

Assessing acrimony and coparenting in dissolved relationships: validation of the BACS-8 and the MCS-DR in a Spanish sample

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Assessing acrimony and coparenting in dissolved relationships: validation of the BACS-8 and the MCS-DR in a Spanish sample

Abstract

Background: The aim of this cross-sectional study was to validate two instruments, the Brief Acrimony Scale-8 (BACS-8) and the Multidimensional Co-Parenting Scale for Dissolved Relationships (MCS-DR), in a Spanish sample of divorced parents. These instruments were designed to assess acrimony and coparenting dynamics, including overt and covert conflict, in postdivorce relationships.

Methods: The sample consisted of 237 divorced parents (142 women, 95 men; mean age 49.1) who were legally separated/divorced, had dependent children, and resided in Spain. The participants completed the BACS-8, the MCS-DR, the CARE questionnaire and other validation criteria. To assess the internal structure of the scales, confirmatory factor analyses (CFAs) were performed. To evaluate convergent and discriminant validity, Pearson correlations were employed.

Results: The CFA results indicated that the model fit was adequate to good for both measures (MCS-DR: RMSEA = .060 [95% CI], CFI = .949, TLI = .942; BACS-8: RMSEA = .076 [95% CI], CFI = .983, TLI = .974). A strong correlation was identified between acrimony and coparenting conflict, particularly overt conflict. Furthermore, a significant relationship was observed between covert conflict and acrimony, although to a lesser extent. The provision of coparenting support was negatively associated with acrimony and conflict and positively related with postdivorce relationship quality. **Conclusions:** The BACS-8 and MCS-DR are reliable and valid instruments for the assessment of acrimony and coparenting dynamics in Spanish divorced families.

This study emphasises the pivotal role of overt and covert conflict in the development of postdivorce coparenting relationships. Furthermore, this highlights the necessity for targeted interventions aimed at reducing conflict and enhancing coparenting support.

Keywords: coparenting; acrimony; divorce; separation; validation

Introduction

Divorce and dissolution of relationships are becoming increasingly common in modern society.

The incidence of divorce in Europe has increased twofold, from 0.8 per 1,000 individuals in 1964 to 1.6 per 1,000 individuals in 2024. Furthermore, these data are an underestimate of the percentage of relationship dissolutions, as they do not include nonmarital relationship breakdowns (1). In Spain, the number of divorces in 2024 is slightly greater than the European average (1.8 per 1,000 inhabitants). Additionally, over half of these divorces (50.8%) occur in families with minor children, who reside in households where the parents have terminated their romantic relationship but must continue to interact and collaborate in their parental functions (2). The extant literature on the effects of divorce on children consistently documents an increased risk of adjustment difficulties for children in divorced families. These difficulties manifest as higher levels of externalising and internalising behaviours (3–5), more relational problems and lower academic achievement (6–8).

Importantly, however, parental divorce does not affect all children in the same manner. There is considerable variation in the way children from divorced families adapt. Some children cope and adapt well to their circumstances, whereas others continue to experience difficulties over time. This variability can be attributed to a range of economic, social, individual, and relational factors (7,9,10). One of the primary factors influencing children's adjustment is the concept of the coparental relationship. This construct is exclusively concerned with the manner in which

parents care for their children. The term is defined as the joint responsibility of providing for the socialisation, care and nurturing of their children (11). Postdivorced parents who engage in coparenting responsibly are confronted with a multifaceted challenge. They must set aside their differences and collaborate in making coordinated parenting decisions across two distinct households while maintaining a respectful and constructive approach, avoiding conflict in front of their children, and refraining from criticising each other (12,13).

The coparenting relationship is a complex and multidimensional construct. While there is no consensus among authors regarding the specific dimensions that comprise it, the literature suggests that it is a multifaceted phenomenon. Two main areas have been consistently identified in coparenting research: coparenting conflict and coparenting collaboration/support (14,15). The term 'coparenting conflict' is used to describe disagreements and disputes between parents about their respective roles and responsibilities in relation to their child. These disagreements may manifest in a number of ways, including criticism, belittling, and blaming (16,17). In contrast, the term 'collaboration' is used to describe the extent to which coparenting adults support, cooperate, and communicate with each other about the child as well as communicate a climate of mutual loyalty to the child (18).

The level of conflict between parents is associated with long-term difficulties in children's adjustment, and increased coparental conflict is linked to greater emotional and behavioural problems (19–21). These findings indicate that there is a direct relationship between coparental conflict and adjustment. Furthermore, a more hostile coparental relationship is associated with poorer parenting skills and a lower quality parent–child relationship (20).

A more detailed analysis of conflict has identified two forms: overt and covert (22–24). Overt conflict is defined as direct and overtly aggressive or negative exchanges between parents (14).

There is substantial evidence that hostile, intense and frequent conflict between parents is a significant risk factor for children, with a range of adverse outcomes, including sleep problems, internalising and externalising behaviours, interpersonal difficulties, poor academic performance and physical health problems (21,25,26). The most extensively researched area in postdivorce coparenting is overt hostile conflict (22,27).

Conversely, covert conflict is more elusive and challenging to identify (14,24). The fundamental feature of covert conflict, as identified by clinicians and researchers, is the use of indirect and subtle tactics by parents to attack the other parent and involve the child in their differences. Such manifestations may be indirect, whereby custodial adults actively violate boundaries by placing the child in the midst of their disagreements. This may manifest as scapegoating of the child or exerting pressure on the child to align with one of the parents (14,27). This dynamic has also been identified as triangulation (17,20,27,28) or parental role diffusion (29). Children who are immersed in this type of interparental conflict are caught in the middle and tend to either align with or move away from one parent (29). A relationship has been identified between covert conflict and the development of depression and antisocial behaviour (27). A number of authors (10,24,30,31) have emphasised the importance of covert and derogatory behaviours that erode the authority of the other parent figure and leave the children in a position of being caught between the two parents (32–34). Covert conflict, which is arguably more subtle and challenging to identify, has been comparatively less studied than overt conflict. Consequently, a limited number of instruments have been developed for the purpose of assessing it. To illustrate, in the systematic review of coparenting relationship assessment instruments analysing instruments for various family structures (15), of the 21 instruments analysed, only eight assess covert conflict in

some way. This is typically conceptualised as undermining or triangulation. Of these, only two instruments assess this phenomenon in separated or divorced families (14,17).

In general, instruments designed to assess the quality of the coparental relationship tend to focus on the presence of overt conflict. Importantly, while the assessment of the coparental relationship in intact families has received greater attention and the dimensions that integrate this variable have been studied in depth, this has not been the case in the study of divorced families (35). The majority of existing instruments were developed for intact families (15), and those designed for divorced families often fail to reflect the multidimensional complexity of coparenting.

Conversely, some researchers view acrimony as an attitudinal aspect of interparental conflict, encompassing the array of emotions or hostility that parents harbour towards each other (36).

The level of acrimony between former partners has been increasingly acknowledged as a significant risk factor influencing the adjustment of parents and children to divorce (37–40).

It is important to note, however, that the construct of high interparental conflict itself lacks a consensual definition. Birnbaum and Bala observed that, although the term ‘high conflict’ is widely used, it is frequently applied in a vague manner to very different types of cases, and they called for more refined and explicit analytical concepts to identify and differentiate its various forms (41). For the purposes of the present study, we adopt the following working definitions.

High interparental conflict is understood as a pattern of frequent, intense, and poorly resolved disputes between separated parents that recurrently involves the child. Within this broad category, a distinction is commonly drawn between reactive conflict (i.e., situational and largely transitory tension that tends to arise around the separation itself and to diminish over time) and entrenched conflict (i.e., chronic, pervasive, and self-perpetuating hostility that proves resistant to change and is frequently expressed through indirect, covert tactics). These behavioural

manifestations of conflict should, in turn, be distinguished from acrimony, which denotes the attitudinal and affective dimension of the post-separation relationship (i.e., the bitterness, resentment, and hostility that former partners harbour towards one another) rather than any specific behaviour, and from family violence, which involves coercion, control, or abuse and constitutes a qualitatively distinct and more severe phenomenon that should not be conflated with high conflict. The two instruments validated in the present study were designed to capture these distinct facets: the MCS-DR (14,35) assesses the behavioural dimensions of coparenting (overt conflict, covert conflict, and support), whereas the BACS-8 (42) assesses the affective dimension of acrimony.

Regarding family violence in relation to high-conflict separation, although the two are conceptually distinct, the boundary between them is not absolute. Coercive and controlling behaviours may overlap with high conflict, and Johnston (43) observed that high-conflict divorce frequently co-occurs with interparental violence. Family violence therefore warrants explicit consideration, both because it may underlie symmetrical conflict and because it calls for different assessment, safety, and intervention responses than conflict or acrimony alone. The instruments examined in the present study assess conflict and acrimony rather than violence or coercive control; they are intended to complement, and not to substitute for, dedicated screening for abuse, which remains essential whenever these dynamics are suspected.

On the other hand, in Spain, where the legalisation of divorce occurred considerably later than in other parts of the world, comparatively little attention has been given to the effects of divorce on children and to the development of instruments to assess the coparental relationship after divorce in comparison with other countries (44). At present, only one questionnaire exists that assesses family adjustment to divorce (CAD-S) (45). This includes two dimensions of the coparental

relationship: a general dimension of the conflict and another dimension of disposition coparenting, which is similar to support.

In light of the pivotal role of the coparental relationship in postdivorce adjustment, particularly in the context of parental conflict, and the dearth of instruments in Spain to assess this relationship, it is essential to develop specific instruments for divorced families that can more accurately and comprehensively assess the relational dynamics in divorce situations, including the affective dimension of the relationship between parents (i.e., acrimony). The scale of coparenting relationships in dissolved relationships (MCS-DR) (14,35) is a suitable instrument for fulfilling both objectives, as it has been developed specifically for parents whose affective relationship has ended and covers a range of relational aspects. Conversely, the Acrimony Scale (42) is employed for the purpose of evaluating the emotional dimension of the relationship between former partners. The present study thus aims to validate both instruments, which assess coparenting in separated families from a more differentiated multidimensional perspective. Specifically, we will test whether the internal structure of the Spanish version of each scale replicates the original factor structure (i.e., four factors for the MCS-DR and one factor for the BACS-8). We also expect the BACS-8 and the MCS-DR conflict subscales (overt and covert conflict) to be positively correlated with one another, and both to be negatively correlated with coparenting support (the MCS-DR support subscale and the CARE questionnaire) and with the quality of the postdivorce relationship. Methods

Participants

The study sample consisted of 237 divorced parents, 142 women and 95 men. The mean age of the participants was 49.1 years ($SD = 8.0$; $min = 26$; $max = 77$). The majority of the respondents had obtained a university degree (70%). With respect to custody, 38.4% of the respondents

indicated that they had joint or shared custody, 39.7% identified themselves as custodial parents, and 22.4% identified themselves as noncustodial parents. The majority of the sample (83.5%) had been divorced for more than two years, with most of these cases resulting from a mutual agreement (62.9%). In terms of the relationships between former spouses, 47.7% of the respondents indicated that the relationship was hostile or nonexistent, whereas only 18.6% reported a friendly relationship. While sample size determination in factor analysis is a complex issue that depends on multiple parameters such as communality levels and factor overdetermination (46), our sample exceeds the threshold of 150–200 cases considered sufficient for stable and replicable factor solutions when factor loadings are moderately strong ($\geq .60$) and each factor is defined by at least four indicators (47).

Measures

Brief Acrimony Scale-8 (BACS-8). The Brief Acrimony Scale, developed by Rahimullah et al. (42), is a measure of conflict between divorced parents in the context of coparenting. The original 25-item scale (48) has been employed in research involving postseparation populations, and this abbreviated version was developed for rapid screening of coparenting conflicts. The items are scored on a 4-point scale (1=*almost never*, 4=*almost always*), with high scores indicating a high level of acrimony. The internal consistency of the eight items comprising the Brief Acrimony Scale was found to be high, with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .84. Furthermore, the scale demonstrated adequate criterion validity. The items of the abbreviated version of the acrimony scale are primarily concerned with the relationship between former spouses, the persisting bitterness and animosity between them as ex-spouses, and do not assess aspects related to parenting.

Multidimensional Coparenting Scale for Dissolved Relationships (MCS-DR), developed by Ferraro et al. (14). The 22-item questionnaire assesses four dimensions of coparenting behaviour. (1) Support, which encompasses acts of assistance, consistency, and collaboration, reflects a shared understanding of parenting and child-rearing expectations; (2) Overt conflict, which refers to overtly confrontational or directly antagonistic actions; (3) Internally regulated covert conflict, which includes behaviours that are within the reporter's control, including indirect methods of communication (e.g., through the child) or more passive-aggressive forms of conflict that may occur in the presence of the other parent; and (4) Externally regulated covert conflict, which includes behaviours that the reporter perceives as originating from sources beyond their own control. These may be specific instances involving the former partner, such as the child being asked about the reporter's personal life by that individual, or they may be manifested through the child's behaviour, such as the child taking sides in a conflict between the reporter and their former partner. The items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (always). Cronbach's alpha for the subscales ranges from 0.77 to 0.93, indicating satisfactory internal consistency. The instrument has demonstrated adequate concurrent, discriminant, and criterion validity. The MCS-DR was selected over other available coparenting measures for two main reasons. First, unlike instruments developed for coparents in ongoing relationships, such as the Coparenting Relationship Scale (CRS) (49), which was designed and validated for respondents in a cohabiting or married relationship, the MCS-DR was developed and validated specifically for dissolved relationships, the target population of the present study. Second, instruments assessing post-separation parenting have largely concentrated on general support and overt conflict. By contrast, the MCS-DR explicitly differentiates overt conflict, support and, central to the aims of this study, covert conflict in its self-controlled and externally controlled

forms (e.g., triangulation or communicating through the child), which are not captured to the same degree by the other instruments. Validating the MCS-DR therefore complements, rather than duplicates, the existing instruments by providing the first Spanish measure to assess covert conflict among separated and divorced parents.

The excouple support questionnaire (Cuestionario de Apoyo Recibido de la Ex pareja, CARE, developed by Yárnoz-Yaben (50), is an 8-item questionnaire designed to assess parents' perceptions of the support provided by their former spouses in raising children and children's satisfaction with this support. The responses are provided on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). CARE exhibits appropriate internal consistency in our sample (Cronbach's $\alpha = .92$).

Quality of the relationship with the ex-partner. It was assessed via a single item that inquired about the current status of the relationship : “After the separation, how would you describe the relationship between you and your ex-partner?” Responses are scored on a five-point Likert scale ranging from “non-existent” to “friendly”.

Type of divorce. The respondents were asked to indicate whether the divorce had been by mutual agreement or contentious and to provide the time lapse since the separation.

Procedure

To adapt the Acrimony and Co-Parenting questionnaires, the original authors were approached to request permission. Once permission had been obtained, a Spanish translation of the original scale was carried out by three bilingual professionals. A discussion was held to address discrepancies in the translation and to draft a final version in Spanish. The scale was

subsequently back-translated into English by another bilingual professional with expertise in this field. A final Spanish version of the scale was formulated on the basis of the back-translation.

The participants were contacted via a number of associations representing separated and divorced parents across Spain. Inclusion criteria were: (a) being legally separated or divorced, (b) having dependent children, and (c) residing in Spain. No additional exclusion criteria were applied. An explanatory message and the link to the questionnaire were transmitted to the associations for distribution to their members. Furthermore, the questionnaire was disseminated via the research team's professional networks. Recruitment took place online between January and June 2021.

The cross-sectional study was conducted in accordance with the ethical standards set forth by the Comillas Pontifical University institutional review board (IRB) and received IRB approval (Approval No. 2019-31, dated March 19th, 2019). Prior to the administration of the questionnaires, all participants were required to provide informed consent.

Table 1 about here

Data analysis

The internal structure of the coparenting and acrimony scales was evaluated through confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). We estimated the model parameters via maximum likelihood and accounted for the asymmetry in the distribution of item responses by applying robust standard errors and Satorra-Bentler scaled test statistics (MLM) (51,52). To evaluate the goodness of fit, we employed robust estimates of the root mean square of the approximation (RMSEA) and its 90% confidence interval, the Tucker–Lewis index (TLI), and the comparative fit index (CFI) (52). In the case of the RMSEA, values lower than .05 constitute a good fit;

values in the .05--0.08 range indicate an acceptable fit; values in the .08 – 0.10 range indicate a marginal fit; and values greater than .10 indicate a poor fit (53). In the case of the CFI and TLI, Hu and Bentler (54) propose a cut-off value of .95. Additionally, the chi-square model fit information was incorporated. When minor fit deviations were identified, modification indices were examined to assess the presence of residual correlations between items with similar wording. In these cases, preserving the original scale structure was considered a preferable strategy over item removal, in order to enhance cross-language comparability and interpretability.

The convergent and criterion validity of the subscales was evaluated in relation to the score on the CARE test and quality of the postdivorce relationship by means of a Pearson correlation and point-biserial correlation in the case the type of divorce. The lavaan package (55) in the R programming language was used to perform factor analyses (56). There were no missing data: all participants completed every item of the BACS-8, the MCS-DR and the CARE questionnaire, so all analyses were conducted on the full sample ($N = 237$).

Results

Confirmatory factor analysis

The analysis of the Coparenting Scale demonstrated an adequate to marginal fit, as indicated by $X^2(224) = 467.774$; $p < .001$; RMSEA = .075 [95% CI: .066 - .085]; CFI = .920; TLI = .909 values. Additionally, modification indices indicated that errors of items 1 and 5 of the externally regulated conflict should be correlated (*“When we argue, our child takes sides”* and *“Our child joins in or takes sides when my former partner and I disagree”*). Incorporating this correlation resulted in an improved fit, as indicated by the following statistics: $X^2(223) = 377.433$; $p < .001$;

RMSEA = .060 [95% CI: .050 - .071]; *CFI* = .949; *TLI* = .942 (Table 2). The wording of both items explains the substantial similarity between the two item responses ($r = .631$; $p < .001$). All four subscales presented adequate internal consistency: Overt Conflict ($\alpha = .93$), Support ($\alpha = .94$), Self-controlled covert conflict ($\alpha = .79$), and Externally controlled covert conflict ($\alpha = .82$).

Table 2 here

The analysis of the Acrimony Scale showed an adequate to marginal fit, as indicated by $X^2(20) = 83.338$; $p < .001$; *RMSEA* = .128 [95% CI: .100 - .157]; *CFI* = .948; *TLI* = .927. Additionally, the modification indices indicated that the errors of items 5 and 6 of the Acrimony Scale should be correlated (Do you feel hostile toward your former spouse? Does your former spouse feel hostile toward you?). When this correlation is included, the fit improves, $X^2(19) = 40.795$; $p < .001$; *RMSEA* = .076 [95% CI: .044 - .108]; *CFI* = .983; *TLI* = .974 (Table 3). The wording of both items explains a substantial degree of similarity in the two item responses ($r = .466$; $p < .001$). The acrimony scale presented an adequate internal consistency ($\alpha = .94$)

Table 3 here

Relationship with criteria variables

We found that the CARE measure was significantly related to the scales in the expected directions. Specifically, there was a strong negative correlation with the Acrimony Scale ($r = -.904$, $p < .001$) and a similarly strong relationship with the Support subscale of the Coparenting Scale ($r = -.897$, $p < .001$). With respect to the criterion variables, significant associations were observed with the type of the divorce process, particularly in the areas of overt conflict ($r = -.399$, $p < .001$), support ($r = .470$, $p < .001$), and acrimony ($r = -.526$, $p < .001$), as well as with postdivorce relationship quality (see Table 2). The covert conflict dimensions of the coparenting scale, both Self and Externally controlled, appear to be the most discriminative construct in

relation to the CARE and the criterion variables. Finally, the time since divorce did not have a significant association with the coparenting dimensions or acrimony scale scores.

Table 4 here

Discussion

The results of the present study offer critical insights into the dynamics of acrimony and coparenting in divorced families in Spain, as validated through the BACS-8 and MCS-DR scales, with the CARE questionnaire serving as the criterion for validation. The internal consistency of the CARE questionnaire was also assessed. These findings have substantial implications for understanding how the relational context of separated parents is associated with postdivorce adjustment, both for the parents and the children involved.

This study lends further support to the literature on the significance of the coparenting relationship in divorced families, particularly in relation to children's psychological and emotional outcomes (3,7). As hypothesised, higher levels of overt conflict, characterised by direct and confrontational actions such as yelling, sarcasm, and hostility, were found to be strongly correlated with negative relationship quality between ex-spouses. This relationship was particularly evident in the strong correlation between overt conflict and acrimony. These findings are consistent with the hypothesis that overt conflict intensifies postdivorce challenges, placing a greater emotional burden on both parents and children (25).

In contrast, the presence of supportive coparenting behaviours was found to be positively correlated with enhanced relationship quality, reduced acrimony, and improved postdivorce adjustment. This emphasises the protective function of collaboration and mutual support in reducing the adverse effects of divorce, which is consistent with the findings of previous studies

(18,24). This finding serves to reinforce the importance of interventions that promote supportive coparenting as a buffer against the detrimental effects of parental separation.

The coparenting scale has the advantage of assessing covert conflict—a dimension of interparental conflict that is underestimated in both the CARE scale and the acrimony scale. Thus, these subscales, Self-controlled and Externally controlled covert conflict, provide greater discrimination from the CARE and acrimony scale measures than the support or open conflict subscales do, which display more conceptual overlap. Although covert conflict has been relatively understudied despite its insidious effects (14), the negative correlations between covert conflict and ex-couple support indicate that covert behaviours are important in shaping the overall postdivorce relationship. The distinction between self-controlled and externally controlled covert conflict revealed that more subtle forms of conflict, such as triangulation, manipulation through children, and indirect hostility, are also associated with postdivorce adjustment, albeit in a more indirect manner. These findings build upon previous work by Ferraro et al. (2020) and Petren et al. (2017), indicating a need for greater attention to be paid to covert conflict in both research and clinical interventions.

These dimensional findings also bear on the ongoing debate regarding the definition of high conflict (41). Although the present study was not designed to test discrete subtypes of conflict, the observed pattern of associations is consistent with the conceptual distinction between reactive and entrenched conflict. Overt conflict, which correlated strongly with acrimony and with a contentious type of divorce, appears to reflect the more direct and reactive expressions of hostility, whereas the covert dimensions, particularly the externally regulated form involving triangulation and the involvement of the child, showed greater discriminant validity and may index the more indirect and entrenched dynamics that are harder to detect and to resolve. The

clear separation between the behavioural dimensions of the MCS-DR and the affective dimension assessed by the BACS-8 supports treating conflict and acrimony as related but distinct constructs: the strong association between overt conflict and acrimony indicates convergence, whereas the comparative independence of the covert dimensions indicates that the coparenting scale captures aspects of the post-separation relationship that an attitudinal measure of acrimony alone does not.

From a clinical perspective, these considerations also underscore the importance of distinguishing high conflict from family violence in applied settings (43). Because coercive control and abuse can co-occur with the conflictual dynamics captured by these scales, practitioners should screen separately for violence rather than infer its presence or absence from conflict and acrimony scores, and should adjust safety planning and intervention accordingly.

The validation of the BACS-8 scale in our Spanish sample indicates that acrimony, as an attitudinal aspect of interparental conflict, has a significant effect on the quality of the coparenting relationship. The robust negative correlation between acrimony and coparental support highlights the extent to which negative emotions, such as hostility and resentment, impede collaborative parenting efforts. These findings are in accordance with the conclusions of Peixoto et al. (2022), who identified acrimony as a significant predictor of negative postdivorce outcomes. The present study thus serves to reinforce the importance of addressing acrimony in interventions aimed at fostering healthier coparenting relationships.

The results also indicate significant associations between the type of divorce and several aspects of postdivorce coparenting dynamics and acrimony. In particular, contentious divorces were associated with higher levels of acrimony, overt conflict, and self-controlled and externally controlled covert conflict, suggesting that unresolved disagreements and adversarial litigation

may co-occur with greater hostility between ex-spouses. This finding is consistent with previous research linking contentious divorces to higher interparental conflict and poorer quality of coparenting relationships (25,27). The higher acrimony in such cases may be associated with poorer coparenting and greater overt and covert conflict, including self-managed covert behaviours such as sarcasm or indirect criticism. On the other hand, mutually agreed-upon divorces were associated with higher levels of coparenting support, which is consistent with studies highlighting the protective role of constructive coparenting in facilitating positive postdivorce adjustment (18).

These findings highlight the necessity of targeted interventions that address both overt and covert conflicts in postdivorce coparenting relationships. It is imperative that mental health professionals and family psychotherapists are particularly mindful of the detrimental impact of covert conflict, which is frequently unnoticed but has been associated in prior research with significant and far-reaching psychological difficulties for children (19–21). The development of tailored interventions that address the emotional aspects of acrimony and facilitate constructive communication between former partners is of paramount importance for improving family outcomes following the dissolution of a marriage.

These results also carry implications for measurement choices in future research. Because acrimony and overt conflict were strongly correlated, the two instruments should not be regarded as interchangeable, but rather as complementary measures of related yet distinct constructs. The BACS-8 provides a brief, targeted index of the attitudinal and affective dimension of the post-separation relationship (i.e., acrimony), whereas the MCS-DR captures the multidimensional behavioural coparenting relationship, encompassing the overt conflict, covert conflict, and support dimensions. The covert and support dimensions, in particular, assess aspects of

coparenting that an acrimony measure does not; consequently, the coparenting scale alone would not fully substitute for a dedicated assessment of the affective climate, nor would the acrimony scale capture the covert and supportive behaviours indexed by the coparenting measure.

Limitations

While the study offers valuable insights, it is important to consider the limitations of the research design. The sample size ($n = 237$) was relatively modest, and the majority of participants were well educated, which may limit the generalisability of the findings to more diverse populations. Furthermore, the use of self-report measures may have introduced a degree of bias, given the subjective nature of the responses. It would be beneficial for future studies to include a more diverse sample and to consider the use of observational or multi-informant approaches to assess coparenting dynamics. In this context, future research could benefit from longitudinal studies to clarify the long-term impact of acrimony and covert conflict on children's adjustment.

Another consideration is the composition of the sample. The recruitment strategy, which relied partly on associations of separated and divorced parents, may have led to an overrepresentation of high-conflict relationships. This is reflected in the proportion of participants who reported having a hostile or non-existent relationship with their former partner. However, it should be noted that the absence of direct communication between former partners does not preclude the assessment of coparenting dynamics. In high-conflict or disengaged post-divorce relationships, coparenting interactions frequently occur indirectly, through covert conflict patterns that involve the children themselves, such as triangulation, parentification, or the use of children as messengers. These dynamics are precisely what the MCS-DR is designed to capture, and thus does not undermine the construct validity of the instrument and in fact it is useful for evaluating the discriminant and criterion validity of the instruments, but it limits how widely the descriptive

distribution of co-parenting and acrimony scores can be generalised to the broader population of divorced parents. Therefore, future studies should seek more representative samples that encompass the full range of post-divorce relationships, including predominantly amicable ones as well as those involving low contact.

Similarly, future research would benefit from examining the psychometric performance of the BACS-8 and the MCS-DR among different groups of separated and divorced parents, especially in relation to levels of interparental conflict. This could be achieved by formally testing the measurement invariance of the scales and conducting subgroup analyses, for example comparing high- and low-conflict groups. This would provide more nuanced evidence regarding the robustness and applicability of the instruments across the heterogeneous range of post-divorce relationships.

Conclusions

This study successfully validated two important instruments, the Brief Acrimony Scale-8 (BACS-8) and the Multidimensional Co-Parenting Scale for Dissolved Relationships (MCS-DR), for the assessment of coparenting dynamics and acrimony in a Spanish sample. Both scales demonstrated robust psychometric properties, exhibiting reliability and validity in the measurement of both overt and covert conflict behaviours in postdivorce families. The findings of this study contribute to the existing body of knowledge in this field by providing a valuable addition to the limited set of assessment instruments available in Spain. They offer a comprehensive means of evaluating the complex relational dynamics between divorced parents.

The findings corroborate those of previous studies on the harmful effects of overt conflict on postdivorce adjustment, particularly with respect to its correlation with poor coparenting quality.

The study emphasises the necessity of addressing overtly hostile interactions, such as verbal aggression and sarcasm, which were found to significantly correlate with negative outcomes in the coparenting relationship.

A further significant contribution of this research is its exploration of the phenomenon of covert conflict, which, despite its subtlety, has a considerable effect on the dynamics of the postdivorce family. The findings revealed a correlation between covert conflict and elevated levels of acrimony, as well as decreased levels of coparenting support. This study's focus on covert conflict broadens the comprehension of the impact of less visible forms of tension between parents on the parental relationship; prior research has, in turn, linked such dynamics to children's adjustment. These findings suggest the need for greater attention to these dynamics in future research and clinical practice.

Moreover, the validation of the BACS-8 scale indicated that acrimony between former spouses plays a pivotal role. The findings indicated that elevated levels of acrimony were associated with a reduction in coparenting support and an increase in conflict, thereby highlighting the significant emotional burden that unresolved hostility can impose on both parents and children.

The findings of this study indicate that mental health professionals and family therapists should adopt a comprehensive approach to postdivorce parenting, addressing both overt and covert conflicts. Interventions should be provided to divorced parents to assist them in the management of conflict while simultaneously promoting emotional healing and the development of cooperative coparenting skills. Targeted programmes aimed at reducing overt conflict may represent a valuable avenue for supporting coparenting quality, which prior research has in turn linked to more favourable emotional and behavioural outcomes for children. It is imperative that

the emotional dimensions of postdivorce relationships be addressed in order to support healthier coparenting dynamics.

In conclusion, this study highlights the intricate interrelationship between overt conflict, covert conflict, and acrimony in influencing postdivorce coparenting relationships. The validated scales provide valuable tools for both research and clinical practice, facilitating more detailed assessments of the relational challenges encountered by divorced families.

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Declaration

Ethics approval and consent to participate

We confirm that all methods were carried out in accordance with relevant guidelines and regulations. Informed consent was obtained from all. The Comillas Pontifical University institutional review board (IRB) approved the study (Approval No. 2019-31, dated March 19th, 2019).

Consent for publication

Not applicable.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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Conceptualization, AOC, PMD, BCB; Methodology, PMD, JMC, BCB; Formal Analysis, JMC; Investigation, AOC, PMD, JMC, BCB; Data Curation, PMD, JMC; Writing– Original Draft Preparation, AOC, PMD, BCB; Writing– Review & Editing, AOC, PMD, JMC, BCB; Supervision, AOC, PMD, JMC, BCB; Project Administration, PMD. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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Data availability

The datasets used and analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

List of abbreviations

BACS-8: Brief Acrimony Scale-8

CARE: Cuestionario de Apoyo Recibido de la Ex pareja (Excouple support questionnaire)

MCS-DR: Multidimensional Co-Parenting Scale for Dissolved Relationships

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Tables

Table 1

Sample description

	N	%
Custody		
Custodial parent	94	39.7
Noncustodial parent	53	22.4
Shared	91	38.4
Studies		
Primary Education	15	6.3
Secondary Education	56	23.6
University Studies	166	70.0
Type of Divorce		
Contested Divorce	88	37.1
Mutual agreement	149	62.9
Time since divorce		
Less than 6 months	4	1.7
6-12 months	11	4.6
1 - 2 years	24	10.1
More than 2 years	198	83.5
Quality of expartner relationship		
Friendly	44	18.6
Fluid in regard to the children and courteous toward us	30	12.7
Nonexistent, we don't talk to each other	55	23.2
Very scarce, and almost always hostile, with insults and complaints	58	24.5
Restricted, we exchange only the minimum information	34	14.3
No answer	16	6.8

Table 2*Factorial weights of the confirmatory factor analysis*

	<i>Factorial weights</i>				
	<i>Standardized</i>	<i>Estimate</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>Z value</i>	<i>p value</i>
Overt Conflict					
7. Conversations between us are tense and/or sarcastic	0.783	1.031	0.064	16.11	< .001
8. My former partner criticizes or belittles me	0.921	1.360	0.041	33.38	< .001
23. Disagreements with my former partner become hostile and/or aggressive	0.784	1.031	0.067	15.36	< .001
12. Interactions with my former partner are unpleasant and/or uncomfortable	0.885	1.262	0.051	24.96	< .001
17. During disagreements, my former partner yells or screams at me	0.691	0.984	0.074	13.31	< .001
18. We express contempt or dislike for each other	0.732	0.900	0.073	12.36	< .001
22. My former partner is sarcastic or makes jokes about my parenting	0.819	1.100	0.060	18.31	< .001
Support					
9. We have similar goals and expectations for our child	0.858	1.122	0.054	20.76	< .001
5. We agree on general standards for our child's behavior	0.875	1.127	0.050	22.64	< .001
6. My former partner is a resource to me in raising our child	0.831	1.222	0.062	19.73	< .001

2. We have similar rules for our child	0.808	1.009	0.057	17.66	< .001
13. We ask each other for advice and/or help in childrearing decisions	0.834	1.067	0.059	18.22	< .001
19. We support each other during difficult parenting decisions	0.851	1.201	0.055	21.88	< .001

Self-controlled covert conflict

21. I try to show that I am better than my former partner with our child	0.554	0.560	0.079	7.05	< .001
11. I ask our child about my former partner's personal life	0.545	0.397	0.047	8.49	< .001
15. I am sarcastic or make jokes about my former partner's parenting	0.658	0.604	0.069	8.71	< .001
16. Rather than expressing my opinions with him/her directly, I share my frustrations about my former partner with our child	0.752	0.598	0.058	10.37	< .001
4. I criticize or belittle my former partner	0.781	0.683	0.060	11.46	< .001

Externally controlled covert conflict

3. When we argue, our child takes sides	0.569	0.712	0.077	9.27	< .001
1. Rather than expressing his/her opinions with me directly, my former partner shares his/her frustrations about me with our child	0.810	1.169	0.072	16.16	< .001

10. My former partner sends messages to me through our child	0.690	0.853	0.073	11.62	< .001
14. My former partner asks our child about my personal life	0.728	0.938	0.064	14.60	< .001
20. Our child joins in or takes sides when my former partner and I disagree	0.511	0.574	0.080	7.14	< .001

Correlations among dimensions

Overt Conflict

Support	-0.760	-0.760	0.041	-18.71	< .001
Self-controlled covert conflict	0.511	0.511	0.061	8.32	< .001
Externally controlled covert conflict	0.911	0.911	0.025	37.02	< .001

Support

Self-controlled covert conflict	-0.386	-0.386	0.064	-6.07	< .001
Externally controlled covert conflict	-0.635	-0.635	0.055	-11.57	< .001

Self-controlled covert conflict

Externally controlled covert conflict	0.485	0.485	0.068	7.17	< .001
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Table 3*Factorial weights of the confirmatory factor analysis*

Acrimony	<i>Factorial weights</i>				
	<i>Standardized</i>	<i>Estimate</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>Z value</i>	<i>p value</i>
Do you feel friendly toward your former spouse?	-0.863	-0.975	0.049	-20.04	< .001
Do you have friendly talks with your former spouse?	-0.881	-1.059	0.043	-24.80	< .001
Is your former spouse a good parent?	-0.754	-0.866	0.048	-18.02	< .001
Do you and your former spouse agree on discipline for the children?	-0.794	-0.884	0.045	-19.67	< .001
Do you feel hostile toward your former spouse?	0.618	0.643	0.054	11.91	< .001
Does your former spouse feel hostile toward you?	0.744	0.881	0.049	18.10	< .001
Can you talk to your former spouse about problems with the children?	-0.880	-1.073	0.039	-27.78	< .001
Can you talk to your former spouse about problems with the children?	-0.863	-1.098	0.042	-26.23	< .001

Table 4*Relationship with criteria variables*

	CARE (<i>n</i> = 237)	Type of divorce (<i>n</i> = 237)	Time since divorce (<i>n</i> = 221)	Quality of the postdivorce relationship (<i>n</i> = 237)
Overt Conflict	$r = -.739$ $p < .001$	$r = -.399$ $p < .001$	$r = .112$ $p = .086$	$r = -.637$ $p < .001$
Support	$r = .897$ $p < .001$	$r = .470$ $p < .001$	$r = -.056$ $p = .387$	$r = .814$ $p < .001$
Self-controlled covert conflict	$r = -.378$ $p < .001$	$r = -.161$ $p = .013$	$r = .026$ $p = .692$	$r = -.294$ $p < .001$
Externally controlled covert conflict	$r = -.570$ $p < .001$	$r = -.285$ $p < .001$	$r = .123$ $p = .058$	$r = -.508$ $p < .001$
Acrimony	$r = -.904$ $p < .001$	$r = -.526$ $p < .001$	$r = .073$ $p = .261$	$r = -.844$ $p < .001$