

# The Mental Health Statuses of Adult Children from Unconventional Families



Noemi Arevalo

Department of Social Work

Capstone Research Advisor: Dr. Karen Lee

## ABSTRACT

There is relatively little data studying the long-term effects parental statuses have on young adult functioning. Moreover, adults raised with unconventional parents (cohabiting parents, adoptive, step, or single parents, parents who had same-sex relationships, or parents who remarried after a divorce) and the possible effects of their parental union on their well-being have not been discussed. Therefore, this study is aimed to compare the mental health status between adults raised in different unconventional families. The current study is a secondary analysis of the data from the New Family Structure Survey study, 2011-2012. The sample for the study was 2,988 young adults from unconventional families. The results showed that four groups differ in depression, life satisfaction, and suicidal ideation, suggesting adults raised with same-sex parents are more vulnerable to mental health issues than other adult groups. Key implications are educating parents who fall into these parental categories, and creating interventions tailored to individuals raised in such family dynamics.

## INTRODUCTION

### Significance

- Unconventional families are more common than traditional families and must be further studied to understand the unique challenges the younger generation of such backgrounds are facing.

### Purpose

- The purpose of this study is to examine the health behaviors of adults raised in unconventional families.

### Research Questions

- Is there a mean difference amongst adults raised in different unconventional families and symptoms of depression?
- Is there a difference amongst adults raised in different unconventional families and symptoms of life satisfaction?
- Is there a difference amongst adults raised in different unconventional families and symptoms of suicide ideation?

### Hypothesis

- There will be a mean difference between adults raised in different unconventional families and symptoms of depression.
- There will be a difference between adults raised in different unconventional families and symptoms of life satisfaction.
- There will be a difference between adults raised in different unconventional families and symptoms of suicide ideation.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

- The health statuses of children from cohabitating families were compromised due to the high stressful home environment and union dissolution (Schmeer, 2011).
- Some adoptees may be traumatized and at a higher risk of psychological morbidity and suicide due to their biological parents who had a mental illness and died from suicide (Nyber, 2016; Petersen, 2014).
- Adolescents from same-sex parents had poorer psycho-social wellbeing due to the changes and transitions experienced when creating this new family (Potter & Potter, 2017).

### Gaps and Limitations

- There are no studies researching parental marital history, family processes, adolescent psychosocial development, and young adult mental outcomes (Wickrama et al., 2013). Furthermore, few researchers have examined the direct and indirect connections between family structure and emerging adults even regarding their relationship outcomes (Bouchard, & Lachance-Grzela, 2016).

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design and Data Collection Procedures

- The current study is a secondary analysis of the data from the New Family Structure Survey study, 2011-2012
- The survey gathered information on the experiences of adults raised in unconventional families that included cohabiting parents, adoptive, step, or single parents, parents who had same-sex relationships, parents who remarried after divorce along with those adults who were not raised in biologically intact households.
- The goal of the cross-sectional study was to examine the relationships, social, and health behaviors amongst the individuals.

### Sample and Sampling Methods

- The participants were recruited through either the random digit dialing sampling or the current address-based sampling methodology (Regnerus, 2012).
- The original study consisted of 15,058 18-39-year-old adults residing in the U.S.
- The current study utilized a subsample of 2,988 participants who are a part of an unconventional family.

### Measures

- The depression was measured by the adult's responses to nine questions of a depression index to assess how true the questions were over the past seven days. These items are a subset of the Center for Epidemiological Studies-Depression scale (Radloff, 1977).
- The life satisfaction was measured with one item asking participants how happy or unhappy are they with their life these days.
- The suicide ideation was measured with one item asking participants if, in the past 12 months, they have ever seriously thought about committing suicide.

## RESULTS

### Kruskal- Wallis H-Test

- Depression.** A Kruskal - Wallis H test was conducted comparing mean depression scores among study participants from various unconventional parental family groups. A significant result was found ( $H(3) = 41.39, p < .001$ ), indicating that the 4 unconventional parental groups differed from each other. Follow-up pairwise comparisons indicated that adults raised with co-habitant parents were significantly less depressed (Mean Rank=1418.26) than adults raised with same-sex parents (Mean Rank=1682.92). Adults raised with other unconventional parents (Mean Rank=1345.91) were less depressed than adults raised with adoptive parents (Mean Rank=1548.05). Additionally, adults raised with same-sex parents were significantly more depressed than other adults raised with unconventional parents. There was no significant differences in depression among adults raised with adoptive parents and the other two unconventional parental groups.

### Chi- Square Test

- Life satisfaction.** A chi-square test was calculated comparing the frequency of unconventional family's category in life satisfaction. A significant association was found ( $\chi^2(6) = 15.894, p < .001$ ), while a Cramer's V statistic suggested a weak relationship (.052). Adults raised with same-sex parents were more likely to report unhappiness in life (17.2%), followed by respondents with adoptive parents (14.5%), co-habitant parents (12.6%), and other parents (11.5%).
- Suicidal Ideation.** A chi-square test was calculated comparing the frequency of unconventional family's category in suicide ideation. A significant association was found ( $\chi^2(3) = 20.97, p < .001$ ), while a Cramer's V statistic suggested a weak relationship (.084). Adults raised with same-sex parents (13.9%) and adoptive parents (13.3%) have in the past seriously thought of committing suicide versus adults raised with co-habitant parents (7.8%) and other parents (6.9%).

Table 1

Sample Characteristics (N=2,988)

Characteristic	f	%
Gender		
Male	971	32.5
Female	2,016	67.5
Age		
18-29	1,675	56.1
30-44	1,313	43.9
Racial/ ethnicity		
White, Non-Hispanic	1,835	61.4
Black, Non-Hispanic	416	13.9
Other, Non-Hispanic	143	4.8
Hispanic	469	15.7
2+ Races, Non-Hispanic	124	4.1
Level of Education		
Less than high school	234	7.8
High school	649	21.7
Some college	1,172	39.2
Bachelor's degree or higher	933	31.2
Marital Status		
Married	1,218	40.8
Widowed	7	0.2
Divorced	80	2.7
Separated	48	1.6
Never married	1,115	37.3
Living with a partner	520	17.4
Employment Status		
Working- as a paid employee	1,735	58.1
Working- self-employed	174	5.8
Not working- on temporary layoff from a job	36	1.2
Not working- looking for work	523	17.5
Not working- retired	2	0.1
Not working- disabled	113	3.8
Not working- other	402	13.5
Income		
Less than 14,999	592	19.9
15,000-39,999	872	29.3
40,000-99,999	1,152	38.6
100,000 or more	365	12.2

Figure 1

Depression Amongst Adults Raised with Unconventional Parents

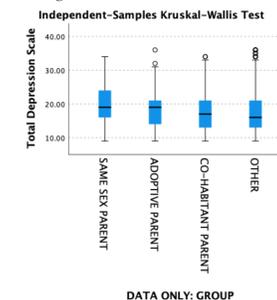


Table 2

Prevalence of Life Satisfaction Among Adults Raised with Unconventional Parents

Data Only: Group	Happy		Neither happy nor unhappy		Unhappy	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Same Sex Parent	167	72.0	25	10.8	40	17.2
Adoptive Parent	134	69.4	31	16.1	28	14.5
Co-habitant Parent	492	75.5	78	12.0	82	12.6
Other	1475	78.5	188	10.0	217	11.5

Table 3

Prevalence of Suicide Ideation Among Adults Raised with Unconventional Parents

Data Only: Group	Yes		No	
	n	%	n	%
Same Sex Parent	32	13.9	199	86.1
Adoptive Parent	26	13.3	169	86.7
Co-habitant Parent	51	7.8	600	92.2
Other	130	6.9	1746	93.1

## DISCUSSION

### Summary of Findings

- The mean depression scores among adults with unconventional parental groups differed significantly. Adults raised with same-sex parents were significantly more depressed than adults raised with co-habitant parents and other unconventional parents.
- A significant difference in the distribution of life satisfaction responses was found between adults raised in different unconventional families. This indicated that adults raised with same-sex parents were more likely to report unhappiness in life followed by respondents with adoptive parents, co-habitant parents, and other parents.
- A significant difference in the distribution of suicidal ideation responses was found among adults raised in different unconventional families. Adults raised with same-sex parents and adoptive parents were more likely to think about committing suicide in the past than adults raised with co-habitant parents and other parents.

### Strengths

- This study was inclusive of various unconventional family systems.
- From the data collected it was able to obtain a general visualization of the attitudes and characteristics of the selected groups. With such information it was simple to facilitate a comparison between groups.
- This study used items from the validated scale, the Center for Epidemiological Studies-Depression scale (Radloff, 1977).

### Limitations

- As the questions were standardized, there was no further effort made to understand why participants were unhappy or have thought of committing suicide before.
- The study lacked a diverse population sample as more than fifty percent of the participants identified as White.
- Additionally, the study was completed during a set time that cannot be used to analyze the behaviors over time.

### Implications for Research and Practice

- Future research is needed to study the gender differences in the outcomes of the adult children.
- Further research should include a sample consisting of high number of participants from diverse racial/ethnic backgrounds.
- Social workers must develop workshops for same-sex, adoptive, co-habitant, and other parents to help them understand the possible impact of family types on children's developmental experiences.
- Various services (e.g., support groups, case management) must be available to children belonging to unconventional families as an outlet to make connections and learn beneficial coping strategies.

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