

## How couples re-organized themselves following divorce: adjustment, co-parenting and family alliance

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### Abstract

*Divorce represents a breakdown of the individual and familiar life-span, and requires relevant psychological process(es) of reorganization for the components of the broken families. The challenge for divorced parents is that divorce introduces elements of continuity and discontinuity in the evolution of the family. The ex-partners, even though they are no longer married, continue to be co-parent. The aims of this work are to analyse the process(es) of reorganization, in a sample of Italian divorced families (N=93), with regards to the constructs of adjustment to divorce, co-parenting and family alliance and to explore their relationships. Multi-method procedures involve both self report measures for the evaluation of representations' level and observational measures for the evaluation of interactive models. Preliminary results indicate functional and dysfunctional pathways between the families and show the association between representation level and interactive practices.*

**Keywords:** Divorce, Co-parenting, Adjustment to divorce, Family alliance, Family functioning

\* Received: March 08, 2011; Revised: May 11, 2011; Accepted: May 16, 2011.

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## 1. Introduction

Divorce represents a breakdown of the individual and familiar life-span, and requires relevant psychological process(es) of reorganization for the components of the broken families.

The aims of this work are to analyse the process(es) of reorganization, in a sample of Italian divorced families, with regards to the constructs of adjustment to divorce, co-parenting and family alliance. These aims are pursuant to those which guided previous research<sup>4</sup>, conducted at a national level, and whose objectives included: the possibility that the children of divorced parents, in a conflictual relationship, can enjoy a normative three-way relationship with their parents – a basic prerequisite for the achievement of intersubjectivity (Stern, 2004) – and, moreover, to what degree this possibility may affect their development. The results of this study were consistent with the findings reported in literature (Amato, 2000; Emery, 2004): that is; the existence of a link between family re-organization and the well-being/maladjustment of children following their parents' divorce. For this reason the authors decided it would be of interest to study the process of families' reorganization, following separation, in terms of *emotional adjustment, co-parenting and family alliance*.

According to Ahrons and Miller (1993) divorced families need from 18 to 24 months to settle and reorganize in a functional way. Literature identifies three major psychological challenges which are specific to divorce adjustment: coordinating parenting with a former partner, the loss of the intimate partner and the loss of social networks associated with the former partner (Sweeper & Halford, 2006). Following divorce, individual well-being tends to decline, in a condition of psychological distress, and the most frequent symptoms are anxiety, depression, psychosomatic symptoms, persecutory ideas, substance abuse or bad habits linked to physical health (Amato, 2000; Kalmijn & Monden, 2006). Such physical and emotional upheaval can last for several years following separation. Some adults are more resilient, while others are more vulnerable to the effects of divorce (Booth & Amato, 1991).

For these individuals, the losses of divorce are difficult to process and couples may display a destructive conflict – *despairing bond* (Cigoli, Mombelli, & Galimberti, 1998) – and dysfunctional co-parenting. Sbarra and Emery (2005) underlined that some parents (15% of sample), 12 years later report on-going co-parenting difficulties and display on-going difficulties in accepting the end of their marriage.

Co-parenting is defined as the parents' ability to support each other in raising children for whom they share responsibility for many years after

<sup>4</sup> Supported by Italian Ministry of Education and Research, 2006-2007.

their divorce (McHale, 1997, 2007). Although the educational needs of children and the consequent roles modify over time, the lives of children and their parents are interdependent (McHale & Rasmussen, 1998). Even some 20 years after parental divorce, children, who are now themselves adults, need contact with their parents, especially in special circumstances such as birthdays, graduations, weddings, etc.

Family alliance is defined as the degree of coordination which family members can achieve and their ability to work together as a team (Fivaz-Depeursinge & Corboz-Warnery, 1999).

## 2. Aims

Several studies have emphasized the prominent role played by the (parental) non-acceptance of the breakup of the marital bond, as evidenced by impairment in family reorganization following a divorce (Kaslow, 1981; Amato, 2000; Cigoli, 2006).

We tested this hypothesis and if there was any relation between the variables examined: adjustment, co-parenting and family alliance.

Traditionally, these constructs have been studied separately; only in the 1990s did scholars begin to study the relationship between them. McHale and Fivaz-Depeursinge (1999) examined the relationship between co-parenting and family alliances in a sample of families and they hypothesized a relationship between co-parenting typologies and family alliance. Lubrano Lavadera, Di Benedetto and Malagoli Togliatti (2008) examined these constructs in a pilot sample of 33 families undergoing separation, which resulted in some initial indications, which we propose putting to the test and will be indicated in this current paper. Since this work is not longitudinal, we did not give ourselves overly ambitious goals in terms of the epigenesis of processes.

## 3. Method

The research procedure was multi-method and used both self-reporting and observation. As for Reiss (1989), it is important to examine family processes on both a representative and practicing level. Interactive models and representations may not be the same.

Research protocol consisted of observing the families through *Clinical Lausanne Trilogue Play* (LTPc) during the third or fourth meetings with the consultant. A clinical expert in the procedure conducted the observation session according to rules of LTPc. Participation was obtained through a procedure of informed consent. Both parents provided consent for children. In the same session the mother and father separately completed two

questionnaires about their adjustment to divorce. Two weeks later, the parents were met again with a follow-up observation session. The counsellor was given a diagnostic report on the observation.

### 3.1 Participants

The sample for this study was composed of 93 heterosexual, 2-parent families. All the families were undergoing judicial divorce and were recruited into counselling by three different court experts in the Rome County Court, located in the urban district of Rome (Italy). These families were in conflict with each other and had great difficulties in defining “alone” the transition from family unit to divorced family; they need the intervention of the Court to define the questions about their children: i.e. custody, visit plannings, parental and co-parental roles.

Divorce proceedings are, on average, begun 2.3 years before court expert interventions. The presence of at least one child was a requirement for inclusion in the sample. The mean age of the Mothers was 40.70 yrs. old ( $SD = 5.57$ , age range, 26-54) whilst the father’s mean age was 44.20 ( $SD = 6.16$ , age range, 33-64). The parents’ Educational level was in line with the Italian national rate (33% of parents had received junior-school education, 36% secondary-school education and 31% had completed an academic degree).

With regards to the life cycle of the families we recruited, most of them had children of school age. The number of children for each family was in line with the national socio-demographic trend which tends towards the constitution of families with only one child and the lack of large families with 3 or more children (in line with, moreover, the lower tendency for divorce in larger families): 49 families had only 1 child; 38 families had 2 children; 5 families had 3 children and 1 family had 4 children. The mean age of the children was 8.82 yrs. ( $SD = 3.72$ ). Male was 74 and female 69.

### 3.2 Measures

*Separation Adaptation Scale* (Ardone & Lucatello, 1999) was used to measure the adjustment to divorce. SAS is a self-reporting instrument created from an Ahrons’ questionnaire (1980) and validated on the Italian population (Ardone & Lucatello, 1999). It assesses different features of co-parenting couples following divorce. It is a 60 item questionnaire on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = functional; 5 = dysfunctional) divided into 10 dimensions which are factored into two major dimensions: the *parental dimension*, which refers to parental cooperation for children’s wellbeing – involved the following areas: conflict; parental collaboration; attitudes about the other as a parent; parental interaction; parental involvement - and the *dimension of emotional involvement with the former partner* which includes marital interaction, anger; guilt; positive feelings and psychological distance. The SAS displays good reliability: Cronbach  $\alpha$  coefficients of *Parental Dimension* range between .65 and .95; Cronbach  $\alpha$  coefficients of

*Emotional Dimension* range between .60 and .89. Cronbach  $\alpha$  coefficient of 2 Dimension was .80.

*Co-parenting Scale-revised* (McHale, 1999), was used to assess co-parenting. It is a self-reporting instrument made up of 23 items on a seven-step Likert scale (1 = never; 7 = always). It is designed to assess separated parents' perception of the frequency with which they engage in several activities related to co-parenting and to promoting their children's sense of family. The scale is presented as two distinct sets of questions: 5 items involve behaviour regarding each parent alone with the child and 18 items involve behaviour regarding the family triad or as a group. The scale measures four dimensions of the co-parental relationship: *Family Integrity* involves both overt and covert behaviour promoting a sense of united family; *Disparagement* reflects active criticism of the co-parent and undermining of his or her authority and credibility. It measures the frequency with which one parent derides the absent parent in the child's presence: thus undoing the co-parent's discipline. *Conflict*: frequency with which parents argue in front of child in a strong or moderate manner. *Reprimand*: frequency with which parents are involved in co-parental disciplinary activities and it includes behaviour indicating both parental limit-setting and the family unit during an interaction with the child. The Co-parenting Scale displays good reliability: Cronbach  $\alpha$  coefficient of Reliability for the 4 Scales ranges between  $\alpha = .50$  and  $\alpha = .80$ . Cronbach  $\alpha$  coefficient of 4 scales = .76.

*Clinical Lausanne Triogue Play (LTPc)* (Malagoli Togliatti & Mazzoni, 2006). Triadic interactive processes have been explored through LTPc. LTPc was a semi-structured observational procedure which assesses the construct of "family alliance". Observation takes place in a semi-structured setting, i.e.: in a room with 2 cameras and a two-way mirror which enabled observation of play from outside the play-room. The setting consisted of a round table around which we arranged chairs according to the number of participants. To facilitate interaction with the child (ren), the parents' seats were turned towards the child's seat – which is (are) put between them – rather than facing towards each other.

According to the child's age, we provided toys, LEGO© (for children aged from 2 to 10), or sheets of white paper and a single pen (for children aged from 11 to 17). The family was asked to build something together with LEGO© bricks or, for older children, to write a story about a week end spent separately from parents. The families were instructed to play together following the rule of alternating 4 distinct phases: one parent had an active role and the other observes (2+1); the parents switched roles (2+1); both parents played with the child together (3 together) and in the fourth phase, the child was the third phase, while parents interact with each other (1+2).

The total duration of play was a standard time of 15/20 minutes, but the duration of each individual phase of the play (i.e.: 2+1; or 3 together) was not established by the researcher. The duration of each phase was regis-

tered and codified according the coding system. The consultant gave the instructions and then observed the family through the two-way mirror.

The coding followed the procedure outlined in the handbook (Castellina, Franci, & Mazzoni, 2006). Based on *structural* and *functional/clinical* readings coding system regarded mother, father and child/children during each phase of play and for each functional level (*participation, organization, focalization, affective contact*) and provided *dimensional* and *categorical* assessments. A handbook provides the coding criteria and examples (Castellina et al., 2006). *Dimensional assessment* is carried out by judges through *structural reading* and provides a family functioning global score between 0 and 40. The higher the score, the more the family alliance is considered to be functional.

Through a macro-analytic coding system it is possible to codify the 4 *functional levels* which lie at the basis of family functioning: a) *participation*; b) *organization*; c) *focalization*; d) *affective contact* (Fivaz-Depeursinge & Corboz-Warnery, 1999), differentiated according to 3 levels of appropriateness (0 = inappropriate; 1 = partially appropriate; 2 = appropriate). *Categorical assessment* is carried out by judges through the *functional and clinical reading* after the *structural reading*. The *functional and clinical reading* outlined family functioning on the basis of the global characteristics of interaction. It involves a narrative report of the play, in which coders described everything which took place during the play session.

Functional and clinical reading assessed the clinical diagnosis of family alliance(s). Four family alliances can be diagnosed, following these operative definitions: (A) *the cooperative alliance*. Families were able to reach the goal of affective sharing and of the play. All the 4 phases were correctly played out and each functional level was processed in a functional way. (B) *The stressed alliance* appeared in families who were able to reach the goal of affective sharing, but who committed interactive mistakes; mistakes which were, however, repairable later, restoring a tone of collaboration. The affective tone was one of warmth. (C) *The collusive alliance* was typical of families who didn't carry out all phases of the play (i.e.: omitted one or more phases); didn't reach the aims of play and did not share positive affects. Regarding the functional level, these families maintained an appropriate level only in *participation*. (D) *The disordered alliance* displayed the highest degree of dysfunction. The main characteristic is the exclusion of one member from family: the basic functional level of *participation* was in-appropriate, so as the levels of *organization, focalization* and *affective contact*.

LTPc displays good validity and reliability (Lubrano Lavadera, Mazzoni, Malagoli Togliatti, & San Martini, 2007). Reliability for the functional level (*participation, organization, focalization* and *affective contact*) (inter-class coefficients) ranges between  $\alpha = .43$  and  $\alpha = .75$ . These results showed acceptable levels of internal coherence for the functions of participation,

focalization and affective contact, whereas the function of organization showed a low level of internal coherence. The item analysis for this last functional level showed that the absence of the score of the fourth phase created a slight improvement of internal reliability index of this functional level:  $\alpha = .46$ ;  $\check{r} = .22$ . Cronbach  $\alpha$  coefficient of 4 functions is .88 and a mean correlation coefficient among the 4 functions is  $\check{r} = .67$ . These results justified the use of a global score (cross-function).

## 4. Data Analysis

The Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) was used to conduct bi-variate and multi-variate analyses relating to independent variables. For the statistical tests we used more conservative levels of critical alpha for single comparisons: .01, instead of .05 as a critical level in order to control I° type error. Furthermore, given the low number of subjects, we did not adopt a more rigorous method to control type I error inflation in order that the efficacy of the test not be excessively lowered. We made post-hoc comparisons among mean results, only after measuring F omnibus significance, using the LSD procedure (*Least Significant Difference*).

### 4.1 Results

#### *Family alliance*

Only 83 families were observed through the LTPc. Clinical LTP captures different relational and co-parental patterns in the family following parental divorce. According to the research questions we found different coordination capacities among divorced parents in conflict: indeed, results show that it is possible to observe different relational patterns in the family following divorce. Families with dysfunctional alliance(s) prevailed (noted as families with a collusive alliance and families with a disordered alliance) in the sample: in these families the trans-generational relationship is *pathological*. More specifically, we found 30 families with collusive alliance; 28 families had a diagnosis of disordered alliance; 19 families presented a stressed alliance, while 6 families presented a cooperative alliance (Tab. 1).

The overall average score of families was 18.81 ( $SD = 8.32$ ;  $n = 83$ ) and the overall average scores of each participant were: 17.04 for mothers ( $SD = 6.73$ ;  $n = 83$ ), for the fathers 17.16 ( $SD = 6.92$ ;  $n = 83$ ), for the 1st child 18.6 ( $SD = 7.01$ ,  $n = 83$ ) and the 2nd child 17.22 ( $SD = 6.45$ ,  $n = 40$ ). Participants obtained scores that did not differ significantly between each other, that is; there does not seem to be an individual who works better or worse than the other [ $F_{(1,82)} = 2.93$ ,  $p = .07$ ]. Furthermore, a significant effect of phase [ $F_{(3,80)} = 92.01$ ,  $p < .01$ ] was found. Post-hoc tests showed that the average score of the last phase is significantly lower than those of the other phases, thereby demonstrating greater difficulty for families to carry out the last phase of play.

Table 1 - *Alliance frequencies*

	N	%	Global score
Disordered alliance	28	33.72%	8.12
Collusive alliance	30	36.13%	19.93
Stressed alliance	19	22.97%	27.92
Collaborative alliance	6	7.23%	40.05
<i>n</i>	83	100%	

### *Adjustment to divorce*

SAS and Coparenting were completed by 68 couples of parents. Parents had similar perceptions about their own adjustment to divorce (Tab. 2 & 3): there was no difference between the mean scores of fathers and mothers as regards to the *parental dimension* [ $F_{(1,67)} = .06; p > .01$ ] and the *affective dimension* [ $F_{(1,67)} = 1.31; p > .01$ ]. However examining the subscales of the *parental dimension* we found a significant difference between the mean scores of fathers and mothers in *parental involvement* subscales [ $F_{(1,67)} = 6.27; p < .01$ ]: mothers claimed to be more involved in their childrens' lives than fathers; and in the "*attitudes toward each other as a parent*" subscale [ $F_{(1,67)} = 5.67; p < .01$ ] i.e.: fathers evidenced a better view of mothers as parents. Here, too, the difference in *parental involvement* is significant: the mothers describe themselves as being more involved in the daily lives of their children [ $F_{(1,67)} = 7.22; p < .01$ ].

In the *affective dimension* we found a significant difference between mothers and fathers *psychological distance* [ $F_{(1,67)} = 4.86; p < .01$ ]: the fathers describe themselves as more emotively distant than the other parent. Both parents described themselves as less prone to conflict and less collaborative.

Mothers and fathers had not reached an appropriate psychological distance, despite a denial of feelings of anger or guilt towards the other parent. These data suggest ambivalence in the elaboration of the divorce.



Table 2 - *Parental Dimension - Mothers' and fathers' mean scores*

	Mothers			Fathers			<i>F</i>
	<i>n</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	
PARENTAL DIMENSION	68	2.96 <sup>a</sup>	.50	68	2.92 <sup>a</sup>	.67	.06
Conflict	68	2.74 <sup>a</sup>	1.28	68	2.65 <sup>a</sup>	1.06	.72
Cooperation	68	1.74 <sup>a</sup>	.76	68	2.01 <sup>a</sup>	.75	2.93
Attitude about the other as a parent	68	2.73 <sup>a</sup>	.83	68	3.19 <sup>b</sup>	1.03	5.67
Parental interaction	68	2.36 <sup>a</sup>	.99	68	2.23 <sup>a</sup>	1.12	.02
Parental involvement	68	4.32 <sup>a</sup>	.82	68	3.77 <sup>b</sup>	1.12	7.22

Post hoc test; a, b: different letters indicate means significantly different,  $p < .01$ .

Table 3 - *Emotional Involvement Dimension - Mothers' and fathers' mean scores*

	Mothers			Fathers			<i>F</i>
	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>DS</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>DS</i>	
EMOTIONAL DIMENSION	68	1.93 <sup>a</sup>	.51	68	2.02 <sup>a</sup>	.58	1.31
Marital interaction	68	1.35 <sup>a</sup>	.32	68	1.42 <sup>a</sup>	.52	.51
Anger	68	1.83 <sup>a</sup>	.48	68	1.88 <sup>a</sup>	.45	.13
Guilt	68	2.08 <sup>a</sup>	.94	68	2.13 <sup>a</sup>	.85	.00
Positive feelings	68	2.12 <sup>a</sup>	.66	68	2.34 <sup>a</sup>	.94	1.31
Psychological distance	68	1.89 <sup>a</sup>	.98	68	2.35 <sup>b</sup>	1.13	4.86

Post hoc test; a, b: different letters indicate means significantly different,  $p < .01$ .

Table 4 - *Co-parenting Scale-revised - Mothers' and fathers' mean scores*

	Mothers			Fathers		<i>F</i>
	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>DS</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>DS</i>	
Family Integrity	68	3.51 <sup>a</sup>	.92	4.2 <sup>b</sup>	1.10	4.06
Disparagement	68	2.13 <sup>a</sup>	.75	2.46 <sup>a</sup>	.72	.87
Conflict	68	2.56 <sup>a</sup>	1.35	2.34 <sup>a</sup>	1.46	.51
Reprimand	68	3.24 <sup>a</sup>	.63	3.05 <sup>a</sup>	.82	.62

Post hoc test; a, b: different letters indicate means significantly different,  $p < .01$ .

### *Co-parenting*

The mean scores obtained from mothers and fathers did not differ in some subscales of the Co-parenting subscale: *Conflict*, *Disparagement* and *Reprimand* (Tab. 4). The sole difference is to be found in the *Family Integrity* subscale [ $F_{(1,67)} = 4.06; p < .01$ ]. These parents report that they rarely implement behaviours designed to evoke the family unit. However, fathers are those who describe themselves as more inclined to implement this type of behaviour.

Both mothers and fathers reported that they did not implement behaviour(s) which undermine the authority or credibility of the other parent (*Disparagement: Mother* = 2.13, *SD* = .75; *Father* = 2.46, *SD* = .72). In the *Conflict* subscale both referred no discussion in the presence of the child (*Mother* = 2.56, *SD* = 1.35; *Father* = 2.34, *SD* = 1.46).

Mothers and fathers intervened early to standardize the behaviour of children, without delegating this task to the other parent (*Mother* = 3.24, *SD* = .63; *Father* = 3.05, *SD* = .82).

### *Parental adjustment (SAS) and family functioning (LTP)*

There were no significant correlations between the overall score obtained by the family at LTPc and the two variables measured by SAS. The only significant correlation was between the mothers' *affective dimension* and the fourth part of LTPc ( $r = .38, p < .01, n = 68$ ): if mothers perceived the emotional relationship with father as functional then there was better functioning in the fourth part of the LTPc. Higher scores for fathers in the *parental dimension* were associated with higher scores in the *organization dimension* ( $r = .43, p < .01, n = 68$ ).

### *Parental Adaptation (SAS) and co-parenting*

The results displayed statistically significant correlations. The principal correlation regards the correlation emerging between the mothers' *Family Integrity* scale to the Co-parenting Scale and the scores obtained in *Parental Dimension* of the SAS ( $r = .69, p < .01, n = 68$ ). The more the mothers perceive a sense of family unity, the more they feel the parental dimension to be functional and *vice versa*.

For fathers, though, *Family Integrity* was correlated both to their own scores in the *Emotional Dimension* of SAS ( $r = .54, p < .01, n = 68$ ) and also to the scores obtained by the mothers ( $r = .57, p < .01, n = 68$ ). For fathers, family integrity is related to the management of both their own emotional aspects and those of the other partner. For mothers, however, the only significant results are those regarding: correlation with the subscale of *positive feelings* (SAS) ( $r = .56, p < .01, n = 68$ ); and non-parental interaction ( $r = .70, p < .01, n = 68$ ): that is; mothers perceive more positive feelings towards the other partner and are more willing to interact with each other on a non-parental level and *vice versa*.

Compared to the scale of *Devaluation* of Co-parenting it can be seen that the score obtained from fathers was positively and significantly correlated to the score obtained in the *Emotional Dimension* ( $r = .4, p < .01, n = 68$ ) i.e.: the more fathers tend to seek a non-parental relationship with the other partner, the more they tend to implement devaluating behaviour towards that partner and *vice versa*. No significant correlations between the scale of the *Conflict* of Co-parenting and the principal dimensions of SAS emerged. However, there was a positive correlation between the score obtained by fathers on this scale and the score obtained by both parents in the SAS sub-scale of *Conflict* (parents  $r = .63, p < .01, n = 68$ ).

Lastly, a negative and statistically significant correlation was found between maternal ratings on the Co-parenting scale of *Blame*, and paternal ratings of the SAS *Parental Dimension* ( $r = -.55, p < .01, n = 68$ ). No significant correlation with the *Emotional Dimension* emerged.

### *Triadic family functioning (LTPc) and Co-parenting*

The scale of *Family Integrity* of both the father and the mother was positively correlated with the overall score of the father ( $r = .35, p < .01, n = 68$ ) and mother ( $r = .41, p < .01, n = 68$ ) to LTPc. Likewise, the Co-parenting *Conflict* scale of the father correlated negatively with several different scores obtained by families in LTPc; most notably, the family's *global score* ( $r = -.68, p < .01, n = 68$ ). The scale of *Conflict* then correlated with the functional levels of *Participation* ( $r = -.62, p < .01, n = 68$ ), *Organization* ( $r = -.72, p < .01, n = 68$ ) and *Attention* ( $r = -.68, p < .01, n = 68$ ), with scores of 1st child ( $r = -.68, p < .01, n = 68$ ), of mother ( $r = -.59, p < .01, n = 68$ ), of father ( $r = -.58, p < .01, n = 68$ ) and with the score of the family in the third phase of LTPc ( $r = -.66, p < .01, n = 68$ ). No other significant correlations emerged.

## 5. Discussion

The current work represents a study aimed at understanding family functioning and parental adaptation to divorce in relation to specific dimensions in a sample of couples involved in conflictual divorce proceedings. Moreover, it should be noted that this sample recruited couples in judicial divorce proceedings, a procedure which, in Italy, usually lasts more than three years. The families under consideration are characterized mainly by a dysfunctional operation, with problems relating to the management of family roles and competition between parents (collusive alliances) or to participate in family interaction, with the dynamics of exclusion or self-exclusion (disturbed alliances).

The result is in line with similar studies (Malagoli Togliatti & Lubrano Lavadera, 2006; Lubrano Lavadera *et al.*, 2008; Lubrano Lavadera, Laghi, & Malagoli Togliatti, *in press*). The data is interesting in relation to the timing of our observations: the observed families are divorced by an average of two years and, according to several authors (Ahrons & Miller, 1993), it is at this moment that a divorced family unit should reorganize itself in a functional way. These families, therefore, belong to that minority of cases: families who experience difficulties in achieving this aim.

This result is, however, easily explained; given that we are dealing with divorced families, where their conflict is expressed in the Court Room. It is, though, surprising to observe the high number of families with a type B, stressed, functional alliance. It should be remembered that, when speaking of a stressed alliance, we intend an alliance where the family manages to reach the goal of playing together, but encounters some obstacles along the way. The *relational dance* on the whole is positive. Families observed with a stressed alliance, on average, have difficulties in the last phase. These couples that fall into this typology manage to conceal their own level of conflict in the parental relationship, even though they are in conflict within the marital sphere. This interesting result is in line with other researchers' findings (McHale, 1995) according to which the conjugal and co parental subsystems are constructs neither completely independent nor completely super-imposable (Schoppe-Sullivan, Mangelsdorf, Frosch, & McHale, 2004).

Most families show a collusive alliance: these are the families that are not able to adequately coordinate themselves especially regarding (re)organization. In these families, the members have shown difficulty in staying inside their own roles and respecting the role of the family's other members (organization level). The characteristic peculiar to these interactions is that of open or hidden competition between parents and the elevated level of the child's involvement in parental conflict. These parents demonstrated the incapacity to separate their marital role from their parental role, i.e.: that the dysfunctional marital aspects of their relationship are the domi-

nant ones. Through the process of *spill over* (Katz & Gottman, 1996), marital conflict can invade the parental and co-parental functions, and make parenting more inconsistent and less authoritative: thereby making parents less willing to deal with the emotional problems of their children. Erel and Burman (1995) suggested that parents may balance their dissatisfaction in the marital relationship, through the intensity of the relationship with the child. However, this compensatory mechanism fails to protect the children and involves them in a dysfunctional relationship.

Families with a disordered alliance have also been observed in our study. Data show that these are families in which, during structured observation with the LTPc procedure, not even the participation of all the divorced family's members is guaranteed. These couples display dysfunctional co-parenting and have frequently discrepancies in their involvement with their child (McHale, 1995).

We found that families encountered greater difficulties during in the last phase of play: when we asked parents to interact with each other and to let their children play alone. In divorced families the last phase of the play can be much more difficult and the parents were unable to interact with each other; thus excluding the child from interaction. This is a two-way process: from the parents' side; parents did not avert their attention from the child, whilst from the child's side; the child him/herself intervened in a *protective* manner in those parental interactions perceived to be at risk (of conflict). The fourth phase is the only phase in which the ex-couple is involved on two relationship levels: the marital level (explicit) in that they must interact directly with each other; and the parental level (implicit) in that the child observes them as parents and is under their responsibility. The families can show difficulties in separating themselves from the child. Marital conflict, in fact, can invade co-parental relationship through *spill over* process, and make co-parenting more hostile and less affective.

As regards the *adaptation of parents to the divorce*, mothers and fathers perceive themselves averagely adjusted to the *parental dimension*, but less adjusted on an *emotional* level. As highlighted in literature (Wang & Amato, 2000; Ahrons & Tanner, 2003), these are ex-partners who are still emotionally involved and who experience difficulties in reorganizing marital separation. No significant differences emerge in perceptions of ex-spouses, except for some subscales of the two main dimensions of the SAS. In particular, mothers report a greater commitment and involvement in activities concerning children (*parental involvement*) than fathers (it should be remembered that mothers are the parent to whom the child has been awarded). Di Benedetto (2009) showed similar results.

Similarly, literature (Katz & Gottman, 1996) about the involvement of fathers in the lives of children following separation appears to corroborate this fact. Ahrons and Tanner (2003) consider that, in most cases, the involvement of fathers in the lives of children increases or remains stable. It

can be compromised by the persistence of destructive forms of inter-parental conflict. Marsiglio, Amato, Day & Lamb (2000) indicate that it is precisely the mother's role of "guardian" which hinders the involvement of fathers in the lives of. This refers to the concept of *gatekeeping*: that is; the mother's role of *moderator* in promoting or hindering the involvement of fathers in the lives of their children (Fagan & Barnett, 2003).

Fathers, then, are those most affected by the conflict, and tend, therefore, to react with disengagement (Katz & Gottman, 1996; Lamb, 1997). In the scale of *psychological distance*, it is fathers who, on average, obtain higher scores in the degree of distance-involvement in the relationship with the ex-partner. The mothers describe themselves as less emotionally involved with their ex-spouse than the fathers do. This finding is consistent with the study by Wang and Amato (2000), in which women seem to display a better degree of adaptation to separation. In this study, not only did the women participants report that their ex-partner's welfare was of lesser concern to them, but also that they were overall less involved with him. Moreover, according to the authors, it is men who evidence a greater attachment to their ex-partners than women do.

Sweeper and Halford (2006) argue, in fact, that the loss of the intimate relationship with each other is one of three divorce challenges which couples face, and that this is a significant predictor of adaptation to separation. For the other scales, no significant differences emerge: mothers and fathers do not seem to be afflicted by feelings of guilt for the separation, whilst they seem to deny feelings of anger and resentment towards each other: fathers, especially, report that they display positive feelings of affection and interest, as also found in searches of Lubrano Lavadera *et al.* (2008) and Di Benedetto (2009).

These results suggest ambivalence within the process of elaboration towards the – still incomplete – separation and reveal the difficulty for both parents to recognize the other as an interlocutor, when faced with the reciprocal desire for them both to be present in the lives of their children (*ibid.*). The process of individual and relational adaptation and reorganization as a result of the divorce is a long, non-linear process (Bohannon, 1970; Kaslow, 1981; Cigoli, 2006) and it is possible that the ex-partners can remain "stuck" in a phase, unable to overcome it, and consequently fail to develop the event of divorce, with the risk of developing problems of adjustment.

As regards assessment of the *co-parental* relationship, there were no significant differences in the perceptions of either mothers or fathers. Both parents perceive the presence of a conflict on matters pertaining to their children and state that they do not implement behaviours which can promote a sense of family unity. That is, the possibility of establishing functional co-parenting with the other parent following divorce, as the processes of *spill-over* (McHale, 2007), seem to be related to each spouse's adaptation to the separation from their spouse, or to their ability to relate to one another

in a manner free from feelings of anger, guilt, disappointment (Kaslow, 1981; Amato, 2000; Cigoli, 2006). However, neither of the two parents, state that they implement conduct designed to disqualify the other. The prevailing style seems to be a competitive style. Similar results were found by Lubrano Lavadera *et al.* (2008).

The breakdown of the marital bond may be associated to a “decline of parental ability” (Cigoli, 1998) and parents can be less sensitive to the needs of their children (Dowling & Gorell Barnes, 2000). For mothers, the presence of both covert and overt behaviour which promotes the sense of a team and a sense of family unity (*Family Integrity*) is associated with the perception of a good level of co-operation with the father in raising children (*Parental Dimension*). However, where mothers perceive fathers to be little present and uninvolved, they intervene of their own initiative to regulate the behaviour of their children and *vice versa*: the more mothers manage parenting alone, the more fathers tend to disengage. Literature finds that that co-parental interaction of fathers with mothers is correlated to the emotional aspects inherent in divorce. The more ex-spouses are perceived to have become ‘adapted’ towards the separation, the more fathers perceive positive feelings of family integrity; similarly, the more a sense of family integrity is perceived, the more parents will be willing to engage in non-parental interaction (that is; about matters not regarding parenting) and the less they will devalue each other (Lubrano Lavadera *et al.* 2008). For mothers, the perception of positive feelings toward the ex-spouse is an important factor in promoting behaviour which is designed to lead to family integrity, or a sense of family unity. Likewise, Katz and Gottman (1996) found that mothers are very sensitive to the removal of the spouse in exercising their emotional co-parenting.

Lastly, data reveal significant relationships between *family functioning* and *co-parenting*. Both parents obtain higher scores in LTPc – or, more precisely, more adequate levels of functioning – where they perceive a sense of family unity (and *vice versa*). Additionally, fathers’ assessments of the frequency with which discussions take place in the presence of the child (*Conflict*) correlate with the LTPc *family functioning*. As evidenced in literature (Katz & Gottman, 1996; Marsiglio *et al.*, 2000; Ahrons & Tanner, 2003), fathers are more affected by conflict than mothers, something which would seem to condition the functioning of the family as a whole. Mothers seem to be able to preserve more of their parental role from unresolved emotional issues. These issues are correlated, in fact, only to their functioning in the fourth stage of LTPc, which is the stage where non-parental interaction is more greatly required (Katz & Gottman, 1996).

These correlations between the constructs also provide information about the concurrent validity of the instruments. In particular, the *parental dimension* – measured by SAS – appears to be correlated to various measures of the Co-parenting Scale, indicating that both instruments measure constructs which are partially similar or related.

## 6. Conclusion

We found different patterns of family coordination among parents involved in a conflictual divorce and who continue to enact their conflict in court after two years of divorce. There was a prevalence of families with a dysfunctional alliance. These parents evidenced difficulty in separating their marital role from their parental role: most mothers and fathers had not reached an appropriate psychological distance - despite denying feelings of anger or guilt towards the other parent. They displayed ambivalence in their elaboration of the divorce and, at times, showed difficulties in separating themselves from the child. Marital conflict, in fact, can invade the co-parental relationship through *spill over* processes, and make co-parenting more hostile and less affective. The father's co-parenting skills and LTPc functioning seemed to be more associated to their affective adjustment to divorce than to the mothers themselves. However, as pointed out by Katz and Gottman (1996), mothers and fathers are affected by different factors: fathers were seen to be more influenced by marital hostility, towards which they react with behaviours of disengagement towards their children; mothers, on the other hand, were seen to be more affected by the partner's emotive distancing and became more hostile and less collaborative in carrying out educative processes.

A limitation of the study regards the size of sample which is too small to consent complex statistical elaboration; moreover the sample's characteristics - i.e.: situated in Rome district - limit the generalizability of results. Another limitation of present study is that it is correlational and not longitudinal. Only longitudinal research can solve some questions about processes and causal relationships.

This study may be useful in promoting specific interventions to help divorced parent to redefine the boundaries of their relationship in terms of co-parenting. The results of this research may be useful, in fact, in designing specific interventions for divorced families by selecting the level - "point of entry" - from which to implement the intervention itself. For example, for some families it may be more effective to begin with the co-parental relationship, that is; work through Family Mediation. For other families, it will be necessary to begin with the parent-child dyadic relationship; that is, Intergenerational Mediation. For still others it will be necessary to work upon the family as a whole via Family Divorce Therapy; whilst in some other cases, it will be necessary - as a starting point - to carry out individual work on the development of negative experiences related to the divorce. Properly structured intervention decreases the risk of mistakes or failures and increases the compliance of individual family members to treatment.

Moreover, in terms of social policies, the results of this study are useful in understanding the real difficulties which, despite the legislative guidelines (Italian Law 54/2006), still remain in applying shared custody



(Malagoli Togliatti, Lubrano Lavadera, Caravelli, & Villa, 2009; Malagoli Togliatti & Lubrano Lavadera, 2011; Lubrano Lavadera, Caravelli, & Malagoli Togliatti, *in press*). There are, in fact, some families for whom separation is an insurmountable, evolutive task, which amplifies any individual problems present, and makes it difficult, if not impossible, to conceive of maintaining a relationship with the other party as a parent. For these families it will be necessary to create 'ad-hoc' interventions so that they can identify themselves as parents and effectively manage functional co-parenting. These initial results are also indicative of the validity of the instruments used to assess constructs related to each other and to indicate a relationship between the level of representations and the interactive practices of the divorced family (Reiss, 1989).

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