

assessing attachment style across a variety of close relationships: the ecr-rs

this handout originally appeared as a www.stressedtozest.com blog post on 18.04.13

Nearly four years ago I wrote a blog post "*Assessing attachment in adults*" where I discussed this field and gave more details of the 36-item "*Experiences in close relationships - revised (ECR-R)*" questionnaire. Despite the *ECR-R* being much easier to administer than (related but different) heavyweight methods like the Adult Attachment Interview, I haven't regularly used it over the years – quite largely because answering & then scoring 36-items for a series of different relationships is pretty time-consuming.

My interest in attachment has continued, it informs many aspects of my work as a therapist, and I frequently talk about it with clients – for example when linking to the importance of self-compassion or the potential value of schema-focused cognitive therapy. There are a series of downloadable handouts on attachment towards the bottom of this website's "*Good knowledge*" page on "*Relationships, families, couples & psychosexual*". Additionally clicking on the search tag "*attachment*" will bring up several pages of blog posts including one entitled "*Some great attachment websites*" which opens a door onto the sea of internet information we can reach out to.

One of the great attachment websites I revisited recently is Professor Chris Fraley's at the University of Illinois. It's very good ... informative, witty, generous and fascinating. Taking a journey through the website I looked again at his 2011 paper "*The Experiences in Close Relationships – Relationship Structures questionnaire: A method for assessing attachment orientations across relationships*" with its abstract reading "*Most research on adult attachment is based on the assumption that working models are relatively general and trait-like. Recent research, however, suggests that people develop attachment representations that are relationship-specific, leading people to hold distinct working models in different relationships. The authors report a measure, the Relationship Structures questionnaire of the Experiences in Close Relationships–Revised (ECR-RS; R. C. Fraley, N. G. Waller, & K. A. Brennan, 2000), that is designed to assess attachment dimensions in multiple contexts. Based on a sample of over 21,000 individuals studied online, it is shown that ECR-RS scores are reliable and have a structure similar to those produced by other measures. In Study 2 (N = 388), it is shown that relationship-specific measures of attachment generally predict intra- and interpersonal outcomes better than broader attachment measures but that broader measures predict personality traits better than relationship-specific measures.*"

Now the *ECR-RS* questionnaire does look very interesting. It is only 9-item so it makes assessment of attachment style across a series of relationships much more feasible. Here is a downloadable Word version of the *ECR-RS* and here a PDF version. I have also put together a score chart downloadable as a Powerpoint slide or as a PDF diagram. Having the questionnaire on one side of A4 is useful, but sacrifices space that could have been used to explain the scale a bit more fully. Downloading a copy of this blog post could help as an additional handout.

So when filling in the questionnaire, note that there are five columns - "m" for mother (or a mother-like figure), "fa" for father (or father-like figure), "p" for current (or former) romantic partner, "fr" for best friend (or close friends more generally). When relevant the "th" column can be used for a relationship with a psychotherapist. A query that people filling in the questionnaire sometimes raise with me is the time period that it refers to - specifically in relationship with one's parents. I suggest answering primarily thinking about how it was in childhood. Often there isn't a big difference between answers for childhood and answers that describe the relationship across adulthood as well. If you want to, you can answer for both and compare the scores to see what has changed and what hasn't.

[cont.]

Fraley comments that there is a tendency for scores for partner and friend to resemble each other a bit, and for mother and father to resemble each other a bit (although avoidance scores tend to be higher for fathers). I have added a column for "therapist". This is sometimes helpful to assess in my work, particularly when a client has known me for some time. Fraley comments that one can use the *ECR-RS* with a wide variety of relationships including siblings, teachers, God, and pets (although one might need to leave out some of the questions with pets!). Interestingly what look like similar answers may not mean exactly the same across different relationships. So – for example – I might "*strongly disagree*" that "*I worry that this person won't care about me as much as I care about him or her*" with both my mother and my therapist. However with my mother it might be because I feel very secure about her love, while with my therapist it might not be a concern because it simply doesn't matter to me as much. As a therapist I find using the *ECR-RS* of considerable potential help as one can compare, contrast and work directly with the scores the client gives for their relationship with me and the scores they give for other relationships like their mother and father.

The maths of working out the average scores is slightly clunky. Note that one answers items 1 to 4 using the 1 to 7 scale, but then reverse scores each item by subtracting the initial score from 8 to get the final score. Average avoidance is calculated by adding the answers for items 1 to 6 (with 1 to 4 reverse scored) and dividing the total by 6. Average anxiety is calculated by adding the answers for items 7 to 9 (no reverse scoring here) and dividing the total by 3. One can then record attachment avoidance & anxiety for each relationship over the page on the *ECR-R/RS dimensions* chart.

Fraley gives scores from an internet study involving over 21,000 people. Their average age was 31. They came from a variety of mainly English speaking countries. They were all in exclusive dating or marital relationships. The women tended to score a bit more highly than the men on anxiety. The men tended to score a bit more highly than the women on avoidance. Note these people are not a "representative sample" of the general population, but internet samples like this are still "typical" enough to produce useful comparison scores.

Average anxiety & avoidance scores for the women were 2.15 (1.66) & 3.52 (1.78) for their mothers; 2.46 (1.86) & 4.21 (1.76) for their fathers; 3.29 (1.99) & 2.44 (1.32) for their partners; and 2.32 (1.55) & 2.38 (1.24) for their closest friends.

Average anxiety & avoidance scores for the men were 1.92 (1.42) & 3.77 (1.62) for their mothers; 2.28 (1.64) & 4.15 (1.63) for their fathers; 3.05 (1.90) & 2.56 (1.28) for their partners; and 2.41 (1.45) & 2.89 (1.35) for their closest friends.

The figures in brackets are standard deviations. Taking the average score and first subtracting and then adding the standard deviation (SD) gives a range which covers approximately 70% of subjects in the survey. So for women's mothers, the anxiety score was given as 2.15 (1.66). Subtracting the standard deviation gives $2.15 - 1.66 = 0.49$ as the bottom of the range and $2.15 + 1.66 = 3.81$ as top of the range. Since 1 is the lowest score obtainable with the questionnaire, this means that 70% of women in this survey score their mother between 1 and 3.81 for attachment anxiety.

Note you can download a Word version or a PDF version of the *ECR-RS*. There is also a scoring chart downloadable as a Powerpoint slide or as a PDF diagram. This blog post is downloadable too as an additional background handout in a Word version or a PDF version.

(note, links to all articles mentioned are on the 18.04.13 www.stressedtozest.com blog post)
