The Adult Attachment Interview: coherence & validation in adolescents

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Chapter 1

General Introduction

History of attachment theory

In the 1940s, John Bowlby started to develop attachment theory. Observations of young children being separated from their mothers led him to emphasize the importance of the mother-child relationship (Cassidy, 1999). Early writings on attachment have mainly focused on young children. However, Bowlby (1973) stressed the role of attachment across the lifespan, "from the cradle to the grave": "*For not only young children, it is now clear, but human beings of all ages are found to be at their happiest and to be able to deploy their talents to best advantage when they are confident that, standing behind them, there are one or more trusted persons who will come to their aid should difficulties arise. The person trusted provides a secure base from which his (or her) companion can operate.*" (p. 359). Attachment relationships thus remain important during adolescence and adulthood.

A move to the level of representation

Until the call by Main, Kaplan and Cassidy (1985) to "move to the level of representation" in attachment research, individual differences in attachment relied on the observation of an infant's nonverbal behavior during the stressful Strange Situation Procedure (SSP; Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978). On the basis of Bowlby's (1973, 1980, 1982) description of attachment as a working model or mental representation Main and colleagues (1985) suggested to operationalize individual differences in adult attachment as differences in mental representations of the self in relation to attachment as they emerged from autobiographical narratives about childhood attachment experiences. This approach paved the way for investigating attachment in older children and adults. While in infancy attachment classifications were based on observations of nonverbal behavior, verbal behavior was now suggested to have the potential of being a window to attachment representations (Main et al., 1985). The Adult Attachment Interview (AAI; George, Kaplan, & Main, 1996; Hesse, 1999; Main, Goldwyn, & Hesse, 2003) was developed to derive an adult's overall state of mind with respect to attachment from the coherence of his or her narrative about attachment experiences in the past.

Development of the AAI

The AAI was first administered in a study of Main, Kaplan and Cassidy (1985) focusing on the relation between parents' attachment representation and infants' strange situation classification 5 years earlier. While reviewing early AAI transcripts, Main was able to correctly predict SSP classifications in many cases (see Hesse, 1999 for an overview). However, no rule system for coding the AAIs had yet been developed. Main and Goldwyn developed a formal AAI coding system using 44 AAI transcripts of the Berkeley longitudinal study. With feedback from the SSP classification of the infant, the coding system was adjusted and revised after categorization of each parent's AAI transcript. The remaining 66 transcripts of the Berkeley study were coded without feedback from SSP classifications. In this second sample, it was found that parents with a secure attachment representation most frequently had infants who had been classified secure in the SSP five years earlier (Main, Hesse, & Kaplan, 2005; Main et al., 1985).

Later it was discovered that lapses in de monitoring of reasoning and discourse during discussions of loss or trauma during the AAI were related to disorganized infant classifications in the SSP. In a subsample of 53 mothers from the Berkeley longitudinal study, it was found that 16% of the mothers who did not show such lapses in discourse had infants who were disorganized, while 91% of the mothers who showed significant lapses did have infants who were classified disorganized 5 years earlier (Main & Hesse, 1990). The unresolved classification thus also showed high correspondence between unresolved attachment in mothers and disorganized attachment in their infants.

Since then a large number of studies has examined the concordance in attachment of parents and their children (e.g., Pederson, Gleason, Moran, & Bento, 1998; Steele, Steele, & Fonagy, 1996). In a meta-analysis Van IJzendoorn (1995) showed that parents transmit their attachment representation to their children. This transmission takes place, at least partially, via parental sensitive responsiveness. Because the association between parental AAI classification and infant SSP classification is not fully explained by parental sensitivity, the existence of a transmission gap became clear.

The AAI protocol and classification system

The Adult Attachment Interview is an hour-long, semi-structured interview (George et al., 1996). After a warming-up question about the family setup, respondents are asked

to describe the relationship they had with their parents as a young child. Next, participants are probed to give five adjectives for the relation they had with each parent. For each adjective a specific incident is asked to support the adjective. Other questions concern being emotionally upset as a child, being physically hurt, and being ill. Then respondents are probed about the first time they were separated from their parents and whether they ever felt rejected by their parents. They are also asked how they think they are affected by their childhood experiences and whether there were any aspects that they would consider to be a setback to their development. Furthermore, individuals are asked why they think their parents behaved as they did. Some questions concern the loss of loved ones, experiences of abuse, and other traumatic experiences. The interviewer then focuses on changes in the relationship with the parents since childhood and how the relationship with the parents is currently. Finally, participants are asked to give three wishes for their own child for twenty years later and what they would hope their children would learn from being parented by them (George, et al., 1996; see also Hesse, 1999).

On the basis of verbatim transcripts of the AAI, individuals are judged as having a secure (F), insecure-dismissing (Ds), or insecure-preoccupied (E) attachment representation (Main et al., 2003). Secure individuals are able to freely value their experiences and yet stay objective regardless of the nature of their experiences. When they describe their parents as warm or loving, they are able to support this claim with examples of specific incidents. When childhood experiences were not so positive secure individuals are reflective, thoughtful, and often implicitly forgiving.

Dismissing participants devalue the importance of attachment relationships and experiences. They tend to emphasize their own strength and independence. Parents are typically described in positive terms, while support is lacking or contradictory evidence is present. Dismissing participants deny or minimize possible negative influences of childhood experiences. For example, a participant may claim to have benefited from being often rejected by parents because it taught him to take care of him or herself (Main et al., 2003).

Preoccupied individuals are still confused and overwhelmed by early attachment relationships and experiences. They are not able to focus fruitfully on the questions; neither do they give objective descriptions of their childhood experiences. Preoccupied persons appear to be angry towards their parents, or their discourse is characterized by vague speech (Main et al., 2003). For example, a preoccupied individual can go on and on about a little mistake his mother made in the past, while also trying to get interviewer agreement by saying *"don't you think that was ridiculous of my mother to do?"*

On top of their main classification, individuals might be classified as unresolved-disorganized (U) (Main et al., 2003). This classification is given when an individual

shows lapses in the monitoring of reasoning or discourse in reaction to loss or other traumatic events. An example of a lapse in the monitoring of reasoning when talking about a loss is when a participant indicates disbelief that the person is dead, by saying *"My father thinks I am a good mother"* while the father had died before the grandchild was even born. A participant who, for example, pays unusual attention to details of a funeral is showing a lapse in the monitoring of discourse.

When an interview transcript cannot be placed in one of the three organized categories, the interview is judged "cannot classify". This is the case when a transcript has strong characteristics of both the dismissing and preoccupied categories. For example, the participant may idealize mother while being angry with father. This category is rarely present in non-clinical samples (Main et al., 2003).

Coherence of discourse

While Main and Goldwyn's coding system first consisted of general content-oriented descriptions of the AAI categories, they also developed continuous scales which were mainly concerned with the discourse process, namely: coherence of transcript, coherence of mind, metacognitive monitoring, idealization, insistence on lack of memory, derogation of attachment, involving anger, passivity of thought processes, fear of loss of a child, unresolved loss, and unresolved trauma (see Hesse, 1999 for an overview). These state of mind scales were associated with the SSP, with coherence of transcript having the highest correlation with infants' attachment security. Main and Goldwyn (1998) defined coherence as "(…) *a connection or congruity arising from some common principle or relationship; consistency; connectedness of thought such that parts of the discourse are clearly related, from a logical whole, or are suitable or suited and adapted to context."* (p. 44). It was discovered that Main and Goldwyn's new focus fitted well with the work of the linguistic philosopher Grice (Hesse, 1999). Grice (1975) proposed that discourse is coherent when a speaker adheres to the following four maxims:

Quality:	be truthful, and have evidence for what you say
Quantity:	be succinct, yet complete
Relation/Relevance:[1]	be relevant
Manner:	be clear, brief and orderly

[1] Grice referred to this maxim as the maxim of relation. It is however better known as the maxim of relevance. In this thesis we will therefore refer to it as the maxim of relevance.

Secure participants are characterized by coherent discourse. During the AAI they are able to access and reflect on memories while simultaneously maintaining consistent and collaborative discourse (Hesse, 1996). Insecure individuals significantly violate Grice's maxims without licensing; they violate the maxims without directly appealing to Grice's Cooperative Principle or without appealing to the maxim of quality when violating one of the other three maxims (Mura, 1983). For example, a violation of the maxim of quantity is licensed when the participant says "I am sorry but I would rather not go into that". Dismissing participants typically violate the maxims of quality and quantity (Hesse, 1999). They are not able to give evidence for the positive evaluations they provide or even contradict themselves. Dismissing individuals are also very succinct, for example by claiming lack of memory. Preoccupied individuals tend to make transgressions of the maxims of quantity, relevance and manner. They tell long stories, focus on issues they are not asked for, and use angry or passive speech. The two different forms of insecure attachment representations are thus characterized by different forms of incoherent discourse (Main et al., 2003). The importance of the coherence scale in the AAI was also shown empirically by Waters, Treboux, Fyffe, and Crowell (2001) who found that the scale for coherence of transcript is the most important component of an empirically derived continuous security score.

The AAI as a research tool

The validity and reliability of the AAI has been established thoroughly in adult samples (Hesse, 1999). AAI classifications are predictive of parents' responsiveness to their children and of infant's attachment security (see for a meta-analysis Van IJzendoorn, 1995). Evidence for the discriminant validity of the AAI comes from research showing that AAI classifications are independent of memory abilities (Bakermans-Kranenburg & Van IJzendoorn, 1993; Sagi et al., 1994), intelligence (Bakermans-Kranenburg & Van IJzendoorn, 1993; Sagi et al., 1994; Steele & Steele, 1994; see for an exception Crowell et al., 1996), general discourse style (Crowell et al., 1996), and tendency to give social desirable answers (Bakermans-Kranenburg & Van IJzendoorn, 1993; Crowell et al., 1996). Finally, test-retest stability of the AAI is confirmed by four studies revealing that when AAIs are administered two times with a time of 2 to 22 months in between, stability of classifications is high (Bakermans-Kranenburg & Van IJzendoorn, 1993; Benoit & Parker, 1994; Crowell, Treboux, & Waters, 2002; Sagi et al., 1994).

To become a reliable coder of the AAI, a 2-week training institute and 30-case reliability check are necessary. Not only is becoming a reliable coder and coding

interviews time-consuming, all interviews also need to be transcribed verbatim before coding can begin. The AAI is thus a labor-intensive research tool (Hesse, 1999).

Nevertheless, the AAI has been applied in a large number of studies in many different countries (when only counting studies using Main et al.'s classification system, the AAI was applied to 105 samples; Van IJzendoorn & Bakermans-Kranenburg, in press). Researchers using the AAI have focused on a wide variety of topics and samples. For example, the AAI was used in studies on parent-child interactions (e.g., Roisman, Madsen, Henninghausen, Sroufe, & Collins, 2001; see Van IJzendoorn, 1995 for a meta-analysis on parental sensitivity), psychopathology (see Dozier, Stoval, & Albus, 1999 for an overview), and intervention effects (e.g., Bosquet & Egeland, 2001; Bakermans-Kranenburg, Juffer, & Van IJzendoorn, 1998). Samples included adults and adolescents with or without their children, parents, and romantic partners (e.g., Simpson, Rholes, Oriña, & Grich, 2002; Treboux, Crowell, & Waters, 2004). Some participants came from low socio-economic classes, others from middle or high socio-economic backgrounds (see Van IJzendoorn & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 1996 for an overview). Individuals were part of biological families or adoptive families (e.g., Caspers, Yucuis, Troutman, Arndt, & Langbehn, 2007; Irhammer & Bengtsson, 2004). Some of the participants belonged to clinical groups (see Van IJzendoorn & Bakermans-Kranenburg, in press for an overview). Overall, these studies have shown that the AAI has the potential of classifying persons as having a certain mental representation with respect to attachment in such a way that a wide variety of a person's behavior and personality may be predicted.

In an attempt to make the measurement of attachment representation less intensive and more easily accessible a number of self-report instruments have been developed such as the Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment (IPPA; Armsden & Greenberg, 1987), and the Reciprocal and Avoidant Attachment Questionnaires for adults (West, Sheldon, & Reiffer, 1987; see for an overview Crowell, Fraley, & Shaver, 1999; Hesse, 1999). However, assessing unconscious processes by individuals' consciousness reports is difficult if not impossible. Studies investigating the association between self-reports and AAI classifications found no proof for the convergent validity of these instruments (De Haas, Bakermans-Kranenburg, & Van IJzendoorn, 1994; see for an overview Crowell et al., 1999; Hesse, 1999).

Alternatives to the AAI coding system

Although Main, Goldwyn, and Hesse's (2003) classification system is the "gold standard" to code AAIs, two alternative systems have been developed to analyze AAIs: Fremmer-Bombik's system (see Grossmann, Fremmer-Bombik, Rudolph, &

Grossmann, 1988) and Kobak's Q-sort (1993). Of these, Kobak's Q-sort is the most widely used. It consists of 100 items which are mostly derived from descriptions in Main et al.'s coding system. Each AAI transcript should be sorted by two persons, one of whom needs to be a reliable coder of Main et al.'s classification system. Participants may receive scores on the secure/anxious and deactivation/hyperactivation dimensions (Kobak, Holland, Ferenz-Gillies, Fleming, & Gamble, 1993) as well as for secure, dismissing and preoccupied attachment representations (e.g., Zimmermann, 2004). The overlap between AAI classifications based on Kobak's Q-sort and Main and Goldwyn's system ranges between 61% and 74% (see Hesse, 1999 for an overview).

This Q-sort has been used in studies reporting impressive findings; for example, relations have been found with mother-adolescent interactions (Kobak et al., 1993), physiological responses during the AAI (Dozier & Kobak, 1992), and symptom expression (Cole-Detke & Kobak, 1996). However, in contrast with Main et al.'s coding system, the unresolved and cannot classify categories cannot not be identified with Kobak's Q-sort. In addition, an individual's childhood experiences influence the dimension/representation score, whereas Main et al.'s (2003) system exclusively focuses on narrative form not content. This is an important difference because the childhood experiences a person describes during the AAI may be influenced by an individual's current mood (Roisman, Fortuna, & Holland, 2006). Kobak's Q-sort thus has two important disadvantages over Main et al.'s (2003) coding system.

Aims and outline of the dissertation

Although much research has been done with the AAI, many questions are still remaining. The current thesis aims to extend our insight in some of the potentials and limitations of the AAI. More specifically, the aim of the thesis is to find an answer to the following three questions:

(1) Do attachment experts, linguists and non-experts define coherence in attachment interviews differently?
(2) Is the AAI a valid instrument to measure attachment representation in adolescents?
(3) Do persons with divergent attachment representations differ in physiological responses to the AAI and to a mother-adolescent conflict interaction task (construct validity)?

In chapter two, we investigate whether attachment experts, linguists and non-experts define coherence in attachment interviews differently. If there is no difference in the definition of coherence by these groups, attachment interviews might be coded with a measure for coherence by other coders than attachment experts, or even with the help of advanced computer programs. The AAI would then become a more easily accessible and less labor intensive tool for researchers as well as for clinicians.

In contrast with application to adult samples (see Bakermans-Kranenburg, 1993, for the first systematic validation of the AAI), the psychometric properties of the AAI have not been examined systematically in adolescent samples even though the AAI has been used widely in these samples too. In the third chapter we test whether the AAI may also be applied to a group of adolescents. We examine whether adolescents' attachment representations are related to mothers' sensitive responsiveness, mother-adolescent interactions patterns, perceived support, and emotional investment in others versus in self. As a test of the discriminant validity of the AAI we examine possible associations of attachment classifications with temperament and intelligence.

In chapter four, we investigate whether AAI classifications are related to differences in stress regulation during the AAI and during a mother-adolescent conflict interaction task. We hypothesize that during the AAI dismissing individuals may experience more stress than secure individuals because of their defensive strategy. During the conflict interactions task dismissing as well as preoccupied participants are expected to be more stressed than secure individuals.

The results of this series of studies are summarized and discussed in the last chapter. Finally, we describe limitations of our studies and directions for future research.