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Older people are 'happier' whether they have children or not, but 'happiness' is impacted by health and childhood attachment.

Dr Robin Hadley, Unemployed
Mrs Chloe Newby, Male Psychology Network
Dr John Barry, University College London

@RobinHadley1

www.wantedtobeadad.com

BSG Conference, Manchester, UK, 5th July 2018

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Background

- The aim of this study was to find out if there psychological predictors of being childless in later life.
- Demographic change: increased longevity, decreased fertility, smaller families, increase in divorce, fluxivity in personal networks.
- Potential or actual infertility has major implications for health, wellbeing, and identity: with many studies on psychological impact of involuntary childlessness.
- Paucity of research on psychological links to childlessness.
- Much deficit discourse around ageing & non-parenthood:
- Terms in this talk may be used, such as 'childfree' 'childless' 'voluntary' 'involuntary' 'infertile' 'old' 'older' 'elderly' 'gay' 'straight' 'non-heterosexual' 'Heterosexual' are contentious.

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Acknowledgement

This study was only conducted through the legacy of my brother:

Anthony Arthur Hadley (*1952-2015*)

Method

- **Cross-sectional online survey:** 394 UK adults aged 50 years and over. Deployed June 2017 recruitment level (375) reached in 5 days. *Qualtrics* survey software.
- **Sample** (stratified by region). **Men (237):** 195 parents; 42 non-parents. **Women (157):** 125 parents; 32 non-parents. White-British.
- **Age (mean \pm SD):** men 76.9 ± 7.5 , women 76.8 ± 7.4 .
- **Analysis:** Logical regression analysis: *SPSS* software (Version 22).
- **Recruitment:** Initial poor response. A certified market research company (*Lightspeed*) recruited the sample & sent out the survey.
- **Exclusion criteria:** Age (< 50); not giving consent or key information (gender, parental status etc.); response bias; 'Speedsters' (those who completed the survey in less than 40% of median time).
- **Ethics approval:** UCL Research Ethics Committee (ref: 4075/010).

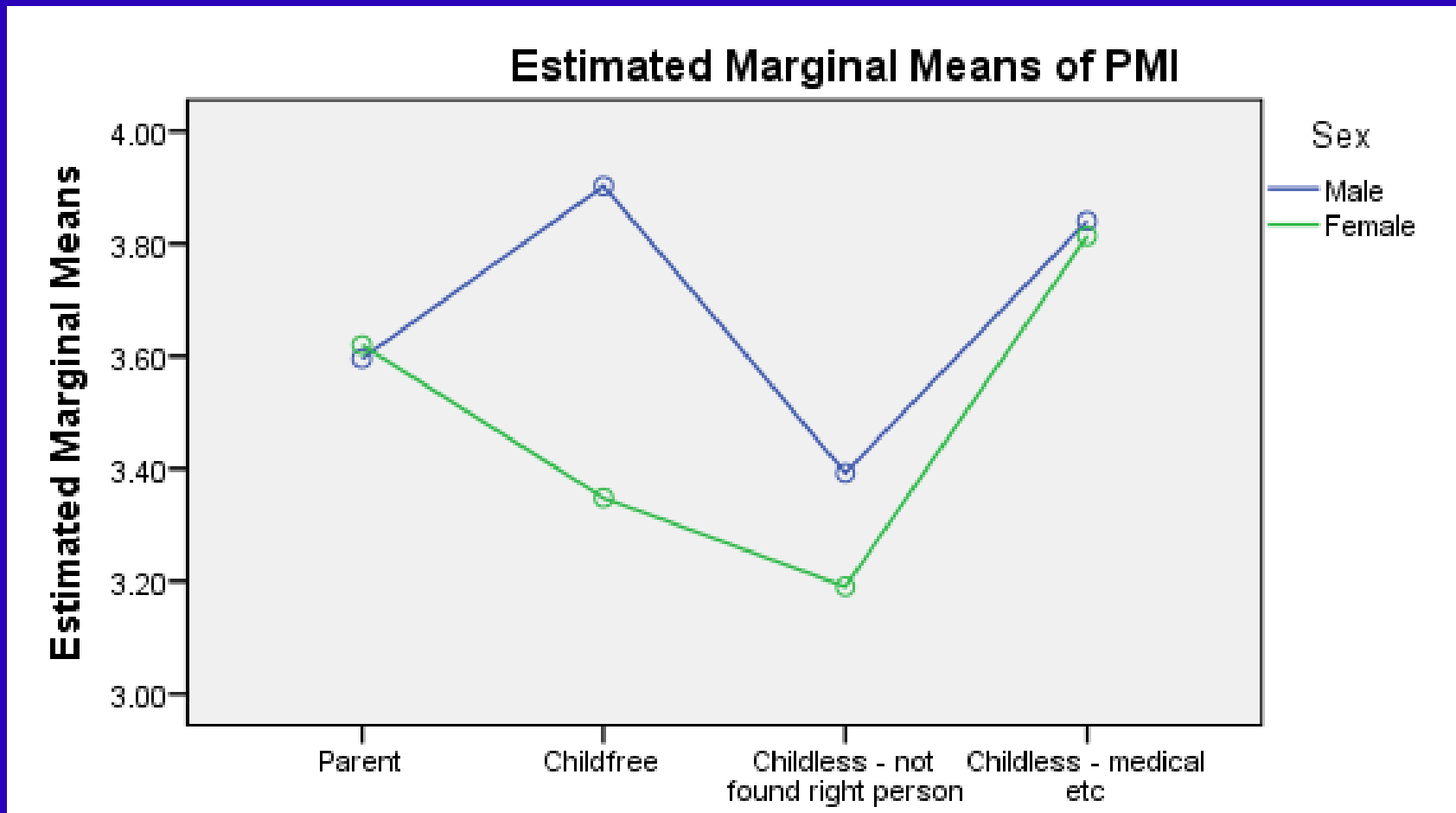
Variables

- **Predictors:** 'Childless' (unplanned) or 'childfree' (by choice) compared to being a '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.*
- **Predictor variables:**
 1. **Demographic:** age; sex; education level; marital status.
 2. **Background:** sexuality; ethnicity; stressful life events.
 3. **Psychological:** *Health-Related Quality of Life (MOS 36-Item Short Form Health Survey (SF-36)).*
 4. **Mental positivity:** *Positive Mindset Index (Barry, et al.,2014).*
 5. **Attachment style:** *The Relationship Structures (ECR-RS) questionnaire.*

Results

- Marital Status was the strongest predictor of whether someone was a parent or not.
- Sex was not a predictor for parental status.
- Male and female parents had a similar level of 'happiness.'
- Men who were 'childfree' had the highest PMI followed by men and women who were 'childless: Medical or other reasons'. Followed by Parents . The 'childless: not finding the right person' had the lowest PMI.
- Childfree men had higher PMI than who male parents ($p < .071$) and childless by chance men ($p < .063$).
- Compared to parents, childless people were significantly more likely to report having 'anxious childhood attachment' to their primary caregiver.

Parent, childfree, childless not found the right person, childless by medical or other reason.



Predictors of being a parent ($n=319$ to being childless ($n=23$))

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

Mean \pm SD outcomes according to the sex and parent status of the participants.

HRQoL = Health-Related Quality of Life, measured with the SF-12

PMI = Positive Mindset Index

Anxious attachment

- Anxious attachment: fear of risk of abandonment by a loved one.
- One of the main findings was that childless people were significantly more likely to have anxious childhood attachment to their primary caregiver.
- Independent of other demographic and psychological variables e.g. HRQoL, PMI, or the impact of recent life stress
- Highlights the significance of anxious childhood attachment as a factor in later life relationships.
- Men with childhood histories of shyness: married later; had children later than other men. More likely to experience marital instability. Women with similar shyness history are not affected in the same manner. (*Caspi et al., 1988*)

Qualitative quotes

- 'I have friends whose children think of me as a surrogate grandfather and I love the role. My partner is now too old to have children and although I have missed out on being a full time parent I feel blessed that close friends have turned me into an 'honorary' grandfather which gives me some fulfilment and much contentment.' M, 74
- 'i never felt a drive to have children.' F, 82
- 'Given my sexual orientation the creation of children would not occur naturally in my relationships. I feel very strongly that children should ideally grow up in stable families with their biological father and mother, and not created to be used as pawns in social engineering.' M, 69
- **Finance & Sexuality:** 'Anti gay UK.' 'Being a gay parent was blocked when I was younger.' 'Even if i did i think you need loads of money to be a parent successfully.' M, ?3

Strengths & Limitations

- Study explored psychology to childlessness rather than the usual childlessness to psychology
- Many previous studies focused on the psychological consequences for women: this study included men.
- Examined the influence of sex as a predictor of parent status: no significant influence of sex was found.
- Statistically significant relationship between Anxious Attachment and being childless.
- Sample size: adequate to power the main test (Parents Vs Those with no children for any reason): other tests needed an average of 8% more participants for adequate power.
- Paucity of BAME and LGBT respondents: not able to conduct between group comparisons.
- Retrospective and self-reported nature of the data.

Thank you any questions?
If its quants based then I'm the qual fella..

Dr Robin Hadley, Unemployed

Mrs Chloe Newby, Male Psychology Network

Dr John Barry, University College London

Mr Anthony Arthur Hadley (funder: 1952-2015)

Contact:

rahadley7.8@gmail.com

[@RobinHadley1](https://twitter.com/RobinHadley1)

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