

THE ATTACHMENT STYLE INTERVIEW (ASI)

A Fact sheet to use in court work

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This is a brief fact sheet summarising the measurement properties and key research papers of the ASI interview, to inform its use in health and social care services, specifically child and family court proceedings.

Describing the ASI

- Attachment theory is influential in both research and practice in providing explanations of individuals' capacities to achieve good support, close partner relationships and effective parenting of their own and other's offspring.
- The ASI is a standardized interview tool, which assess support-based attachment styles in adults and is adapted for social workers and psychologists working in Adoption/Fostering and Child Care contexts
- Attachment styles differentiate those Secure (the most adapted) from those Insecure Anxious (Enmeshed or Fearful) and those Avoidant (Angry-dismissive or Withdrawn) or Dual/disorganised (Anxious and Avoidant). These latter identify different typologies involving over-dependent versus over self-reliant; frightened versus angry; needy versus isolated less adapted socially.

Background to the ASI

- The ASI was originally developed in a large programme of research funded by the Medical Research Council identifying vulnerability in families in relation to mental health, and was used in over ten years of psychosocial research on families conducted by Professor Antonia Bifulco and her research team at the Lifespan Research Group, Centre for Abuse and Trauma Studies, Middlesex University (formerly at Royal Holloway, University of London).
- Its reliability and validity has been tested in a number of sites.
- It provides an objective, evidence-based assessment tool that has gone through careful checks to show it is consistent and reliable in its use. The scores do not depend on the opinion of the professional undertaking the interview, but on a series of rules and rating procedures all outlined in a training manual and verified in research contexts.
- Training in the measure for social workers and psychologists comprises of a four-day course covering the essential elements required for administering and scoring the instrument reliably.
- The ASI training is rolled out across the UK by Child and Family Training, a highly regarded organisation experienced in training social work trainers in evidence

based measurement.

- The ASI is being used to assess parents/carers in adoption and fostering and child care services to aid in understanding of parents' current supportive network including quality of partner and other close support relationships, and barriers to such closeness from attitudes of Anxious style or Avoidant style. This ASI aids assessments of risk and resilience and is specifically used as a means of predicting parents and carers' likely future support in relation to anticipated need related to crises that may arise with placed children.
- A key text which covers the properties of the measure, the research findings and its use in social work and clinical practice is:
- **KEY TEXT: Bifulco, A., & Thomas, G. (Sept 2012). Understanding adult attachment in family relationships: Research, Assessment and Intervention. London: Routledge.**
- It should not be confused with the other measures, notably the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI) which is not adapted for use by practitioners and which is not support-focused.

Research background

- The ASI is accepted as a standardised measurement tool in research terms, since it has been tested in relation to its reliability (similarity of scoring same interview by different scorers on different sites; its relative stability over time) and its validity (it relates to other experiences as expected from attachment theory)(1, 2).
- The ASI's reliability and validity is established among researchers (including several cross- cultural studies (3) and good inter-rater agreement (above 75% agreement between raters) has been found in three different published studies (in London, across Europe and in Japan) (3)
- Good stability of the measure was found, for example when administered before and after birth (75%) and over a three-year period with community women (73%) in terms of basic Secure or Insecure style. Where change did occur it was somewhat more often in a positive direction to greater security.(4)

Key findings

- 'Highly Insecure' Anxious (Enmeshed and Fearful) and Angry-dismissive attachment styles are a significant predictor of emotional disorder (major depression and anxiety). This is found in community women, those expecting a baby and their partners(5).
- Such styles also relate significantly to other risk factors such as low self- esteem, poor support, partner difficulties and childhood neglect and abuse (4, 6).
- Clearly Secure, all Mildly Insecure styles and the Moderately Withdrawn style do not elevate risk of depression and in fact these styles have resilient aspects.
- In retrospective community studies, Highly Insecure styles (Markedly and Moderately) were related to incompetent parenting, which in turn related to neglect or physical abuse of offspring as reported in late adolescence/early adulthood (7).
- Insecure ASI categories were associated with more insensitive and distant mother-baby interaction(4).

Application of the ASI to Adoption and Fostering

- The ASI is only one of many tools used to assess family strengths and difficulties.
- The research team designed the interview for Adoption/Fostering and childcare on the basis of extensive earlier study on support and cognitive vulnerability for depression and following a careful pilot study using the measure in practice in association with the voluntary agency Parents for Children.
- In order to transfer methods from research to practice it is necessary to produce an effective training course evaluated by practitioners and develop knowledge of the ASI interpretation in adoption/fostering contexts. This has been done by the university group in collaboration with the national training organisation Child and Family Training.
- Four-day trainings in the use of the ASI, including the rating of a practice interview, have been held with nearly a thousand social workers over the last 5 years with over 50 services requesting training.
- The ASI uses standardised thresholds for what constitutes ‘good- enough’ support, and aids practitioners to avoid the biases and ‘halo effects’ from clients’ socially-desirable responses. Using investigator-based tools (where the assessor makes the final scoring and judgments are based on previously determined benchmarks), with semi-structured probing to determine evidence for a more in-depth picture of relationships, helps to counter-act such biases. The key text for the application of the ASI in adoption/fostering is: **KEY TEXT: The Attachment Style Interview (ASI): A support-based adult assessment tool for adoption-fostering practice. Antonia Bifulco, Catherine Jacobs, Amanda Bunn, Geraldine Thomas & Karen Irving. Adoption and Fostering (2008), vol 32, No.3, pp33-45**

Use in court

- The ASI is a reputable interview tool for assessing social and psychological factors around relationships that highlight risk or resilience in relation to family life.
- However, as with all other tools, the ASI is not sufficient to give a rounded coverage of family strengths and weaknesses and should be used together with other tools.
- Reports produced for court using the ASI give headline scoring with explanation, but also reproduce some of the verbatim comments to illustrate the relevant context, relationships and styles for transparency in order that the voice of the client can be represented. This is based on the audio-recorded and scorings recorded in a standardised ASI pack with explanations of each scale and illustrative scoring examples for easy reading.
- Practitioners using the ASI for court work should be experienced users who have had previous cases checked for accurate scoring. Difficult cases can be checked for scoring through the university team, or with a trained colleague to ensure consistency.
- Parents or carers with a high level of insecure styles (Anxious such as Enmeshed or Fearful, or Angry-dismissive) or Dual/disorganized styles are considered high risk in relation to partner support/stability and sensitivity required for good parenting. This is particularly evident when both partners in the family have such styles. Secure styles, or those at only ‘mild’ levels of insecurity, and those rated Moderately Withdrawn do not have risk, and indeed show high levels of resilience.
- The ASI had been used extensively in adoption and fostering panels and

childcare courts where its evidence-based practice is generally well received and deemed clear and transparent.

- For further research information and access to other practitioners who can endorse the ASI contact antonia.bifulco@mdx.ac.uk

References

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