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Anxious Attachment as a Predictor of Adult Childlessness

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- This study was only conducted through the legacy of my brother:
Anthony Arthur Hadley (1952-2015)

#ICPCE2023



Background

1. **Demographic change**: increased longevity & decreased fertility.
2. **Unwanted childlessness** has major implications for health, wellbeing and identity.
3. **Paucity of research on** psychological links to **childlessness**: **most studies** focus on psychological impact of involuntary childlessness.
4. **Majority studies** focus on women.
5. **For men with** childhood histories of shyness: married later & had children later **than other men**; more **likely to experience** marital instability. Not so for **equivalent** women



Hypothesis

1. The aim of this study was to find if there was any predictors of being a parent or childless in people >50 years.
2. This study tests the hypothesis that demographic and psychological factors predict whether someone >50 years has children or not.



Method

1. Cross-sectional quantitative-qualitative online survey (*Qualtrics*).
2. **Recruitment: Initial** recruitment issues led to use of a **certified** market research company (*Lightspeed*).
3. **Inclusion criteria:** UK adults **aged** >50 years.
4. **Exclusion criteria:** Age (< 50); not giving consent **or** key information; response bias: 'Speedsters' (**those who** completed the survey in less than 40% of median time).
5. **Analysis:** Logical Regression Analysis & Latent Thematic Analysis.
6. **Ethics approval:** UCL Research Ethics Committee (ref: 4075/010).



Sample

- Recruitment level ($n=375$) reached in 5 days.
- Sample (stratified by region): 394 UK adults aged >50 years; White-British.
- Men (237): 195 parents; 42 non-parents.
- Women (157): 125 parents; 32 non-parents.
- Parents 319; 74 Non-parents
- Age (mean \pm SD): men 76.9 ± 7.5 ; women 76.8 ± 7.4 .



Variables

- **Predictors:** 'Childless' (unplanned); 'childfree' (by choice); 'parent' (self-defined: 'Do you have children?' Yes or No).
- **Dependent variable:** Parent Status (divided into 3 binary outcomes): *Parent or Childless; Parent or Childfree; Parent or Other.*
- **Control variables:** ethnicity; sexuality; stressful life events.



Variables

- Predictor variables:
 1. **Demographic:** age; gender; education level; marital status.
 2. **Psychological:** *Health-Related Quality of Life (MOS 36-Item Short Form Health Survey (SF-36)).*
 3. **Mental positivity:** *Positive Mindset Index (PMI)* Barry, J., Folkard, A., & Ayliffe, W. (2014). Validation of a brief questionnaire measuring positive mindset in patients with uveitis. *Psychology, Community & Health, 3(1)*, 1–10
 4. **Attachment style:** *The Relationship Structures (ECR-RS) questionnaire.*



Results

1. Sex was not a predictor of parental status.
2. Childless people **were** significantly **more likely to** report **having** 'anxious childhood attachment'.
3. **Childless people** showed more signs **of an** avoidant attachment style than parents.
4. Marital Status **and** being older **were the** strongest predictor **of whether someone was** a parent.
5. **Male and female** parents **had a similar level of** 'happiness' (PMI).
6. **The** 'childless: not finding the right person' had the lowest PMI.



Anxious Attachment a predictor of childlessness in later life

| Variable | <i>B</i> | OR | 95% CI | <i>p</i> |
|---------------------------|--------------|---------------|---------------------|-----------------|
| Age | -.101 | .904 | (0.84-0.97) | .006 |
| Sex | .326 | 1.386 | (0.50-3.87) | .533 |
| Education | -.213 | .808 | (0.51-1.28) | .366 |
| Marital Status | 2.967 | 19.439 | (6.23-60.61) | .0000003 |
| Life Stress | -.002 | .998 | (1.00-0.99) | .593 |
| HRQoL | .041 | 1.042 | (0.98-1.10) | .167 |
| Mental Positivity | .178 | 1.195 | (0.54-2.67) | .664 |
| Anxious attachment | .572 | 1.772 | (1.09-2.88) | .021 |
| Avoidant attachment | .052 | 1.053 | (0.59-1.88) | .860 |



Qualitative quotes

1. ' Although I have missed out on being a full-time parent, I have friends whose children think of me as a surrogate grandfather, and I love the role...which gives me some fulfilment and much contentment.' M, 74
2. 'I never felt a drive to have children.' F, 82
3. Sexuality: 'Being a gay parent was blocked when I was younger.'



Conclusions

1. This study explored psychology to childlessness rather than the usual childlessness to psychology.
2. A main finding showed childless people were significantly more likely to have had anxious childhood attachment to their primary caregiver.
3. This highlights the significance of anxious childhood attachment as a factor in childlessness and later life relationships.
4. Use of a market research company overcame recruitment issues.



Thank you!

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Full paper:



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