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Current Trends in Family Structures in Four Colombian Cities

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to contribute to the understanding of current changes in family structure in urban Colombia and their relationship to socio-demographic variables. Seven hundred and seventy Colombian families from the cities of Medellín, Bogotá, Cali, and Barranquilla participated in the study. In all of these Colombian cities, the nuclear family is predominant but coexists with other family structures, such as the extended nuclear, the female single-parent, and the extended female single-parent family. Women have abandoned the role of housewife to participate in the labor market. Similarly, there is evidence of a reduction in the number of children in family groups when compared to previous studies. Consistent with previous studies in Latin America, the results demonstrate the peak of the female single-parent family.

Keywords

Family structure, nuclear family, single-parent family, extended family, socio-demographic variables, demographic trends

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Introduction

An awareness of family structures and demographics allows for the conceptual, theoretical, and methodological development that leads to an understanding of the composition and direction of family life. In addition, this allows for the empirical study of the characteristics that compose family adaptations and the establishment of hypotheses about their relationship with the psychological well-being of family members (Langton and Berger 2011; Zeiders et al. 2011).

Studies have analyzed family structure in relation to academic performance and achievement (Battle 2002; Del Ángel Castillo and Torres 2008; Escribà 2006; Heard 2007), the consumption of psychoactive substances (Barrett and Turner 2006; Rees and Valenzuela 2003; Wagner et al. 2010), aggressive and delinquent behavior (Kierkus and Baer 2002), eating behavior (Hasenboehler et al. 2009), parental satisfaction (Luengo 2008), and changes in child and adolescent behavior (Brown 2004; Zeiders et al. 2011).

Although the importance of the family and family structure in human development is recognized, there have been few of these studies conducted in Latin America (Zeiders et al. 2011). In Colombia, there have been a few studies on family structures in different regions of the country (Agudelo 2005). This study contributes to the understanding of current changes in the family structure. The analysis was performed in four Colombian cities and considered the relationship between family structures and socio-demographic variables.

Family structures

The family structure can be understood as the internal composition of the family, the number of people in the family, the relationships among family members, the civil status of the parents, and the responsibility of the parents for raising children (Del Ángel Castillo and Torres 2008). The classification of the typology of family formations and parenting is used to characterize family structures. This classification distinguishes five types of families. The first structure, or nuclear family, occurs when two parents cohabit with their children (Luengo 2008). The second structure, female or male single-parent, “is that which consists of one spouse and his or her children” (Castaño 2002: 132).

The third family structure is the extended family and consists of persons of two generations of the same family (at least one parent lives with his or her children and uncles/aunts and cousins). The fourth structure is the simultaneous family, which is when both spouses have children from previous relationships. This structure occurs when at least some of these children and the children the couple has had together live with the couple” (Gómez 2001: 30). The fifth structure is the compound family, which is composed of two or more families that are not related by blood; cohabitation leads the families to share the same internal relationship dynamics and processes that are unique to families (Agudelo 2005).

Family structure transformation and repair in Latin America

In Latin America, the emergence of new family models is the result of economic, political, and social adjustments that have occurred throughout the world (Arriagada 2006; Ariza and De Oliveira 2006; Del

Ángel Castillo and Torres 2008; Dintwat 2010; Landale, Oropesa and Bradatan 2006). Ariza and De Oliveira (2004) affirmed that socio-demographic, socio-economic, and cultural transformations have affected the structure, organization, and internal dynamics of the family. In Latin America, these transformations are products of the demographic mobility that is caused by migration or forced internal displacement (Bengtson 2001; Landale, Oropesa and Bradatan 2006).

In the 1990s, a change in the two-parent nuclear family led to men no longer acting as the sole provider (Ariza and De Oliveira 2006; Del Ángel Castillo and Torres 2008). In countries, such as Venezuela, Panama, Mexico, Costa Rica, Chile, Brazil, and Bolivia women have left the role of full-time housewife in nearly half of two-parent nuclear families; these women have joined the labor market and now contribute to the family income (Sunkel 2006).

Sunkel (2006) affirmed that, in 1990, the nuclear family represented 46.3% of all types of families in Latin America; this percentage fell to 42.8% in 2002. The family institution in Latin America and the Caribbean is experiencing a rapid process of transformation. Specifically:

- Family unit size is declining;
- Frequency in the number and delay of the timing of marriages is decreasing;
- Frequency of early motherhood is decreasing;
- Frequency of consensual unions is increasing;
- Frequency of spousal separations is increasing;
- Frequency of single-parent in both one-person and reconstituted family households is increasing (Quiroz, 2001).

For Mexican-Americans, Zeiders et al. (2011) showed that single-parent families grew from 14% in 1980 to 22% in 2001. In Mexican non-traditional households, Ariza and De Oliveira (2006) suggested that there is an increased frequency of female single-parent households. Even if 70% of Mexican households are nuclear families, the loss of this important structure is highlighted by the progressive growth of single-parent families. Research conducted by Valdés (2004) shows that Latin American families have experienced changes in the stages of the life cycle in the period between 1990 and 2002. During this time, the percentage of nuclear families was reduced from 63.1% to 61.9%. Likewise, especially in Central America, there has been an increase in female single-parent households (Valdés 2004; Chant 2003; López and Salles 2000).

Other studies demonstrate the relationship between family structure and socio-economic variables. In a study that was conducted in Latin America, Acosta (2003) showed that the prevalence of an extended family was greater in households that were headed by females. Furthermore, compared to nuclear family households, females were more likely to participate in economic activities in extended-family and female-headed households.

Family structure transformation and repair in Colombia

According to Echeverri (2004), the most salient characteristic of the Colombian family is the coexistence of diverse typologies, such as nuclear families coexisting with extended or reconstituted-nuclear families.

A study conducted by Estrada (2006) between 1999 and 2002 at the Universidad Pontificia Bolivariana (Pontifical Bolivarian University) produced family profiles for a sample of 7,280 people. The results of the study showed that the typologies of the nuclear, single-parent, and extended family continue to be the predominant forms of family organization but that these typologies were declining. The simultaneous family showed no variation and continues to be among the four predominant types. The decline in the former typologies gives rise to new forms of family, such as the couple with no children and the one-person family, the latter has increased in frequency by 76%.

A study by Ospina and Vanderbilt (2007) characterized the typologies of the families of students at the Popular Catholic University in Risaralda, Colombia. The results indicated the presence of different family typologies. The frequency of nuclear families was 54.6%, and the frequency of single-parent families was 29.4%. The parents of the students primarily reported religious (Catholic) (66.3%), free (12.1%), and civil (9.7%) unions. According to the Colombian National Statistics Administration Department (DANE) (2005), the nuclear family represented 58% of families in 1978; in the 1993 census, the nuclear family represented 54.9% of families. According to the National Demographic and Health Survey in 2005, the nuclear family represented 53.6% of families, and the female single-parent family represented 30.3% of families. In 2010, the National Demographic and Health Survey found that the nuclear family had risen to 56% of family arrangements and that female single-parent families had risen to 34% of family arrangements. The survey demonstrated that 3% of children whose parents are both alive live with only their father, and 6% of these children do not live with either parent.

For a population in the city of Medellín and under an agreement between the Potifical Bolivarian University and the Inter-American Development Bank, Agudelo (2005) found that 43.7% of the 453 sampled families were nuclear, 21.5% were extended, and 13.8% were female single-parent. This finding is consistent with the data reported in the 1993 Medellín census.

Methods

In accordance with Montero and León (2007), the current study uses surveys and representative samples to describe populations. In the context of the macroresearch project titled, "Categorization of the Fairytale Test for Colombia," families were selected from the four primary Colombian cities: Bogotá, Medellín, Cali, and Barranquilla. Participants were recruited through public and private education institutions, and informed consent was obtained through school assignments. All of the participating parents signed informed consent forms. The sampling frame came from the 2005 DANE census. The distribution of the final sample included 770 families that were living in Bogotá, Cali, Medellín, and Barranquilla. The families represented all socio-economic strata, but medium-sized families from middle socio-economic strata predominated (table 1).

Table 1. Socio-demographic characteristics of families (N=770)

Characteristics	F	%
City of residence		
Bogotá	312	40.5
Cali	131	17.0
Medellín	209	27.1
Barranquilla	118	15.3
Socio-economic status		
High (Classes 5 and 6)	272	35.3
Middle (Classes 3 and 4)	369	48.2
Low (Classes 1 and 2)	125	16.3
Family size		
Large (five or more members)	200	26.49
Medium (three or four members)	471	62.38
Small (two members)	84	11.13

Instruments

The socio-demographic questionnaire was designed by the authors of the present study. The questionnaire investigated the following: information related to the family composition; reasons that the family was composed a particular way; other cohabitating family members; sibling-group organization and ages; academic training; occupation and position of the father and/or mother; and data regarding all family members, such as age, gender, education, and occupation.

Analysis

After the database was built, it was transferred for analysis to the statistical package R Language and Environment for Statistical Computing. The qualitative variables were described with frequency tables, and the quantitative variables from the socio-demographic questionnaire were described using central tendency and dispersion. The qualitative variables were compared with contingency tables, and Pearson's chi-squared test was used to identify the dependence among these variables and to characterize the family structure of the sample.

Results

The results are presented in three sections. The first section indicates the socio-demographic characteristics of the family members, the second section corresponds to the family structure, and the third section presents several intersections between family structure and the socio-demographic variables.

Socio-demographic description of the family members

In the national context, most of the parents were between 41 and 50 years old; in contrast, the number was the smallest for parents more than 70 years old. In relation to the national distribution, Cali had the highest percentage of young parents (between 21 and 30 years old) (table 2).

Table 2. Fathers' socio-demographic information by city

Variables	City				National
	Bogotá	Medellín	Cali	Barranquilla	
	%	%	%	%	%
Age range					
21-30 years old	6.8	3.3	7.0	5.2	6.0
31-40 years old	30.4	33.3	35.7	39.6	33.6
41-50 years old	52.7	47.5	38.9	44.8	47.1
51-60 years old	9.1	14.2	17.3	8.3	12.1
61-70 years old	.7	1.7	1.1	2.1	1.1
Over 70 years old	.3	0	0	0	.1
Education					
None	.7	.9	0	0	.5
Some primary	2.6	1.7	1.1	3.2	2.2
Primary	9.4	8.6	7.5	3.2	7.8
Some high school	12.4	15.5	11.5	17.2	13.4
High school	20.6	29.3	31.0	22.6	25.2
Some technical	0	0	0	0	0
Technical	5.6	11.2	6.9	4.3	6.8
Some university	1.9	0	2.9	3.2	2.0
Professional	33.7	25.0	33.9	40.9	33.2
Postgraduate	13.1	7.8	5.2	5.4	8.9
Occupation					
Self-employed	31.3	40.0	30.4	32.3	32.7
Employee	66.3	57.4	66.8	66.7	65.0
Unemployed	.7	1.7	1.6	0	1.0
Retired	1.4	.9	.5	1.0	1.0
Student	0	0	.5	0	.1

Bogotá has the highest percentage of parents who have completed professional education (table 2); Cali and Barranquilla are in a similar situation. Compared to other Colombian cities, Barranquilla has the largest percentage of parents who have completed professional education, and Bogotá has the largest percentage of parents with only a low level of education (incomplete or primary).

A small percentage of the national distribution reported not having any formal education. The majority of the parents in the national sample are employees, and many are self-employed; Medellín has the largest portion of self-employed parents. The unemployment rate of the sample was low.

Table 3 demonstrates that mothers are younger than fathers nationwide. In all of the cities, the majority of women are between 31 and 40 years old. Nationally, mothers' primary level of education is professional.

However, in Medellín, the predominant education level is high school. Only a small percentage of mothers reported having no education. Compared to the fathers, a smaller percentage of the mothers identifies with the professional and post-graduate levels of education. Barranquilla has the lowest educational level (incomplete or primary) for mothers.

Table 3. Mothers' socio-demographic information by city

Variables	City				National
	Bogotá	Medellín	Cali	Barranquilla	
	%	%	%	%	%
Age					
21-30 years old	16.6	10.7	16.7	19.1	16.0
31-40 years old	42.5	55.0	44.8	50.4	46.5
41-50 years old	38.3	31.3	36.0	25.2	34.5
51-60 years old	2.3	2.3	2.5	5.2	2.8
61-70 years old	.3	.8	0	0	.3
Education					
None	1.0	0	0	0	.4
Some primary	1.7	1.6	3.0	1.8	2.1
Primary	7.7	5.6	3.0	10.0	6.4
Some high school	13.2	10.4	14.1	13.6	13.1
High school	18.8	32.8	26.3	30.0	25.0
Some technical	.3	0	0	0	.1
Technical	11.1	23.2	9.6	6.4	12.1
Some university	1.4	1.6	3.0	.9	1.8
Professional	35.2	20.8	36.4	30.9	32.4
Postgraduate	9.4	4.0	4.5	6.4	6.7
Occupation					
Self-employed	12.1	11.0	13.9	17.5	13.2
Employee	64.5	55.1	63.1	41.7	59.2
Housewife	22.8	31.4	20.9	40.8	26.4
Retired	.3	0	0	0	.1
Student	.3	2.5	2.1	0	1.1

Nationally, the largest percentage of mothers is in the employed category. However, in Barranquilla, the percentage of employed mothers is lower than in the other cities, and the percentage of mothers who are dedicated to housekeeping is higher. In all four cities, many mothers report homemaking as their occupation.

Table 4 shows that families in these four Colombian cities are predominantly comprised of two children, and there are few families with five or more children. Barranquilla has the largest percentage of families with five children. The national average shows a preponderance of families with two children, and Bogotá

is above the mean for the number of children per family. Nationally, the second-most common number of children per family is one child; Bogotá is below the national average.

Table 4. Distribution of number of children in families by city

No. of children	City				National %
	Bogotá %	Medellín %	Cali %	Barranquilla %	
One	16.8	31.3	31.9	19.8	23.9
Two	54.9	39.7	38.2	35.1	44.8
Three	19.7	19.1	22.2	29.7	21.8
Four	6.6	7.6	5.3	9.9	6.9
Five	.7	1.5	1.9	4.5	1.7
Six	1.0	0	.5	.9	.7
Seven	.3	.8	0	0	.3

Family structure

Table 5 shows the distribution of the sample according to family structure in the cities where the participants reside. Nationally, families are predominantly nuclear, and extended nuclear families are the next most common type. Bogotá has the highest percentage of nuclear families, and Barranquilla has the highest percentage of single-parent families. Among single-parent families, the extended female single-parent family accounts for the largest percentage nationally and is most prevalent in Cali. The male single-parent family is the least common family type in Colombia.

Table 5. General family structure in the four cities

Family structure	City				National %
	Bogotá %	Medellín %	Cali %	Barranquilla %	
Nuclear	63.5	54.2	45.9	45.3	54.2
Extended nuclear	12.3	18.3	22.5	18.8	17.2
Simultaneous	3.0	.8	2.4	.9	2.1
Extended simultaneous	.3	0	0	0	.1
Female single-parent	7.6	6.9	8.1	14.5	8.7
Extended female single-parent	10.6	15.3	18.2	13.7	14.0
Male single-parent	.3	0	.5	1.7	.5
Extended male single-parent	1.7	2.3	.5	1.7	1.5
Mixed	0	.8	1.0	1.7	.7
Other	.7	1.5	1.0	1.7	1.1

A chi-squared test (44.05, $p=0.020$) showed a relationship between city and family structure. In other words, the cities are characterized by different family structures.

Table 6 shows socio-economic status (SES) in relation to family structure. The high SES group is mainly comprised of nuclear families. The data demonstrate that lower SES families are represented by a smaller

percentage of nuclear families and a larger percentage of extended nuclear and extended female single-parent families. The chi-squared test (41.68, $p=0.001$) indicated that the variables are dependent. Therefore, families with higher socio-economic status are more likely to be nuclear families.

Table 6. Family structure and socio-economic status

Type of family structure	Socio-economic status		
	Low %	Middle %	High %
Nuclear	45.1	54.4	73.6
Extended nuclear	20.1	18.3	7.2
Simultaneous	3.0	1.9	.8
Extended simultaneous	.4	0	0
Female single-parent	8.3	8.5	10.4
Extended female single-parent	17.8	13.9	5.6
Male single-parent	.4	.8	0
Extended male single-parent	1.9	1.1	1.6
Mixed	1.1	.5	0
Other	1.9	.5	.8

Table 7 shows that as the age of the fathers increases, the percentage of families with a nuclear structure increases. The highest percentage of fathers between the ages of 21 and 30 years old is found as part of a female single-parent extended family type; the next highest percentage of fathers in this age group is found as part of the nuclear family type. The other paternal age groups are predominately nuclear families followed by extended nuclear families. The age group of 61 to 70 years old is an exception because the female single-parent structure has the second highest percentage. The chi-squared test (94.84, $p=0.001$) indicates that families with younger fathers are more likely to have mothers in the role of the head of the household.

Table 7. Family structure and paternal age

Type of family structure	21-30 years	31-40 years	41-50	51-60	61-70	Over 70
	old %	old %	years old %	years old %	years old %	years old %
Nuclear	28.2	46.6	68.1	69.9	87.5	0
Extended nuclear	23.1	25.0	14.9	15.7	0	100.0
Simultaneous	7.7	2.2	.6	2.4	0	0
Extended simultaneous	0	.4	0	0	0	0
Female single-parent	5.1	8.2	8.4	3.6	12.5	0
Extended female single-parent	33.3	14.2	5.6	6.0	0	0
Male single-parent	0	.9	.6	0	0	0
Extended male single-parent	2.6	1.3	1.5	1.2	0	0
Mixed	0	0	0	1.2	0	0
Other	0	1.3	.3	0	0	0

In terms of the age of the mother, the family structure distribution is similar to the fathers' distribution (table 8). Mothers between 51 and 60 years old are more likely to have nuclear families, and mothers between 21 and 30 years old are more likely to be in extended female single-parent families. The male single-parent type is absent for mothers who are between 41 and 70 years old, and the extended simultaneous family type is absent among mothers who are between 31 and 70 years old. A significant relationship was found between the two variables (92.79, $p=0.001$).

Table 8. Family structure and maternal age

Type of family structure	21-30 years	31-40 years	41-50 years	51-60 years	61-70 years
	old	old	old	old	old
	%	%	%	%	%
Nuclear	25.4	56.3	64.8	76.2	50.0
Extended nuclear	24.6	17.2	15.6	4.8	0
Simultaneous	4.2	2.6	.8	0	0
Extended simultaneous	.8	0	0	0	0
Female single-parent	8.5	8.3	8.6	14.3	0
Extended female single-parent	29.7	12.6	9.4	0	50.0
Male single-parent	1.7	.3	0	0	0
Extended male single-parent	3.4	.9	.4	0	0
Mixed	.8	.6	0	0	0
Other	.8	1.1	.4	4.8	0

Table 9 shows that a high percentage of retired and employed fathers are a part of nuclear families. Half of unemployed fathers are in an extended nuclear family. Unemployed fathers are associated with other types of family structure, and employed fathers tend to have a nuclear family structure. The chi-squared test showed that the father's occupation is related to the development of the family structure (59.04, $p=0.018$).

Table 9. Family structure and paternal occupation

Type of family structure	Type of occupation				
	Self-employed	Employed	Unemployed	Retired	Student
	%	%	%	%	%
Nuclear	54.3	63.5	14.3	85.7	100.0
Extended nuclear	20.4	18.0	57.1	14.3	0
Simultaneous	2.3	.7	0	0	0
Extended simultaneous	.5	0	0	0	0
Female single-parent	7.2	6.8	14.3	0	0
Extended female single-parent	10.4	9.1	0	0	0
Male single-parent	1.4	.2	0	0	0
Extended male single-parent	2.3	1.4	0	0	0
Mixed	.5	0	0	0	0
Other	.9	.2	14.3	0	0

When comparing the family structure with the mother's occupation, half of the mothers who dedicate themselves to the home are a part of nuclear families, and a percentage of the mothers who study form extended female single-parent families (table 10). Table 10 shows that mothers who are students relate to other types of family structure and that mothers who are dedicated to the home often form nuclear or extended nuclear families. The chi-squared test showed a significant relationship (53.09, $p=0.032$).

Table 10. Family structure and maternal occupation

Type of family structure	Type of occupation				
	Self-employed %	Employed %	Housewife %	Retired %	Student %
Nuclear	48.9	55.8	59.3	100.0	37.5
Extended nuclear	18.5	16.3	21.4	0	0
Simultaneous	5.4	1.7	1.1	0	0
Extended simultaneous	0	.2	0	0	0
Female single-parent	10.9	8.1	7.7	0	12.5
Extended female single-parent	13.0	16.5	7.7	0	37.5
Male single-parent	2.2	.2	0	0	0
Extended male single-parent	0	.2	1.6	0	0
Mixed	0	.2	.5	0	0
Other	1.1	.5	.5	0	12.5

Discussion

The purpose of this study is to contribute to the body of knowledge regarding changes in prevailing family structures and their relationship to socio-demographic variables in four Colombian cities. The results show that the nuclear family structure predominates, and the extended nuclear family is the second-most common family structure. This result follows patterns in Latin America in which the nuclear family continues to be the most common type of family organization (Valdes 2004; Sunkel 2006; Zeiders et al. 2011). These results also agree with previous studies of the Colombian population (Agudelo 2005; Echeverri 2004; Estrada 2006; Ospina and Vanderbilt 2007). Although the nuclear family is prevalent, this type of family has declined in relation to other forms of family organization, which is similar to the trends in other Latin American countries (Sunkel, 2006), including Colombia (Ospina and Vanderbilt 2007; DANE 2005; National Demographic and Health Survey 2005).

Another relevant result of the present study concerns different family structures that coexist with the nuclear family, such as the extended nuclear, female single-parent, and extended female single-parent structures. These changes in family functioning are similar to the international changes that Quiroz (2001) observed, and they are the consequence of geopolitical and socio-cultural variables. Echeverri (2004) demonstrated this tendency in Colombia, and Agudelo (2005) explained that these changes are related to social and cultural phenomena, such as forced displacement.

Consistent with other studies (Ariza and De Oliveira 2006; Quiroz 2001; Sunkel 2006; Zeiders et al. 2011), the results of this investigation highlight the presence of the female single-parent family. The

female single-parent family in Latin America is explained as the consequence of one of the spouses leaving the home, typically because of death, separation, and/or divorce, or only one parent raising the children (single-motherhood or single-fatherhood). Furthermore, the literature suggests that, compared to other countries in Latin America, the female single-parent structure is at its highest level in Colombia (National Demographic and Health Survey 2010). Although the percentage of single-parent families was not high in the present study, the extended female single-parent structure was the third-most prevalent and the female single-parent was the fourth-most prevalent. If these two single-parent structures were combined, they would occupy the second-most prevalent family structure after the nuclear structure.

Other studies of the Colombian population have highlighted the increase in female single-parent families. For example, Estrada (2006) showed the prevalence of female single-parent and extended families, followed by that of the nuclear family. In Agudelo's study (2005), even though the two single-parent structures predominate, the extended structure represents a larger percentage than the female single-parent structure. The extended family was relevant in this study in the same way as it was in other studies in Latin America (Valdés 2004; Chant 2003; Lopez and Salles 2000; Sunkel 2006) and Colombia (Agudelo 2005).

The primary findings of this study show that women have abandoned the role of housewife to participate in the labor market and contribute to their family's income. This finding is corroborated by other authors for other Latin American countries (Ariza and De Oliveira 2006; Del Ángel Castillo and Torres 2008; Sunkel 2006). For example, Acosta (2003) showed that female participation in economic activity is greater in extended households and female-headed households in comparison with nuclear families.

In the present study, the greatest economic participation of women was in nuclear households. Additionally, the largest percentage of women who were students belonged to extended female single-parent families. Another relevant socio-demographic variable is the number of children of the participating parents, the average of which was two. This result shows a decline in the number of children per family. The National Demographic and Health Survey (2010) suggests that the average number of children that a woman will have in her reproductive lifetime has been steadily declining over the last few decades.

The following are the additional relevant results and contributions of this research: a) high SES is prominent in nuclear families, and low SES is prevalent in female single-parent and extended families; b) the family structure is related to the city where the family resides; and c) the type of occupations held by the father and mother influences the development of the family structure. For example, retired fathers tend to form nuclear families, whereas employed and unemployed fathers tend to form extended nuclear families. Mothers who are students have a higher chance of forming families with an extended single-parent structure, and mothers who dedicate themselves to the home form, predominately, nuclear families.

In conclusion, the present study highlights that the changes in the socio-economic, cultural, and political conditions in Colombia have resulted in changes in the patterns of the traditional family structure. These changes have increased the instability of unions and have encouraged family structures other than the nuclear family. These results encourage the development of educational and health programs that aim to support quality-of-life for all existing family structures. However, more research is necessary to

investigate the psychological well-being and quality-of-life of family members in various family structures.

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