

The Attachment Style Interview for adoption (ASI-AF): A time-effective assessment tool for prospective carers

Prof Antonia Bifulco, Middlesex University

Antonia.bifulco@mdx.ac.uk

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This summary outlines the merits of the Attachment Style Interview (ASI) as a highly effective tool for assessing the risk and resilience of prospective adoptive parents. This is in the context of the current discussions about reducing the assessment time to speed up the process of adoption, as well as drives to improve expert assessments in local authority teams rather than incurring costs for expert assessors. We would like to argue that the ASI is both time-effective in the amount of key information captured in its use early in the assessment and also social workers in adoption-fostering teams can be trained in reliable use of the ASI in the 4-day courses held by Child and Family training around the country. (We also hold courses for psychologist bi-yearly in central London. Please see website for details).

Background

Originally developed and tested in psycho-social research^{1, 2} it was introduced into social work and psychology practice around 2005³ by Parents for Children who commissioned a pilot study in its use. Whilst never formally part of the original Form F, or Prospective Adopters Report (PAR), it encompasses many of the key elements required for assessment and was identified in the Adoption Guidance documentation. The demand for its increasingly high level of use in services has been based on practitioner demand for a user-friendly attachment measure which aids with case analysis of risk and resilience in carers. Trainings are now conducted in local authority and voluntary organisations nationally through Child and Family Training⁴ and the Lifespan Research Group with around 150 teams trained and regularly using the ASI. Feedback from practitioners indicate it to be a highly effective tool, with many courts and panels now requiring attachment style assessments of prospective carers (see overleaf for quotes). The ASI reflects in Secure individuals, the positive interaction, support and stability of relationship with partner, family and friend relationships, the presence of appropriate levels of autonomy, effectiveness of support for combating stress, and openness to help-seeking and service-access, all elements required in adoption practice guidance.

A summary is provided below with contact details provided for further information.

What is the ASI?

- A standardised interview for assessing quality of partner relationship; quality of close supportive relationships and the degree of Secure or Insecure attachment styles (Enmeshed, Fearful, Angry-dismissive, Withdrawn or Dual/disorganised).

¹ Bifulco A, Moran P, Ball C & Lillie A (2002) Adult Attachment Style II. Its relationship to psychosocial depressive-vulnerability. *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology* 37: 60-67.

² Conde, A, Figueirido B & Bifulco A (2011) Attachment style and psychological adjustment in couples *Attachment & Human Development*, 13: 271-291

³ Bifulco A, Jacobs, C, Bunn, A, Thomas G & Irving K (2008) The Attachment Style Interview (ASI) as an assessment of support capacity: exploring its use for adoption-fostering assessment. *Adoption and Fostering*, 32: 33-45.

⁴ www.childandfamilytraining.org.uk

- It is a measure that describes, quantifies and analyses aspects of close relating important for adoption suitability retaining original narrative for justification of scoring and to illustrate service-user views.
- It has established reliability and validity and long history of use in researching families.
- The interview requires a 4-day training in its reliable use. Trainings are held regularly either on team sites or in open courses by Child and Family Training or the Lifespan Training team at Kingston University.
- The training team also provides consultancy in its reliable use and help with analysis and report writing.
- The interview takes around 1.5 hours to administer and 3 hours to score and analyse.

What does the ASI assess?

- In-depth details of quality of partner relationship and of close support. This will establish stability of family and friend setting for future child care.
- Brief assessment of current stressors.
- Resilience, in terms of positive relationships and Secure, or mildly insecure attachment styles. Such resilience relates to positive support, parenting and mental health.
- Risk, in terms of individuals with problematic or distant relationships and marked or moderate levels of insecurity including Dual/disorganised, Enmeshed, Fearful or Angry-dismissive styles. Such risk reflects potential deterioration of relationships post-placement, lack of support and negative attitudes to help seeking, problem parenting and potential mental health difficulties. This is associated with early childhood adversity which is unresolved.
- Parenting associated with highly insecure styles is less competent with issues around helplessness or hostility.⁵
- Those with marked or moderately Withdrawn styles have lower risk levels, but their parenting is likely to lack necessary warmth.

When should the ASI be used?

- Agencies can decide the optimum time to administer the ASI, but its most successful use has been early in the assessment procedure. This can show likely suitability at an early stage and therefore reduce delays in other assessment procedures.
- The ASI can be used again post-placement to look at changes in quality of relationships and attachment security to aid prevent placement breakdown. At this point the supplement - Parenting Role Interview - can be used to assess parenting competence and interaction with the placed child or children.
- The ASI can be used with current or prospective adoptive or foster carers; with family/friend carers and with birth parents for example over contact or custody issues.
- An adolescent version of the ASI is used with children in residential care, and a child version is under development to allow for a more sensitive matching analysis between carer and placed child.

What are the benefits of the ASI?

⁵ Bifulco, A, Moran P Jacobs C & Bunn A (2009) Problem partners and parenting: Exploring linkages with maternal insecure attachment style and her neglect/abuse of children. Attachment & Human Development, 11, 69-85.

- Objective ratings with direct links to the evidence-base. This creates the best balance between standardised assessment and practitioner judgement.
- Transparency and salience of questioning and coding, with the interview booklets having clear instructions and benchmarked rating examples for other multiagency practitioners, panels and courts to understand. This helps with interagency communication, but also defending judgements in the case of complaints through the IRM.
- A good track record in terms of its use in adoption panels and court proceedings.
- A time-effective measure in terms of balancing the length of interview (1.5 hours) scoring and analysis (3 hours) given it substitutes for a number of other assessment tools.
- Whilst there are other interviews in attachment such as the Adult Attachment Interview which has a good track record in researching effects of adoption as an intervention for maltreated children⁶ the ASI is much more user-friendly, can be reliably used by social workers and is very transparent in its coding of ongoing information about current attachment figures.

What are the disadvantages of using the ASI?

- The ASI requires training in its use. This involves 4-days of social worker time. Whilst this involves cost, the training provides CPD for social workers in terms of increasing their knowledge and practical skills around understanding and assessing using attachment theory and methods.
- The ASI requires assessment time commitment. This involves approximately around 4.5 hours in all with scoring and analysis. Whilst this may seem lengthy, it is of course only a small proportion of time spent assessing the adoptive carers, and its yield in terms of objectively assessed risk and resilience factors relevant to adoption suitability is high, making it time-effective.
- Not all professionals in the adoption system will know the ASI in detail. Therefore some 'translation' is required in the final report writing to clarify categories used and their meaning. Standard definitions of the various scales and categories are provided for report writing with advice on where to use original verbatim remarks to illustrate information collected. Increasingly as the ASI is used more widely practitioners in social work, psychology and the legal system, are becoming more familiar with its use and find it readily accessible.
- It is tied to Attachment Theory which is only one psychological theory about families and parenting. However attachment theory is increasingly becoming a dominant and highly effective approach to social work and psychological practice with substantial research to show its validity in this field. The ASI can be used also as a more 'neutral' tool for assessing partner and support relationships, as well as hostile or fearful interactions, which hold as basic social psychological and cognitive risks for problem relating and mental health issues.

More information:

- www.attachmentstyleinterview.com; www.childandfamilytraining.org.uk

⁶ Steele, M., Hodges, J., Kaniuk, J., Hillman, S., & Henderson, K. (2003). Attachment representations and adoption: associations between maternal states of mind and emotion narratives in previously maltreated children. *Journal of Child Psychotherapy*, 29(0), 187-205.

Practice users quotes: (They agree to being contacted about their experience of the ASI.)

* **Hazel Field | Senior Adoption Practitioner** hazel.field@adoptionmattersnw.org

Adoption Matters Northwest | 14 Liverpool Rd | Chester | CH2 1AE

Direct Line: 01978 754488 | Main Office: 01244 390938

'Our agency finds it invaluable not only in terms of info it gives us about prospective adopters can say lots about its relevance to almost all of the "narrative" Parts of the PAR. It provides solid evidential management info about individuals' practice, and I know managers find this useful as supervisors. It has usefulness in providing a benchmark for standards via the training provided by Lifespan, and the agency moderation/consensus meeting which ensure that the tool is used correctly and individual work can be benchmarked against it. We find this raises standards, though in initially can be intimidating for SWs, (as there are few standardised tools at our disposal in adoption against which our practice can be measured).'

* **Dorothy Porter, Independent Family Therapist.** dorothy.porter@talktalk.net

'In relation to adoption assessments ,I find that the the ASI helps create a realistic dynamic description of the Support network in relation to both emotional and practical support and how it is accessed in the present . Thinking about the individual and couple, I have detailed information about what the applicant is saying and doing about both their ability to recognise stressors as well as confiding about them. It helps me with the analysis of a couple's and individual's functioning and what may happen post placement . It can provide a joint language with the applicant to talk about issues pre and post placement, as you can say e.g." you know we talked about the fact that when you feel stressed you tend to become more insular and turn away a little , well that is what is happening now".'