point at which “fresh data no longer sparks new insights or reveals new properties (Creswell, 2014, p. 189). The consistency and redundancy of the data across multiple sources provide evidence of triangulation and further confirms that the themes extracted from the data accurately reflect the lived experience of the participants adding to the validity of the study (Creswell, 2014).

Findings

The researcher identified six dominant themes (1) Parental Programming, (2) Relational Well-being, (3) Injustice, (4) Grief & Loss, (5) False Allegations, and (6) Intergenerational Patterns. Figure 1 shows a thematic chart that outlines the identified themes and subthemes of the study. Participant excerpts were pulled from transcribed interviews and letters.
Parental Programming

Targeted parents referred to a variety of experiences in which the alienating parent attempted to intentionally damage or destroy their relational bond with their child(ren). These experiences included but were not limited to, refusal to comply with custody arrangements, inappropriately sharing aspects of the marital relationship and divorce, reduced visitation, increased power for the child, reduced or mitigated respect for the TP, as well as forms of mental and emotional abuse, were common narratives expressed across all data sets.
Loss of Connection/Contact with Targeted Parent. All five participants reported a loss of contact and connection with their child(ren), which was directly related to an attempt by the AP to reduce the amount of parental time and contact for the TP. For some participates, this was the result of the AP’s efforts to sway court interventions and dictates. For others, there was a definitive effort by the AP to negate custody agreements and encourage the child to separate from or reject the TP.

- My ex-wife has said that I threatened to steal the children and run off into the woods and hide with them, and they would never be found. That is not the truth. But if my children believe that...believe they would never see their mother again, that’s a nightmare that she is breeding in them. You know...and the only thing that is going to fix that is to be able to talk to them and speak truth to them. And that is the one thing she has made sure will never happen. This is what the court system made sure would never happen. The court system divides and makes sure that you can’t reconcile. You can’t get back together, and you can’t fix it.

- I rarely saw them. I didn’t see them on any actual holidays. They would go with their dad on holidays, and they would come to my house some other or random...the Friday before Christmas or whatever. I didn’t even get Mother’s Day with them...he usurped that because he “needed” them.

- I was never allowed to have communication when [child] when he was with [ex-spouse] because that was his time. But yet when [child] was with me, [ex-spouse] had to have constant access.

- Truth is so much more powerful than lies. Lies are a house of cards, but truth is a foundation. Truth is solid. Lies can be knocked down if you allow them to have contact. And that is why over and over again, my wife makes sure I can never see my kids.

- There is no one telling my kids, besides me, that it is ok for them to have a relationship with their dad.

Parentification of Child (child moved into adult position). The targeted parents also articulated a shift in the familial system’s power structure, citing a never before seen exertion of authority or power on the part of the child.

- Every time he came back from his dad, he was not the same kid. He would come home angry; he wouldn’t talk to me; he would slam the door and spent all day in his
bedroom. If he was downstairs, he would just sit there and glower at us and wouldn’t have anything to do with us. It would take several days to get him to calm down and not be so bitter and angry at me. It was just easier for him to go along with his dad than to fix this. He [son] ended up deciding that his dad’s version was the only version he wanted to hear because that was the easiest route to go in life.

- I know they are trying to drive me to my knees, they are trying, it’s almost like a clear tactic or strategy they are employing as a group (AP and children). They are pretty united in it.

- I can’t get them to engage in a conversation. I call all of them once a week, and they never answer. I have left messages until their mailboxes are full. I sent my daughter a text last week and said, “can we get together something? And her text…you can tell she has been coached. She said, “I don’t think that would be beneficial to me.” I know how she talks, and this is not how she talks. I have no way of even finding out what is in their mind…what they are thinking…what has made them decide to cut me off and never give me an explanation for it.

- It wasn’t me that abandoned them. They are doing the very thing that they have accused me of doing. They have abandoned me.

**Child becomes Coconspirator and Ally of AP.** A common assertion by the targeted parents was observed fusion and efforts by the AP to form an alliance between the AP and the child(ren).

- He [son] was the spy. We started referring to [son] as the mole in our household because, within an hour of anything happening in our household, we would be getting calls from my ex-husband. So, I was like, how did you know that, and what does that have to do with you?

- I’ve always seen two key people in this, and that is my ex-wife and my brother, who is their pastor and uncle. They are the most influential people in this, by far. For any of them to go against that…would be swimming upstream for them in their world. To actually step away from that and take a step toward me or embrace me in any way…it would almost feel like betraying the family code on their side.

- I think that all of the adults are basically…letting them down by not stepping in and telling them what they have been doing all along. That it is ok for them to have a relationship with their dad, by example, or by saying that. Unfortunately, the example they have is all of this shunning of me. So, they would have to break ranks with that on the outs to do that.

- When [child] got older and got more entrenched in [ex-spouse’s] ways and lies and stuff, he just stopped talking. He would go home and tell his dad everything.
• Any time I tried to discipline [child], he would end up calling his dad. There was a big fight with cell phones. Every time he was here, he was constantly on the phone recording, constantly going off outside talking to dad in the bushes telling dad about what was going on.

Form of Child Abuse. Participants consistently referred to the level of emotional and mental harm they observed being imposed on their child(ren) as a form of maltreatment or abuse.

• Truth matters. I mean to me morally, you are morally bankrupt if you are not honest, but when it comes to things like this…to this degree…I don’t see how a person can live with themselves…like with the stuff their mother has said and the picture she and her family have painted. I just don’t get why you would do that…to me, it is just shallow. It’s really kind of evil. Why would you want your kids to believe something so terrible? Just to get back at me? If they grow up being lied to all of the time…that’s going to affect them in the long run.

• I think my ex-wife is causing so much more damage to the kids than she realizes. Instead of just punishing me. I understand being mad at me, but eliminating me from the kid’s lives is a terrible thing for them. Involving them in this punishment of me has just stolen from them so much, and it’s cruel. I’ve tried to say that to her so many times, but she pushes back and gets mad. We’ve had some knockdown shouting matches over this issue because she doesn’t see it at all. She still wants to put all of this at my feet. I understand the marriage is over, but I am still a dad, I still care about our kids please don’t keep them from me. But she absolves herself from all of that responsibility, every time.

• I’m mad that his dad put him in this situation because that is a terrible thing for a parent to do to a kid.

• Being forced to decide or choose between one parent or the other…that is one of the worst things you could do to a kid emotionally. You are ripping half of them away from themselves. I’m not ignoring myself or my pain, but these are children. We are supposed to do what’s best for our children as parents.

Relational Well-being

All of the participants indicated significant shifts in the state of their emotional well-being. While the participants seemed to prioritize these relational distresses uniquely, they all reported a definitive change in how they view themselves, others, and God.
**Relationship with Self.** Participants largely reported adverse effects associated with the experience of targeted parenting. Common expressions in the data included feelings of shame, guilt, worthlessness, reduced self-confidence, etc.

- You know, this has had such an effect on me, I cannot…I can never get away from the thoughts of what I can do to try and win my kids back…even though I don’t seem to be able to fight city hall here. I have no allies here; everyone is against me in this. So, the moment I wake up in the night and the moment my mind goes to this…which, it does always…I cannot sleep. My mid is too…on this, so it is like this has taken over every waking moment of my life.

- I’ve lived in a lot of shame and guilt over all of this. There is no doubt…and the longer it goes…that I don’t have my kids in my life…the worse that feels. So, to some extent, their punishment is hitting right where they intend it to. It’s below the belt, but it constantly, constantly hurts. Their rejection hurts!

- I thought I was the only person going through this. I thought there was something wrong with me because I ended up in such a terrible situation, and what an awful mother I was that her child would choose to not be involved in her life.

**Relationship with Others.** The ability to form a safe and trusting relationship with others was a concern expressed by targeted parents. Their experiences as a targeted parent had long-term ramifications on their ability to connect and bond with others.

- Trust is very hard, even more hard than it was prior…I do…I’m always looking at people’s motives now. Like why did they say it that way? What do you mean by that? I do a lot more questioning. Sometimes that makes people very angry because they’re like why are you even questions? And I’m like I don’t know. I have a need to know. It’s just I’ve heard those words before, and they ended up not being true, so sometimes I just need a little more reassurance that what I’m hearing is the truth. In some respects, my sensors go up much easier. I don’t want to say I’m vigilant to things, but I’m always watching and waiting and trying to gage things much more than I used to.

- I try to keep my expectations at a minimum. That’s kind of how I’ve had to approach a lot of things with that mindset because I’ve been lied to…having those trust issues. Being in those situations with my ex and stuff, they definitely have made me have issues with trust. I don’t expect it to be any different with my kids. I mean, it’s probably not going to be fast. It’s going to take time to build trust.
Relationship with God. The experience of targeted parenting had an impact on the targeted parent’s concept of God. Some reported being able to hold on to their faith, while others felt their views had changed significantly as a result of their experiences.

- I have stacks of books on parental alienation, I have all of this stuff, and I was reading and praying, and God never showed up. God never showed up in court. Not one single thing gave me hope that God was going to be there and that this was going to be ok. There is just no hope. And I realized that it didn’t matter how. Much I read, it didn’t matter how studious I was, it didn’t matter how much I prayed or how much faith I had, none of it mattered.

- It’s hard to believe that God is not mad at me. I have a mix of feelings, like what my brother says…like I deserve it. I have that also in my head somewhere. I mean honestly…it has been hard. I mean there are days that I cry out…for help. And there are days that I feel abandoned myself.

- I’ve always been extremely strong in my faith. I’ve had moments of up and down, but I’ve never left my church, I never left my faith. But I did struggle, I had a lot of dark days, and I couldn’t pray, and I couldn’t trust and I couldn’t even…I’d go to church, but I would just sit there and just feel so dead inside.

Injustice

The theme of injustice was largely focused on the targeted parent’s experience with the court and social services systems. Common topics included a lack of responsive engagement, unfair and biased outcomes, and financial issues.

Weaponized Court System. The targeted parents reported a variety of situations in which they felt the court and law enforcement provided little support or colluded with the AP to support the targeting behaviors.

- He started using the police to harass me as well as the social services. They all saw what he was doing, but they were like, it seemed like they were powerless to tell him to stop. It was just so frustrating. What good is an ordered agreement between two people if it is not enforced?

- It doesn’t make sense, I’m fighting baseless claims that I have no way to prove them wrong, and I’m being told …well just because you can’t prove them wrong doesn’t make them wrong or you can’t tell somebody that they can’t lie on you because you
can’t prove they are not lying. It’s like a circus or something. Honestly, that’s what it feels like.

**Truth Devalued (guilty until proven innocent).** Participants repeatedly noted their experiences with being required to prove their innocence. Their inability to disprove an allegation often resulted in long-term negative outcomes for the targeted parent.

- There is no justice…there never is. All you have to do is be accused. You just have to be accused, and people will convict you of it. And in the majority of cases, people just lie about you.

- People don’t understand that when you get a restraining order, there are so many repercussions. I’ve never done anything to have my rights taken away. But I am the victim of lies. Judges have said they would rather give the restraining order just in case the guy is a bad guy. Not based on face. Not based on truth. They restrict my liberties based on a judge’s fear of liability.

- My attorney told me that I have to prove that the things she said are not true. And I thought…aren’t we in America? Isn’t the very presumption of innocent until proven guilty enough? That doesn’t make sense to me. If all of these things that she is saying…there is no public record of it, nothing proves that it is true, why should she be allowed to say it? At this point, she could say I’m a murderer, she can say whatever she wants, and there are no consequences. I mean, I would assume that the presumption of innocence for the lack of any factual record or anything having taken place would be more than enough, but I guess not.

**Disappointment/Dissatisfaction with Court System.** The participants have a lot to say about the level of disappointment and dissatisfaction they experienced as a result of their involvement in the legal system. Targeted parents talked at length about custody issues, financial issues, protracted wait times, and the importance of self-advocacy.

- I found out that even if it is a legal thing, the custody agreement, nobody is going to make him [ex-husband] do what he is supposed to do. The attorneys don’t understand; they don’t get it. My experience is that they don’t get it at all. They just see money. They are like we’ll go to court again. Such a waste of time.

- My ex made [child] go to court and testify against my objections. He made [child] get up there and say things that didn’t happen and say who he wanted to be with, and it was awful, absolutely awful. It was just like…I can’t believe this is happening…it was like the twilight zone. But to force our child to get up and say…this and say that… the judge just let him go on and on and on.
• We had to file a motion…she kept backing out on visits and not getting back with people. Typical stuff. So, basically, we should have already been at me having full parental time. It is making me jump through extra hoops…financially…putting a lot more on me to be able to be a father…it’s just not fair.

• No one is going to be your advocate more than yourself. You have to put your hopes in a lot of people and a lot of effort and time into it. You get a lot of no’s and a lot of we can’t do anything for you. That is pretty much how it has been for me the whole time.

• You have to pick your battles. It’s hard, it’s really hard, and most of those people are only going to give you what you have coming and not much else. It’s very tough and very frustrating. You have to learn how to be patient and set your emotions aside because this process is absolutely very frustrating, and it can break you if you let it.

• If I’m sitting here with another person that is about to enter into this, whether they know it or not, I would encourage them to have good legal counsel right up front. I did not protect myself. I would encourage anybody thinking about divorce to do everything they can to avoid it. I did not realize the cost was going to be this great. I did not think that I was losing my kids at all.

**Grief and Loss**

Targeted parents used the language of grief and loss to express the emotional pain and isolation they have experienced. Feeling alone, feeling misunderstood, overwhelmed, powerless, and blamed were all common ways of attempting to put their experience into words. A salient aspect of the targeted parent’s grief process of the sense that the grief was unresolvable and inconsolable.

**Loss of Power (powerlessness).** Targeted parents reported feeling they were up against something over which they had no control and seemed to struggle with reconciling the difference between hopelessness and powerlessness.

• I can’t bring peace to my kids. She keeps breeding hate and rejection in them, and I can’t talk to them and bring peace and kindness and comfort, you know. I can’t do anything about that. I’m angered that I can’t help my own kids.

• Our family is a victim of lies. And there is no hope to fix it. There is no path; there is nobody I can go to; there is no court system; there is nothing I can do to stop it.
People can’t understand how a parent has the power to turn the mind of a child. They can’t believe that a parent has that kind of power, but they do.

**Loss of Parental Position.** The loss of a parental role in their child(ren)’s lives was a common topic. This loss, coupled with the loss of a relational bond with their child, seemed to result in a sense of isolation and emotional distress for the targeted parents.

- I’m always going to hold onto hope because I don’t want to give up on my kid. I don’t want to give up on him. I just know it won’t be anytime soon. I thought for sure…I’d give him a few months and here it is almost four years and not a word, nothing. It just pains me every time I think about it.

- I don’t wish for anybody else to go through this. It’s not fun. It takes a lot out of you financially, mentally, and ultimately, I’m losing out on my children’s youth, that is stuff I will never get back.

- I really felt like the matriarch. I don’t feel like that anymore. I just feel like I’m just, kind of on the side. I mean, relationally, I felt like I was influential with my kids; I felt like I had some power there. I mean, I really did…until I moved out of the house, and everything changed.

- They tell me they don’t love me, that I never loved them. For my kids to have no good thoughts or memories of me kills me. It just kills me.

**Disenfranchised Grief.** Targeted parents report difficulties processing their grief. Their hidden sorrows go unacknowledged and unvalidated in large part because others don’t seem to understand or grasp the enormity of their loss.

- I have a girlfriend, she sent a text to my dad and said, you’re all killing [TP]…you don’t know this, but you are killing him. And my dad’s response to her was that I need to repent, or it’s going to always be like this. I couldn’t be more clear. They don’t understand. I don’t know who would ever be able to open their eyes to that; it’s not going to be me.

- I don’t know who to talk to…I’m just out here on an island. Who am I supposed to call? Is there a hotline somewhere for targeted parents?

- I’ve tried therapy and counseling on my own, but it’s been ineffective. They don’t understand. I don’t know who else to talk to…
**Never-ending Grief Process.** What seemed to make the grief process of the targeted parent unique was the perceived lack of resolution or closure. As opposed to other forms of grief, the grief of the targeted parent seemed relentless, unresolvable, and endless.

- It has felt like a death. Now I am simply a broken dad. And I have SO MUCH pain over our broken relationship. My heart truly breaks over this every single day. The pain of it is the first thing I feel each morning when I wake up, and it just won’t stop.

- I don’t think you can get through to people unless they have felt it in their heart. Because that broken heart is something you can’t put words to…you can only feel the emotion.

- I can see why people end up doing irrational things. I can see why people get so emotionally caught up and end up making really bad decisions off of their emotions. I mean, these are my kids, and I don’t get to see them…that can put a lot of mental anguish on a person.

**Loss of Voice (unseen, unheard).** Targeted parents often described situations where their views, thoughts, feelings, and needs were disavowed. This silencing, of sorts, seemed to exacerbate an already difficult situation for the TP.

- I stopped telling the story because to tell the story takes too long and second nobody believes me. I can count on one hand the number of people who believe that I don’t beat up women. I never have. I never thought about it. Nobody cares, so I stopped telling them.

- I couldn’t help them [children]. I really couldn’t because my opinion; my word didn’t matter.

- If there is no one to listen…no one to care…no one to help…why talk?

**False Allegations**

The experience of being falsely accused was a topic of great concern for the targeted parents. They seemed to understand that even if they could prove that the allegations were false, the shadow of the allegation was likely to remain for a lifetime.
Slander. The targeted parents consistently described a campaign of verbal assault by the AP. Efforts to discredit or defame the TP were reportedly directed at friends, family, legal authorities, and communities at large.

- Whenever I went to court, I said heal, we need to heal relationships, come back together and heal relationships, and that was completely rejected by the court. Completely rejected by every counselor, completely rejected by the guardian ad litem, it was completely rejected every time. I had a counselor sit on the stand and say my daughter was suffering from PTSD from an event that never happened. How do you suffer PTSD from fiction? It never happened. The court system makes sure you can’t reconcile because only one narrative is accepted, and anything opposite of that is 100% rejected.

- Sometimes it doesn’t even seem real. Like something from a movie. Like how…you read of stories and hear about people who are falsely accused of stuff. I guess that is one of the reasons I am so passionate about the truth is because there are real consequences to some of these lies. I mean, you literally have people who go through huge lawsuits or spend decades in prison accused of stuff they didn’t do. It bothers me quite a bit…that she has lied about me because if these things were true, I would just own them…but they are not, and that is frustrating.

- A couple of months after I moved out, I found out all of the things he was saying about me from my own parents…that I was a pothead, I had lost my mind, that I stole money and ran all of the credit cards up, that I was having an affair. My older children know that stuff is not true, but it wasn’t just with the kids it was like with the full extended community. He campaigned to make me look like a lunatic with serious character-logical problems…it was pretty broadly cast. He did his best to contact everyone that he could.

- I got the worst texts and phone calls and things from people who were saying the most judgmental things without ever asking one question.

- The truth didn’t matter; a good rumor is always more fun than what actually happened. People just naturally seem to find the lie more appealing than the truth. And the lie seems to live forever.

Libel. Targeted parents reported written defamation by the AP that often took the form of restraining orders and court statements.

- My wife had a restraining order against me. One hundred percent of it was a lie. I said before that the only thing that was the truth on that restraining order was my name. Everything was fiction. And zero evidence. Absolutely zero evidence to support it. There was nothing at all, what-so-ever to support any of her claims. And nobody
cared. So, for twenty-five years, I had a spotless record, and that didn’t count for anything.

- My brothers and sister-in-law were assisting my ex-husband and filing reports to DCS against me. Filing police reports against me. All kinds of stuff they were making up, that my ex was whipping up into all kinds of stuff and the police would come, and I was like this is seriously not what you think it is.

- Unbelievable, I got the restraining order…I wasn’t the one who needed to be restrained.

**Character Assassination.** Targeted parents reported that one of the most troubling aspects of being falsely accused was attacks on their personal character.

- The first thing my wife did, when she decided she wanted a divorce…she went around to all of our friends telling them stories…lies about abuse.

- I know I’m not a bad mom. I’m not perfect, but I’m not a bad mom. And I know I didn’t do the things that his dad is saying that I did.

- I know my ex-wife said that I’ve threatened her. That’s not the truth. I’ve never spoken those words, I’ve never acted anything similar to that, that’s not the truth but if my children believe that, you know, how do you undo that? The only way you can undo that is with the truth, and because I’m not allowed to speak to them, I’m not allowed to speak truth.

- If you try to explain it to someone, they don’t understand because they have never experienced it. It would seem too far-fetched. They think…a kid would tell the truth…somebody would tell the truth. They think…you have seven kids and none of them like? It’s got to be you. If your wife and seven kids all hate you, it’s got to be you. And they just, they don’t understand how easy it is…no it’s not seven, eight people who hate me…it’s one! And she has hijacked everybody else.

- It is going to take time for me to undo all of the damage that she has done to my character and my kids. It is really tough because if she is saying that stuff to my children about me…what if they really believe it? It may not be a big deal, or they might always be leery of me because of it. It’s not fair.

- I mean, I’m sad primarily, and the reason for me being said are just so unfair. It is just unjust. So, I’m angry about that. I’m angry that I’ve been lied about. There is just…straight up lies. And the people who are closest to him [child] are encouraging him in this separation.
**Intergenerational Patterns**

One of the most productive aspects of the interview process was the mapping of the targeted parent’s family of origin or genogram. The genograms provided below are not complete representations of each individual genogram created during the first interview. Such depictions would reduce the ability to recognize the individual patterns of fusion, triangulation, emotional reactivity, emotional cutoff, and marital conflict. Instead, each example is an excerpt from a larger familial map and highlights one layer or common pattern extrapolated from the genograms.

**Fusion.** Fusion is best described as an exaggerated need for togetherness. Family members fuse to feel connected, reduce isolation, reduce anxiety, and borrow self from other family members. Targeted parents consistently reported observed patterns of fusion between the AP and the child(ren). This pattern of fusion between the AP and the child was often reflective of a pattern of fusion in the AP’s family of origin.

Figure 2 highlights a pattern of fusion in the alienating parent’s family of origin, which then replicates between the alienating parent and the child. In this example, Ann is the targeted parent (mother), and her ex-husband is the alienating parent (father). Fusion between the AP and the child seems to be a reflection of the AP’s history of fusion with his mother. Intergenerational fusion between the AP and the child was a common pattern observed across data sets.
**Triangulation.** Bowen (1976) considered the triangle to be the most basic emotional unit of the family system. A triangle consists of any three parts of the emotional system, either three individuals or two individuals and an issue (Friedman, 1991). This triangulation process often consists of the mother, father, and child, with the parents experiencing some form of unresolved conflict that is avoided by focusing on the child.

In this example (Figure 3), Betty is the targeted parent, and her ex-husband is the alienating parent. The negative focus of the AP’s father could provide insight into an observed familial pattern of possessiveness, control, and exaggerated child focus. Triangulation between the mother, father, and child that allowed the couple to manage the system’s chronic anxiety and resulted in an amplified child focus dynamic was a common pattern observed across data sets.
**Emotional Cutoff.** An emotional cutoff is an attempt to remove or separate one’s self from the past in order to better manage one’s present. At the root of this need to emotionally cutoff is a need to distance one’s self from unresolved fusion with a parent, sibling, or other family member. The example (Figure 4) is taken from the genogram of Keith and demonstrates a pattern of cutoff between parent and child that is playing out in the nuclear family unit.

In this example, unresolved attachment issues in the targeted parent’s family of origin have surfaced as a near mirror image of the emotional cutoffs of the previous generation. Following the example of their mother (alienating parent) and their uncle (alienating parental figure), three of the children have adopted a pattern of emotional cutoff as a way of managing unresolved attachment issues and fusion with nuclear and extended family members.
Emotional Reactivity. Emotional reactivity is generally a symptom of a much deeper problem or family dynamic. In short emotional reactivity is a symptom of a lack of differentiation of self or an individual’s ability to deal with the life crisis they experience. Families with low levels of differentiation of self, tend to experience a magnification of familial crisis’ (Friedman, 1991).

Figure 5 focuses on several factors that are indicative of lower levels of differentiation of self and subsequent emotional reactivity. Taken from Dan’s genogram, the prevalence of emotional cutoffs, fusion, triangulation, child focus, and hostility suggest patterns of emotional
reactivity and low levels of differentiation that are being passed intergenerationally through the family system.

**Figure 5**

*Example of Emotional Reactivity*

**Marital Conflict (poor conflict resolution/unresolved breach/no repair).** BFST maintains that relational symptoms can show up in either in the relationship that exists between the marital partners, the individual partners, or the children. The overall health of the marriage is assessed based on the extent to which the nuclear family and system is symptom-free in all three areas (Friedman, 1991).

Figure 6 demonstrates how intergenerational patterns of marital discord, including poor conflict resolution skills, unresolved and unrepaird relational breaches, can undermine intimacy
and connection. This example demonstrates issues that may have contributed to the inability to repair and maintain a bond. Of particular interest is the high level of fusion in the alienating mother’s family of origin as well as repetitive patterns of negative focus from mother to father.

**Figure 6**

*Example of Marital Conflict*

**Van Manen: Lifeworld Experiences**

Thematic analysis concluded with the researcher further analyzing the collective data through the lens of Van Manen’s existential categories or orienting lifeworlds. (Van Manen, 2015). This final phase of analysis attempted to explore the fundamental lifeworld themes or “existentials” of targeted parenting and extrapolate “the experiential structures that make up the experience” (Van Manen, 2015, p. 79). What follows is a synopsis of the lived experience as
expressed by the targeted parents within the context of their lived space, body, time, and lived relation to the other. Table 2 provides an overview of the dominant lifeworld themes.

### Table 2

**Lifeworld Themes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lived Space</th>
<th>Lived Body</th>
<th>Lived Time</th>
<th>Lived Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not belonging, cutoff, abandoned</td>
<td>Downcast eyes</td>
<td>Past (never-ending, haunting, regrets, unrecoverable losses)</td>
<td>Inability to trust</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling unsafe, no safe haven</td>
<td>Holding head in hands</td>
<td>Present (surreal, dream-like, detached, mentally foggy)</td>
<td>Loss of intimacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loss of home and family</td>
<td>Tears/weeping</td>
<td>Future (hopeless, no vision or ambiguous hope)</td>
<td>Reduced willingness for vulnerability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fatigue, no internal rest or peace</td>
<td>Drooping shoulders</td>
<td></td>
<td>Increased need for self-protection, guardedness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I don’t matter</td>
<td>Furrowed brow</td>
<td></td>
<td>Imposed and self-directed isolation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling lost, unsettled, disconnected</td>
<td>Long sighs</td>
<td></td>
<td>Suspicion and wariness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clinched laughter</td>
<td>Nevous laughter</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Clinched, jetting jaw</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Lived Space (spatiality).** The lifeworld of lived space or felt space speaks of the propensity of the human being to “become the space we are in” (Van Manen, 2015, p. 102). As expressed by Van Manen, lived space is the existential theme that refers to us to the world or landscape in which human beings move and find themselves at home or at rest (Van Manen, 2015).

The narratives of the targeted parents provided several insights into the ways they experienced their lived space. While contextual differences did exist, the narratives shared several commonalities. These included but were not limited to
• A sense of not belonging, being cutoff or abandoned
• Feeling unsafe or lacking a safe haven
• Lamenting the loss of a home and a sense of family
• A sense of fatigue and a lack of rest or inner peace
• Feeling as though they didn’t matter
• Feeling lost, unsettled and disconnected

**Lived body (corporeality).** A significant aspect of the data gathered included the video and audio recording of the interview sessions. While much of the data points were pulled from the rich and thick narratives provided, an equally salient aspect of the narrative was captured in the physical expressions that occurred as the participants shared their stories and experiences. Review and reflection of these video and audio recordings provided an additional layer of insight into the lived experiences of parental targeting. It should be noted that aside from a few fleeting moments of levity (typically before the interviews commenced), the participants were consistently serious, focused, and deeply thoughtful and throughout the sessions. The most common characteristics of these bodily expressions included.

• Downcast eyes
• Participants holding their head in their hands
• Tears/weeping
• Drooping shoulders
• Furrowed brow
• Long sighs
• Nervous laughter
• Clinched, jetting jaw

**Lived Time (temporality).** Lived time or subjective time speaks to how an individual experiences time rather than the actual, physical passage of time on a clock. For the targeted parents, these experiences are best understood through the temporality of past, present, and future reflections. Within these contexts, the targeted parents defined their experiences as follows.
• Past (never-ending, haunting, regrets, unrecoverable losses)
• Present (surreal, like a dream, detached, mentally foggy)
• Future (hopeless, no vision)

Although at least two of the participants could identify moments of hope, as they attempted to construct their vision of the future, these experiences often comingled as an ambiguous mix of both hope and despair.

**Lived Other (relationality).** The dimension of the lived other or relational connection speaks to more than corporeal expressions; a handshake, hug, or physical attraction/rejection (Van Manen, 2015). Although relational connection can be expressed in such actions, the dimension of the lived other (relationality) speaks more to the space that exists between individuals. The experience of the lived other highlights the space (relationship) that exists between ourselves and others, or more succinctly stated, the “interpersonal space” that is being mutually shared (p. 104). The targeted parents described their experiences of this interpersonal space, as it relates to their current way of being with others, in a number of relational terms including

• An inability to trust or loss of trust
• The loss of intimacy or intimate connection
• Reduced willingness for vulnerability
• Increased need for self-protection or guardedness
• Both imposed and self-directed isolation
• Tendencies for suspicion and wariness

**A “Typical” Narrative of the Targeted Parents Lived Experience**

While no narrative could embody all of the unique and nuanced experiences of any particular phenomena, the goal of constructing a “typical” narrative of parental targeting is to provide a compilation of the shared characteristics of the targeted parent experience in order to further define and clarify the phenomena through the lens of the targeted parent. As expressed by
Van Manen, this goal helps “make some aspect of our lived world, of our lived experience, reflectively understandable and intelligible” (Van Manen, 2015, p. 125).

Based on the data collected from the five participants of this study, including the written narratives, audio, and video recordings, letter-writing exercise, and field journal notes, the following textual reflection attempts to honor the lived experiences of the participants and give voice to an authentic narrative of the targeted parent experience.

**Interpretive Targeted Parent Narrative**

The phenomenon of targeted parenting is a deeply personal and life-altering experience. It is not defined by gender, socioeconomic position, or religious preference but is rather birthed in the context of human bondedness and relationship. The experience of targeted parenting is capable of shifting deeply embedded ways of being with self, with others, and with God. It can alter core belief systems and reconfigure one’s views about life, purpose, and transcendent beliefs.

Parental targeting evokes powerful emotional responses that are often experienced as overwhelming, confusing, and unmanageable. A sense of injustice and loss of personal agency may be present as well as experiences of an altered reality that are difficult to reconcile, set right, or make meaning. The targeted parent may suffer years of a protracted and disenfranchised grief process due to a cultural insensitivity to the depth and prevalence of the phenomenon. Resources for the targeted parent may be few or nonexistent, as are opportunities for recognition, support, or validation.

The long-term consequences of parental targeting have intergenerational implications that support familial tendencies for fusion, triangulation, emotional cutoffs, emotional reactivity as well as patterns of limited conflict resolution and unresolved and unrepaired relational
woundedness and trauma. Targeted parenting undermines the family system, fragments basic human needs for security, safety, and positive self-regard and limits the ability of future generations to obtain and maintain the intact familial unit. The phenomenon of parental targeting ultimately results in a loss of inner and collective unity, peace, and well-being in and among all members of the familial system.

Responses to Research Questions

In light of the thematic analysis process utilized in the study and as a result of the insights, themes, and reflective interpretations produced by the collective data sets, the researcher provides the following responses to the research questions that guided the study.

RQ1. What is the meaning ascribed to the experience of parental alienation by targeted parents?

The targeted parents interviewed for this study provided a substantial collection of rich and thick oral, written, and observational data from which the researcher was able to identify six distinct themes or structures of meaning. These six themes and additional subthemes provided a framework through which to understand the ways targeted parent’s attempt to make meaning of the phenomenon of parental alienation.

It is important to note, however, that each participant narrative represented a snapshot of sorts of the participant’s struggle to make meaning of a life event that, at the time of their participation, had yet to find a place of resolution or closure. As a result, the phenomenon of parental alienation represents a lived experience for which the targeted parents have yet to frame or integrate in a conclusionary or finalized manner. Thus, it is appropriate to assert that the making of meaning, for the targeted parent, is an ongoing, evolving, and yet unresolved process that involves experiences of betrayal, grief, injustice, defamation, loss, and social isolation.
It is interesting to note that although the participant narratives confirmed the presence of an incomplete resolution process, there were several points at which the participants all demonstrated a solidarity of beliefs. In each interview, the participants demonstrated a consistent belief that the actions taken by the alienating parent were intentional and designed to damage or destroy the child’s ability to maintain an intimate bond with the targeted parent. There was also solidarity in the participant’s experience of being taken aback, startled, and shocked by their ex-partner’s alienating behaviors and actions.

The data also highlighted the participant’s belief that the actions of the alienating parent and the impact on both the child and the targeted parent was a form of domestic violence and abuse. The following excerpts support these observations and further validate the participant’s lived experience of parental alienation.

- It was my wife and in-laws plan to not let me or my family be a part of my son’s lives.
- You think you know someone…I was shocked.
- I don’t understand how a person can live with themselves, the picture she and her family painted of me, it’s more than shallow, it’s evil.
- This was intentional; she knew that the best way to punish me was to keep my kids from me.
- I didn’t know what I was dealing with…until it was too late. It didn’t occur to me that he would be able to tear my relationship with my children apart.
- Why is he doing this to our son? He said he loved him more than life itself, and yet he is destroying this child.
- What do you say to someone who would risk the well-being of their own child in order to get back at their ex?
RQ2. What are the characteristics and dominant themes associated with parental targeting?

The primary or dominant themes and character extrapolated from the data provide a backdrop against which the phenomenon of parental targeting can be better understood. These six themes and their supporting subthemes provide insight into the ways targeted parents make meaning and understand the phenomenon of parental alienation. These identified themes and their associated subthemes include

- **Parental programming**
  - Loss of connection/contact with targeted parent
  - Parentification of child (child moved into adult position)
  - Child becomes coconspirator and ally of alienating parent
  - Form of child abuse
- **Relational well-being**
  - Relationship with Self
  - Relationships with Others
  - Relationship with God
- **Injustice**
  - Weaponized court system
  - Truth (guilty until proven innocent)
  - Disappointment/Dissatisfaction with court system
- **Grief and loss**
  - Loss of power (powerlessness)
  - Loss of parental position
  - Disenfranchised grief
  - Never-ending grief process
  - Loss of voice (unseen, unheard)
- **False allegations**
  - Slander
  - Libel
  - Character assassination
- **Intergenerational patterns**
  - Fusion
  - Triangulation
  - Emotional cutoff
  - Marital conflict (poor conflict resolution/unresolved breach/no repair)

These themes, subthemes, and characteristics suggest that targeted parents experience parental alienation as an emotionally, relationally, physically, and spiritually taxing life event.
that resists resolution and has long-term, long-range ramifications for all members of the familial unit.

**RQ3. What role, if any, do intergenerational patterns and social structure play in the phenomenon of parental alienation and parental targeting?**

The data sets gathered in this study suggest that intergenerational patterns and social structure play a significant role in the development, execution, and maintenance of alienating behaviors and the phenomenon of parental targeting. Participants provided rich and thick narratives through interviews and the construction of detailed, three-generational genograms about the role intergenerational patterns play in the lived experience of parental alienation and subsequently targeted parenting. While the data highlighted a number of striking interpersonal patterns of behavior that play a role in intergenerational transmission of alienating behaviors, several dominant patterns, including fusion, triangulation, emotional cutoff, and marital conflict, consistently defined an intergenerational process of transmission.

Of particular interest were patterns of fusion between the alienating parent and a parental figure that mirrored the tendency of the alienating parent to fuse with their own child(ren). In addition, high levels of emotional cutoff, triangulation, and marital conflict also appeared in the genograms and suggested that families experiencing parental alienation are heavily influenced by the transmission of these patterns of behavior and subsequently repeat the patterns they experienced in their families of origin in their relationship with their spouse and child(ren).

**RQ4. What impact, if any, does parental targeting have on relational well-being?**

The data sets collected in this study suggested that the lived experience of parental targeting has a profound impact on the relational well-being of all members of the familial unit. Participants consistently reported being deeply impacted in their inability to have a healthy, relational regard for self, with others, and with the God of their understanding. Reports of
internal dissidence, loss of trust, inability to bond, guardedness, shame, guilt, feelings of condemnation, and unworthiness were all terms used by the participants to describe the relational difficulties they experience as a result of their experiences as a targeted parent. The inability to find peace with one’s self seemed to act as a catalyst for other types of relational disconnection and ultimately, an inability to find peace in their spiritual self or connection with God.

**Evaluation of the Research Design**

The hermeneutic phenomenological design of this study provided a robust framework for exploring the lived experience of the targeted parent. The recursive, reflective process of making meaning by extrapolating the dominate themes represented in the lived experience of the targeted parent’s lifeworld, allowed the data to speak and reveal the existential essences hidden in the participant’s narratives. As a strength, the metrological stance of the study helped illuminate the complexities of the phenomenon of parental targeting and honor both the interpretive, reflective nature of hermeneutic process and the lived experience of the researcher. As expressed by Van Manen, the lived experience of the researcher and the researched is “the starting point and endpoint of phenomenological research” (Van Manen, 2015, p. 36).

A primary objective of the study was a desire to explore and give voice to the lived experience of parental targeting as it was experienced by the targeted parent. As such, the study was designed to collect a significant amount of data from each participant selected for the study through a variety of methods. These included interviews, audio, and video recordings, and a letter-writing exercise. Participants were also invited to share additional forms of media they believed would add to a better understanding of their lived experience.

Originally, this study was built on the vision of a face-to-face interview process as a means of opening up a more personal and intimate experience for the participants. The goal
being an authentic interpersonal exchange between the researcher and the participant that would yield written as well as experiential data. Due to the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, however, this design element had to be restructured due to concerns for physical safety and wellness. To ensure the safety of all parties, the interview process was moved to an encrypted online platform.

The shift from face-to-face interviews to an online platform resulted in several logistical challenges. These challenges included an increase in the complexity of the recruitment process as participants were subsequently required to meet specific technology-based skill set requirements. The change to an online process also increased the physical distance between the researcher and the participant, which reduced the quality of the interpersonal and experiential data collected. For example, the online platform limited the visual field to a head and shoulder parameter and blunted the emotional and relational exchange between the researcher and the participant. Thus, many of the more subtle forms of communication, such as facial expressions, body language, and shifts in breathing patterns, were reduced or eliminated.

In addition, it was originally anticipated that the distribution of a recruitment letter and email to a variety of social services, law firms, therapy offices, churches, and other venues where targeted parents might be receiving services would provide adequate coverage. This outreach, as well as the distribution of study fliers, was projected to reap an adequate response from potential participants. However, in light of the challenges associated with the COVID 19 lockdown, a more individualized method was employed to assure recruitment information came to the attention of potential participants. Hand-delivered fliers and letters proved to be the most effective method for distribution and resulted in an ample number of quality participants capable of providing rich, thick narratives of their lived experience as a targeted parent.
It is also important to note the decision on the part of all of the participants to forgo the submission of any additional forms of media-based expression. While it cannot be conclusively asserted that the complexity of submitting such media in a digital form may have contributed to the reluctance of the participants to engage in this form of sharing, the possibility exists that participants may have found a physical face-to-face interview format more conducive to the submission of such articles as photos, poetry, journal entries and other personal forms of their lived experience.

Once developed, the logistical process of completing the participant questionnaire, identifying qualified participants, scheduling the interviews, and completing the two-phase interview process was completed with few issues or complications. Participants were able to complete the two-phase interview process within the requested two-week time frame. Video and audio recordings were manually transcribed and compared to the original recordings to ensure accuracy.

The consistency and redundancy of the collected narratives proved to be a somewhat surprising development; saturation was achieved within the context of the first few participants. Additional participants were added to confirm this dynamic. The use of a thematic analytic process proved to be a satisfactory process for illuminating the salient themes and characteristics of the participant’s lived experience. Use of Van Manen’s protocol for lived space, body, time, and other provided an additional layer of exploration that further enhanced and supported the data extraction. Of particular interest was the focus of lived body, which allowed for a more detailed overview of the physical expressions of the participants.

Collectively, the hermeneutic phenomenological framework supported by a thematic analytic protocol provided a substantial amount of dense data that authentically represented the
lived experience of the targeted parents who participated in the study. While there may have been a flattening of the interactional quality of the interview process due to the switch to an online format, the data pulled from the study provides a more in-depth understanding of the lived experience of the targeted parent than previously provided in the literature and successfully illuminates the dominate themes and subthemes of the targeted parent’s experience.
CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS

Overview

“Blessed are the makers and maintainers of peace, for they shall be called the sons of God!
~ Matthew 5:9, (Amp.)

The purpose of this study was to better understand the lived experience of the targeted parent and the role intergenerational patterns of marital discord and social structure play in the formation of parental alienating behaviors. The study further explored the effect of alienating behaviors on the relational well-being of the targeted parent. This final chapter will provide a summary of the research study that will include the following sections, a review of the original purpose of the study, a restatement of the research questions that framed the study, a brief summary of the study and findings, a detailed discussion of the conclusions, implications, and applications, subdivided as necessary, that rose from the collective study process as well as a section outlining the limitations of the study and suggestions for further research. The chapter will conclude with a section on the implications of the study for future research and a brief summation.

Research Purpose

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to understand the lived experience of parental targeting and the role intergenerational patterns of marital discord and social structure play in the formation of parental alienating behaviors as well as the effect of alienating behaviors on the relational well-being of targeted parents. This study utilized a collaborative integration of Bowen family systems theory as a means through which to better understand the phenomenon of parental targeting and the role intergenerational patterns of marital conflict play in the formation of alienating behavior and the implications of parental alienating behaviors for Christian leaders and educators.
Research Questions

The development of several guiding research questions early in the process provided a containing framework that helped guide the study and stay true to the original intention of the study objectives. The following research questions guided this study:

**RQ1.** What is the meaning ascribed to the experience of parental alienation by targeted parents?

**RQ2.** What are the characteristics and dominant themes associated with parental targeting?

**RQ3.** What role, if any, do intergenerational patterns of marital conflict and social structure play in the phenomenon of parental targeting?

**RQ4.** What impact, if any, does parental targeting have on relational well-being?

Research Conclusions, Implications, and Applications

Summary of the Study

Over the course of several decades, the intact family unit has undergone a number of significant changes (Axinn & Barber, 1997; Eickmeyer & Manning, 2018; Manning & Cohen, 2012; Rhoades & Stanley, 2014; Smock, 2000). The normalization of divorce, cohabitation, single-parent households and co-parenting agreements has led to a series of troubling and socially impactful changes in how the nuclear family has been redefined and restructured. Research on these shifts has generated a plethora of studies on how these processes of restructure have impacted societal beliefs and perceptions about marriage, and the family unit have become commonplace (Axinn & Barber, 1997; Collardeau & Ehrenberg, 2016; Eickmeyer & Manning, 2018; Guzzo, 2014; Manning & Smock, 2002; Rhoades & Stanley, 2014; Smock, 2000).

Research has demonstrated that marital conflict, divorce, and family restructuring increase the likelihood of relational and emotional distress for all members of the family unit
(Amato & Patterson, 2017; Fagan & Rector, 2000; Raley & Wildsmith, 2004). This impact is especially striking for children (Fagan & Rector, 2000; Raley & Wildsmith, 2004).

An especially troubling outcome of this normalized familial reorganization process is the phenomenon of parental alienation. The intentional efforts of one parent to damage or destroy the relational bond between the child and their other parent is a phenomenon that has sparked great interest in the professional communities that serve distressed and divorcing parents (Ellis, 2005; Polak & Saini, 2015; Meier, 2009; Shaw, 2016). Undergirded by the work of Richard Gardner in the early 1980s, law firms, social service professionals, and researchers alike have based much of their work on the postulations and criteria developed by Gardner (Ellis, 2005; Polak & Saini, 2015; Meier, 2009; Shaw, 2016).

Few research studies have attempted to understand the phenomenon of parental alienation and subsequently, the experience of the targeted parent by soliciting the lived experience of the targeted parent (Balmer et al., 2017; Lehr & MacMillan, 2001; Finzi-Dottan, Goldblatt & Cohen-Masica, 2011; Poustie et al., 2018). This study attempted to add to the literature on parental alienation by exploring the lived experience of the targeted parent and the role intergenerational patterns of marital discord and social structure play in the development of alienating behaviors, as well as the impact of parental targeting on the relational well-being of the targeted parent. The findings of this study provide insights and suggestions for faith-based, church and para-church organizations for the development of more effective pro-marriage and pro-family leadership programs, educational curriculum, and family-focused services (Wolterstorff, 2002).

The study utilized a qualitative, hermeneutic phenomenological design supported and informed by a family systems perspective and undergirded by the theological concept of Shalom. In order to gain a better understanding of the lived experience of parental targeting, a qualitative
methodology was employed. Data were collected from participants by means of a two-phase interview process that produced over two hundred pages of verbatim transcription, sixteen hours of audio and video recording, five, three-generational genograms, the results of a participant letter-writing exercise, and over thirty hand-written pages of field notes. These data points were thematically analyzed within the context of a reflective, recursive hermeneutic process. The identified themes and subthemes were additionally analyzed in light of Van Manen’s “existential” lifeworld framework and narratively interpreted to produce a representative narrative of the targeted parent’s lived experience.

Summary of the Findings

This study was guided by four primary research questions. This section will provide an overview of the research questions and the ways in which that data supported or refuted each inquiry.

Research Question 1

What is the meaning ascribed to the experience of parental alienation by targeted parents?

The data provided a rich and thick description of the meaning targeted parents ascribe to the phenomenon of parental alienation. Based on the dense and rich oral, written, and observational data collected, the researcher was able to identify several representative issues that seem to characterize the most burdensome aspects of the targeted parent’s lived experience. (1) Targeted parents experience parental alienation as an ongoing life experience, which they have difficulty framing in a meaningful, purposeful, or manageable manner. The targeted parents often used such phraseology as never-ending, living death, and unreconcilable to explain the difficulty they have integrating their experiences. In short, the idea of making meaning of their lived experience as a targeted parent is one defined by ambiguity and an inability to find closure,
make meaning, or fully integrate the experience in a meaningful or sensible way. (2) Targeted parents believe parental alienation to be a purposeful act on the part of the alienating parent and intentionally orchestrated to damage or destroy the relationship between them and their child(ren). (3) Targeted parents consider parental alienation to be a form of abuse perpetrated on both themselves and their children and for which there is little support or remedy in the court, social service, or law enforcement fields.

Research Question 2

What are the characteristics and dominant themes associated with parental targeting?

The study data sets provided six distinct themes and supporting subthemes.

Theme 1: Parental Programming. Targeted parents identified several alienating behaviors utilized by the alienating parent in an attempt to damage or destroy the relationship between themselves and their children. This theme was divided into four subsets, which include (1.1) Loss of connection/contact with the targeted parent. Targeted parents reported being systematically isolated from their child(ren) by the alienating parent and the court system. (1.2) Parentification of child or efforts by the alienating parent to move the child into an adult position or equal. Often the child was elevated into this adult position and treated as a conciliatory figure by the alienating parent. (1.3) The child is recruited by the alienating parent to take on a co-conspirator role or form an alliance with the alienating parent in order to place the targeted parent in an outside or cutoff position. (1.4) The alienating behaviors of the ex-spouse are abusive and result in relational, emotional, physical, and spiritual damage to the child(ren).

Theme Two: Relational Well-being. Targeted parents reported changes in how they relationally interacted and felt about themselves, their relationship with others, and their relationship with God. This theme was subdivided into three distinct areas, which included (2.1)
Relationship with Self. Targeted parents reported a decline or shift in their ability to maintain positive self-regard and consistently reported feelings of inadequacy, guilt, shame, and a lost sense of worth or value. (2.2) Relationship with Others. Targeted parents reported an increase in guardedness, a loss of trust, a tendency to be suspicious of others, and a fear of rejection. (2.3) Relationship with God. Targeted parents reported experiencing a loss of connection with the God of their understanding that seemed to mirror their experiences with the alienating parent. Participants reported a sense of darkness, disconnection as well as accompanying experiences of feeling guilty, unworthy, ashamed, and rejected. Three of the participants reported a definitive loss of spiritual connection, which, at the time of the interview, was yet unresolved. Two of the participants reported an ability to work through these dark experiences and reestablish a sense of connection, albeit in a somewhat altered form.

**Theme Three: Injustice.** Targeted parents often referred to a sense of injustice and lack of support by law enforcement, the courts, and the legal and social services fields. This theme was divided into four subthemes. (3.1) Weaponized court system. Targeted parents consistently referred to the problems they encountered with the court system, law enforcement officers, and legal and social service officials. During these encounters, they experienced a lack of compassion, a tendency for the court to avoid obvious infringements, and noncompliance by the alienating parent as well as a tendency by the court to collude with the alienating parent. (3.2) Truth devalued; targeted parent guilty until proven innocent. Targeted parents regularly recalled situations in which they were required to prove that the false allegations lobbied by the alienating parent were not true. This inverse process of attempting to prove one’s innocence as opposed to the alienating parent being required to provide substantiated evidence was a common occurrence reported by the participants. (3.3) Disappointment or dissatisfaction with the court system.
Responses by the targeted parents, when asked to provide an overview of their experiences with the court system, law enforcement, and social service representatives, were generally negative. While the targeted parents were able to identify a handful of positive experiences, the majority of the experiences involved feeling unheard, unseen, disrespected, blamed, and misrepresented.

**Theme Four: Grief and Loss.** This multidimensional theme was divided into five subthemes. (4.1) Loss of power or powerlessness. Targeted parents reported feeling a mixture of frustration, sadness, apathy, and acceptance with regard to their inability to protect their child, change their situation, or otherwise influence their set of circumstances. (4.2) Loss of parental position. Targeted parents described feeling as though they had lost their position as a parent. Fear of losing contact or further alienating their child by maintaining a parental position often resulted in a loss of the targeted parent’s ability to function as a fully vested parental figure in their child’s life. (4.3) Never-ending death process. The participants described a protracted grief process for which they could not find resolution or closure. (4.4) Disenfranchised grief. The inability to find solace in the support of others was an especially painful part of their targeted parent experience. The inability or unwillingness of others to acknowledge or provide validation for their loss seemed to exacerbate an already difficult grief process. (4.5) Loss of voice, feeling unseen and unheard. Targeted parents described scenarios in which they felt invisible or erased by their community, their place of worship, their workplace, and even by those individuals who were supposed to be providing counsel and representation.

**Theme Five: False Allegations.** Targeted parents spoke at great length about the experience of being falsely accused. (5.1) Slander. Verbal misrepresentations, verbal slurs, proclamations, and assertions by their ex-spouse proved to be an especially difficult dynamic for the targeted parent. Often the targeted parent reported being shocked by the ability of their
former mate to spread falsehoods in an attempt to ruin their reputation and diminish their ability to maintain contact with their child(ren). (5.2) Libel. The use of written documentation by an ex-spouse in the form of restraining orders, falsified statements of fact, and other legal documents and filings were an egregious aspect of the ex-spouses attempts to defame the targeted parent. (5.3) Character assassination. While the targeted parents seemed to understand, although not agree, with the actions of their ex-spouse to try to defame, attempts to actually undercut or destroy the targeted parent’s reputation by concocting or asserting horrific acts of violence, abuse, neglect, substance use, or unlawful behavior seemed to exemplify the length to which the ex-spouse was prepared to go to destroy the relational bond between the targeted parent and the child and effectively remove the targeted parent from the child’s life entirely.

Theme Six: Intergenerational Patterns. Several important findings resulted from this aspect of the study. Based on the genogram developed during the first interview, the following subthemes highlight the primary patterns that came to the forefront during the analysis process. (6.1) Fusion. This pattern of relational interaction proved to be a dominant aspect of the parental alienation dynamic. Patterns of fusion seemed especially prevalent between the alienating parent and at least one parental figure. A pattern of fusion between the alienating parent and the child(ren) was also a significant aspect of the targeted parenting scenario. (6.2) Triangulation. While triangulation can be a normal relational pattern in the case of parental alienation, it can be identified on a multidimensional level both as a tendency to reduce anxiety and tension between the couple that results in an exaggerated child focus and as the result of unresolved conflict between the parents that resulted in the alienating parent colluding with the child and forcing the targeted parent into an outside position. (6.3) Emotional Cutoff. This effort to reduce anxiety between highly fused family members was a frequent dynamic identified in the targeted parent’s
genogram. (6.4) Emotional Reactivity. This familial pattern was indicative of the lower levels of differentiation of self that presented in the familial genogram. This tendency to become emotionally activated, offended, and reactive seemed quite prevalent across all three generational levels. (6.5) Marital Conflict. While this aspect of intergenerational transmission was not surprising, the specific form of marital conflict did prove to be unexpected. The researcher had anticipated a more emotionally reactive and undifferentiated form of conflict to be at the core of this dynamic; however, the conflict represented in the genograms of the targeted parents spoke more of a lack of conflict resolution skills, unresolved breaches to the marital bond and unrepaired marital infractions.

**Research Questions 3**

What role, if any, do intergenerational patterns of marital conflict and social structure play in the phenomenon of parental targeting?

The data suggest that intergenerational patterns and social structure play a role in the phenomenon of parental targeting. Targeted parents reported being influenced by several forms of social structure, including their place of worship, the legal system, social service agencies, law firms, and community resources. The majority of the experiences depicted by the targeted parents were negative in that the interactions of the targeted parents proved to be less than satisfactory and, at times, lacking in validation, effective resources, educational material, and general knowledge. While targeted parents did report significant levels of marital discord in both their family systems and those of their parents, the types of marital conflict were more oriented in a lack of conflict resolution skills and an inability or lack of ability to resolve or repair breaches in the marital bond. This was a surprising result since the literature has historically
defined marital conflict through the lens of emotional reactivity, physical aggression, avoidance, and more demonstrative forms of engagement.

**Research Question 4**

What impact, if any, does parental targeting have on relational well-being? The data provides evidence of a significant impact on the targeted parent’s relationship with self, with others, and with God.

The narratives provided by the participants suggest that there is a significant impact on the relational well-being of the targeted parent as a result of their exposure to the phenomenon of parental alienation. Targeted parents consistently reported shifts in their sense of personal well-being and ability to provide good self-care. Targeted parents reported difficulties seeing value in themselves and often reported strong feelings of worthlessness, hopelessness, shame, guilt, and other self-degrading emotions. The participants also reported difficulties with regard to their ability to interact with others in a healthy manner. Patterns of avoidance, guardedness, suspicion, and mistrust highlighted their commentaries on relational connection.

Especially troubling was the targeted parent’s reported loss of connection with the God of their understanding. While all of the participants reported having a Christian orientation to faith, three of the targeted parented reported shifts so significant in their view of God that it had resulted in identifying themselves as a non-practicing Christian. The remaining two participants reported having experienced a season of separation but, at the time of their interview, reported positive movement in their ability to regain their spiritual connection. However, even these participants referred to this reconnection as an altered form of their previous understanding of faith.
Research Conclusions, Implications, and Applications

This study explored the narratives of five targeted parents who are currently alienated from at least one of their children, post-divorce. The intent of this study was to better understand the lived experience of the targeted parent and assess the role intergenerational patterns of marital discord and social structure play in the development and deployment of alienating behaviors. This study also focused on the impact of alienating behaviors on the relational well-being of the targeted parent. The data collected in this study provided a rich and thick narrative of the lived experience of the targeted parent, which was supported by a variety of data sets including the fully transcribed narratives that resulted from a two-phase interview process, detailed three-generational genogram charts illustrating the complexities of the targeted parent’s family system, audio and video recordings, a letter-writing exercise, and copious field journal notes. The dense nature of the data, as well as the multiplicity of the collection methods, offers a superior method for understanding the lived experience of the targeted parent than has previously been deployed through second-hand accounts, subjective observations, and conjecture. This study builds on the current literature base and provides several unique insights about the lived experience of the targeted parent.

Empirical Literature Discussion

Historically the literature on parental alienation has focused on defining the phenomenon, establishing a criterion to identify the most salient aspects of the phenomenon, and exploring the impact of parental alienation on the child(ren), both those who are currently being exposed to the dynamic and longitudinally on adult children with a history of parental alienation (Baker, 2005, 2006; Baker, Bone & Ludmer, 2014; Baker & Fine, 2014; Gardner, 1987, 1991, 2002). Significant focus has also been directed toward better understanding parental alienation within
the context of the parent’s dissolving couplehood (Johnston, 2005; Polak & Saini, 2015). The vast majority of these studies have been based on the experiences and observations of those legal, social service, and clinical entities that encounter parental alienation during the execution of their service to families in the midst of pronounced turmoil and conflict (Bernet & Baker, 2013; Carter, 2011; Childress, 2015; Houchin et al., 2012; Hoult, 2006; Lorandos et al., 2013). Thus, a great deal of the literature available on the phenomenon of parental alienation is based on second-hand descriptions, anecdotal accounts, and theoretical postulations drawn from legal case reviews, longitudinal databases, clinician caseloads, and convenience samples (Bernet & Sauber, 2013; Lorandos et al., 2013; Meier, 2009; Pepiton et al., 2012). It is concerning that the vast majority of the available literature on parental alienation is based on the theoretical assertions of a clinical researcher, most notably the work of Richard Gardner in the 1980s, that has yet to be fully vested as an empirical basis or criteria for defining parental alienation in the family unit (Grohol, 2012; Houchin et al., 2012; Meier, 2009; Pepiton et al., 2012; Walker & Shapiro, 2010).

Because the phenomenon of parental alienation has previously been defined by persons taking an observational or “outside-in” stance, this study attempted to explore the phenomenon of parental alienation from a more specific “inside out” position. This goal was achieved by searching out the lived experience of the targeted parent. While observational insights by those who work with or reflect upon the experiences of others do provide relative understandings into phenomenological events, no experience can be adequately defined outside of parameters of lived experience. This study provided a framework for hearing the voices of those directly impacted by the phenomenon of parental alienation and lifts up an authentic narrative of targeted parenting that has been scarce in the literature (Balmer, 2017).
Research studies on parental alienation are largely divided into several discrete categories; those that focus on creating a diagnostic criterion or defining the phenomenon, those that focus on the impact of parental alienation on children, and those that attempt to better understand the phenomenon through the lens of theory and as a mental disorder. Studies that focus on the development of a definitive definition or diagnostic criterion tend to depend upon the work of Gardner, who espoused framing parental alienation as a manifested syndrome or mental disorder in children exposed to an alienating and targeted parent dyad (Baker, 2005, 2006; Baker et al., 2012; Childress, 2015; Ellis & Boyan, 2010; Pepiton et al., 2012). As an observational, child psychiatrist, Gardner postulated a series of distinct characteristics he believed defined the interactional patterns he observed between divorcing parents and how these behaviors impacted their children. Gardner’s work quickly became the gold standard for assessing parental alienating behaviors in the court system and social services agencies (Lorandos et al., 2013; Meier, 2009; Pepiton et al., 2012).

The assumed creditability of Gardner’s postulations has acted as the mainstay upon which the majority of the current literature is based. His work quickly gave birth to other theoretically based deductions and clinical hypotheses about the mental state of the individual partners and their children (Childress, 2015; Ellis, 2005; Kelly & Johnston, 2005). Studies based on Gardner’s work have provided a backdrop for further delineations about parental alienation in both legal and clinical settings (Ellis, 2005; Ellis & Boyan, 2010; Lorandos et al., 2013; Meier, 2009; Pepiton et al., 2012).

**Points of Agreement**

The participants of this study provided a number of data points that affirm previous research assertions. Targeted parents identified several aspects of the alienating process of
alienating behaviors that capture the essence of the alienating parent’s efforts to damage or destroy the relational bond between the targeted parent and the child(ren). A notable consensus highlighted by the targeted parents was the belief that parental alienation is a form of abuse directed at both the child(ren) and the targeted parent. This finding is consistent with recent research that frames parental alienation as a form of domestic violence (Harman et al., 2019; Harman et al., 2018; Kruk, 2010; Poustie et al., 2018). Study participants reported experiences of emotional and mental abuses, including intentional acts or threats of a loss of parental rights, financial ruin, loss of contact with the child(ren), false allegations, threats of bodily harm and sexual violence as well as other forms of abuse that include emotional and mental manipulations and conditioning designed to erase, eradicate or transform the child’s memory of the targeted parent. At least one participant alleged acts by the alienating parent intended to inflict spiritual harm.

Participant targeted parents reported a significant negative impact on their relational, emotional, physical, and spiritual well-being and described a number of relational issues stemming from their experiences as a targeted parent. These included significant shifts in their ability to maintain a healthy regard for self, form and maintain healthy relational interactions with others and conceptualize or maintain their previously established faith-based belief system and relational bond with the God of their understanding. Research has strongly suggested an association between experiences of parental targeting and relational and emotional distress and a reduced sense of well-being (Baker, 2005, 2006; Darnell, 1998; Finzi-Dottan et al., 2013; Kruk, 2010). Previous studies found that targeted parents reported a significant increase in relational distress with self, with others, and in their relational experience of God (Baker, 2005, 2006, 2007; Baker & Ben-Ami, 2011; Bentley & Matthewson, 2020).
Previous studies report that alienating behaviors often result in long-term relational and emotional issues for targeted parents (Bentley & Matthewson, 2020; Lee-Maturana et al., 2020; Poustie, Matthewson & Balmer, 2018). The findings of this study are consistent with previous research studies that outline the specific ways targeted parents understand and experience the long-term relational, emotional, and spiritual ramifications of parental alienation (Finzi-Dottan et al., 2012; Harman et al., 2019; Kurk, 2010; Poustie et al., 2018).

This study also provides support for previous research exploring the role of intergenerational patterns of marital conflict in marital dissolution (Amato, 1996, 2009; Amato & Patterson, 2017; Beal, 1998; Collardeau & Ehrenberg, 2016; Hardy et al., 2015; Klever, 1998). However, this study identified a wider range of intergenerational influence and a more specific delineation of the types of marital discord that contributes to the dynamic of parental alienation. While previous studies have acknowledged the intergenerational transmission process as a significant contributing aspect in the phenomenon of parental alienation, the focus has historically been on the ability, or inability, of the parents to maintain their relational bond in the absence of conflict. Because conflict is a normal aspect of human relational connection, this hypothesis represents a quandary of sorts due to the unlikely expectation that any intimate relationship could be inherently conflict-free.

The experiences articulated by the participants suggest that marital conflict is a multidimensional feature that, in the case of parental alienation, is directly linked to an inability or derelict understanding of the importance of repairing relational wounds and healing emotional breaches in the couplehood. While narratives about the role intergenerational patterns of marital conflict provide insight into the dynamics that drive such phenomenon, exploration into the underlying forces driving the conflict seems to shift the subject of inquiry to the presence of high
levels of emotional reactivity, tendencies for emotional cutoff, fusion and other indicants that suggest that marital conflict is but an outward manifestation of a deeper problem, most notably low levels of differentiation of self (Klever, 1998). In the absence of a well-defined sense of self or differentiation, emotional reactivity, emotional cutoff, fusion, and triangulation inherently contribute to an increase in marital conflict and difficulties in addressing relational breaches and emotional woundedness.

Thus, while this study does offer confirmation of the importance of understanding intergenerational patterns of marital discord, such understanding only offers a surface perspective. This study would suggest that a better understanding of the role of marital conflict in the phenomenon of parental alienation must include a more detailed understanding of the intergenerational transmission of differentiation of self, as well as the periphery manifestations that seem to undergird the types of marital discord seen in cases of parental alienation.

**Points of Divergence**

This study offers a number of findings that seem to challenge specific aspects of the current literature base. Expressly, these challenges include the framing of the parental figures and child as having some form of mental disorder or emotional incapacity, the delineation that the court system and social service agencies provide the best forum for managing the relational issues associated with marital conflict, family violence, and divorce and parental alienation and the use of Gardner’s observational data as a basis for defining the phenomenon of parental alienation (Lorandos et al., 2013; O’Donohue et al., 2016; Houchin et al., 2012; Pepiton et al., 2012; Worenklein, 2013).

The push by a number of respected researchers, clinicians, and lawyers to define the phenomenon of parental alienation through the lens of mental ill-health or disorder has become a
dominant theme over the course of the past several decades. These studies promote an assortment of theories about the mental stability of the parental partners as well as that of the children. Such studies have been met with significant pushback, including that of the APA, who continues to frame parental alienation as a relational issue, not a mental health issue (Cary, 2012; Grohol, 2018). Currently, efforts to include all forms of parental alienation as a specific form of mental illness in either the parents or child have been rejected by the APA (Grohol, 2018).

The findings of this study challenge the framing of parental alienation as a form of mental illness or disorder instead recognizing the relational qualities of the dynamic and the need to conceptualize the phenomenon of parental alienation as a form of family violence with associated traumatic ramifications and manifestations. The narratives and experiences of the targeted parents confirm the presence of limited skill sets associated with effective communication, conflict resolution, and personal responsibility in both parental figures.

Most evident was a tendency on the part of the targeted parent to tolerate high levels of inappropriate behavior coupled with a limited capacity for setting or maintain healthy boundaries. This tendency to sacrifice self and tolerate intrusive behaviors, while certainly worthy of inquiry and intervention, does not rise to the level of a mental disorder or illness. Neither does the unfortunate and unsavory behaviors of the alienating parent, as reported by the targeted parent. These behaviors, both those of the targeted parent and those of the alienating parent, speak to a lack of differentiation of self, intergenerational patterns of emotional reactivity, emotional cutoff, fusion, triangulation, and chronic anxiety. While troubling, these concerns can be addressed through a number of interventive methods and modalities that neither require a mental disorder diagnosis or theory of emotional incapacity.
The findings of this study also challenge the assertion that the legal system and associated social service organizations provide adequate intervention or treatment options (Johnston, 2005; Polak & Saini, 2015). Nor does the legal system and corresponding entities demonstrate a capacity for understanding the complexities of the familial system or the ability to effectively design, execute, or manage reconciliatory or reunification processes. Such issues are better addressed by persons trained in family systems and conflict resolution as well as those who demonstrate an affinity for familial wellness, trauma-informed care, and relational maturity (Ellis & Boyan, 2010; Kelly & Johnston, 2005; Kruk, 2018, 2019).

It is interesting to note that many legal experts and those trained to serve the legal community strongly advocate and promote legal remedies as a responsible response to issues surrounding familial difficulties despite the generally accepted premise that the legal system is adversarial at its core. Through such a lens, all family members become either winners or losers based on the strategical prowess of their legal counsel. It is difficult to see how such a system honors the relational well-being of all family members or promotes any type of unity or facilitative process. The sentiments of the targeted parents confirm the presence of such a conundrum and tell a story in which the legal system often becomes nothing more than a colluding extension of an already adversarial and conflicted system.

The findings of this study bring into question the use of Gardner’s methodology and conceptualization of the parental alienation dynamic as a fundamental or defining aspect of the PA phenomenon. While Gardner’s work does provide insights about the dynamics that define parental alienation, the potential benefits of his work have largely been lost amid the use of his postulations to argue their use as an empirically supported diagnostic tool.
The organic acceptance of Gardner’s speculative criteria further encourages the ideology of pathology and undermines the credibility of the research based on an unsubstantiated theoretical postulation (Meier, 2009; Pepiton et al., 2012). Research based on supposition or conjecture can only further propagate an expansion of that supposition. As delineated by the study participants, pathologizing trauma and framing the enormity of the emotional distress that results from the loss of a child through parental alienation is neither facilitative nor representative of the actual lived experience of targeted parenting.

**Fresh Ideas**

The findings of this study provide several opportunities for constructing fresh ideas about the phenomenon of parental alienation and, more specifically, the experience of targeted parenting. Insights extrapolated from data reveal three key opportunities for adding a fresh perspective to the current literature base.

**Targeted Parenting and the Legal System.** Targeted parents are dissatisfied and disappointed with the legal system. Study participants provided a variety of insights based on their experiences with the legal system. Aside from a couple of individual people, for whom the participants expressed appreciation, the vast majority of the narratives expressed profound disappointment and dissatisfaction with their interactions with the court and the legal system. Specific areas of direct contact included lawyers, judges, guardian ad litems, social workers, and legal assistants. As a collective, the targeted parents reported feeling devalued, unheard, falsely accused, misrepresented, and judged by the authoritative figures with whom they interacted. The targeted parents also talked about being frustrated by the lack of knowledge about parental alienation by the attorneys and judges connected to their case. Several reported feeling drained by their experiences, both emotionally and financially, while others eventually decided to simply
opt-out of the legal system due to a lack of confidence with regard to being adequately represented.

This finding is especially relevant due to the significant role the legal community has played in driving research, framing custody arrangements, facilitating unification processes, and creating policies about best practices in parental alienation cases. It is also interesting to note the traditionally authoritative claim by the legal community that interventions with families struggling with parental alienation are best served through legal channels and specially trained agents of the court rather than marriage and family therapists and systemic professionals. While the narratives provided in this study represent only a few voices, their stories represent authentic, first-person experiences that provide an unvarnished viewpoint about the ability of the court to meet the needs of families overwhelmed by the phenomenon of parental alienation. Based on the findings of this study, perhaps the time has come to rethink the dominant role of the legal system in resolving relational familial issues and seek alternative methods for resolving family crises and forging reconciliatory options.

The Grief Process of the Targeted Parent. Targeted parents experience a protracted grief process. While the literature has openly acknowledged grief as a reasonable response to the dynamic of targeted parenting, much of the information available on how targeted parents process loss, falls short of capturing the true impact of the loss of the parental bond with their child. The findings of this study highlight the enormity of the loss targeted parents experience and the inability of the targeted parent to find resolution or closure for their grief. The protracted grief process of the targeted parent seems to be directly related to a sense of disenfranchisement. Targeted parents reported feeling that their grief was misunderstood, dismissed, minimized, unmanageable, not allowed, unrecognized, and never-ending.
Recognizing the role disenfranchised grief plays in reducing the targeted parent’s ability to reconcile, heal, and make meaning of their lived experience is a vital aspect of restoring the targeted parent’s relational and emotional health. While the literature does offer some insight into the ways the targeted parent experiences grief, the opportunities for further exploration are great. The findings of this study suggest that the unresolved and disenfranchised grief of the targeted parent is a much larger concern than previously imagined. Efforts to better understand this aspect of the targeted parent’s experience is an important and relevant consideration worthy of further consideration.

The Role of Marital Conflict. Not every couple experiencing parental alienation is highly conflicted. A common assertion found in the literature base is the belief that the dynamic of parental alienation is largely populated by highly conflicted couples who demonstrate a propensity for volatile interactions. While it would be reasonable to assert that at least a percentage of the couples who experience parental alienation are in fact highly conflicted and demonstrate an inclination for volatile interactions, the narratives of the study participants suggest that it is possible for the couple to present with little open conflict and no history of violence, overt distress, or volatility.

Rethinking this dominant view seems in keeping with the findings of this study. Targeted parents expressed feelings of frustration with being labeled overtly emotional, angry, and uncooperative by court officials, extended family members, friends, and community members. As expressed by one participant, “just exactly how would you expect a parent to react to having their child forcibly removed from their life? What would you consider a normal reaction to such a situation?”
In contrast to the typical portrayal of the highly conflicted couple, the targeted parents in this study demonstrated a higher tendency for avoidance and acquiescence than conflict or confrontation. This study seems to suggest that in at least in some cases, the targeted parent is more likely to be limited in their ability to set healthy boundaries or limit the intrusive behaviors of others than overly demonstrative or confrontive. Their tendency to sacrifice themselves in order to maintain some semblance of peace would appear to be, at least in some cases, the more salient issue.

**Theoretical Literature Discussion**

This study was framed through the lens of a hermeneutic phenomenological design and qualitative methodology. The study was further supported and informed by Bowen family systems theory. The choice of a hermeneutic phenomenological design was based on the researcher’s belief that lived experience is a foundational aspect of understanding human phenomenon and provides the most reasonable starting point for better understanding the meaning people make of their life experiences. This choice of methodology was also chosen based on the researcher’s support of Heidegger’s understanding of recursive, reflective learning or hermeneutic circle, which recognizes and honors the pre-suppositions and life experiences of the researcher as valuable contributions to the research process. The use of Bowen family systems theory is a further reflection of the researcher’s orientation to systemic thinking, which lifts up the interdependent interplay between the individual parts of the system and the collective whole. This formulated research design provided a sound framework through which to view, interact, and honor the collective and individual aspects of the targeted parent’s lived experience.
**Points of Agreement**

This study provided support for the use of a hermeneutic phenomenological framework for better understanding the lived experience of parental targeting. As expressed by Heidegger (1927/1962), the hermeneutic circle provides a metaphoric scaffold for the researcher’s repetitive movement between the parts of the experience, to the whole, and then back to the parts in an ever-increasing depth of understanding. This ideology of the relational interdependence of the parts and the whole, most notably the reflective action of the influence of the parts on the whole and the whole on the parts, finds congruence with many of the fundamental assertions of systems theory. Thus, this study was roundly supported by the use of hermeneutic phenomenology undergirded by Bowen family systems theory.

Because BFST provides a systemic method for understanding the complexities of the family unit, it provided an effective method for exploring, interpreting, and better understanding the lived experience of parental alienation in and among the various members of the family unit. The findings of this study found congruence with many aspects of the literature. For example, numerous studies focus on systemic dynamics such as the intergenerational transmission of marital conflict, child-focused families as well as the presence of patterns of emotional cutoff, emotional reactivity, levels of differentiation of self, and chronic anxiety (Amato, 1996; Amato & Patterson, 2017; Donley, 2003; Glad, 1999; Hardy et al., Larson, 1998; 2015; Wolfinger, 2000).

Specifically, the findings of this study find equivalence with the work of Donley 2003 and the family process of child-focus, which highlights the tendency for conflicted couples to resolve their anxiety by shifting the focus off of the couplehood and onto one or more of the children (Beal, 1998). Other points of agreement include studies that explore the
intergenerational transmission of marital instability, self-regulation, and other family of origin issues as well as studies that focus on the effect of differentiation of self on marital conflict, the impact of triangulation on relationships, and the role of emotional cutoffs in family conflict (Amato & Patterson, 2017; Campbell, 1992; Ellis & Boyan, 2010; Glad, 1999; Peleg, 2014).

**Points of Divergence**

The findings of this study found few points of contention with the literature based on systemic precepts. Any differences were minor and consisted of slightly different interpretations rather than widely divergent issues. For example, some difference exists about whether or not couple conflict, in the literature, is framed as the intergenerational transmission of discord or a deeper representation of the intergenerational transmission of low levels of differentiation of self, emotional reactivity, emotional cutoff, and chronic anxiety (Amato, 1996, 2009; Amato & Patterson, 2017; Friesen, 2003; Frost, 2015; Gilbert, 1992; Glad, 1999; Hardy et al., 2015). Such differences seem minor and tend to debate a particular focus rather than dispute the use of systemic principles and application.

**Fresh Ideas**

The findings of this study suggest that possible fusion between the alienating parent and a parental figure may support the tendency of the alienating parent to fuse with the child. Further exploration into this reported dynamic might help explain the alienating parent’s propensity for forming an even more exaggerated form of fusion or coalition with the child, which in turn elevates the child to an adult or equal position with the alienating parent. From this parentified position, the equalized parent and child collaboratively establish an emotional cutoff with the targeted parent and, in so doing, move the targeted parent to a more subservient, less powerful, outside position. The child, from an adult position, assumes a position of authority over the
targeted parent who tends to assume a more subjective position due to fears of becoming even further alienated from the child. This hypothesized shift in the power structure of the familial unit may provide insight into how patterns of parental alienation are birthed and thus provide insight into possible preventative measures or interventions.

**Study Implications**

From the findings of this study, it is argued that parental targeting can accurately be framed as a form of child abuse and family violence that manifests as a result of destructive intergenerational patterns and is inherently a relational issue best addressed through therapeutic interventions that honor the interpersonal health and well-being of all members of the family unit. The findings of this study also assert that parental targeting is an intentional act executed by the alienating parent in an attempt to damage or destroy the relational bond between the child(ren) and the targeted parent and that these intentional acts by the alienating parent often result in a number of troubling outcomes for the targeted parent, which include but are not limited to, a protracted and socially isolating grief process, and significant impairment in the targeted parent’s ability to form and maintain healthy, balanced relational bonds with themselves, others and God. The findings also provide evidence of the role intergenerational patterns play in the emergence, facilitation, and maintenance of the parental targeting phenomenon. This section will explore each of these findings within the context of their theoretical, empirical, and practical applications.

**Theoretical Implications**

This study explored the role of intergenerational patterns play in the emergence, facilitation, and maintenance of alienating behaviors or outcomes. The findings highlighted the impact patterns of fusion, triangulation, overt child focus, emotional reactivity, emotional cutoff,
and chronic anxiety have on the perpetuation of troublesome ways of being with self and others. However, the simple identification of these patterns has little value apart from their ability to act as a catalyst for developing effective ways of applying this knowledge in ways that reduce or otherwise circumvent the potentiality for harm in the family unit.

BFST has proposed a method for assessing the health of the familial unit by examining the condition and function of three distinct areas, notably the marital relationship, the health of the partners, and the health of the children (Friedman, 1991). This assessment begins with “getting to the systemic forces,” both those that exist in the nuclear family unit and those being transmitted intergenerationally (Friedman, 1991, p. 137).

This study has demonstrated the value of mapping the intergenerational patterns of the family system and extracting those patterns that undergird dysfunction and conflict. These patterns then become a template of sort that guides therapeutic interventions developed to address the needs of the individual parents, the needs of the couplehood, and the needs of the children. The implications for such a protocol include a more cohesive method for addressing both the collective family unit and the individual needs of specific family members. Through this lens, the family unit is provided with a holistic approach that directly impacts the development of alienating patterns and reduces the likelihood that either parent can be placed in a position of isolation or assume a position of overt power that can and often does result in experiences of child abuse and family violence.

**Empirical Implications**

Studies in the literature regarding parental alienation and targeted parenting tend to highlight the destructive impact of PA on children (Baker, 2005, 2006; Johnston, 2005; Mahrer et al., 2018; Walker & Shapiro, 2010). Moreover, while this is an obviously important aspect of
the PA phenomenon, this almost singular focus has resulted in an abundance of research focused on the task of defining parental alienation, diagnosing parental alienation, and constructing various legal postulations about parental alienation as litigation and child custody protocols (Carter, 2011; Ellis & Boyan, 2010; Houchin et al., 2012). As a result of this tendency for child-focused research, studies on the parental partners have been somewhat limited in scope and tend to emphasize proposed mental deficiencies in the parental partners (Baker & Fine, 2014; Childress, 2015; Meier, 2009). This focus has resulted in a fair amount of the studies attempting to hypothesize mental illness in the parents as the precipitating cause of the PA dynamic (Lorandos et al., 2013; Meier, 2009).

Consequently, these inquiries have produced a plethora of articles, books, research, and papers that privilege the mental illness narrative and outline specific legal strategies, co-parenting guidelines, treatment options, and re-unification plans designed to treat the dysfunction and alleged mental illness, rather than the underlying relational problems that drive the behaviors. Most recently, the literature seems to suggest a growing alliance between those who view PA as a legal matter best resolved in the family court system and those who argue that PA is better defined as a mental health issue to be treated psychiatrically (Ellis & Boyan, 2010).

However, the findings of this study provide evidence that parental alienation is a relational issue underscored by potentially destructive intergenerational patterns that often manifest as child abuse and family violence and is best addressed from a therapeutic family-systems perspective (Johnston, 2005; Lee-Maturana et al., 2020; Harman et al., 2018). A growing number of research studies have identified parental alienation as a complex family system issue best addressed by systemically trained professionals utilizing a family systems
approach that recognizes the multiple factors that influence parent-parent and parent-child relationships. (Harman et al., 2018; Harmen et al., 2019; Johnston, 2005; Saini et al., 2017).

The finding of this study also demonstrates evidence of a protracted or disenfranchised grief pattern in targeted parents. These findings seem congruent with current research that identifies a variety of traumatic life experiences that result in an exaggerated and often unresolved grief process in individuals who suffer loss in ways not generally accepted or recognized on a large social scale (Attig, 2004; Elizabeth, 2019; Lee-Maturana et al., 2020; Harman et al., 2016). The narratives of the participants indicate that the disenfranchised grief of the targeted parent often goes unrecognized and untreated and represents an additional layer of their lived experience ripe for further exploration and inquiry.

**Practical Implications**

Several distinct areas of concern came to light as a result of this study. The finding of this study suggests a need for increased awareness, insight, training, and education in a number of settings. This section will explore practical implications for addressing the real-world needs of the targeted parent in the legal and social services field, by treating professionals, through targeted parent resources, and as a ministry opportunity for the Body of Christ.

**Legal and Social Services.** The findings of this study demonstrate a general pattern of dissatisfaction and disappointment by participants with regard to their interactions with legal representatives and the family court system. Participants reported feeling dismissed, devalued, and unheard by court officials and cited prolonged legal proceedings and financial loss as deterrents to seeking appropriate counsel and input from attorneys, judges, and law enforcement officers. Participants reported similar experiences in their encounters with social service
providers, court-appointed guardian ad litem’ and other court affiliated representatives. (Vassiliou & Cartwright, 2001).

Legal professionals and other affiliated court officials would likely benefit from interaction with and instruction by professionals who operate within the context of a family systems framework (Mahrer et al., 2018). Efforts to lift up and recognize the value of shared parenting, reduce gender bias and privilege familial healing and reconciliation would be additional ways the family court system and legal professionals could enhance their ability to facilitate better outcomes. Lastly, training in family systems, emotional intelligence, and other forms of relationally-based, family-focused education could provide the basis for a more family-friendly orientation that honors the health and relational well-being of all members of the familial system (Mahrer et al., 2018).

Clinicians. The findings of this study reveal concerns about the apparent lack of therapists, counselors, social works, and other treating professionals with the requisite skills required to effectively facilitate therapeutic care for targeted parents. While there were some indications that participants had experienced at least some of their interactions with treating professionals as helpful and supportive, the majority of the interactional experiences were reported as disappointing, unsatisfactory, and judgmental. The collective consensus being that the participants felt the counselors, mental health professionals, and social workers did not understand their situation, were uneducated about the phenomenon of parental alienation, or worse, became judgmental and skeptical about the abuse to which they were being subjected.

These findings suggest a need for additional training and familiarization with the phenomenon of parental alienation and targeted parenting as a form of child abuse and family violence that negatively impacts all members of the family unit.
**Targeted Parents.** The findings of this study highlight the lack of available resources for targeted parents and the importance of helping targeted parents increase their capacity for appropriate self-care and self-agency while reducing tendencies to tolerate abusive behaviors. Interventions that increase the targeted parent’s ability to manage stress and build life skills could provide the framework for healthier relational interactions, less fusion, and reduced anxiety. Additionally, programs and educational literature that provide validation and support would be beneficial as would peer support groups and therapist lead, family systems-oriented groups, family leadership, and educational classes (Hardy et al., 2015: Wilke et al., 2015).

**The Body of Christ.** One of the most distressing findings of this study was the depth of the impact parental alienation and targeted parenting had on the participant’s relationship with themselves, with others, and with God. The reported isolation, judgment, and lack of validation of the participants emphasize the need for compassionate and facilitative support for families struggling with alienating behaviors and outcomes. For the body of Christ, parental alienation and targeted parenting represent an opportunity to be the hands and feet of Christ and infuse hurting families with God’s Shalom peace.

Unfortunately, the Church seems to be as unfamiliar and unprepared to deal with the ramifications of parental alienation as the majority of other outreach and resource centers. This lack of awareness and lack of understanding has, at least in the case of the participants of this study, resulted in a crisis of faith that for many has developed into a reduced sense of self-worth, a lack of relational connection with others, and most egregiously, a loss of faith.

The need for spiritual intervention in cases of parental alienation is great, as is the need for a greater understanding in the body of Christ about the dynamics that give birth to and support the proliferation of this toxic phenomenon. Such awareness could be facilitated by
providing ministry personal, as well as congregants, with educational information and
frameworks for spiritual interventions. Organizational churches could provide opportunities for
support groups, marriage mentoring, abuse and family violence training, and other forms of
support. Most notably, however, believers could be most helpful by choosing to become more
informed about the phenomenon of parental alienation and support the development and
facilitation of pro-family, pro-marriage, and pro-parenting programs and curriculum.

**Study Applications**

This section will attempt to suggest specific ways the findings of this study can be
conceptualized, implemented, and applied within the context of the targeted parent’s life. Such
applications serve to transform the findings of the study into real-world, hand’s on actions that
directly meet the needs of the couples, children, and families impacted by the phenomenon of
targeted parenting.

**Resources and Support**

A consistent lament for the participants of this study was a reported lack of supportive
resources available for targeted parents. This feeling of isolation significantly contributed to their
sense of hopelessness, abandonment, and loss of faith. Some of this lack of support and available
resources may be due to a languaging issue. While the professional and research communities
are familiar with the terms and phraseologies generally used in discussions about the
phenomenon of parental alienation and targeted parenting, it would seem that such terms are less
familiar or relative for the general population. Thus, there is a need to establish methods through
which to better engage and service the couples, parents, and children impacted by parental
alienation in ways relevant to their experiences and understanding.
This researcher found congruence with the lament of the participants due to an experiential awakening that took place during the recruitment process when it became necessary to go beyond the conventionally accepted language of parental alienation and provide detailed explanations to potential referral sources and participants. These types of lived experiences seem to highlight the need to build a more community-friendly template for building awareness, improved dialogue, and resourcing. Training programs that reflect the lived experiences of the targeted parent along, with similar forms of educational information, could act as a springboard for increased community awareness of the service needs of targeted parents.

**Christian Leaders and Educators**

The implications for ministry with regard to parental alienation and targeted parents are great. As an underserved population, families, couples, and children impacted by this phenomenon represent a contemporary form of familial crisis that is currently operating out of the conscious awareness of a vast number of Christian leaders and educators. Programs that introduce ministry leaders and educators to the phenomenon of parental alienation could provide a catalyst for expanded family-based support services and resources. In addition, increased awareness could support the development of family-focused, pro-marriage, pro-family and pro-parent training, leadership programs, and curriculum for utilization in church and para-church organizations.

While couple and marriage therapy are effectual and well-known forms of helping couples resolve relational issues, the stigma of seeking any type of counseling or therapeutic assistance can be a deterrent to engaging in these types of services. As this researcher has postulated, and as supported in the literature, education programs geared toward increasing relationship skills offer a less threatening and highly effective method for strengthening the
familial bond and couplehood. (Hardy et al., 2015; Wilke et al., 2015). Framing relationship training as family leadership or marriage and family education expands the current range of services available to struggling families and couples and offers a new field of service geared to enrich, lead, and teach individuals, couples, and family’s better ways of doing relationships with themselves, with others and with God.

Such services, when underwritten by spiritual principles, would provide a rich, diverse, and scripturally accurate method for developing pro-couple, pro-marriage, pro-family programs, and curriculum. These types of leadership and education programs, in addition to providing a broad range of family-friendly services, could also develop specialized training and educational curriculum framed to meet the unique needs of specific populations such as people experiencing the phenomenon of parental targeting and targeted parenting. Not only would these types of programs greatly enrich support for the family, but such programs would also offer much-needed assistance to underserved and misunderstood populations experiencing relational distress.

**Parental Alienation – A Loss of Shalom.** This study has provided insight into the ways the phenomenon of parental alienation and subsequently targeted parenting have impacted the lives and relational bonds of five representative targeted parents. Their stories tell, at least in part, the relational, emotional, physical, and spiritual toll parental targeting takes on all members of the family unit.

At its most core level, parental targeting speaks to a breakdown of God’s original plan for peaceful unity and relational connection between humankind, one another, and God. More specifically, parental targeting represents a loss of peace or God’s perfect Shalom in both the collective home and the marital union. For the body of Christ, this loss of Shalom peace in the home is especially egregious due to the symbolic value of marriage, family, unity, and covenant
relationship in scripture. As representative ways of being with self, others, and God, marital conflict, divorce, parental alienation, and parental targeting fall short of God’s original plan for healthy, harmonious marriages, homes, and families.

**Shalom Byit – The Way it Ought to Be.** This study attempted to better understand the dynamics that contribute to and underscore the phenomenon of parental targeting. However, simply knowing what leads to dysfunction and the loss of God’s Shalom peace does little to alleviate pain and suffering unless that knowledge can be translated into actionable plans and objectives. To reconcile the way things are, with the way it ought to be, requires a vision that fully embraces God’s plan and God’s method for redemptive reconciliatory healing and wholeness (Plantinga, 1995). As expressed in the 12th chapter of Corinthians, this plan begins with the individual growth of the parts (members of the body of Christ), which is facilitated by the collective members of the body. In short, discipled disciples, disciple or train, teach and lead younger members of the body into positions of maturity and leadership. These mature members of the body are able to provide wise counsel because they have developed the ability to manage the “solid food” of the Word.

…but solid food is for the full-grown men, for those whose senses and mental faculties are trained by practice to discriminate and distinguish between what is morally good and noble and what is evil and contrary to either to devere or human law (Hebrew 5:14, Amp.).

Building strong, mature, and biblically discerning Christian leaders and educators capable of designing, developing, and modeling healthy relational completeness with self, others, and God is a key factor in reclaiming the family unit and marital bond as God ordained examples of His Shalom peace. It is a circular process that begins in the home and ends in the home. Children raised to maturity in homes of peace and unity have a better opportunity to pass these standards on to their children and subsequent generations.
Now may the God of peace, [Who is the Author and Giver of peace], Who brought again from among the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, by the blood [that sealed, ratified] the everlasting agreement (covenant, testament), Strengthen (complete, perfect) and make you what you ought to be [emphasis added] and equip you with everything good that you may carry out His will; [while He Himself] works in you and accomplishes that which is pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ (the Messiah); to Whom be the glory forever and ever (to the ages of the ages). Amen (so be it) (Hebrews 13:20, 21, Amp.).

Research Study Limitations

This study was able to expand the literature base on parental alienation and targeted parenting. However, the researcher would note the following identified limitations. (1) Interpretive hermeneutic phenomenological studies are not designed to provide data that is generalizable to the larger population; however, this study did provide data or commonalities that were transferable to persons with similar lived experiences. (2) This study was limited to a distinct population, which included participants who were married at least five years and who were at least two-years post-divorce. This study did not explore the prevalence of parental alienation or targeted parents in married, never married, and co-habitating couples. (3). The data collected in this study consisted of self-reported accounts based on the lived experience of the participants. Therefore, this data cannot be validated with regard to its empirical value or accuracy. (4). This study was further limited by excluding participants with lived experience in blended family units or other forms of familial restructuring, such as those defined by remarriage. (5). This study did not address individuals who experience the phenomenon of parental targeting while maintaining a marital relationship with the alienating parent. (6). This study did not take into consideration the perspective of the alienating parent or the alienated child or attempt to differentiate between the experiences of men and women who have lived experience as a targeted parent.
Further Research

A vital aspect of conducting research is the identification of additional areas of inquiry that lend themselves to new insights and expanded understandings. This study identified several areas worthy of further consideration and exploration and are presented here to encourage continued investigation into the phenomenon of parental alienation and targeted parenting.

While this study expanded the literature by providing new insights into the lived experience of targeted parenting, the sample size was not large enough to provide generalization to the larger population. Future research should seek input from a more diverse population from a more expansive geographic area. Research on the lived experience of targeted parenting should also explore ways to secure input from never married, cohabitating, remarried, and other forms of couplehood to gain a broader understanding of the circumstances under which parental alienation develops. Other methods for expanding the research on targeted parenting would include in-person, face-to-face interviews and focus groups that would allow researchers to glean valuable tactile and experiential data not available or blunted by the use of online or other forms of less engaging interaction. Such studies, utilizing a post-COVID 19 framework, could provide additional data unavailable due to the necessity of employing an online platform.

Because this study engaged both male and female participants, future studies that explore possible differences in the ways men and women experience targeted parenting may provide insights into how gender influences the targeted parent’s role in parental alienation. Future studies that explore parental alienation and targeted parents in other forms of familial structure such as never married, cohabitating, married, and remarried relationships would add additional depth to the literature. In a similar manner, qualitative studies that explore the lived experience
of the alienating parent could add an additional layer of understanding yet unrepresented in the literature.

Studies that expand the use of genogram charting as a method for a more in-depth exploration of the intergenerational patterns that contribute to and maintain alienating behaviors could provide further information on ways to restructure and reduce intergenerational transmission of alienating and abusive behaviors and reduce their prevalence in subsequent generations. Such studies could offer further evidence of how family genograms can be used by treating professionals to identify unresolved traumas and grief processes that may underly or contribute to alienating behaviors and family violence. These types of inquiry could be further strengthened by longitudinal studies that explore the development and progression of parental targeting across time.

Because all of the participants in this study offered insights into how the phenomenon of parental targeting impacted the way they make meaning of their faith, future studies that explore the role faith, or the lack thereof, play in the phenomenon of parental targeting could add additional insight into the impact of PA on personal wellness and relational health. Lastly, future studies on the use of systemically-based marriage and family therapy and domestic mediation as methods of ameliorating resources for couples and families experiencing alienating behaviors could help identify effective interventive and reconciliatory protocols for reducing the prevalence of parental alienation and targeted parenting in familial units.

**Summation**

This study was designed to increase the authentic representation of the targeted parent’s lived experience in the literature. Because such representation has historically been scarce, this study sought to fill this gap by providing a rich and thick narrative of the lived experience of the
targeted parent and correspondingly identify specific aspects of the literature base that would benefit from expanded inquiry and interpretive reflection. This present study provided insight into the meaning targeted parents made of the phenomenon of parental alienation and explored the role intergenerational patterns of marital discord play in the development of alienating behaviors. The study identified six dominant themes and corresponding subthemes that helped further illuminate the lived experience of targeted parenting and provided a backdrop for assessing areas worthy of future inquiry and study. This study also significantly added to the literature with regard to how the experience of parental alienation impacted the targeted parent’s relational well-being.

This study employed a hermeneutic phenomenology design, which was supported by the systemic framework of Bowen family systems theory. The hermeneutic phenomenological orientation of the study provided a platform for the researcher to honor a reflective process that allowed the lived experience of both the researcher and the researched to intertwine within the context of the hermeneutic circle and produce an even stronger and more graphic picture of the targeted parent’s lived experience.

As long as the phenomenon of parental alienation continues to impact the integrity of the parental bond and subvert the integrity of one of life’s most basic forms of healthy relational attachment, there will exist a need to better understand the dynamics that drive the phenomenon. This study identified specific ways to address the familial crisis of parental alienation and develop effective means for reducing or even eliminating the destructive impact of parental alienation on all of the members of the family unit.

Ultimately, this study provided a venue for reflection about the deeper spiritual issues that undergird the phenomenon of parental alienation. At its core, parental alienation is the
epidemic of broken relationship and a loss of peace. Because humankind was designed for rich, full, and complete relational connection (God’s Shalom peace), the loss of relationship, especially deeply held relationship, is one of the most emotionally painful offensives a human can experience.

The brokenness of parental alienation requires nothing less than the restorative wholeness mirrored in the completeness of God’s Shalom. God’s desire for perfect peace and wholeness in all aspects of our relational experiences; with ourselves, with others, physically, emotionally, and in community speak to God’s redemptive and reconciliatory character and provides a template for restorative intervention, healing, and relational health.

It is the desire of the researcher to be a facilitative agent of God’s completed work and a true peacemaker in the facets of this world that fall short of that design. If this study provides insight into the relational brokenness known as parental alienation and challenges others to become agents of reconciliation and makers of peace in the homes, families, churches, workplaces, and communities where they work, play, worship, and work, all of the time, effort, and sleepless nights that went into completing this work will have been worth every second. To God be the Glory, and may God’s perfect peace find expression in every individual who takes on the challenge of being a modern-day reconciliator and peacemaker. “And the wise are peacemakers who go on quietly sowing for a harvest of righteousness – in other people and in themselves” (James 3:18, PHILLIPS).
REFERENCES


doi:http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.liberty.edu/10.1007/s13524-011-0025-4


April 17, 2020

Teresa Walters
Brian Pinzer


Dear Teresa Walters, Brian Pinzer:

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study to be exempt from further IRB review. This means you may begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your approved application, and no further IRB oversight is required.

Your study falls under the following exemption category, which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46:
101(b):

Category 2.(iii). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met:
The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by §46.111(a)(7).

Your stamped consent form can be found under the Attachments tab within the Submission Details section of your study on Cayuse IRB. This form should be copied and used to gain the consent of your research participants. If you plan to provide your consent information electronically, the contents of the attached consent document should be made available without alteration.

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any modifications to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty University IRB for verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by completing a modification submission through your Cayuse IRB account.

If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether possible modifications to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us at irb@liberty.edu.

Sincerely,

G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP
Administrative Chair of Institutional Research
Research Ethics Office
APPENDIX B: RECRUITMENT LETTER

Walters Recruitment Letter Template

[Date]

[Recipient]
[Title]
[Address 1]
[Address 2]

Dear [Recipient]:

As a graduate student in the School of Divinity at Liberty University, I am conducting research to better understand the lived experience of parental targeting. The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study is to understand the lived experience of parental targeting and the role intergenerational patterns of marital discord and social structure play in the formation of parental alienating behaviors as well as the effect of alienating behaviors on the relational well-being of targeted parents. I am writing to invite eligible participants to join my study.

Participants must be divorced individuals at least 18 years of age who were married a minimum of five years and are at least two years post-divorce. Participants must also reside within the midwestern state of Indiana. Participants must have lived experience as a targeted parent and be able to provide rich, descriptive narratives of the lived experience of parental targeting. Participants, if willing, will be asked to attend two online interviews within a two-week period. Each interview will last between 1 and 1.5 hours. Names and other identifying information will be requested as part of this study, but all collected information will remain confidential.

No preparation will be required for the first interview; however, participants will be asked to prepare for the second interview by writing a letter to either the child(ren) from whom they are currently alienated, the alienating parent, or a social service, legal, or mental health professional they believe significantly impacted their lived experience. Participants will be encouraged to submit any additional artifacts in the form of poetry, journal entries, photos, art work etc., they believe will help facilitate the expression of their lived experience of targeted parenting.

In order to participate, please visit [LINK] to complete a brief online questionnaire. Participants that fall within the study parameters will be notified by email and provided with a link to an online scheduling site where they can schedule two interview appointments. Both interviews will be audio and video recorded. Participants will receive an email confirmation of their appointment times. This confirmation email will provide information about how to login to the video conferencing platform. The video conferencing platform being used for this study, Doxy.me, is a secure HIPPA compliant platform that can be accessed via computer or cell phone app.

A link to a consent document will be provided in the appointment confirmation email. The consent document contains additional information about my research. Participants will need to sign the consent document and digitally submit the form on Doxy.me during the first interview appointment.
Walters Recruitment Letter Template

If you have any questions about the study or the process of becoming a participant, I can be reached at 555-555-5555 or by email at email@liberty.edu. Thank you in advance for your time and consideration.

Warm regards,

Teresa M. Walters, LMFT, LAC
Doctoral Candidate: Rawlings School of Divinity at Liberty University
555-555-5555 | email@liberty.edu
Research Participants Needed

A Study Exploring the Targeted Parent’s Lived Experience

*Parental alienation is a relational process in which one parent (alienating parent) negatively influences a child’s perception of the other parent (targeted parent).*

~ Balmer, Mathewson & Hines, 2017

- Are you a divorced individual with lived experience as a targeted parent?
- Are you willing to attend two online interviews and share your story of parental alienation as a targeted parent?

If you answered yes to these questions, you may be eligible to participate in a research study exploring the lived experience of parental targeting.

The purpose of this research study is to better understand the lived experience of parental targeting. Participants will be asked to attend two online interviews within a two-week period. Participants should anticipate a total time commitment as follows, (1) Short online inquiry questionnaire *10 min.* (2) Interview one *1 hr. to 1.5 hrs.* (3) Letter-writing exercise completed prior to the second interview *20-30 min.* (4) Interview two *1 hr. to 1.5 hrs.*

Participants will be encouraged to submit any additional forms of lived experience in the form of poetry, journal entries, photos, art work etc., they believe will help facilitate the expression of their lived experience of targeted parenting during the second interview.

Information from this study will provide needed insight into the lived experience of parental targeting and the role intergenerational patterns of marital discord and social structure play in the formation of alienating behaviors. This study will also explore the effects of alienating behaviors on the relational well-being of targeted parents.

This study will be conducted on a secure, HIPPA compliant video conferencing platform that can be accessed by either computer or cell phone app.

**Interested parties can complete an inquiry questionnaire at** [Inquiry Link](#)

Teresa M. Walters, a doctoral candidate in the Rawlings School of Divinity at Liberty University, is conducting this study.

**Please contact Teresa M. Walters at 555-555-5555 or email@liberty.edu for more information.**
APPENDIX D: CONSENT FORM

Walters Informed Consent Document

Consent Form

Title of the Project: Me, We, and Thee: A Hermeneutic Phenomenological Study of the Targeted Parent’s Lived Experience
Principal Investigator: Teresa M. Walters, LMFT, LAC, Rawlings School of Divinity at Liberty University

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. In order to participate, you must be a divorced individual at least 18 years of age, who was married for at least five years and is currently two years post-divorce. You must live within the mid-west state of Indiana and reside in the Indianapolis metropolitan area or surrounding counties. You must be willing and able to make yourself available for two separate online interviews lasting between 1 hour and 1.5 hours each. You must be willing to complete both phases of the interview process within a two-week time frame. You must have lived experience as a targeted parent and be able to provide a rich, descriptive narrative about the lived experience of parental targeting. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research project.

What is the study about and why is it being done?

The purpose of the study is to better understand the lived experience of parental targeting and the role intergenerational patterns of marital discord and social structure play in the formation of parental alienating behaviors. This study will also explore the effect of alienating behaviors on the relational well-being of targeted parents.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to do the following things:
1. Attend the first online interview. This interview will last between 1 hour and 1.5 hours, be audio and video recorded, and require no advance preparation.
2. Write a short letter to either your alienated child, the alienating parent or to a legal or social service provider who was involved in the divorce/custody process. The intent of the letter is to express (to your subject) how the experience of parental targeting has impacted your life and your relational well-being. This letter will need to be prepared prior to the second interview. You will need to return this letter prior to the second interview and verbally share it with the interviewer. This letter is for interview purposes only and is not intended for actual delivery to the subject of the letter. You may also create and share any additional materials you feel provide insight into your experience of parental targeting. These items could include, but are not limited to, poetry, journal entries, art work, photos, or other media that help more fully express your lived experience. (20-30 minutes).
3. Attend the second online interview. This interview will last between 1 hour and 1.5 hours and will be audio and video recorded.

Liberty University
IRB-FY19-20-164
Approved on 4-17-2020
Walters Informed Consent Document

How could you or others benefit from this study?

Participants should not expect to receive direct benefit from participating in the study; however, participation will provide an opportunity to tell your story of parental alienation as the targeted parent in a safe, supportive, and nonjudgmental environment.

Benefits to society include better understanding about the lived experience of parental targeting, which could provide insight into the types of support services targeted parents need, increased clarity about possible future studies of families impacted by parental alienation, and increased public awareness of the phenomenon of parental targeting. A better understanding of the role intergenerational patterns of marital discord play in parental targeting and the effect of parental targeting on relational well-being are also possible societal benefits.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

The assumed risk for participant harm can be compared to that which would be expected of a normal psychotherapy process. However, due to the sensitive nature of the subject matter, care will be taken to provide any type of therapeutic support the participant may desire or need during or following participation in the study.

You will be free to take a break or immediately suspend either interview should you become emotionally distraught or feel unable to continue. Should you believe yourself to be in need of additional support services, a list of area counselors and treating professionals will be provided to you. Should you feel the need for immediate assistance, you will be directed to either the nearest emergency room or encouraged to dial 911 for on-site assistance.

Please note that under Indiana law each citizen of Indiana is considered a “mandated reporter” with a duty to report abuse and neglect or a child, elder, or dependent adult. As a licensed marriage and family therapist (LMFT) and licensed addiction counselor (LAC), I am subject to certain limits to confidentiality and mandatory reporting requirements. These limitations include an obligation to breach confidentiality under the following circumstances:

1. If I perceive an individual to be a direct or immediate danger to self or others.
2. If I have reason to believe that a child, an elder, or dependent adult is being neglected or abused.

How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records. Data collected from you may be shared for use in future research studies or with another researcher. If data collected from you is shared, any information that could identify you, if applicable, will be removed before the data is shared.

- Confidentiality will be maintained through the use of pseudonyms and by changing specific contextual details that could reveal your identity. All interviews will be conducted at a safe and secure location that will assure privacy and guard against any part of the interview being overheard.
Walters Informed Consent Document

- The interview platform will both audio and video record both interviews. All collected data including written, recorded, and observed will be securely stored on a password-locked computer. The researcher’s office is fitted with a professional security system to ensure against any unauthorized access to stored data.

- Hard copy, textual data will be stored in locked file cabinets at the researcher’s office, which will be protected by both on-site and off-site security. All computer-generated files and data, video, and audio recordings will be maintained on an encrypted, external hard-drive to avoid any opportunity for cloud or internet security failures or “hacks.” All data will be securely maintained for a period of three years after which the data will be shredded or destroyed in a confidential manner.

- Audio recordings will be transcribed and stored on a secure, external hard drive. This hard-drive will only be accessible to the researcher via a password secured computer. All audio recording, video recording, transcribed data and observational data will be shredded or destroyed after a period of three years.

- Confidentiality will be limited only to the extent demanded by Indiana law and mandated reporting requirements.

### How will you be compensated for being part of the study?
Participants will not be compensated for participating in this study.

### Is study participation voluntary?
Participation in this study is voluntary. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time.

### What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?
If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study.

### Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?
The researcher conducting this study is Teresa M. Walters. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact her at (317) 760-0604 or twalters13@liberty.edu. You may also contact the researcher’s faculty sponsor, Dr. Brian Pinzer, at bpinzer@liberty.edu.

### Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?
If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, you are encouraged to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu
Walters Informed Consent Document

Your Consent

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

_I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study._

☐ The researcher has my permission to audio-record and video-record me as part of my participation in this study.

_________________________    _______________________
Printed Subject Name        Signature & Date
APPENDIX E: SURVEY QUESTIONS

A Study Exploring the Targeted Parent's Lived Experience

Research Participant Inquiry Questionnaire
Inquiry questionnaire for individuals interested in participating in a research study about the lived experience of parental targeting.

* 1. Please provide the following information.
   - Name
   - City/Town
   - State/Province
   - ZIP/Postal Code
   - Country
   - Email Address
   - Phone Number

* 2. What is your gender?
   - Female
   - Male
   - Other (please specify)

3. What is your race or ethnicity?
   - Asian
   - Black or African American
   - Hispanic or Latino
   - Middle Eastern or North African
   - Multiracial or Multiethnic
   - Native American or Alaska Native
   - Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander
   - White
   - Another race or ethnicity, please describe below

Self-describe below:
4. What is your highest level of education?
   - High School
   - Undergraduate
   - Graduate
   - Other (please specify) 

* 5. What is your current marital status?
   - Divorced
   - Remarried
   - Never married
   - Cohabiting
   - Other (please specify) 

* 6. If divorced, are you at least two years post-divorce?
   - Yes
   - No

* 7. What is your age
   - Under 18
   - 18-24
   - 25-34
   - 35-44
   - 45-54
   - 55-64
   - 65+
8. Which of the following religions or spiritual affiliations best describe your transcendent beliefs? (Check all that apply)
- ☐ Christian
- ☐ Jewish
- ☐ Buddhist
- ☐ Muslim
- ☐ Hindu
- ☐ A follower of some other religion
- ☐ Not religious

* 9. Do you have a child or children that were born or adopted during your marriage and from which you are currently alienated?
- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Other (please specify)

* 10. Do you currently have any type of contact with this child or children?
- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Other (please specify)

* 11. Are you willing and able to talk about your marital, family of origin, and childhood experiences?
- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Other (please specify)
* 12. Do you believe that you have lived experience as a targeted parent i.e., do you believe you have experienced a dynamic in which your marital partner deliberately attempted to damage or destroy your relationship with your child or children?
   ○ Yes
   ○ No
   ○ Other (please specify)

* 13. Can you attend two (2) separate, online interview appointments, each lasting between 1 and 1.5 hrs., within a two-week period?
   ○ Yes
   ○ No

14. Do you have access to either a private computer or cell phone which could be utilized for two online interview sessions?
   ○ Yes
   ○ No

15. Do you have the skills required to utilize an online video conferencing platform on either a computer or a downloaded cell phone app?
   ○ Yes
   ○ No

* 16. Do you believe yourself capable of providing a rich narrative about your lived experience as a targeted parent?
   ○ Yes
   ○ No

* 17. Please provide a brief one or two-paragraph narrative about why you find the subject of parental targeting interesting and why you would like to participate in this research study.
Walters Participant Acceptance Email

Participant Acceptance Email

Dear [Participant]

Thank you for your interest in my research study on parental targeting and for taking the time to complete the participant inquiry questionnaire. I am happy to inform you that your questionnaire confirms that you meet the criterion for the study.

This email is your official invitation to join the study.

If you are interested in moving forward, I will need you to schedule two online interview appointments. Available times and dates can be accessed by following [this link]. Once on the scheduling site, you will be able to choose between a variety of day, evening, and weekend appointment slots. You will receive an email confirmation once you have completed this step. If you have any problems with the scheduling software, please feel free to call for assistance. You will need to supply your name and email address in order to schedule your appointments.

You will additionally need to download, review, and sign a copy of the informed consent document which can be found by clicking on [this link]. This document will provide additional information about the research study. Please read the consent form carefully. If you have any questions or concerns, I can be contacted by phone at (555) 555-5555, or by email at email@liberty.edu.

**Interview 1:** The first interview will require no advance preparation. This interview will last between 1 hour and 1.5 hours. Both interviews will take place via the Doxy.me video conferencing platform. This platform is a secure HIPPA compliant format that can be accessed on either a computer or by utilizing a cell phone app. Information about how to log in to the Doxy.me video conferencing software can be found on your appointment confirmation email. During this interview we will be creating a genogram, which is a type of family map. The construction of this map will help identify familial patterns over several generations.

**Interview 2:** The second interview will be a letter-writing exercise and will require you to write a short letter prior to attending the interview appointment. This letter should be addressed to either the child(ren) from which you are currently alienated, the alienating parent or a social service, legal, or mental health professional you believe significantly impacted your lived experience as a targeted parent. You will write this letter “as if” the intended party would be reading the letter; however, the letter is not intended for actual delivery. This letter will provide the basis for discussion during the second interview. You will be encouraged to submit any additional items or media you feel further express your lived experience as a targeted parent. Examples might include journal entries, photos, art work, poetry etc. This interview will last between 1 hour and 1.5 hours. Both the letter and any additional media should be in a form that can be submitted digitally on the Doxy.me platform.

Due to the sensitive nature of our subject matter, every effort will be made to provide a safe, supportive and nonjudgmental space for you to share your experience. You will be free to withdraw from the study at any time should you feel this is in your best interest. Additionally, a
Walters Participant Acceptance Email

list of licensed, professional service providers will be made available should you feel such services would be helpful or needed.

Thank you again for your interest and participation. I look forward to meeting you at the first interview. Please remember to download, review and sign the consent document prior to your first interview. You will be asked to submit the signed consent form at the beginning of the interview via the Doxy.me file exchange feature.

Warm regards,

Teresa M. Walters, LMFT, LAC
Doctoral Candidate: Rawlings School of Divinity at Liberty University
555-555-5555 | email@liberty.edu
APPENDIX G: LETTER WRITING INSTRUCTIONS

Walters Letter-writing instructions – to be provided following the first interview appointment.

Dear participant,

For the second interview you will be participating in a letter-writing exercise. This letter will be written “as if” the intended party will be reading the letter; however, the letter is not intended for actual receipt by the subject of the letter. The letter will be utilized as part of the second interview appointment. *Do not mail or deliver the letter.*

Please address your letter to either the child(ren) from whom you are currently alienated, the alienating parent or a social service, legal, or mental health professional you believe significantly impacted your lived experience as a targeted parent.

Please complete this letter prior to the second interview appointment. In addition to your completed letter, please feel free to submit any additional forms of lived experience in the form of poetry, written word, journal entries, photos, art work etc., that you believe will help facilitate the expression of your lived experience of parental targeting. Both the letter and any additional media should be in a form that can be submitted digitally via the Doxy.me. secure file exchange feature.

If you have any questions please feel free to call me at 555-555-5555 or email me at email@liberty.edu

Warm regards,

Teresa M. Walters, LMFT, LAC
Doctoral Candidate: Rawlings School of Divinity at Liberty University
555-555-5555 | email@liberty.edu
APPENDIX H: GENOGRAM PROTOCOL

Genogram Inquiry Categories and Questions
Interview Narrative

The genogram is a well-known inquiry instrument used to gather information of a person’s immediate and extended family members that influence their relational, emotional, behavioral, and spiritual well-being. Genograms typically record information about family members and their relationships over at least three generations.

Because the construction of a genogram is a collaborative and evolving process, questions are generally fashioned in response to the shared narratives of the interviewee.

For this study the genogram will be utilized to explore a specific lived experience, parental targeting, and its impact on relational, emotional, behavior, and spiritual well-being of the individual and the familial unit.

Specific areas of inquiry will seek to understand the role intergenerational patterns of marital conflict play in parental targeting.

Proposed inquiry categories include

- Demographic information and historical facts
- Date of births, marriages, marital separations, co-habitations, children, divorces, illness, deaths, etc.
- Siblings position
- Ethnicity, class systems, religious and faith-based systems
- Occupations and education
- Current relational and health status
- Patterns of functioning
- Contextual factors
- Religious, spiritual and transcendent experiences and orientations

Questioning follows a natural progression from questions about the problem to who was involved and how the experience impacted the participant

Examples of specific questions might include

- Marital conflict and discord are normal aspects of a marital relationship. What kinds of conflict, discord or problems did you experience in your marriage?
- During your marriage, how would you describe your relationship with your partner?
- Can you identify a time or event during the marriage that significantly changed the dynamic of the marital relationship?
- During your marriage, how would you describe your relationship with your child/children?
- Have any extended family members had particular marital or parenting problems or concerns?
- Are there certain family members who have more power to define what will happen in a relationship?
## APPENDIX I: LIST OF SUPPORT PROFESSIONALS

### Walters Participant Support Services List

### Licensed Counselors, Therapists and Professional Service Agencies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name and Address</th>
<th>Contact Information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Dr. Robert Smith, Ph.D., LLC | CanalScape Counseling Associates  
429 East Vermont Street  
Suite #11  
Indianapolis, IN 46202  
317-283-6360 |
| Freedomway Therapy Services, LLC | Reality Counseling, LLC  
429 East Vermont Street  
Suite # 309  
Indianapolis, IN 46202  
317-730-4433 |
| Loom of Life Couple and Family Therapy, LLC | New Outlook Counseling Center  
422 ½ 5th Street  
Columbus, IN 47201  
812-343-7248 |
| Hope Haven Psychological Resource, LLC | Dr. Eric Davis  
5610 Crawfordsville Road  
Suite # 200  
Indianapolis, IN 46224  
317-241-4673 |
| Centerpoint Counseling | Abram Sinn, LMFT  
7700 N. Meridian Street  
Indianapolis, IN 46260  
317-252-5518 |
| Healing Streams Psychotherapy and Counseling, LLC | Nancy Eisenman, MSW, LCSW  
320 N. Meridian Street  
Suite # 617  
Indianapolis, IN 46204  
317-528-0026 |
| Vibrantly Live | Christian Theological Center  
709 East Main Street  
Suite B  
Brownsburg, IN 46112  
317-520-1476 |
|  |  |