Why LGBTQ Adults Keep Ambivalent Ties with Parents: Theorizing “Solidarity Rationales”

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ABSTRACT

Many LGBTQ adults have ongoing relationships with their parents that are ambivalent, typified by both solidarity (e.g., frequent contact, emotional or financial exchange) as well as conflict (e.g., parents’ heterosexism and cissexism). Yet, why LGBTQ people remain in—rather than end—their ambivalent intergenerational ties is under explored. We analyze qualitative in-depth interview data with 76 LGBTQ adults to answer this question. We find that LGBTQ adult children deploy narratives that privilege intergenerational solidarity over strain—what we call “solidarity rationales”—to explain why they remain in their ambivalent intergenerational ties. Four solidarity rationales were identified: 1) closeness and love, 2) parental growth, 3) the unique parent-child role, and 4) the importance of parental resources. Identifying LGBTQ adults’ solidarity rationales pulls back the curtain on the compulsory social forces driving persistent intergenerational relationships. This study also advances our thinking about how socially marginalized people cope with complex social ties that include interpersonal discrimination and stigma.

KEYWORDS: family; sexuality; gender; intergenerational tie; ambivalence.
gender non-binary, among other gender and sexuality expansive identities\(^1\) (Gonzalez et al. 2013; Meadow 2018). However, decades of research also show that LGBTQ people experience, on average, less solidarity and more conflict in their intergenerational ties compared to cisgender heterosexual (cishet) people (Montano et al. 2018; Needham and Austin 2010; Ryan et al. 2010). One pervasive site of intergenerational conflict for LGBTQ children is parents’ heterosexism (the belief that everyone is and should be heterosexual) and cissexism (the belief that everyone is and should be cisgender) (Reczek and Bosley-Smith 2021).\(^2\)

While research has investigated the intergenerational solidarity and conflict experienced by LGBTQ adult children (for a review, see Reczek 2020), less attention has been paid to intergenerational ambivalence—the simultaneous presence of both solidarity and conflict—in LGBTQ ties. In the case of LGBTQ adults, intergenerational ambivalence is often experienced as having heterosexist and cissexist parents (i.e., conflict)\(^3\) and intergenerational support and connection (i.e., solidarity) (Connidis 2015; Connidis and McMullin 2002a; Reczek 2016). While the potential for ambivalence to damage or end intergenerational ties and harm individuals has been well established, less is known about why LGBTQ people maintain their ambivalent intergenerational relationships (Connidis and McMullin 2002a; Norwood 2013; Ocobock 2013; Reczek 2016).

To gain deeper understanding of the persistence of ambivalent LGBTQ family ties—and the continuation of ambivalent social ties more broadly—this study asks: why do LGBTQ adults remain in their ambivalent intergenerational bonds? To answer this question, we draw on the intergenerational conflict-solidarity-ambivalence perspective and in-depth interviews with 76 LGBTQ adults. Understanding the specific justifications LGBTQ adults use to explain their persistent ambivalent relationships with parents advances our thinking about why socially marginalized people remain in their family of origin. In doing so, we draw renewed attention to how families are complex and dynamic spaces that individuals must constantly uphold and justify remaining in across the life course (Connidis and McMullin 2002a).

With the aim of understanding why LGBTQ individuals maintain their ambivalent intergenerational ties, we first review research and theory on adult child-parent relationships through the intergenerational conflict-solidarity-ambivalence framework. Next, we apply this framework to LGBTQ adult child-parent ties specifically, demonstrating what is known about LGBTQ intergenerational ties. Finally, we introduce our empirical study on why LGBTQ people maintain ambivalent parent-child ties.

**INTERGENERATIONAL CONFLICT-SOLIDARITY-AMBIVALENCE THEORY**

Most adult children and their parents remain connected in adulthood through what is known as intergenerational solidarity, typically measured on a continuum from high to low contact, support exchanges, mutuality, close geographic proximity, affection, value similarity, and family obligation (Blake 2017; Conti 2015; Fingerman et al. 2020; Scharp and Hall 2017; Van Gaalen and Dykstra 2006). Ninety-eight percent of adults between the ages of 25 to 32 maintain regular contact with at least one parent (Hartnett et al. 2018), and most adult children and their parents continue to use the language of parent and child and exhibit hierarchical behavior (e.g., children’s deference) throughout the life course (Conti 2015; Scharp and Hall 2017; Silverstein, Gans, and Yang 2006). The parent-

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1 Sexual and gender expansive identities include anyone whose gender and sexuality lies outside cisgender (someone who identifies as the same sex and gender as that assigned at birth) and heterosexual identities.

2 The concepts heterosexism and cissexism are fundamentally related to, and rely upon, the concepts of homo-, bi, queer-, and trans-phobia, which all relate to the stigma of and discrimination against LGBTQ people. Parents exhibit both heterosexism/cissexism and heterosexism rely on homo-, bi-, queer-, and trans-phobia simultaneously, as heterosexism and cissexism rely on homo-, bi-, queer-, and trans-phobia to exist. As such, we tend to use the former throughout the paper with the recognition of these interlocking dynamics.

3 Parental homophobia and transphobia exist at least in part as a result of their broader macro and meso homophobic and transphobic culture that typifies the United States today.
child tie is further bonded by emotional, social, instrumental, and financial support (e.g., joint credit cards and banking accounts, next of kin, joint mortgages) (Blau 1986; Coleman 1994; Fingerman et al. 2009), and these exchanges of economic resources are especially salient in the context of a weaker social safety net (Cooper 2014; Hacker 2006; McCloud and Dwyer 2011; Silva 2013).

Intergenerational solidarity is strongly institutionalized. In childhood, solidarity operates through parents’ legal and social authority over minor children (Hays 1996; Martin 2004; Meyer 2006; Skinner and Kohler 2002). When children become adults, solidarity remains but shifts in form, with norms and ideology dictating that adult children remain beholden to parents even as adult children are expected to become more independent (Bengtson 2001; Reczek and Bosley-Smith 2022; Silverstein et al. 2006). The continuation of intergenerational solidarity when children are adults is, from a sociological perspective, not naturally occurring but instead the result of powerful material and cultural-cognitive forces that frame the parent-child tie as normatively persistent—a dynamic that has been termed “compulsory kinship” (Reczek and Bosley-Smith 2022).

Conflict is just as pervasive in parent-adult child relationships as solidarity, with parents rated among the most “difficult” social network members with the highest levels of and most consistent conflict relative to any other social tie (Gilligan, Suitor, and Pillemer 2015; Offer and Fischer 2018). Parents report conflict when children fail to achieve normative adult statuses such as being heterosexual or cisgender, having an independent household, being (heterosexually) married, being financially independent and employed, and being a parent (Birditt et al. 2010; Kalmijn and De Graaf 2012; Pei and Cong 2019). 94 percent of adult children report at least one source of tension with a parent (Birditt et al. 2009), most commonly over styles of communication and interaction, as well as values, politics and religion (Clarke et al. 1999; Van Gaalen and Dykstra 2006).

Given the prevalence of both conflict and solidarity in intergenerational ties, scholars point out that most intergenerational ties have simultaneous solidarity and conflict—a dynamic known as intergenerational ambivalence (Connidis 2015; Connidis and McMullin 2002a; Lüscher and Pillemer 1998; Peters, Hooker, and Zvonkovic 2006). Stemming from Merton and Barber’s sociological analysis of the construct of ambivalence more broadly (1963), intergenerational ambivalence persists across micro, meso, and macro levels. At the macro level, ambivalence occurs at the intersection of two prevailing but contradictory social norms; for example, when parent-child relationships are buoyed by structural norms and laws that dictate intergenerational solidarity (Connidis 2015) and the norms of adult child independence. These contradictory societal norms are borne out in the meso level of local community culture and expectations of the local organizations of households and carework, and at the micro level when contradictory social norms cultivate “opposing feelings or emotions that are due in part to countervailing expectations” for one or both party’s role in an intergenerational relationship (Connidis and McMullin 2002a:558).

Intergenerational ambivalence has been measured and conceived of in two distinct ways at the individual level, which is the focus of this study (Fingerman, Hay, and Birditt 2004; Lendon, Silverstein and Giarrusso 2014; Lettke and Klein 2003; Pillemer and Suitor 2002; Van Gaalen and Dykstra 2006). First, ambivalence is measured by a direct question regarding feeling both conflict and solidarity in the parent-child tie (i.e., do you have mixed feelings towards your children? Or, how often have you felt “torn in two directions, or conflicted, about the relationship”? (Pillemer, Suitor et al. 2007:782). Mothers experience direct ambivalence with children who were not married, experienced serious problems in adulthood, or when children and mothers had different levels of commitment to the relationship. In turn, adult children report direct ambivalence when parents fail to exhibit unconditional love or are highly critical of their children (Pillemer and Suitor 2002; Pillemer et al. 2007).

Second, scholars use indirect measures of ambivalence by assessing levels of conflict and solidarity independently through separate measures. Scholars suggest that an indirect measure may be more accurate because people may have a difficult time articulating the degree to which they feel conflicted but can readily describe both positive and negative feelings independently (Fingerman et al. 2006; Lüscher and Pillemer 1998). Indirect measurement shows that most parent-child ties exhibit some
level of ambivalence, as both conflict and solidarity are typical of intergenerational ties (Birditt, Fingerman, and Zarit 2010; Fingerman et al. 2006; Willson et al. 2006). In the indirect ambivalence measurement, a relationship could, for example, have a high degree of contact and financial exchange (i.e., high solidarity) but also significant and long-lasting conflict over an adult child’s spouse or a parent’s life choices (i.e., high conflict) (Birditt et al. 2010; Fingerman et al. 2006).

Taken together, while the conflict-solidarity-ambivalence model provides a holistic view of the prevalence and content of ambivalent parent-adult child ties, it does not theorize why ambivalent intergenerational ties are maintained. Additionally, because the prevalence and subsequent management of ambivalence is not evenly distributed throughout all parent-adult child ties, we explore the unique case of LGBTQ intergenerational ties within the conflict-solidarity-ambivalence frame to set the stage for our present study.

**LGBTQ Intergenerational Conflict-Solidarity-Ambivalence**

LGBTQ child-parent ties, like all parent-child bonds, have dimensions of conflict, solidarity, and ambivalence (Horn and Wong 2017; Ocobock 2013). While many parents of LGBTQ adults are supportive of their child’s gender or sexuality (van Bergen et al. 2020), LGBTQ people are significantly less likely than their cishet peers to report feeling supported by, attached to, and close to their parents (Needham and Austin 2010; Van Bergen et al. 2021) and they report more conflict with parents due to parents’ cissexism and heterosexism (Montano et al. 2018; Pachankis, Sullivan, and Moore 2018; Reczek and Bosley-Smith 2021). Recent population-level studies show that LGB-identified people have a similar number of family ties as cishet people but have significantly less family solidarity in adulthood than cishet people (Hsieh and Wong 2020; Hull and Ortyl 2019). Because of these dynamics, some LGBTQ adults may not disclose their identities to their parents in order to avoid potential conflict (Meyer 2003; Reczek and Bosley-Smith 2021).

LGBTQ adult-child parent ties have been theorized to have especially high levels of ambivalence due to the higher rates of conflict related to heterosexism and cissexism alongside persistent positive components of the relationship. For example, LGBTQ adults may feel emotionally close to parents, or parents may provide financial and instrumental resources keeping them bonded (Perales and Huang 2020). At the same time, LGBTQ adults may feel that they are failing their social role as an adult child because parents disparage and reject their gender and sexuality (i.e., conflict; McGuire et al. 2016; Reczek and Bosley-Smith 2021). In one of the only recent studies comparing levels of ambivalence across sexuality, research from the Netherlands shows that men in same-sex relationships report more ambivalent relationships with their mothers than men partnered with women (Fischer and Kalmijn 2021). Moreover, qualitative and theoretical work has shown that LGBTQ intergenerational ambivalence occurs when the societal expectations and norms of intergenerational solidarity remain intact for LGBTQ adults and their parents, but parents also exhibit heterosexism and cissexism (Connidis 2012; Connidis and McMullin 2002b; Heatherington and Lavner 2008; Reczek 2016). Although far less studied or theorized, LGBTQ intergenerational ambivalence may be especially salient for transgender and gender non-conforming people, given the heightened negative response of transphobic parents (Rahilly 2015; Robinson 2020). Research shows that some parents are supportive of their transgender and gender expansive children (Meadow 2018; Travers 2019), yet a vast amount of research shows that many transgender and gender expansive adolescents and adults are rejected by their parents (McGuire et al. 2016; Norwood 2013; Robinson 2018; 2020). It is likely, then, that gender expansive people also experience ambivalence in these ties.

**The Present Study: Why LGBTQ Adults Stay in Ambivalent Ties with Parents**

LGBTQ people have experiences of intergenerational ambivalence due to their marginalized LGBTQ identities in a cissexist and heterosexist society and parents’ corollary hetero- and cis-sexiism (Meyer 2003; Montano et al. 2018; Pachankis et al. 2018) that exists alongside parent-adult child solidarity.
While we know most LGBTQ intergenerational ties remain intact (Hull and Ortyl 2019), often through the use of “conflict work” practices such as education or conflict avoidance (Reczek and Bosley-Smith 2021), exactly why LGBTQ adults keep their ambivalent ties is undertheorized. The present study answers this question with an analysis of in-depth interviews with LGBTQ adults.

**METHOD**

*Data Collection*

The current study draws on qualitative data collected between 2015–2017 aimed to examine the family relationships of 76 LGBTQ adults in a large Midwestern city and its surrounding areas. The study city was chosen because research on LGBTQ populations has predominantly been conducted in the coastal urban areas, missing a focus on Midwestern LGBTQ lives (Stone 2018). In the Midwest, 3.6 percent of adults identify as LGBT; an estimated 20 percent of all LGBTQ individuals live in the Midwest, emphasizing the importance of studying LGBTQ experiences in this region (Hasenbush et al. 2014). This sample may reveal something particular about Midwestern LGBTQ adults as experiences and understanding of LGBTQ identity vary by place (Brown-Saracino 2015; Stone 2018), in part due to geographic differences including religiosity, levels of acceptance of LGBTQ identities, and access to LGBTQ resources. The lead faculty investigator and four graduate student interviewers conducted the in-depth interviews. Interviews averaged about 90 minutes but spanned from 45 minutes to 3 hours. Respondents received a $20 gift card for participating. Most interviews occurred in person—either at the interviewers’ university offices or in coffee shops. A small percentage of interviews were conducted over the phone when transportation or geographic distance was an impediment to in-person interviews.

Respondents were recruited through a variety of methods including, most commonly, flyers distributed throughout the city center in LGBTQ locales and a booth at local Pride events; a minority of respondents were recruited through social media and participation in transgender and gender nonconforming specific events. In addition, less than 10 percent of respondents were recruited via snowball sampling from previously interviewed respondents. The recruitment language noted that we were looking for LGBTQ adults to interview about their relationships with their parents. It is possible that the flyer and other recruitment language, with a focus on parent-child ties, could have recruited more participants who have maintained relations with family than those who do not; those who are estranged may have self-selected out of the study. A priority of recruitment was to have a racially, economically, gender, and sexually diverse sample of LGBTQ adults, and thus interviewees were initially screened from a wider pool of interested subjects based on diversity in gender and sexual identity, age, race-ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. For example, we declined interviews with white gay/lesbian cisgender people after we had the current number represented in the sample.

Respondents filled out a survey prior to the interview that included questions regarding gender identity, sexuality, socioeconomic status, race, experiences of discrimination, measures of relationship quality in each parent-child tie, a household roster, and health. We used this survey to contextualize findings with sociodemographic data, not to imply generalizability of data to the broader LGBTQ population. Respondents’ age, race, gender identity, sexuality, and household income from the survey are listed in Table 1.4 Pseudonyms were given to all participants to protect anonymity, and we use the pronouns the participants indicated in their interviews throughout the text below.

4 We allowed respondents to choose more than one category or write in an identity status for gender, sexuality, and race-ethnicity response categories. In order to represent our sample in a table format, we constructed mutually exclusive response categories. In Table 1, those who selected “woman” or “man” and their sex at birth responses (“male” and “female”) matched were placed in the cisgender category, those whose sex at birth responses differed from their gender identity now, as well as those who selected transgender were placed in the transgender category, and those who chose only gender queer or gender nonconforming or transgender as one of their gender identities are listed in the appropriate category. The sexuality and race-ethnicity variables represented in Table 1 were constructed by placing those who selected just one category in the appropriate category, those who
The semi-structured interviews covered a wide range of topics, including family relationships, health, and gender and sexuality-related experiences, from childhood to adulthood. The present study is focused on responses to questions about relationships between parents and children, including (but not limited to) “how close/not close do you feel with your parent(s) and why,” “why do you think you keep this relationship going?” (See the online appendix). All interviews in the present study were coded manually within NVIVO qualitative software. The authors follow Deterding and Waters’ (2018) flexible coding approach—an approach that uses both inductive and deductive coding strategies. This approach is conducive to qualitative projects of relatively large sample sizes and occurs in two stages. First, the two authors initially sorted the interviews into broad descriptive codes based on the questions asked in the interview (e.g., LGBTQ-related conflict with parents, support from parents). This initial descriptive coding for the present study specifically related to intergenerational relationship quality.

Based on these initial descriptive codes, 85 percent of the sample reported at least one instance of LGBTQ-related conflict with parents resulting from parents’ cissexism and heterosexism. The degree and specific form ranged widely from having parents make heterosexist/homophobic or cissexist/transphobic comments during coming out and never talking about the topic again, to parents throwing a child out of the house for being trans, to parents making consistently anti-bisexual comments across several years. At the same time, 88 percent of the sample reported a dimension of intergenerational solidarity with parents (e.g., consistent contact, financial, emotional, or instrumental support). This initial descriptive coding for the present study specifically related to intergenerational relationship quality. 

In order to provide additional context for each theme and subtheme and to demonstrate sample representation in each theme, we report the number (and % of total) of LGBTQ adults who we coded in each theme; this does not suggest representativeness in the broader population, nor are meant to be interpreted as statistically significant.
exchanges, mutuality, close geographic proximity, affection, value similarity, and family obligation). From these initial codes, the authors developed the code “LGBTQ Ambivalence” based on an “indirect” measure of ambivalence (Birditt et al. 2010) when both LGBTQ-related conflict (i.e., parents cis and heterosexism) and intergenerational solidarity were present (80 percent of the total sample).

Next, to address our research question of why, from the perspective of adult children, ambivalent ties are kept, Reczek constructed the analytical codes of our study. Within the broader “LGBTQ Ambivalence” category, coding: “Children Explain Persistent Ambivalent Relationship with Parent” (i.e., any time adult children explained why continued their tie). Out of this singular code, Reczek next performed an additional layer of analytic coding of the specific reasons LGBTQ adults maintained these ties, developing four primary, non-mutually exclusive themes: 1) despite cis/heterosexism, we’re close/we’re loving (n = 53; 70 percent of sample); 2) despite cis/heterosexism, parents are getting better (n = 42; 55 percent of sample); 3) despite cis/heterosexism, the parent role is irreplaceable or unique (n = 32; 42 percent of sample); and 4) despite cis/heterosexism, the parent provides invaluable resources (n = 47; 62 percent). These themes we conceptualized as “solidarity rationales,” and they are detailed below.

RESULTS

The present study explores why LGBTQ adults remain in ambivalent parent-child ties. Analysis revealed that respondents with ambivalent relationships explain that this tie persists through the use of solidarity rationales, defined as explanations for behavior that privilege intergenerational solidarity over intergenerational strain. The term “solidarity,” a concept from the well-established conflict-solidarity-ambivalence model described previously, refers to any uniting aspect of the parent-child tie (i.e., support, contact, financial exchange, obligation, closeness); the term “rationale” is used to call attention to the specific narratives respondents use to emphasize one aspect of the intergenerational tie (in this case, solidarity) over others (in this case, heterosexism or cissexism). Respondents relied on four solidarity rationales to explain a persistent tie: 1) parent-child closeness and love, 2) parental growth, 3) parent-child role uniqueness, and 4) the importance of parental resources. In using these four rationales, LGBTQ adults do not deny or hide conflict stemming from parental cissexism and heterosexism, but they frame this conflict as ultimately overshadowed by the solidarity-filled dimensions of the relationship. These themes, described below, are not mutually exclusive; most people drew on multiple rationales to navigate their ambivalent parent-child ties.

The Solidarity Rationale of Closeness and Love

The first solidarity rationale used to explain the persistence of ambivalent ties from the adult child’s perspective is emphasizing the parent-child tie as loving and close (i.e., solidarity through emotional support and affection) even as parents are also cissexist and heterosexist (n = 53; 70 percent of sample). Clara (41, white, bisexual cisgender woman) has significant conflict with her parents whom she considers extremely biphobic. When Clara came out, she recalled their saying “that was pretty much the worst thing you could have ever told us,” leading Clara to actively separate the intimate parts of her life from her parents. Clara explains, “I kind of had a double life. I would be gay, have apartments, have girlfriends, you know, we’d live together, and my parents have never seen an apartment I’ve lived in, ever, until probably this house with [my partner] and I. It seemed like . . . if they didn’t have to deal with it or see it, it was okay.” Yet, at the same time, Clara emphasized that feelings of closeness and love were simultaneous with—and more important than—the conflict via her solidarity rationale. “And I mean . . . we’re close. They would always say ‘We love you, we just don’t accept this.’ ‘We love you and we don’t accept this.’” Despite this lack of acceptance, in her interview Clara emphasizes the dimensions of solidarity in her parent-child relationship, highlighting her parents as “close” and “loving,” which keeps the tie intact. Clara asserts the closeness despite the conflict, saying,
“But on the flip side of it, we were always still sort of close though, in the sense of like, I knew they loved me, I still know they love me, they know I love them.” Emphasizing love and closeness over their biphobia allows her to maintain her ambivalent relationship with her parents.

Tricia (50, white, lesbian, cisgender woman) said that her mom does not accept her LGBTQ identity, and as a result Tricia tries to avoid the topic of her sexuality with her mom at all costs. For the most part, Tricia feels her mom’s disapproval generally, recalling an example of a damaging conversation where her mother simply said, “You make things so hard for yourself. Why don’t you just go with men?” When asked in the interview why she keeps this relationship despite the lack of acceptance she says, “It’s weird. It’s like we’re close, but not close. Even though we’re somewhat contentious, I feel like there are certain types of things that only my mother could understand.” In this way, Tricia expresses that she and her mom are close, but at the same time she is unable to explain what being “close to” or “getting love from” her mom means in the context of her mom’s homophobia. As a result, closeness is framed as more essential and more salient than any conflict between the pair, justifying their bond.

Jackie (54, white, transgender woman, “don’t know, evolving” sexuality) explains the persistence of her ambivalent tie by emphasizing a sense of closeness and love as more important than the damaging transphobia also present in their tie. Jackie says her parents have been present, but not good parents. Like many others in our study, there have been times of intense sometimes violent conflict over her being trans and not straight. For example, her dad still does not support her gender, and she explains, “He gets angry easy. He’s a little paranoid. I change the subject [from my LGBTQ status]. I want to get along with my dad. If I can’t redirect him, then I’ll say, ‘I gotta go.’” Still, she emphasizes her parents’ love as a reason to maintain this ambivalent tie. “I was fortunate to have parents that loved me. I was unfortunate to have parents that just couldn’t handle it” — the “it” being raising a gender non-conforming child, Jackie explains. Jackie doubles down on this rationale, explaining further, “It’s one thing to have a parent that beats you, or physically abuses you, but if they don’t love you, that’s even worse . . . Knowing your parents love you, that gives you a little solace.”

Jackie works to explain her ambivalent parent-child relationships —and thus keep them intact—through an emphasis on the solidarity in their relationship. While love bonds the family together, it is clear that the conflict is deeply painful. She reflects on this, saying: “If I could choose my family, I wouldn’t have chosen them. If they were just my friends, I wouldn’t speak to them . . . . With your family, you can’t choose your family.” Jackie will not leave her parents, no matter how painful the relationship is; love will bind them together forever. Emphasizing solidarity through closeness and love is a way that Jackie, and others, manage intergenerational ambivalence, enabling the continuation of the parent-child relationship.

The Solidarity Rationale of Parental Growth

Respondents used a second solidarity rationale to explain their continued ambivalent relationships with parents: emphasizing parental growth (n = 42; 55 percent of sample). In this theme, respondents characterized as having ambivalent ties with a parent explain that while parents still do not fully accept their LGBTQ identity, they also believe that parents are—or are at least trying to become—more supportive of an LGBTQ identity. This solidarity rationale, then, relies on a sense of change over time towards solidarity—minimizing conflict over time. Any amount of progress made by parents is emphasized as a rationale for staying in the relationship, even when conflict remains.

Brian (36, straight, white transgender man) explains that at the start of his transition, “I don’t think [dad] even got the name or pronoun right the whole time.” But once Brian started transitioning, his dad exhibited a little bit of progress each time Brian saw him: “Then, when I went back a few months later at Christmas, my voice was a little bit deeper and then, maybe once a day he got the name and pronoun right.” Now, Brian classifies his body as “mostly passing” and reflects that his dad is not perfect but is getting better. Brian talks about what his relationship with his dad is like now,
saying with a bit of laughter, “I think we’re up to a couple times a day now, he gets the names and pronouns right. He’s not doing it maliciously, in his mind he’s doing really good with it, you know? I want to be like, ‘Not really, but . . . ’” Brian continues saying he knows his dad has a long way to go:

The joke is I’m going to come home one time with a beard and then maybe he’ll be better about it, if I can grow a damn beard . . . I mean, he’s getting better. He does better, he doesn’t say ‘the girls’ anymore, most of the time, which is nice. He still calls me [deadname nickname] sometimes, which, whatever . . . he’s getting better.

One way Brian explains his staying in the ambivalent tie is by placing emphasis on the fact that his dad tries to correctly gender him and is working at improving, even as there is continued conflict due to his dad’s lack of understanding of his gender identity.

In another example of the growth solidarity rationale, Jamie (22, Black, transgender and gender queer/gender non-conforming, queer) has worked to advance their mom’s understanding of their gender identity in order to keep the bond. Jamie recounts a conversation that they had with their mom about moving to another state. They laugh recounting this conversation, saying, “I ended up not wanting to move there because I found out specifically that there is not a large queer community there and that the LGBT community in [Southwest state] mostly caters to only white gay cis men.” Jamie explains, “She [sighs] . . . she didn’t understand it [chuckles] because I told her that there was not much of a community and she was like, ‘There’s lots of gay people here, I’ve seen lots of gay men.’ And I’m just like, ‘That’s not the same mom.’ And she was like, ‘Well the girl at my job is gay,’ and I’m like “That’s not the same either.” Based on these conversations, Jamie thinks their mom is genuinely trying to understand and putting in effort to do so. “She’s trying which is a thing that I appreciate at least is that she’s trying to understand at least.” Jamie’s ability to see her mom growing and trying to understand is vital to their continued relationship. Jamie suggests that their mom’s willingness to be educated is a key reason to stay in an ambivalent parent-child relationship wherein her mother’s growth overshadows past and persistent heterosexism and cissexism.

In a final example of this theme, Alicia (41, Native American or American Indian, bisexual transgender woman) explains that her mom has had a tough time with her gender transition:

When I first came out as trans I think I lost her . . . She still calls me son on the phone, and I still have to correct her much to chagrin. And sometimes—she’ll do good, she’ll do good, she’ll do good, and then she’ll slip up. And it’s like, “Oy.” It’s more aggravating than anything. Because every time she does it . . . I do a face palm and it’s like, “Oy.” And it’s like, “No mom. I’m not your son anymore. I’m your daughter.” “I’m sorry, son. I mean daughter.”

Alicia manages this deep discomfort and difficult relationship by emphasizing the aspects of the tie that exhibit growth and effort (i.e., solidarity): “I think she’s genuinely trying because when I correct her, she seems a little hurt.” She further explains how her mom’s trouble with her gender is understandable and forgivable in the context of her effort because “At least it’s not like some people out there . . . whose parents completely disown them. I am grateful for that.” The belief that her mom’s transphobia could be worse, alongside evidence that her mom has gotten better over time, provides key rationales that keep the ambivalent relationship tied. Alicia, like others in this theme, explain their ambivalent relationships with parents persist despite their cissexism and heterosexism by emphasizing their simultaneous growth—or at least good faith efforts to try to be better overshadows the problems that remain.
The Solidarity Rationale of Parent-Child Role Uniqueness

Respondents (n = 32; 42 percent of total sample) use a third solidarity rationale to explain their persistent ambivalent relationships with parents: the assertion that their parent-child tie is unique and thus inherently of value. A key aspect of this rationale is the emphasis that the roles of parent and child can never be replaced, even when a parent fails to be a “good” parent, and thus this tie needs to stay intact no matter what. Through this solidarity rationale, the parent is framed as irreplaceable, overshadowing parents’ cis- and hetero-sexism and keeping the parent-child relationship together.

Leslie (30, white, lesbian transgender woman, gender queer/gender non-conforming) describes her relationship with her mom as “somewhat limited. I occasionally talk to her, but for the most part, she only contacts me when she needs me for something.” This distance is because Leslie’s mom simply does not accept her gender or sexuality. Yet, while the rift exists, Leslie keeps the relationship intact by emphasizing the uniqueness of her mom in her life. She says, “The way I look at it, family is family. You help family. And she’s my mom. So there’s an expectation that I help her out... I have no problems fulfilling that expectation. Same with my dad. Especially with how much he’s helped me over the years.” Role uniqueness and thus permanence of parents is a core way Leslie explains her ambivalent connection with her parents in the face of cissexism and heterosexism; without this rationale (and the rationale of parent resources we discuss next), she would not remain in this bond.

Similarly, Cheryl (28, Black, lesbian cisgender woman) had significant strain with her mother after coming out as lesbian. “She said I was going to Hell. I’m nasty. My mom hit the fan.” However, Cheryl explains why she deals with this homophobia by reframing her relationship with her mother as irreplaceable and thus sustained:

You only get one. When my step-mother passed it was just like... before she passed away [she and my half-brother, her biological child] would get into it. He would cuss her out, scream at her, yell at her. He just has so much regret and guilt with him now. It’s just, like, I don’t want that. You only get one parent, so. It’s better to just move past the issues if you can.... She’ll never be what you’re looking for. Just move past that expectation that she would ever apologize or be the mother that I would want her to be. I just let it go, because I knew it would just poison the relationship that we do have now.

Cheryl’s mother is never going to be the mom she wants and deserves because of her homophobia, but she is and always will be Cheryl’s mother. Cheryl keeps the relationship intact by drawing on the rationale that their bond is irreplaceable and unique, even if damaged by homophobia.

Brad (19-year-old white, gay transgender man) echoes the theme of an unbreakable parent-child bond when discussing his extremely painful relationship with his dad. When Brad came out, saying: “I am transgender. I was born a female, I’m now transitioning to male,” his dad “got so violent, the police were almost called.” Brad cut his dad out of his life due to this response, but after a couple of years of estrangement they reconciled. When explaining why, Brad says, “I don’t want to be without a dad. I went like that for a couple years and I didn’t like it. I wouldn’t talk to him or have anything to do with him.” While Brad’s dad had periodically provided some love and closeness when Brad was younger, he currently does not offer much love today, nor has he exhibited growth or change around his cissexism. But, he does offer the role of dad, and this helps Brad keep the ambivalent tie. As Brad explains, it is important to have a dad because those roles mean something uniquely important, even if his dad does not fulfil the desired content of this role.

Natalie (46, Black transgender and gender queer/GNC person) came out as transgender to her mom when she was 40 years old—around the same time she got divorced from her ex-wife. But Natalie explains that her mom was aware of her being trans when she found her undergarments and clothes in Natalie’s room when she was a young teen. Natalie denied the accusation of being gay, and her mom “gave me a whoopin’ out of this world. At that point I knew that I couldn’t really talk about...
how I felt... I didn’t talk about it at all. I mean, I didn’t talk about it to anybody. I just bottled it up and kept it to myself.” Because of this early experience, Natalie did not discuss her trans status again with her mom until about 5 years ago. Today, Natalie’s mom consistently misgenders her, with Natalie explaining that “My mother’s very religious. She comes from a Black Baptist background, so she always was like, ‘Have you prayed?’” It is clear there is still a lot of tension around Natalie’s gender.

And yet, Natalie gives her mom a pass because of her belief in the unique and irreplaceable role as her mom:

She’s working on it. My mom, you know she’s working on it, but mom gets a pass, you know? Mom gets a pass... She yells out that dead name to get my attention, and not realizing that she’s screaming out that dead name... and I answer, and I respond, which is frustrating because I hear this, and that’s not what I want to be addressed by, but it’s my mom. She gave birth to me. She put me on this earth, you know? ... Given the circumstances, and everything that she’s dealing with, with dealing with my dad and the whole nine yards, it’s not worth the effort.

Having a mom is unquestionable, and as a result the person in this role must be given “a pass” on her transphobia and the ensuing ambivalence in their relationship. Natalie would not have stuck around to see if her mom could change if she was not in the role of mother. Respondents emphasized the uniqueness of this relationship to explain the persistence of their ambivalent parent-child connections, reflecting wider societal values of family as irreplaceable and uniquely forever, regardless of an ambivalent dynamic.

The Solidarity Rationale of Parental Resources

The emphasis on financial and instrumental resource exchanges is the last solidarity rationale used to explain intact ambivalent relationships (n = 47; 62 percent of sample). For these respondents, the importance of parental resources as a source of solidarity overshadows the conflict caused by parents’ cissexism and heterosexism.

Jasmine (18 years old, white, gay/lesbian, genderqueer person) illustrates the importance of financial support in keeping them in a relationship with their father. Jasmine explains that their dad rejects their gender and sexuality and would like to cut him out of their life but needs his financial help. Jasmine says, “I’d like him to just leave me alone, but then I wouldn’t have tuition... In paradise, what I would like to have happen is him just move with his girlfriend and just pay my mom child support for my tuition and just leave me alone. That’s what I would like.” Jasmine manages the serious ambivalence in her relationship with their dad by privileging resources over the desire to disengage, bolstering the rationale for this persistent ambivalent relationship. Jasmine keeps but minimizes contact with their dad as much as possible, staying in relationship with him only because they are financially dependent.

Similarly, Alyson (23 years old, white, trans and gender queer, queer person) cut off xir mom for two years because she rejected Alyson’s sexuality and gender. Yet, later, Alyson needed to return to the family for financial support:

As my father puts it, [there was a] failure to embrace... Talking to them in general is very stressful. I talk to them now because, well, I can’t afford my own phone bill, and my health insurance is with my father. It’s not a very good relationship, but I do try to have like casual social contact as well.
Alyson desired to become estranged with xir parents because they were significantly heterosexist and cissexist toward Alyson. Yet, xe reframes their relationship as primarily about financial resources, a component of solidarity in parent-child relationships, to justify staying in this bond.

For some, it is not just financial but also instrumental support (i.e., help with everyday tasks) that is emphasized over conflict in ambivalent ties. Isobel (23 years, white, queer cis woman) notes that she is frustrated that her mom really does not understand her gender and sexuality status and the truth of who Isobel is as a queer person partnered to a transgender person. But she manages this ambivalence through the solidarity rationale of resources, noting she needs her mom:

As far as every time something happens I just call her. My sink stopped working, what do I do? My car is making this weird sound, what am I supposed to do about that? What do I need to do if I want to pay my bill online this time instead of over the phone, or whatever. She provides all of that help for us and I rely on her a lot for that kind of stuff. How do I do this? How do you do that?

Isobel manages the ambivalence of a lack of acceptance by privileging the solidarity and downplaying the conflict, eventually saying, “I think we’ve learned to work together as having a relationship, any kind of relationship does, I think she’s learned to work with me and who I am.” This rationale of the importance of financial and practical resources, alongside the rationale of parental growth, is understood as a necessity because Isobel receives significant instrumental support from her mom – with this support becoming a key rationale for maintaining this ambivalent tie.

Taken together, emphasizing the importance of instrumental and financial support was a core way that respondents explain their persistent ambivalent parent-child relationships in the face of parental cis- and trans-sexism.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

Relationships with parents are among the longest lasting and most important social ties with remarkable impacts on adult children’s life chances and well-being (Fingerman et al. 2020). While the intergenerational bond could hypothetically end once children become lawfully independent, especially when these ties are rife with ambivalence, most parents and adult children remain firmly bound as central members in the institution of the family (Birditt et al. 2009; Fingerman et al. 2020). However, research has yet to develop a comprehensive understanding of why adult children maintain ambivalent intergenerational relationships. We advance sociological theory by showing that LGBTQ adults downplay parental cissexism and heterosexism and emphasize parent-child solidarity through the deployment of the “solidarity rationales” of love/closeness, growth, role uniqueness, and resources. By articulating these commonplace beliefs about what the parent-child tie should be but only partly or sometimes is—loving or close, growing, unique, and resource rich (Cohler 2003; Connidis and McMullin 2002a and b)—solidarity rationales firmly bind parents and children as central members in the compulsory institution of the family (Birditt et al. 2009; Fingerman et al. 2020). In articulating an understanding of the ways adult children explain their persistent ambivalent intergenerational relationships through the concept of solidarity rationales, we give insight into how people sustain their complicated and contradictory family ties.

The solidarity rationales of love and closeness, growth, uniqueness, and resources reveal how parents are framed by their adult children as loving even if rejecting; close even if unsupportive; getting better but also bad; uniquely necessary while at the same time painful; helpful but also hurtful. First, the notion that love and closeness should forever bond parent-child relationships together became a primary ideology in the early 20th century and has remained central to parent-child ties ever since (Stone 1979; Zelizer 1985). As such, contemporary social norms dictate that parent-child relationships be perceived as loving and close (Bengtson 2001; Connidis 2015; Feld 1981; Silverstein et al.
even when bonds do not wholly live up to this expectation. When evidence of conflict occurs in the context of the also-present solidarity, respondents emphasized parent-child closeness and love to manage parents’ heterosexism and cissexism. Notably, few people who identify as cis or trans men used the rationale of love and closeness. This may be because cis and trans men, and those inhabiting masculinity as a primary identity, may not as readily engage in the emphasis of love and closeness talk due to stigma about feminized (de Boise and Hearn 2017).

In the rationale of parental growth, parents often had a long history of being highly problematic and hurtful towards their LGBTQ children. While painful to recall for many, LGBTQ children drew on that history to emphasize instances of effort and improvement. In these highly ambivalent ties, emphasizing parental growth centers the promise of the future to reconcile the past; children cannot (and do not need to) leave the family when parents are or have been rejecting because parents are framed as always becoming more supportive. This rationale prioritizes forgiveness and progress over pain, keeping parents and children bonded despite past painful and scarring experiences (Ghosh 2020; Klein and Golub 2016; Pullen et al. 2020). Transgender and gender expansive people in our sample were more likely to rely on the notion of growth to manage intergenerational ambivalence, in part because parents’ reactions to trans and gender expansive identities were among the worst reactions in the sample, in line with socio-cultural norms of transphobia that are highly prevalent today (Klein and Golub 2016; Robinson 2018). However, because initial parental reactions were often negative, there was room for parents to learn and become accepting. Parents are framed as a source of solidarity in the future, and this hope works to keep the relationship tied.

The rationales that privilege both uniqueness and resources further emphasize aspects of solidarity to explain the persistent tie. Children grow up relying on their parents for a sense of belonging, identity, and financial support, with this dynamic continuing in adulthood (Aquilino 1997; Rossi and Rossi 1991). Like notions of love and closeness, social and financial connections between parents and children are idealized, propagated, and made necessary through media (e.g., film, TV, books, social media), social institutions (e.g., schools, churches), governmental policies (e.g., survivorship benefits, minimal government support), language (e.g., parent, child), and financial dependence (e.g., shared credit cards, co-residence) (Perales and Huang 2020; Silverstein et al. 2006). Such norms continue into adulthood, wherein deep-seated norms tell us that being an adult child is a key social role with unique qualities that must continue no matter what; this tie is simply compulsory (Connnidis 2015; Reczek and Bosley-Smith 2022). Further, due to societal income inequality and the absence of a robust U.S. welfare state (Cooper 2014; Hacker 2006; McCloud and Dwyer 2011; Silva 2013), many people still need parents to be a source of financial or instrumental support. In this context, LGBTQ adults emphasized both economic exchanges and role continuation to understand and continue their ambivalent parent-child ties (Acosta 2010; Swartz et al. 2011; Watson 2014).

Notably, a higher proportion of Black, Latin/a/o/x, and Indigenous people in our study used the illusion of uniqueness compared to other rationales, although white people relied on this illusion too. Due to both a racist U.S. culture and being a minoritized subpopulation of the United States, Black, Latina/o/x, and Indigenous people may have fewer opportunities to experience social belonging more broadly outside of what they consider family (Diaz et al. 2001). Even as Black, Latin/a/o/x, and Indigenous people have long built a broader family network of kin that includes not only parents but also friends, neighbors, aunties, and grandmas, parents remain irreplaceable social ties. For example, in Latinx families, a value of familismo creates deep and unbreakable bonds between parents and kids (Zinn 1982), perhaps in part because parent-child solidarity is necessary for survival and self-identity in a racist social environment. Future research should look more closely at how race-ethnicity, region, and nationality matter in the presence and type of solidarity rationales, as we expect that the reasons people continue ties with family are shaped by these factors in ways our data prevent us from fully exploring.
While we identify these four primary rationales used to explain persistent ambivalent intergenerational ties, there are likely other types of solidarity rationales that are deployed in the face of other ambivalent social relationships. Future research could explore how these solidarity rationales may be deployed in other family ties to keep social ties intact (Connidis and McMullin 2002a). Future work should also test the function, utility, stability, and transformation of these rationales over time, within and between various family types and across contexts. Further, solidarity rationales may be used when adults find themselves in other ambivalent or conflictual social ties with coworkers and bosses (Ziegler et al. 2012), friends or acquaintances, siblings (Volkom 2006), grandparenthood (Mason, May, and Clarke 2007), neighbors, and others with whom they feel they must maintain a tie when the relationship has both aspects of solidarity and conflict (Fingerman et al. 2004). For example, when working with a coworker with whom one has solidarity (i.e., similar class status) but also conflict with around politics or personal identities (making the relationship ambivalent), a person may develop a solidarity rationale—likely beyond those we identify here—to manage conflict and keep the relationship intact and positive. Thus, future research can use this concept to explain the management of other ambivalent social ties. We also note that a small number of LGBTQ people in our study have estranged ties with parents. Our present study focuses on why people stay in their ambivalent ties, and thus examining the reasons for estrangement are not within the scope of the study (see Reczek and Bosley-Smith 2022 for a discussion of estrangement).

Relationships between parents and children are among the longest lasting and most impactful social ties, and this relationship has a remarkable impact on both generations’ life chances and well-being (Fingerman et al. 2020). But why so many parent-child ties persist even in the face of serious conflict and ambivalence has been understudied. This paper provides a new theoretical tool to explain the persistence of ambivalent LGBTQ adult child-parent relationships, contributing to the sociology of the family, research on gender and sexuality, and sociological theory on the persistence of “difficult” social relationships more broadly. Despite conservative fears of a dying institution, familial solidarity between parents and children remains a compulsory force maintaining this social tie (Connidis 2015; Reczek and Bosley-Smith 2022; Silverstein et al. 2006), even when these ties are characterized by ambivalence. Findings show that solidarity rationales reassert parents as a central aspect of LGBTQ adults’ family, regardless of the also-present ambivalence due to parental heterosexism and cissexism. By focusing on why LGBTQ people persist in ties with parents, this study shines new light on the guiding compulsory ideologies that keep family of origin ties intact—even when they are less than ideal.

REFERENCES


