

CIVIC AND MORAL DISENGAGEMENT, WEAK PERSONAL BELIEFS AND UNHAPPINESS: A SURVEY STUDY OF THE “FAMIGLIA LUNGA” PHENOMENON IN ITALY

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In Italy, the transition from adolescence to adulthood has lately increased. There is disagreement about whether this is a healthy adaptation to current socioeconomic conditions or a sign of excessive dependency and insecure anxious attachment (Flett, Endler, & Besser, 2009; Maione & Franceschini, 1999; Scabini & Cigoli, 1997; Scabini & Marta, 1996). We present a study of 1570 Italian undergraduates at the University of Padova, exploring relations between: living choice; attachment style; religious, spiritual, and personal beliefs; civic and moral disengagement; and perceived happiness. Living on one's own was associated with avoidant or secure attachment, being more engaged in society, and stronger personal and spiritual beliefs. Both living with parents and in other living situations was associated with anxious attachment, weaker personal beliefs but stronger religious beliefs, greater civic and moral disengagement, and greater unhappiness. Regardless of living arrangements, anxious attachment was related to civic and moral disengagement, weaker personal beliefs, and greater unhappiness. Insecure avoidant attachment was instead related to civic and moral disengagement and weaker religious and spiritual beliefs.

Key words: Attachment; Spirituality; Civic and moral engagement; Well-being.

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INTRODUCTION

Since the 1980s there has been concern in Italy that the transition to adulthood has been lengthening (Buzzi, Cavalli, & De Lillo, 2007; Scabini, 2000; Scabini & Donati, 1988). There has been disagreement, both in the general public (Buzzi et al., 2007) and among professional psychologists (Maione & Franceschini, 1999), over whether this is a healthy adaptation to current social and economic conditions or a sign of excessive dependency and insecure anxious attachment. The purpose of the present paper was to examine the latter possibility empirically, using measures of attachment insecurity, various kinds of beliefs, civic and moral disengagement, and

happiness or subjective well-being. The basic premise was that separation from parents provokes anxiety in Italian university students, which makes them reluctant to live on their own (Flett, Endler, & Besser, 2009). This reluctance was expected to be greater in students who suffer from attachment anxiety, and the tendency to continue living at home with parents was expected to be associated with a lack of engagement in society (Maione & Franceschini, 1999) while not adding to security or subjective well-being.

The Italian Phenomenon of “Famiglia Lunga” or “Long Family”

The growing tendency of Italian young adults to live at home with their parents has been called “famiglia lunga” (Scabini & Donati, 1988; Scabini, Marta, & Lanz, 2006). A survey study by the Institute for Social Research (IARD) revealed that six million Italians aged 20 to 34 years do not intend to leave their parents’ home in the near future (Buzzi et al., 2007).

The “long family” phenomenon can be viewed in relation to Banfield’s (1958) construct of Italian “amoral familism,” a cultural pattern identified after World War II characterized by the absence of moral obligations to anyone outside the family, combined with a strong distrust of social and political institutions. According to Banfield, amoral familism occurs when at least two elements combine: economic stagnation and ongoing foreign domination. Under these conditions, social bonds and cooperation tend to be limited to family members. After the war, some of the social tendencies associated with amoral familism have persisted.

More recent studies (e.g., Pietropolli Charmet, 2000) indicated that there had also been a transformation from the “ethical” family to the “affective” family. Part of this change stems from a concern that authoritarian parenting practices may have contributed to fascism. Especially since the 1970s, the paternal authority of the traditional Italian family has declined while maternal protection and emotional closeness has increased. At the same time, the birth rate has fallen dramatically and the nuclear, rather than extended, family has become prevalent. These changes may have increased young adults’ dependency on their nuclear families (Scabini, 2000). Much earlier, Freud (1936/1959) wrote about the risk of overindulged sons, saying that for them the danger of “object loss” might outweigh other dangers. This may now apply to Italian late adolescents.

RESEARCH PROGRAM

The Independent Variables: Living Conditions and Attachment Style

Attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980) is a conceptualization of the behavioral system that underlies emotional bonds in relationships between children and their parents, beginning early in infancy. The main idea in the theory is that the quality of a child’s relationships with primary caregivers shapes the child’s mental representations of self and relationship partners (called “internal working models” in the theory; Bowlby, 1969); such mental representations, related expectations, and emotion-regulation strategies affect the child’s emotions and behavior in

subsequent close relationships. The theory was originally tested in studies of young infants and their mothers, using a laboratory assessment procedure called the Strange Situation (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978). Ainsworth and colleagues found that they could reliably classify infants as secure, anxious, or avoidant in the Strange Situation, and that these classifications were predictable from in-home observations of infant-mother interactions. According to Ammaniti and Stern (1992), each sample of parent-child interactions should be considered within its specific cultural context; as a matter of fact, each mother-child dyad chooses the most appropriate relationship script in its cultural worldview.

Many researchers (see Grossmann, Grossmann, & Waters, 2005) found that infants' Strange Situation classifications predicted later social and emotional outcomes throughout childhood into adolescence. Hazan and Shaver (1987) showed that the same individual difference constructs — attachment security, attachment anxiety, and avoidant attachment — could be used in studies of adolescent and adult romantic, or couple, relationships. Subsequently, their three-category measure was designed to form two-dimensional measures of attachment anxiety and avoidance (e.g., Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998), which form four different adult attachment styles: secure, dismissing, preoccupied, and fearful. Adult attachment measures were subsequently used in hundreds of studies, reviewed and integrated by Mikulincer and Shaver (2007), showing that attachment “styles,” assessed with self-report measures, are related to both relevant family background measures and measures of later relationship functioning and psychosocial adaptation.

In the present study, we used the Italian translation of Griffin and Bartholomew's (1994a, 1994b) scale to measure attachment orientations in a sample of Italian university students. We submitted the data to factor analysis to reduce the items to three scales indicating secure, anxious, and avoidant attachment.

We expected to find a correlation between an independent living choice and a low level of attachment anxiety. This hypothesis is connected to the question raised by Maione and Franceschini (1999) during the Fedora Psyche Conference: “Do young people have a real insecure (or ambivalent) attachment, or could they simply be a little opportunistic, or even astute and well adapted to the social conditions offered by the country they live in?” (p. 48). Finally, we expected the two variables attachment style and living condition to affect all the other variables considered, such as civic and moral disengagement, beliefs, and happiness.

The Dependent Variable of Civic and Moral Engagement vs. Disengagement

A young adult who has left home and begun to live autonomously needs to look after him- or herself, shop for food, cook, clean, pay bills, and so on, without much caretakers' help (Scabini, 2000). Handling this kind of responsibility may also make it easier to take responsibility in other life domains (Kato, 2009), such as becoming involved in civic and charitable activities (McKinney, 2002). We expected students who did not live on their own, especially those with higher scores on measures of attachment insecurity, to be less civically and morally engaged (see Erez, Mikulincer, van Ijzendoorn, & Kroonenberg, 2008; Gillath et al., 2005).

The Dependent Variables of Religious, Spiritual, and Personal Beliefs

One aspect of the literature on the “long family” is the concern that dependent young adults living with their parents may not develop strong and autonomous beliefs about the nature of reality and people’s role in society (Diamanti, 1999). They may simply accept their parents’ beliefs, which in many Italian families means accepting the parents’ religious beliefs. We therefore expected that university students who lived on their own and those who had an avoidant attachment style would have weaker religious beliefs. We also expected that avoidant participants, no matter what their living condition, would have weaker spiritual beliefs, than secure ones (see Hall, Halcrow, Hill, & Delaney, 2005). Finally we expected both secure and avoidant participants to have stronger personal beliefs than anxious ones.

The Dependent Variable of Happiness

The IARD survey (Buzzi et al., 2007) found that young adults who live on their own are more satisfied with life than those who continue to live with parents. We expected to obtain similar findings, in addition to connections between attachment anxiety and lower subjective well-being. We also expected that anxious participants would perceive themselves as less happy than secure ones.

METHOD

Participants

Participants were 1570 students (990 women, 580 men) from both scientific (48.5%) and humanistic (41.3%) departments of a large Italian University, ranging in age from 18 to 38 years ($M = 22.11$, $SD = 2.51$).

Materials and Procedure

Participants were contacted in class and asked to volunteer for a study on university students. The questionnaire included the following measures.

Living situation. Participants were asked whether they were living on their own or with their parents, or under some other conditions, such as in dormitories. A dummy variable was created that was given a value of 1 for *living alone* and 0 for *other living conditions*. The latter level refers to students who live in “protected conditions” in which they are taken care of by other people (e.g., parents, boarding school, dormitories, etc.)

Relationship Scales Questionnaire (RSQ; Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994a, 1994b). The RSQ contains 30 attachment-relevant items that participants rate on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (*not at all like me*) to 5 (*very much like me*). The measure was originally intended to

appraise the four attachment styles that Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) assessed using four single items. Because the measures of the four separate styles had low reliabilities, and because we were using an Italian translation of the items (Camboni, 2005), we performed a factor analysis to determine the appropriate number of internally consistent scales to create. A scree plot indicated that a three-factor solution was preferable, so three factors, accounting for 37.37% of the item variance, were extracted and submitted to direct oblimin rotation (allowing the factors to be intercorrelated).

One factor, with nine items with loadings above .35, corresponded to attachment anxiety (e.g., "I worry about being abandoned"). Those items formed a scale with a reliability coefficient (α) of .81. A second factor (eight items; e.g., "I find it easy to get emotionally close to others"), indicated attachment security, and had an α coefficient of .71. A third, six-item, factor (e.g., "I prefer not to have other people depend on me"), indicated avoidant attachment and had an α coefficient of .71. Seven of the 30 RSQ items did not load above .35 on any of the three factors and were not used in the present study. The anxiety factor was statistically independent of both security ($-.02$) and avoidance ($.03$). Avoidance was correlated with security, $-.30$, $p < .01$.

Civic and moral disengagement. The Civic and Moral Disengagement Scale (Caprara, Fida, Vecchione, Tramontano, & Barbaranelli, 2009) includes 40 items, indicating lack of responsibility and lack of respect for and interest in social norms and laws. Each item was rated on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (*not at all agree*) to 5 (*completely agree*). This scale was added after data collection had begun, so the sample size, for analyses involving this variable, is smaller (around 750) than the sample size (around 1560) for the other analyses ($\alpha = .89$).

Strength of religious, spiritual, and personal beliefs. Participants were asked, in four questions taken from the WHO quality of life measure (WHO QOL Group, 2006), the extent to which they possessed strong "religious beliefs," "spiritual beliefs," and "personal beliefs" on five-point scales ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very much*). The WHOQOL-SRPB was developed to determine how religious, spiritual, and personal beliefs are related to quality of life in different countries. The idea behind that research was that different kinds of beliefs, such as the belief in God or the belief in and commitment to a particular political ideology, might create a greater sense of meaning in life, which might in turn contribute to psychological well-being.

Happiness or subjective well-being. The SHS (Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999) is a four-item measure of overall happiness: two items invite respondents to characterize themselves using both absolute and relative ratings (e.g., *Compared to most of my peers I consider myself...*); two items offer brief descriptions of happy and unhappy individuals and ask respondents to indicate the extent to which each one describes them ($\alpha = .80$).

RESULTS

Descriptive results for all variables, broken down by gender, are shown in Table 1. Women scored significantly higher than men on attachment anxiety and secure attachment, and on religious and spiritual beliefs. They were also less civically disengaged (i.e., more engaged) than men relative to the measure of civic and moral disengagement.

TABLE 1
Descriptive statistics for major variables by gender

| Variable | Women | | Men | | <i>t</i> | <i>df</i> | <i>p</i> < | Effect size: Cohen's <i>d</i> and <i>r</i> |
|-------------------------------|----------|-----------|----------|-----------|----------|-----------|------------|--|
| | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | | | | |
| Attachment Anxiety | 2.56 | 0.78 | 2.38 | 0.78 | 4.22 | 1561 | .001 | .23 and .11 |
| Avoidant Attachment | 3.42 | 0.88 | 3.40 | 0.72 | 0.59 | 1562 | <i>ns</i> | |
| Secure Attachment | 3.27 | 0.65 | 3.13 | 0.62 | 4.05 | 1561 | .001 | .22 and .11 |
| Civic and Moral Disengagement | 1.76 | 0.40 | 1.98 | 0.46 | 7.04 | 745 | .001 | .51 and .25 |
| Religious Beliefs | 6.83 | 2.43 | 5.97 | 2.46 | 6.76 | 1567 | .001 | .35 and .17 |
| Spiritual Beliefs | 3.07 | 0.98 | 2.79 | 1.07 | 5.36 | 1559 | .001 | .27 and .14 |
| Personal Beliefs | 3.67 | 0.79 | 3.69 | 0.92 | 0.44 | 1553 | <i>ns</i> | |

Note. Degrees of freedom are different for each dependent variable because of missing values and a different administration of materials for disengagement (see Method).

Table 2 displays correlations among the key variables. Attachment anxiety was significantly associated with civic and moral disengagement, weaker personal beliefs, and greater unhappiness. Avoidant attachment was significantly related to civic and moral disengagement and to weaker religious and spiritual beliefs, but it was not significantly related to happiness. Attachment security, in contrast, was significantly related to being more civically and morally engaged (McKinney, 2002), having stronger beliefs of all three kinds, and being significantly happy. The size of these correlations was similar, and not different, across the three different kinds of living arrangements.

TABLE 2
Correlations among key variables

| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 |
|----------------------------------|----|-----|--------|-------|--------|--------|-------|--------|
| 1. Attachment Anxiety | -- | .02 | -.05 | .19** | -.01 | -.04 | -.08* | -.40** |
| 2. Avoidant Attachment | | -- | -.32** | .14** | -.14** | -.10** | .04 | .01 |
| 3. Secure Attachment | | | -- | -.13* | .09* | .13** | .09** | .21** |
| 4. Civic and Moral Disengagement | | | | -- | -.19** | -.16** | -.06 | -.05 |
| 5. Religious Beliefs | | | | | -- | .68** | .11** | .13** |
| 6. Spiritual Beliefs | | | | | | -- | .33** | .12** |
| 7. Personal Beliefs | | | | | | | -- | .11** |
| 8. Happiness | | | | | | | | -- |

* *p* < .01; ** *p* < .001.

Attachment Style and Living Arrangements

Among participants, 1285 did not live on their own (1061 participants lived with their parents; 224 had other living arrangements, such as dormitories) while only 278 did. We expected that young adults who lived autonomously would score lower on attachment anxiety than the others (participants who either still lived with their parents or in other living arrangements). Results supported our predictions (Table 3). There was also a significant association between living arrangement and avoidant attachment. Participants living on their own were significantly more avoidant than those living with parents or in some other living arrangement. The differences on the attachment security scale were not significant, but participants living on their own had the highest security mean. In general, these results are compatible with our hypotheses, and all of the significant results remained unchanged when age was statistically controlled.¹

TABLE 3
Descriptive results for attachment factors, by living arrangements

| Variable | Alone | | Other arrangements | | <i>t</i> | <i>df</i> | <i>p</i> < | Effect size: Cohen's <i>d</i> and <i>r</i> |
|---------------------|----------|-----------|--------------------|-----------|----------|-----------|------------|--|
| | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | | | | |
| Attachment Anxiety | 2.36 | 0.68 | 2.56 | 0.73 | 4.30 | 1561 | .001 | .28 and .14 |
| Avoidant Attachment | 3.50 | 0.78 | 3.39 | 0.76 | 2.26 | 1562 | .03 | .14 and .07 |
| Secure Attachment | 3.29 | 0.58 | 3.23 | 0.61 | 1.61 | 1561 | <i>ns</i> | |

Hierarchical Regression Analysis

We conducted five hierarchical regression analyses predicting each of the dependent variables: disengagement, religious beliefs, spiritual beliefs, personal beliefs, and happiness. In the first step, we entered as predictors living arrangement (living alone was coded 1, and living with parents or other living arrangements was coded 0) and the three attachment factors (anxious, avoidant, secure); in the second step we added a two-way interaction between living arrangement and each attachment factor. In Table 4 only the first step results are reported, the second step did not add any significant portions to the explanation of dependent variance (*F*s change ≤ 2.09 ; degrees of freedom between 659 and 1331, always not significant). The explained variance ranged from 2% for personal beliefs to 19% for happiness. For civic and moral disengagement the significant predictor variables were living choice (with those living alone being less disengaged), attachment anxiety, and avoidance (with people scoring higher on either form of insecurity being more disengaged).

For religious beliefs, the significant predictor variables were living choice (with those living alone being less religious) and avoidant attachment (with those scoring higher being less religious). For spiritual beliefs, the significant predictor variables were living choice (with those living alone being less spiritual), avoidant attachment, and secure attachment (with those scoring higher in avoidant attachment being less spiritual and those scoring higher on secure attachment

being more spiritual). For personal beliefs and happiness, the significant predictor variables were anxious, avoidant, and secure attachment (with those scoring higher on secure attachment being lower on personal beliefs and happiness, and those scoring higher on avoidant and secure attachment being higher on personal beliefs and happiness).

TABLE 4
Regression analysis predicting Civic and Moral Disengagement, Religious Beliefs, Spiritual Beliefs, Personal Beliefs, and Happiness

| Dependent variable | Independent variables | <i>b</i> | <i>se</i> | β | <i>t</i> | <i>p</i> ≤ |
|---|-----------------------|----------|-----------|---------|----------|------------|
| Civic and Moral Disengagement | Living Alone | -.116 | .042 | -.105 | -2.781 | .006 |
| | Attachment Anxiety | .081 | .017 | .184 | 4.905 | .001 |
| | Avoidant Attachment | .064 | .018 | .140 | 3.575 | .001 |
| | Secure Attachment | -.026 | .017 | -.059 | -1.509 | .132 |
| <i>R</i> -square = .08, <i>F</i> (4, 662) = 14.74, <i>p</i> < .001 | | | | | | |
| Religious Beliefs | Living Alone | -.899 | .165 | -.148 | -5.442 | .001 |
| | Attachment Anxiety | -.014 | .067 | -.006 | -.212 | .832 |
| | Avoidant Attachment | -.306 | .070 | -.124 | -4.357 | .001 |
| | Secure Attachment | .074 | .070 | .030 | 1.058 | .290 |
| <i>R</i> -square = .04, <i>F</i> (4, 1334) = 14.66, <i>p</i> < .001 | | | | | | |
| Spiritual Beliefs | Living Alone | -.141 | .069 | -.056 | -2.041 | .050 |
| | Attachment Anxiety | -.033 | .028 | -.032 | -1.176 | .240 |
| | Avoidant Attachment | -.082 | .029 | -.080 | -2.786 | .005 |
| | Secure Attachment | .101 | .029 | .100 | 3.473 | .001 |
| <i>R</i> -square = .03, <i>F</i> (4, 1327) = 8.79, <i>p</i> < .001 | | | | | | |
| Personal Beliefs | Living Alone | -.019 | .056 | -.009 | -.339 | .735 |
| | Attachment Anxiety | -.083 | .023 | -.100 | -3.635 | .000 |
| | Avoidant Attachment | .055 | .024 | .066 | 2.303 | .030 |
| | Secure Attachment | .081 | .024 | .098 | 3.386 | .001 |
| <i>R</i> -square = .02, <i>F</i> (4, 1324) = 6.79, <i>p</i> < .001 | | | | | | |
| Happiness | Living Alone | .011 | .066 | .004 | .167 | .867 |
| | Attachment Anxiety | -.420 | .027 | -.391 | -15.730 | .001 |
| | Avoidant Attachment | .080 | .028 | .075 | 2.864 | .004 |
| | Secure Attachment | .201 | .028 | .188 | 7.202 | .001 |
| <i>R</i> -square = .19, <i>F</i> (4, 1333) = 78.99, <i>p</i> < .001 | | | | | | |

For spiritual beliefs, even if *F* change was not significant, a marginally significant interaction was present between living choice and avoidant attachment ($\beta = .05$, $t = 1.61$, $p = .108$). Slope analysis for those living alone and in other living conditions (Figure 1) shows that avoidant

attachment is more highly correlated with stronger spiritual beliefs for those who do not live alone.

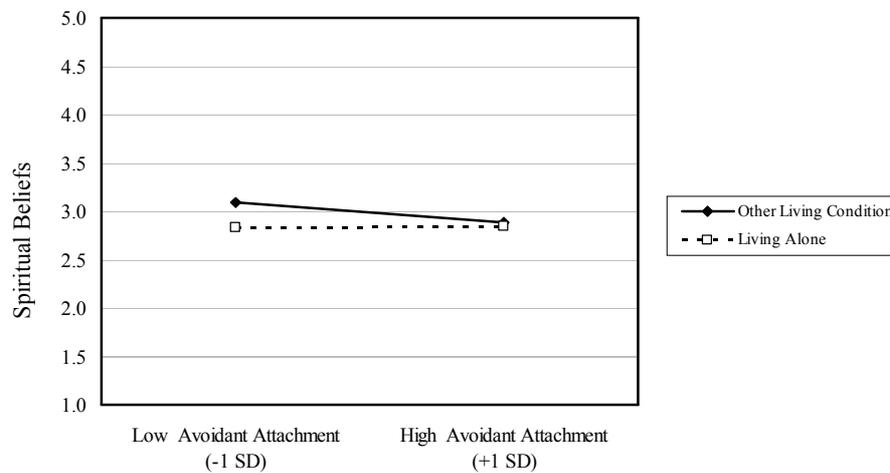


FIGURE 1
Interaction between Avoidant Attachment and Living Condition for Spiritual Beliefs.

DISCUSSION

Results largely support our predictions. Italian university students who lived on their own scored lower on anxious attachment. This is compatible with expectations based on a previous Italian study by Maione and Franceschini (1999). In addition, students who lived on their own scored higher on avoidant attachment and marginally higher on secure attachment. These findings are all compatible with the possibility that anxiously attached late adolescents and young adults are likely to continue to live in “protected environments” longer than the others.

We expected that university students who continued to live with their parents would have stronger religious beliefs than those who lived on their own, and it proved to be the case. This may support the idea that dependent young adults living with their parents are less likely to develop autonomous beliefs about the nature of reality and people’s role in society than those who move away from the family home. Students who stay at home may simply accept their parents’ beliefs, which in many Italian families include beliefs associated with Catholicism. We should acknowledge, however, that religious beliefs were positively correlated with attachment security and civic and moral disengagement, so there is no indication in the data that religiosity per se is a personal or civic liability; in fact, the opposite seems to be the case.

As expected, avoidant participants no matter what their living condition, showed weaker spiritual beliefs than secure ones. These results are associated with Hall and colleagues’ (2005) findings, by which secure people have a stronger connection to a spiritual community than to any of the other attachments.

Finally, as we predicted, both secure and avoidant participants showed stronger personal beliefs than anxious ones. This result confirms the typical characteristics of the three different attachment styles, described by Mikulincer and Shaver (2007): while both secure and avoidant

people are generally more able to maintain their autonomy (the latter by avoiding closeness), anxious people tend to behave in a clingy and dependent way.

Consistently with our expectations, students who lived on their own reported higher subjective well-being than the others (see Buzzi et al., 2007). It would be useful in future studies to explore the causes of happiness and unhappiness related to different living arrangements.

Although results were mostly in the expected directions, the effect sizes were generally not large. This means that late adolescents and young adults who did not live on their own are slightly less secure, less engaged in society, and less happy, but among them, the worst off are those who are anxiously attached, disengaged, and without strong beliefs. Not everyone who continued to live at home exhibited this set of problems, however, therefore concerns about the “long family” should be directed especially at families whose stay-at-home young adult offspring are anxiously attached, civically and morally disengaged, and unhappy, and who are likely to have been affected by a particular kind of parenting (Cassidy & Shaver, 2008; Lavy, Mikulincer, & Shaver, 2010). We may suppose that they are the ones most likely to abuse drugs and feel alienated (see Bellio & Fiorin, 2009; Bergeret & Bergeret, 1984; Ferraro, Caci, D’Amico, & Di Blasi, 2007; Soresi, Nota, & Ferrari, 2005), although those possibilities remain to be explored further in future studies.

NOTE

1. In ANCOVA with attachment style as dependent variables, living arrangements as independent variable, and age as covariate, we obtained the same results. There was little difference in age between the living-choice groups, with those living on their own being 22.97 years and those having other living arrangements being 21.93 years.

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