

ADULT ATTACHMENT INTERVIEW

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Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Developmental Psychology, Clinical Psychology, Attachment Theory

The **Adult Attachment Interview** (AAI) is a highly specialized, semi-structured clinical and research tool designed to evaluate an individual's current "state of mind" concerning their attachment experiences and history. Unlike direct questionnaires that assess behavior, the AAI focuses on the coherence, consistency, and reflective capacity of the subject's narratives regarding their past relationships, particularly those with their primary caregivers (mothers and fathers).

This strategic questioning process typically spans approximately one hour and is utilized primarily to determine an individual's mental competency and overall state of well-being as it relates to their internal working models of attachment. The utility of the AAI lies in its ability to predict an adult's own parental capacity and their children's attachment patterns, providing a profound insight into intergenerational transmission of attachment security.

1. Core Definition and Theoretical Foundations

The AAI represents a crucial assessment mechanism rooted deeply in the framework of Attachment Theory, originally formulated by John Bowlby and later expanded upon by Mary Ainsworth. While Ainsworth's Strange Situation procedure assessed infant attachment quality, the AAI was developed by researchers, notably Mary Main and Nancy Kaplan, in the early 1980s to measure the attachment representations in adults.

The fundamental objective is not to gain an objective account of historical events but rather to assess the subject's ability to coherently reflect upon and integrate those experiences, especially those involving stress, separation, loss, or trauma, such as **divorce** or overly **authoritative behaviors** from parents. The quality of this reflective process reveals the underlying structure of the individual's mental models concerning intimacy and self-reliance.

The interview relies on the principle that the way an adult discusses their childhood experiences--including their ability to integrate contradictory feelings, acknowledge the complexity of relationships, and maintain consistent narratives--is highly predictive of their current functioning and relational style. A consistent and thoughtful narrative typically indicates a secure or **autonomous** state of mind regarding attachment.

2. Methodology and Administration

The administration of the **Adult Attachment Interview** is rigorous and requires specialized training. The interview proceeds through a standardized series of questions designed to elicit

general descriptions of early relationships, specific positive and negative memories, experiences of separation, loss, and trauma, and reflections on how these experiences have impacted their adult personality.

The interview is fully transcribed and subjected to a complex coding system. Coders assess several key scales, including coherence of discourse, idealization of the caregiver, emotional involvement, and preoccupation with past relationships. The structure is designed to activate the individual's attachment system, forcing them to recall and organize memories that may be emotionally challenging, thereby revealing their underlying attachment strategy.

Key to the methodology is the concept of **coherence of discourse**. A person with secure attachment does not necessarily report a perfect childhood; rather, they provide narratives that are logically consistent, internally reflective, and collaborative, following the Gricean maxims of communication (quality, quantity, relation, and manner). Conversely, narratives that are vague, contradictory, highly idealized without supportive evidence, or excessively angry often lead to insecure classifications.

3. The Four Major AAI Classifications

The strategic questioning process culminates in classifying the individual into one of four distinct categories, which mirror the categories derived from infant studies but apply to the adult's internal representation of attachment. These classifications determine the subject's overall **mental competency** and relational prognosis regarding their individual attachment endeavors:

Dismissing (Ds): These individuals tend to minimize the importance of attachment relationships and often idealize their parents, yet fail to provide specific supporting memories. Their narratives are typically brief, lacking emotional depth, and often claim that early experiences had little to no influence on their development.

Preoccupied (E): Subjects classified as preoccupied are still intensely engaged with or angrily struggling against their past attachment figures. Their narratives are often long, rambling, and confusing, marked by passive anger, overwhelming detail, and difficulty focusing on the relevant point. They appear unable to resolve past conflicts.

Disorganized/Unresolved (U): This category is characterized by lapses in the monitoring of reasoning during discussions of trauma or loss (such as abuse, death, or severe parental neglect). The interviewee may exhibit sudden shifts in discourse, disorganized speech, or logical contradictions when discussing these events. This classification is often linked to serious psychopathology.

Autonomous or Secure (F): Secure individuals value attachment relationships but maintain objectivity regarding their past. They provide narratives that are coherent, internally consistent, balanced, and collaborative, acknowledging both positive and negative experiences without

idealization or excessive preoccupation.

4. Clinical and Forensic Applications

The AAI has significant implications across both clinical and forensic psychology. Clinically, it provides therapists with a deep understanding of a patient's internal working models, offering crucial insights into why they engage in certain relational patterns or therapeutic ruptures. This information guides treatment planning, especially in complex cases involving personality disorders or persistent relational difficulties.

As noted in specific legal contexts, **Adult Attachment Interviews** can be quite helpful to therapists examining patients to determine their **competency to stand trial** for an alleged crime. In forensic evaluations, the AAI offers a standardized measure that contributes to determining an individual's psychological stability and their reflective capacity, which are often essential components of a psychological evaluation requested by the court.

Beyond these applications, the AAI is widely used in developmental research to study the intergenerational transmission of attachment. A vast body of evidence demonstrates a strong correlation between a mother's AAI classification and her infant's attachment classification in the Strange Situation, highlighting the AAI's power as a predictive tool for parental functioning.

5. Further Reading

[Adult Attachment Interview \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Psychology Today: Overview of the AAI](#)

[Forensic Psychology \(Wikipedia\)](#)