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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  $76.9 \pm 7.5$ ; women  $76.8 \pm 7.4$ .



# 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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