

# Anxious attachment predicts childlessness in later life

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## 1: INTRODUCTION

Parent is a significant status in most societies and is an important marker of success as an adult. However, childlessness has increased substantially in Europe in recent decades<sup>1</sup>. Involuntary childlessness impacts on mental and physical health, wellbeing, intimate and wider relationships, and socio-economically across the life course<sup>2</sup>.

There has been much psychological research in to the impact of infertility. Yet there are three areas that need addressing in that body of work:

**1:** the influence of psychological factors in infertility is under studied.

**2:** there is a presumption that infertility impacts psychology and not the impact of psychological functioning on infertility.

**3:** most studies on infertility and childlessness focus on the psychological consequences for women rather than for men.

This study explored the possibility that demographic and psychological factors can predict whether a person over the age of 50 has children or not.

## 2: METHOD

A cross-sectional online survey of 394 UK adults aged over 50 years and over.

**Sample:** Men: 195 parents: 42 non-parents. Women, 125 parents: 32 non-parents.

**Analysis:** Logical regression analysis.

**Predictors:** 'Childless' (unplanned) or 'childfree' (by choice) compared to being a parent.

**Dependent variable:**

**Parent Status** (divided into three binary outcomes): *Parent or Childless*; *Parent or Childfree*; *Parent or Other*.

**Predictor variables:**

**Demographic:** age, sex, education level marital status.

**Background:** sexuality, ethnicity and life stress.

**Psychological:**

**Health-Related Quality of Life:** The MOS 36-Item Short Form Health Survey (SF-36).

**Mental positivity:** Positive Mindset Index<sup>3</sup>

**Attachment style:**

The Relationship Structures (ECR-RS) questionnaire. *Anxious Attachment* is described by three items:

**1:** 'I often worry that this person doesn't really care for me.'

**2:** 'I'm afraid that this person may abandon me',

**3:** 'I worry that this person won't care about me as much as I care about him or her.'

Higher scores indicate more problems with attachment.

## 3: RESULTS

**Table 1.** Predictors of being a parent (n=319) compared to being childless (N=23)

Variable	B	OR	95% CI	p
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
<b>Anxious attachment</b>	<b>.572</b>	<b>1.772</b>	<b>(1.09-2.88)</b>	<b>.021</b>
Avoidant attachment	.052	1.053	(0.59-1.88)	.860

Table 1 highlights three main themes:

**1:** anxious attachment style was associated with an increased odds of being childless (OR = 1.772 [1.09-2.88] (p<.021)). This was independent of two other significant findings:

**2:** being older increased the odds of being a parent rather than being childless (OR = 0.903 [0.84-0.97], p<.006)

**3:** being married significantly increased the odds of being a parent (OR = 19.439 [6.23-60.61], p<.0000003).

## 4: CONCLUSION

This study is the first to highlight the significance of anxious childhood attachment as a predictive factor of childlessness in later life. Childhood stress impacts physical and mental health and shapes the subsequent physiological response to stress<sup>4</sup>. Childhood attachment problems, especially avoidant attachment, predict adult relationship quality and adulthood relationship satisfaction<sup>5</sup>. Demographic factors influence childlessness<sup>1</sup>. For example, the higher a women's education level the higher the age of first birth<sup>1</sup>. No significant influence of educational level on being a parent or not was found in this study.

This study demonstrated that anxious attachment predicts childlessness in adulthood: childless people showed more signs of an anxious attachment style than parents. The results highlighted that the relationship between anxious attachment and childlessness is independent of other demographic and psychological variables.

This cannot be explained by HRQoL or PMI, or the impact of recent life stress. Medical problems associated with fertility were not a significant predictor of childlessness. This may have been an effect of the relatively small sample size.

## 5: Implications:

These findings have theoretical and practical significance in both our understanding of lifespan development and interventions across the lifespan.

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