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## Impact of Parental Estrangement on Psychological Distress Among Separated Parents in Pakistan

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### Abstract

*The study investigates the impact of parental alienation on psychological distress among separated parents in Pakistan. The objective is to examine the extent of psychological distress caused by parental alienation and to identify any gender differences in these experiences. A quantitative research design was employed, collecting data from 150 separated parents using standardized questionnaires. The Parental Alienation Questionnaire (PAQ), which assesses the degree of alienation perceived by the parent, and the Kessler Psychological Distress Questionnaire (KPDQ), a measure of non-specific psychological distress, were used. The data was analyzed using SPSS version 25, employing descriptive statistics, regression, correlation, and t-test analysis to explore relationships between variables and gender differences. Key findings reveal that parental estrangement significantly contributes to psychological distress among separated parents. The results suggest no significant gender differences in the levels of psychological distress experienced by mothers and fathers affected by parental alienation. These results underscore the pervasive impact of parental alienation on the mental health of separated parents, regardless of gender.*

**Keywords:** Parental Estrangement, Psychological Distress, Separated Parents, Parental Alienation.

### Introduction

Globally, almost a million marriages end in divorce worldwide, leaving over 100,000 families to deal with the difficulties of child custody and visitation issues (Bell, 2020). When children see turbulent divorces, they frequently show less emotional and psychological pain than children raised in households where parents are separated but still have constant arguments (Heller, 2022). Although divorce can have a significant detrimental effect on children, it seems that children of separated parents

who continue to have disagreements may face much more difficult consequences (DONOHUE, 2022).

Parents who are separated frequently encounter many difficulties navigating the nuances of co-parenting (Anderson, 2020). Parental alienation is a particularly upsetting situation in this scenario, as one parent purposefully damages and upsets the child's relationship with the other parent (Ferraro & Lucier-Greer, 2022).

Parental alienation is an interaction by which one parent adversely impacts a child's impression of the other parent. This outcome in the child unreasonably maligning the separated parent while areas of strength for communicating with the distancing guardian (Galbally, 2021). Eventually, this can bring about the distancing guardian crushing the connection between the child and the targeted parent. There is as of now no settled-upon conclusive arrangement of ways of behaving that comprise parental alienation, in any case, parent alienation is perceived to include various strategies involved by the estranging guardian trying to program the designated child to terminate the targeted parent (Guida, 2023).

Parental alienation happens when one of the guardians purposefully slows down the connection between the child and the other parent (Marques et al., 2020). This resistance from one of the guardians includes ways of behaving intended to defame the targeted parent and to decrease the contact between the child and that distanced parent, a reality that prompts the dismissal of that parent by the child (Anderson, 2020).

Children can encounter three degrees of parental alienation: gentle, moderate, and serious. In gentle cases there is some parental programming against the other parent however appearance isn't genuinely impacted, and the youngster figures out how to arrange to have a relationship with the two guardians without an excess of trouble. In instances of moderate parental alienation, there is extensive programming against the other parent, bringing about battles around appearance (Boch-Galhau, 2020).

The complicated dynamic of parental alienation in separated families has far-reaching effects on parents' ability to co-parent after a divorce or separation (Miralles et al., 2023). The complexity of this occurrence creates difficulties that may make parenting in these situations less successful.

Parental alienation, in which one parent purposefully or inadvertently damages the relationship between the child and the other parent, frequently results in communication problems. It is difficult for separated parents to work together and make decisions for their children's welfare when there is a communication gap (Marques et al., 2020).

Parental alienation frequently results in the erosion of trust, which is a fundamental component of effective co-parenting (Mercer, 2021). When trust is undermined, it becomes more difficult for parents to collaborate on shared parenting responsibilities (Miralles et al., 2023).

Both parents suffer emotionally from parental estrangement, which adds stress and strain to their lives. Their parenting abilities may be hampered by their inability to concentrate on their children's demands as a result of their emotional anguish (Milchman, 2020). Parental alienation can lead to an increase in legal battles and custody conflicts. The targeted parent might become involved in court cases, which would take time and money away from constructive co-parenting initiatives (Rathus, 2020).

Diminished parental competency may affect children the most when they are caught in the middle of parental alienation (Andreopoulos & Wexler, 2022). Children's general well-being can be impacted by an unstable and emotionally taxing environment that arises from strained parent-child relationships (Gibson, 2021).

When parental alienation is prevalent, it can be difficult to keep routines and parenting practices consistent. Children may find it challenging to adjust to the new dynamics and expectations in the divided family structure as a result of the disruption (Meier, 2021). When alienating behaviors damage the targeted parent's reputation with the children, parental authority is put in jeopardy. The co-parenting interaction grows more complex as enforcing norms and boundaries becomes more difficult (Zaccour, 2020).

Parental alienation, a phenomenon in which one parent tries on purpose to keep their child apart from the other parent, can have a significant and long-lasting impact on both the parent who is being targeted and the child (Duraismy et al., 2023). Studies have emphasized the range of strategies used by parents who wish to alienate their children, such as disparaging remarks, communication blockers, and unfounded allegations, all of which contribute to the breakdown of the parent-child bond. Targeted parents frequently experience significant psychological distress, which shows up as anxiety, depression, and a lowered sense of parental efficacy (Baig, 2023).

A study used standardized tests to evaluate the character attributes of parents who alienate their children. The study, which used 150 parents as a sample, identified specific personality features that were more frequently linked to alienating behaviors, offering insights into potential risk factors (Wang & Chen, 2022).

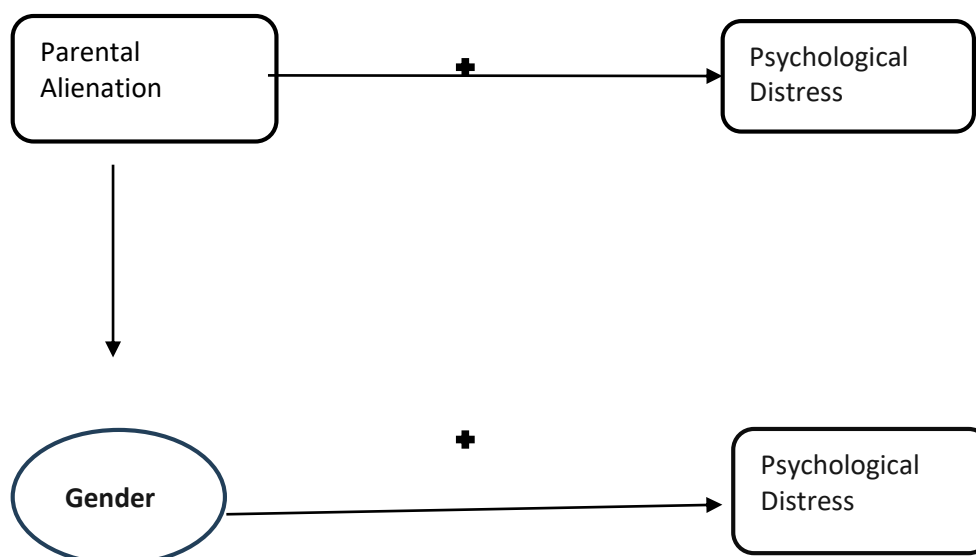
### **Objectives of the Study**

1. To examine the effect of parental alienation on Psychological Distress among separated parents in Pakistan.
2. To determine gender differences in experiences of Psychological Distress among separated parents affected by parental alienation in Pakistan.

### **Methodology**

#### **Conceptual Framework**

Based on the above literature the following frame has been made.



### Research Design

The study was based on a quantitative research design since the data will be examined using a questionnaire. This was primary research based on surveys of separated parents in Pakistan. Statistical analysis was employed to draw conclusions and make generalizations about the population.

### Hypotheses

Parental alienation will have a positive impact on psychological distress among Separated Parents in Pakistan.

There are significant gender differences in experiences of psychological distress among separated parents affected by parental alienation.

### Population and Sample

The sample size was calculated using online Epitool by utilizing a parent article and turned out to be 150 (Verhaar et al., 2022). To gather data, a non-probability convenient sampling technique was utilized. Since the data was obtained at random from separated parents, a purposeful sampling strategy was adopted.

### Inclusion Criteria

1. Separated Parents in Pakistan
2. Parents Experiencing Parental Alienation
3. Both Genders

### Demographics

A demographic sheet was provided to the participants. Participants were asked about their age, gender, education, source of income, and monthly income. The main mode of data collection was online survey forms on legal forums such as Vekeel online, child custody law firms, and single parents support network of Pakistan on Facebook and Instagram.

As a centralized legal platform, Vekeel online offers a way to distribute the survey around pertinent discussion boards and chat rooms. By focusing on legal categories,

the survey can connect with people who have personal experience or knowledge relevant to the study's topic.

A wider audience was reached by joining Pakistani single parents' Facebook and Instagram communities. Through the distribution of the survey link within these groups and the production of interesting content, like infographics or short videos, the study gathered attention and communicated the significance of the survey to a larger audience.

When choosing platforms, well-known, legitimate legal forums, and study-related social media groups, making sure the latter had lively, involved memberships was considered. The forums' legitimacy to steer clear of any potentially misleading information was checked. The procedure of obtaining informed consent ought to be explicit, with the introduction clearly outlining the survey's goal and highlighting its voluntary nature. Participants were informed of the possible risks and advantages by providing information about the study and the use of the data was assured. At the start of the survey, a consent form that participants must sign to continue was included.

The consistency and completeness of the survey responses were verified regularly. Requesting superfluous or too sensitive information that isn't related to the goals of the study was refrained.

### **Instruments**

#### **Parental Alienation**

Parental Alienation Scale (PAS) was developed by Richard A. Gardner in 1985. This questionnaire is thoughtfully designed, consisting of 24 self-report items carefully curated to assess various dimensions related to parental alienation. Participants involved in this study were requested to utilize a 5-point Likert scale to articulate their responses, providing a nuanced perspective on their experiences. The reliability ( $r = 0.92$ ) and validity ( $ICC = 0.85$ ) of this tool make it an authentic tool to incorporate (Machuca, 2005).

#### **Psychological Distress**

Psychological Distress Questionnaire developed by Kessler RC and his team in 2003. The questionnaire comprises 10 self-report items. Participants used a 5-point Likert scale to indicate their responses. PDQ had sensitivity and specificity of 68% and 88% respectively (Mehrabian et al., 2022).

#### **Data Collection & Analysis**

The data analysis was conducted using SPSS version 25.0. Descriptive statistics, including frequency tables and percentages, were used to summarize demographic variables such as gender, age, and education. The reliability of the scales used, namely the Parental Alienation Scale (PAS) and the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10), was confirmed with Cronbach's Alpha values of 0.915 and 0.788, respectively. Correlation analysis was performed to explore the relationship between parental alienation and psychological distress, revealing a significant positive

correlation. Regression analysis was employed to assess the impact of parental alienation on psychological distress, showing that parental alienation significantly predicted psychological distress among the participants. Independent t-tests were used to examine gender differences in psychological distress, and the results indicated no significant differences between males and females.

### **Ethical consideration**

Ethical considerations for this study included obtaining informed consent from all participants, ensuring transparency by clearly communicating the study's purpose and their right to withdraw at any time. The research design prioritized minimizing harm by carefully framing questions to avoid distress, and participants were allowed to skip any uncomfortable questions. Confidentiality and anonymity were rigorously maintained, with data securely stored on encrypted servers and no personal identifiers collected, ensuring participants' privacy was fully protected throughout the research process.

### **Results**

The enrolled population of 150 revealed no significant gender differences in psychological distress among separated parents affected by parental alienation.

**Table 01**

*Demographics of the Enrolled Population (N = 150)*

Variable	Frequency	Percent
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	71	47.3
Female	79	52.7
Total	150	100.0
<b>Education</b>		
Intermediate	1	0.7
Graduation	98	65.3
Master	51	34.0
Total	150	100.0
<b>Age</b>		
21-25	24	16.0
26-30	50	33.3
31-35	38	25.3
36-40	16	10.7
41-45	11	7.3
46-50	8	5.3
51-55	3	2.0
Total	150	100.0

Table 01 shows the analysis of the demographic data revealed that the sample of 150 participants was fairly evenly distributed between genders, with 71 participants

(47.3%) identifying as male and 79 participants (52.7%) as female. In terms of age distribution (table 02), the majority of participants were in the 26-30 age group, comprising 50 participants (33.3%), followed by the 31-35 age group with 38 participants (25.3%). The education levels of the participants (table 03) varied, with 98 participants (65.3%) having completed graduation and 51 participants (34.0%) holding a master's degree.

**Table 02**

*Reliability of the Scales Used in the Current Study (N = 150)*

Scale	Cronbach's Alpha	Number of Items
PAS*	0.915	23
K10*	0.788	10

\*PAS = Parental Alienation Scale, K10 =Kessler Psychological Distress Scale

Regarding the scales used in the study, the Parental Alienation Scale (PAS) demonstrated high reliability with a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.915 for its 23 items as shown in Table 02. The Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10) had moderate reliability with Cronbach's Alpha of 0.788 for its 10-item.

**Table 3**

*Regression Analysis for K10 with Parental Alienation (N=150)*

Variable	Scale	Mean	Std. Deviation	Correlation	Regression Coefficient (Beta)	Sig.
PAS <sub>total</sub> *	K10*	57.07	18.31	0.530	0.530	0.05

\*PAS = Parental Alienation Scale, K10 =Kessler Psychological Distress Scale

The regression analysis results (table 03) showed different levels of distress on the K10 scale, which explains approximately 15.3% of the variance in psychological distress scores. Among them, individuals in the low distress category (10-19) tend to have lower psychological distress scores compared to those not in this category, and this difference is statistically significant (Beta = -0.217, p = 0.013). On the other hand, individuals in the moderate distress category (20-24) tend to have higher psychological distress scores compared to those not in this category, and this difference is statistically significant (Beta = 0.342, p = 0.002). However, there are no significant differences in psychological distress scores for individuals in the high distress category (25-29) or the very high distress category (30-50) compared to those not in these categories (Beta = 0.124, p = 0.192 and Beta = 0.177, p = 0.068, respectively). Overall, the regression model is statistically significant in predicting psychological distress based on the distress categories from the K10 scale (F = 10.085, p = 0.000).

**Table 4**

*Descriptive statistics of Kessler Psychological Distress Scale*

Variable	N (Valid)	Missing	Skewness	Std. Error of Skewness	Kurtosis	Std. Error of Kurtosis
Kessler Psychological Distress Scale	150	0	0.861	0.198	-0.060	0.394

Table 4 shows the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale appears to have a moderately skewed distribution to the right and a slightly flatter distribution compared to normal (negative kurtosis).

**Table 5**

*Independent T-test for Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (N=150)*

Variable	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t- value	df	p- value
Kessler Psychological Distress Scale	Male	71	26.35	9.51	1.086	14	0.279
	Female	79	24.80	8.01		8	

## DISCUSSION

This chapter discusses the findings of the study regarding the impact of parental alienation on psychological distress among separated parents in Pakistan. The study aimed to investigate the relationships between these variables and explore potential gender differences in their experiences.

**Parental alienation will have a positive impact on psychological distress among Separated Parents in Pakistan.**

The current results of the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10) revealed that a considerable proportion of the participants in this study reported moderate to high levels of psychological distress. These findings are consistent with previous research indicating that separated parents are at increased risk of experiencing psychological distress due to the stressors associated with separation and co-parenting (Bernet & Greenhill, 2022). The regression analysis showed that individuals in the low distress category tend to have lower psychological distress scores compared to those not in this category, which aligns with previous research demonstrating the validity of the K10 in distinguishing between levels of psychological distress (Welsh et al., 2020).

The regression analysis conducted in the study indicated that individuals in the low-distress category tend to have lower psychological distress scores compared to those not in this category. This finding is consistent with previous research, such as the study by Welsh et al. in 2020, which demonstrated the validity of the K10 in distinguishing between levels of psychological distress.

Overall, the findings of this study contribute to the existing literature on the impact of parental alienation, parental competency, and psychological distress among separated parents. The moderate positive relationship between parental alienation and parental competency adds to this literature by highlighting the complex interplay between these variables. This suggests that as parental alienation increases, parental



competency in managing parenting challenges may decrease, leading to higher levels of psychological distress among separated parents.

These findings underscore the importance of providing support and interventions for separated parents to help them cope with the stressors associated with separation and co-parenting, ultimately improving outcomes for both parents and children.

Overall, the findings of this study are consistent with previous research on the impact of parental alienation, parental competency, and psychological distress among separated parents (Ametaj et al., 2024). The moderate positive relationship between parental alienation and parental competency found in this study adds to the existing literature by highlighting the complex interplay between these variables.

**There are no significant gender differences in experiences of psychological distress among separated parents affected by parental alienation.**

The study found no significant gender differences in psychological distress among separated parents affected by parental alienation in Pakistan. This is consistent with some previous research that has also failed to find significant gender differences in these factors. However, other studies have reported gender differences in the experience of parental alienation, with some suggesting that mothers may be more likely to experience alienation than fathers.

The lack of significant gender differences in this study could be due to cultural or contextual factors specific to the sample population. Further research is needed to explore these factors and understand how they may influence the experience of parental alienation and its effects on psychological distress and parental competency. Additionally, the lack of significant gender differences in psychological distress supports the notion that these factors are not determined by gender but rather by individual and contextual factors (Thakre et al., 2022).

The finding of no significant gender differences in psychological distress among separated parents affected by parental alienation in Pakistan is an interesting observation. This result is consistent with some previous research that has also failed to find significant gender differences in these factors. However, it contrasts with other studies that have reported gender differences in the experience of parental alienation, with some suggesting that mothers may be more likely to experience alienation than fathers.

One possible explanation for the lack of significant gender differences in this study could be cultural or contextual factors specific to the sample population in Pakistan. Cultural norms and societal expectations regarding gender roles and parenting may influence how parental alienation is experienced and expressed by men and women. In some cultures, there may be less emphasis on gender differences in parenting roles, leading to more similar experiences of parental alienation and its effects on psychological distress.

The findings also support the notion that psychological distress is not determined by gender but rather by individual and contextual factors. This aligns with the broader

understanding that gender is just one of many factors that can influence psychological well-being and parenting behaviors. Other factors, such as personality traits, coping mechanisms, social support, and cultural beliefs, may play a more significant role in determining how individuals experience and respond to parental alienation.

Further research is needed to explore the cultural and contextual factors that may influence the experience of parental alienation and its effects on psychological distress and parental competency in different populations. Understanding these factors can help inform interventions and support services that are sensitive to the unique needs of separated parents, regardless of gender.

### **Limitations**

Self-report measures in studies on parental alienation, and psychological distress, rely on subjective perceptions, which can be influenced by social desirability bias, memory recall issues, and individual reporting styles, potentially introducing bias and affecting the validity and reliability of findings.

A small sample size reduces the statistical power of the study, making it more challenging to detect significant effects or associations. This limitation impacts the external validity and generalizability of the findings to the larger population of separated parents in Pakistan.

### **Recommendations**

With many participants reporting moderate to high levels of psychological distress, accessible mental health support services such as counseling, therapy, and support groups tailored to the needs of separated parents are recommended.

Longitudinal studies and randomized controlled trials could assess the impact on family dynamics, parental well-being, and child outcomes. Research should also consider cultural and contextual factors specific to Pakistan, including cultural beliefs, societal norms, and legal frameworks related to divorce and parenting.

### **Conclusion**

This study underscores the link between parental alienation and psychological distress among separated parents in Pakistan, demonstrating that higher levels of parental alienation are associated with increased psychological distress. The results highlight the critical need for interventions focused on reducing parental alienation to enhance family dynamics and emotional well-being. Future research should delve into the specific behaviors that constitute parental alienation and their direct impact on psychological distress, as well as develop effective strategies to improve co-parenting communication and address the emotional needs of separated parents and children. By tackling these issues, targeted interventions can promote healthier family environments and strengthen parent-child relationships in the context of separation.

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