

## The Attachment Style Interview (ASI): A Fact Sheet

**This fact sheet summarises the measurement properties and key research findings of the Attachment Style Interview (ASI).**

### Background to 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 others' offspring. The ASI is a standardised interview tool, which assesses support-based attachment styles in adults and is adapted for case workers, social workers and psychologists working in Adoption/Fostering and Child Protection contexts.
- The interview was originally developed in a large program of research funded by the Medical Research Council, UK, 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 Centre for Abuse and Trauma Studies, Middlesex University. The research team subsequently designed the interview for Adoption/Fostering and children's services. More recently the team has developed an adolescent version, the ASI-AD, which is used in Residential Care and with other young people at risk.

### The Attachment Style Interview

- The ASI is an evidence-based assessment of support and attachment style that provides workers with a tool for measuring current marital/partner relationship and support contexts. The ASI is an audio-recorded, semi-structured interview that takes around an hour and a half to administer. It 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 ASI is one of the few attachment style interviews that has an accessible method of questioning and scoring to assess both secure and insecure relating styles.
- The ASI assessment aids understanding of parents' & carers current supportive network including the quality of their partner and other close support relationships, and identifies barriers they have to such closeness where they may have Anxious or Avoidant attachment styles. It measures their Ability to Make and Maintain relationships and Overall Attachment Style. The ASI should not be confused with the other measures, notably the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI) which is not adapted for use by practitioners and is not support-focused.
- Specifically the ASI provides an objective evidence base for the following:
  - Overall **Attachment Style**. Insecure attachment styles are either of an anxiously attached nature (**Enmeshed or Fearful**) or are of an avoidant nature (**Angry-dismissive or Withdrawn**).
  - Current **on-going support from partner**, if there is one (Please note it does not assess past partner or support relationships).
  - Current **on-going support from close confidants**.
  - Current **Ability to Make and Maintain relationships**.

- Current generalised **attachment attitudes to closeness/autonomy** to ascertain the reasons for attitudes which a person can have that form blockages in obtaining support from close others. This includes those attitudes that create distance from others e.g. high mistrust, psychological barriers to getting close to people, fear of rejection or anger. It also includes attitudes that create over-dependence on others e.g. high need for the company of others, low self-reliance in decision making and high fear of separation from loved ones.
  - It also assesses ability to access help and support and barriers to this in terms of insecure attachment style.
  - It provides a baseline for gauging future change.
- Overall attachment style is derived according to an established procedure. Those with good support and positive attitudes to others are rated as 'Clearly Secure' and those with good support and some negative attitudes are scored as 'Mildly Insecure'. However those with poor support, inability to make relationships and a series of negative attitudes are scored as 'Markedly', or 'Moderately Insecure' in their attachment style. 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 and less adapted socially.

### Key findings using the ASI

- Secure styles, or those at only 'Mild' levels of insecurity as measured by the ASI, and those rated Moderately Withdrawn show high levels of resilience. A secure attachment style, in terms of the ASI, refers to good ability to make and maintain close supportive relationships. It also refers to having positive attitudes towards others in terms of trust and being able to attain closeness, being self-reliant and having low levels of anger and fear in relating to others.
- Prevalence figures show that just under half in a general community sample have 'Clearly Secure' attachment style, with around a third having a 'Mildly Insecure' attachment style and around twenty percent a 'Highly Insecure' attachment style. Parents or carers with a significant 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.
- 'Highly Insecure' Anxious (Enmeshed and Fearful) and Angry-dismissive attachment styles are a significant predictor of emotional disorder (major depression and anxiety). Such styles also relate significantly to other risk factors such as low self-esteem, poor support, partner difficulties and childhood neglect and abuse (4, 5).
- 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, Markedly and Moderately Insecure Styles were related to incompetent parenting, which in turn related to neglect or physical abuse of offspring as reported in late adolescence/early adulthood (6).
- Insecure ASI categories were associated with more insensitive and distant mother-baby interaction (4).

## Use of the ASI in services

- The ASI is used with parents & carers in Adoption/Fostering and child protection services as a means of predicting parents and carers' support in relation to anticipated need over the course of crises that may arise with any of their children. It also aids understanding of parents' current supportive network, quality of partner relationship, other close relationships and relating ability, helping assess resilience and ability to provide a stable family context for the child.
- The 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 needs that may arise with placed children.

## 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).

## Use in court and Adoption/Fostering Panels

- The ASI is well received by the Children's Courts as it is evidence based, clear and transparent. The ASI is only one of many tools used to assess family strengths and difficulties and should always be used in conjunction with other assessments.
- The ASI 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. The ASI's reliability and validity has been tested in a number of sites and it is a reputable interview tool for assessing current social and psychological factors around relationships that highlight risk or resilience in relation to family life.
- The ASI provides workers with objective scores for the quality of the current partner and relationship including current interaction and confiding behaviours. All these scores can be used to inform reports and assessments.
- Reports produced for court or panels using the ASI should give headline scoring with explanation, but also crucially reproduce some of the verbatim comments to illustrate the relevant context, relationships and styles, in order that the voice of the client can be represented. This is also useful for client feedback, which is usually well received as it is based on the audio-recorded verbatim comments 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. To ensure consistency all ASI cases are required to be quality controlled with a fully trained colleague.

Further information regarding ASI research and practice can be found in: Bifulco A, & Thomas, G. *Understanding Adult Attachment in Family Relationships: Research, Assessment and Intervention*. Routledge. (2012)

### **The Adolescent Attachment Style Interview (ASI-AD)**

The ASI-AD works on the same principles as the ASI and has been adapted to assess the attachment style of adolescents. The tool has been used reliably for young people aged thirteen and over (7,8) and offers a standardised measure for evaluating the quality of their close relationships and the barriers to interpersonal relationships. Exploring the amount of support that is both sought and received the ASI also provides insight into cognitive affective attitudes around mistrust, anxiety, avoidance, autonomy and anger management (9). The results provide a platform from which workers can develop the most appropriate strategies for ongoing intervention and for providing the young person with a "second chance secure base" (10).

In research carried out in residential care in the UK nearly all of the young people assessed were categorized as having Insecure attachment styles, and almost 50% had a Disorganised pattern of attachment (9).

### **References**

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