Reviewer’s report

Title: The influences of childlessness on the psychological well-being and social network of the oldest old

Version: 1 Date: 15 May 2011

Reviewer: Tanja Rothrauff-Laschober

Reviewer’s report:

Review: Childlessness

Overall comments: The purpose of the study was to examine differences in psychological well-being and parental and marital status among the oldest old. Results showed no differences in well-being between parents and the childless. Some differences were found for social support networks and living arrangements.

Introduction:

1. Major compulsory revision: The introduction starts with negative relationships between involuntary childlessness and psychological well-being. However, the remainder of the introduction does not specify whether findings refer to voluntary or involuntary childless older adults. This omission needs to be addressed considering empirical support for the differential outcomes between voluntary and involuntary childlessness.

2. Major compulsory revision: In addition, the introduction currently leads the reader to believe that the study will focus on involuntarily childless adults. This is not the case. As such, the introduction needs to weave together the different types of studies on childlessness and the purpose of the current study (e.g., why “all” types of childless adults are included in the study).

3. Discretionary revision: Considering the cross-sectional design of the study, the term “influences” of childlessness on psychological well-being is not quite correct (including the title of the manuscript). Longitudinal designs can examine influences whereas cross-sectional designs are limited to examining relationships among variables.

Methods (Major compulsory revisions):

4. Please explain why the goal of the study was to understand the oldest old but the sample was limited to 85 year-olds only rather than all adults 85 and over.

5. Procedure:

a. The authors acknowledge that their assessment of childless status has limitations. One way to address this limitation is to at least look at how many of the childless adults have grandchildren. This will provide somewhat of an idea of how many of these adults have deceased children. If the numbers are very small, deleting them from the study might be warranted or controlling for the fact that
they did have children. Having had children versus never having had children, although a childless status, can have different effects on well-being.

b. Please add citations to all measures that are standardized. In addition, please note possible limitations in the discussion of using single-item scales.

6. Please explain why you decided to dichotomize continuous variables, considering the statistical limitations of this practice, rather than using analyses specifically designed for use with continuous dependent variables.

7. The sample sizes for chi-square sometimes fall below the required n = 5 per cell. You should consider using a chi-square adjustment such as Fisher’s exact test to overcome this issue. A greater concern, however, is the use of logistic regression with many variables in light of the very small sample size for childless adults (n = 57) and by marital status. Conventional methods suggest n = 10 per variable in the analysis (e.g., if you have 5 variables you need at least 50 participants in the study).

Results (Major compulsory revisions):

8. Can you please better explain the sample size? 650 oldest old were contacted and 496 agreed to participate (76% response rate). Of the 496, only 377 actually participated. That would mean that the sample size is 377 instead of 496 as mentioned in the abstract and table?

9. I suspect that the small sample size for childless adults, and thus lack of power, accounts for the lack of significant findings. This should be discussed as a limitation of the study.

Discussion (Major compulsory revisions):

10. Some sections of the discussion should provide better explanations of or speculations regarding the findings.

11. Paragraph 8, line 5: “…would suffer more from never having had children.” This statement is not supported by the data, because it is possible that some childless adults had children who died. As noted earlier, looking at the number of childless who have grandchildren will help provide some insights on this issue.

12. In addition to listing the limitations, the authors need to provide an explanation of what these limitations mean regarding the study and findings.

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

Declaration of competing interests:

I declare that I have no competing interests.