

Adult Attachment Interview

Introduction: I'm going to be interviewing you about your childhood experiences, and how those experiences may have affected your adult personality. So, I'd like to ask you about your early relationship with your family, and what you think about the way it might have affected you. We'll focus mainly on your childhood, but later we'll get on to your adolescence and then to what's going on right now. This interview often takes about an hour, but it could be anywhere between 45 minutes and an hour and a half.

1. Could you start by helping me get oriented to your early family situation, and where you lived and so on? If you could tell me where you were born, whether you moved around much, what your family did at various times for a living?

In the case of participants raised by several persons, and not necessarily raised by the biological or adoptive parents (frequent in high-risk samples), the opening question above may be "Who would you say raised you?"

Did you see much of your grandparents when you were little? If participant indicates that grandparents died during his or her own lifetime, ask the participant's age at the time of each loss. If there were grandparents whom she or he never met, ask whether this (these) grandparents) had died before she was born.

If yes, continue as follows: **Your mother's father died before you were born? How old was she at the time, do you know?** In a casual and spontaneous way, inviting only a very brief reply, the interviewer then asks,

Did she tell you much about this grandfather?

Did you have brothers and sisters living in the house, or anybody besides your parents? Are they living nearby now or do they live elsewhere?

2. I'd like you to try to describe your relationship with your parents as a young child if you could start from as far back as you can remember?

3. Now I'd like to ask you to choose five adjectives or words that reflect your relationship with your mother starting from as far back as you can remember in early childhood--as early as you can go, but say, age 5 to 12 is fine. I know this may take a bit of time, so go ahead and think for a minute...then I'd like to ask you why you chose them. I'll write each one down as you give them to me.

Okay, now let me go through some more questions about your description of your childhood relationship with your mother. You say your relationships with her was (you used the phrase) Are there any memories or incidents that come to mind with respect to (word)

(If one specific but poorly elaborated incident is given, the interviewer probes for a second. Again, the interviewer does this in a manner emphasizing his or her own interest.)

(If as a first response the participant gives a "scripted" or "general" memory, as "Loving. She always took us to the park and on picnics. She was really good on holidays" or "Loving. He taught me to ride a bike"--the interviewer says, "Well, that's a good general description, but I'm wondering if there was a particular time that happened, that made you think about it as loving?")

(If the participant does now offer a specific memory, briefly seek a second memory, as above. If another scripted memory is offered instead, or if the participant responds "I just think that was a loving thing to do", the interviewer should be accepting, and go on to the next adjective. Here as elsewhere the interviewer's behavior indicates that the participant's response is satisfactory.)

4. Now I'd like to ask you to choose five adjectives or words that reflect your childhood relationship with your father, again starting from as far back as you can remember in early childhood--as early as you can go, but again say, age 5 to 12 is fine. I know this may take a bit of time, so go ahead and think again for a minute...then I'd like to ask you why you chose them. I'll write each one down as you give them to me. (Interviewer repeats with probes as above).

5. Now I wonder if you could tell me, to which parent did you feel the closest to and why? Why wasn't there this feeling with the other parent?

6. When you were upset as a child, what would you do?

---When you were upset emotionally when you were little, what would you do? (Wait for participant's reply). **Can you think of a specific time that happened?**

---Can you remember what would happen when you were hurt, physically? (Wait for participant's reply). **Again, do any specific incidents (or, do any other incidents) come to mind?**

---Were you ever ill when you were little? (Wait for participant's reply). **Do you remember what would happen?**

When the participant describes going to a parent, see first what details they can give you spontaneously. Try to get a sense of how the parent or parents responded, and then when and if it seems appropriate you can briefly ask one or two clarifying questions.

"I was just wondering, do you remember being held by either of your parents at any of these times--I mean, when you were upset, or hurt, or ill?"

7. What is the first time you remember being separated from your parents?

--How did you respond? Do you remember how your parents responded?

--Are there any other separations that stand out in your mind?

8. Did you ever feel rejected as a young child? Of course, looking back on it now, you may

realize it wasn't really rejection, but what I'm trying to ask about here is whether you remember ever having rejected in childhood.

--How old were you when you first felt this way, and what did you do?

--Why do you think your parent did those things--do you think he/she realized he/she was rejecting you?

Interviewer may want to add a probe by rephrasing the question here, especially if no examples are forthcoming. The probe we suggest here is:

--Did you ever feel pushed away or ignored?"

--So, were you ever frightened or worried as a child?

9. Were your parents ever threatening with you in any way - maybe for discipline, or even jokingly?

-- Some people have told us for example that their parents would threaten to leave them or send them away from home.

Some people have memories of threats or of some kind of behavior that was abusive.

If the interviewer suspects that abuse or other traumatic experiences occurred (maybe something was alluded to during the probe for adjectives, for instance), it is important to establish some dialog around a specific event or two, if possible. The coder must understand the nature of "harsh discipline" or "beatings" in order to determine if it qualifies as abuse (Did it leave marks? Was the subject overwhelmingly frightened or terrified?) and after identifying the abuse, the coder needs some dialog around an event to score.

--Example: Could you elaborate a bit on a specific time that happened? What were the circumstances?

And these follow-ups should be asked:

--How old were you at the time? Did it happen frequently?

--Do you feel this experience affects you now as an adult?

--Does it influence your approach to your own child?

**--Did you have any such experiences involving people outside your family?
(if so, same follow-up probes)**

10. In general, how do you think your overall experiences with your parents have affected your adult personality?

--Are there any aspects to your early experiences that you feel were a set-back in your development?

If the participant has named one or two setbacks, the follow-up probe used is:

---Are there any other aspects of your early experiences, that you think might have held your development back, or had a negative effect on the way you turned out?

If the participant has understood the question, but has not considered anything about early experiences a setback, the follow-up probe used is:

---Is there anything about your early experiences that you think might have held your development back, or had a negative effect on the way you turned out?

11. Why do you think your parents behaved as they did during your childhood?

12. Were there any other adults with whom you were close, like parents, as a child?

--- Or any other adults who were especially important to you, even though not parental?

13. Did you experience the loss of a parent or other close loved one while you were a young child--for example, a sibling, or a close family member?

--Could you tell me about the circumstances, and how old you were at the time?

--How did you respond at the time?

--Was this death sudden or was it expected?

--Can you recall your feelings at that time?

--Have your feelings regarding this death changed much over time? (If not volunteered earlier.)

-- Did you attend the funeral, and what was this like for you?

If loss of a parent or sibling:

--What would you say was the effect on your (other parent) and on your household and how did this change over the years?

--Would you say this loss has had an effect on your adult personality?

(Where relevant)--**How does it affect your approach to your own child?**

13a. Did you lose any other important persons during your childhood?

(Same queries--again, this refers to people who have died rather than separation experiences).

13b. Have you lost other close persons, in adult years? (Same queries).

14. Other than any difficult experiences you've already described, have you had any other experiences which you regard as potentially traumatic?

Let the participant free-associate to this question, then clarify if necessary with a phrase such as, **I mean, any experience which was overwhelmingly and immediately terrifying.**

(If the subject reveals physical or sexual abuse or some other trauma that was terrifying, use the same follow-up probes for abuse to the extent the subject is okay with the discussion.)

15. Now I'd like to ask you a few more questions about your relationship with your parents. Were there many changes in your relationship with your parents (or remaining parent) after childhood? We'll get to the present in a minute but right now I mean changes occurring roughly between your childhood and adulthood.

16. Now I'd like to ask you, what is your relationship with your parents (or remaining parent) like for you now as an adult? Here I am asking about your current relationship.

-- Do you have much contact with your parents at present?

--What would you say the relationship with your parents is like currently?

--Could you tell me about any (or any other) sources of dissatisfaction in your current relationship with your parents? Any special (or any other) sources of special satisfaction?

17. I'd like to move now to a different sort of question--it's not about your relationship with your parents, instead it's about an aspect of your current relationship with (specific child of special interest to the researcher, or all the participant's children considered together). How do you respond now, in terms of feelings, when you separate from your child / children? (For adolescents or individuals without children, ask about imagined child. See protocol.)

(after sufficient time) --**Do you ever feel worried about (child)?**

(If subject says that yes, she worries a lot, it is helpful to ask what sort of things she worries about. The coder will be trying to determine if the subject fears that she might lose the child to death and whether or not her fears are connected to a source.)

18. If you had three wishes for your child twenty years from now, what would they be? I'm thinking partly of the kind of future you would like to see for your child. I'll give you a minute or two to think about this one.

19. Is there any particular thing which you feel you learned above all from your own childhood experiences? I'm thinking here of something you feel you might have gained from the kind of childhood you had.

20. We've been focusing a lot on the past in this interview, but I'd like to end up looking quite a ways into the future. We've just talked about what you think you may have learned from your own childhood experiences. I'd like to end by asking you what you hope your child (or our imagined child) might have learned from his/her experiences of being parented by you.