



# Examining the Role of Early Caregiving Experiences on Later Emotional Language Use



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## Introduction

- Attachment theory claims that the quality of early caregiving experiences is internalized as a mental representation that organizes how adults' think, feel, and talk about relationships
- The quality of early caregiving is typically assessed via observations of maternal and paternal sensitivity and responsiveness of the child's signal or by child's response to separation and reunion with caregivers in a laboratory task (Strange Situation).
- Mental representations in adults are usually measured by semi-structured interview; the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI).
- AAI primarily coded for narrative coherence—that is the internal consistency of the participant's responses
- Here we examined whether early experiences *also* predicts the emotional valence of AAI narratives using an automated text analysis program

## Prediction

- The experience of supportive/more secure early caregiving experiences from infancy through age 15 years will be associated with the use of more words indicative of positive emotion and fewer words indicative of negative emotion during the AAI administered at age 18 years

## Methods

### Participants

- 857 young adults (age 18 years) from NICHD Study of Early Childcare and Youth Development (SECCYD)
- SECCYD is an 18 year longitudinal study. It is one of the largest, most comprehensive studies of child development

### Measures

- Emotional Language during AAI was coded using Linguistic Inquiry Word Count (LIWC). LIWC is an automated text analysis program

### Predictor variables

- Maternal sensitivity: Composite of nine observations of mother-child interactions coded for maternal sensitivity ( $\alpha = .83$ ).
- Paternal sensitivity: Composite of five father-child observations coded for paternal sensitivity ( $\alpha = .70$ ).
- Proportion of time secure in early childhood: Strange Situation Procedure at 15 months, Attachment Q-Set at 24 months, and Modified Strange Situation Procedure at 36 months.

	Positive Emotion	Negative Emotion	Anxiety	Anger	Sadness
Infant Attachment	.030	-.067	-.018	-.088*	.009
Maternal Sensitivity	.152**	-.155**	.073*	-.208**	-.095**
Paternal Sensitivity	.113**	-.049	.130**	-.098**	-.057

## Conclusion and Discussion

- Although the documented effects were small, there is some evidence that individuals who experience sensitive maternal and paternal caregiving later reflected fondly on their childhood experiences. This shows childhood experiences have a lasting impact on how we express emotion and feel about relationships in young adulthood.
- Future research should examine the context of AAIs and determine whether or not there are other emotional, linguistic effects in adults due to their early experiences with caregivers (depression, anger, etc.)
- Future research should also examine whether or not the use of negative and positive emotional language remain consistent across multiple interpersonal relationships experienced in adult lives (such as with partners, friends, children, etc.)