

Developmental Psychology and the Scientific Status of Parental Alienation

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Abstract:

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

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