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Mini-Review

# Mini Review: Attachment Representations of Adoptive and Foster Parents

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## Abstract

The present study outlines the importance of adoptive and foster parents' attachment representations in the subsequent development of their child. Attachment representation distributions of these samples are presented and discussed, and implications for social work are presented. Notably, attachment security of adoptive parents ranges between 35.9% and 76% and preoccupation ranges from 0 to 10%. The review suggests social workers should pay special attention to the way parents discuss early relationships and experiences of past loss or trauma.

## Introduction

Previous research has demonstrated the social transmission of attachment representations across generations [1,2]. The idea that parents' representation of their own early experiences influences their child's subsequent emotional development is relevant for all children and may be especially relevant for children adopted out of abusive homes. Fewer studies have shown the social transmission of attachment in non-genetically related dyads [3], but it is known that previously maltreated children need sensitive and responsive caregiving to begin forming trusting relationships again [4]. To assess generalized attachment representations in adulthood, the Adult Attachment Interview [5], comprises a series of questions about one's childhood experiences including 5 adjectives to describe their relationship with mother and then father with supporting memories, if they ever felt rejected as a child, and how they think their early relationships have impacted them today [5]. The coding of the AAI results in a classification of one's attachment representation: Insecure-dismissing, insecure-preoccupied, or autonomous-secure [6]. Speakers may be coded as can't classify if they display contradictory strategies, such as idealizing and preoccupied anger [7]. An additional classification of unresolved is given to speakers who become seemingly disorganized when talking about past loss or trauma [6]. These attachment representations have been inferred to guide parental behavior during interactions with their children, which in turn influences the child's development and the quality of the parent-child relationship [8].

## Discussion

Steele et al. [3] were the first to demonstrate that only 3 months after placement, adoptive parents' attachment representations were associated with their maltreated adopted children's emotional themes in a story stem completion task. They found more instances of aggressiveness, including catastrophic fantasies, child aggression, adult aggression, throwing out or throwing away (literally getting rid of the child), bizarre or atypical content, and child or adult injured or dead in the story stems of children whose parents' AAIs were classified as insecure-dismissing or insecure-preoccupied. For the parents whose AAIs were classified as unresolved regarding past loss or trauma, there were more instances of the parent appearing child-like, adult aggression, throwing out or throwing away, and fewer instances of realistic mastery and sibling or peer help in their children's story stem completions [3].

Subsequent work has corroborated the findings from that study. Barone and Lionetti [9] found secure attachment in adoptive parents to be a protective factor against attachment insecurity and disorganization in their late-adopted preschoolers [9]. In the same study, attachment disorganization was linked to decreased emotional understanding skills, pointing to the importance of the security in the child's development. Lionetti [10] found that adoptive mothers security of attachment predicted their infants' development of security over and above infant's temperament. Stovall-McClough and Dozier [11] showed infants placed with autonomous foster parents, as compared to insecure foster parents, were more likely to show secure behaviors quickly upon placement, less likely to show avoidant behaviors within the first 2 months of placement and showed more stable attachment strategies over time. In a sample of older adoptees, maternal attachment security was related to secure internal working models in their adopted children, as assessed by the FFI [12]. Those children with secure internal working models were also less likely to have significant psychological problems [12]. Despite the evident importance of the attachment state of mind of adoptive and foster parents, there has been limited studies on the distribution of attachment representations of adoptive and foster parents and those that have been done have produced inconsistent results. Notably, what stands in all of these samples is the lack of preoccupied transcripts in adoptive parent samples. Speakers classified as preoccupied are still involved with their past attachment experiences, do not describe them coherently or reflectively, and have high scores of involving anger or passivity of discourse [7]. Future research should examine why these speakers are consistently underrepresented in these samples (Table 1).

**Table 1:** Attachment distributions of adoptive and foster parents.

	Secure	Dismissing	Preoccupied	Unresolved
Bakermans-Kranenburg and van IJzendoorn, (2009) [7] non-clinical normative sample	58%	24%	18%	19%
Raby et al. (2017) [13] international adoptive parents	75%	9%	5%	11%
Raby et al. (2017) [13] foster parents	55%	19%	1%	25%
Dozier et al. (2001) [14]	54%	22%	0%	24%
Sanotini and Zavattini (2005) [15]	76%	9%	10%	4%
Ballen et al. (2010) [16]	35.90%	17%	0%	46.20%

## Conclusion

Given the documented importance of the state of mind of adopters on their children's subsequent development, the present article calls for more research on this concept in adoptive and foster care parents. Further, the gold standard in assessing attachment, the Adult Attachment Interview [5] is an hour-long interview and requires a skilled and reliable coder to yield a classification. Thus, this method may not be feasible in clinical contexts where resources are often limited. Future research should explore familiarizing mental health workers with the findings from empirical studies of attachment and pay special attention to the interplay between attachment states of mind in adoptive samples, specifically for aspects of security and indices of disorganization when speaking of past loss or trauma.

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