

Navigating the Maze: Parental Alienation, Self-Esteem and Parenting Styles

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Abstract

Keywords:

parental alienation, self-esteem, parenting styles

This study examines the interplay between childhood parental alienation, adult self-esteem, and parenting styles experienced during upbringing. The sample comprises 125 Romanian participants (76% female, 24% male), aged 21 to 59 (M= 33.8, SD= 8.88). Distinct datasets were formed based on the absence of either parent during childhood, enabling separate analyses for mother-child and father-child relationships. Results reveal a statistically significant negative association between childhood parental alienation and adult self-esteem. Moreover, a significant positive correlation is found between experiencing democratic parenting during childhood and current self-esteem. The study also demonstrates that the authoritarian parenting style only moderates the relationship between parental alienation and self-esteem within the father-child relationship, albeit at a low to moderate level of influence. Conversely, this effect is not observed within the mother-child relationship. These findings have been further analyzed in the context of current research on the topic, thus contributing to the comprehension, prevention and management of parental alienation, its impact on adult self-esteem, and the promotion of healthier parent-child relationships

Zusammenfassung

Schlüsselworte:

Elterliche Entfremdung, Selbstwertgefühl, Erziehungsstil

Diese Studie untersucht das Zusammenspiel zwischen elterlicher Entfremdung in der Kindheit, dem Selbstwertgefühl im Erwachsenenalter und den Erziehungsstilen, die während der Kindheit erlebt wurden. Die Stichprobe umfasst 125 rumänische Teilnehmer (76% weiblich, 24% männlich) im Alter von 21 bis 59 Jahren (M= 33.8, SD= 8.88). Basierend auf dem Fehlen eines Elternteils während der Kindheit wurden getrennte Datensätze gebildet, um getrennte Analysen für die Mutter-Kind- und Vater-Kind-Beziehungen zu ermöglichen. Die Ergebnisse zeigen eine statistisch signifikante negative Assoziation zwischen der elterlichen Entfremdung in der Kindheit und dem Selbstwertgefühl im Erwachsenenalter. Darüber hinaus wird eine signifikante positive Korrelation zwischen der Erfahrung einer demokratischen Erziehung in der Kindheit und dem aktuellen Selbstwertgefühl festgestellt. Die Studie zeigt auch, dass der autoritäre Erziehungsstil nur die Beziehung zwischen elterlicher Entfremdung und Selbstwertgefühl innerhalb der Vater-Kind-Beziehung moderiert, wenn auch auf einem geringen bis moderaten Einflussniveau. In der Mutter-Kind-Beziehung ist dieser Effekt hingegen nicht zu beobachten. Diese Ergebnisse wurden im Kontext aktueller Forschung zu diesem Thema weiter analysiert, wodurch sie zum Verständnis, zur Prävention und zum Management von elterlicher Entfremdung beitragen, zu deren Auswirkungen auf das Selbstwertgefühl im Erwachsenenalter und zur Förderung gesünder Eltern-Kind-Beziehungen.

1. Introduction

Parental alienation involves intentional acts by one of the parents to create a separation between the child and the other parent. Typically, parents engage in alienation because they believe it will help them maintain a closer relationship with the child after a separation or divorce. By convincing the child that spending time with the other parent is unsafe or that the other parent doesn't love them as much, the parent engaged in alienation aims to gain advantages regarding child custody, establishing residence, the schedule of personal connections, and ultimately, the significant time they will spend with the child.

In the specialized literature (Johnston & Sullivan, 2020), it has been noted that such attempts can have significant and long-lasting negative effects on

children, especially on their self-esteem. Additionally, in cases where parental alienation is proven, this aspect can influence the decision regarding parental authority/custody of the children, as well as their placement with the rejected parent. Some of the actions that can lead to these consequences include various alienating behaviors from one party, such as blaming the other parent for the separation or divorce, telling the child that the other parent was violent or dangerous in some way, making negative comments about the other parent, involving the minor in separation or divorce proceedings, etc.

This study delves into exploring how the childhood experience of parental alienation influences the present-day self-esteem of adults. This inquiry is



crucial as strong self-esteem is linked to improved mental well-being (Sowislo & Orth, 2013), academic achievement (Di Giunta et al., 2013), effective stress management (Lo, 2002), and reduced occurrence of external behavioral issues (Teng et al., 2015).

2. Theoretical foundation

2.1. Parental Alienation

The commonly used definitions of parental alienation refer to a child being encouraged by one parent (referred to as the alienator or favoured parent) to reject contact with the other parent (referred to as the rejected, alienated, target, or unfavoured parent), thereby destroying the relationship between the unfavoured parent and the child (Darnall, 2010; Gardner, 2002).

Furthermore, for parental alienation to be present, it is essential that the child had a normal relationship with the alienated parent before the alienation occurred (Lowenstein, 2002).

In classic cases of parental alienation, the alienating parent typically exhibits a certain level of psychopathology and/or significant sociopathy (Gardner, 2002), as they consciously engage in alienating behaviours, disregarding the destructive impact on the child.

However, it is possible that the alienating parent may not be aware of the significant distortions in the child's perceptions and thinking regarding the rejected parent (Friedlander & Walters, 2010).

According to Gardner (1985), Parental Alienation Syndrome (PAS) is defined as follows:

".../ Its primary manifestation is the campaign of denigration against one parent, a campaign that has no justification. It results from the combination of indoctrination (brainwashing) activities by the favoured parent and the child's own contributions to the denigration of the target parent. In cases where there is genuine abuse and/or neglect by the target parent, the child's hostility may be justified, and the explanation of Parental Alienation Syndrome does not apply." (Gardner, 1985).

This definition highlights three factors: brainwashing actions by the alienating parent, situational factors, and the child's own contributions (Visu-Petra et al., 2016). Another important factor, according to this theory, is time, meaning that the more time the alienating parent has with the child, the higher the likelihood that their alienation efforts will succeed.

Some authors (Fidler et al., 2013; Harman, 2016) argue that parental alienation should be considered a form of child abuse or even a form of family violence. They assert that the favoured parent abusively wields power over the other parent by controlling the child's contact. This model is based on the hypothesis that there is an abusive power dynamic at play and emphasizes the importance of recognizing this type of violence in the family context.

As a result, clinical studies and some extensive empirical studies describe disturbed and disruptive behaviours from favoured parents, often characteristic of borderline and narcissistic psychopathology (Eddy, 2010). Favoured parents are more likely than rejected parents to exhibit controlling and coercive behaviours, poorly regulated bursts of anger, paranoid traits, and parenting styles that encourage enmeshed relationships between parent and child, such as invasive and infantilizing behaviours (Garber, 2011).

Based on research on 1000 child custody disputes, Clawar and Rivlin (2013) identified that programming/indoctrination by the favoured parent is the primary dynamic behind child alienation and consider it a psychologically abusive behaviour. Kelly and Johnston (2001) also agree that the behaviours of the favoured parent constitute emotional abuse of the child.

Furthermore, Romanian legislation also includes parental alienation in the category of "child abuse," as defined by Law no. 272 of June 21, 2004, on the protection and promotion of children's rights ("Law 272/2004"). According to Article 94 of Law 272/2004, "child abuse" is defined as "any voluntary action of a person who is in a relationship of responsibility, trust, or authority towards the child, which endangers the life, physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development, bodily integrity, physical or mental health of the child, and is classified as physical, emotional, psychological, sexual, and economic abuse."

2.2. Self-esteem

Self-esteem is typically defined as the overall positive evaluation a person has of themselves (Rosenberg et al., 1995). Rosenberg recognized as one of the pioneers in the field of self-esteem, emphasized that high self-esteem involves self-respect and a sense of one's own worth. Sedikides and Gregg (2003), in line with Rosenberg's perspective, described self-esteem as the subjective perception or evaluation a person has of their own worth.

Brown et al. (2001) distinguish three ways in which the term "self-esteem" is used: (a) global self-esteem or trait self-esteem - referring to how individuals typically feel about themselves, i.e., feelings of self-affection; (b) self-evaluation - referring to how individuals assess their various abilities and characteristics, and (c) state self-esteem - referring to momentary emotional states, for example, a person might say their self-esteem increased after getting a promotion, or another person might say their self-esteem decreased after a divorce.

Similarly, Branden (1969) proposed that self-esteem consists of two fundamental elements: (a) self-efficacy, which reflects the confidence in one's capacity to reason, acquire knowledge, make choices, and navigate challenges effectively, and (b) self-respect, which embodies the conviction in one's entitlement to happiness and the belief that individuals inherently deserve respect, love, and the pursuit of fulfilment in life.

The results of the meta-analysis conducted by Orth et al. (2018), which synthesizes available longitudinal data on average changes in self-esteem, showed that average levels of self-esteem increased from the age of 4 to 11, remained stable between the ages of 11 and 15, increased significantly up to the age of 30, continued to rise until the age of 60, peaked at the age of 60, and remained constant until the age of 70. Self-esteem slightly decreased until the age of 90 and declined more pronouncedly until the age of 94.

2.3. Parenting styles

Baumrind (1966, 1967, 1971) is generally regarded as a pioneer in the research on parenting styles. Her research significantly contributed to the understanding of different parenting styles and their impact on child development. She emphasized the importance of both parental demands (control) and responsiveness (affection) in child rearing. Based on these criteria, Baumrind (1966) identified and described three primary parenting styles: authoritative (i.e., democratic), authoritarian, and permissive, highlighting the positive outcomes associated with authoritative parenting.

Regarding the criterion of parental control, according to a meta-analysis conducted by Power (2013), two factors were identified. The first (identified in seven studies) reflects highly directive and often critical parental behaviour (such as orders, restrictions, negative comments, and threats), while the second (identified in four studies) reflects forms of

control that promote autonomy (such as suggestions, offering choices, cooperation, and encouragement). These types of control align with what Baumrind (1971) termed authoritarian and authoritative control practices, and what other authors (Hughes et al., 2004) referred to as parent-centered control and child-centered control.

Recent findings (Chen et al., 2000) suggest disparities in parenting styles between fathers and mothers. Maternal warmth emerged as a significant factor in fostering emotional adjustment, whereas paternal warmth was notably linked to subsequent social and academic achievements. Additionally, indulgence from fathers, rather than mothers, was found to be a significant predictor of children's challenges in adjustment.

3. Research methodology

3.1. Research design

The cross-sectional correlational study aimed to investigate the relationship between childhood parental alienation, adult self-esteem, and parenting styles (authoritative, authoritarian, and permissive) experienced during childhood. In the first stage, the study intends to analyze the connection between parental alienation (independent variable) and current self-esteem (dependent variable), as well as between parenting styles (independent variable) and current self-esteem (dependent variable). Additionally, in a second stage, the study has tested the moderating effect of parenting styles within the relationship between childhood parental alienation (independent variable) and adult self-esteem (dependent variable).

The objectives and hypotheses of the study involved examining the relationship between childhood parental alienation, parenting styles experienced during childhood, and adult self-esteem. Given that the authoritarian parenting style may contribute to increased conflicts and ineffective communication between parents (Deslandes et al., 2019; Reitman et al., 2002), the study has also investigated the manner in which this parenting style interacts within the relationship between childhood parental alienation and adult self-esteem.

In order to increase the specificity of the analyses and better understand the relationship between the variables, the sample has been divided in two: the first group aimed to investigate the participant's relationship with the father, whilst the second evaluated the one with the mother. Therefore, the following hypotheses were formulated:

H1: Childhood parental alienation towards the father has a statistically significant negative relationship with self-esteem in adulthood.

H2: Father's democratic parenting style during childhood has a statistically significant positive relationship with self-esteem in adulthood.

H3: Father's authoritarian parenting style moderates the relationship between childhood parental alienation and self-esteem in adulthood.

H4: Childhood parental alienation towards the mother has a statistically significant negative relationship with self-esteem in adulthood.

H5: Mother's democratic parenting style during childhood has a statistically significant positive relationship with self-esteem in adulthood.

H6: Mother's authoritarian parenting style moderates the relationship between childhood parental alienation and self-esteem in adulthood.

3.2. Procedure and participants

Participants were recruited from the online environment, through social media platforms (Facebook, WhatsApp), in the period of April - May 2023, mainly from among the students of the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences at the University of Bucharest. They were invited to complete an online form, created using Google Forms, with questions marked as mandatory to eliminate the risk of incomplete responses. The form included three scales regarding the analyzed variables, namely parental alienation, current self-esteem, and parenting styles.

In the initial section of the form, participants gave their consent to participate in the study and for the processing of personal data in accordance with the Regulation (EU) 2016/679 of the European Parliament and of the Council dated 27 April 2016 concerning the safeguarding of individuals regarding the processing of personal data and the free movement of such data, and the repeal of Directive 95/46/EC (General Data Protection Regulation or GDPR).

In the second part, they completed a section regarding socio-demographic data: gender, age, place of origin, level of education, own relational status, parents' relational status, quality of parents' relationship, and the presence of parents during childhood and adolescence. In the third part, they completed the scales corresponding to the three studied variables. Regarding the scale on parental alienation and parenting styles, participants responded

to items about the behaviors of each parent separately - mother and father.

The convenience sample included in this study consisted of 125 participants from Romania, with 76% being female (N=95) and 24% being male (N=30), aged between 21 and 59 years old. Most of the participants came from urban areas, accounting for 86.4% (N=108).

Based on the *a priori* power analysis conducted using G*Power 2.1.9.7 software (Erdfelder et al., 2009), the required number of participants to achieve a statistical power of .95 and a medium effect size is 111 individuals. The only exclusion criterion was a minimum age of 18, which was met by all participants.

Based on the absence of either the father or mother during childhood (up to 18 years), two separate samples were formed - one sample for the analysis of research variables in the context of the participant's relationship with the father, and one for investigating constructs within the participant's relationship with the mother.

3.3. Instruments

A custom questionnaire was crafted for the study, comprising 58 questions. These encompassed: (a) basic demographic information, consisting of five questions, and three questions about the participants' parents; (b) retrospective accounts of exposure to parental alienation behaviors, with 20 items; (c) current self-esteem, with 16 items; and (d) parenting styles of the parents, with 33 items.

The initial scale employed in the questionnaire was The Baker Strategies Questionnaire (Baker & Chambers, 2011), comprising 20 items focused on experiences of parental alienation behaviors. These behaviors were described as "actions the parent (mother/father) could have done during childhood and adolescence." The items were drawn from studies on adults suffering from "Parental Alienation Syndrome" (Baker, 2007) and investigations involving parents worried that the other parent was trying to alienate the child from them (Baker & Darnall, 2006).

Participants were requested to assess the frequency of their encounters with these behaviors separately for each parent, which affected their relationship with the other parent, both from the mother and from the father, using a 5-point Likert scale, namely 1 (never), 2 (rarely), 3 (sometimes), 4 (often), and 5 (always). In other words, there was a separate scale for each of the two parents, with items

adjusted accordingly depending on the targeted parent (e.g., "Retained or prevented phone messages, letters, cards, or gifts from my father that were meant for me", "Encouraged me to ignore or consider less important the rules, values, and authority of my mother").

The second scale included in the questionnaire was the Self-Liking, Self-Competence Scale - Revised (SLCS-R), developed by Tafarodi & Swann (1995), comprising two sub-scales aligned with the dual dimensions of self-esteem: Self-Competence and Self-Liking. Each sub-scale has 8 items, with both positive and negative items balanced, with a total of 16 items. Participants were requested to indicate the degree of their agreement with general statements reflecting a high or low level of self-competence and self-liking. Their responses were evaluated using a 5-point Likert scale, spanning from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

The final scale integrated into the questionnaire concentrated on parenting styles was the Short Version of the Parenting Styles and Dimensions Questionnaire (PSDQ - SV) developed by Robinson et al. (1995, 2001). This questionnaire is based on the democratic, authoritarian, and permissive parenting styles developed by Baumrind (1968, 1971). The democratic style included three dimensions, each with five items: Connection/Warmth and Support, Regulation/Reasoning or Induction, and Granting Autonomy/Democratic Participation. The authoritarian style included three dimensions, each with four items: Physical Coercion, Verbal Hostility, and Non-Reasoning/Punitive and the permissive style comprises a single dimension, consisting of five items related to Indulgence. Participants provided responses to questions on a 5-point Likert scale: 1 (never), 2 (sometimes), 3 (about half the time), 4 (very often), and 5 (always), for each parent separately, namely, mother and father.

4. Results

4.1. Descriptive Statistics

Table 1. Sample characteristics for the full sample

	n	%
Gender		
Female	95	76
Male	30	24
Provenance		
Urban	108	86.4
Rural	17	13.6
Education		
High school	25	20
Undergraduate studies	54	43.2

Master studies	43	34.4
Doctorate	3	2.4
Marital status		
Single	15	12
In a relationship	47	37.6
In a complicated relationship	1	.8
Married	56	44.8
Divorced	5	4
Living with partner	1	.8
The parents' marital status:		
Not separated or divorced before the participant turned 18 years old	106	84.8
Separated or divorced before the participant turned 18 years old	19	15.2
The quality of the relationship between parents:		
During the most fraught time, the relationship was not that bad	70	56
During the most fraught time, the relationship was extremely bad	55	44
The presence of parents:		
Both parents were present during childhood (18 years old)	115	92
At least one parent was absent during childhood (18 years old)	10	8

Table 1 presents sample characteristics for the full sample. However, in order to accurately assess the relationship between the participant's self-esteem in adulthood and the two variables pertaining to their childhood: parental alienation and parenting style, further analyses were conducted on two groups. The first one aimed to investigate the participant's relationship with the father (n=110), whilst the second evaluated the one with the mother (n=114).

4.1.1. Descriptive Statistics – Group 1: the relationship with the father

Tabel 2. Sample characteristics

	n	%
Gender		
Female	84	76.4
Male	26	23.6
Provenance		
Urban	93	84.5
Rural	17	15.5
Education		
Highschool	23	20.9
Undergraduate studies	51	46.4
Master studies	34	30.9
Doctorate	2	1.8
Marital status		
Single	14	12.7

4.1.2. Descriptive Statistics – Group 2: the relationship with the mother

Table 4. Sample characteristics

	n	%
Gender		
Female	87	76.3
Male	27	23.7
Provenance		
Urban	97	85.1
Rural	17	14.9
Education		
Highschool	24	21.1
Undergraduate studies	52	45.6
Master studies	36	31.6
Doctorate	2	1.8
Marital status		
Single	14	12.3
In a relationship	43	37.7
In a complicated relationship	1	0.9
Married	50	43.9
Divorced	5	4.4
Living with a partner	1	0.9
The parents' marital status		
Not separated or divorced before the participant turned 18 years old	104	91.2
Separated or divorced before the participant turned 18 years old	10	8.8
The quality of the relationship between parents		
During the most fraught time, the relationship was not that bad	66	57.9
During the most fraught time, the relationship was extremely bad	48	42.1
The presence of parents		
Both parents were present during childhood (18 years old)	110	96.5
At least one parent was absent during childhood (18 years old)	4	3.5

Table 3 displays the Means and Standard deviations for the relationship with the father across the five analysed variables, along with the internal consistency of the scales and the distribution indices. The reliability was adequate for all variables, except the permissive parenting style which was excluded from further statistical analyses. Regarding the parametric nature of the data, the values for Kurtosis and Skewness for all variables, except parental alienation, support the assumption of normality. As a result, the association between parental alienation and the other variables has been investigated using the Spearman analysis of correlation.

Table 4 presents sample characteristic for Group 2 - the relationship with the mother.

Table 5 presents the Means and Standard Deviations for the relationship with the mother across the five analysed variables, as well as the internal consistency of the scales and the distribution indices. The reliability was adequate for all variables, except the permissive parenting style which was excluded from further statistical analyses. Regarding the parametric nature of the data, the values for Kurtosis and Skewness for all variables, except parental alienation, support the assumption of normality. As a result, the association between parental alienation and the other

Tabel 2 presents sample characteristic for Group 1 – the relationship with the father.

Table 3. Means, Standard Deviations, psychometric properties and normality

	M	SD	Cronbach α	Skewness	Kurtosis
Parental alienation (towards the father)	29.6	12.8	.94	2.38	6.67
Self-esteem	53	11.6	.91	-.46	.23
Authoritarian parenting style (father)	24.7	10.9	.93	1.18	1.02
Permissive parenting style (father)	10	2.67	.28	.47	.20
Democratic parenting style (father)	35.7	17.3	.97	.75	-.59

variables has been investigated using the Spearman analysis of correlation.

Table 5. Means, Standard Deviations, psychometric properties and normality indices

	M	SD	Cronbach α	Skewness	Kurtosis
Parental alienation (towards the mother)	25.4	8.17	.92	2.88	10.9
Self-esteem	53.4	11.7	.91	-.46	.22
Authoritarian parenting style (mother)	26.8	10.1	.91	.86	.09
Permissive parenting style (mother)	11.4	2.97	.43	.59	-.03
Democratic parenting style (mother)	41.9	16.5	.96	.20	-.97

4.2 Inferential Statistics

4.2.1 Inferential Statistics - Group 1: the relationship with the father

Table 6. Correlations for Study Variables for the relationship with the father (Pearson correlation coefficient)

Variable	1	2	3
1. Self-esteem	-		
2. Authoritarian parenting style (father)	-.12	-	
3. Democratic parenting style (father)	.34***	-.32***	-

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Table 7. Correlations for study variables (Spearman correlation coefficient)

Variable	1
1. Parental alienation	-
2. Self-esteem	-.30**
3. Authoritarian parenting style (father)	.22*
4. Democratic parenting style (father)	-.40***

The correlations among the investigated variables are presented in Table 6 and Table 7. A positive statistically significant association between the father's democratic parenting style and the participant's self-esteem in adulthood has been identified ($r = .34$, $p < .001$) (Table 6), supporting hypothesis 2. A negative statistically significant correlation between self-esteem and parental alienation ($r = -.30$, $p < .01$) (Table 7) has also been identified, providing evidence for hypothesis 1.

Table 8. Moderation estimates – the moderator role of father's authoritarian parenting style on the relationship between parental alienation towards the father and self-esteem

Dependent variable	Predictor	B	SE	95% Confidence Interval		Z	p
				Lower Limit	Upper Limit		
Self-esteem	Parental alienation	-.25	.08	-.40	-.09	-3.12	.002**
	Authoritarian parenting style (father)	-.09	.09	-.27	.09	-.99	.32
	Parental alienation * Authoritarian parenting style (father)	.02	.00	.01	.04	3.06	.002**

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Table 9. Simple Slope analysis: the effect of the predictor (parental alienation) on the dependent variable (self-esteem) at different levels of the moderator (father authoritarian parenting style)

	B	SE	95% Confidence Interval		Z	p
			Lower Limit	Upper Limit		
Average	-.25	.08	-.41	-.08	-2.93	.003**
Low (-1SD)	-.56	.14	-.83	-.28	-4	<.001***
High (+1SD)	.05	.12	-.19	.30	.45	.65

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

A moderation analysis was performed, and the results are presented in Table 8 and Table 9. The results indicate that parental alienation towards father has a statistically significant effect on self-esteem ($\beta = -.25$; $Z = -3.12$, $p < .01$), and although the father's authoritarian parenting style has an insignificant effect on the latter ($\beta = -.09$; $Z = -.99$, $p > .05$), there is a significant interaction effect ($\beta = .02$; $Z = 3.06$, $p < .01$) (Table 8). Consequently, the father's authoritarian parenting style serves as a partial moderator in the relationship between parental alienation and self-esteem. Specifically, at a low and medium level of the moderator, the father's authoritarian parenting style has a significant effect on the self-esteem registered in adulthood ($\beta = -.56$; $Z = -4$, $p < .001$) ($\beta = -.25$; $Z = -2.93$,

$p < .01$) (Tabel 9). Therefore, these results partially support hypothesis 3.

4.2.2. Inferential Statistics - Group 1: the relationship with the mother

Table 10. Correlations for Study Variables for the relationship with the mother (Pearson correlation coefficient)

Variable	1	2	3
1. Self-esteem	-		
2. Authoritarian parenting style (mother)	-.23*	-	
3. Democratic parenting style (mother)	.34***	-.56***	-

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Table 11. Correlations for study variables (Spearman correlation coefficient)

Variable	1
1. Parental alienation	-
2. Self-esteem	-.23*
3. Authoritarian parenting style (mother)	.36***
4. Democratic parenting style (mother)	-.27**

The correlations among the variables investigated concerning the relationship with the mother are displayed in Table 10 and Table 11. A positive statistically significant association between the mother’s democratic parenting style and the participant’s self-esteem in adulthood has been identified ($r = .34$, $p < .001$) (Table 10), as well as a negative statistically significant correlation between the latter and mother’s authoritarian parenting style ($r = -.23$, $p < .05$) and parental alienation ($r = -.23$, $p < .05$) (Table 11). These results support both hypothesis 4 and 5.

An exploratory moderation analysis was further conducted, with the results presented in Table 12. The results indicate that parental alienation towards mother has a statistically significant effect on self-esteem ($\beta = -.31$; $Z = -2.34$, $p < .05$), as well as the mother’s authoritarian parenting style ($\beta = -.23$; $Z = -2.32$, $p < .05$). However, the interaction variable has an insignificant effect on self-esteem ($\beta = .01$; $Z = 1.60$, $p > .05$). Consequently, the mother’s authoritarian parenting style does not act as a moderator in the relationship between parental alienation towards the mother and self-esteem in adulthood.

Table 12. Moderation estimates- the moderator role of mother's authoritarian parenting style on the relationship between parental alienation directed towards the mother and self-esteem

Dependent variable	Predictor	B	SE	95% Confidence Interval		Z	p
				Lower Limit	Upper Limit		
Self-esteem	Parental alienation	-.31	.13	-.57	-.05	-2.34	0.01*
	Authoritarian parenting style (mother)	-.23	.10	-.44	-.03	-2.32	.02*
	Parental alienation * Authoritarian parenting style (mother)	.01	.01	-.00	.03	1.60	.11

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Table 13. Simple Slope analysis: the effect of the predictor (parental alienation towards mother) on the dependent variable (self-esteem) at different levels of the moderator (mother’s authoritarian parenting style)

	B	SE	95% Confidence Interval		Z	p
			Lower Limit	Upper Limit		
Average	-.31	.13	-.57	-.04	-2.32	.02*
Low (-1SD)	-.48	.19	-.86	-.10	-2.48	.01*
High (+1SD)	-.14	.14	-.42	.14	-.96	.33

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Table 13 illustrates that at a low level of mother’s authoritarian parenting style, alienation towards the mother has a statistically significant effect on self-esteem in adulthood ($\beta = -.48$; $Z = -2.48$, $p < .05$). At a moderate level, the effect is also statistically significant ($\beta = -.31$; $Z = -2.32$, $p < .05$), but not at a high level of the moderator ($\beta = -.14$; $Z = -.96$, $p > .05$). Given that the interaction effect is not statistically significant, the mother’s authoritarian style does not serve as a moderator in the relationship between alienation towards mother and self-esteem in adulthood. Therefore, the results do not support hypothesis 6.

5. Discussions

The results support the first and fourth hypothesis, parental alienation experienced during childhood, towards both father and mother, has a significant, though of reduced intensity, association to self-esteem in adulthood. This could be explained by the existence of various covariates, the participants having experienced different life events and encountered situations that influenced their self-image by the time they reported their self-esteem. Even though the intensity of the connection is not strong, its mere existence suggests the importance of a person's relationship with their parents during childhood, as the nature of this interaction influences outcomes in adulthood.

These findings align with the study conducted by Johnston et al. (2005), as well as clinical observations indicating that alienated children tend to experience more difficulties, exhibit greater emotional dependence, possess lower social competence, and display problematic self-esteem (either low or defensively high).

The second and fifth hypothesis is also supported by data, the democratic parenting style for both parents presenting a positive significant association to self-esteem in adulthood. The result promotes and supports further this parenting style. These results are congruent with findings from other studies (Baumrind, 1991; Lamborn et al., 1991; Steinberg et al., 1994), which suggest that the democratic parenting style consistently correlates with favorable outcomes in children's development. Such outcomes include psychosocial competence (e.g., maturity, resilience, optimism, autonomy, social competence, self-esteem), as well as academic achievements.

The third hypothesis is only partially confirmed, as the authoritarian parenting style moderates the association between parental alienation and self-esteem solely within the participant-father dyad group. The results from the second group, that analyzed the relationship with the mother, could not support hypothesis 6.

This result would suggest that the child-parent dynamics differs for each parent. A person seems to be more susceptible to experiencing certain outcomes derived from parental alienation in the case of an authoritarian father compared to a mother with the same parenting style. However, the association between the mother's authoritarian style and self-esteem would indicate that the participants whose interaction with the mother was characterized by an

authoritarian parenting style tend to have a lower self-esteem in adulthood.

These latter results are in line with findings from other studies (Hoeve et al., 2008; Steinberg et al., 1994; Williams et al., 2009; Wolfradt et al., 2003), suggesting that an authoritarian parenting style consistently correlates with adverse outcomes in children's development. Such outcomes include aggression, delinquent behaviors, somatization, depersonalization, and anxiety.

6. Conclusions

Research on this topic can provide additional clarifications on the mechanisms through which parenting styles and parental alienation affect the current self-esteem of adults, contributing to the development of psychological and social theories in this field. Additionally, the results of studies can strengthen and validate existing theoretical models, providing a solid foundation for future research and the development of appropriate interventions and policies.

Understanding parenting styles and their influence on child development can empower parents to adopt more effective approaches and foster healthier relationships with their children. Furthermore, research findings can contribute to understanding, preventing, and managing parental alienation, its influence on the current self-esteem of adults, as well as promoting healthier parent-child relationships.

Future research directions could focus on conducting additional studies on various more representative samples (children, preadolescents, adolescents, adults, predominantly from families with divorced/separated parents). Continuing research on this topic would contribute to the theoretical and practical development of the phenomenon of parental alienation, understanding the psychological, familial, and social processes underlying it, as well as the development of effective practices and interventions to address issues related to parental alienation and its impact on self-esteem. Additionally, further studies on the role of parenting styles, especially the democratic parenting style, in the healthy development of the child are warranted.

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