

Adult attachment and long-term singlehood

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Rates of singlehood are increasing rapidly in the Western World. In the current paper, we discuss the phenomenon of long-term singlehood from an attachment perspective, outline three distinct sub-groups of singles (anxious, avoidant, and secure), and demonstrate the utility of these groups by highlighting their unique characteristics and possible life outcomes, including factors that may moderate these outcomes. Finally, we offer suggestions for future research to enhance our understanding of this vastly under-researched population.

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The desire for romantic love is so pervasive across cultures it may serve an evolutionary function [1^{**}]. However, rates of singlehood are increasing rapidly in the Western World, and more people are now living alone than at any other point in history [2]. Singles are often ignored in psychological research, which is unfortunate given that singles are a sizeable and growing group of individuals. Here we discuss the phenomenon of long-term singlehood from an attachment theoretical perspective.

Individual differences in attachment and long-term singlehood

Attachment theory has proven to be one of the most useful frameworks for understanding relationship dynamics across the lifespan. Adult attachment avoidance is characterized by the maintenance of attachment system deactivation, discomfort with intimacy and closeness, and excessive self-reliance. In contrast, attachment anxiety is characterized by hyperactivation of the attachment system, sensitivity to rejection and abandonment, and

intense distress when attachment needs are not met. Those low in attachment anxiety and avoidance have an internal working model of attachment security, characterized by confidence that protective others will be available and responsive in times of need, and a sense that it is safe to confidently explore one's environment [3,4].

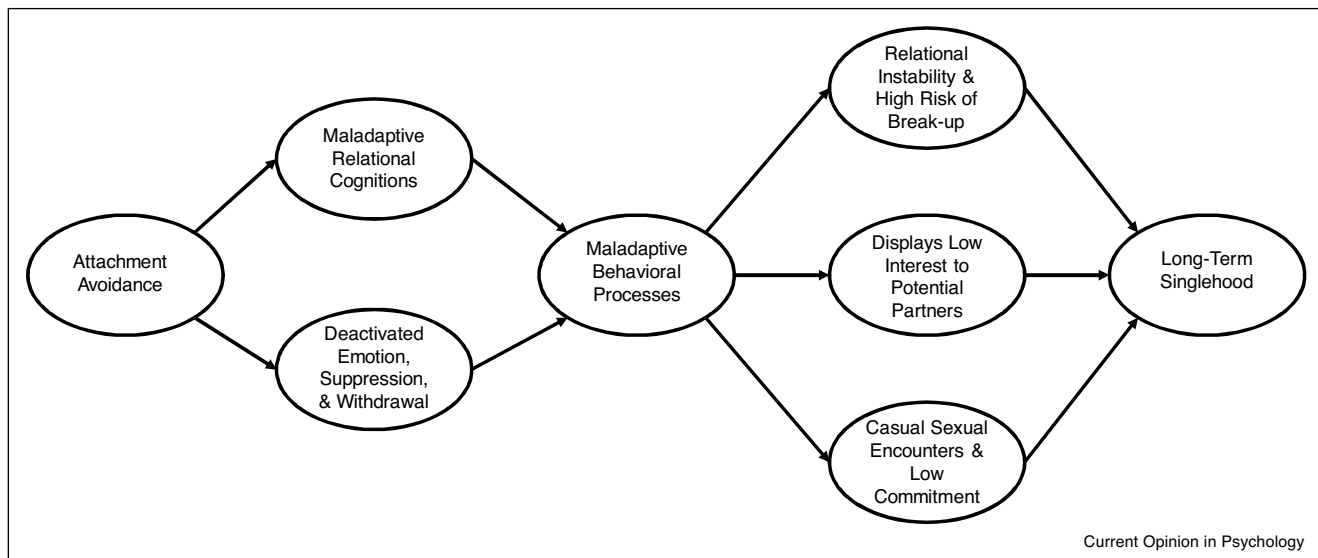
Emerging evidence suggests that single individuals are higher in attachment insecurity than their partnered counterparts; however, there are discrepancies between studies regarding which dimensions of attachment predict singlehood, and the magnitude of these effects [5^{**}]. We recently outlined an attachment theoretical model of long-term singlehood, and reviewed evidence suggestive of at least three distinct sub-groups of singles [5^{**}]. Here we demonstrate the utility of these distinctions by highlighting the unique characteristics and possible life outcomes of each group.

Attachment avoidance

Attachment avoidance is associated with cognitive, affective, and behavioral processes that undermine potential for intimacy. Those high in attachment avoidance dampen their hopes for intimacy, especially when there is opportunity for connection, in order to circumvent attachment system activation, and prevent potential distress [6]. They show less non-verbal intimacy, affection, and expressiveness [4], and even sit further away from partners during interactions [7]. The strategies used by avoidant individuals to maintain attachment system deactivation are at odds with factors known to facilitate satisfying relationships [8]. Accordingly, they are less likely to form a committed romantic relationship [9], and more likely to avoid new relationships following break-up [10]. Thus, as displayed in [Figure 1](#), one sub-group of singles is likely to be characterized by attachment avoidance [5^{**}].

Those who remain long-term single due to processes associated with attachment avoidance are likely to display relatively poor life outcomes. Specifically, although this group defensively downplays the importance of close relationships, they do still desire intimacy, and are even more affected by separation and rejection than their secure counterparts [11]. The characteristic features of avoidant attachment are pervasive and undermine potential for intimacy in both romantic and non-romantic relationships [12^{**}], which reduces the likelihood that attachment needs will be successfully met in non-romantic relationships. This group may therefore be at greater risk of poor psychosocial adjustment. However, there may be factors that can buffer negative effects of singlehood amongst avoidant individuals.

Figure 1



Model of Attachment Avoidance Predicting Long-Term Singlehood.

From: Pepping CA, MacDonald G, Davis PJ. **Toward a psychology of singlehood: an attachment theoretical perspective on long-term singlehood.** *Curr Dir Psychol Sci* (in press). doi:10.1177/0963721417752106, reprinted with permission.

Given that those high in attachment avoidance prefer more solitary activities, it is plausible that success in these activities might, to some extent, compensate for a lack of social connectedness. For instance, early qualitative research found that some people remain single because they are dedicated to career pursuits and work [13]. Recent evidence reveals that those high in attachment avoidance can in fact be more successful in careers characterized by self-reliance and autonomy, and may be more satisfied in their work compared to those low in avoidance [14]. Perhaps career success and job satisfaction might moderate associations between singlehood and life satisfaction amongst avoidant individuals. It seems likely, however, that any protective qualities associated with career success might be attenuated following retirement. A longitudinal study tracked workers from pre-retirement to 7-years post-retirement and found that, although most people coped well, income decline predicted higher rates of depression and more psychosomatic complaints amongst those high in attachment avoidance [15].

It is also important to consider the influence of age and developmental stage. For instance, romantic relationships during adolescence and early adulthood are often brief, and many adolescents remain single, which is not associated with poor outcomes during adolescence [16]. Indeed, dating and romantic involvement during adolescence is often associated with poorer outcomes [17], a pattern that reverses in adulthood [18]. Thus, singlehood in adolescence and young adulthood may be more normative, and not associated with attachment insecurity. Indeed, age moderates the

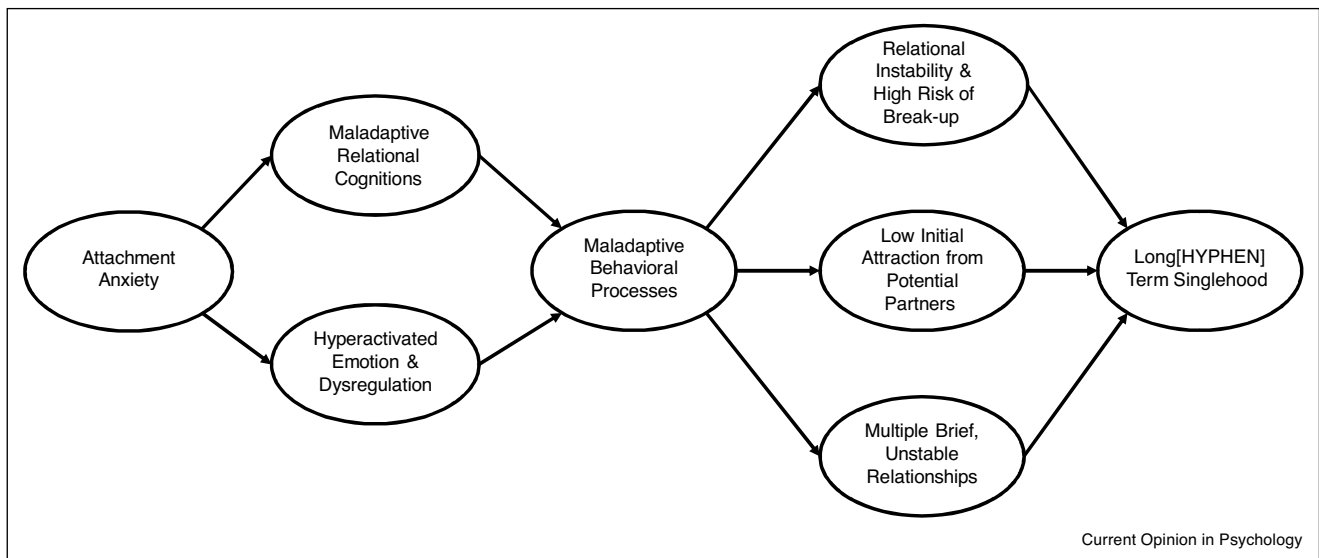
association between attachment avoidance and single status, such that younger singles (aged 18–30) display *more* comfort with closeness (low avoidance) compared to their coupled counterparts, whereas older singles (aged 46–60) display less comfort with closeness (high avoidance) [19]. Thus, it seems that in adolescence and young adulthood, attachment avoidance may not be associated with singlehood, whereas for those who remain long-term single into adulthood, attachment avoidance may be implicated.

Avoidant singles may fare worse over time as they age and require more social and practical support, as they are especially reluctant to seek support in times of need [20]. Social support buffers the effects of depression on life satisfaction in older age [21], and the solitary coping strategies used by avoidant individuals may thus become less effective with age. Consistent with this proposition, attachment avoidance is associated with less satisfaction with support received from others in older (35–66) but not younger (18–34) adults, and these perceptions of support mediate associations between attachment avoidance and poor psychosocial adjustment in older adulthood [22]. Thus, for avoidant singles, individualistic coping strategies, such as immersion in work, might buffer the effects of isolation on life outcomes in young adulthood, but these strategies are likely to become increasingly ineffective as one ages and requires more support.

Attachment anxiety

Attachment anxiety is associated with cognitive, affective, and behavioral processes that undermine romantic

Figure 2



Model of Attachment Anxiety Predicting Long-Term Singlehood.

From: Pepping CA, MacDonald G, Davis PJ. **Toward a psychology of singlehood: an attachment theoretical perspective on long-term singlehood.** *Curr Dir Psychol Sci* (in press). doi:10.1177/0963721417752106, reprinted with permission.

relationships [4]. Anxious individuals have intense desires for intimacy, but hold little confidence that their efforts to get close to others will be successful, and are hypervigilant to signs of rejection and abandonment [12**]. These fears give rise to maladaptive behaviors such as excessive reassurance seeking, anger and clinginess in response to jealousy, and interpersonal awkwardness [4], and these processes undermine their interpersonal success [23]. Accordingly, attachment anxiety is associated with relational instability and high risk of break-up [12**]. A second sub-group of long-term singles is therefore likely to be characterized by attachment anxiety (see Figure 2) [5**].

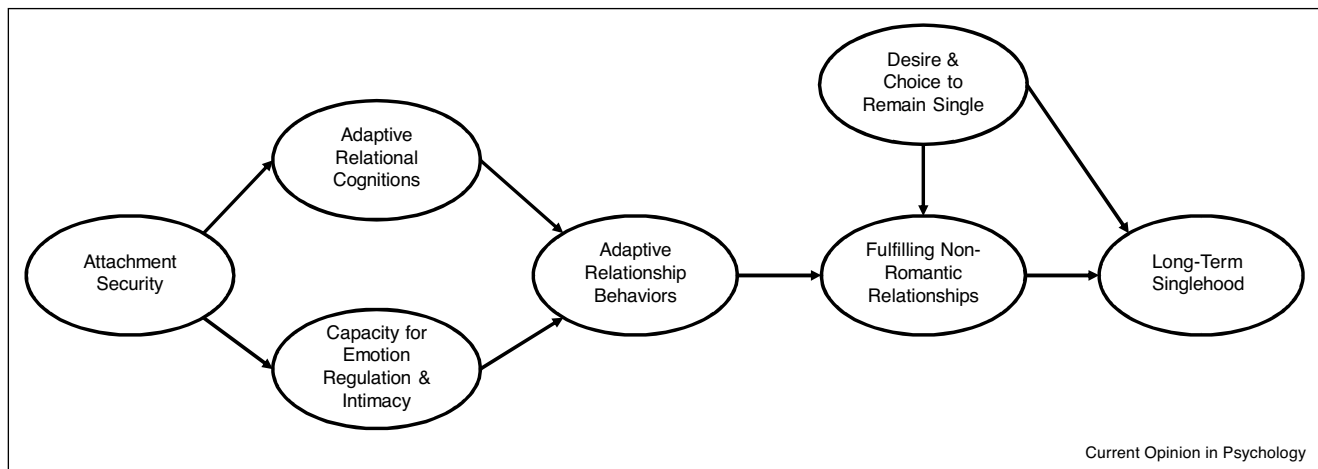
Those who remain long-term single due to processes associated with attachment anxiety are likely to display relatively poor life outcomes. Those high in attachment anxiety report more fear of being single, defined as the tendency to experience anxiety or distress related to being without a romantic partner [24**], which is associated with longing for ex-partners [25] and increased loneliness and depression [24**]. They are therefore likely to be less satisfied with their single status given their strong desire for intimacy [3], and dissatisfaction with relationship status predicts less overall life satisfaction [26]. Again, there may be factors that moderate, or buffer, these associations.

Given that attachment anxiety is characterized by an intense desire for intimacy, anxious singles may seek out non-romantic relationships more readily, and the

quality of these relationships might buffer the negative effects of singlehood. Evidence from social identity theory research reveals that those with more group memberships and broader social ties display a range of beneficial psychosocial outcomes [27]. Interestingly, single individuals are more socially connected to neighbors, friends, and relatives than their married counterparts [28]. Perhaps the quality of these relationships might moderate associations between singlehood and well-being amongst anxiously attached individuals. However, attachment anxiety is pervasive and also undermines non-romantic relationships [12**]. Nonetheless, the correlation between global attachment (e.g. attachment anxiety) and relationship-specific attachment (e.g. attachment to friends) is imperfect ($r = .41-.77$) [29]. For instance, an individual high in attachment anxiety may have experienced parental and romantic attachment figures as rejecting and inconsistent, but have experienced supportive, sensitive, and responsive relationships with friends [29]. Research is needed to investigate whether the quality of non-romantic relationships moderates the association between singlehood and low well-being amongst anxiously attached singles, with better outcomes for those with more secure attachments outside of romantic relationships.

Anxious individuals report more fear about being single [24**], and are often not optimistic about their future relationship prospects [30]. However, anxious singles who are able to muster optimism about finding a partner in the future may fare better than their less optimistic

Figure 3



Model of Attachment Security Predicting Long-Term Singlehood.

From: Pepping CA, MacDonald G, Davis PJ. **Toward a psychology of singlehood: an attachment theoretical perspective on long-term singlehood.** *Curr Dir Psychol Sci* (in press). doi:10.1177/0963721417752106, reprinted with permission.

counterparts [31], though this may be somewhat dependent on age and developmental stage. Single older adults report few opportunities to meet potential partners in their social circles, as they no longer frequent venues where single people typically socialize (e.g. clubs or pubs), and many in their existing social circles are already partnered [32]. Research should test whether optimism about future relationship prospects moderates associations between singlehood and well-being amongst anxious singles, and whether the protective quality of optimism declines with age.

Finally, pet ownership can decrease loneliness and increase well-being [33], and pets can serve as attachment figures [34]. Pet ownership may therefore assist those high in attachment anxiety to cope with loneliness and buffer effects of social isolation. However, the beneficial effects of pets seem to be more pronounced amongst securely attached individuals [35] which, again, attests to the pervasive effects of attachment insecurity in non-romantic relationships.

Attachment security

For some, singlehood may not reflect attachment insecurity, but may instead represent a satisfying personal choice [36**]. That is, those whose singlehood is an autonomous decision (rather than an avoidant denial of intimacy needs) and who get attachment needs met in other, non-romantic relationships, may fare relatively well on psychosocial indicators (see Figure 3) [5**]. Consistent with this proposition, recent evidence indicates that satisfaction with single status is a strong predictor of overall life satisfaction [26].

Securely attached individuals who choose to remain single may have greater success forming long-term stable friendships to meet attachment needs [12**]. Indeed, recent evidence suggests singles may be more socially connected with friends and family than their coupled counterparts [28]. Secure individuals rely on the primary strategy of the attachment system, namely proximity seeking, and may therefore use these same strategies to develop non-romantic relationships. Satisfying interpersonal relationships and broader social ties predict increased quality of life and well-being, reduced risk of depression, and lower mortality risk [37,38]. Thus, when singlehood reflects a secure personal choice as opposed to difficulties forming or maintaining relationships, single status should be associated with positive life outcomes.

Conclusions

Here we have outlined three distinct sub-groups of long-term singles and their differential associations with life outcomes. Research is needed to investigate factors that may distinguish between insecure individuals who remain long-term single from those who do not, and life outcomes amongst distinct sub-groups of long-term singles. Attachment Theory brings a strong theoretical and empirical foundation to enhance our understanding of long-term singlehood, and our hope is that the current paper will stimulate further research on this much-neglected topic.

Conflict of Interest Statement

Nothing declared.

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