

"Earned Security":

Can the Adult Attachment Interview Distinguish Between Parents Who Have Suffered Abuse as Children Who Will and Will Not Abuse Their Own Children?

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Abstract

An important topic for research is why some people abuse their own children or children in their care. There is a commonly accepted belief that parents inevitably reproduce the behaviour they were exposed to themselves as children. This article explores the phenomenon of "earned security", a term given to the state of mind of people who have been classified as Autonomous on the Adult Attachment Interview (George et al., 1984/1996; Main & Goldwyn, 1998) despite having suffered maltreatment in early life. Research is reviewed which shows that Autonomous people make sensitive caregivers, and people who are judged to be "earned secure" from the AAI are more likely to be sensitive caregivers than parents who themselves have had good parenting. To illustrate the facility of the AAI as a discriminating instrument, a case study is presented of a transcript from a woman who can be described as "earned secure" and a caring parent despite having suffered severe abuse from caregivers.

Introduction

Concern about the rising incidence of children being neglected and abused by their parents has produced many views about what might be the causes and what can be done to prevent so many tragic cases. A common belief is that these are cases where parents are reproducing the treatment they themselves received as children, and that they cannot help but repeat this behaviour learned from bad role models. The Adult Attachment Interview (AAI) (George et al., 1984/1996; Main & Goldwyn, 1998) is revealing cases which have been described as "earned secure". Such individuals have suffered maltreatment from attachment figures in infancy and childhood, yet the coding system of the AAI places them in the category of F-Autonomous, the category that has been shown to be related to securely attached infants. This article discusses

what the AAI is contributing to our understanding of the links between parenting received and parenting given.

Assessing attachment

The nature of the relationships formed between parents and their infants has been intensively explored by attachment researchers. Mary Ainsworth (Ainsworth & Wittig, 1969) devised a laboratory procedure, the Strange Situation, as a way of assessing separation anxiety and exploratory behaviour by analysing the behaviour of toddlers with their mothers. This procedure led to the classification of attachment behaviour of infants as either secure (B) or insecure, with insecure groups being described as either anxious avoidant (A) or anxious resistant (C). The classifications were linked conceptually with mothers' behaviours noted in home observations, and showed that the responses of the infants in the Strange Situation were consistent with the parenting they had experienced. Careful examination of the videotapes of Strange Situations that did not fit these three categories led to the description of anomalous behaviours that indicated a fourth category, which was called “Disorganised” (D) attachment (Main & Solomon, 1990).

Following the success of the Strange Situation procedure for assessing attachment relationships of parents and infants, attachment researchers constructed an interview to find out whether parents' memories of the parenting received was related to parenting, given the attachment pattern with their child. The coding system based on a narrative analysis of the semi-standardised Adult Attachment Interview found that the assessment of the parent's current state of mind with regard to their own attachment experiences was related to the classification of infants' responses to their mothers in the Strange Situation procedure. Subsequent investigations using both the Strange Situation with toddlers and the Adult Attachment Interview with parents has produced the remarkable finding that the AAI is successful in predicting 75% of the classifications of the toddlers with that parent in the Strange Situation – even if the AAI is administered before the child was born (van IJzendoorn, 1995). This discovery has led to further investigations of what it is that the interview discerns that is apparently transmitted through the relationship caregivers have with a child.

The concept of the Internal Working Model (IWM) was first described by Bowlby (1969/1982) to account for the notion that early expectations seemed to form a template in the mind through which expectations and behaviours of later relationships were filtered. This model was “working” because it was always involved in relationships, but open to disconfirmation as well as confirmation of expectations about relationships. Hence, although the IWM of attachment could change, it was resistant to change

since it was usually out of conscious awareness. The IWM of the parent is seen as shaping behaviour in relationship with the infant, and this shapes the infant's IWM in the first year, so the transmission of IWM occurs in infancy, before language. The Adult Attachment Interview was conceived as a way of assessing the IWM of a parent, and subsequent research with this instrument has added to knowledge of the ways that early experience shapes expectations of intimate relationships in later adolescence and in adulthood. It is a very time-consuming assessment method. Administering the AAI takes at least an hour, the audiotape must be transcribed verbatim, and the coding of the interview can take from two to seven hours. Coding can only be done after official training at an Attachment Institute course followed by practice coding until the coder is approved as reliable. Various efforts to devise a self-report or less time-consuming projective method have been tested against the AAI and so far have been found not to measure the same aspects of attachment nor to have the same capacity to predict the child's attachment pattern (Crowell & Treboux, 1995). The AAI as an instrument contains questions which have proved so effective that similar questions are appearing in other research interviews assessing the links between memories, beliefs and emotions (e.g., Scharfe & Bartholomew, 1994). The interview allows participants to convey information without being consciously aware of doing so. The classifications derived from the coding system for the AAI have led to careful research projects designed to explore the implications of a parent having a particular attachment pattern, for themselves, for their intimate relationships and for their parenting.

Earned security

Adult Attachment Interview transcripts are coded as F – (Free) Autonomous, Ds – Dismissing, E – (Enmeshed) Preoccupied and U/d – Unresolved/disoriented regarding loss and abuse. Cases where there is a breakdown of fluency and coherency of discourse when loss or abuse is being reported may be classified as U/d. These cases are important with regard to the care and protection of children because they have been shown to be associated with Disorganised classifications in toddlers and to predominate in high-risk populations and adult and adolescent psychiatric disorders (Fonagy et al., 1996; Main & Hesse, 1990; West et al., 2001). These are cases where maltreatment in childhood may be associated with abusive parenting.

In contrast, “earned security” refers to the phenomenon of the person who has suffered maltreatment from family members or loss of an attachment figure in childhood but who is classified in the AAI as being F-Autonomous because he or she has been able to provide ideographic¹ memories of events with attachment figures which neither idealise the parents nor deny maltreatment, can reflect maturely on motivation

of self and others, and clearly value intimate relationships. In the context of the AAI, the term “autonomous” means consciously and intentionally self-regulating. This term does not mean “independent” or “separate”, but implies the capacity to be an intact self-in-relationship. The classification of F-Autonomous is derived mostly from the coherence of the discourse rather than from the reported nature of the parenting received.

Parents who are classified as F-Autonomous from the AAI have been shown in several research projects to have a significant chance of constructing a relationship with their children that is secure (van IJzendoorn, 1995). Most people who are classified as F-Autonomous report at least one parent who was available and caring for them through childhood, and is felt to be concerned for them even in adulthood. This matches the common perception that caring parents produce strong families and consequently the next generation are also going to be caring parents. Attachment researchers following the original ideas of Bowlby (e.g., 1988) proposed that secure attachment in infancy is a protective factor, giving the opportunity for the development of capacities such as self-confidence, social skills, the ability to seek help when it is needed and the ability to establish strong intimate relationships (see, for example, Jacobsen et al., 1994).

However, when the proposition that F-Autonomous parents have B-Secure infants has been put to the test there have been some interesting findings. The London Parent-Child Project (Fonagy et al., 1991) is a longitudinal research programme which recruited about 100 mothers and 100 fathers when they were expecting their first child. Of the 96 mothers, 59 (61%) were classified F-Autonomous prenatally. Seventy-five percent of the F mothers had children classified as secure from the Strange Situation at one year. The next task was to identify what might be involved to explain why 25% of F-Autonomous parents had insecure children. Fonagy et al. (1991) report that they thought at first that the mothers of the insecure babies may not have been coded as mainstream F-autonomous (F3),² or that life events occurring between the time of the interview and the assessing of the child at 12 months could have accounted for the insecure patterns of the children. What they found was that these mothers were more likely to be given the prototypical classification of F3 than the Autonomous mothers with secure children. Further examination suggested that these mothers may have been those who had had rather more benign parenting than the others. Prior to becoming mothers themselves they may not have been challenged to reflect on good or bad parenting, taking their own parents’ caregiving for granted. Those who had run into various difficulties and had come to terms with them, and had found ways of articulating aspects of parenting that they valued in relation to their own experiences, were more likely to have secure children. The term Autonomous

might be a particularly appropriate term to describe what it is about parents that is responsible for the security of their children. Regardless of whether their own parenting was good or bad, they have been challenged to think about parenting, can talk about the issues without obvious defensive strategies, and can see themselves as responsible for the way they behave with their children. When coding for F-Autonomous, researchers may need to be alerted to whether or not there have been challenges to acceptance of on-going parental support for themselves. Lack of challenge may make previously secure young parents less well-equipped to cope with untoward events occurring in the early years of their own parenting.

Being located in the psychoanalytic tradition in London, the Parent-Child project team saw the link in terms of defensive processes – the quality of sensitive caregiving of the mother was affected by her inability to understand or to contain her infant’s anxiety. They illustrated these ideas with some very interesting case study examples (Fonagy et al., 1991). The London team went on to construct a new scale for use with the Adult Attachment Interview, with the intention of clarifying the Coherence scale, the score for which was highly related to overall secure/insecure classification. They tried to operationalise the ability to reflect on mental states, believing that this concept was integral to the ability to understand the mental states of self and others, calling it the Reflective-Self Function. The Reflective-Self Scale criteria were used with the transcripts of the AAI. At the low end of the scale were people who did not or could not use mental state words, did not seem to be able to see behaviours as being influenced by contextual or personality factors, and could not reflect on either their own or their parents’ motivation. At the high end were people who, even when reporting distressing events, could see them contextualised and emanating from a variety of conditions. They would offer statements of personal responsibility for their own behaviours, including rueful accounts of having failed to live up to their own standards. This part of the London research produced a striking finding that counters the belief that poverty and abusive parenting in infancy and childhood inevitably lead to abusive relationships with the next generation of children.

When they had applied the Reflective-Self Scale to their original AAI transcripts, the Parent-Child team looked for how this scale related to the previous data collected. The infants were classified as secure or insecure, the mothers as being deprived or non-deprived (on the basis of extreme scores for rejection and/or neglect in childhood and other indices) and high reflective-self or low reflective-self. Seventeen mothers were in the deprived and low reflective-self group and only one of their children was classified as secure. Ten mothers were deprived and high reflective-self and all ten of their children were secure. In contrast, of the 39 non-deprived, high reflective-self mothers,

31 had secure infants (Fonagy et al., 1994). Those statistically significant findings suggest that a mother’s high reflective-self is more important for the establishment of a child’s attachment security than the mother having a non-deprived history.

An American study with 40 predominantly middle-class parents (men and women) who were part of a larger study classified parents’ AAI transcripts into three groups: continuous secure (n = 10), earned secure (n = 20), and insecure (n = 10) (Pearson et al., 1994). The earned secure group were those individuals who had been classified as F-Autonomous but had reported early hardship experiences. The parenting style of each group was assessed with their first-born child at about 42 months. The earned secure group did not differ from the continuous secure group on the parenting dimensions. They did differ from the insecure group on both warmth and the provision of structure to their child’s problem-solving exercise. This study offers further evidence that the parents do not inevitably reproduce their own experiences of care.

A later American study specifically addressed the question of the nature of parents who break the inter-generational cycle of abuse (Phelps et al., 1998). They cited the evidence gathered by van IJzendoorn (1992) that “a coherent perspective on a harsh upbringing (i.e., earned security) protects adults from replaying the parenting mistakes of the past, whereas an incoherent mental framework (i.e., insecurity) puts one at risk” (p. 23). This study also picked up the finding from the Pearson et al. (1994) research discussed above, that the earned secure group ran a higher risk of depression, so they thought it important to examine the nature of parenting under conditions of low and high stress. The sample for this study was 126 married mothers and their first-born sons. The data were collected when the children were 11 months old and 27 months – the period of the so-called “Terrible Twos”. The earned secure parent group had mothers and fathers who were scored less loving, more rejecting and more neglecting in comparison to those of the continuous secure group. They generally seem to have had similar childhood histories to the insecure group. Under low-stress conditions the earned secure group did not differ on the parenting dimensions from the continuous secure and insecure groups. Under high stress, the positive parenting of the earned secures did not differ from the continuous secures but was significantly different to that of the insecure group. A conclusion of this study is that parenting in a community sample operates much the same way for parents whether they are secure or insecure under low-stress conditions, but under high-stress conditions, secure, including earned secure parents, can continue to be competent parents, whereas the insecure group may not cope well. This study dealt with a normative population with differing degrees of daily hassles, not extreme negative life events. Research has not been able to be conducted on the different qualities of resilience of attachment groups under

extreme conditions in the maintenance of parenting competency. For consideration of what might happen with extreme conditions it is necessary to turn to case studies.

In New Zealand there have been a few unpublished studies using the Adult Attachment Interview. Several cases have been found of a person who could be labelled as “earned secure” despite extreme conditions of maltreatment in childhood. It seems clear that had these participants been assessed with a self-report instrument, their truthful reporting of their experience and attitude would have led to a classification of insecure, which would have led to an expectation that they would parent in a way that could be called cold and distant (Dismissing), or intrusive and controlling (Preoccupied) or, more likely, neglectful and abusive (Unresolved/disoriented or Cannot Classify). Such cases can only be found using the interview method, and deserve study so we can uncover what may be the sources of their effectiveness as parents.

Rosie’s story³

The case study presented here provides an example of how the Adult Attachment Interview, when coded using the Main and Goldwyn (1998) coding criteria, can distinguish between a person who has achieved secure/autonomy regarding attachment despite extreme maltreatment by attachment figures in childhood and one who is still insecure regarding attachment. It comes from a small project (Sweney, 2000) where women who had little academic success prior to enrolling as mature students in two-year polytechnic courses were interviewed using the Adult Attachment Interview and other instruments to see if they provided some measure of maturity or cognitive development that might explain why these participants could overcome the disadvantage in their early history. No data is available about Rosie apart from the Adult Attachment Interview transcript. What is presented here are features of the narrative that lead to a classification that can be called “earned secure”.⁴

The Adult Attachment Interview opens with a general question about the early family situation, where they lived, whether they moved much, what they did for a living. Rosie replies:

Um well. I was raised, I guess, in the Social Welfare system since I was about 4. My mum and dad had a big fight when I was really little and they split so Dad took the two oldest girls and Mum took the two youngest [indistinct]. Through the welfare system I had been to like 14 different primary schools, um one intermediate and one high school, which was really good. Um stayed with um lots of foster, foster parents. Stayed with an auntie and uncle and friends, really close friends of Mum and Dad’s for a while. They were really abusive. Um and I remember part

of that is kind of like getting cups and saucers and things thrown at me and having to sleep under the mat or under mattress and a yeah. At that time I guess it was just normal to us cos that's what we were used to but. Um, and then Social Welfare said my my sister who is a year younger than me and had always been together and Social Welfare had said they would never split us but they did. And she went to live in [place 1] and I stayed in [place 2] for a while and that was really hard. It was really hard cos we had always been together and it was like losing half of yourself [indistinct] and it was yeah, promises that they said the [indistinct].⁵

It is often the case that the first things people mention in an interview contain signals of important issues that will emerge later in the interview when the participant has relaxed into the subject matter and the memories. Some key points of Rosie's story are alluded to here. Later in the interview she says her only memory of her mother is the scene just after she returned from hospital with a new baby. Her father came home very drunk and popped a balloon that had woken the baby that her mother had been trying to get to sleep all day. The subsequent fight with the parents screaming and throwing things at one another led to her mother walking out the front door with the two babies. The way this story was told gives a clear impression that this scene remains a vivid memory, and she was about four at the time. So the memory of this event and its relevance to attachment security is important regarding scoring the AAI. Complete abandonment by the mother at this age leads to a high score for Rejection. In addition, it seems that the father was indeed incapable of caring for his two older daughters. Later she tells of how her father was scary, with some vivid memories, and how he was confusing. First she tells of an incident that she can remember in a muddled way of being in the room when her father was having sex with a 12-year-old and the police busting in and later trying to interview her using dolls. Then she says:

... when he used to go away on the trips he'd say I'll be back tomorrow. But like it was 3 weeks down the track or yeah. So there was a bit of confusion about dah you know why did you do this? And why did you say that if you didn't mean it?

When she was taken away by Social Welfare Rosie was put with one set of relatives who were apparently reasonable caregivers until one of them became ill. The two sisters were then passed on to more family, where the uncle and cousins sexually abused them. While Rosie is talking about some of the things that happened when she was with that family there is a breakdown in her discourse sufficient for her to be given a score for Unresolved but not one that is high enough to give her a primary AAI classification of Unresolved.

She said that whenever she ran away she would go to her grandfather whom she loved and who paid attention to her. Towards the end of the interview she admitted that he too had been touching her when she was young and later she realised this would be construed as sexual abuse.

The AAI has questions about experiences of separation. Rosie talks about her separation from her sister when the sister was nine and she was ten.

... and that was just horrific. Oh. Um what makes it even worse I think. It was at it was a Maori worker that came and took her. You know and it was like, and she was trying to reach out for me and I was reaching out for her. She had like really long hair. You could sit on her/she could sit on her hair and I was holding on to that because that was the last bit I was going to get. And um [distressed] but they got her away. It was just awful. Like I said before it's kind of like part of me had gone.

A speech like that indicates this has been a memory that has been returned to many times in her life, and it still retains its power to trigger the same effect as the original scene (Tomkins, 1979, cited in Singer & Salovey, 1993). What is important for us to note is that the Adult Attachment Interview has provided the opportunity for this woman not only to tell that she was maltreated in childhood, but also to demonstrate explicitly and implicitly through her discourse that this still distresses her. From the evidence given, we can believe that she had experiences up to about age ten which were not conducive to the forming of any sense of secure attachment.

Rosie continues the story of what happened after she and her sister were separated:

I was really rebellious. The house that I went to after that I was really rebellious. I hated them. I hated everything they stood for and every time that social worker came to see me I just didn't want to even, I just wanted to hit her and stuff. And then I went to another house after that and they had a pony, or they got a pony for me and so that was sort of calmed down a little bit. But it was till [sigh] still really really hard and was probably four five months down the track. Yeah.

It is not clear whether this was the family that she refers to later in the interview who she stayed with from about 11 1/2 till 16 or 17.

... so that was the longest time that I had, that I ever stayed anywhere. Um they were like parents. I fitted into their, I guess I fitted into their family. I was ten years older than the youngest girl who they adopted. And um, oh I was the oldest in that family too. The two boys were a little bit younger than me. And they were on a

farm and that was really cool, cos, yeah I enjoyed the farm, and the animals, the family was always good.

Interviewer: *So you felt they were really like parents?*

I used to call them Mum and Dad. Yeah. Took me about probably 18 months two years before I could have any kind of trust in them and for me to be able to do that, but yeah I did end up calling them Mum and Dad.

Demonstrating that Rosie has had continuing problems and they trigger negative memories, the following response tells us also that she has become able to look at these memories and discuss them in ways that allow her to be given a fairly high score for overall Coherence of Mind, as set out in the criteria for the AAI.

Interviewer: *Other than the difficult experiences you have already described have you had any other experiences that you would regard as potentially traumatic?*

Being married the first time. Um. Because of the car accident I think that I married him. We had already been thinking of marriage but I was already pregnant when I met him and so and then the accident happened and I was I was six months pregnant and that happened. And we did. We just got married and I think I stayed with him because I was grateful. Not only because he took on this child that wasn't his but also because he didn't know if I was going to be in a wheelchair for the rest of my life. So it was a kind of grateful thing. When the abuse started it was like huh where did this come from? Why is this happening to me? Um it started out like the shoving and the slapping and then the closed fist and then it was like um abuse. There was like the sex stuff. We're going to have sex and that's all there is to it. So, we did. Then there was, I don't feel very good about myself I think you should go and have sex with somebody else and so you can tell me what it was like, and that kind of stuff. So we did. And then there was the drinking and the only thing I didn't do that he tried to make me do was do hard core drugs, you know like take LSD and stuff like that. Didn't want to do that. I have never done that, in fact I had never even smoked a marijuana joint. I think I was 22 when I smoked my first joint. Um [sigh] and but everything it was just like ... He would never help me with the housework, he would never cook, he would/I did all the stuff for the baby and it was, in, it was, like I wasn't fully functional, I had joints that didn't work properly, yeah. But I stayed because I thought I was doing the right thing. Then when I got the ACC⁶ money after two years after the accident we built a house and he was/he did have some input in that. But anyway when I left he took over two-thirds of it, which I thought a waste of time ...

Further on in the interview Rosie is asked about relationships with her parents between childhood and adulthood. She interprets the question as what she has learned from her parents. Her father died before she left her first husband, when she was in her twenties. When she was perhaps 30, she met her mother again at the funeral for a sister who was drowned.

[Sigh] My dad my dad showed me a whole lot of stuff I think, especially with drinking and that, I guess my mum has too. They were both alcoholics, my mum still is. It's no problem for my mum to go home at night time and have two flagons before she goes to bed. Um and I don't want my kids to be like that and I don't want me to be like that either. I think that there never was a closeness. Like I never, I don't remember ever my dad telling me that he loved me. And I don't ever remember telling my dad that I love him because he hadn't proved that he could or that he had. My mum, my sisters, see it um it's like acquaintances. She and I are like acquaintances. We know each other but that's all there is to it.

We know from the transcript that when this interview was conducted Rosie had completed a two-year polytechnic course and was gleeful about having been a full-time employee for almost a year. Her oldest child is 18 and the youngest eight. She feels she has achieved quite a bit since nobody, not even the foster parents she had as an adolescent, had expected much of her at school, even though they taught her good study habits. She is proud of her children, and very protective.

I worry that the world isn't going to be as nice to them as it has been in these last few years that I've had with [husband 2]. Even if it's gonna exist in like in when I'm 40, when they're 40 I don't know if the world's going to be here. Tried to guide them as best I can in the good life and what's the point if it's not going to be here.

... I hope that they'll all be caring adults. Whether they've got children, because like [child 1] says I'm not having children. But whether they've got children or not [I hope] they care about people and they partner each other and their family and whatever.

Interviewer: *What do you hope your children might have learned from their experience of being parented by you?*

That love is really important. That caring's OK, that sharing's OK, or talking's OK. Um cos one of the things that I needed to do when I met [husband 2] was say we're going to talk about everything. Communication is very important, so that's yeah. Um that it's that it's OK just to be you.

Applying the highly developed coding system for the AAI to this New Zealand transcript, we can assess the state of mind regarding attachment of this woman at the point in time when the interview was conducted from features of her narrative. We can infer that she now is Autonomous despite her history. We do not know what her attachment pattern was when Child 1 was an infant, when she was a very young mother, in a wheelchair, and the husband was not the baby’s father. We do not have any external corroboration of her parenting practice but we know from the interview that Rosie did not reproduce the overall parenting pattern of her parents although it is highly likely she was in a distressed state when her children were young, and it seems she was lacking any real social support. Some attachment researchers believe that attachment organisation can change in adulthood when an insecure person finds a secure spouse (Jackson, 1993) and this may be what has happened here. We can only assume from how she speaks about her children that Rosie has been a protective mother through the tough years, but we know from her discourse that in her more mature years she can articulate what is important in relationships and show how she values them. Her children will have been exposed to conversations that speculate on the motives of people, especially in family relationships that are assumed to be caring, and will have been reassured by their mother’s attention to them and of her continuing concern for them. This is a case where we can say that the cycle of abuse has been broken.

Cases of earned security found using the Adult Attachment Interview provide evidence that counters the view that attachment experiences of infancy remain stable. The prototype proposition that the earliest experience of attachment remains influential throughout life was supported by the evidence coming from the congruence of parents’ attachment classifications and that of their infants at 12 months in the Strange Situation. Yet recent research, directed at examining the stability question with samples of adolescents and young adults who were classified in the Strange Situation in infancy, has had mixed results. There is some agreement that originally secure children have a strong chance of remaining in a caring and competent family and, if life events such as divorce occur, do cope better than originally insecure children. Also, children who were originally insecure are more likely to continue to live in families that are less competent or caring and where there is a greater chance of negative life events occurring, so their original insecurity remains. Such evidence leads some theorists now to argue that it is because contexts remain stably secure or insecure that attachment classifications appear continuous for the majority of people (Grossmann et al., 1999).

In cases such as Rosie’s, one can infer that had her attachment pattern been measured any time from infancy to young adulthood, her classification would have been insecure – possibly Unresolved. Yet, she has found contexts which have countered her original

chaotic and abusive childhood situations, she has found people who care for her and for whom she cares, and this has given her the confidence and opportunity to “explore” the person she can be. Stories such as this should be told more often, to challenge the belief held by many that they will not be able to prevent themselves becoming abusive parents.

Conclusion

The Adult Attachment Interview has the capacity to distinguish between those parents who have been abused as children who, at the time of the interview, have either maintained the protective stance developed in early life and continue to have maladaptive attachment expectations (Unresolved), and those who have somehow gained the ability to reflect on their experiences and come to terms with them, deciding in the process that they are responsible for their own decisions and behaviours as adults (Autonomous). The coding system of the AAI (Main & Goldwyn, 1998) alerts researchers to features which enable them to distinguish between the two groups; however, it does not provide a diagnostic tool that says that one group will abuse their children and the other will not. Research conducted so far has shown that one group will be at greater risk of failing to cope under stressful or extreme conditions, and that their children will be at risk. We also know that being able to reflect on negative aspects of life, not to deny them or become emotionally overwhelmed in recounting them, is associated with more sensitive parenting. Knowing this allows community and welfare groups to plan more effectively how to offer protection and care to children whose parents are not coping. Clearly, more research needs to be done with the aid of this instrument.

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Footnotes

1. “Ideographic” memory describes the specificity of an autobiographical or episodic memory (Siegel, 2001) where oneself in a scene is recalled with visualisation. In some cases this may include awareness of people present, smells, sounds and other vivid details.
2. Within the F classification are the following sub-groups: F1 (Some setting aside of attachment), F2 (Slightly dismissing or restricting), F3 (Highly coherent), F4 (Strong valuing of relationships with some accompanying preoccupation with attachment figures, with separation or with past trauma), and F5 (Somewhat resentful/conflicted while accepting own continuing involvement).
3. Rosie is a pseudonym, and Rosie has given permission for her story to be used in this article.
4. The transcript was coded F4 by two experienced coders, the first author and Dr C. McMahon, trained by Professors David Pederson, Mary Main and Eric Hesse and approved reliable. Neither of the scores for Unresolved Loss and Unresolved Trauma were high enough to classify this transcript as primary U/d (Unresolved/disoriented).
5. Transcript extracts are verbatim from the interview, but pauses in the speech are not recorded here.
6. Accident Compensation Commission.