Article

MMPI-2 Profiles of Mothers Engaged in Parental Alienation

Paolo Roma[1], Daniela Marchetti[2] ,
Cristina Mazza[1] , Franco Burla[1],
and Maria Cristina Verrocchio[2]

Abstract

Parental alienation (PA) describes a family dynamic in which a parent engages in behaviors that are likely to foster a child's unjustified rejection of the other parent. PA is considered a particular form of child psychological maltreatment with both short- and long-term negative consequences. Parents who attempt to turn a child against the other parent in cases of separation/divorce can be difficult to identify. Increasing our understanding of the personality features of these parents via psychological assessment may enable us to identify PA more quickly following the onset of abuse. In the present study, the personality characteristics of mothers engaging in PA were examined through a comparative analysis of MMPI-2 profiles. The results indicated that alienating mothers presented higher moral virtue and extroversion. They were more vulnerable to interpersonal stress and they demonstrated unsuccessful self-representation. The findings provide a preliminary model for understanding the profile of mothers who engage in PA.

Keywords

parental alienation, MMPI-2, preferred parent, alienating parent, child custody disputes, personality features

[1]Department of Human Neuroscience, Sapienza University of Rome, Rome, Italy
[2]Department of Psychological, Health and Territorial Sciences, G. d'Annunzio University of Chieti-Pescara, Chieti, Italy

Corresponding Author:
Daniela Marchetti, Department of Psychological, Health and Territorial Sciences,
G. d'Annunzio University of Chieti-Pescara, Via dei Vestini, Chieti, 66100, Italy.
Email: d.marchetti@unich.it

Introduction

Parental alienation (PA) describes a family dynamic in which a parent (the alienating parent) engages in behaviors that are likely to foster a child's unjustified rejection of the other parent (the targeted parent) (Baker, 2007; Lorandos et al., 2013). In some cases, the child succumbs to the emotional manipulation and comes to hold distorted thoughts and feelings about the targeted parent. This outcome is the result of PA behaviors that are engaged in over time with the deliberate aim of harming the targeted parent and his or her relationship with the child (Baker & Darnall, 2006; Harman et al., 2019; Verrocchio, Baker, et al., 2018). PA impacts individuals across all socioeconomic and demographic indicators, irrespective of gender, marital status, sexual orientation, education level, income, and racial group membership (Harman et al., 2019; Harman, Leder-Elder, et al., 2016).

The PA family dynamic was first observed by clinicians in the 1980s, after it was written about extensively by the family systems theorist Minuchin (1974). Gardner (1985) was the first to document the widespread phenomenon of PA in the forensic context and, since that time, it has been acknowledged and studied by numerous mental health professionals and researchers (Baker, 2007; Fidler et al., 2008; Gennari & Tamanza, 2017; Harman, Biringen, et al., 2016; Johnston et al., 2005; Lubrano Lavadera et al., 2012; Saini et al., 2016; Stoltz & Ney, 2002; Verrocchio Marchetti, et al., 2018). In many countries, PA has been found to be a pervasive form of child psychological abuse (Harman et al., 2018) that negatively affects the child's mental and physical health (Poustie et al., 2018; Verrocchio et al., 2014). As Baker and Ben Ami (2011) argued, "the psychological foundation of parental alienation—lack of empathy and the inability to tolerate the child's separate needs and perceptions—is also the foundation of psychological maltreatment" (p. 473).

Although cases of PA have been described in several studies (Harman, Leder-Elder, et al., 2016), it remains difficult to quickly and accurately detect such cases due to the denial and distortions presented by the alienating parent and the child. That is, the alienating parent and the child tend to attribute reasons for their refusal of the targeted parent (Poustie et al., 2018) exclusively to the inappropriate and/or violent behaviors of that parent, thereby denying and mystifying the dynamics of the alienation. The lack of quick recognition of this form of psychological maltreatment can be detrimental to the child's mental health. In particular, research has widely confirmed the negative impact of PA on children, with outcomes ranging from psychopathology (e.g., depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and conduct disorders) to poor academic performance and low self-esteem (Baker, 2007; Ben-Ami & Baker, 2012;

Saini et al., 2016; Verrocchio et al., 2016; Verrocchio et al., 2019; Verrocchio & Baker, 2015).

A few instruments have been developed to detect PA. The most widely used of these is the Baker Strategy Questionnaire (BSQ, Baker & Chambers, 2011)—a self-report measure that assesses an adult's recollection of childhood exposure to PA. However, the BSQ was developed for research purposes and it is not intended for use in, for example, child custody evaluations. Rowlands (2019) recently validated a self-report measure called the Rowlands Parental Alienation Scale (RPAS), which is designed for use with targeted parents to detect the presence and severity of PA in children. While this measure shows promise for identifying the presence of PA, it draws on only one information source—parent reports of children's behavior—and does not account for children's own self-reports. Bernet et al. (2018) applied the Parental Acceptance–Rejection Questionnaire (PARQ; Rohner, 2005) to distinguish between alienated and non-alienated children. The PARQ is a self-report questionnaire that children complete to describe their parents. While it was not originally developed to detect PA, it has been used in child custody evaluations (Heller, 2009). Evidence reported by Bernet et al. (2018) suggests that the PARQ may help custody evaluators distinguish between neglectful parenting and PA; however, more studies are needed to compare the PARQ scores of alienated and estranged children. Additionally, the authors concluded that "the PARQ should not be used in isolation to determine whether a child is alienated" and "both clinical and forensic practitioners should consider using the PARQ as one component of a comprehensive evaluation when they are concerned about the possible diagnosis of parental alienation" (Bernet et al., 2018, p. 782). Only one measure, the Parental Alienation Scale (PAS), was developed for use in a forensic setting to assess the behaviors of all parties involved, including the targeted parent, the alienating parent, and the child (Gomide et al., 2016). Although the PAS demonstrated adequate properties in its first study, further research should analyze its criterion and ecological validity in assessing PA in legal settings. Furthermore, it must be noted that the measure does not include items to assess parents' personality features, which may affect their behavior.

Many authors have speculated about the psychological characteristics of parents who engage in PA behaviors. For example, Gardner (1998) opined that several underlying motivations could propel a parent to attempt to turn a child against the other parent. Based on extensive clinical experience, he identified that some parents engage in PA out of revenge. Other parents, Gardner speculated, might engage in PA out of emotional immaturity and the desire to be the preferred parent; for these parents, creating a loyalty conflict and causing their child to choose him or herself over the other parent may

engender a feeling of pride, self-satisfaction, and egogratification. Likewise, some parents may induce the child to reject the other parent in order to never have to deal with the uncomfortable experiences of vulnerability and loneliness. Following a review of 16 cases of PA, Dunne and Hedrick (1994) considered the important role that psychopathology in the alienating parent might play in the family dynamic. These potential causes of PA have also been supported by subsequent research and/or clinical writings. For example, Kelly and Johnston (2001) posited that some parents engage in PA out of pathology and anger, including problems with boundaries and differentiation from their child, severe separation anxiety, impaired reality testing, and projective identifications with their child. Baker (2007) reported that adult children's descriptions of their alienating parent suggest that alienating parents may have a personality disorder—specifically a narcissistic, anti-social, or borderline disorder. Baker observed that such personality disorders may compromise parents' ability to acknowledge and accept that their child might find value in their relationship with the other parent, even though they (the alienating parent) no longer do. The notion that alienating parents may have a personality disorder has gained considerable traction in the field. Many clinicians (Baker & Ben Ami, 2011; Kelly & Johnston, 2001) have noted that alienating parents are unable to separate their needs from those of their child, are prone to misrepresentation and dishonesty, and are highly manipulative. However, there remains a considerable lack of evidence on the relationship between parents' personality features and PA.

An overwhelming proportion of child custody evaluations involve psychometric measures, which are predominantly used to assess the personality characteristics and functioning of litigants. One such measure, the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory-2 (MMPI-2) (Butcher et al., 2001), is a well-established psychological instrument that is frequently used in forensic assessment (Burla et al., 2019; Mazza et al., 2019a; Mazza, Monaro et al., 2019b; Mazza et al., 2019c; Mazza, Monaro et al., 2020; Roma et al., 2013; Roma et al., 2016; Roma et al., 2018; Roma et al., 2019a; Roma et al., 2019b; Roma et al., 2020). Only two studies have analyzed the MMPI-2 profiles of PA subjects. In the first, Gordon et al. (2008) examined the MMPI-2 protocols of 76 PA subjects (mother alienators = 31, father targets = 31, father alienators = 7, mother targets = 7) and 82 subjects with no presentation of PA (mothers = 41; fathers = 41). They found that alienating mothers and fathers demonstrated higher scores on scales indicative of primitive defenses (L+K-F and [L + Pa + Sc]–[Hy + Pt]), such as splitting and projective identification, relative to non-alienating parents. These results could represent empirical evidence of PA theory. Indeed, by using such primitive defense mechanisms, alienating parents may damage their children's ability to form judgments of

others based on adequate reality testing. In more detail, when alienating parents teach children to subjectively classify others as all good or all bad, and justify the unfair treatment of others, the children's capacity for healthy intimacy may become impaired. In the second research study examining the MMPI-2 scores of alienating subjects, Siegel and Langford (1998) found differences between alienating (n=16) and non-alienating (n=18) mothers. Alienating mothers were more likely to complete the MMPI-2 in a defensive manner (demonstrating higher scores on the L and K scales and a significantly lower score on the F scale), striving to appear flawless. The authors concluded that parents engaging in alienating behaviors were more likely than other parents to use the psychological defenses of denial and projection, which are associated with the validity scale.

Given the potentially negative psychological consequences for children of the delayed identification of PA, the development of tools capable of identifying alienating parents is critical. Use of assessment measures such as the MMPI-2 to identify the personality profiles of alienating parents may support child custody evaluators in more rapidly detecting cases of PA. Moreover, a better understanding of the personality features of alienating parents could improve psychological interventions within PA cases.

Rationale and Aims

The aim of the current study was to build on the existing knowledge base by conducting an in-depth examination of the psychological features of alienating mothers according to their MMPI-2 profiles. The focus on mothers was determined by the results of a recent study with a "high-conflict" Italian sample (Verrocchio Marchetti, et al., 2018), which found that in 78% of the cases, the target parent was the father. Building on the aforementioned results (Gordon et al., 2008; Siegel & Langford, 1998), which supported the hypothesis of alienating parents' inflated self-representation, we selected a pool of MMPI-2 scales that could empirically measure the tendency to describe oneself as more righteous, healthy, vigorous, and resistant to stress and anger: *Lie* (L), *Correction* (K), *Moral virtue* (Pa3), *Inhibition of aggression* (Hy5), and *Imperturbability* (Ma3). Furthermore, following Baker's (2006) description of alienating mothers as narcissistic women (i.e., self-centered, demanding a high degree of attention and admiration, unable to see their children as separate individuals, charming, sensitive to criticism, and low in empathy), we also selected a constellation of MMPI-2 scales that could capture these features: *Hypomania* (Ma), *Denial of social anxiety* (Hy1), *Ego inflection* (Ma4), *Need for affection* (Hy2), *Paranoia* (Pa), *Poignancy* (Pa2), *Hysteria* (Hy), *Amorality* (Ma1), and *Psychopathy* (Pd). Specifically, the research questions

addressed in this study were as follows: First, are MMPI-2 self-representation scales (L, K, Hy5, Pa3, and Ma3) higher in alienating mothers than in non-alienating mothers? If so, this finding would be consistent with the observation that alienating parents are often dishonest, engage in extreme impression management, and are unable to reflect on their normative flaws. Second, are MMPI-2 scales related to narcissism (Ma, Hy1, Ma4, Hy2, Pa, Pa2, Hy, Ma1, and Pd) higher in alienating mothers than in non-alienating mothers? Again, if so, this result would be consistent with previous research and/or clinical writings describing the narcissistic personality of alienating parents. Third, what is the best indicator among the MMPI-2 scales of the psychological representation that alienating mothers seek to present? It was not possible to make any assumptions on this question since no studies had previously attempted to investigate the issue.

Method

Participants

We analyzed MMPI-2 profiles from the case record of a previous evaluation. In more detail, we collected 58 PA case files from four custody evaluators who had been appointed by Italian courts between 2015 and 2017. In the first step, we excluded: (a) cases with mothers who had not been born and raised in Italy; (b) cases with allegations of violence (also ongoing) that could potentially explain the child's refusal of a parent; (c) cases relating to child protection, as differences have been found between child protection and child custody disputes (Resendes & Lecci, 2012); and (d) cases in which informed consent was not provided for the research. Accordingly, 17 cases were excluded. In the second step, we established the inclusion criteria for the PA group: participants had to be female and aged 18 years or older, they had to explicitly or implicitly support the child's refusal of the other parent, they had to have at least one child who refused the other parent (for at least 1 year), they had to have a minimum reading level of a sixth grade equivalent, and they had to have a valid MMPI-2 profile. The complete case files (proceedings and expert opinions) of the alienating mothers were evaluated by two of the authors, who confirmed that the inclusion criteria were met in all 41 cases. Data for the control group were extracted from archival records of mothers who had been evaluated in the context of a child custody dispute between the years of 2015 and 2017. Inclusion criteria for the control group were that the participants had to be female and aged 18 years or older, have never exhibited or been accused of PA, have a minimum reading level of a sixth grade equivalent, and have a valid MMPI-2 profile.

In total, 81 mothers involved in a custody dispute participated in this study. Of these, 41 who were identified as engaging in PA were compared with 40 non-alienating mothers (No-PA). The test exclusion criteria (see "Measures" section) led us to exclude one more protocol among the PA group, as the Cannot Say scale score was > 30. The groups did not differ in age (M_{PA}= 40.00± 5.75; M_{No-PA} = 40.85 ± 5.74) or years of education (M_{PA} = 14.25 ± 2.68; M_{No-PA} = 14.53 ± 3.88). The study was carried out with written informed consent from all subjects, who were asked to participate in research on "assessment tools in forensic evaluation," in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki. It was approved by the local ethics committee (Board of the Department of Human Neuroscience, Sapienza University of Rome).

Measures

The full version of the MMPI-2 (Butcher et al., 2001) was administered individually to all participants, according to standard instructions. The Italian version of the measure consists of 567 items (Pancheri & Sirigatti, 1995). According to the technical manual (Butcher et al., 2001), we excluded protocols with a Cannot Say scale score > 30 or a VRIN or TRIN T-score >80. We did not make exclusions on the basis of the other validity scales, in order to ensure that a full range of validity scale scores was available for analysis (nevertheless, no exclusions would have been made according to the technical manual). On the basis of the literature on the psychological profile of alienating mothers (as previously described), we analyzed 16 MMPI-2 scales referring to self-representation and narcissism (see Table 1).

Data Analysis

ANOVA analyses comparing the PA and No-PA groups were performed. Further, correlation and binary logistic regression analyses were conducted including the selected MMPI-2 scales that significantly differed between groups as predictors and the alienation variable (PA vs. No-PA) as the dependent variable.

The SPSS-24 statistical package (SPSS inc., Chicago, IL) was used for all analyses.

Results

To answer Question 1 pertaining to the mean differences in the selected scales related to self-representation, independent t-tests were conducted with the group (PA vs. no-PA) as the independent variable and the MMPI-2 scores as

Table 1. Selected MMPI-2 Variables.

	Psychological Traits	Related MMPI-2 Scales	What is Measured by the Scale
Self-representation	Flawless, rigid, moralistic, calm, cool, collected	L	Infrequent and therefore improbable virtues
		K	Denial of problem of adaptation
		Hy5	Disinterest in violence
		Pa3	Moral virtue
		Ma3	Cool and composed under social stress
Narcissism	Grandiose, egocentric, needing affection, self-report behavior, melodramatic, dynamic and fascinating, sensitive to criticism, low on empathy	Ma	Excitement, inflated self-esteem, amorality
		Hy1	Extraversion
		Ma4	Pugnacious autonomy
		Hy2	Need for affection
		Pa	Persecution
		Pa2	Emotional aensitivity
		Hy	Hysteria
		Ma1	Amorality
		Pd	Antisocial behavior and attitude

the dependent variables. The results revealed statistically significant differences for all of the selected scales related to self-representation (L, K, Hy5, Pa3, and Ma3), with the PA group demonstrating significantly higher values than the No-PA group (Table 2). Specifically, in three of these scales (L, K, and Pa3), the average score of the PA group was above the cut-off point (T-score = 65), placing it in the range defined as "high" in the MMPI-2 technical manual (Butcher at al., 2001). Analysis of the frequency distribution revealed that the number of PA subjects who exceeded the cut-off in these scales was more than double the number of No-PA subjects on the L scale (42.5% vs. 19.5%) and more than triple the number of No-PA subjects on the K scale (47.5% vs. 14.6%). On the Pa3 scale, more than 50% of PA subjects exceeded the cut-off of 65, compared to no No-PA subjects (52.5% vs. 0%).

To address Question 2, we compared the PA and No-PA groups on the MMPI-2 scales pertaining to narcissism (Hy1, Hy2, Ma, Ma1, Ma4, Pa, Pa2, Hy, and Pd). PA mothers obtained higher T-scores on three scales: Hy1, Hy2, and Pa. On Hy1, PA mothers scored in the mean range. On the Pa scale, however, PA mothers obtained a mean classified as "moderately

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics for Groups (PA= 40; No-PA= 41) for the Selected MMPI-2 Scales, and Effect Sizes.

Scale	Group	% > 65	M (SD)	F	P	Cohen's d
Self-representation						
L	PA	42.5	65.20 (9.02)	3.330	<.001	.749
	No-PA	19.5	59.00 (7.72)			
K	PA	47.5	65.57 (7.89)	4.133	<.001	.930
	No-PA	14.6	59.12 (6.06)			
Hy5	PA	22.5	60.72 (6.65)	3.170	.001	.724
	No-PA	7.3	55.27 (8.46)			
Pa3	PA	52.5	65.62 (7.69)	8.908	<.001	.978
	No-PA	0	51.76 (6.27)			
Ma3	PA	25	57.70 (7.94)	3.242	.001	.720
	No-PA	7.3	51.95 (8.02)			
Narcissism						
Hy1	PA	0	56.45 (5.21)	4.464	<.001	.992
	No-PA	0	50.27 (7.08)			
Ma	PA	0	46.15 (5.58)	-.656	.513	-
	No-PA	9.3	47.31 (9.79)			
Ma4	PA	0	43.00 (7.44)	-1.066	.289	-
	No-PA	0	44.76 (7.38)			
Hy2	PA	47.5	66.95 (7.48)	7.031	<.001	.953
	No-PA	2.4	55.12 (7.65)			
Pa	PA	27.5	62.47 (10.10)	4.889	<.001	.940
	No-PA	9.8	51.95 (6.26)			
Pa2	PA	2.5	46.55 (8.45)	.132	.895	-
	No-PA	4.9	46.27 (10.63)			
Hy	PA	5.0	53.42 (7.07)	.673	.503	-
	No-PA	4.4	52.34 (6.94)			
Ma1	PA	2.5	46.40 (8.48)	.511	.611	-
	No-PA	0	45.39 (9.29)			
Pd	PA	7.5	54.45 (4.65)	1.668	.099	-
	No-PA	2.4	52.09 (5.08)			

Note. PA = alienating mothers; No-PA = non-alienating mothers.

high," and the distribution of values revealed that the number of PA subjects who exceeded the cut-off score was triple the number of No-PA mothers (27.5% vs. 9.8%). The same pattern was found on the Hy2 scale, with approximately half of the PA subjects exceeding the clinical cut-off point of 65 (47.5% PA vs. 2.4% No-PA).

Table 3. Correlation Matrix for the Statistically Different MMPI-2 Scales.

	L	K	Pa	Hy1	Hy2	Hy5	Pa3
K	.283*						
Pa	.156	.118					
Hy1	.193	.424**	-.081				
Hy2	.169	.589**	.379**	.453**			
Hy5	.412**	.332**	.218	.105	.294**		
Pa3	.252*	.616**	.533**	.398**	.830**	.288**	
Ma3	.300**	.525**	.139	.433**	.228*	-.109	.396**

*$p \leq .05$; ** $p \leq .01$.

According to Cohen (1988), significantly different standardized effect sizes were large for the following scales: K (*d*=.930), Pa (*d*=.940), Hy1 (*d*=.992), Hy2 (*d*=.953), and Pa3 (*d*=.978); differences were in the medium range for L (*d*=.749), Hy5 (*d*=.724), and Ma3 (*d*=.720).

Table 3 shows the correlations between the eight MMPI-2 scales that demonstrated significantly different scores between groups; most correlations were statistically significant. Compared to the standardization sample of the same nationality (Pancheri & Sirigatti, 1995), these correlations were higher, indicating a different approach of these subjects to the MMPI-2 with respect to the normative sample, as also found in previous research (Archer et al., 2012).

In order to answer Question 3 pertaining to the best indicator among the MMPI-2 scales of the psychological representation that alienating mothers sought to present, a binary logistic regression analysis was conducted including the MMPI-2 scales that significantly differed between groups as predictors and group (PA vs. No-PA) as the dependent variable. The results indicated that the eight predictors explained approximately 57% of the variance (F[8,72]=12.315, $p<.001$)(see Table 4). Among the eight independent variables, the Pa3 scale most significantly predicted PA ($\beta = .407$, $p<.01$).

Discussion

Comparisons between PA and No-PA subjects on the MMPI-2 scales produced interesting findings. With reference to the MMPI-2 validity scales, on the impression management scale (L), PA mothers made an effort to appear virtuous, suggesting a rigid moral outlook and constrained self-presentation designed to forestall negative moral judgment. In contrast, No-PA mothers showed a milder pattern of conformity, conventionality, and inflexibility. A

Table 4. Effect of the Eight MMPI-2 Scales on PA, Binary Logistic Regression Analysis.

	β	t	p
L	.125	1.375	.173
K	−.155	−1.251	.215
Pa	.175	1.551	.125
Hy2	.166	1.073	.287
Hy3	−.099	−.905	.368
Hy5	.145	1.451	.151
Pa3	.407	2.396	.019
Ma3	.144	1.311	.194

similar pattern was demonstrated by the self-deception scale (K). While No-PA mothers described themselves as moderately self-favorable, seeing themselves as adjusted and sufficiently able to cope with difficulties and feeling no need to call attention to them, the K T-score of PA mothers (together with their clinical elevation on the L scale) suggested a high self-favorable bias with unrealistic self-reported adjustment, a need to deny problems and weaknesses, and a desire to present an image of adequacy and self-control that was inconsistent with real life. In this group, insight was likely to be narrow, if not impaired. Evaluating the values achieved by the two validity scales (L and K) together, the underreporting of No-PA mothers demonstrated an expected pattern in forensic assessment (Roma et al., 2014); PA mothers, however, achieved a clinical level of underreporting, with values sufficient to distort the profile of the MMPI-2 clinical and behavioral scales.

The differences between groups on most clinical scales and subscales proceeded in the same direction as those shown by the validity scales. Relative to No-PA subjects, PA subjects demonstrated rigidity in beliefs, values, and attitudes, as well as greater sensitivity to criticism and susceptibility to the behavior of others (Pa scale). Nevertheless, they denied negative dispositions in others and disclaimed normal paranoia about the levels of selfishness, expediency, and dishonesty that one may reasonably—however regrettably—expect to encounter in one's social environment (Pa3). Even if these latter characteristics seem opposed to the description of the Pa scale, the denial of paranoid attitudes is a manifestation of paranoid ideation (Graham et al., 1999). In line with what has already been described, PA subjects described themselves as having faith and optimism in other people, without a critical or resentful attitude toward others (Hy2). In particular, they denied having negative traits such as cynicism, hostility, and rebellious attitudes toward others.

The psychological picture of PA subjects was completed by the other three scales of the MMPI-2 that showed significantly different results between groups. In particular, PA mothers demonstrated greater extroversion (Ma3 and Hy1) than No-PA mothers. Furthermore, they declared more confidence in social situations and composure in contexts of social stress (Ma3). They also described themselves as free from social anxiety and fear of embarrassment, and as demonstrating social disinhibition (Hy1). Lastly, they expressed disavowal of and disgust toward violence (Hy5).

It is important to note that all clinical scales (except Pa) that significantly differed between groups were closely correlated to the K scale, indicating a similar meaning to that which is already present in the literature (Butcher et al., 2001; Nichols, 2011). This data strengthens PA mothers' self-representation of stability in the MMPI-2, characterized by extroversion, social skills, and control over harsh feelings.

Overall, relative to no-PA mothers, PA mothers used the MMPI-2 to present an image of higher moral virtue, self-control, and extroversion; they also sought to demonstrate good intentions towards others and denied holding any bad intentions. However, their self-representation was unsuccessful, and, at times, it even backfired. From the interpretation of the item's content of the MMPI-2 scales with significant differences in T-scores emerges as an established fact (Nichols, 2011) that other people perceive PA mothers, as well as individuals with those elevations, not as virtuous, but as self-centered, predictable, unoriginal, stereotyped in their thinking, narrow in their interests, and naive or inflexible in their outlook. They were also seen as slow to adapt to unfamiliar ideas and situations, and consequently vulnerable, especially to interpersonal stress.

Among the eight scales that differed between groups, the Pa3 scale was the best predictor of PA. The moral virtue described in this scale, as well as the denial of dishonesty, cynicism, and hostility in others, seems to have summarized the characteristics of the other scales, providing a unique and very powerful measure of a possible PA profile.

Briefly, the responses to our research questions were as follows: (a) "Are the MMPI-2 scales referring to self-representation higher in alienating mothers than in non-alienating ones?" Our results answered this in the affirmative. Although both groups obtained scores on most of the selected scales under the clinical cut-off (T-score = 65), PA mothers obtained higher scores than No-PA mothers. It is therefore likely that PA mothers sought to deny distress, alienation, and abnormality in order to produce an image of over-conventionality and to minimize problems to a greater extent than did No-Pa mothers. (2) "Are the MMPI-2 scales relating to narcissism higher in alienating mothers than in non-alienating mothers? The results partially answered this

question, because only three scales resulted in higher T-scores in the PA group. And (3) "What is the best indicator among the MMPI-2 scales of the psychological representation that PA subjects strive to present?" Here, the Pa3 subscale was found to be the most significant predictor of the PA psychological profile.

A strength of the current study is that it was the first comparison of a PA and No-PA sample involved in child custody disputes, drawing on major MMPI-2 scales. Despite the small sample size, which does not enable a complete generalizability of the results, the effect sizes were high, demonstrating sufficient power to detect statistically significant effects. Future research would benefit from examining whether similar findings exist in larger samples, also by exploring trends in the Additional, Content, and Psy-5 MMPI-2 scales. Many important questions should also be addressed with respect to parents' gender and role, analyzing the personality characteristics of alienating fathers (not included in this study) and targeted parents. For example, it would be helpful to gain insight into whether the personality characteristics of alienating fathers differ from those of alienating mothers, and how the personality characteristics of alienating and targeted parents combine to contribute to and/or reinforce PA. It would also be helpful to know—from a prevention perspective—whether certain parent characteristics protect children from the effects of PA. Finally, future research should seek to determine a more accurate personality profile of alienating parents, also considering other personality disorders (e.g., antisocial and borderline), because much more knowledge is needed on this form of psychological maltreatment.

Additionally, there are significant practical implications for this study, because mental health and legal professionals (e.g., guardian *ad litems* and custody child evaluators) must recognize PA in order to recommend interventions. PA is a serious form of psychological maltreatment that generates negative outcomes for children. In line with previous clinical observations, the current study has shown that alienating mothers demonstrate specific personality features. Due to this finding, it is imperative that mental health and legal professionals assess parents' personality in order to more quickly and accurately detect PA and prevent harm to children. The use of personality inventories in child custody evaluations should follow strict guidelines, in order to benefit from the well-documented advantages and disadvantages of psychological testing in this context (Erickson et al., 2007; Valerio & Beck, 2017). Evaluators should establish a rationale for using any test, in connection with the aim of the evaluation and a full consideration of the strengths and limitations of employing traditional assessment procedures in forensic examinations. They must also show careful consideration of contextual variables and knowledge of the research results in order to correctly administer and

interpret the results of psychological tests (Archer et al., 2016). In sum, forensic practitioners should form opinions based on all of the information gathered from multiple assessment methods. Thereby, if a parent scores high on a particular scale, the evaluator may not conclude that she/he necessarily engages in PA behaviors. However, in our opinion, the MMPI-2 could be useful for contributing further information on the parents during the evaluation of parenting skills in child custody disputes or other conflictual scenarios. By understanding the most frequent MMPI-2 profiles of alienating parents and combining this with other significant factors, such as a prior positive relationship between the child and the now rejected parent, the absence of maltreatment by the rejected parent, the use of alienating behaviors by the favored parent, and the presence of behavioral manifestations of alienation in the child (Baker, 2020), evaluators may improve their identification of PA. Thus, MMPI-2 profiles should not be interpreted in a deterministic fashion, according to a causal model of explanation. Rather, the MMPI-2 should be used to add incremental validity to evaluators' assessment and decision making. Furthermore, as there is not currently a "gold standard" measure for identifying PA, results of the present research suggest that all of the aforementioned elements are valuable to piece together a picture that can support practitioners' consistent and reliable assessment.

A further benefit of the further study of PA parents' personality characteristics is that it might generate better insight into how the intractability of PA described in the clinical literature might be managed (Baker & Fine, 2013, Verrocchio, Baker et al., 2018). Therefore, the present study may help to inform therapeutic interventions and legal decisions with respect to PA. Dysfunctional personality traits and/or disorders in alienating parents are significant factors that could explain why, once on the road to alienation, parents are not likely to stop on their own accord.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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ORCID iD

Daniela Marchetti (iD) https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3745-4562
Cristina Mazza (iD) https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2554-8094

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