

Recording and Transcribing the Adult Attachment Interview

The Adult Attachment Interview is a structured interview devised by Carol George, Nancy Kaplan, and Mary Main (1984, 1985, 1996). It includes approximately 18 standardized questions, with standardized follow-up questions or "probes". The interview focuses on family relationships, and the audiotape, the disk and the printout should be treated as highly confidential material.

The interview should be audio-taped using the best equipment available. The person interviewing the subject may want to use two microphones rather than one for the recording, so that interviewer and subject can both be heard clearly. Before each session begins, the interviewer should test out the microphones. This is done by attempting a recording in the traditional manner (e.g., "testing ...testing"), while placing herself in the position which will be taken by both subject and interviewer. It is wise also to adopt positions that the subject might take which are less than ideal for recording purposes (for example, a highly slumped posture), and talking in a low voice (the subject's voice may drop at certain points in the interview). Microphones pinned to interviewer and subject collars are ideal for recording.

Once the interviewer is satisfied that the equipment is working, the date, time, interviewer name, and subject identification number should be spoken onto the tape through recording as well as written on the label. The researcher will let the transcriber know whether and where this information is to appear on the transcript.

On the average, the Adult Attachment Interview takes just over an hour to conduct, but some interviews take only 40 minutes, while some run to two hours. The person conducting the interview should be aware of the time at which the first side of the tape will be running out, and should gracefully pause as her speaking turn arises to change the tape before it comes to a halt. Otherwise, the subject may be disconcerted by this break from the intimacy of the interview (all too often, the tape runs out in the middle of discussion of important losses), and the researcher may lose vital information. The interviewer should also be prepared for the possibility of needing a second tape. Some recorders now beep gently to announce the arrival of the end of one side of the tape.

The Adult Attachment Interview is transcribed verbatim, inclusive of indications of speaking difficulty and genuine speaking errors on the part of both interviewer and participant. The only changes made by the transcriber are those made in the final printout in order to preserve confidentiality. Every word spoken by both interviewer and participant must be transcribed exactly, as are stammers (*she came from Ar, Arkansas*), indications of assent or dissent (*mmm-hm, Arkansas*) and place-holders (*she came from uh, uh, Arkansas*).

Before beginning her first transcription, the transcriber should read through the directions for the interview several times. In addition, the researcher she is working with may want to familiarize her with the forms and intentions of the analysis of the interview, and the way that particular scores depend upon accurate transcription (for example, note the reliance on accurate transcription and punctuation implied in the scores for preoccupying anger, for passivity of thought processes, and the score for coherency of transcript). As the interview has come increasingly to be understood in terms of

discourse between two conversational partners (rather than as a narrative produced by one person), and as speech errors upon the part of the person being interviewed have come to form the basis of several of the scoring systems (above), the necessity for increased accuracy of transcription has become evident. Similarly, the mechanics of analysis are now being worked out systematized (for example, notes on probable experience are being placed to the left of the text, state of mind to the right), and this leads in turn to special requirements for formatting.

The interview should be transcribed in keeping with the following directions. It is assumed that transcription is done using a computer.

Confidentiality issues

All names, places, and indications of ethnic origin as described by the subject/participant are first transcribed into the record as spoken. Following transcription of the complete interview, the transcriber uses search-replace or the equivalent for her word processing program to change each name in order as Person 1, Person 2, and each place as City 1, Country 1, Country 2, etc. References to ethnic origin should also be changed to Ethnic 1, Ethnic 2, etcetera. Some researchers will have developed codes for summarizing professions mentioned in a way that will be less identifying for their subjects. (You may want to copy the file before making this special "confidentiality" printout, so that the researcher you are working with will have both the altered copy and the original readily available.)

At the end of the text, and on a separate page, you should print out a key to the above for the researcher. This will look as follows:

Person 1 Ida
 Country 1 England
 Ethnic 1 Polish
 Ethnic 2 Greek

The researcher you are working with will let you know whether she wishes you to make further alterations in the text.

FORMAT

The transcriber must be familiar with the format of the AAI. This means not only reading the complete interview, but also keeping a copy for ready reference while transcribing (for example, a summary of questions and question numbers may be kept nearby). This will permit her to follow the interview most easily.

Underlining and numbering major questions

Each major question in the interview is transcribed in bold, and underlined. Many researchers will also suggest that the transcriber assign the interview its number from the

interview summary. Note, however, that the question will be transcribed *as the interviewer speaks it*, rather than in accordance with the formatting provided in written form. Thus:

8. Did you ever, uh, feel rejected as a young child? You may not have thought of it as, quite as, rejection at the time.

This imaginary interviewer is not doing very well! However, the transcriber still must transcribe the question as spoken.

Indicating who is speaking

Each major speaking turn by each speaker is assigned its own paragraph. Each interviewer turn is printed in bold, while participant responses are printed in regular type. Consequently, there is no need to identify speakers further (as for example, by I. for interviewer, S. for subject, etc.) Thus:

Do you remember a time?

Uh, uh, no, I don't think I do. Well, w, wait, maybe once or twice.

How old were you when you first felt this way?

I guess about seven.

Seven, okay. And the next time?

I was nine.

Dealing with brief remarks or sounds

Very brief remarks over-riding, under-riding, or added to the speech of the primary speaker by an alternative speaker are usually inserted into the paragraph in italics and in parentheses. The italics and parens are used no matter which speaker is inserting a brief remark or taking a brief turn. What we are trying to avoid with the italicized parens is making distracting paragraph changes which neither clarify the text nor save trees. The following is what we are attempting to avoid.

That's a hard one.

Yeah.

I can't think, give me a minute--

Okay.

Uh, okay.

Okay.

I'm ready with the first one.

This should instead have been transcribed as follows:

That's a hard one. (*Yeah*). I can't think, give me a minute (*okay*). Uh, okay
 (*okay*) I'm ready with the first one.

In the following example, the transcriber is again making the right decision in inserting brief remarks or sounds into the text of the primary speaker. Thus the following example is correctly transcribed--

The next time I was about nine (*nine, okay*). It was around Christmas, and I didn't get the bike I wanted. I was pretty upset, as you can imagine (*mmm*) 'cause I had been planning on it for months.

Well, I'd like to know (*okay*) what you did when you felt this way. Do you
 (*uh, uh*) remember?

I, I didn't tell anyone about it, because I felt like if they didn't remember, I wasn't going to remind them--(*so you didn't remind them*). I didn't let them know.

The above examples are clear conversational insertions into the conversational "turn" taken by a primary speaker. They are remarks made while the primary speaker is still engaged in conversation. Whenever, in contrast, definite turns are being taken, they are always assigned paragraphs. As an example, an answer to a question, whether short or long, is always transcribed as a second paragraph. The transcriber will usually be able to determine whether other brief remarks are important answers worthy of use of a second paragraph from pauses, voice drops, voice rises, and content. The following sorts of turns will always be assigned to full paragraphs.

9. Uh, were your parents ever threatening with you in any way--maybe for discipline, or maybe just jokingly?

No.

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

--uh.

You can take a minute to answer.

Yes, they did.

6
(5)
page numbers
are off

Margins

Most researchers will prefer very wide margins at each side of the page, as notes indicating the subject's experiences will be made to the left of the text, and notes regarding the subject's state of mind will be made to the right. The researchers you are working with will let you know the width of margin they prefer (probably about 1.5 to 2.0 inches to each side of the text). Many will also ask you to use line-numbering, running either through the interview (e.g., lines 1-1400), or beginning anew on each page.

Non-speech sounds

The researcher you are working with will let you know whether non-speech sounds, such as laughing or crying, are to be recorded. Some will elect to have you record these in the original text, but omit them in the printout. If a subject is quietly crying for several seconds, and the researcher prefers not to record this information, you must still record and time the pause from a conversational turn. Thus you may transcribe:

--and then she, she {{transcriber note: subject is crying quietly during these 7 sec}}

Go ahead and take a minute.

As an alternative, you may simply transcribe:

--and then she, she {{7 sec}}

Go ahead and take a minute.

Indications of assent and dissent often take the form of sounds rather than "yes" and "no" statements. These have a fairly universal form, so the transcriber will not have much difficulty in hearing the difference. Unfortunately, because of the absence of an established convention for indicating dissent, transcribers sometimes use the same written form for indications of assent and dissent (using, for example, Mm-hm for both yes and no as indicated by the subject). This is a mistake which will leave the researcher in substantial difficulty. For example:

Were you ever abused as a young child?

Mm-hm.

Were your parents ever...

The researcher reading this printout will have to return to the tape to determine the real answer. It seems as though the interviewer heard "mm-hm" in the negative, but the interviewer may have been mistaken, and the researcher will need to know. To avoid this confusion, all indications of dissent should be followed by double brackets indicating that

the transcriber heard the non-speech sounds as indicating the negative. It is usually not necessary to mark assent as well, because indications of assent (*mm-hm*), of listening (*mm* or *uh-huh*), and of encouraging the primary speaker to continue (*mmm*, *uh-huh*) occur very frequently in these texts.

In short, having to mark each indication of assent in double brackets seems too much to ask of the transcriber, while failure to mark dissent is intolerable to the researcher. Texts should therefore be marked as follows:

Were you ever abused as a young child?

Mm-mm {{no}}.

Were your parents ever threatening with you in any other way?

Mm-hm.

What would they do?

Well, it was pretty awful, I mean really awful (*mmmm*). They would take out, take out the belt (*uh-huh*) and whip it around in the air, or slap it down on the nearest piece of furniture.

Transcriber cannot hear

If no matter how hard you try, you cannot really make out something the subject says, you should indicate this in the double brackets which are always your way of stepping into the transcript. You may make guesses regarding which of two words or phrases may have been spoken in the double brackets.

Where you cannot hear one or both speakers for a time, do not forget to mark the length of time that you cannot hear the conversation as well as the person or persons whose speech is being lost. You might deal with this problem as below:

--and then she, she got a {{house?/horse?}} and everything seemed to change. Of course {{.....subject seems to be speaking but transcriber cannot hear for these seven seconds}}. Then when she--

{{interviewer seems to be speaking, then subject, but transcriber cannot hear for 14 seconds}}.

Slips of the tongue, and other speech errors and omissions

Transcripts of these interviews not infrequently include slips of the tongue, omissions, and other forms of mis-speaking. These changes, omissions and slips form

the basis of several interview scoring systems and classifications. An accurate transcription of the speaker's errors is vital, and failure to record them accurately can lead to a mis-classification of the entire transcript.

Some transcribers may have had previous training in which corrections of speech errors were very much encouraged (as, for example, transcribing the reports of several persons speaking at a meeting). In this case, they may be in the habit of correcting what is actually heard, e.g., inserting dropped words, or correcting mis-spoken ones. They might, for example, automatically correct the spoken sentence--

"She was aw... and had a hard time figuring out what was wrong with her"--

to the following--

She was aw... and I had a hard time figuring out what was wrong with her.

In transcribing the Adult Attachment Interview, corrections must not be made. Sentences of the type actually spoken point to a particular interview classification.

Other transcribers may work too quickly, and transcribe errors into the spoken text where the speaker made none. The costs to the researcher will be enormous if the transcriber should permit unusual or bizarre usages to appear as a result of poor transcription (as see "punctuation", below).

When language is read back on the screen or from printout, it sometimes contains unusual usages, errors, or anomalous meanings which have escaped the transcriber as she recorded the text. Transcriber, interviewer and researcher can be saved a good bit of time if the transcriber checks each half-page or so on the screen or printout. Unusual sentence forms and unusual meanings can then be immediately checked against the tape. When meanings are extremely anomalous, but appear to be accurate transcriptions of what was said (as, "I have a lot of letters he sent me after he was dead"), the transcriber **MUST** use double brackets to step into the text with {{sic}}. This is the printer's traditional way of indicating that the printing is accurate (sic being Latin for thus, or exactly thus).

Punctuation

As implied above, correct punctuation is critical to the scoring of the Adult Attachment Interview. As speakers know instinctively, Sentence endings are usually indicated by a voice drop and stop; questions often but not always by a rise; commas by a pause; and colons by a dramatic full stop with emphasis. Admittedly, however, finding the correct punctuation for representing spoken language is not always this easy.

One major scoring system in the interview looks for run-on sentences such as the following:

"And then I went there but I don't know how because it was very far away and hard to find and when I saw him standing there, but he was not very friendly, and I felt like I didn't really care why he was or wasn't, it was his fault not mine that things had turned out the way they had and I wasn't going to do a thing about it."

Presuming that this is the sentence as spoken, it should be transcribed as above. The transcriber should not correct the sentence in any way. By mis-interpreting vocal indications of a comma as a full stop (period) the transcriber working with the above could make it more coherent and cause errors in coding. This could be done by inserting a period, rather than a comma, between "wasn't" and "it" in the above sentence, so that it would read as two sentences.

The transcriber needs to understand why punctuation is so critical. Let us deal, then, with the spoken sentence--

"She was a really lovely sort of person, I think. So she was like, I guess she was fourteen at the time."

Punctuated with a comma following "like", the sentence as transcribed above represents an apparently active change of direction for the speaker, as indicated by a suspension and minimal pause in the speaker's intonation on and following "like". This speaker might merely be deciding to give the young woman's age in a more graceful way than by saying "So she was like, fourteen."

On the other hand, it is conceivable that a full voice drop accompanied "like" on the tape. In this case, the sentence as spoken and transcribed would read as follows:

She was a really lovely sort of person, I think. So she was like. I guess she was fourteen at the time.

This would indicate that the speaker lost track of an idea following "like", which would be accurate given a sudden cut-off of speech at "like", or a voice drop indicating a sentence ending. In this case, the subject may have lost a thought descriptive of the qualities of this young woman. This has an entirely different meaning and points to different scoring and classification.

Pauses and interruptions

In the Adult Attachment Interview, noticeable pauses of less than two seconds are to be marked by two dashes, as, --. By noticeable pauses, we mean exactly that--silences which go beyond that expected as speakers process their thoughts or take conversational turns. The transcriber will notice these, but need not assess their duration, which the reader will presume to be somewhere between one and two seconds. For longer pauses, the transcriber will need a stopwatch. This is not as tedious or time-consuming as it seems. Knowing the duration of these longer pauses is, moreover, vital to the reader.

Pauses lasting longer than two seconds are indicated by dots, each separated by three spaces, with each dot indicating one second of time, followed by the transcriber's indication of the actual number of seconds. Thus an eleven second pause would be indicated as {{11 sec}}. The dots are used to provide the reader with a visual analogy to the length of time that the speaker falls silent. While this seems absurd for delineating the difference between a four second {{4 sec}} and a six second {{6 sec}} pause, it will keep readers from over-riding or reading past

a pause lasting 32 seconds
 {{32 sec}}.

Pauses must always be attributed to the correct speaker. When the interviewer asks a question, and the subject fails to speak for 32 seconds, the conversational turn is presumed to have been passed to the subject, so the pause is attributed to the subject, not the interviewer. On the other hand, when a sentence is left incomplete, the pause is attributed to the person speaking the incomplete sentence. In the following example, the subject has paused once:

How old were you at the time?

I was, I was {{5 sec}} very little.

In the next example, the subject has been slow to respond, and has paused twice.

How old were you at the time?

--I was, I was {{5 sec}} very little.

The correct marking of pauses of course depends on correct interpretations of "spoken" punctuation. Clear periods and questions make the transcription of pauses easy, but sometimes a suspension of the voice makes clear that the speaker has not finished a sentence, but is still thinking. This is tricky, but the silence should probably then be attributed to that speaker.

As an example, let us presume that there is a 1 and 1/2 second silence between the speaking turns taken by the following two speakers (the example is without punctuation):

"Where were you at the time"

"I don't know"

{{1 1/2 sec silence}}

"Do you want to take a minute to think"

The transcriber will indicate the person who paused through listening carefully to the voice speaking "I don't know". If there is a full stop, the silence will be attributed to the interviewer, who has elected through silence to give the speaker more time. In that case the transcription should read as follows:

Where were you at the time?

I don't know.

--Do you want to take a minute to think?

However, the intonation assigned by the subject to "I don't know" may indicate that no full stop has been reached, and that she is trying to think. In this case, "know" may have been sounded as "kn--ow" with no accompanying voice drop, to indicate suspension of

speech while retaining a conversational turn. The correct transcription will then be as follows:

Where were you at the time?

I don't know--

Do you want to take a minute to think?

Interruptions are indicated by slashes (/), assigned to both the person being interrupted, and the person doing the interrupting. In assessing the Adult Attachment Interview, it is vital for the reader to know whether the subject has simply run out of steam at the end of her conversational turn, or been interrupted by the interviewer. The following speaker has run out of steam:

I can't seem to get to it, I just--

Take a minute to think.

But the subject is understood differently if she has simply been interrupted:

I can't seem to get to it, I just/

/Take a minute to think.

In transcribing real-life conversations, some researchers use double slashes to indicate that two people are speaking at the same time. In this case, the words which overlap are encased within these double slashes for both speakers. This does not yet seem necessary for the Adult Attachment Interview, where over-riding is almost always indeliberate rather than indicative of struggles over a conversational turn.

Final reading by the interviewer

Following transcription, the person conducting the interview should listen to the audio tape while reviewing and if necessary correcting the text. The interviewer may hear both her own speech and that of the subject more clearly than the transcriber has been able to do in spots, and will be able to indicate that statements which might otherwise have seemed somewhat bizarre (as, "cold...it's cold") may actually refer to the temperature of the room in which the interview was conducted. If this is the case, the text should be followed in double brackets, as,

But he died when I was seven...cold, it's cold...{ {interviewer note: subject was referring to temperature of the interview room, which was cold} }.

Transcribers should give their name and the date of their transcription at the end of the transcription. Later corrections should be dated and signed (e.g., those made by the interviewer, as above).

Note. Some computer programs permit a numbering of each line as printed out, which is very useful for coding, although somewhat inelegant. In addition, some transcription machines permit a transcriber to mark places on the tape which she wishes others to review (for example, spots which are difficult to hear), and she may wish to indicate this number in the text.