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The “solution” to parental alienation: A critique of the turning points and overcoming barriers reunification programs

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ABSTRACT

Parental alienation is a phenomenon in psychology that has garnered tremendous controversy over the past sixty years (Joshi, 2021). Especially within the realm of high-conflict divorce cases, parental alienation is considered by some mental health professionals as a great concern that can be resolved through reunification therapy or related educational programs. These educational programs, which aim to bring families together and attempt to rectify the concern of parental alienation, are seen in Linda Gottlieb's *Turning Points* (New York, New York; Austin, Texas) as well as Deutsch, Ward, Sullivan, and Friend's *Overcoming Barriers* (Palo Alto, California; Natick, Massachusetts; New York, New York). In this paper, we highlight research findings of the programs, methods used, limitations, as well as critiques of the programs. Ultimately, there is a lack of reliable research behind each of these programs and a potential concern for traumatizing individuals who engage in such programs.

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The notion that divorce establishes circumstances where a distressed parent might attempt to turn a child against the other parent is not novel. For almost 200 years, people have heard terms such as “poisoning the child’s mind” and “alienating the child’s affection” used in legal cases (Lorandos et al., 2013). Parental Alienation (PA) refers to the child’s strong alliance with one parent and rejection of a relationship with the other parent without legitimate justification (Bernet, 2010). This has led to the term in psychological research and published literature known as Parental Alienation Syndrome (PAS). Although a more complex concept, Parental Alienation Syndrome refers to a child with parental alienation who manifests some or all of eight characteristic behaviors. These eight behaviors include: the child’s campaign of denigration against the alienated parent; frivolous rationalizations for the child’s criticism of the alienated parent; lack of ambivalence; the independent-thinker phenomenon; reflexive

support of the preferred parent against the alienated parent; an absence of guilt over exploitation and mistreatment of the alienated parent; borrowed scenarios; and spread of the child's animosity toward the alienated parent's extended family (Gardner, 1992a). PA refers to the alienating behaviors of a parent. PAS are symptoms manifested by the child (Darnall, 2011).

Parental alienation researchers and advocates believe such dynamics and symptoms can be resolved through psycho-educational interventions for alienated children, reunification therapy for alienated children and rejected parents, or even co-parenting classes to reduce parental conflict (Lorandos et al., 2013). The most commonly applied approach would be reunification therapy. Reunification therapy is a recently developed therapeutic modality for treating high-conflict, litigious families (Darnall, 2011). The purpose of the reunification therapy when PA is purported to be present is to encourage a change in the child's attitudes (Lorandos et al., 2013). The focus of the therapy is reportedly encompassed into three components: tempering the hostilities of the alienating parent; assuring an emotional and safe environment for the children with both parents and significant others; and repairing the damaged relationships with the children (Darnall, 2011). However, this is one way reunification therapy can be applied, as it can also be practiced outside of supposed PA cases.

There are several programs across the United States of America that attempt to address issues of Parental Alienation through reunification therapy. Some of the most notable programs in this discipline are Deutsch, Ward, Sullivan, and Friend's *Overcoming Barriers* (OCB; located in Palo Alto, California; Natick, Massachusetts; New York, New York) and Linda Gottlieb's *Turning Points* (TPFF; located in New York, New York and with a branch in Austin, Texas run by Loretta Maase). Although these programs have gained a following through various cases of high conflict divorces, there are several concerns and a persistent lack of reliable research that substantiate the methods used in the practices of the programs. In this paper, we will thoroughly detail and analyze the literature surrounding each program, their methods, summary of findings, limitations, critiques, and suggested points of future thought.

Linda Gottlieb's Turning Points

Located in New York, Linda Gottlieb's website Turning Points program states it is a "short-term, effective treatment program to restore healthy family functioning between parent and child and to promote a civil and respectful co-parenting relationship" (Gottlieb, 2021b). Turning Points for Families (TPFF) is a four-day, transitional program to "jump-start" the

healing of a severed or severely damaged relationship between a child and parent. According to Gottlieb and the Turning Points Program's website, parental alienation refers to:

An observable family dynamic in which a child denigrates and rejects a parent (known as the alienated parent) in the absence of a reasonable or valid reason—child abuse/neglect or a pattern of markedly deficit parenting—and justifies the rejection with weak, trivial, frivolous, or absurd reasons (Gottlieb, 2021a, p. 1).

Gottlieb states the influencing parent, also known as the alienating parent, “manipulates the child through a brainwashing process to sever or severely undermine the relationship between the alienated parent and child” (Gottlieb, 2021a, p. 1).

Affiliated literature

Linda Gottlieb believes such dynamics can be resolved through reunification therapy and research demonstrates the effectiveness of this approach. According to Gottlieb, research shows relapse is certain if the child were to have contact with the “unreformed alienating parent” (Gottlieb, 2021a, p. 6). Gottlieb has written and published two works on parental alienation, a book as well as a book chapter (Gottlieb, 2012, 2013). Gottlieb has also written several pieces on topics and scenarios related to parental alienation. These works are not published in academic journals nor do not appear to have undergone the official peer review process. The two prominent works featured on the Turning Points website are entitled *Children are Harmed when Professionals Reject Science* (Gottlieb, 2020a) and *Reasons for the Apology Letter from The Alienating Parent* (Gottlieb, 2020b). In the first work, Gottlieb discusses being “stunned” by the “exceedingly high number” of professionals who come to believe the false abuse allegations, as reported by the child, are true (Gottlieb, 2020a, p. 2). Research has consistently shown children typically tell the truth and false allegations only represent a small percentage of the population (Faller, 1984; Lyon & Dorado, 2008; O'Donohue et al., 2018; Ruck, 1996; Rush, 2014). Gottlieb states she is “unaware of any peer-reviewed studies on the prevalence of the phenomenon of false child abuse allegations in alienation cases” and proceeds to provide statistics based on her experiences in her practice (Gottlieb, 2020a, p. 2). According to Gottlieb (2020a), from having treated 700 children who were victims of alienation to some degree, 80% (550) of the moderate to severe cases of PA had made at least one knowingly false child abuse allegation. Gottlieb does not operationally define what she classifies as moderate or severe cases of PA. It is important to ponder how accurate these statistics are reported to be without a research study conducted at

the time of writing. The validity and generalizability of these results is a source of concern. Gottlieb (2020a) states parental alienation is especially of great concern when a child sex-abuse allegation is made as it could have serious consequences in the family dynamic. Gottlieb (2020a) refers to the substantial peer-reviewed research on the suggestibility of children, particularly mentioning research by Dr. Julia Shaw and Dr. Elizabeth Loftus. By mentioning these findings, Gottlieb infers to the notion that children can be susceptible to making false allegations when “coached” by the alienating parent. Although this research was popularized in the 1980s and 1990s, current research trumps prior findings of suggestibility research and demarks such prior research as outdated by not having considered the length of the suggestibility. Research has found individuals can forget the false details after a prolonged period and it is uncommon for an allegation to derive from coaching (Brainerd & Poole, 1997; Chan et al., 2022; Faller, 2007; Starns & Hicks, 2005). If one considers a child custody case, high conflict divorce, or a family sex-abuse allegation, the child would be asked to repeat their version of events repeatedly over several months to various professionals. As a result, false allegations would be very difficult to uphold throughout these different evaluations.

In the second aforementioned piece, Gottlieb argues alienated children know they have abused/maltreated/rejected a parent and they suffer guilt for their entire lives as a result unless they are fully exonerated of these behaviors (Gottlieb, 2020b). She states children might not immediately recognize and acknowledge their abusive parent, but they will be adversely affected when they eventually come to recognize it (Gottlieb, 2020b). Gottlieb cites the research of Amy Baker (Baker & Fine, 2007) regarding the concept of guilt in alienated children. Gottlieb explains that for the exoneration cycle of the child’s guilt to be completed, “the alienating parent must accept full responsibility for the child’s rejection and maltreatment of the alienated parent” (Gottlieb, 2020b, p. 1). To teach children to take responsibility for their mistakes is to model taking responsibility for their behaviors. Gottlieb proposes this be done through an apology letter for causing the alienation and emphasizing the alienated parent had not abused them nor placed the child at risk as well as apologizing for “having created... such distortions, untruths, and utterly fabricated allegations of child abuse” (Gottlieb, 2020b, p. 3). This apology is meant to reduce the child’s risk potential for dysfunction across behavioral, cognitive, emotional, and interpersonal domains. Within the text, it is not considered how one can distinguish between false or truthful accusations. Additionally, it may be important to consider how the child would feel about the “alienating parent.” This is vital to consider as it could influence the entirety of the

family dynamic and not solely the relationship between the child and the “alienated” parent.

Method

Participants

There is not a substantial amount of information regarding the parents or families that have participated in the Turning Points for Families program. Gottlieb states families eligible for TPF are referred by the court and must have an order that includes program engagement, interventions, and specific custody arrangements (Gottlieb, 2021a, p. 14–15).

There are nine testimonials on the Turning Points program website, mainly from fathers who have been accused of abuse; however, there is no information regarding the families who have engaged in the program. As of the TPF program assessment conducted by Harman and colleagues, the main information is participants mainly come from the United States of America and likely attain good financial standing (Harman et al., 2021).

Procedures

The program operates on the idea that the court has determined “(1) the child is safe in the care of the [alienated] parent, and (2) the [alienating] parent has, at a minimum, interfered with and/or not adequately supported the relationship between the other parent and their child” (Gottlieb, 2021a, p. 11). However, TPF is considered “not suitable for and does not accept referrals for cases of bona fide protective causes for the rejection” (Gottlieb, 2021a, p. 11).

The program consists of a three to four-hour therapy session which is provided daily each of the four days. The rest of the day consists of the “rejected” parent and child engaging in “continual new corrective experiences” with each other (p. 14). They do this by exploring the local attractions and experiencing common interest activities in New York City. Gottlieb suggests they can visit the local library, where the “rejected” parent can tutor the child if needed. They can also engage in other activities such as going to museums, amusement parks, toy stores, gardens, swimming, boating, bowling, ice-skating, hiking, rock climbing, and trampolines.

Throughout the four days, Gottlieb provides a specific procedure for the family to undergo. During the first day, Gottlieb explains she asks the “alienated” parent to bring any pictures or videos of their children and she “walks them down memory lane” (Long Island Backstory, 2018).

Gottlieb takes them to lunch and then the afternoon activities begin. Gottlieb takes pictures of the parent and child engaging in the activities and sends them to the “alienating” parent. Gottlieb claims that she takes these pictures and videos for purposes of the court as well as to demonstrate body language and affect which cannot be emphasized enough in a report. The intended purpose of this engagement is so that the “rejected” parent’s authority with the child is reestablished through the supervision, nurturing, and support being provided by her or him throughout the four days. Linda Gottlieb herself accompanies the family on these activities. According to her, Gottlieb coaches and intervenes, when necessary, as well as monitors the developments. On the second day, Gottlieb has the child and the “alienated” parent watch *Welcome Back, Pluto* (Long Island Backstory, 2018). This video is meant to show the typical story of what an “alienated” parent has to go through. On day three, Gottlieb educates the child and the “alienated” parent on the “ease of implanting memories and distorting memories” (Long Island Backstory, 2018). On the last day, Gottlieb discusses a summary of what occurred, and the child goes home with the “formerly alienated” parent. Gottlieb states that the alienating parent does not participate. The alienating parent is asked to write a letter to the child stating: “I support the reunification and this is why, these are the qualities your other parent has to offer you, and this is why you need your other parent meaningfully in your life”. Gottlieb explains “unfortunately, most alienators [are] not able to write that letter” and “the letter is a *test* to determine the resolve of the alienating parent, but it is not needed for reunification” (Long Island Backstory, 2018). The notion that most “alienators” are unable to compose such a letter suggests treatment is typically not fully accomplished, and this part of the program is quite unsuccessful.

Ultimately, the family sees a family therapist which Gottlieb collaborates with and there must be a 90-day no contact period with the alienating parent (Long Island Backstory, 2018).

The success of this program relies on the 90-day no contact period with the alienating parent to be adhered to. Gottlieb explains that after the program, the family’s engagement with an “experienced family therapist assures maintenance and enhancement of the reunification” (Gottlieb, 2021a, p. 17). Gottlieb does not recommend individual therapy follow-up therapy for the child, stating it is generally forbidden and individual therapy for the child “will only serve as a forum for the programmed child to revert to venting the programmed script, just as a cult member will only repeat the words of the cult leader” (Gottlieb, 2021a, p. 18). The concern arises as to whether the child is provided space to express and discuss their feelings or thoughts.

Several concerns arise as a result of the program's procedures. First, there is no method proposed by Gottlieb to detect legitimate abuse from the "alienated" parent. Although the court would have determined no abuse presence, Gottlieb would ideally have her own procedure of evaluating these circumstances. Gottlieb has stated that even if there is no alienation, "there is no downside to the program as it is time with the other parent" (Long Island Backstory, 2018). Without a procedure in place, there is an increased risk of the child being at the hands of the "alienated" parent. It is also not specified if Gottlieb and her team administer any scientific or psychological measures with the family during their engagement. Knowing such information would aid in determining the scientific validity or reliability of the program's outcomes.

Second, the accommodations are not paid for by the program. Considering this program is located in New York City, it is important to note that the necessary accommodations to partake in the program, and the program itself, would be costly. Unfortunately, there is no indication on the website as to the cost of the program and it is unclear if the suggested outdoor activities are included in the overall cost. Based on some of the court orders Gottlieb made available online, it could be that the cost is approximately \$6,000 per parent. This lack of transparency can be seen as concerning, as it is unclear how much families are being charged and whether or not this is considered a reasonable price for the work that is being completed in the program.

Results

According to Gottlieb, Turning Points has proven to be a highly successful reunification program. On the program's website, Gottlieb states they have "maintained statistics and data for several criteria regarding the program's outcomes; the psychological, cognitive, and behavioral improvements of the child; and the removal from the alienating parent and placement with the alienated parent do not traumatize the child" (Gottlieb, 2021a, p. 15). The concern was we did not see any of these findings available on the website. According to Gottlieb, outcome data and effectiveness of the Turning Points intervention were "in process of being assessed and evaluated by the Colorado State University both for its success of reunification and the positive effect on the alienated child" (Gottlieb, 2021a, p. 15). It was mentioned "the analysis [was] expected to be completed in early to mid-2020 and expected to be published in a peer-reviewed journal" (Gottlieb, 2021a, p. 15).

As the time frame had passed, the authors thought it valuable to contact Linda Gottlieb and her team regarding the publication of this evaluation.

The program administrator noted that they “expect the review to be really good and can’t wait till it is done”. Dr. Harman, who also replied, stated that the evaluation was set to be completed soon, as COVID slowed things down quite a bit. However, at the time, the results of the analyses and preparation for publication were underway. The paper was to be submitted for review sometime toward the middle or end of January 2021 and take weeks to months to go undergo the peer review process. The authors also contacted Loretta Maase from the Austin, Texas branch of the Turning Points program to understand what kind of research or statistics of program effectiveness were available. She explained that “the only official research to date will be a study by Dr. Jennifer Harman at the University of Colorado.” She said she would be happy to let the authors know when the research is published and that it would show that the “Turning Points program has a success rate of approximately 98% when treatment protocols are followed (90-day no contact).”

Within the context of research, it is not typical to know the results of the study before the analysis is conducted. During the initial stages of correspondence, prior to the study being published, there was a concern regarding the possible biased nature of this study as well as the validity of its conclusions. The individual conducting the study, Dr. Jennifer Harman, is also a leading researcher in the field of Parental Alienation. For a scientifically unbiased review, the main reviewer should have been neutral to the position in question. If not, then at least it would have been imperative to have multiple researchers weigh in on the review to have various perspectives vocalized in the evaluation. This could have happened via the process of peer-review and therefore the authors could not assume this was not going to occur.

The study was officially published on September 7, 2021, the delay of publication likely due to the global pandemic (Harman et al., 2021). Dr. Jennifer Harman’s study, *Evaluation of the Turning Points for Families (TPFF) program for severely alienated children*, was co-written with graduate student Luke Saunders (Colorado State University) and professor of communications, Dr. Tamara Afifi (University of California Santa-Barbara). Findings demonstrated 96.4% of fifty-five children reconnected with the alienated parent as a result of the TPFF program (Harman et al., 2021). Results revealed TPFF was found to be a safe program for children and that “participants in the TPFF program either had positive changes, or their ratings on the scales remained stable (i.e. no significant negative changes) over time” (Harman et al., 2021, p. 13).

The study at first glance appears to be a thorough examination of data of families who participated in the TPFF in the past (Harman et al., 2021). First, Harman and her colleagues were able to provide a

comprehensive literature review of the concept of parental alienation, along with research of programs similar to TPF. The authors also provide a detailed description of the TPF program as well as what each day entails (Harman et al., 2021). Second, there was an attempt to minimize some bias in the study, by including professionals who were not familiar with TPF. Both the colleagues that she co-wrote the article with, as well as those who were assigned to code the TPF data, were reportedly not familiar with the program (Harman et al., 2021). Nevertheless, there still is a significant bias with the first author of the study, Dr. Jennifer Harman, who is a leading researcher and advocate in the field of parental alienation. Third, the data were de-identified and made public such that other researchers could access it. This access to the data is important as others can have a better understanding of how these data look and can be analyzed (Harman et al., 2021). Lastly, it is beneficial that Harman and her colleagues address the issues regarding the cost of the program. Harman notes that the program may be “financially unobtainable for many families in need of intervention for severe parental alienation” and the “findings may not generalize to families that lack the means to participate” (Harman et al., 2021, p. 17). Although the average cost of the program is never mentioned in the article, the awareness that the program’s cost makes it inaccessible to some is a very important limitation to acknowledge.

The study itself has a multitude of issues regarding the overall research design and subsequent analysis. The critique of this first and only research conducted about TPF is best presented by Dr. Jean Mercer, professor emerita at Stockton University. As discussed in Dr. Mercer’s blog *Child Myths*, Harman and colleagues demonstrate issues with the study design regarding levels of evidence, measurement, severity as well as their implications for research design, and harm (Mercer, 2021b).

The primary concern of the study lies with the validity behind the ultimate conclusion that TPF is an effective treatment. When conducting a study regarding the effectiveness of a treatment, a proper conclusion can only be made when “the outcome research has involved randomized controlled trials or careful clinical controlled trials” (Mercer, 2021b). The group of individuals who underwent the treatment would need to be compared to similar individuals who received a different treatment or no treatment at all. In doing so, one can then make a more evident conclusion regarding the differences and impact the treatment had on people as opposed to people who received a different treatment or no treatment. By lacking the presence of these control groups, it is difficult and misguided to conclude that the TPF program is more effective than engaging in another treatment or no treatment

over time. As a proponent of parental alienation, Dr. Harman could have a vested interest in demonstrating that a reunification program is effective, as it would validate the concept of parental alienation and Gottlieb's program would have a peer-reviewed study to refer to for the courts as well as the families involved. What would be the incentive or benefit of hypothesizing and finding this program could be unsuccessful?

As Dr. Mercer points out, the secondary concern lies in the measurements utilized in the study (Mercer, 2021b). The quantitative analyses conducted are not considered with the appropriate statistical procedures. The ratings of participants in the TPF program are not considered properly due to the statistical procedures used, as Likert scale ratings cannot be applied in arithmetical operations which are needed for parametric statistics. Harman expressed that they "did not anticipate large changes in relationship quality in a short, 4-day intervention" (Harman et al., 2021, p. 12). As Mercer notes, if one does not anticipate a great change in 4 days, one should also explore what is the purpose a 4-day intervention (Mercer, 2021b). It could be argued that the therapeutic work continues after the 4-days; nevertheless, it is difficult to measure the proper effectiveness of the program even without control groups.

Mercer also delves into the notion of "severity" in these cases of parental alienation (Mercer, 2021b). Harman states that in the sample many of the children and alienated parents made significant progress toward reunification before participation in the TPF program (Harman et al., 2021, p. 12). If this is the case, one should consider how "severe" these cases were and how exactly this is operationalized by Gottlieb's program, in addition to the findings from the court. Given this prior "significant progress" between alienated parents and children, it would be paramount to consider what confounding variables played a role in the study. Having children and alienated parents interact and engage with each other prior to the TPF intervention means that the changes in attitude or supposed effectiveness of the program could be due to other causes, including this reconnecting before the start of the program.

Lastly, as discussed by Harman and colleagues in the article, the concern of harm is ever-present for scholars or other mental health professionals who do not endorse the concept of parental alienation (Harman et al., 2021). As Mercer mentions, the increased number of lawsuits of children adversely affected by parental alienation education/treatment programs cannot be dismissed (Mercer, 2021b). Harman's focus on the non-problematic behavior of the children during the program does not indicate that these children who experienced the program are not adversely affected or traumatized. Although no study has officially been conducted

regarding the adverse effects of such programs, the presence of lawsuits toward these programs indicates some individuals have bad experiences and subsequent trauma. These lawsuits have highlighted issues of harm in these kinds of programs and these people's voices should not be ignored.

In *H.L.J v. R.G.J.*, a 2017 custody case from Pennsylvania, the court-ordered psychologist of the mother and child referred them to engage in Gottlieb's Turning Points Program (*H.L.J v. R.G.J. Superior Court of Pennsylvania*, 2020). The case was such that the child was under the primary physical custody of the father and partial physical custody to the mother. They began to undergo reunification therapy before being referred to Gottlieb, and the child was experiencing anxiety to the point that she no longer wanted to meet with her mother. The individual conducting the reunification therapy, Dr. Adrian Quinn, opined that the child's rejection of the mother was influenced by the father. As a result, he recommended a higher level of care and referred them to Gottlieb. The father was opposed to the idea and argued that Gottlieb's methodology was not widely accepted and is opposed by a majority of her peers. Gottlieb was asked to testify in the case and the father argued that, as a result of the lack of evidence-based practice of her program, Gottlieb's entire testimony should be disregarded. However, because of the "liberal definition" of what qualifies one to be considered an expert in the Pennsylvania court, Gottlieb was still ultimately considered an expert in the case (*H.L.J v. R.G.J. Superior Court of Pennsylvania*, 2020). Gottlieb states that she believed it was important for the mother and the child to undergo intensive reunification therapy as well as that she found no signs of abuse within the relationship. However, it was not clear how Gottlieb was able to come to this conclusion. This led the father to remain in a difficult position: if the father did not support the mother's relationship with the child, the no contact period, as required by Gottlieb for TPF, would be extended indefinitely. By extending the no-contact period indefinitely, one could question if this is also leading to alienating the other parent in the end.

Additional research that is present on Gottlieb's website are general articles written about Parental Alienation, in which details of her program and its scientific efficacy are not discussed (Reay, 2015; Warshak, 2010, 2015). From these articles that Gottlieb highlights on her website, we recognize that only two of the three are research studies (Reay, 2015; Warshak, 2010). Furthermore, there are two main concerns with each of these studies. First, both studies are from quite some time ago (2010 and 2012). Although this does not invalidate the proposed findings, this does not reflect the most recent research in the field and would require more recent follow-up. Second, both studies obtained a rather small

sample size of 22–23 participants (Reay, 2015; Warshak, 2010). With such a minuscule sample size, it is difficult and scientifically misguided to generalize such results to the general public. These results can solely provide a preview of the effectiveness of the programs discussed in the articles.

Overall, we see the program can have its attraction with families struggling and facing difficult dynamics, but it is not necessarily based on scientific research methods.

Given the information provided, the procedures of the program appear to be a form of informal therapy, with a total of approximately sixteen hours of formal therapy. It is also unclear what kind of therapeutic modality is being utilized in these three to four-hour daily sessions. The therapeutic modality used in sessions can likely vary from case to case; however, if this were the case, this should be discussed in the overview of the program.

Although Gottlieb has established the program to promote her methods of how to resolve parental alienation, there is only one published outcome study regarding the effectiveness of the program. Therefore, people are encouraged to engage in a program that, prior to 2021, did not have any scientific backing or validity. This is a great concern given the fundamental assumptions of parental alienation, such as the belief children must have contact with both parents for their psychological benefit, are weakly supported by evidence (Mercer, 2021a).

Thus, three main concerns arise surrounding this program. First, if an intense dispute occurs between parents, it is essential to explore how the parents came into this situation and how the child became involved in this dynamic. Second, it is important to determine what the concern of the child is. What exactly needs to change (e.g. difficult behavior, emotional approach)? This will help operationalize potential effectiveness of the program on a particular family. In essence, it is imperative to listen to the child. Whether such allegations were to be true or false, the reality is the child might still experience difficult reactions with a parent who has not been around them for a while. A relationship cannot be imposed on someone and, even if the child maintains misinformed beliefs of a parent, it is vital to consider the psychological impact of this process on the child. Exploring these adverse effects or potential risks could highlight the transparency of the program and provide further avenues of improvement for the future. Currently, the program is marketed as a family program; however, the focus tends to be on the satisfaction of the parents. It would be advised to have each parent of the child attend individual therapy before engaging in such a program. The child should also engage in individualized therapy for others to obtain further insight into the

feelings and thoughts of the child through the litigation process. Third, the structure of TPFf relies on the absence of the “alienating parent” in the outings and aftermath of the program. Ultimately, it is vital to understand why Gottlieb concluded the “alienating” parent should not attend these outings and why this was the best method for reuniting the child and “rejected” parent. These explanations would provide a better understanding of the program as well as the reasoning behind the techniques and protocols.

Deutsch, Ward, Sullivan, and Friend’s Overcoming Barriers

The Overcoming Barriers (OCB) Family Camp is an intensive treatment program designed for high-conflict families (Sullivan et al., 2010). According to Sullivan and colleagues as well as Judge and Deutsch (2010; 2016), the development of the camp came after an attempt to reunify a father and his children, which was sabotaged by the mother. This led Dr. Judge to work with the counselors to create a program that included all members of the family (Judge & Deutsch, 2016). An important element about OCB is that it specifies that it is only supposed to be used with families, “when the rejection [of a parent] has been determined to be unjustified by or disproportionate to the child’s experience of the parent” (Judge & Deutsch, 2016, p. 133). However, according to the OCB website, Family Camp is currently canceled indefinitely due to a lack of appropriate funding for the resources needed to maintain it. Nevertheless, they are still offering training to mental health professionals, lawyers, and judges, as well as publishing books.

Referrals can be made by legal parties involved in the case, when both parents commit to children having a relationship with both parents. OCB is designed to be four to five days in length, however there is also an intensive two and a half to three-day immersion version (Judge & Deutsch, 2016). Each day contains interventions planned by psychologists (Sullivan et al., 2010). In the morning, groups are divided into children, the favored parents, and the “alienated” parents (Judge & Deutsch, 2016). This way there is support from people going through similar experiences; however, this has led to polarization of groups (Judge & Deutsch, 2016). OCB also included occasional groups of mixed parents, although there is no visible standardization of this (Judge & Deutsch, 2016). Counselors provide psychoeducation with themes of “goals and motivations; appropriate expectations and possibilities of change; identifying and correcting cognitive distortions; issues of fear, safety, overprotection, and under protection; strategies for coping with intense effect; and effective tools for direct communication” (Judge & Deutsch, 2016, p. 138). The groups are used as

smaller, more controlled versions of life outside of camp. Group leaders also help parents translate activities to improve communication, emotional regulation, and their relationship with the child (Sullivan et al., 2010). This allows parents to practice being vulnerable and express emotions in a safer way (Sullivan et al., 2010). Groups for children focus on psycho-education, specifically through themes of “building group cohesion and trust; understanding different points of view; understanding how thoughts, feelings, and behaviors are related; identifying cognitive distortions; and changing behavior in small (or larger) increments” (Judge & Deutsch, 2016, p. 138). The goals for children’s groups are to make the child’s view of both parents less rigid such that they view each parent more realistically to ultimately fix their relationships with both parents (Sullivan et al., 2010).

The second portion of each day is when a mental health clinician works with each parent, parental figure, or the entire family unit. During these sessions, the clinicians focus aim to, “(1) address the dynamics that maintained their high level of interparental conflict; (2) structure, plan, and support the connections between the rejected parent and child; (3) address disputes in the parenting plan; and (4) discuss and recommend aftercare services” (Sullivan et al., 2010, p. 123). In these sessions, clinicians combine family systems therapy and concepts such as distortions, perspective-taking, desensitization, exposure therapy, suggestibility, and misperception (Judge & Deutsch, 2016). These techniques are quite diverse, and several of them require longer than five days to be utilized effectively. Judge and Deutsch discuss how it can be problematic if clients come in with preexisting therapists because they often take their client’s “side” and do not look at the situation from a family systems lens, especially if they are treating their client for posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms due to marital abuse (2016). The first concern is the implication someone’s individual therapist should be working for the entire family, even if that is not their client. This could lead to difficult dynamics in the therapeutic space. The second concern is if the client has PTSD from marital abuse, then rejection of the other parent by the child is justified and not eligible for OCB based on their requirements. Sullivan and colleagues report co-parenting sessions reflect high-conflict patterns they previously engaged in, and even with intensive individual counseling, many of these dyads did not find any resolution (2010).

The third portion of each day is the closing circle, where everyone in camp sits together, listens to announcements, and plans for the next day (Judge & Deutsch, 2016). The attendees practice new skills and observe each other in different situations (Judge & Deutsch, 2016). This helps perceptions of other family members’ units by seeing more potential and humanizing them.

Milieu therapy is utilized to enhance the therapeutic experience (Sullivan et al., 2010). Milieu therapy is a treatment approach utilizing resources of a controlled environment (Raskin, 1976). Location and facilities are structured to encourage the separation of children from favored parents, connect the parents, allow children of similar age and gender to connect and support each other, as well as maximize staff support (Sullivan et al., 2010).

At the end of the program, there is a talent show called, “the Big Show” where everyone organizes into groups of their choice and performs. This is an opportunity for family members to see each other in different contexts and work successfully as a team (Judge & Deutsch, 2016). Then they hold the “final circle,” where the whole camp gathers. During this time, everyone has a chance to write anonymous affirmations and put them in a box to be read out loud by staff. The staff also write an affirmation for each family. Before leaving, each family is set up with professionals outside the camp to continue the progress they have made. After everyone leaves, the staff all engage in a debriefing session (Judge & Deutsch, 2016). The program creators performed one study to test the efficacy and validity of the program. In *Overcoming parent-child contact problems: Family-based interventions for resistance, rejection, and alienation* by Judge and Deutsch, Michael Saini, Ph.D. coauthored a chapter that describes what should go into an evaluation of a program like OCB, however that was not the protocol that was followed (Judge & Deutsch, 2016). Contrastingly, a mixed-methods within-subjects design with no comparison group was used and included pre-intervention, post-intervention, and follow-up assessments (with no timeline mentioned) as well as qualitative interviews with the parents and the children (Judge & Deutsch, 2016). The only form of assessment used by family members was a self-report Likert-style questionnaire designed for parents, and only the parents filled it out all three times (Judge & Deutsch, 2016). The sample size for this study was 10 families, which consisted of 20 parents and 24 children, but only 13 of the children completed the survey even once (Judge & Deutsch, 2016). The other 11 participated in a qualitative interview; however, findings from that portion of the study are not available in the book (Judge & Deutsch, 2016). The authors acknowledge that they did not control for any outside factors that could impact the results of the study, which is a basic component of any reliable scientific research (Judge & Deutsch, 2016). To ensure that families receive the same treatment, the facilitators fill out a “fidelity checklist” (Judge & Deutsch, 2016). This checklist simply lists parts of the program and asks the responder to check ‘yes’ or ‘no’ regarding referral and screening factors, facilitator adherence, facilitator adherence, target population, location/setting, materials, delivery, dosage,

and aftercare, but does not address treatment of participants or specific strategies utilized (Judge & Deutsch, 2016).

A follow-up study was later conducted entitled, *Strengthening Coparenting Relationships to Improve Strained Parent-Child Relationships: A Follow-Up Study of Parents' Experiences of Attending the OCB Program*. In this study, a link was sent anonymously to those who attended the camp (Saini, 2019). They had to meet inclusion criteria and provide informed consent. There was a sample size of 40 participants, with 57.1% mothers and 42.9% fathers (Saini, 2019). The sample was split exactly evenly between favored and rejected parents (Saini, 2019). However, 10.7% of the participants did not attend family camp but participated in services offered by OCB outside of that format (Saini, 2019). This study only used a qualitative survey as well as the Success of Interventions for Strained Relationships (SISR), which is a 15 question, Likert-style survey (Saini, 2019). Every participant only filled out the survey and SISR one time, with the time since they attended the camp ranging from six months to 10 years (Saini, 2019).

There were no statistically significant findings with the Overcoming Barriers Approach. The qualitative portion of this study demonstrated preconceived expectations parents and children had before attending camp greatly influenced their experience (Judge & Deutsch, 2016). The most valuable conclusion is the purpose of OCB is, "to plant seeds of hope and help families on the road to repairing strained relationships" and they acknowledge it is not feasible to completely fix these relationships in such a short time frame (Judge & Deutsch, 2016, p. 293).

In the follow-up study, Saini (2019) states that there was no difference in the results from the individual as well as the group format and this is why the results are combined; however, no statistics were provided to demonstrate this. Through qualitative analysis, Saini noted that 42.5% of participants did not find the program met their expectations and only 25% of participants found it did (Saini, 2019). Participants joined the program for a variety of reasons; therefore, whether or not it met their expectations is not a consistent measurement for the outcome of the program. Many people also reported that the courts either did not follow up nor utilize the information appropriately, which led to personal confusion and distress (Saini, 2019). Most parents indicated their understanding and ability to take responsibility for the problems within their relationship, as well as the impact on their children, improved since attending the camp (Saini, 2019). About half (48.1%) of parents reported the conflict in their relationship remained the same, and 25.9% reported there was more conflict than before (Saini, 2019). Quantitative results demonstrated 86.7% of participants reported improvements; however, this article only stated this refers to improvements in their view of each other, not the co-parenting

relationship (Saini, 2019). Although developing an aftercare plan was part of the design of the program, only 67.9% reported this actually occurred (Saini, 2019). Within that 67.9%, many reported that there were problems maintaining it, whether that was the fault of the parents or the court (Saini, 2019).

Discussion

The structure and theory behind the OCB program have several strengths including that the program includes the entire family, and that they try to have a one-to-one ratio of staff to attendees (Saini, 2019). The training and qualifications of the staff that are around the participants are not specified in any detail, which is cause for concern. It does say that psychologists created the interventions; there is nothing written about who implements or supervises any of the interventions. This leaves a lot of room for inconsistency, as well as no way to ensure that the interventions are implemented correctly. If the people providing these interventions are not licensed psychologists, then there is also no way to ensure they would know how to handle complications when they undoubtedly arise. The description of the program is notably missing any way to avoid parental biases within the staff. There is a debrief at the end of the entire program; however, at that point, it could be considered too little too late. When working closely with people in such high conflict situations, it is difficult to avoid bias one way or the other; therefore, it is vital to address it before it causes any potential damage.

Even if the issues discussed above were addressed, the format of both studies does not yield reliable or informative results. In the 2016 study, the sample size is very small and children did not have the opportunity to discuss their experiences more than once. This makes it impossible to discuss long-term effects of the program on these children. Furthermore, as some families are court involved, participants saying what was needed for their desired outcomes is additional risk to the research. Another threat to the validity is 10.7% of participants did not attend the camp and participated in a different intensive program (Saini, 2019). If these participants did not attend, then their results cannot speak to the efficacy of the camp. The sample is not generalizable, as Saini reports 53.8% had a university degree and 80% of them earned more than \$100,000 a year (2019). These figures do not reflect most of the population. Although the second study obtained a larger sample size, external variables were not addressed or eliminated. Results were also not clearly operationalized. The information from qualitative surveys used in both studies did not have evident goals for the conclusions. They helped clarify the parent's individual feelings

about the program, however, they did not demonstrate the efficacy of it or how it helped the children (Judge & Deutsch, 2016; Saini, 2019).

No children were included in the 2019 study which can be seen as incredibly troubling, considering the point of the camp is about the relationship with their parents and the good of the child. The point of the camp should be to help the parents to be able to effectively parent their children without causing any more harm to the children (Judge & Deutsch, 2016). The children's view of their parents and the treatment they are receiving should be the focal point of determining the effectiveness of this program. Since the OCB program does recognize that it cannot cause this change on its own, it should have more emphasis on maintaining the aftercare programs as well. Although there are complications during court proceedings, implementing, and participating in these aftercare programs should be mandatory. This should be the case as it was part of the design of the program. Although the theory behind the OCB camp is solid, there need to be structural changes and efficacy testing if the camp were to be continued in the future.

Conclusion

Although each program discussed has its limitations, programs which focus on parental alienation are limited in terms of research foundation. The lack of research in the field of parental alienation makes it challenging to establish programs supported by scientific evidence. The focal point of future studies should be on the children and the impact these programs have on them, as opposed to the parents involved in litigation. As the concept of parental alienation is questioned in psychology, programs catered to this notion should be approached with great caution. The consequences of engaging in these programs could be financially and emotionally detrimental to families, especially amid abuse allegations. Furthermore, the child would likely experience more emotional difficulty whilst in contact with the potential abuser than not being in contact with them. If these programs intend to operate in the future, it would be advised the respective directors conduct further scientific research to substantiate their claims, procedures, and program efficacy. By conducting further research into these programs, individuals involved in litigations can have a holistic and better understanding of the potential advantages as well as disadvantages of engaging in reunification or educational programs.

Disclosure of interest

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