

# Am I Prepared to Take Care of My Aging Parents? The Effects of Adult Attachment, Self-Construal, and Relationship Quality on Filial Anxiety

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## Introduction

The central focus of this study was to examine several predictors of filial anxiety, which is defined as the concern brought about by an individual's perceived ability to care for an aging parent, either prior or during the provision of care (Cicirelli, 1988). These predictive factors were: adult attachment, self-construal, and relationship quality with the parents. Cicirelli (1988) argues that filial anxiety originates from the adult child's attachment to the aging parent and the efforts to preserve the emotional bond, and, ultimately, the parent's life. Regarding attachment, it has been found that children who were anxious about the threatened loss of their attachment figure may increase support for their parent and preserve the important attachment object (Carpenter, 2001; Murray, Lowe, Anderson, Horne, & Lott, 1996). At the same time, insecurely attached children may be less eager to care for their parents because the psychological rewards for maintaining the relationship are not immediately known (Carpenter, 2001). The literature is inconsistent with regard to the relationship between attachment and filial anxiety.

The basic characteristic of the self-construal refers to the degree to which a person sees him/herself as separate from or connected with others (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Consequently, we argue that individuals with an independent self-construal may experience less concerns about the ability to meet caregiving needs compared to those with an interdependent self-construal.

Studies found that subjects who perceived less family hostility and aggression acknowledged more anxiety about their abilities to provide future care (Meyers & Cavanaugh, 1995). High intimacy and admiration scores have been found to increase support between mothers and adult daughters (Schwarz, Trommsdorff, Albert, & Mayer, 2005). It is, however, unclear how relationship quality is related to filial anxiety.

## Research Questions:

1. Is attachment related to filial anxiety?
2. Is there an association between independence/interdependence and filial anxiety?
3. Is relationship quality related to filial anxiety?

## Methods

### Sample

337 middle aged daughters, average age = 45.2 years

### Procedure

Standardized face to face interviews were carried out in the respondent's home. Average interview period was 75 minutes.

### Variables

#### Filial Anxiety

Based on Cicirelli's (1988) filial anxiety instrument; seven items were used ( $\alpha=.90$ ), ranging on a scale from 1 (not true at all) to 5 (very true).

#### Adult Attachment

Based on Hazan and Shaver's (1987) attachment scale; eighteen items were asked using a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree); these items formed the variables avoidance ( $\alpha=.86$ ) and anxiety ( $\alpha=.72$ ).

#### Independence/Interdependence

Based on Singelis' (1994) Self-Construal Scale; ten items were asked using a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree); the items assessed independence ( $\alpha=.68$ ) and interdependence ( $\alpha=.65$ ).

#### Relationship Quality

Based on Furman and Buhrmester's (1992) scale; eighteen items were asked using a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree); these formed three subscales: intimacy ( $\alpha=.90$ ), conflict ( $\alpha=.91$ ), and perceived admiration from parent ( $\alpha=.86$ ).

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Table 1  
Intercorrelations for Predictors of Filial Anxiety

Variables	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
Anxiety (1)	.51***	.09	.11*	-.01	-.14*	-.14*	-.27**	.17**	.15*	.31***
Avoidance (2)	—	.04	-.13*	-.07	-.23**	-.19**	-.38***	.10	.11	.19**
Independence (3)	—	—	.10+	.10	-.02	.03	-.07	.04	.14*	.04
Interdepend. (4)	—	—	—	.21***	.16*	.19**	.16**	-.05	-.01	.12*
Intimacy M (5)	—	—	—	—	.33***	.52***	.12+	-.03	.17*	-.08
Intimacy F (6)	—	—	—	—	—	.14+	.56***	.15*	-.04	-.24***
Admiration M (7)	—	—	—	—	—	—	-.52***	-.24***	.15*	-.03
Admiration F (8)	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	-.03	-.22**	-.15*
Conflict M (9)	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	.11	.19**
Conflict F (10)	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	.05
Filial Anxiety (11)	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—

Notes: M is for mother; F is for father.

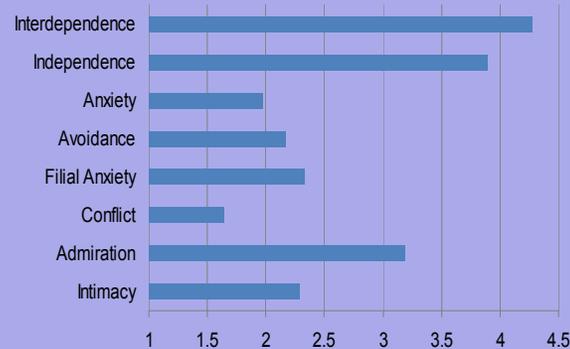


Figure 1: Mean Values for Predictors of Filial Anxiety

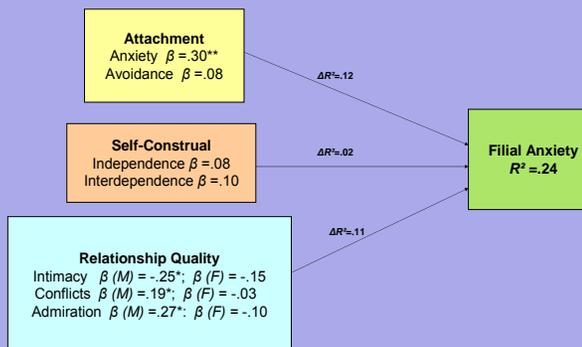


Figure 2: Predictors of Filial Anxiety

## Results

Multiple regression analyses were used, resulting in a four step analysis (Figure 2). The first step accounted for control variables, age and education. The next step was attachment style, the third self-construal, and, lastly, relationship quality with both parents.

Results showed that adult daughters who are more anxious experience stronger filial anxiety ( $\beta = .30^{**}$ ). Avoidance did not have a significant effect ( $\beta = .08$ ).

Neither measure of self-construal, independence ( $\beta = .08$ ) and interdependence ( $\beta = .10$ ), were found significant predictors.

Finally, with regards to relationship quality, all three measures for the mother showed significant results, while none for the father showed a significant relation to filial anxiety. Conflict with the mother ( $\beta = .19^*$ ) and admiration from the mother ( $\beta = .27^*$ ) were both positively related to filial anxiety, indicating that the higher the conflict and perceived admiration, the greater the filial anxiety. However, intimacy was negatively related ( $\beta = -.25^*$ ), which indicates that the more intimate the relationship, the lower the anxiety.

## Discussion

This study shows that there are diverse qualifiers to be filially anxious. Not only does it depend on the individual, as measured in attachment, but also on the overall relationship with the parents.

Attachment is a relevant predictor for filial anxiety. Middle-aged daughters who are anxious with regard to relationships also worry about the welfare and the anticipated caregiving of the aging and increasingly needy parents. Interdependence and independence did not act as predictors for filial anxiety in regression analyses, although the correlations (see Table 1) showed that interdependent adult daughters experience stronger filial anxiety.

Admiration has a positive relation to filial anxiety. This most likely means that the adult daughter acknowledges the admiration of her parents and does not want to disappoint them. Since caring for an aging parent is often quite burdensome, the conflict between expectations and ability arises and increases anxiety. Furthermore, the more intimate the daughters were with the mother, the less filially anxious they were. The more positive the relationship, the easier the undertaking of care will be with the mother. Additionally, the more conflict with the mother, the more filially anxious the adult daughter was. The amount of conflict may lead them to believe that they are not capable of caring for their aging parent.

Our study was the first of its kind to explore how adult attachment, self-construal, and relationship quality impact filial anxiety. We found that attachment, especially anxious attachment, as well as relationship quality with the mother can be used to predict the prevalence of filial anxiety.

Future research should evaluate these same variables from a cross-cultural perspective. We will be especially interested to see if self-construal is related to filial anxiety in Eastern societies, where people are generally viewed as collectivistic or interdependent, as opposed to the largely individualistic Western countries with strong focus on independence and autonomy.

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