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General Notes to Supplement the AAI Protocol

Overview

These notes are offered to give new interviewers an understanding of key elements in conducting an AAI. Adhering to Mary Main's AAI Protocol makes life easier for the coder who is attempting to unravel and analyze the dialog. For instance, obtaining all five adjectives before getting into a discussion about them presents the coder with the "constellation of adjectives" that the subject must then defend with memories. Also, knowing to ask a subject who has been abused to "describe the circumstances" or to tell about an instance or two of abuse can make the difference in the determination of the important Unresolved classification. If there is no dialog to analyze regarding abuse (or loss or other trauma), classifying the transcript becomes difficult. More about these important topics below.

Let the Silence Fall

One of the best things an interviewer can do—and this quality can mean the difference between a good interview and a great interview—is to leave an appropriate silence when the subject has finished speaking in case he or she thinks of more things to say. Respondents who receive a cut-off "okay!" too quickly at the end of what they just said might be inclined to hold back on embellishing their thoughts, which is not a good thing on an AAI unless you have the occasional subject who is long-winded and needs for you to move the interview along (rarely).

Sound Quality and Interruptions

Sound quality should be one of the first considerations when conducting an AAI. Some subjects talk in a whisper, or mumble, and may need the microphone placed very close, or may need to be asked to speak up if you think the recorder might not pick up the voice. An interview that can't be heard by the transcriber is a waste of time. Moments will arise when a mother has a noisy baby on her lap, or when traffic noise or room noise is compromising the recording quality. Give special attention to avoiding interruptions from a child as much as possible when a subject is talking in apparent anger about a relationship, or when he or she is talking about trauma such as loss or abuse. The AAI is linguistics based, and the coder is looking for such things as becoming lost in anger, or absorbed in relating an incident of abuse, or lapsing into a eulogy when talking about an important loss, for example. Interruptions can spoil the opportunity to evaluate text for absorption in these situations. If you can have a second person entertaining the baby (or trying to, as it's not always easy), that can help, or you can pause the interview until the baby's attention is diverted again.

Question 1: Demographics

This question is designed as a warm-up for the interview and to gather information about where the subject lived, who important caregivers were, etc. Some subjects will automatically answer briefly, but others may start to talk about relationships here. If that should happen, keep in mind that Mary Main says to keep this first question and the subject's response to no more than 2 or 3 minutes at most (unlike most of the interview, when you will allow the subject to talk at length, within reason.) Gently extract the information you need and move on fairly quickly to the next question. Be alert to whether or not the subject mentions any important caregivers besides parents here. Was there a live-in aunt or nanny who was an important caregiver? There will be another question later in the interview about adults the subject was close to, but it's helpful to find this information early so that you can ask for adjectives for other close relationships when you get to Question 3 rather than finding out about other close persons later and having to come back and ask for adjectives then. If both parents and stepparents served as important caregivers during childhood, you will want to get five adjectives and specific memories for all four caregivers.

Questions 3 and 4: The Heart of the AAI Descriptive words or phrases and memories to support them

These questions are at the heart of the AAI. Take your time with them. If you speak too fast with the question requesting five adjectives for an important caregiver, subjects may not grasp all of what you are asking. Slow down here.

When you ask for five adjectives or words to describe the childhood relationship with the mother and then the father, it's important to collect the adjectives before allowing the subject to get into a long-winded discussion. Some subjects will launch into narratives about each adjective as they are coming up with them if you don't gently keep them on topic. There will be plenty of time for discussion in the follow-up probe for memories that illustrate each adjective, and it's important for the coder to see the "constellation of adjectives" that the subject produces to describe the relationship before they actually get into a discussion about each one. If a subject does get into a big discussion, you can interrupt when it feels appropriate (without cutting the subject off and without making her feel she is being corrected) and say, "Okay, I have 'mean' and 'strict.' That's two. Can you think of three more?" (Or whatever works for you to keep the subject on topic of producing adjectives.)

All parts of the question are important:

- 1) Five adjectives or words for the relationship with the mother (be sure to include the word "relationship" in the question)
- 2) ...from early childhood--and then "early childhood" is defined as "from as far back as you can remember, but ages 5 through 12 is fine," so that the subject will understand what you mean by "when you were little" or "childhood" for the rest of the interview.
- 3) "Thinking of these words may take some time" (you are letting the subject know it's okay to have quiet time to think)
- 4) "I will write them down as you give them."
- 5) "Then I'll ask you why you chose them."

(These statements help the subject understand the task so that she doesn't launch into a discussion about each one now.

IMPORTANT: Since the question is rather complex, I suggest coming back and repeating the main task after you have asked the question in its entirety, saying something to the effect, “Okay, so I’m looking for five adjectives or words for the relationship with your mother when you were a small child.”

If the subject gives phrases instead of single words, that’s okay. You can write down “took care of me” or “taught me the rules,” with the idea that these are the subject’s words. Using his or her own words is preferable to requiring single words that you choose.

Allow the subject quiet time to think of adjectives, if he or she needs it. Mary Main, author of the AAI Protocol, stresses the importance of allowing time and encouragement as the subject comes up with a complete constellation of five adjectives unless you are convinced they cannot or will not produce five of them. In determining state of mind regarding attachment strategy, there is no question more important than this one on the AAI, and as a coder, I really need to see discussion around five adjectives for each important caregiver if at all possible.

In AAI Protocol support notes, Mary Main says: “The participant’s ability (or inability) to provide both an overview of the relationship and specific memories supporting that overview forms one of the most critical bases of interview analysis. For this reason it is important for the interviewer to press enough in the effort to obtain the five ‘overview’ adjectives that if a full set is not provided, she or he is reasonably certain that they truly cannot be given.”

Dr. Main goes on to say, “The interviewer’s manner should indicate that waiting as long as a minute is not unusual, and that trying to come up with these words can be difficult. Often, participants indicate by their non-verbal behavior that they are actively thinking through or refining their choices. In this case, an interested silence is warranted. Don’t, however, repeatedly leave the participant in embarrassing silences for very long periods. Some research participants may tell you that this is a hard job, and you can readily acknowledge this. If the participant has extreme difficulty coming up with more than one or two words or adjectives, even after some quiet places and attempts by you to get them to think back into childhood, you can then say, ‘Well, that’s fine. Thank you, we’ll just go with the ones you’re already given me.’” Again, though, this conclusion is a last resort when attempting to get the subject to produce adjectives for the childhood relationships.

Follow up to Question 3: Memories to support adjectives

Example of how to ask for support of each adjective: “The first word you chose was ‘loving.’ Can you think of a specific memory that would illustrate why you chose that word to describe the childhood relationship with your mom?”

1. “Relationship” --So you are repeating the word “relationship” in the follow-up question (just as in the original question)—important, because if the subject then talks about the mother being beautiful and tall, for example, after you have clearly asked her to talk about the relationship, the

coder will know the question was about the relationship – much better than having to correct the subject because you didn't use the word "relationship in the question."

2. "Childhood" -- Note that in the AAI Protocol, Mary Main includes the word "childhood relationship" as a reminder when asking for specific memories for each adjective, so your question could be worded like this: "The first word you used to describe your childhood relationship with your mom was loving" or you could make the reference to childhood in the second part of the question and say, "Can you think of a specific memory that fits with the word 'loving' to describe the relationship when you were little?" In other words, you can vary the questions to make them conversational, but be sure to refer to childhood or "when little" or "when you were a kid" (etc) with each question. It is important the subject be reminded they are talking about childhood when probing for memories of each adjective so that if they then start talking about the present or the more recent past, the coder will know that the question was clear. If you ask the question correctly, and the subject still talks about the present relationship, there is no need to correct them, but be assured the diversion to the present has meaning to the coder.

If the subject appears to be talking in generalities, make an attempt or two to get specifics. You could, for instance, say, "That gives me a good general idea of how the relationship was loving, but see if you can come up with a specific memory or instance from your childhood to illustrate why you chose that word." Some subjects won't be able to give anything but generalities, and that's okay, but the coder wants to be sure the subject understood you were looking for a specific instance in time, if the memories can be accessed.

Questions on Trauma/Abuse

Question #9, "Were your parents ever threatening with you in any way—maybe for discipline, or even jokingly?"

Mary Main writes about the importance of having a discussion of the circumstances of abusive incidents in her "AAI Protocol," but she does not actually list this question in the protocol, so be sure when you make your own notes to remind yourself of the "circumstances of abuse" question, as the first (and most important) follow-up when a subject says that yes, she was threatened or abused or received harsh discipline. The best chance the coder has for discovering an Unresolved state of mind is usually when the subject describes an actual instance of abuse. Example: "I was racing up the steps, one, two three, jump! to try to escape my father, and he was really really really angry, and I dashed into the closet and hid behind the clowns." (Note that the subject has become so absorbed with the panic of escaping her father that she has become less coherent and almost unaware of the interviewer, not explaining, for example, that the "clowns" were in a picture on a cereal box in the closet.)

You will want to listen all through the interview for any references to extreme behaviors such as beatings, slaps, frightening rages, harsh discipline, and even being witness to abuse by one family member toward another, which counts as physical abuse even if the subject was not the victim. Ask what the subject means by "harsh discipline," etc. if they do not discuss it voluntarily. The coder must identify abuse by AAI standards before the subject's state of mind related to the abuse can be evaluated, and in order to identify abuse, the coder will want to know

how frightening the incidents were and whether or not the subject had welts or bruises or lasting pain, or if she witnessed someone else being abused. If this information is not forthcoming, it is okay to ask directly, unless a subject says he or she would prefer not to talk about it. It is fine to ask, “Did the beatings or slaps ever leave marks?” Don't be too quick to back off these discussions, even if the subject appears emotional or upset, but if the subject says he or she does not want to discuss it, then that request must be honored, of course. You may still be able to ask non-intrusive questions such as what age the person was when the behavior occurred, how frequent it was, and how they responded, depending on your subject's willingness to answer. An AAI where a subject does not discuss an abuse cannot be scored for Unresolved state of mind due to that abuse.

Also, be sure to ask if the subject ever had threatening or abusive experiences from anyone outside the family. *Remember that loss and abuse questions are not confined to childhood, but relate to traumas that occur any time in the subject's life.*

Loss

As you are determining what losses the subject has experienced, also find out if they were persons she was close to. You probably don't need to ask Loss questions regarding relatives or friends that the subject says she wasn't close to. Of course, if an important caregiver is deceased, that loss should be questioned even if the subject says she wasn't close to the person. The lack of closeness to a mother or father, for example, is not necessarily an indication of the significance of the loss.

Again, be sure to ask about the circumstances of a loss, for it is in this discussion that the coder may note lapses in discourse or reasoning. If a subject just says, “She died of a heart attack,” ask them to tell you more about that, maybe how they found out about it, or just ask, “Could you tell me a little more about that?”

Other Trauma

This question relates not just to parental experiences, but anything in the subject's life that felt traumatic. The AAI Protocol gives this follow-up (after giving the subject a moment to reflect on the original question) to help clarify: “I mean, any experience which was overwhelmingly and immediately terrifying.”

If the subject does talk about something that felt traumatic, be sure to ask at the end of the discussion if there are any other traumatic experiences they haven't talked about. The subject might have more than one, but might not tell about them if you don't ask.

Separation Question #17:

If you get a subject who talks about fairly intense worrying when separated from the child – that something might happen to the child – it would be helpful to the coder if you add a follow-up question to ask what sort of things he or she worries about. The coder is trying to see, for one

thing, if the subject worries that “something might happen” (meaning death) and whether or not this worrying is connected to a source (like living in a bad neighborhood).

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