

# How Ex-Spouses (and Parents) Communicate in Family Mediation

Claudia Chiarolanza<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup>*Sapienza University of Rome, Department of Dynamic and Clinic, Rome (RM)*

---

*Abstract.* Communicate in a constructive way is a challenging topic for dyads who are involved in close relationships. This behavior is more difficult in separated couples where it is possible to find anger and resentment for the past behaviors. Ex-spouses (and parents) could be involved in a continuous conflict and this has a huge impact on own and their children health. In this study, we analyzed twenty-four meetings of Family Mediation, utilizing Rapid Marital Interaction Coding System (RMICS). Analysis of conflict during first meeting in Family Mediation revealed the existence of a negative reciprocity between parents. Results put in evidence a pattern maternal dysphoric affect – paternal self-disclosure which reveals as Self plays a significant role in conflict dysregulation. Limitations and future directions as they pertain to research, practice, and consultation are discussed.

*Keywords:* RMICS, conflict, separation, family mediation, coparenting

*Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Claudia Chiarolanza, Department of Dynamic and Clinical Psychology, University of Rome “La Sapienza” – Via degli Apuli, 1 – 00185 Rome (IT). Email: [claudia.chiarolanza@uniroma1.it](mailto:claudia.chiarolanza@uniroma1.it)*

Received: 03.05.2020 – Revision: 20.06.2020– Accepted: 28.06.2020

---

## **Introduction: Marital Conflict after separation**

Conflict between ex-spouses has a significant impact on the quality of parent-child relationship. In particular, when conflict is intense and extended over years, it has been considered an adverse experience for both parents and children with an increased risk for outcomes in health (Cummings & Davies, 2002). Scholars have well established that high level of parental conflict predict high risk of negative outcomes especially among children (Fagan, Palkowitz, 2019; Grych, 2005). Disagreement between parents regards disputes about custody or other parenting issues; however, in the conflictual communication between ex-spouses there are verbal and not verbal expressions related to anger, revendication, attachment to other as a spouse, typically expressed as nonacceptance of the end of the relationship (Amato, 2000). Being co-parents is a challenge which reveals the competence of parents to work together as a team supporting in the best interest of the child (Margolin, Gordis, & John, 2001). The transition out of marriage puts individuals to cope the passage between being a marital and parental couple to a solo parental couple: this could be a real harsh task for ex-spouses when negative feelings connected to marital level overwhelm a realistic evaluation about parental level. Many couples during the transition of divorce exhibit behaviors related to the cycle of negative reciprocity, where one partner expresses negativity and the other responds in turn. As Snyder and colleagues (2005) have examined distressed couples are trapped in negative cycles more often and for longer periods of time than do nondistressed couples. It could be difficult that parents consider themselves as two adults responsible for the education and care of that child (Leclair et al., 2019).

This phenomenon is well documented in the literature with the name of spillover effect in which affect, or behavior shifts from one domain or relationship to another within a family system. Shift occurs in the same valence, such that negative affect in one subsystem is linked to negative affect in another, or stress at work carries over and increases stress at home (Bolger, DeLongis, Kessler & Wethington, 1989). In particular, feelings and behaviors in the marital field could model parent-child relationship. For example, low and negative marital functioning was associated in the hostile and competitive coparenting while dyadic satisfaction predicted warmth and positive affect in the families (Stroud, Durbin, Wilson, & Mendelsohn, 2012).

Again, when marriages ended, individuals spend a considerable time in the elaboration of why the relationship ended. As Maccoby and Mnookin (1992) showed, couples after the divorce persist in angry behaviors, connected to the marital issues. However, the persistent focus on the marital aspects –

instead that coparenting ones - contribute to the difficulty to create a parental team, causing finally an individual and relational poor adjustment. Some studies showed that also in divorced families, conflict between ex-partners is associated with conflict in the parent-child relationship (Amato & Sobolewski, 2001). So, according to the Family Systems Theory, each subsystem has unique properties but at the same time, each subsystem could influence, and be influenced by the other subsystems. In this direction, boundaries with varying degrees of permeability contribute to separate members into various subsystems, such as the marital or the parent-child subsystem (Minuchin, 1974). After separation and divorce, we have to consider the unique propriety of coparenting subsystem, that is supporting each other in their respective parental role in the best interest of child (McHale, 1995).

### **A look at Family Mediation**

Family mediation has been designed to promote coparenting alliance after separation and divorce (Carter, 2011). It is a form of intervention developed to promote coparenting abilities in separated and divorced families, often conceptualized as an alternative to the adversary legal system (Emery, 1994). In fact, disputes between separated parents about children issues is common and may occur long time after separation. Family Mediation provides to parents the possibility to find individualized agreements: it is considered as the elective intervention to face conflicts following the separation and divorce. According to Bush and Folger (2005), it is important helping parties to see themselves in a new light and changing their perspective; parents have to acknowledge reciprocally that their relationship is transformed. When separated parents arrive for the first time in a mediation center, voluntarily or soliciting by the Court, they often communicate in a very aggressive way. So, parents have supported by mediators to recognize the views and perspectives of their children wellbeing and this would probably be beneficial for many divorced families. In Italy, family mediation developed since 1989. At the beginning, two Centers were created, one in Milan named Centro GeA (Genitori Ancora) in 1989 and the other in Rome named Sezione di Mediazione Familiare at University of Rome - La Sapienza in 1990. The spread of family mediation as an intervention has not been so rapid in Italy because of the absence of a specific law which should recognize the abilities and the competences of family mediators. In 2013, following the Italian law n. 4 instituted to regulate specific expertise without professional registers, most associations of Family Mediators were involved in a Consensus

Conference to define the professionalism of Family Mediators. Additionally, a National organization external to the associations of Family Mediators has been involved to certify the competences and the abilities of their members (Re, 2020). These steps favored a resonance in the public opinion, contributing to the increase of family mediation interventions. In this direction, an important study to understand Family Mediation in Italy was promoted and realized by Italian Society of Family Mediators - S.I.Me.F. (Allegri, Lucardi, Tamanza, 2012). Participants were 121 family mediators with great experience, which reported very positive evaluations about their professional training according to a scale from 0 to 100 (mean= 80,3). Besides, they filled 1133 questionnaires about family mediation interventions. In the sample, separation was proposed mostly by the women first (53,3%) and few times by men (25,7%), while for 14,9% of cases the procedure was promoted by both. In 6,1% information was not reported. Family mediators used negotiation techniques (72,8%) as their main tool to understand and reframe dysfunctional aspects of parental communication. Moreover, 33% of mediators have referred to use the genogram, as a tool to analyze family relationships; assessment of conflictual style was used for 47,4% of cases, and for 50% of family mediators used the analysis of parents expectations to explain the goals and methods of the intervention. One important aspect analyzed in this study has been the relation between quality of mediation and the context in which family mediation takes place: a solo family mediation service is associated more frequently with a positive outcome (77,9%) than a nonspecific context (56,3%). Besides, results have shown that lawyers mainly suggested to their clients this intervention (24%) followed by psychosocial operators (21,1%) and, also by the judge (9,5%). This is a crucial point because the access to family mediation services suggested by the lawyers and the ex-users of family mediation services were found promoting greater positive outcomes (87,7% by lawyers, 92,2% by ex-users) than by psychosocial operators (71,6%), voluntary access (48,2%) and judge (40,4%). This latter has been perceived by parents as a Court order, and not as a judge advise. It is clear that it is more probable that parents obtain more positive outcomes when they assign a personal meaning to the mediation process. The importance of family mediation as a potent force for reducing post-divorce conflict is highlighted by a long-term study by Sbarra & Emery (2008). They examined systemic patterns of interpersonal influence between divorced parents who were randomly assigned to either mediate or litigate a child custody dispute in the mid-1980s.

Reports of coparenting conflict were assessed 5 weeks after the dispute settlement, 13 months after the settlement, and then again 12 years later. One

hundred nine (N=109) parents provided data over this 12-year period. One of the most important result is that parents who followed a path of family mediation decreased conflict in the year following dispute resolution, whereas litigation parents reported increased conflict. Long term effects for decrease in conflictual pattern were not so evident for the couples who were in mediation group: so, this is a critical point for research in family mediation.

This study has the goal to analyze the communication in Family Mediation meetings. In particular, we tested a) the quality of communication (negative vs. positive) during the first session of family mediation; b) the cycle of reciprocity between ex-spouses and parents in term of models of communication.

## **Methodology**

### **Participants**

Twenty-four couples were recruited at Sezione di Mediazione Familiare [Family Mediation Section], University of Rome “La Sapienza” as users of family mediation service. Participants had to meet the following criteria in order to participate: (1) having at least a child; (2) express the intention to separate from the actual partner (3) being available to participate to the present study. Both fathers and mothers signed the informed consent, according to Ethical Code of Italian Association of Psychologists. The mean age of fathers in the sample was 47.72 years old (SD = 9.98), and 45.09 years old (SD = 7.44) for mothers.

### **Procedure**

Observational data were collected during the first meeting of couples who decided to address to Sezione di Mediazione Familiare. Two video cameras recorded both parents during the meeting; microphones recorded the couple audio interactions. The videotapes of the 24 sessions lasted 1h 30 min each one. Videotaped recordings of the negotiation sessions were coded by trained coders using the RMICS (Heyman, 2004), which contains verbal and nonverbal behaviors to describe the ongoing sequential actions of both partners in the conflictual interaction.

### **Coding System**

Rapid Marital Interaction Coding System (RMICS) is an event-based system providing data on conflictual behavior during the family mediation session. The RMICS was designed to measure frequencies of behavior and behavioral patterns between intimate partners during conflicts, otherwise, in family mediation context we used RMICS to measure frequencies of behavior

and behavioral patterns between divorced parents. RMICS includes 11 communication categories coded in a hierarchy that includes respectively 5 negative, 4 positive, 1 neutral and 1 other codes of decreasing importance in understanding marital conflict. Negative codes are higher in hierarchy than positive and neutral codes. Negative categories are psychological abuse (PA; e.g., demeaning statements, insults); distress-maintaining attributions (DA; negative causal explanations); hostility (HO; e.g., angry affect, criticism, disapproval); dysphoric affect (DY, e.g., sad affect, weeping); withdrawal (WI; e.g., stonewalling). Positive categories consists of acceptance (AC; e.g., paraphrasing, expressions of caring); relationship-enhancing attributions (RA; positive causal explanations); self-disclosure (SD; statements that express the feelings, wishes, or beliefs of speaker); humor (HM; e.g., joking, laughing). Neutral category is named as constructive problem discussion (PD; e.g., description of the problem, constructive solutions, talking about children) while category named other (OT) is referred to any statements on something other than a personal or relationship topic such as “What time is it?”. In this study, the code Constructive discussion has been incorporated into positive codes in order to make the analysis more homogeneous. RMICS basic coding unit is the speaker turn; when two or more codes are present in the same turn, speaker receives the code highest on the hierarchy.

### Results

A general analysis of frequencies for the sample has been conducted. Results has been shown in Table 1 and Table 2. Findings showed that parents during first session in Family Mediation expressed more positive codes (2804 frequencies) rather than negative ones (801 frequencies).

Table.1 *Descriptive statistics for Negative Codes in RMICS*

	PA	DA	HO	DY	WI	Total
Mothers	25	28	369	77	19	517
Fathers	5	32	208	28	11	284

*PA: Psychological Abuse, DA: Distress-Maintaining attributions; HO: Hostility; DY: Dysphoric affect; WI: Withdrawal*

Table.2 Descriptive statistics for Positive Codes in RMICS

	AC	RA	SD	HM	PD	Total
Mothers	3	1	20	4	1359	1387
Fathers	1	4	23	10	1379	1417

AC: Acceptance; RA: Relationship-Enhancing Attribution; SD: Self-Disclosure; HM: Humor; PD: Constructive Problem Discussion

We run a Chi square analysis to test the difference between roles and codes. Results showed a gender difference between negative and positive codes [ $\chi^2 = 56,8$ ;  $df=1$ ;  $p<.01$ ].

Table.3 Chi square analysis for Role X Codes

		Codes			
		Negative Codes		Positive codes	
		Frequencies	Adjusted residuals standardized	Frequencies	Adjusted residuals standardized
Role	<b>Mothers</b>	517	7.54	1387	-7.54
	<b>Fathers</b>	284	-7.54	1417	7.54

Sequential analysis has been used to explore reciprocity in communication is different for mothers and fathers. RMICS data were transformed into a frequency matrix for all couples (pool over session) at lag 0 and lag 1, indicating the number of positive or negative stimuli by either husband or wife (given), followed by the number of positive or negative responses by each partner (target). Adjusted standardized residuals have been calculated to test the direction of effect association between codes at lag 0 and codes at lag 1. In this study, we considered adjusted residuals higher than |2.58|, associated to  $p<.01$ . Results of sequential analysis showed that  $\chi^2 = 792.3$ ;  $df=11$ ;  $p<.01$ . Table 4 displays frequencies and adjusted standardized residuals between mothers (lag 0) and fathers (lag 1).

Table.4 Sequential analysis between mothers (lag 0) and fathers (lag 1)

**Lag 0:  
Mothers**

**Lag 1:  
Fathers**

	PA		DA		HO		DY		WI		PD	
	N	Adj std										
<b>DA</b>	0	*	1	20.83	8	-0.77	0	*	0	*	2	-4.45
			4									
<b>HO</b>	3	5.96	1	-1.86	1	8.39	1	0.51	9	-1.83	6	-9.66
	4				5		6				6	
					9							
<b>DY</b>	0	-0.51	0	-0.27	5	0.00	0	*	0	*	0	*
<b>WI</b>	1	4.82	0	-0.89	2	-5.20	0	*	0	*	3	2.86
	1										9	
<b>SD</b>	0	*	0	*	0	*	1	12.43	2	0.07	1	-5.52
							8					
<b>PD</b>	1	-7.64	3	-5.04	2	-4.98	2	-5.00	5	1.64	4	10.91
	6				5		5		1		9	
					9						7	

Legenda: PA: Psychological Abuse, DA: Distress-Maintaining attributions; HO: Hostility; DY: Dysphoric affect; WI: Withdrawal; SD: Self-Disclosure; PD: Constructive Problem Discussion.

Note: we run a sequential analysis with codes when total cells are  $\geq 5$ . Structural 0 has been deleted and counted in matrix table. N is for joint frequencies; Adj std is for adjusted standardized residuals.

Results of sequential analysis showed that  $\chi^2 = 807,6$ ;  $df = 13$ ;  $p < .01$ . Table 5 shows frequencies and adjusted standardized residuals between

fathers (lag 0) and mothers (lag 1).

Table.5 Sequential analysis between fathers (lag 0) and mothers (lag 1)

		<b>Lag 0: Fathers</b>											
<b>Lag 1: Mothers</b>		<b>DA</b>		<b>HO</b>		<b>DY</b>		<b>WI</b>		<b>SD</b>		<b>PD</b>	
		N	Adj std	N	Adj std	N	Adj std	N	Adj std	N	Adj std	N	Adj std
<b>PA</b>	0		*	35	6.52	0	*	11	4.51	0	*	21	7.90
					-								-
<b>DA</b>	14	19.15		2	1.31	0	*	0	*	0	*	5	5.22
									-				-
<b>HO</b>	9	-0.62		145	7.76	8	2.22	3	5.11	1	-3.06	301	3.87
													-
<b>DY</b>	0		*	12	0.16	0	*	0	*	16	15.72	26	4.62
					-								-
<b>WI</b>	0		*	8	1.86	0	*	0	*	2	0.77	56	1.43
													-
<b>PD</b>	2	-4.44		54	9.31	2	2.13	39	2.87	1	-3.99	513	9.98

Note: We run a sequential analysis with codes when total cells are  $\geq 5$ . Structural 0 has been deleted and counted in matrix table. N is for joint frequencies; Adj std is for adjusted standardized residuals.

## Discussion

Analysis of verbal interaction showed that all codes of the coding system RMICS are represented in the communications between fathers and mothers during first meeting of mediation. Descriptive analysis revealed a general tendency to use positive dimension of communication. In particular, the code Constructive discussion is overrepresented in the corpus data. Looking in detail distribution of codes, we can note that both parents reported low use of communicative forms expressing harmony and understanding to the other,

such as it is evident in the code Acceptance. Chi square analysis showed that mothers utilized negative codes than fathers, acting mainly hostile and destructive communication. Analysis of reciprocity cycle has allowed to understand communication between mothers and fathers, identifying the interactive patterns between the parents. When mothers utilized abusive communication with intention to cause pain to the partner, fathers replied mainly with hostility or withdrawing from relation, promoting negative reciprocity cycle. When mothers started a communication finalized to determine the causes of a negative behavior relevant for the parental couple, fathers answered consistently in the same way: this kind of communication limited the possibility of understanding partner and managing conflict constructively. Again, when mothers communicated in a hostile way, fathers answers significantly in the same way; so, both maintain their position and “nurture” destructive conflict. An interesting result is the negative association between mother hostility and father withdrawal. Mother complains elicited father self-disclosure: both codes are related to the expression of Self, even if they are in different directions, the first with the intention of undermining the relationship, the second with the goal to promote it. Finally, constructive discussion is the code more utilized as a prompt by mothers. In particular, mothers started constructive communication and fathers answered with hostility or negative causal attribution. When fathers started communication, negative causal attributions promoted mother negative causal attributions in turn: this pattern is also present for mothers. When fathers talked utilizing a hostile communication, mothers answered with hostility, but also with psychological abuse, which is a form of verbal and not verbal violence. One interesting result regards father withdrawal. When fathers avoided conflict, mothers answered with psychological abuse, showing forms of verbal violence in front of the avoidance. In front of the disclosure of feelings shown by fathers, mothers answered in a consistent way with dysphoric affect. This interactive pattern is also present when mothers started communication. As a final point, constructive discussion is the code more utilized as a start by fathers. In particular, fathers started constructive communication and mothers answered with psychological abuse, negative causal attribution, or hostility.

## **Conclusion**

Communication in family mediation is a challenging issue for scholars and practitioners interested in marital conflict. When separated couple arrived for the first time in Family Mediation, it is really important to know what kind of communication they utilized. Rapid Marital Interaction Coding System

(RMICS) is a useful tool to understand the quality of couple communication: it is necessary for the goals of Family Mediation increase attention to communication contents. In this study, results showed that at their first meeting couple share more positive communication each other than it is expected. So, this result suggest that positive communication skills could help parents to find post separation agreements in a consistent way. Gender differences in using positive and negative codes could be interpreted with the general assumption that women are socialized to be highly relationship-oriented and to seek closeness and intimacy. So, when there is a breakup in the affective ties, maternal negative communication could be a defensive way to maintain her role as a caretaker of the family. Results showed a hostile communicative reciprocity between mothers and fathers, indicating the presence of a continuous conflict, and by the maintenance of rigid and symmetrical roles. The findings suggest that individuals, especially mothers in this study, are more likely to reciprocate negativity in their relationship, using a code designed to cause pain to the other. In fact verbal forms of violence could turn into a negative cyclical pattern, which has the paradoxical effect to maintain instead to cut the marital relationship. An interesting finding regards the pattern maternal dysphoric affect – paternal self-disclosure which reveals as Self plays a significant role in conflict regulation. In fact, both codes are related to the expression of Self although they did not converge in the same direction. Study design did not consent to deepen this factor: one possible interpretation is that parents misunderstand their interpretation. This study has some limitations. First, coding system RMICS focuses primarily on verbal communicative interactions while, in addition, it would be interesting to explore nonverbal communication, which is essential in conflict management. A further limitation to consider is the lack of generalizability of results, due to the size of the sample. Future scenarios in this research area should explore communication conflict also taking account to the role of the mediator and the quality of his interventions.

## References

- Amato, P.R. (2000). The consequences of divorce for adults and children. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 62, 1269-1287.
- Amato, P. R., & Sobolewski, J. M. (2001). The effects of divorce and marital discord on adult children's psychological well-being. *American Sociological Review*, 66(6), 900–921. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3088878>
- Bolger, N., DeLongis, A., Kessler, R. C., & Wethington, E. (1989). The contagion of stress across multiple roles. *Journal of Marriage and the*

- Family*, 51(1), 175–183. <https://doi.org/10.2307/352378>
- Bush, R.A.B. & Folger, J. (2005). *The promise of mediation: The transformative approach to conflict*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Carter, D. (2011). *Parenting coordination: a practical guide for family law professionals*. Springer Publishing Company.
- Cummings, E. M., & Davies, P. T. (2002). Effects of marital conflict on children: Recent advances and emerging themes in process-oriented research. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 43(1), 31–63. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1469-7610.00003>
- Emery, R. E. (1994). *Renegotiating family relationships: Divorce, child custody, and mediation*. Guilford Press.
- Fagan, J., & Palkovitz, R. (2019). Coparenting and father engagement among low-income parents: Actor–partner interdependence model. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 33(8), 894–904. <https://doi.org/10.1037/fam0000563>
- Grych, J. H. (2005). Interparental Conflict as a Risk Factor for Child Maladjustment: Implications for the Development of Prevention Programs. *Family Court Review*, 43(1), 97–108. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1744-1617.2005.00010.x>
- Heyman, R. E. (2004). Rapid Marital Interaction Coding System. In P. K. Kerig & D. H. Baucom (Eds.) *Couple observational coding systems* (pp. 67-94). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Leclair, V., St-Amand, A., & Bussi eres,  .L. (2019). Association between child custody and post separation coparenting: A meta-analysis. *Canadian Psychology/Psychologie canadienne*, 60(2), 90–101. <https://doi.org/10.1037/cap0000140>
- Lucardi, M., Allegri, E., Tamanza, G., (2012). La mediazione familiare: risultati pragmatici e relazionali in una ricerca sul territorio nazionale, in Cagnazzo A. (a cura di) “*La mediazione Familiare*”, Utet giuridica, Torino, 661-698.
- Maccoby, E. E., & Mnoolin, R. H. (1992). *Dividing the child: social and legal dilemmas of custody*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.
- Margolin, G., Gordis, E. B., & John, R. S. (2001). Coparenting: A link between marital conflict and parenting in two-parent families. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 15, 3–21. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0893-3200.15.1.3>
- McCoy,McHale, J. P. (1995). Coparenting and triadic interactions during infancy: The roles of marital distress and child gender. *Developmental Psychology*, 31(6), 985–996. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0012-1649.31.6.985>
- Minuchin, S. (1974). *Families & family therapy*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard

University Press.

- Re, P. (2020). La professionalizzazione del Mediatore familiare. In Chiarolanza, C., Re, P. (a cura di). *Il riconoscimento del Mediatore familiare*. Canterano (RM), Aracne Editrice, 93-117.
- Sbarra, D. A., & Emery, R. E. (2008). Deeper into divorce: Using actor-partner analyses to explore systemic differences in coparenting conflict following custody dispute resolution. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 22(1), 144–152. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0893-3200.22.1.144>
- Stroud, C. B., Durbin, C. E., Wilson, S., & Mendelsohn, K. A. (2011). Spillover to triadic and dyadic systems in families with young children. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 25(6), 919–930. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0025443>