

# An Overview of Parental Alienation from the Framework of Ecological Systems Theory

## Ekolojik Sistem Kuramı Çerçevesinden Ebeveyn Yabancılaşmasına Genel Bir Bakış

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### Öz

Boşanma, kısaca, eşler arasında evliliğin hukuki açıdan sona erdirilmesi olarak tanımlanabilir. Çatışmalı ayrılık veya boşanma davalarında, ebeveynlerden birinin öfke/kızgınlık hissiyle birlikte sözleri, davranışları ve tutumlarıyla diğer ebeveyni kötülemesi, çocuklarının bu ebeveyniyle olan kişisel görüşme haklarını engellemesi sonucunda çocuklar, hedefteki ebeveyne karşı yabancılaşma geliştirebilmektedir. Alanyazında ebeveyn yabancılaşması (ebeveyne yabancılaşma sendromu), özellikle yüksek çatışmalı boşanma davalarında çocukların ebeveynlerinden biriyle (yabancılaştıran ebeveyn) güçlü bir şekilde ittifak kurması ve herhangi bir meşru gerekçe olmaksızın diğer ebeveyniyle (hedefteki veya yabancılaşılacak ebeveyn) ilişki kurmayı reddetmesiyle sonuçlanan dinamik bir süreç olarak kavramsallaştırılmakta ve çocuklar açısından bu sürecin duygusal istismarın bir türü olduğu belirtilmektedir. Bu derlemede ebeveyn yabancılaşması sürecinde etkili olabileceği düşünülen faktörlerin dinamik etkileşimlerinin ekolojik sistem kuramı perspektifiyle gözden geçirilmesi amaçlanmıştır. Bu kapsamda çalışmada, ebeveyn yabancılaşması kavramının genel özellikleri üzerinde durulmuş ve her bir sistem düzeyinde (mikrosistem, mezosistem, ekzosistem, makrosistem, kronosistem) ebeveyne yabancılaşma sürecini etkileyebilecek risk faktörleri ile yabancılaşmanın çocuk üzerindeki genel etkileri gözden geçirilmiştir.

**Anahtar sözcükler:** Boşanma, çatışmalı boşanma, ebeveyn yabancılaşması, ebeveyne yabancılaşma sendromu, ekolojik sistem kuramı, çocuk

### Abstract

Divorce, in brief, can be described as the legal dissolution of marriage between the spouses. High-conflict divorce or parental separation, the children might be able to develop an alienation state towards the targeted parent because of a parent's denigration against the other one through his/her words, behaviors, and attitudes with rage/anger, and by being precluded from the rights of personal contact with that parent. Literature on divorce, parental alienation (parental alienation syndrome) is conceptualized as a dynamic process resulting in forming a strong alliance with one of the children's parents (alienating parent) and the denial of communication with the other parent (the targeted or the alienated parent) without any legitimate reason especially in high-conflict divorce suits and It is indicated that the process is a type of emotional abuse for the children. The goal of this paper is to review the dynamic interactions of the factors which are considered effective during the parental alienation process from the ecological system theory perspective. The general specifications of the parental alienation concept are emphasized and the common effects of the alienation on the children with the risk factors that might affect the parental alienation process in each system level (microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, chronosystem) are examined.

**Keywords:** Divorce, high-conflict divorce, parental alienation, parental alienation syndrome, ecological system theory, children

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**DIVORCE** can be described as a complex process resulting in the legal dissolution of the marriage and causing the division or dispersal of the family psychologically and affecting all of the family members (Yörükoğlu 2012). In recent years, the divorce rate has been increasingly in Turkey. According to settlement and divorce statistics of Turkish Statistical Institute the divorce rate of the couples has increased in the last decade: 118,568 couples got divorced in 2010 while 155,047 couples were divorced in 2019 and 139,660 children were affected by the divorce having taken place in 2019 (TÜİK 2019). Regarding the increase of the divorce rates, the social and cultural changes and the reflection of these changes upon the family life are notable (Doğan 1998, Steinberger 2006, Aydın and Baran 2010, Bolhari et al. 2012, Şen 2015).

After the divorce process, the parents create a new family dynamic, in which they rearrange the parental roles and responsibilities regardless of the partner relations among each other. At this point, Divorce brings a set of psychological, economical and social changes upon the family structure (Emery 2011, Güler 2017). The studies show that 75-80% of the couples were able to make the transition from a mononuclear family to polinuclear family structure successfully within the first two or three years following the divorce (Hetherington and Kelly 2002). The parents being able to adapt the post divorce process are able to sustain their relationships in a healthy manner with their children within the scope of a sensitive and functional parenthood, transactional patterns and boundaries (Polak and Saini 2015). However, in the divorce literature, it is stated that the orientation period of the post-divorce process can be tough and time consuming and the couples can experience multiple emotions such as rage, offense, guilt (Tein et al. 2000, Pines et al. 2002, Zafer and Kausar 2014). Longitudinal studies show that between 10% and 15% of the divorced couples may still stay in “high-conflict” state even after two to three years (Maccoby and Mnookin 1992, Johnston 1994, Johnston et al. 2009). The concept of high-conflict is used to describe the couples being able to create negative effects towards individuals and other family members (especially the children) when the frequency, duration and intensity of the conflictions are considered (Cummings and Davies 1994).

Depending upon the ongoing conflicts between the parents, the observable negative attitudes of a parent towards the other one are able to affect the childrens’ attitudes towards the parents significantly (Moné and Biringen 2012). The attitudes and behaviors of the divorced parents towards each other and the children have a significant impact on the children and the children affected by the parental conflict could face a lot of problems such as interpersonal relations, academic success, psychological and social adaptation (Gregory Öngider 2016). The process could be likened to live in the middle of a battle zone from the perspective of the children stuck between the high-conflict area between their parents (Ordway et al. 2020). Within this scope, the case of the continuation of the conflictual relationship despite the termination of the conjugal union might cause negative effects upon the children in various aspects (Karataş 2019). Additionally, the parents experiencing various emotional, psychological and economical challenges may direct their attention

towards themselves and continue the existing conflicts in their relationship over their children (Şen 2015). In some conditions, one of the parents might attempt to detract the other parent from the child with his/her words, behaviors and attitudes (Kelly and Johnston 2001). That situation can cause the child to feel negative emotions towards the parents, to deny meeting and communicating with the parents (Kelly and Johnston 2001, Kayma Güneş 2007, Koçyıldırım 2010). The parent denial in the divorce process can occur not only due to the normal or acceptable reasons but also an alienation state (Güler 2017). The parental alienation concept has been studied in the direction of the clinical observations of the mental health professionals encountering with the state of the child denying to form a communication with a parent by choosing the other parent over this one and showing resistance on meeting and demonstrating alienated behaviours without showing an acceptable reason especially during the high-conflict divorce process (Wallerstein and Kelly 1976, Gardner 1985, Gardner 1998, Gardner 2002, Gardner 2004a, Gardner 2004b). The parental alienation concept has been described by various researchers in the academic literature with various names as *pathological alienation* (Wallerstein and Kelly 1976), *parental alienation syndrome- PAS* (Gardner 1985), *the alienated child* (Kelly and Johnston 2001), *unfair/unjustified rejection* (Fidler et al. 2013), *parental alienation* (Darnall 2010).

The aim of this study is to review the dynamic interactions of the probable factors that can be effective upon the parental alienation process from the perspective of the ecological system theory. Within this context, in this article, the risk factors that can affect the parental alienation process in every system level (microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, chronosystem) and the general impacts of alienation on the child will be reviewed by referring the historical development of the parental alienation the up-to-date discussions regarding the concept.

## **Definition of parental alienation (parental alienation syndrome - PAS)**

After its initial definition in the academic literature, it is seen that there are some discussions regarding the structural validity of the parental alienation concept and its use in the field of law (Johnston and Sullivan 2020).

From a historical perspective, the traces of the parental alienation are attributed to Greek Mythology (Torun 2011, Yvanna Aires Gadelha 2016, Kırıcı et al. 2017, Torun 2017). The parental alienation behaviors were first described in the literature by the psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich (Reich 1949). Wilhelm Reich claimed that parents having some characteristic features denigrate their ex-partners and experience a conflict with their partners regarding the custody issues in order to protect themselves against the narcissistic injury that might happen during the divorce process (as cite in Bernet 2008). In the following process, Wallerstein and Kelly (1976) evaluated the resistance of the child regarding the rejection of the parent and visitations after the divorce as a pathological alienation state, and

stated that the children might side against a parent while supporting the other. In 1980's, Richard Gardner used the term "Parental Alienation Syndrome - (PAS)" based upon his observations upon the divorcing parents, divorced parents and the associated children to explain parental alienation situation of the child from the denigrated parent as a result of one parent denigrating the other one especially in high-conflict divorce suits. He described PAS as a mental state in which the child rejects communication with one parent (the targeted parent) due to the other parent's (alienating parent) effect without any justification (Gardner 1985). He says that in the case of observing eight different behavioral symptoms upon the child (being a part of the slander campaign conducted by denigrating the targeted parent, making weak, inconsistent and meaningless statements to reject the targeted parent, free-thinker phenomenon, lack of ambivalent emotions, abundance of borrowed ideas, no visible guilt on the child, the existence of grudge and hatred against the targeted parent's family root and the unconditional support towards the alienating parent), PAS should be taken into consideration (Gardner 1985, Gardner 1998, Gardner 2002). Within this scope, he conceptualized PAS as mild, moderate and severe in three different alienation levels by considering the frequency and severity of the child's observed behaviours (Gardner 2002) (See Table 1).

**Table 1. Three types of PAS**

Mild	The child demonstrates a mild level of alienation. At this level, the alienating parent tries to impose on the child that he/she is a better parent by utilizing verbal and nonverbal ways. The alienating parent tends to express her/his negative thoughts and experiences towards the targeted parent. At this phase in which the clinical symptoms are recently emerging, the child continues to communicate with the targeted parent.
Moderate	The child demonstrates a moderate level of alienation. Negative emotions such as rage, hate towards the alienated parent are observed to be developed by the child. The child assuming that the targeted parent is evil tends to exhibit devastating behaviours against him/her. At this stage, the targeted parent struggles to communicate with his/her child.
Severe	The child demonstrates a severe level of alienation. The child seeing the targeted parent as an enemy for himself/herself can be a part of the slander campaign of the alienating parent. At this stage, the targeted parent is unable to communicate with his/her child.

Although Gardner (1992), based upon his clinical observations, stated that the custody is often entrusted to the mother and the children might develop PAS against the father in the post-divorce process, both of the parents attempt alienation equally in the following years (Gardner 2002). In some cases, alienating parents revive abuse allegations towards the child in order to slant custody suits in favor of themselves; however, these allegations mostly do not reflect the truth; he evaluated this situation as a method for the alienating parent to punish the targeted parent (Gardner 1992). In parallel with this opinion, when the Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect (CIS-18) examined, It is seen that there are 4% of misreporting regarding the child abuse claims; in divorce and custody suits, this rate is reported as 12% (Trocmé and Bala 2005). Contrary to this finding, with the definition of PAS in the literature, it is stated that the parents might claim the experienced process as PAS by intentional manipulation in some abuse cases (Torun 2017).

At this point, Gardner (2002), by stating that the children having experienced traumatic events such as neglected by the parents, physical/sexual abuse, abandonment might develop parental alienation with reasonable justifications, emphasizes that the PAS diagnosis would not be valid in such cases. In this context, the primary factors are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2. Key Elements of Parent Alienation (Goldin and Salani 2020)**

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A. Child
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Forming a strong alliance with the alienating parent during the high-conflict separation and divorce.</li> <li>• Alienating against the rejected parent as a result of compelling control and emotionally problematic behaviors.</li> <li>• The use of the child as a tool to harm the targeted parent.</li> </ul>
B. Behaviours of the Child
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rejects to form a relationship with the alienated parent without any legitimate reason.</li> <li>• Strongly resists to contact and communicate with the alienated parent.</li> </ul>
C. Attitudes of the Child
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of ambivalence.</li> <li>• No apparent guilt or regret (having no guilt against the abuse claims guided towards the alienated parent)</li> <li>• Free-thinker phenomenon (indicating the reflected opinions as if they were his/her ideas by internalizing them and defending as not being impressed by anyone)</li> <li>• The existence of borrowed ideas (the existence of unreal stories about the targeted parent)</li> <li>• The automatic (reflexive) support of the child to the alienating parent</li> </ul>
D. PAS can not be diagnosed when the targeted parent abuses the child.

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Kelly and Johnston (2001) indicates that reformulation of the concept within the “alienating child” framework has a critical importance by drawing attention to situations such as the misuse of PAS is legal cases, the agents lying beneath the parental alienation described according to just one factor, having limited level of empirical evidence to be able to defined as diagnosable “syndrome”. In this context, Kelly and Johnston (2001) conceptualized the relationship pattern of the children with their parents after divorce or separation as a process transitioning from the children who are able to form positive relations with their parents to the children who are alienating against one of their parents. While at one end of this process, there are children who care and willing to spend time with both of their parents after the divorce or separation states; on the other end, there are children who express negative emotions such as rage, hate, fear towards one of their parent without any realistic reason and resisting to meet with the aforesaid parent. At this point, Kelly and Johnston (2001), evaluating the situation in which the child continues to equally and constantly eager to communicate with both of his/her parents at first; however, during the process he/she chooses one parent and rejects to communicate with the other one as within the “alienating child” framework, indicates that the effect of the alienating parent is not enough alone during the child’s rejection of one of his/her parents, some children can have the strength to break this effect. As to Warshak (2003), he expressed that there needs to be a constant and insistent parental rejection, this rejection should not stem from a logical reason and the preferred parent should have at least a partial effect in order for PAS to be defined. There appears to be a consensus about the fundamental structure of the PAS and the observed behaviours on the child regarding the alienation at this point (Johnston 2003, Rueda 2004). However,

it is also seen that different opinions regarding the recognition of PAS as a diagnosable syndrome has emerged from past to present (Pepiton et al. 2012, Lowenstein 2013, Clemente and Padilla-Racero 2016). A group of researchers, defending the point of view that PAS has a valid and credible structure, expressed an opinion directed towards the importance of the inclusion of PAS in The “*Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)*” and “*International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems (ICD)*” prepared by WHO. Despite the existing arguments in terms of terminological and etiological aspects; researchers emphasizing that PAS is widely observed, defined by the experts working in psychology and law fields universally and accepted by multiple courts, remarked that evaluation, intervention and monitoring can be conducted systematically by specifying the diagnostic criteria (Bernet et al. 2010). Contrary to these opinions, some researchers, by drawing attention to the inadequacy of the studies regarding PAS (Walker et al. 2004, Meier 2009, Walker and Shapiro 2010, Pepiton et al. 2012, Milchman et al. 2020), claimed that the parental alienation is more related to the dynamics than the diagnosis (Garner 2020). Clarkson and Clarkson (2008) indicated that instead of approaching PAS as a separate diagnosis with the justification of that the disorders defined in DSM-5 consider the behaviours observed on individuals during the diagnosis process; however, PAS is a interpersonal process in which more than one individuals’ behaviours are considered, It is suitable to evaluate PAS in the relationship problems context of DSM. In consequence, PAS was not included in DSM-5 and ICD-11 due to the justifications such as inadequate number of studies regarding PAS, frequency of incidence, temporal changes, gender differences (Torun 2017). At this point, contemporary PAS defenders remarked that the results of parental alienation could be described with the terminologies located in DSM-5 such as “the child affected by the problems in parent relations”, “mother-father-child relationship problem”, “psychological abuse towards the child” and they chose to use the term “parental alienation” instead of PAS (Bernet 2015, Bernet et al. 2016, Bernet et al. 2018). In this direction, Bernet et al. (2018) described the parental alienation concept as “a cognitive state in which the child forms a strong alliance with a parent (the preferred or alienating parent) and rejects to form a relationship with the other parent (rejected or targeted parent) without any legitimate reason mostly in the high-conflict separation or divorce cases. In parallel with these studies in the literature, it is seen that various measurement tools are developed in order to define and evaluate the parental alienation (Mone and Biringen 2012, Sirbu et al. 2021), the effectiveness of the use of Parental Acceptance-Rejection Scale is evaluated through quantitative studies during the process of distinction of the parental alienation (the unjust rejection of a parent without any legitimate justification) from the other contact rejections (Bernet et al. 2018, Bernet et al. 2020, Bernet et al. 2020), retrospective and qualitative studies are conducted (Baker 2005, Baker 2006, Baker and Ben-Ami 2011, Baker and Brassard 2013, Baker and Verrocchio 2013, Verrocchio et al. 2019), the alienating behaviours

of the alienating parents are tried to be identified (Baker and Darnall 2006, Baker and Fine 2008), the devastating effects of the alienation upon the family system are underlined (Harman et al. 2019), the quantitative and qualitative studies are heavily conducted upon subjects such as the perspective and the psychological adaptation of the rejected/targeted parent for the alienation process (Balmer et al. 2018, Tavares et al. 2020), the subjective PAS related experiences of the experts working in the field are focused (Bow et al. 2009, Viljoen and Van Rensburg 2014, Braver and Lamb 2018) and systematic compilation studies are conducted (Templer et al. 2016, Marchetti and Verrocchio 2017, Lee-Maturana et al. 2018, Marques et al. 2020). Although the discussions regarding the parental alienation continue in the literature, and though the concept is widely observed and defined today and more than 1000 books, book chapters and more than 500 articles have been published up until today (Bernet et al. 2010, Goldin and Salani 2020, *Parental Alienation Database* 2020); It is remarked that the unknown aspects of the subject should be enlightened with the following studies (Torun 2011, Torun 2017).

Today, it is seen that the parental alienation after separation and divorce is tried to be explained from a wider perspective (Kelly 2007, Friedlander and Walters 2010, Johnston and Sullivan 2020). Although the effect of the alienating parent on the parental alienation is accepted as significant, the factors such as the personality characteristic, parenting styles, the reactions of the alienated parent towards the alienation attempts might also be effective (Johnston et al. 2005, Gordon et al. 2008, Drozd et al. 2016, Johnston and Sullivan 2020, Warshak 2020). It is considered to be beneficial to explain the dynamic interaction among the probable risk factors in the parental alienation process with ecological system approach within a theoretic framework.

## **Ecological systems theory**

Ecological Systems Theory studies the development of an individual in the context of the relationships consisting of the individual's environment. Bronfenbrenner, by defining the layers constituting the individual's environment, explains the effects of each layer on the child's development beginning from the early period (Bronfenbrenner 1979). When innate biological characteristics have an effect on the individual's development are considered, the theory has recently been renamed as the "bioecological systems theory". The child's development shapes around the direction of the maturation and the environmental interaction. While the child's development is evaluated in this direction, not only should the child himself/herself and the child's immediate environment but also the interaction of the child with the expanding environment be examined (Härkönen 2007). According to the ecological system approach, the overlapping systems and the interaction of these systems with one another contribute to the interpretation of the child's developmental process. These systems are named as microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem and chronosystem (Eliasa 2012).

In the studies conducted on the parental alienation, the alienation does not stem from child's individualistic characteristics, but it occurs due to the consequences of dynamic interactions of different processes such as the alienating parents, targeted parents, relatives, experiences during the legal process and this process is a kind of emotional abuse for the child (Torun 2017). In this context, addressing the effect of the existing systems around the child's environment on the alienation process is considered to be important with regards to taking necessary precautions for intervention and observation at the early stage.

## **Parental alienation (PAS) at system levels**

### **Microsystem**

Microsystem is an environment consisting of contexts in which the individual lives such as the family, peers, school and neighbourhood. In this system, the child is able to interact with various social actors such as his/her parents, peers, teachers (Santrock 2014). Although the microsystem represents extensive environments such as school and recreational groups, the focus in this chapter will be the family in terms of parental alienation.

The alienation process at micro level is considered to be fundamentally related with the alienating parent. Torun (2017) states that the alienating parents are the ones who share the same environment and spend more time with the child after the divorce. During the divorce process, the alienating parent might make the child the focus of the parent-to-parent conflict by demonstrating direct or indirect actions due to his/her individual benefits, past or psychological problems and takes various actions in order for the child to reject the targeted parent (Drozdz and Olesen 2004). Baker and Darnall (2006) express that the alienating parents limit the child's communication with the targeted parent by showing emotionally radical and manipulative behaviours. In the literature, it is stated that the alienating parents use seventeen different alienation strategies against the targeted parent in their relationship with their children (Baker and Fine 2008). These strategies are abusive language, hindering and prohibiting and limiting the communication, hindering the form of a symbolic communication, withdrawal of the affection, forcing the child to make a decision, telling the child that the targeted parent does not have any affection for her/him, creating a suspect on the child, putting pressure on the child to reject the targeted parent, forming an impression that the targeted parent is dangerous, proposing the child to spy on the targeted parent, creating a suspicion on the child, wanting the child to keep their secrets against the targeted parent, making the targeted parent to be addressed by his/her name, introducing the probable new parent of the alienating parent as the mother/father figure, changing the name and surname of the child, hiding the medical, academic and other important data of the child from the targeted parent, making the child become dependent.

The developmental characteristics and needs of the child cause changes to occur in relationships with different microsystems. For instance, the parental interaction in the infancy and the adolescence period can be different from one another in various aspects

(Doğan 2010). In accordance with this perspective, the alienating actions of the parent can show differences according to the child's current developmental stage and needs. It is probable that the reactions of the child against the alienation attempts and the effects of these attempts on the child can be different with regards to the age and developmental characteristics. In parallel with this opinion, Lowenstein (1999) indicates that the children's reactions against the aftermath of the alienation situation and the devastating effects of parental alienation in short and long term can occur in different forms in relation with the age and developmental characteristic. When the existing publications (Lowenstein 1999, Baker 2005, Baker 2006, Baker and Ben-Ami 2011, Baker and Brassard 2013, Baker and Verrocchio 2013, Sher 2015, von Boch-Galhau 2018, Verrocchio et al. 2019) examined, these effects are stated as rage, sadness, disappointment, fear, impulse control disorders, low self-esteem and lack of self-confidence, bonding and separation anxiety, developing phobias about various situations, depression and suicidal thoughts, sleep disorders, enuresis and encopresis, diet problems, anxiety, panic attack, drug abuse, sexual identity issues, weak peer relations and educational problems. As such, the devastating effects of the parental alienation in terms of the child may occur in different ways at behavioral, cognitive and psychological levels. In this context, the alienating parent and the alienation attempts are significant risk factors at microsystem level.

The targeted parent-child interaction has also been considered to have an important effect in terms of parental alienation concept. The level of the sadness the targeted parent has gone through after the divorce increases with the loss of the parent-child relationship full of affection. Farkas (2011) indicates that the fact that the targeted parents try to communicate with their children through telephone, letter, SMS, e-mail and remind the children about the fun, joyful and notable memories in their past relationships can have a positive effect. Even under the circumstances in which a strong alienation takes place, the effort of the parent for communication, reminding of the special occasions, and sending gifts increases the child's tendency towards the reality (Farkas 2011). The situation of the child who is exposed to alienation strategies and facing the opposite behaviours of the targeted parent against these accusations can cause the children to experience a conflict cognitively and feel stuck psychologically. At this point, it is quite important for the targeted parent to act accordingly by trying to understand the existing emotions, thoughts and behaviours of the child might experience by considering the child's individual characteristics and how difficult this state of conflict can be. On the basis of these data, it can be indicated that the effort of the targeted parent to form a communication with the child can contribute to the change of the unrealistic perceptions of the child against the targeted parent. In this context, it is considered that the communication attempts of the targeted parent with the child have a protective and preventive importance at microsystem level with regards to parental alienation concept.

The attitudes of the child are not only against the rejected parent but also the hostility might spread across to the extended family of the rejected family at some cases during the

parental alienation process (See Table 2). The extended family members also are thought to have a significant effect on the child at micro level. Torun (2017) expresses that also the extended family members might be involved in the conflict among the parents in different ways during the divorce process. According to Torun (2017), the extended family of the alienating parent also has a role in the alienation process and supports the brainwashing campaign against the targeted parent without questioning. While the extended family of the targeted parent also approaches the accusations and claims against their children with suspicion, they also start to question whether their grandchild's reported speeches are true or not at the same time. Generally, they try to argue their children out of this battle by realizing that the resolution of the subject is difficult in the face of the determination of the opposing side. In some cases, though they prefer to stay neutral by fearing losing their grandchildren, they might become a part of the accusation process thanks to their grandchildren. In the literature, It is stated that the most affected ones in this process are the children (Cartwright 1993, Beiner et al. 2014, Kaganas and Piper 2020). According to Cartwright (1993), in this process, not only is the child left alienated with his/her parent but also he refuses to contact grandmother, grandfather, relatives and the friends of the parent at the same time. The deliberate and systematic attempts of the alienating parent against the targeted parent put a barrier before the pleasant memories the child would create with his/her relatives.

Based on the findings of these studies, the relationship patterns that the alienating parent the extended family established with the child at microsystem level carry risks in various aspects; however, it can be indicated that the effort of the targeted parent about forming communication has a protective significance in terms of preventing alienation.

## Mesosystem

Mesosystem consists of the relations and connections between two or more contexts in which the developing individual actively engages. Mesosystem creates a relation network among different microsystems of the individual's life (Bronfenbrenner 1979). In this context, it is possible to say that the interactions between family and school, family and friends, family and teachers creates the most fundamental mesosystem structures regarding the child. In the literature, It is stated that the children stuck between the parent-to-parent conflicts and developing an alienation state against one of their parents prevail in developing school related problems (Clawar and Rivlin 1991). In this direction, the focus of this chapter will be the school life based upon the idea that the experiences of the children exposed to alienation strategies towards the targeted parent during the divorce process might affect the interaction process of them with the peers and the teachers in the school setting.

The alienating parent, along with not informing the target parent about the important incidents about the child's life or situations regarding the school environment, might tend to hinder the flow of information towards the targeted parents by hiding the true identity of the child from the schools in some cases (Steinberg 2006). Besides, in some situations, the

children might face an inability to attend school regularly as a result of that the alienating parents prioritize their own needs over the children's educational needs. Haines et al. (2019) indicates that not only do the alienating parents manipulate their children but also they attempt to manipulate the school teachers, principals and school staff at the same time. The alienating parents might demand from the school staff not to share the information of the child with the targeted parent (Baker and Darnall 2006). In this process, the alienating parent might convince the school staff by making unreal accusations against the targeted parent. As a result of the various strategies of the alienating parent to manipulate the targeted parent, the communication and interaction between the school staff and the targeted parent erode. By realizing the cautious attitude of the school staff towards the targeted parent, the child might strengthen the righteousness of the alienating parent's expressions (Haines et al. 2019). Accordingly, the relationship pattern between the alienating parent and the school has a potential to affect the child's perception towards the targeted parent negatively.

At mesosystem level, it is thought that not only might the strategies of the alienating parent have an impact on the school staff but also on the child's peers' parents. For instance, the peers' parents of the child exposed to unrealistic scenarios about the targeted parent might try to limit and control the peer-to-peer interaction. This situation might create consequences such as the negatively affected relationships and spoil of the friendships among the children.

Based on these findings, it can be said that the communication networks of which the alienating parent can establish with different contexts have risk factors from various aspects at mesosystem level. Concordantly, it can be concluded that raising awareness of the school staff regarding these kinds of cases has a protective significance in terms of the child and the targeted parent.

## **Exosystem**

Exosystem is constituted of the connections between a social environment in which the individual has no active role and the individual's near environment (Santrock 2014). At this system, an extension of mesosystem, consisting of both official and unofficial structures (public enterprises, professional enterprises, etc.), the developing individual is affected by the changes and developments occurring in these structures despite having no active role (Bronfenbrenner 1979). Bala et al. (2010) states that the situation should be handled in both legal and psychological aspects in order to gain awareness about the dynamics of the parental alienation process and the related cases. Accordingly, it is considered that the experiences at the legal aspect of the divorce process might have an effect on the parental alienation process and thus the focus of this chapter will be the professionals anticipated to be a part of the legal aspect of the divorce such as the judges, prosecutors, lawyers, mental health professionals.

The conflicts experienced by the parents during marriage are formed in accordance with the decisions made by the professionals in legal terms with the decision of divorce

and this interaction network might have a significant impact on the child's life. The topics having been resolved among the parents once now are determined by the third parties such as lawyers and judges in this process (Girdner 1985). According to the taken decisions, both of the parents' access to the children faces to change and the divorce might have a devastating effect upon the family itself (Erdim and Ergün 2016). The liberty of the parents and the children to freely interact is limited in the legal process and the rules expected to be abided legally are specified. After the divorce, the child starts to spend a big portion of his/her time with the parent having custody as a result of that the custody of the child is given to a parent. As the other parent becomes a "visitor" state allowed to contact his/her child at specified time frame (Cartwright 2001). In a study, conducted in our country, in which the life experiences of the divorced couples during the court process and after the divorce are examined, majority of the couples evaluated the divorce process as a stressful period in terms of emotional and psychological aspects and the negatively affected parents having custody in the divorce process tend to seek for blocking the ex-partner's personal confer right with their children with rage/anger feelings (Şen 2015). In the 2709th article of the constitution of the republic of Turkey of the section The Social and Economic Right and Duties, every child has a right to be protected and benefit from the care, and to form a personal and direct communication with their parents as long as it is not against their high interest (Resmi Gazete 1982). Despite the related provision, the prohibiting actions of the parent having custody against the other parent might cause the child to develop an alienation towards this targeted parent and reject to have a communication with the targeted parent. This situation brings about various risk factors for the child in the short and the long term as well. Accordingly, it is considered that the knowledge of the professionals taking place in the legal aspect of the divorce regarding the parent alienation subject and their acquaintance with the concept might have a significant effect upon the march of the cases.

Torun (2017) states that the alienating parents are able to make scheduling easily in the cases that the parental alienation is not considered by the professionals and courts. In some cases, judges request an opinion from psychiatrists and clinical psychologists in order to evaluate and intervene the state of conflict among the parents. Through the detailed evaluation of the accusations of the alienating parent against the targeted parent, judges might rule on by taking the high-interest of the child into consideration (Lowenstein 1998). During the process, in the case that one parent's various allegations regarding the other parent's actions towards the child are true, it might be vital to give custody of the child to the claimant in terms of the child. Sometimes, while the parent's claims might be real, they can also be unverifiable. In these cases, the child might become susceptible to neglect and abuse as a result of that the custody is given to the parent demonstrating abusive behaviours. On the contrary, the child would be faced with the risk of being exposed to the alienating parent's alienation strategies with the verdict in case the claims do not reflect the truth.

The situation might cause the child to recede from the targeted parent, reject to form a communication and develop an alienation against the parent (Torun 2017).

Judges might encounter with children developing an alienation against one of the parents during high-conflict divorce suits. Bala et al. (2010) states that verdicts should be ruled by taking the child's high-benefit and maximum-contact principle into consideration in divorce and custody cases. By considering the maximum contact principle, courts aim to procure the child to be able to in contact with both of his/her parents in consistent and intimate manner by taking the possibility of that the parent having custody blocks the contact of the child with the other parent or detracts the child from the other parent in a deliberate manner into consideration. Judges, at the mid-level of parental alienation cases, might be able to analyze the problematic state with legal interventions such as frequent visitation and meetings with the aim of supporting the child's relationship with the other parent. However, that judges provide verdicts directed to the formation of a comprehensive support and intervention plan by requesting an opinion from mental health experts to be taken is stated to be likely functional (Darnall 2011). Through such decisions, the children might be able to continue to form close relations with both of their parents during the post-divorce process.

Although various studies in academic field are seen to be conducted in our country regarding the topic of parental alienation (Torun 2011, Şen 2015, Güler 2017, Ziyalar and Altuntaş 2018, Geniş et al. 2019, Ulutürk 2019, Karadağ and Özdemir 2020), the limited number of studies involving in the custody case process especially in the aspect draws the attention. In Erdoğan's (2014) publication in which the author analyzes the report records of the divorce and custody suits of our country, it is stated that the experts generally focus on the allegations of the alienating parent against the targeted parent and the emotional abuse imposed by the alienating parent might be disregarded. Besides, it is seen that, due to not carrying out a detailed evaluation in terms of parental alienation, the child gets to the phase of tattering of the whole guardianship with the targeted parent and verdicts are made upon directing the children to psychosocial support units with diagnoses such as depression, post-traumatic stress disorder. When important roles of both of the parents about providing care, guiding and showing affection to the child in the child rearing are considered, the professionals working in the field have massive duties and responsibilities in order for qualitative decisions to be made in divorce and custody cases.

According to this information, at the exosystem level, it can be stated that the ultimate decision makers between the allegations of the alienating parent against the targeted parent and the defense of the targeted parent are the professionals working in the legal field. The decisions made by the judges by evaluating the laws in the line with the acquired information are thought to be able to have a significant impact on the children's lives. Accordingly, the associated professionals should be knowledgeable about the parental alienation subject and that the following verdicts to be made are evaluated accordingly and the cooperation with other related experts have a great importance.

## Macrosystem

Macrosystem, consisting of the whole wide social context, is fundamentally related to culture. Macrosystem existing together with culture and subcultures affects microsystem, mesosystem and exosystem crucially (Bronfenbrenner 1979). Macrosystems are a complex aspect consisting of socio-cultural, economic, political, legal and physical structure and communal life such as language, religion, laws, traditions, values, attitudes, mass communication tools in which the individual grows, involving in the majority of the public members (as cited in Yıldırım and Işıkhhan 2018). The historical, political and legal structure of the society along with the belief and value systems defines the macrosystem. Macrosystem has a significant impact on every aspect of the social structure. The individual is indirectly affected by the changes occurring in the macrosystem (Doğan 2010). The indirect effects of the macrosystem are observed among the relation levels between the mesosystem of bigger enterprises, community ecosystem and smaller microsystems (Betancourt and Khan 2008). Accordingly, the effects of macrosystem on parental alienation should not be disregarded, and the focus in this chapter will be upon the false facts regarding the formation of parental alienation and the solution.

Although parental alienation is widely observed and defined, existing discussions regarding the validity of the concept and the use in the legal aspect are seen (Johnston and Sullivan 2020). The existing discussions and disagreements upon specifying the stance towards parental alienation in social level are thought to be significant.

According to Torun (2017), during the approach and solution phase of parental alienation, interpretations are made rather through personal experiences and the experienced approaches within the process are started to be conveyed auricularly as if they were true. The interpretations and observations made through personal experiences without scientific validity and credibility cause the forming of false facts by the society. Warshak (2015) evaluates the false beliefs developed by the society regarding the formation and solution of parental alienation in ten points. The myths regarding the formation and solution of parental alienation are in Table 3.

Such myths regarding the formation and solution of parental alienation might affect the structures forming the macrosystem such as law, politics, acts. Warshak (2015) states that lawyers, judges, therapists, family members and social environment might give misguided recommendations as a result of the false beliefs developed with regards to the formation and solution of parental alienation. Additionally, field professionals taking misguided recommendations into consideration are also not in need of developing alternative explanations regarding the child's alienation status. This state causes verdicts to be made that do not meet the needs of children in custody cases (Warshak 2015).

According to these data, the reflection of false facts regarding the formation and solution of parental alienation at macrosystem level can be stated to be in a negative direction upon the social structure. In this context, conducting studies with regards to

**Table 3. The myths regarding the formation and solution of parental alienation**

Fallacies about the genesis of parental alienation	1. Children never reject the parent with whom they spend most of their time without any justification.
	2. Children never reject their mother without any justification.
	3. Each parent contributes equally to the parental alienation process of the child.
	4. Alienation is a short-term, temporal reaction of children against the divorce of their parents
	5. The short-term rejection of a parent is a healthy coping mechanism used by the child during the divorce process.
Fallacies about remedies for parental alienation	6. Kids living with the alienating parent do not need an intervention.
	7. The custody should be given in accordance with the parental alienation developing adolescent's indication of preference.
	8. Children rejecting one of their parents illogically but having no problems in other aspects do not need a support therapeutically.
	9. Children developing heavy parental alienation can be intervened with traditional therapy methods while living with the alienating parent.
	10. The separation of children from the alienating parent is a traumatic state.

informing the society about the formation and solution of parental alienation at macro level is necessary.

## Chronosystem

Chronosystem focuses on to what extent the changes in the individual's environment in time are effective on the child's development. Bronfenbrenner (1986) describes these changes occurring in time in two groups as normative (starting school, adolescence, marriage, retirement) and nonnormative (divorce, loss of a family member or severe disease) transitions. These kinds of transitions generally act as a propelling agent for developmental transformation by occurring during the lifetime (Bronfenbrenner 1986). In the literature, that the effects of divorce upon the child are analyzed through longitudinal studies draws the attention (Wallerstein and Kelly 1980, Cherlin et al. 1991, Amato et al. 2009). Öngider (2013) states that the children witnessing the divorce of parents in their childhood experience more problems in their maturity and the children with divorced parents also finalize their marital status with high rates. Although conflicts occurring during and after the divorce process start to decrease in the following two or three years, some parents might be able to continue these conflicts for many years (Moné and Biringen 2012). Children exposed to ongoing conflicts between parents can be negatively affected in social, emotional and psychological aspects (Johnston 1994, Öngider 2013, Bilici 2014, Karadağ and Özdemir 2020). The conducted studies show that the effects of divorce on children peak within the first two years and the relationships evolve into more stationary states after two years (Santrock 2014). However, it is thought that the effects of parental alienation vary according to the alienation levels; when considered that children fully reject the targeted parent in moderate and severe levels of alienation events, the negative effects of alienation would increase in the course of time. Accordingly, the focus in this chapter will be the effects of

the alienation on the individual in the course of time and reforming the communication with the targeted parent.

The impact of parental alienation is substantial on the whole family system, especially on the children (Harman et al. 2019). The children alienating to the parent experience more internalisation and externalisation problems when compared to non-alienating children (Johnston et al. 2005, Geniş et al. 2019). The alienated children generally do not contact the targeted parent for long periods of time. In the studies conducted on adults having experienced alienation in their childhood, it is indicated that parental alienation has long term effects (Baker 2005, Baker and Verrocchio 2013). In the studies conducted with regards to the long-term effects of alienation on adults having experienced alienation, problems such as low self-respect, depression, drug abuse, lack of confidence for themselves and others, alienation against their children and divorce are experienced among majority of the participants (Baker 2005, Ben-Ami and Baker 2012). Those individuals also might develop fears and phobias, experience attachment issues, and have communication problems with their children as adults (Aloia and Strutzenberg 2019). In the literature, it is stated that individuals having experienced alienation during their childhood might also start to make contact again with the alienated parent as time passes (Baker 2005, Rand and Rand 2006). Children experiencing a mild level of alienation and not encountering accusations and hostility are able to reconnect with the alienated parent in a much faster manner. The rate of the children at the moderate level of alienation state to reconnect with their alienated parent is lower compared to the mild level cases. In these cases, the most important factor restarting the connection is the life events. At a severe level of alienation, It is highly unlikely for the children to restart the connection with their targeted parents. However, in some cases, it is stated that the alienating children are able to reconcile with the targeted parent eventually and this rate is approximately at 10% (Torun 2017).

In direction with all the data, at chronosystem level, it can be expressed that the negative effects of parental alienation on children might increase in the course of time; however, children also might be able to start to make contact again by reconciling with the targeted parent. In this process, It is considered that alienated parents should continue trying to make contact with their children by showing active approaches and interventions in the case of alienation state and the positive communication approaches of them might affect the process in a positive way.

## Conclusion

Children might encounter risk of parental alienation against the targeted parent in the cases in which one of the parents try to prevent personal visitation rights with the other parent with the feeling of rage/anger and denigrate the other parent with his/her words, behaviours and attitudes. Even though the concept of parental alienation is described with various names by different authors in the historical process, It is seen to be preferred as parental alienation by contemporary researchers terminologically. The validity and credibility of

the concept scientifically, the concurrently conducted scientific studies regarding the discussions of the use of the term in legal areas show that parental alienation emerges as a result of the interaction between several different processes. Accordingly, how and in what way the children experience parental alienation at each system level is reviewed generally by presenting the multi-factored and dynamic structure of parent alienation with the perspective of ecological system approach.

At microsystem level, the communication patterns of the alienating parent and relatives with the children can be indicated to be effective on the alienation level of the child. That the targeted parent shows efforts to make connection against the resistance of the child in this process can be expressed to be quite significant in terms of reconciliation and restart of the communication. Accordingly, at micro level, it is advised to identify the strong and weak aspects of the family members, to assess the possible risk situations for the children and to take child-oriented consultancy support in the line of families' needs.

At mesosystem level it is seen that the alienating parent might increase their effect on the child by forming a coalition with the school staff and can make various attempts to prevent the targeted parent from taking information about the child. The fact that the child encounters alienation attempts in the home environment and the precautions taken against the targeted parent in order for him/her not to be able to communicate with the child in the school environment might be able to strengthen the child's beliefs regarding the expressions of the alienating parent. This situation brings about the fact that the child experiences problems in his/her academic, social and emotional life. Accordingly, at meso level, it is considered that the educators taking place in education and training areas might face divorce events frequently and It is advised that in-service trainings can be scheduled on topics such as divorce adaptation, the effects of divorce on children, parental alienation.

At exosystem level, when considered the ultimate decision makers during the divorce cases are the professionals working in the legal area, It can be stated that the alienating parent's claims against the targeted parent should be analyzed and the taken decisions have a significant effect on the formation of the child's future life. It is considered that judges should take opinions of the professionals dealing with the child by taking into consideration that he/she might encounter parental alienation cases especially during divorce and custody suits and the process should be monitored after the divorce on a long and short-term basis. Accordingly, at exo level, the arrangement of the in-service trainings regarding raising the knowledge and awareness of the professionals having an indirect interaction with the child (judge, prosecutor, experts, etc.) about parental alienation, developing intervention programs in order to prevent children from the effects of parental alienation by considering the developmental characteristics of children and the active implementation of those programs would be significant.

At macrosystem level, the false facts regarding the formation and solution of parental alienation are discussed and it is considered that the reflection of the myths regarding

alienation would be negative on the social structure. Accordingly, it is advised to make awareness and informing efforts about parental alienation for the society via media and to develop child-protection policies during the legal divorce process.

At chronosystem level, it can be expressed that while the negative effects of parental alienation might increase in the course of time, It is possible to restart the communication with the targeted parent but the level of alienation has a determining role about reconciliation. In this process, it can be indicated that the targeted parents continue to demonstrate active approaches about making connections with their children in a positive manner in the case of alienation state might be quite significant. Accordingly, It is thought that the alienating parents involving their children in this process by utilizing alienation strategies knowingly or unknowingly should be therapeutically supported in order for them to be able to realize their devastating effect on their children. It can be concluded that the studies directed to the long-term effects of parental alienation are observed to be limited and there is a need for more qualitative and quantitative studies in this topic in order to be able to conduct proof-based studies regarding the development of the necessary intervention programs.

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