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### Feeling Not Wanted/Loved and Depression: Does Gender Matter?

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## Feeling Not Wanted/Loved and Depression: Does Gender Matter?

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# Feeling Not Wanted/Loved and Depression: Does Gender Matter?

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## Abstract

Depression affects over 17 million American adults yearly and has been identified as the leading cause of disability in people between the ages of 15 and 44 years. There is evidence that feeling neglect or a lack of parental attachment during childhood is associated with depression. One construct that has been overlooked is love from a parent. The purpose of this study was to analyze the association between individuals who felt not wanted/loved during adolescence and lifetime depression and to examine this association by gender. We examined 5114 participants aged 24–32 years at Wave IV of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health) public use dataset. We used logistic regression analysis to determine the association between an individual feeling not wanted/loved by their parent/caregiver prior to age 18, covariates, and lifetime depression. We then stratified by gender and ran logistic models for both men and women separately. Overall, 16.2% ( $n = 827$ ) reported lifetime depression diagnosis, while 16.5% of the participants reported feeling not wanted/loved “often,” while 29.8% reported it as “sometimes.” Feeling not wanted/loved “often” was associated with higher odds of depression (AOR = 3.00; 95% CI, 2.45–3.66;  $p < .001$ ) versus “sometimes” (AOR = 1.59; 95% CI, 1.31–1.90;  $p < .001$ ). When stratified by

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gender, feeling not loved/wanted was associated with depression among both men (AOR = 3.70; 95% CI, 2.60–5.25;  $p < .001$ ) and women (AOR = 2.73; 95% CI, 2.13–3.48;  $p < .001$ ). Feeling not loved or wanted by a parent/caregiver during adolescence has serious implications, for both men and women. Future studies should further examine this construct and identify family-based interventions that focus on parent/caregiver and child relationships.

### Keywords

emotional neglect and depression, unloved and depression, child rearing and depression, parental relationships, adolescent depression

### Introduction

Depression affects over 17 million adults in the United States and has been identified as the leading cause of disability in people between the ages of 15 and 44 years (Friedrich, 2017; The National Institute of Mental Health, 2018; World Health Organisation, 2017). Rates of depression among both adults and adolescents have been rising consistently for the last 25 years (Hasin et al., 2018). Depression is a common but serious mood disorder with severe outcomes that affects an individual's routine, social, and professional lives (Cho et al., 2019; Teo et al., 2013). A recent nationally representative study found the prevalence of past year major depressive disorder at 10.4%, and 20.6% lifetime (Hasin et al., 2018). Factors such as childhood sexual abuse (Gibb et al., 2007; Infurna et al., 2016), alcohol use (Boden & Fergusson, 2011; Galaif et al., 2007; Selkie et al., 2015), smoking (Fluharty et al., 2017; Paperwalla et al., 2004), and adverse childhood experiences have been linked to depression (Hunt et al., 2017). Rates of depression have been historically found to be higher among women than men (Hyde & Mezulis, 2020; Salk et al., 2017). There is growing evidence that adverse childhood experiences including neglect are known to be associated with increased likelihood of depression (Cheong et al., 2017; Musliner & Singer, 2014; Nanni et al., 2012; Paterniti et al., 2017). In addition, emotional neglect during adolescence has major implications on mental health outcomes (Cohen et al., 2017). Specifically, author Teicher reported that children who suffer neglect in their formative years have reduced growth in the left hemisphere, which may lead to associated increased depression risk for depression (Teicher et al., 2018; Van Der Kolk, 2016). However, authors Winston and Chicot showed that there was evidence from the varying fields of research (for illustration: development psychology, neurobiology, and animal epigenetics) indicating that neglect, parental inconsistency, and an overall lack of perception of love can lead to long-term mental health problems besides reducing children's overall potential and happiness. Thus, lack of perception of love can be considered as a risk factor leading to depression among children (Winston & Chicot, 2016).

In the early years, the social, emotional, and cognitive development of children is largely dependent on a loving bond or attachment relationship with a parent/caregiver (Bornstein et al., 2006; Collins et al., 2000; Winston & Chicot, 2016). An extensive body of literature finds positive associations between the quality or closeness of parent–caregiver–child relationships and offspring well-being when they become adults (Booth et al., 2010; Luthar et al., 2015; Williams & Merten, 2014). One construct that has not been extensively explored is love from a parent. There is growing evidence that a lack of love can lead to long-term mental health problems and reduced happiness (Winston & Chicot, 2016). As an adult, one’s perception of how their parent perceived them in childhood has significant influence. Based on parental acceptance–rejection theory (PARTheory), the psychological adjustment of children is likely to be affected in a specific way described below when they perceive themselves to be accepted or rejected by their parents (Rohner & Khaleque, 2010). PARTheory also postulates that adults’ remembrances of rejection from a parent/caregiver during childhood are likely to be associated with the same form of psychological maladjustment as children (Rohner & Khaleque, 2010). Rohner identifies two primary characteristics of parental conduct toward children, including acceptance and rejection. Acceptance refers to the idea of love and affection by parents, while rejection refers to aversion or reprobation by parents (Rohner et al., 2012). Perceptions of how one is perceived by their parent may have a significant influence on one’s well-being (Khaleque, 2018).

### *Importance of Love Between Parent/Caregiver and Child*

Parental/caregiver love toward a child has received long-standing theoretical and empirical attention (Rohner & Lansford, 2017). The bond and love between a parent/caregiver and child is one of the most important in a child’s life (Walters & Stinnett, 1971). Lack of love in childhood from a parent/caregiver has been found to have severe and longer-lasting emotional, behavioral, and social consequences on both children and offspring (Rohner et al., 2012) including depression (Khaleque, 2018). Children’s perception of being loved by parent/caregivers is amongst the strongest parental influencers of developmental outcomes (Khaleque, 2018). Susukida and colleagues (2016) found that individuals who perceived love from caregivers during childhood had significantly 42–43% lower odds of suicide behaviors than those who did not perceive love. The perception of feeling not loved by a child is often based on the perception of acceptance/rejection from the parent (Khaleque & Rohner, 2012), in which an act of rejection may be implicit or silent (Johnston et al., 2017). Prior work has also found that a related construct, childhood neglect, has been found to predict depression (Paterniti et al., 2017).

### *Gender and the Current Study*

Attachment experiences and closeness of relationships with parents/caregivers are known to vary by gender (Spruit et al., 2020). Girls generally desire more closeness and

dependency and worry about loneliness more than boys (Rose & Rudolph, 2006). Prior studies have found attachments to be more highly associated with depressive symptoms among women in comparison to men (Aifuwa, 2016; Kenny et al., 1993). While previous work has explored constructs such as childhood neglect, parental/child closeness, and attachment, the construct of not feeling loved and mental health has not been extensively explored. The perception of not feeling loved is an important construct to examine as it is unique from neglect. Love is an emotional experience, in which its perception may vary from person to person (Beall & Sternberg, 1995). The current study explores the association between feeling not wanted/loved during adolescence and lifetime depression and second to examine its association by gender. Overall, we hypothesize that feeling not wanted/loved will have a strong association with depression among women in comparison to men as prior studies have found a greater effect on women when examining neglect and attachment (Ge, Conger, & Elder, 2001; Paul & Eckenrode, 2015). Hagborg et al. (2017) found that emotional neglect predicted internalizing symptoms among women, and not men. However, to our knowledge, no previous study has examined gender, relative to not feeling loved or wanted, and subsequent depression. It is important to consider how these associations may vary at the gender level. This knowledge may help inform families and treatment providers for gender-responsive treatments and interventions.

## Methods

### *Participants*

We conducted a secondary analysis using data from the National Adolescent Health Study (Add Health), a longitudinal survey of a nationally representative sample of adolescents in the United States from 1994 to 2008. It aimed to investigate the health trajectories of adolescents into their adulthood. A sample of 132 schools were chosen from the United States using systematic sampling with stratification by a broad range of demographic characteristics (region, school size, school type, and ethnicity). All participants provided voluntary written informed consent for participation in all aspects of the Add Health study in accordance with the University of North Carolina School of Public Health Institutional Review Board guidelines. We used publicly available cross-sectional data from Wave IV of the study. There were 5114 (mean age = 29.00 years;  $SD = 1.78$ ) participants between age 24 and 32 years, including 2761 female (54%) and 2353 men (46%).

### *Measures*

**Outcome: Self-Report of Depression.** The primary outcome of interest was lifetime report of depression. This was based on response to the following question “Has a doctor, nurse or other health care provider ever told you that you have or had: depression?” and coded as a binary variable.

## *Independent variables*

*Feeling not loved/wanted.* To assess feeling not wanted/loved participants were asked “Before your 18th birthday, how often did a parent or other adult caregiver say things that really hurt your feelings or made you feel like you were not wanted or loved?”. Data were recoded into three categories: six or more times was classified as “often,” 1–5 times as “sometimes,” and 0 as never (reference category). This measure has been validated, is reliable, and has been used in prior students assessing love between parent/caregiver and child (Ali et al., 2019; Khaleque, 2018; Khaleque & Rohner, 2012).

*Covariates.* Participant age was calculated by subtracting the respondent’s birth year from the year in which their Wave IV data were collected. The participant’s sex was self-reported and race/ethnicity was identified by the interviewer. Race/ethnicity was classified as Black, Asian, American Indian Alaska Native, and White (reference category). Income was used as a binary variable, with 1 representing “low income with income less <\$30,000” and 0 representing income of \$30,000 or higher. The binary variable for the respondent’s level of education was based on high school graduation, with 1 representing not having graduated high school and 0 representing graduating high school, obtaining a GED or high school certificate of completion or higher education.

Psychiatric and psychosocial covariates that are known risk factors for depression including alcohol use, smoking, and childhood sexual abuse were used as controls in the multivariate models. Regular alcohol use was based on the following question “During the past 12 months, on how many days did you drink alcohol?” and coded binary with “Once or more per month” representing 1 and less than once per month representing 0. For lifetime regular smoking, the following question was used to assess lifetime regular smoking: “Have you ever smoked cigarettes regularly—that is, at least one cigarette every day for 30 days?”, which coded as a binary variable. Childhood sexual abuse was assessed using this question, “How often did a parent or other adult caregiver touch you in a sexual way, force you to touch him or her in a sexual way, or force you to have sexual relations?”, and coded as a binary variable with 1 representing any instance and 0 representing no report of sexual abuse.

## *Data Analysis*

All data cleaning and recoding of variables was conducted in SAS version 9.4 (SAS Institute Inc., Cary, NC, 2017), with analyses conducted in Stata version 14 (StataCorp, 2015). We conducted chi-square tests to determine if there were significant differences for covariates between those who reported feeling not wanted/loved versus who did not. Logistic regression was used to assess whether feeling not wanted/loved was associated with the outcome variable, depression in the model. Models were constructed for the study population and for men and women separately to examine difference in association by sex. Interactions between feeling not wanted/loved were

**Table 1.** Sample Demographics by Gender.

|                                       | Men ( <i>n</i> = 2353), <i>n</i> (%) | Women ( <i>n</i> = 2761), <i>n</i> (%) | $\chi^2$ | df |
|---------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|--|----------|----|
| Race/ethnicity                        |                                      |  | 6.80     | 3  |
| White                                 | 1717 (46.8)                          | 1954 (53.2)                            |          |    |
| Black                                 | 534 (22.7)                           | 706 (25.6)                             |          |    |
| Asian                                 | 70 (3.0)                             | 87 (3.2)                               |          |    |
| Native American                       | 18 (0.8)                             | 23 (0.8)                               |          |    |
| Education                             |                                      |  | 8.92*    | 1  |
| < High school                         | 176 (7.5)                            | 150 (5.4)                              |          |    |
| Graduated high school                 | 2177 (92.5)                          | 2611 (94.6)                            |          |    |
| Income                                |                                      |  | 27.99*   | 1  |
| < \$30,000 per year                   | 256 (10.9)                           | 441 (16.0)                             |          |    |
| ≥ \$30,000 per year                   | 2097 (89.1)                          | 2320 (84.0)                            |          |    |
| Lifetime depression                   | 234 (9.9)                            | 593 (21.5)                             | 124.64*  | 1  |
| Feeling not wanted/loved <sup>a</sup> |                                      |  | 80.91*   | 2  |
| Often                                 | 311 (13.2)                           | 531 (19.2)                             |          |    |
| Sometimes                             | 630 (26.7)                           | 894 (32.4)                             |          |    |
| Never                                 | 1412 (60.1)                          | 1336 (48.4)                            |          |    |
| Childhood sexual abuse                | 60 (2.5)                             | 197 (7.1)                              | 76.76*   | 1  |
| Regular alcohol use <sup>b</sup>      | 1108 (47.1)                          | 1242 (44.9)                            | 23.30*   | 1  |
| Lifetime regular smoker <sup>c</sup>  | 1163 (49.4)                          | 1149 (41.6)                            | 31.28*   | 1  |

Note. Abbreviations: *n*, number.

\*  $p < .05$ .

<sup>a</sup>Not wanted/loved was coded based on lifetime report: Often (6 or more times), sometime (1–5 times), and never 0.

<sup>b</sup>At least one alcohol drink monthly for the past year.

<sup>c</sup>At least one cigarette every day for 30 days, lifetime.

tested independently with psychiatric and psychosocial covariates including childhood sexual abuse, regular smoking, and regular alcohol use.

## Results

Table 1 shows the prevalence of demographic characteristics and covariates for the study population and chi-square results by gender. Overall, 16.2% ( $n=827$ ) of participants reported lifetime depression. A significantly higher percentage of women ( $n=593$ ; 21.5%) versus men ( $n=234$ , 9.9%) reported lifetime depression ( $\chi^2=124.65$ ;  $p<.001$ ). Overall, 16.5% of the participants reported feeling not wanted/loved “often,” while 29.8% reported it as “sometimes,” and 53.8% as never.

In Table 2, we present findings from logistic regression examining the association between not wanted/loved and lifetime depression in our study population. Participants who reported feeling not wanted/loved at the level of “often” reported higher odds of depression than (AOR=3.00; 95% CI, 2.45–3.66;  $p<.001$ ) participants who reported



**Table 2.** Logistic Regression Analyses Predicting Depression.

| Variable                              | AOR  | 95% CI        |
|---------------------------------------|------|---------------|
| Feeling not wanted/loved <sup>a</sup> |      |               |
| Often                                 | 3.00 | [2.45,3.66]*  |
| Sometimes                             | 1.59 | [1.31,1.90]*  |
| Never                                 | Ref  |               |
| Education: Less < high school         | 1.12 | [0.83, 1.53]  |
| Race                                  |      |               |
| Black                                 | 0.55 | [0.44, 0.67]* |
| American Indian/Alaska Native         | 0.86 | [0.36, 2.05]  |
| Asian/Pacific Islander                | 0.92 | [0.39, 2.15]  |
| White                                 | Ref  |               |
| Female gender                         | 2.31 | [1.94, 2.74]* |
| Age                                   | 0.99 | [0.94, 1.03]  |
| Income: <\$30,000 per year            | 1.49 | [1.20, 1.83]* |
| Lifetime regular smoker <sup>b</sup>  | 1.74 | [1.48, 2.04]* |
| Regular alcohol use <sup>c</sup>      | 0.95 | [0.80, 1.11]  |
| Childhood sexual abuse                | 1.73 | [1.29, 2.31]* |

Note. AOR = adjusted odds ratio; CI = confidence interval; Ref = reference category.

\* = significant ( $p < .05$ ).

<sup>a</sup>Not wanted/loved was coded based on lifetime report: Often (6 or more times), sometime (1–5 times), and never.

<sup>b</sup>At least one cigarette every day for 30 days, lifetime.

<sup>c</sup>At least one drink or more every month in the last year.

sometime (AOR=1.59; 95% CI, 1.31–1.90;  $p<.001$ ). Childhood sexual abuse, lifetime regular smoking, and low income also were positively associated with depression. Interactions between the feeling not wanted/loved with lifetime regular smoking, childhood sexual abuse, and alcohol use were not found to be significant.

In Table 3, we stratified by gender and found that feeling wanted/loved was associated with elevated odds of depression in both men (AOR=3.70; 95% CI, 2.60–5.25;  $p<.001$ ) and women (AOR=2.73; 95% CI, 2.13–3.48;  $p<.001$ ). Childhood sexual abuse was found to be significantly associated with depression among women (AOR=1.71; 95% CI, 1.23–2.37;  $p<.001$ ) but not among men. Lifetime regular smoking and low income were significant for both men and women.

## Discussion

Depression contributes significantly to the global burden of disease and is the leading cause of disability worldwide (Friedrich, 2017). As rates continue to rise (Campbell et al., 2016; Egede et al., 2016), it is vital to identify pathways to depression, where intervention may be feasible. The findings from the current study are noteworthy, feeling not wanted or loved from a parent/caregiver during childhood that is a construct

**Table 3.** Logistic Regression Analyses Predicting Depression Stratified by Gender.

| Variable                              | Men  |               | Women |               |
|---------------------------------------|------|---------------|-------|---------------|
|                                       | AOR  | 95% CI        | AOR   | 95% CI        |
| Feeling not wanted/loved <sup>a</sup> |      |               |       |               |
| Often                                 | 3.70 | [2.60,5.25]*  | 2.73  | [2.13,3.48]*  |
| Sometimes                             | 1.83 | [1.31,2.54]*  | 1.48  | [1.18,1.84]*  |
| Never                                 | Ref  |               | Ref   |               |
| Education: Less < high school         | 0.94 | [0.56, 1.58]  | 1.27  | [0.85, 1.87]  |
| Black                                 | 0.39 | [0.25, 0.59]* | 0.63  | [0.49, 0.79]* |
| American Indian/Alaska Native         | 0.34 | [0.04, 2.48]  | 1.20  | [0.45, 2.25]  |
| Asian/Pacific Islander                | 0.19 | [0.04, 0.75]* | 0.31  | [0.14, 0.68]* |
| White                                 | Ref  |               | Ref   |               |
| Childhood sexual abuse                | 1.93 | [0.99, 3.75]  | 1.71  | [1.23, 2.37]* |
| Age                                   | 0.98 | [0.91, 1.06]  | 0.98  | [0.93, 1.03]  |
| Income: < \$30,000 per year           | 1.58 | [1.06, 2.35]* | 1.46  | [1.13, 1.86]* |
| Lifetime regular smoker <sup>b</sup>  | 1.76 | [1.30, 2.35]* | 1.74  | [1.43, 2.11]* |
| Regular drinker <sup>c</sup>          | 0.80 | [0.60, 1.06]  | 1.04  | [0.84, 1.25]  |

Note. AOR = adjusted odds ratio; CI = confidence interval; Ref = reference category.

\* = significant ( $p < .05$ ).

<sup>a</sup>Not wanted/loved was coded based on lifetime report: Often (6 or more times), sometime (1–5 times), and never.

<sup>b</sup>At least one cigarette every day for 30 days, lifetime.

<sup>c</sup>At least one drink or more every month in the last year.

that has not been closely examined. The results from this study are also important because they highlight the negative impact of childhood perceptions of feeling not wanted/loved from a parent/caregiver, which effects for both men and women.

These findings highlight the detrimental effects of feeling not wanted/loved in child's life (often) from a parent or caregiver and emphasize a greater importance of love in a parent/child relationship. This highlights the importance of the perception of an offspring's relationship with their parent and their potential downstream negative effects. How a child may perceive their relationship with their parent has significant implications, including adverse mental health consequences. The importance of love between a parent/child should not be understated as the consequences of rejection during childhood by a parent/caregiver may be lifelong. As adult remembrances of parental acceptance in childhood are known to be associated with their psychological adjustment in adulthood, according to PARTheory (Rohner et al., 2012), how one perceives love from their parent has significant downstream impact, including their psychological well-being later in life.

Upon stratification of the results by gender, the regression models revealed that feeling not wanted/loved was associated with elevated odds of depression in both men (OR=3.70) and women (OR=2.73). Although a higher prevalence of depression was

reported among women, the results reveal that feeling not wanted/loved is positively associated with depression in both men and women. We hypothesized that this association would be stronger for women based on prior studies of neglect and depression, where women generally reported a stronger association than men. However, perception of feeling not wanted/loved and neglect are two independent constructs. Childhood neglect is defined as “situations where parents and adults are inadequate in terms of meeting the basic needs of maintaining and ensuring the protection and well-being of the children they are responsible for” (Horwath & Tarr, 2015; Mennen et al., 2010). While love between a parent/caregiver and child refers to factors such as affection, warmth, attachment, and caring, which we find impacts the mental health of both men and women, likewise, neglect can be a risk factor for depression in children as it is reported to reduce the growth of children’s left hemisphere and lead to long-term mental health problems (Teicher et al., 2018). The results also revealed that childhood sexual abuse was associated with depression among women but not among men. These are in line with studies that have childhood sexual abuse to have a greater effect on depression for women (Chen et al., 2014; Gershon et al., 2018), although other studies have reported a greater effect of sexual abuse and depression among men (Dinwiddie et al., 2000; Silverman et al., 1996).

Overall, healthy child development is a key determinant of health and resiliency in adulthood (Benzies & Mychasiuk, 2009; Milteer et al., 2012). Negative experiences within the family structure during adolescence are a strong contributor to adverse outcomes later in life, including one’s mental health. The findings clearly demonstrate the importance of this aspect, and the results revealed its association of feeling not loved/wanted with depression, over and above several of risk factors including substance use and low socioeconomic status. The negative effect of feeling not loved during childhood can extend well into adulthood. Experiences during adolescence have the potential to significantly impact one’s trajectory.

Findings should be interpreted with certain limitations in mind. First, the current study was a cross-sectional investigation and did not record the age at which depression was diagnosed. Hence, these results do not establish temporality and causality of the association. Second, other factors such as parent/child closeness (Withers, 2020), parental separation/divorce (D’Onofrio & Emery, 2019), and parental conflict (Fear et al., 2009; Hanington et al., 2012) which could impact mental health outcomes were not considered. Third, subdimensions of parenting including rejection or control were not evaluated. Fourth, report of depression was self-reported and may not be as reliable as clinic diagnostic interview. Although there is a modest relationship between self-reported symptoms of depression and its clinical diagnosis (Myers & Weissman, 1980; Sanchez-Villegas et al., 2008), as self-report of depression has been used as a reliable proxy, prior studies have used the single-item depression item from the Add Health study, that was also used in the current study (Noel et al., 2016).

## Future Directions

It is recommended that future studies further investigate mitigation strategies among adolescents who feel not loved by their parent or caregiver. This includes counseling, focus groups, parent/child therapy sessions, family-based interventions, and other mechanisms that lead to favorable long-term outcomes. This includes promoting warmth/affection in the home and reducing indifference, which can contribute to not feeling loved (Ali et al., 2019). Second, it should aim to identify mechanisms to effectively educate parents/caregivers of how to love their child, which is a major challenge. The perception of feeling not wanted/not loved may be an implicit act by a parent and not necessarily a deliberate act of improper behavior. Teaching the language of love may be a difficult task on hand (Rouse & Hadley, 2018). In cases where parent/caregiver themselves may not be a warm, affective, or a loving person, these issues may be more difficult to resolve. However, even in those cases, it is highly important that parent/caregivers are aware of these consequences, so they can make appropriate efforts to provide love and warmth for their children.

## Conclusion

Overall, both men and women are adversely impacted from feeling not wanted/loved within the home, particularly from a parent/caregiver. The results of the current study inform of the impact and importance of feeling not loved in one's life, regardless of gender. The adolescent years are a critical component in one's development that highly influences subsequent outcomes. Further work in this area is warranted. It is important to intervene early to prevent the despair and mental health burdens associated with a lack of love (Steele, 2019).

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