

RMICS

Rapid Marital Interaction Coding System

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History

The Marital Interaction Coding System (MICS) was developed in the late 1960s by researchers at the University of Oregon. Gerald Patterson (1982) described how the original Family Interaction Coding System (FICS) was developed: researchers wore gas-mask-looking facemask microphones to narrate the behaviors of families in the home.

During the late 1960s, Patterson and his colleagues Robert L. Weiss and Robert C. Ziller were awarded Contract No. N00014-67-A-0446-003 from the Office of Naval Research to study small group conflict. Graduate students Hyman Hops, Thomas Wills, and Marion Forgatch were instrumental to the development of the first MICS. The original version of the MICS (Hops, Wills, Weiss, & Patterson) was deposited with the National Auxiliary Publication Service in 1972.

The Oregon research group was responsible for much of the early research on Behavioral Marital Therapy, observation of marriages and families, and assessment development. By the mid-1970s, however, the original group split up. Robert L. Weiss stayed at the University of Oregon and has continued refining the MICS. Hyman Hops is now at the Oregon Research Institute in Eugene, OR, where he has developed a derivation of the MICS, the Living in Family Environments (LIFE) coding system. Patterson and Forgatch continue to do observational work at the Oregon Social Learning Center in Eugene, OR, some of which uses modern derivations of the FICS.

The MICS has undergone several revisions. MICS-II (1979) reflected the collaboration of Gayla Margolin and Gary Weider and included some changes in code definitions and usage. MICS-III (1983) reflected the collaboration of Darien Fenn and Kendra Summers. The changes included splitting several codes, refining the way the MICS defined sequences, declaring the primacy of behavior codes in multiple-code situations. The changes are described in detail in Weiss & Summers (1983).

MICS-IV (1989) reflected the collaboration of Richard E. Heyman and J. Mark Eddy. Among other changes, withdrawal and dysphoric attitude were added, and a hierarchy was established to deal with multiple-code situations. The changes are described in detail in Heyman, Weiss & Eddy (1995).

RMICS marks a new chapter in the MICS history. The purpose of the RMICS was two-fold. First, since the 40 MICS codes were analyzed at the category level anyway, we thought it more parsimonious to code at more macro "category" level than to code at the ultra-micro level. Second, we wanted to use a more empirically-sound method for developing our categories. We (Heyman, Eddy, Weiss & Vivian, 1995) initially started with the categories suggested by a factor analysis of all 1,088 couples coded with the MICS over a 5 year period (i.e., while Richard E. Heyman was at the University of Oregon). Dina Vivian had used a somewhat similar marital coding system, the Kategoriensystem fur partnerschaftliche interaktion (KPI; Hahlweg, Reisner, Kohli, Vollmer, Schindler, & Revenstorf, 1984). Several ideas were incorporated from the KPI.

We thank Robert L. Weiss for giving us permission to adapt material from the MICS-IV manual. We also thank our coders for helping us make the system clearer.

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Glossary

Baseline	Normative behavior for a particular couple. The typical “interactional style” of a couple.
Floor	The person who is speaking is said to be “holding the floor.”
Floor switch	Change in speaker; speaker gives up the floor to the partner.
Hierarchy	Order of importance of codes. Used to choose most important code when several codeable behaviors are emitted in one speaker turn.
Listener	Person who does not hold the floor.
Listener Backchannel	Verbal and nonverbal behaviors that merely indicate the listener is attending to the speaker. These behaviors are not coded directly (since the default listener code is “attention”).
Metacommunication	Communication about the communication process.
MICS	Marital Interaction Coding System.
RMICS	Rapid Marital Interaction Coding System
Speaker	Person who has the floor
Speaker turn	Basic coding unit. Ends when a) floor switch occurs; b) when speaker talks for over 30 seconds, in which case speaker turn equals 30 seconds.
Successful Interrupt	The listener breaks into the speaker’s conversation and successfully takes the floor.
Unsuccessful Interrupt	The listener breaks into the speaker’s conversation but does not successfully take the floor. Any codeable behavior by the listener is coded, but is input as listener behavior.

Codes (listed in hierarchical order)

PA	Psychological Abuse
DA	Distress Maintaining Attribution
HO	Hostility
DY	Dysphoric Affect
WI	Withdrawal
AC	Acceptance
RA	Relationship Enhancing Attribution
SD	Self-Disclosure - Neutral or positive
HM	Humor
PD	Constructive Problem Discussion/Solution
▼OT	Other

Psychological Abuse (PA)

PA is defined as "a communication intended to cause psychological pain to another person, or a communication perceived as having that intent" (Vissing et al., 1991, p. 225).

Context is especially important when coding PA. The cultural context is one such element: individualistic PA involves a personal attack on the spouse (e.g., belittling, mocking), whereas collectivist PA involves attacking a cultural group with which the victim closely identifies (e.g., "Your family is a bunch of morons" "I hate Jehovah's Witnesses" [when the partner is a Jehovah's Witness]).

Verbal PA comprises:

- Disgust
 - "You make me sick." "Why would I want to have sex with you."
- Contempt / belittling / mocking
 - "You're a lousy father."
 - "You couldn't balance the checkbook if you tried, genius."
 - "Aww, you poor thing."
- Belligerence
 - "What are you going do about Huh Huh"
 - "Anytime you want to have a go at me, I'm ready."
- Threats
 - "Don't push me. You know what happens when push my buttons." (Said in a threatening manner.)
- Domineering
 - Playing "district attorney"
 - "Look, I'm the one who makes the decisions around here. Don't talk back."
- Devaluing / negating partner's opinions or ideas (not simply disagreeing)
 - "That's a stupid idea."
 - "When you tell me your ideas about budgeting it makes me want to laugh."
- "Gaslighting" partner - Named after a famous movie starring Ingrid Bergman, where her husband tried to make her think she was going crazy. Gaslighting involves statements that the partner's basic instincts or perceptions are wrong, or that the partner couldn't possibly function alone.
 - "What do you mean I beat you up last month I've never laid a finger on you."
 - "How can you possibly be sad You have nothing to be sad about."
- PA can also be coded for nonverbal behaviors, such as:
 - glowering
 - physically intimidating (e.g., leaning into partner's physical space, smacking fist into hand)
 - pounding fists
 - talking very quietly or through one's teeth, in a threatening or menacing manner

Attributions

Attributions are the basic explanations that people give regarding the factors that cause a particular event. Attribution statements will often contain “because.” The RMICS codes two types of attributions — distress maintaining and relationship enhancing. The DA/RA distinction is derived from Holtzworth–Munroe & Jacobson (1988).

Method for Coding Attributions

1. Identify event (can be behavior, thought, or feeling) that is being explained.
2. Is that event negative or nonnegative?
3. Is the person whose behavior is being explained one of the spouses? (If no, not coded as an attribution)

Table for Coding Attributions

	Internal Intentional Responsible Global (Personality) Stable	External Unintentional Not responsible Specific (Behavior) Unstable
Event being explained		
–	DA	RA
+/0	RA	DA

Distress–Maintaining Attributions (DA)

DAs are negative causal explanations.

- DAs explain negative behaviors as due to personality traits, or to voluntary or intentional causes. DAs explain positive behaviors as due to circumstances, or to involuntary or unintentional causes.
- A DA that is a self-derogatory statement is not a DA, but is coded as a DY. For example, “we can’t afford to send the kids to camp because I am too stupid to get a good job” (said with sad voice tone).

EXAMPLES

1. “You were being mean on purpose.” [DA]
2. “We’re broke because we never stick to our budget” [DA]
3. “I didn’t clean up because I didn’t feel like it.” [DA]
4. “You’re only being nice so that I’ll have sex with you tonight.” [DA]
5. “I always feel like I’m on a leash when I’m coming home from work because if I’m not there within 15 minutes you’re waiting for me at the door ready to bawl me out.” (Irritated voice tone) [DA]
6. “You did that intentionally.” [DA]
7. “We are having problems because I am incapable of maintaining a good relationship.” [DY]

Relationship–Enhancing Attributions (RA)

RAs are positive causal explanations.

- RAs explain negative behaviors as due circumstances, or to involuntary or unintentional causes. RAs explain positive behaviors as due to personality traits, or to voluntary or intentional causes.

EXAMPLES

1. “You’re short with me because you’ve had a hard day.” [RA]
2. “I was mad because your boss kept you late at work.” [RA]

Notes

1. Responses to the partner that are reasons for behavior are coded as attributions, even if the full attributional phrasing is not used in the subsequent responses.

H: “I’m not going back to school because I haven’t saved enough.” [RA]

W: “You’re chickening out.” [DA]

H: “Can’t afford it.” [RA]

W: “Chickening out.” [DA]

2. Words often associated with attributions

Easy

Because

Intentionally

On purpose

The reason why

Hard

Since (e.g., “Since you had a hard day at work, you took it out on me.”)

So (e.g., “You had a hard day at work, so you took it out on me.”)

Hostility (HO)

Hostility comprises all negative affect, and statements with a negative content.

The RMICS hostility code comprises the following MICS codes:

- Turn Off — a nonverbal response which communicates hostility, displeasure, disapproval, or disagreement, and is usually in reaction to something the other partner is saying or has just said.
- Negative voice tone — Hostile voice tone that accompanies nonnegative statements.
- Criticize — dislike or disapproval of the other's behavior.
- Negative mindread — Negative inferences and assumptions made by one person about the spouse, including thoughts, beliefs, and intents that are not offered as attributions.
- Disagree — Disagreements said with negative affect or that do not further the discussion. Note that disagreements that further discussion or explain a partner's point of view in a nonnegative way are coded as PD.
- Examples of how to code disagreements that do not further a discussion:
 1. I think we should go to the movies tonight [PD]
 2. I don't think we should [PD]
 3. Well I do [HO]
 4. Well I don't [HO]

EXAMPLES

Non-verbal

1. Sour look
2. Negative/hostile voice tone
3. Rolls eyes dramatically
4. Turn quickly away from partner
5. Sigh deeply (intended as criticism, not as depressed affect)
6. Exaggerated gasp

Verbal

1. "The problem is your drinking."
2. "I don't give a damn what you think."
3. "You think that I'm a lousy mother."
4. "You're messy."
5. "You're careless about the money."
6. "You never listen to me."

Notes

Coders should attempt to adjust their coding to the baseline interactional style of the couple. For examples, for some couples, loud speaking is a discussion style, rather than a sign of hostility. For these couples, their typical style would be coded as PD. For others, loud speaking is a clear break from their typical style and therefore would be coded as HO. On the other hand, couples that are nasty from the beginning of the interaction should be coded as HO throughout — blatant hostility is not an interactional style.

During training, it is important for coders to calibrate their threshold for hostility with the trainer and other coders.

Dysphoric Affect (DY)

Dysphoric Affect describes sad or depressed expressed emotional states.

Any of the following four conditions should be coded as DY:

1. Self-Complaints — DY is coded for any self-statement that indicates the subject has experienced, is currently experiencing or will experience some negative condition. Negative conditions can refer to physical problems, psychological problems, or a degrading / derogatory self-evaluation. Self-complaints of a psychological nature can be expressed in such specific terms as fear, anger, depression, or anxiety, or they can be expressed using more global terms such as down, grumpy, out of it, spacey, irritable.
2. Whiny voice tone
3. Dysphoric (Sad) Affect— Affect communicating sadness, despondency, or depression. Crying and tearfulness are included in DY. Persons who communicate dysphoric affect may show signs of sadness or distress such as speaking in a low, slow tone, becoming tearful, and verbally expressing their sadness.
4. A DA that is a self-derogatory statement is not a DA, but is coded as a DY. For example, “we can’t afford to send the kids to camp because I am too stupid to get a good job” (said with sad voice tone).

1. Adjectives that describe DY include the following:

dejected	melancholy
depressed	morose
despondent	discouraged
sad	sulky
downhearted	sullen
downtrodden	tearful
glum	

2. Vocal cues include the following:

1. slow pace of speech
2. low, monotone voice
3. Cracked voice

3. Bodily nonverbal cues include the following:

1. heavy sighing
2. withdrawal (supersedes WI, but only when overt signs of sadness accompany the withdrawal and predominate)
3. low activity rate (e.g., sitting on a couch staring, extremely slow but fluid movements while completing an action)
4. appears to be extremely tired or listless

Withdrawal (WI)

WI is coded for behaviors that imply pulling back from the interaction, walling off the partner, or not listening to the speaker. Withdrawal does not consist of any one behavior, nor is it cued by any set cluster of behaviors or affective signs. Rather, the coder must make a judgment, based on the flow of the conversation and the verbal and nonverbal cues, if someone is withdrawing.

WI can be used as either a speaker or listener code. A verbal WI is when one partner expresses a desire to end the discussion in a non-neutral voice tone.

The following are cues to non-verbal WI:

1. Closed-off body language (e.g., folded arms, moving body away from partner), especially when there is a change from a more open position during a turning point in a discussion.
2. Failure to respond (verbally or nonverbally) to the partner's question.
3. Muscular tenseness and/or rigidity.
4. Facial and verbal indications of holding back emotions
5. Nonverbal expressions that indicate that the listener is not listening (e.g., no eye contact, direct but glazed eye contact, turning away from speaker).
6. A sudden decrease in listener backchannel behaviors.

EXAMPLES

Verbal

1. "I don't want to discuss it anymore!"
2. "Oh god, I'm not going to listen to this."
3. "Sure...you're right...you're right." (When meant to block discussion and "shut up" partner)

Non-verbal

1. Husband rolls eyes and picks up chair, moves chair away from wife, and sits facing away from her.
2. Wife turns away, breaking eye contact, and makes no movements.
3. Wife doesn't talk or respond to husband in any way.
4. Husband does not respond to a question.
5. Husband is attending but has no movement and lacks facial expressions. He is very tense and has a "glazed" look in his eyes.
6. Wife looks down and fidgets, her body movements indicative of uneasiness.
7. Husband stops listener backchannel behaviors and shows signs of muscular tenseness and rigidity.

Acceptance (AC)

Acceptance comprises active listening skills that help the partner feel understood and validated.

This code includes all utterances that demonstrate understanding and acceptance of the partner. AC is characterized by the speaker trying to put her/himself in the partner's place, so s/he can comprehend the other's feelings and emotions better.

AC includes statements that involve paraphrasing (Restating partner's statement in your own words) and reflecting feelings (voicing what you thought the partner's underlying feelings were), giving positive feedback, and expressing caring, concern, or understanding of the partner's experience.

EXAMPLES

1. "So my untidiness is a real problem to you." [AC]
2. "...And that depressed you?" (said with caring tone) [AC]
3. "I like how you have been handling the kids lately." [AC]
4. "I could imagine that you would be sad now." [AC]
5. "Why did you take that road?" [PD]
6. "Do you want to go now?" [PD]
7. "I don't blame you for being tired and wanting to go." [AC]
8. "Thank you, that helped." [AC]
9. "You are really helpful." [AC]
10. "It was a good thing for you to do." [AC]

NOTES

The paraphrase or reflection need not be correct, as long as it appears that a good faith attempt at understanding was being made.

Self-Disclosure (SD)

Self-Disclosures are statements about the speaker's feelings, wishes or beliefs.

Generally, SDs include "I" statements, which should be either explicit or strongly implied. SDs should reveal something about the person. Moreover, if a speaker talks about a self-disclosure which occurred in the past, the self-disclosure is still coded as a SD.

1. Direct expressions of feelings are also coded as SDs. This includes all speech contributions which mention a positive or negative feeling by name. These can be feelings about specific things. Excluded are global negative feelings (e.g., anger, hate, dislike, disgust) expressed with "you" as an object and meant to hurt or criticize the receiver (these are coded as HO or PA). Also excluded are disclosures of depressive thoughts or feelings, which are coded as DY.

Examples

1. "I am always glad when we have company." [SD]
 2. "I don't care what you want." [HO]
 3. "I feel very uncomfortable when we are at your parents' house." [SD]
 4. "I'll never get it right." [DY]
 5. "I hate you." [PA]
 6. "You make me so angry." [HO]
2. Direct expressions of wishes, needs and interests, or statements that reveal something about the persons' opinions, beliefs, or values are also coded as SDs. These are often global statements.

Examples

1. "I would always rather go to the movies than go bowling." [SD]
 2. "I want to enjoy more freedom." [SD]
 3. "I feel it is our responsibility to pay for the damages." [SD]
 4. "Money is a means to an end." [SD]
 5. "I see Sunday night is the kind of night that I don't want to have to go out with somebody else." [SD]
 6. "I believe that mothers should be home with her children." [SD]
3. If the possible SD includes a prediction or promise of one's future behavior, code problem discussion [PD].

Examples

1. "I'll love you more." [PD]
 2. "I'll stand up to your parents." [PD]
4. If "should" is used, code as SD if it is about a general opinion, and code as PD if it is concrete and about a particular situation.

Examples

1. "I feel I should help Billy with his homework each night." [PD]
2. "I feel children should respect their parents." [SD]

Accept Responsibility

Accepting responsibility is a special case of SD. SD is coded when a person explicitly accepts the responsibility for a past or present problem or behavior that has been previously defined within the negotiation. A statement in which a person admits that s/he is responsible for the behavior may be coded as SD as can a statement in which one person suggests that both partners are responsible for the problem. Any sincerely apologetic statement may also be coded as SD. However, qualifying an SD with "maybe" turns the statement into PD (see ex. #10). Similarly, qualifying SDs with a "but..." statements implies incomplete acceptance of responsibility, and thus turns the statement into PD (see ex. #11).

Note: The word "feel" followed by the word "that" is usually NOT a feeling.

EXAMPLES

1. "I do have a drinking problem." [SD]
2. "I was wrong to blame you." [SD]
3. "I shouldn't have yelled at you in front of the kids." [SD]
4. "I always start the fights." [SD]
5. "I shouldn't be so violent." [SD]
6. "Perhaps we're both at fault." [SD]
7. "We should have tried working our problems out." [SD]
8. "I'm sorry I made you cry." [SD]
9. "Sorry." [SD]
10. "Yeah, maybe I didn't." [PD]
11. "I'm sorry I made you cry, but you took what I said the wrong way." (neutral voice tone) [PD]

Humor (HM)

Any statement that is clearly intended to be humorous will be coded HM. An HM is usually made in a lighthearted tone and is almost always accompanied by laughter from the person making the statement. Furthermore, HM statements will often (but not always) evoke laughter from the other. HM is also coded for each turn of a laugh or a smile (excluding nervous laughter or smiling). Humor with even slight undertones of sarcasm (directed at the spouse) is coded as HO; sarcastic humor that is mean or hurtful would be coded as PA.

HM comprises the following:

5. Outright jokes of the “one liner” variety.
6. Proposals that are clearly facetious solutions to the problem.
7. Statements that emphasize the humorous aspects of a situation or a problem.
8. Statements that present lighthearted criticism of the other in such a manner that it is also lightly received (e.g., “Oh, you silly goose!” or “You’re such a nut”).

EXAMPLES

1. “I think it’s time to buy that Concord jet we’ve always dreamed of.” [HM]
2. “I know, I’ll bet if we sold the kids and moved to the moon we’d get some privacy.” [HM]
3. “We were so drunk we didn’t know if we were lost or the neighbor repainted his house.” [HM]
4. “Don’t worry about who’ll cook; we’ll just eat out every night!” (said in joking manner) [HM]
5. “Let’s shave our heads and sell flowers at the airport for extra income.” [HM]

Constructive Problem Discussion / Solution (PD)

This code comprises all constructive approaches to discussing or solving problems. The RMICS code comprises the following MICS codes:

- Problem Description (both Problem Description–Internal & Problem Description–External)
- Constructive solutions. All proposals of constructive plans/contracts to solve problems. The MICS originally defined two solution codes:
 - Positive Solution – Suggestions for problem resolution that entail increases in the target behavior.
 - Negative Solution – Suggestions for problem resolution that entail decreases in the target behavior.
- Question – Verbal inquiries toward the partner.
- Agreement – Verbal or nonverbal signs of accord.

EXAMPLES

1. “I think we should start saving more money.” [PD]
2. “You should go out more often.” [PD]
3. “Let’s stop eating out so often.” [PD]
4. “When are the kids going to camp?” [PD]
5. “Tony really has a problem with his drinking.” [PD]
6. “We’re having a hard time with the kids.” [PD]
7. “I think you’re right about that.” [PD]
8. “Wives need to go out with their friends.” [SD]

Notes

“Solutions” can also be forms of hostility when they are not offered as constructive ways of mutually resolving the problem. Ex: “Why don’t you do all of the housework for a change.” (HO)

Other (OT)

OT is most often coded when the experimental situation itself is discussed. OT is coded conservatively; the statement must be clearly out of bounds. If the couple strays from the appointed topic, but is talking about anything relevant to their lives or marriage, use a richer code.

EXAMPLES

1. "Is that the camera?" [OT]
2. "I don't like the painting they have on the wall." [OT]
3. "How long has it been? Has it been 10 minutes yet?" [OT]
4. "I'm hungry. Do you want to go to McDonald's when we're done here?" [OT]
5. (The topic is money) "But I think you're mother is a bigger problem. She's always butting into our lives." [PD]

Notes Not Pertaining to Specific Codes

1. Notes for the first few turns coded in an interaction:
 - a. When beginning to code an interaction, usually assume laughing and giggling is nervous laughter, not to be coded as HM
 - b. When beginning to code an interaction, for the majority of couples, code the first few turns as PD, unless another code is definitely more appropriate.
2. Notes for coding floor switches:
 - a. Unsuccessful interrupt — If one spouse is speaking (has the floor) and the other says something concurrently, but the one with the floor does not acknowledge the other (does not nod, pause, change direction of original comment, agrees, etc), then the spouse without the floor (the listener) gets a listener code.
 - It is important that the utterance made by the listener has meaning. If the coder cannot decipher what the listener said, or the listener stopped trying to interrupt before saying anything meaningful (e.g., yea-but...), listener codes are not given.
 - b. Successful interrupt — If one spouse is speaking (has the floor) and the other says something concurrently, and the one with the floor does not give up the floor (continues to speak) but does acknowledge the other (nods, changes direction of original comment, agrees, etc), then the one without the floor (the listener) gets the floor. The assumption here is that since the interruption has caused a reaction/change by the speaker, the interruption was successful.
 - c. Successful interrupt — If one spouse is speaking (has the floor) and the other says something concurrently, and the one with the floor stops talking, the spouse without the floor (the listener) gets the floor.