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WHETHER OR NOT “IT GETS BETTER”...  
COPING WITH PARENTAL HETEROSEXIST REJECTION

A Thesis Presented

by

CARA HERBITTER

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies,  
University of Massachusetts Boston,  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

December 2017

Clinical Psychology Program

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A Thesis Presented

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## ABSTRACT

### WHETHER OR NOT “IT GETS BETTER”... COPING WITH PARENTAL HETEROSEXIST REJECTION

December 2017

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Directed by Professor Heidi M. Levitt

Lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) people face the burden of additional stressors as a result of their experiences of stigma and discrimination regarding their sexual minority status. Parental rejection of LGB people in the context of heterosexism serves as a powerful minority stressor associated with poorer mental health (e.g., Bouris et al., 2010; Ryan, Huebner, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2009). Few contemporary theories exist to describe the experience of parental rejection. In addition, the extant empirical research has focused primarily on youth experiences among White and urban LGB samples, signaling the need for research across the lifespan investigating more diverse samples. Moreover, prior published studies have not focused directly on how LGB people cope with parental

rejection, but rather on the negative consequences associated with the rejection more generally. For the current study, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 15 LGB and queer (LGBQ) people about their experiences coping with parental rejection using retrospective recall questions. I sought to maximize diversity in the realms of experiences of parental rejection, race, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, gender, age, and U.S. regions. I analyzed the data using an adaptation of grounded theory methodology based upon the work of psychologist David Rennie (e.g., Rennie, Phillips, & Quartaro, 1988). The core category that emerged was: Parental rejection was experienced as harmfully corrective and then internalized; reframing the rejection as heterosexism mitigated internalized heterosexism and enabled adaptive acceptance strategies. The findings documented the common experiences shared by participants, which led to an original stage model of coping with heterosexism parental rejection, a central contribution of this study. In addition to contributing to the empirical understanding of how LGBQ people cope with parental rejection related to their sexual orientation, my findings can guide clinicians working with this population to maximize their clients' adaptive coping. Parental rejection is a complex process that impacts LGBQ people in a wide range of arenas and requires a multi-dimensional coping approach, drawing upon both internal resources and reliance on community supports.

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CHAPTER 1  
INTRODUCTION

**Specific Aims**

**General Aim:** This project responds to the call for additional research on resilience among LGB people (e.g., Kwon, 2013; National Research Council, 2011) by focusing on adaptive coping strategies used in the face of heterosexism. In particular, this project will explore the experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and other queer (LGBQ) people who have encountered parental rejection. Note that, when I describe my intended research, I will use the phrase "LGBQ," as I plan to interview LGBQ people. In describing past studies or literature, however, I will use the language used in those studies or that literature. Parental rejection has been tied to a number of mental health issues among LGB people, including depression and suicidal ideation (e.g., Bouris et al., 2010; Ryan et al., 2009). LGBQ people's parental reactions may change over time, especially as public attitudes toward LGB people are rapidly evolving (Pew Research Center, 2013). With these shifts, LGBQ people's coping strategies may evolve as well. As I will describe, these potentially changing parental reactions and LGBQ people's coping strategies have not been adequately explored in the research literature.

As a preliminary means of addressing this gap, I conducted a qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews with LGBQ people about their experiences coping with

parental rejection. I asked respondents to reflect on both past and current experiences. Specifically, I was interested in investigating the complexity of rejection experiences, in order to develop an understanding of the experience of rejection and to explore the wide array of coping strategies used by LGBTQ people. For instance, I explored how LGBTQ people cope with parental rejection that gradually shifts over time as well as rejection that remains constant. The limited extant research that has assessed the change over time suggested that many parents who initially react negatively may ultimately become more accepting (e.g., Samarova, Shilo, & Diamond, 2014). As such, I hoped that documenting LGBTQ peoples' experiences of their parents' responses changing would provide insight into how LGBTQ people can cope with varied responses by parents. I anticipated that these findings would be useful to inform future interventions aimed at fostering resilience and coping among LGBTQ people who face family rejection.

The specific aims of this qualitative study were as follows:

**Aim #1:** Describe LGBTQ people's experiences of heterosexist parental rejection and acceptance, addressing the complexity of parental rejection/acceptance, which may evolve over time, vary depending on context, or differ between parents.

**Specific research questions include: (a) Precipitants of rejection:** What events immediately preceded heterosexist parental rejection (e.g., coming out to parents, bringing home a partner, etc.)? **(b) Rejection experience:** How is rejection expressed? What is the impact of both sexuality specific and general parental rejection/support on LGBTQ people? How do experiences of parental rejection relate to processes of internalized heterosexism among LGBTQ people? How might intersecting sociocultural

identities impact LGBTQ people's experiences of parental rejection? **(c) Change over time:** How do parental responses change over time, in different contexts, and within sets of parents? What factors influence these shifts and how do these changes impact LGBTQ people?

**Aim #2:** Identify methods of coping used by LGBTQ people who experience parental rejection.

**Specific research questions include: (a) Use of coping:** How did participants respond to, or cope with, parental rejection (e.g., seeking social support, psychotherapy, and LGBTQ community, engaging in advocacy, or using emotional/cognitive strategies)? **(b)**

**Understanding of coping:** How helpful or detrimental were these different methods of coping with parental rejection? How do LGBTQ people understand their practice of coping with parental rejection? How might intersecting sociocultural identities impact LGBTQ people's experiences of coping with parental rejection? **(c) Changes over time:** Over time, and as parental reactions change, how do LGBTQ people's coping methods change?

## **Background and Significance**

### **LGB Minority Stress**

Compounding typical life stressors, LGB people experience the burden of additional stressors as a result of their experiences of stigma and discrimination regarding their sexual minority status. Based upon research on racial minority stress (for a recent review of this literature, see Carter, 2007), Meyer (2003) developed a model of LGB

minority stress as a framework for understanding the higher prevalence of mental health issues among LGB people. He wrote:

The concept of social stress extends stress theory by suggesting that conditions in the social environment, not only personal events, are sources of stress that may lead to mental and physical ill effects. Social stress might therefore be expected to have a strong impact in the lives of people belonging to stigmatized social categories, including categories related to socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity, gender, or sexuality. (p. 675)

Meyer described the following stress processes: external stressful factors, the impact of expecting negative experiences, internalizing societal stigma, and hiding of one's identity. He highlighted the importance of addressing both structural and individual factors to reduce minority stress. He suggested this could be accomplished via interventions aimed at changing the environment, to reduce exposure to stressors, as well as those aimed at helping LGB people cope more successfully. Rejection of LGB people by their parents occurs within this larger context of sexual minority stressors, and so must be understood as being embedded in socio-political systems, in addition to potentially being interpersonally stressful. Sexual minority stress theory provides a framework for understanding both parents' reactions and their effects upon mental health, as well as the potential limits on coping resources available to LGB people within the larger context of heterosexism. The purpose of the current study was to examine the experience of LGBQ individuals' coping with parental rejection related to their sexual orientation.

**Minority stress negatively impacts health.** The detrimental effects of minority stress processes on the physical and mental health of LGB people have been well documented (Cochran, Sullivan, & Mays, 2003; King et al., 2008; Lehavot & Simoni, 2011; Lick, Durso, & Johnson, 2013; Meyer, 2003; National Research Council, 2011). With regard to physical health disparities, Lick et al. (2013) summarized prior research comparing health status between LGB and heterosexual people, reporting that LGB people have been found to experience poorer general health. In a meta-analysis of the literature, LGB people were found to have higher rates of anxiety, depression, suicide attempts, and substance use disorders when compared to heterosexual individuals (King et al., 2008). By pooling prevalence data across studies, researchers determined that LGB people had approximately twice the risk of depression and 1.5 times the risk of any anxiety disorder than heterosexual individuals in the prior year.

In an effort to understand the causes of their poorer health, researchers have identified specific stressors and assessed their effect on LGB people's well-being. For instance, researchers have documented the negative impacts of institutionalized and legalized heterosexism, as enacted via anti-LGB legislation, on LGB people's mental health (Hatzenbuehler, McLaughlin, Keyes, & Hasin, 2010; Levitt et al., 2009; Rostosky, Riggle, Horne, & Miller, 2009; Russell, 2000). Researchers also have reported on the prevalence and negative mental health impacts of violence and overt discrimination on LGB people (Button, O'Connell, & Gealt, 2012; Herek, Gillis, & Cogan, 1999; Herek, 2009). For example, Herek (2009) studied a national probability sample of LGB adults and found that a substantial minority (13%) had experienced anti-LGB personal violence

at least once, with gay men faring the worst (25%). Similar numbers of LGB adults (11.2%) reported experiencing discrimination related to housing and employment. In earlier foundational studies, Herek and colleagues (1999) found that gay and lesbian survivors of anti-gay crimes fared worse than survivors of other non-hate crimes in terms of both mental health and crime-related fears. Specifically, those who survived hate crimes displayed increased symptoms of depression, anxiety, and traumatic stress, as well as greater feelings of vulnerability, fear of crime, and likelihood to attribute negative experiences to heterosexism. Research on the negative impacts of external stressors on LGB people has been particularly robust, perhaps because these instances of overt heterosexism represent clearly measurable stressors.

In addition, researchers have described the role of the internalization of stigma, specifically internalized heterosexism (Newcomb & Mustanski, 2010; Szymanski & Kashubeck-West, 2008). Various synonyms are used to refer to internalized heterosexism, including internalized homophobia, internalized biphobia, and internalized homonegativity. I will use the phrase “internalized heterosexism” when describing groups of studies or the concept more generally, but will defer to the language used by authors when describing individual studies. I have chosen to use "internalized heterosexism," both to recognize the systemic nature of this form of oppression, as well as to be more inclusive of bisexual individuals. To assess the impact of internalized heterosexism, Newcomb and Mustanski (2010) conducted a meta-analytic review on internalized homophobia and mental health problems, including symptoms of anxiety and depression. They found that, overall, higher scores on measures of internalized



homophobia predicted higher scores on measures of psychological distress, especially with regard to depressive symptoms. Also, internalized heterosexism has been found to be associated with decreased relationship quality and increased relationship problems among same-sex couples (Frost & Meyer, 2009; Otis, Rostosky, Riggle, & Hamrin, 2006; Szymanski & Hilton, 2013). Recognizing the multiple forms of oppression experienced by many sexual minorities, Szymanski and Kashubeck-West (2008) conducted a study of 304 lesbian and bisexual women and found that both internalized sexism and internalized heterosexism were associated with greater psychological distress. Given the negative impacts of minority stress, the experience of parental rejection must be understood as occurring amidst this larger context of multiple external and internal stressors and so there is reason to examine its influence on mental health. Similarly, understanding the important role that social support plays in buffering these stressors suggests the multiple negative consequences of parental rejection, as will be discussed.

**Social support buffers minority stressors.** Because decreased social support generally is associated with increased psychological distress (Leavy, 1983), researchers also have reported on the negative impacts on sexual minority individuals related to a lack of social support from family and friends (e.g., Rothman, Sullivan, Keyes, & Boehmer, 2012; Teasdale & Bradley-Engen, 2010; Williams, Connolly, Pepler, & Craig, 2005). Similarly, researchers have found evidence that the presence of social support directly predicts well-being among LGB people and buffers the potential negative effects of sexual minority stressors (e.g., Button et al., 2012; Eisenberg & Resnick, 2006; Graham & Barnow, 2013). The relation between social support and internalized

heterosexism also has been assessed. Szymanski, Kashubeck-West, and Meyer (2008) conducted a critical review on internalized heterosexism and its correlates and reported that studies have generally found a relation between less social support and greater internalized heterosexism. This overall relation is important to consider in understanding the potentially devastating impact of parental rejection on internalized heterosexism and related risks. In a study using ADD Health data and comparing social stressors, social supports, and mental health outcomes among same-sex attracted (SSA) youth and non-SSA youth (N = 11,911; including 784 SSA youth), SSA youth were found to be at higher risk of depression and suicidal tendencies than non-SSA youth (Teasdale & Bradley-Engen, 2010). In addition, among SSA youth, increased social stress and decreased social support served as mediators between same-sex attraction and depressive symptoms. Highlighting the importance of family support in particular, Eisenberg and Resnick (2006) found that family connectedness and perceived adult caring were significant protective factors against suicidal ideation and attempts in a study comparing suicidal tendencies among 2,255 LGB and 19,672 non-LGB teens. Of note, while this study yielded an impressive sample size, the researchers acknowledged that the LGB label was applied to youth who reported same-gender sexual behavior, rather than based upon self-identification with LGB identities. As such, findings should be cautiously applied to LGB-identified youth. Nonetheless, these studies suggest that inadequate levels of social support are likely a significant minority stressor, whereas adequate social support can serve as a buffer against sexual minority stress. This understanding is crucial as I explore the impact of parental rejection on LGB-identified people.

## **Parental Rejection**

Parents and families of origin have been found to be an important potential source of social support that influence people's well-being, especially among youth (e.g., Viner et al., 2012). In particular, much psychological research has focused on the negative impacts of low social support from parents on development and mental health through adulthood (e.g., Adam et al., 2011; Reed, Ferraro, Lucier-Greer, & Barber, 2014). While many studies of mental health among LGB youth include a measure of family or parental support (e.g., Espelage, Aragon, Birkett, & Koenig, 2008; Mustanski & Liu, 2013), fewer studies have focused on parental rejection specifically. Those studies that have specifically examined parental rejection have generally identified a lack of support as a risk factor, and the presence of support as a protective factor (e.g., Needham & Austin, 2010; Ryan et al., 2009), in terms of mental health concerns.

The literature on parental support and rejection can be challenging to summarize, as these constructs are not operationalized uniformly. As described in the previous section, inadequate social support, such as parental support, may be understood as a minority stressor in itself, whereas the presence of a type of social support has been conceptualized as a protective factor that may serve to ameliorate other minority stressors—and, thus, the absence of social support also may be seen as the lack of a protective factor. In addition, different studies have assessed the direct effects (e.g., Ryan et al., 2009; Ryan, Russell, Huebner, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2010), mediating effects (e.g., Needham & Austin, 2010), and moderating effects (e.g., Poteat, Mereish, DiGiovanni, & Koenig, 2011) of parental support on mental health. To add to this complexity, some

studies have assessed for experiences of parental support and rejection as parts of the same question, such as asking respondents to evaluate parental responses to their coming out as either rejecting or accepting (e.g., D'Amico & Julien, 2012). This question format does not allow for measuring concurrent rejection and acceptance, as the related concepts of parental rejection and acceptance may not necessarily be simply opposite ends of a continuum. Rather, it seems valuable to conceptualize them separately and, thus, acknowledge that rejection and acceptance can occur simultaneously, as either or both parents may demonstrate both rejecting and accepting actions (Perrin et al., 2004; Ryan et al., 2010). A limited number of studies have focused specifically on the positive role of parental support and acceptance (e.g., Ryan et al., 2010), but they have demonstrated the potential to conceptualize rejection and acceptance as related but separate constructs. In this literature review, I focused primarily on parental support/rejection related to sexual orientation, but occasionally included studies from the broader family support/rejection literature related to sexual orientation, if there were no relevant published studies focused on parents explicitly.

In the context of the current study, I focused on parental rejection primarily as a minority stressor, as well as the absence of parental support as a “missing” protective factor from other minority stressors—thereby recognizing that parental support may not simply be an inverse of parental rejection. In using the phrase “parental rejection,” I mean to encompass experiences among sexual minorities in which they received inadequate parental support that negatively impacts development, as well as those who experienced outright rejection. Given the importance of parental support to

developmental well-being within the general population (e.g., Viner et al., 2012), researchers have noted the surprising lack of studies on the impact of parents/caregivers on the well-being of LGB youth (e.g., Ryan et al., 2009). The extant research suggests the negative impacts of low parental support and rejection on LGB people (e.g., Bouris et al., 2010; Needham & Austin, 2010; Rothman et al., 2012; Ryan et al., 2009).

**Parental rejection among youth.** In recognition of this gap, and the importance of understanding the state of research in order to develop an agenda, Bouris and colleagues conducted a 2010 systematic literature review of articles about parental influences on a range of adolescent and youth health variables. They focused on quantitative articles with U.S. based samples published from 1980-2010, and identified 31 articles in total, of which the majority included a mental health outcome. Bouris et al. reviewed a few studies suggesting that negative parental reactions to LGB youth's sexual orientation increased the youth's risk of substance abuse and suicidal ideation and attempts, with more studies demonstrating the inverse relation between parental rejection and the overall mental health and well-being of LGB youth. The studies reviewed also highlighted the role of parental support as a buffering factor from many health problems. Finally, these authors noted two important limitations of the reviewed studies—the use of convenience samples and a cross-sectional design—and, as such, these findings must be interpreted cautiously. They also noted the need for more diverse samples and more geographic diversity. In particular, samples including rural youth were absent.

Among the more recent articles reviewed, Ryan et al. (2009) conducted a retrospective, cross-sectional study of a community sample of 224 White and Latino

LGB young adults (aged 21-25) and found that participants who described greater parental rejection as adolescents were at 8.4 times increased risk for suicide attempts, 5.9 times increased risk for high levels of depression, and 3.4 times greater risk for illegal drug use, when compared to those who experienced little or no parental rejection. It should be noted that, while this study is frequently cited in the literature, the measure of parental rejection is based upon a scale developed by the researchers, which is not sufficiently described with regard to psychometric properties. This criticism has been raised (e.g., Lai, 2011) regarding the authors' related study on parental acceptance (Ryan et al., 2010). Despite this potential weakness, I include this study because it is bolstered by the use of qualitative research to develop a scale specific to the experiences of parental rejection by LGB youth, whereas more established measures of family or parental support may not fully capture these experiences. In addition, the negative impacts of parental rejection on LGB youth are also evidenced by research relying on probability sampling and previously used measures of parental support. Utilizing a subset of cross-sectional data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health), a national probability sample, Needham and Austin (2010) found that sexual minority young adults fared worse on certain mental health indicators than heterosexual young adults, and that these differences could at least partially be explained based on current levels of parental support—suggesting the buffering role of parental support. For instance, utilizing logistic regression, these authors found that bisexual women had 86% greater odds of reporting symptoms signaling that they are at risk for major depressive disorder compared to heterosexual women, a difference which was fully mediated by

differences in parental support. Similarly, lesbian and bisexual young women had two times the odds of reporting suicidal thoughts than heterosexual women, which was partially mediated by parental support. Among young men, the differences in mental health outcomes between heterosexual and sexual minority youth were less pronounced, and they did not differ significantly on many negative mental health factors; the exception was that young gay men reported a significantly higher risk of suicidal thoughts compared to heterosexual young men, which was partially mediated by parental support.

Given the negative impacts of parental rejection, and the protective effects of parental acceptance, on LGB people, it is important to understand the frequency of these experiences along with clarifying the wide range of experiences encompassed by the constructs of support and rejection. Utilizing data from three years of the Delaware High School Youth Risk Behavioral Survey, Button et al. (2012) found that sexual minority youth were significantly less likely to endorse receiving parental support compared to heterosexual youth, with 39% of sexual minority youth compared to 56% of heterosexual youth reporting that their parents provided them with support and encouragement. At the extreme, LGB youth may experience abuse by parents, as a recent meta-analysis demonstrated that sexual minorities are approximately 1.2 times more likely than non-sexual minorities to report having experienced parental physical abuse (Friedman et al., 2011). Highlighting the multi-fold negative impacts of these experiences, McLaughlin, Hatzenbuehler, Xuan, and Conron (2012) drew upon Add Health data to show that greater exposure to any experiences of childhood adversity, including child abuse,

partially mediated the relations between sexual orientation and several negative mental health outcomes, including suicidality, depression, smoking, and substance abuse. As evidenced by these studies, LGB youth are at greater risk for a range of negative parental experiences, which are associated with an increased risk of mental health problems, warranting additional study of parental rejection of LGB people.

In trying to ascertain what types of support and rejection matter the most in terms of well-being, some researchers have found that, for LGB youth, general support may not be sufficient but, rather, sexuality specific support may be required to achieve the protective benefit (Bregman, Malik, Page, Makynen, & Lindahl, 2013; Doty, Willoughby, Lindahl, & Malik, 2010). In a study of 169 LGB youth, Bregman et al. (2013) conducted a latent profile analysis and identified two identity patterns: affirmed and struggling. These authors found that both parental rejection related to sexual orientation and sexuality-specific family support were related to profile membership, but that general family support was not related to profile membership. As described earlier, defining parental support and rejection can be challenging; relatedly, quantitative studies may be ill-equipped to capture the full complexity of parental reactions. In a qualitative study of 24 LGBQ young adults (aged 18-28), participants described the varied reactions of family to their coming out, which included overtly negative responses, disbelief, silence, or seemingly affirming responses with negative undertones (Mena & Vaccaro, 2013). This rich range of responses suggests that there is a wide range of potential reactions that may not be fully captured in quantitative findings, especially using existing measures. There is also some evidence that family support may become less protective to



adolescents as they age (Mustanski, Newcomb, & Garofalo, 2011), which is in keeping with adolescent development theory more broadly, as the role of parental influence changes over adolescence (e.g., Collins & Laursen, 2004). In a community sample of 425 LGB youth aged 16-24, participants under age 21 benefited significantly more from family support than those 21 and over. These results suggest both the potential for gender and sexual orientation differences on these measures, and the importance of exploring parental support at different developmental moments.

**Parental rejection among adults.** Although most studies of LGB people's experiences of parental support focus on its impact during youth (e.g., Bouris et al., 2010), there is evidence that early experiences related to parental support may have important effects across the lifespan. Utilizing Massachusetts-based data from the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS), Rothman et al. (2012) reported on the potentially long-term negative impacts of unsupportive reactions to sexual orientation disclosure among LGB adults aged 18-60. Specifically, they found that gay or bisexual (GB) men were significantly more likely to endorse experiencing depression over half of the prior month, and currently engaging in binge drinking, if their parents had been unsupportive when they came out, compared to those whose parents had responded supportively. Similarly, lesbian or bisexual (LB) women were significantly more likely to endorse experiencing depression for more than half of the previous month, and ever engaging in illegal drug use, if their parents had responded unsupportively, compared to those whose parents had responded supportively. Notably, the data from this study is

cross-sectional and retrospective and focuses on parents' initial reactions to their children's disclosure.

I could locate no published studies focused on the impact of current parental support among middle and older adults on LGB individuals' health, but we can extrapolate some findings from more general studies of social support that include a family support variable, in which we see mixed results. In a study comparing gay and lesbian (GL) cohabiting committed adult couples with straight married adult couples (aged 19-74, mean 34.7), family and friend support was found to be associated with better individual well-being across relationship types (Graham & Barnow, 2013). While not focused on parental support in particular, this study suggests the continuing importance of family support for well-being among gay and lesbian couples from early to late adulthood. In a survey of 2,349 LGB adults aged 50 and over, higher social support and larger social networks were shown to be protective against depressive symptoms, signaling the ongoing importance of social support throughout the lifespan (Fredriksen-Goldsen et al., 2013). However, in this study, the investigators did not parse out sources of social support, but rather utilized global measures of social support that combined support from family and friends. As such, we cannot determine the relative contribution of family support, let alone parental support, as a buffering factor against negative mental health symptoms. In an online study of LGB adults aged 50 and over, Masini and Barrett (2008) found that social support from family was not predictive of psychological variables, whereas social support from friends was significantly associated with improved well-being and fewer symptoms of depression and anxiety. Given the paucity of data, it

seems that more research on the impact of current family support, and in particular parental support and rejection on middle and older adults, is needed.

While larger questions about the impact of current parental and family support on middle and older adults will require large-scale studies across the lifespan, qualitative research is particularly valuable for trying to determine the reasons for any potential developmental differences between younger and older LGB adults. For instance, if parental support indeed matters less to LGB older adults compared to younger adults, there could be many explanations for this, which I considered in approaching this study. It could be a generational effect; for example, older adults' families may be more likely to be unequivocally unaccepting, causing older adults to distance themselves from their families of origin and discount their approval. Might this shift then represent an adaptive form of coping, i.e., the transitioning from relying on support from one's family of origin, which has been unavailable or unhelpful, to support from one's chosen family? Alternatively, may the shift simply be an impact of increased independence from parents in the course of aging and no different than the trajectory of aging for adults of all sexual orientations? The current study and additional qualitative research may help illuminate some of the underlying reasons for any developmental differences in the experience of parental rejection related to sexual orientation.

**Parental rejection related to disclosure of sexual orientation.** Relatedly, much of the research on parental acceptance and rejection in response to a particular developmental milestone has—not surprisingly—focused on disclosure of sexual orientation (e.g., Rothman et al., 2012, as described above). In a recent Canadian study

comparing 111 LGB youth who had come out to their parents to 53 who had not, D'Amico and Julien (2012) found that youth who retrospectively reported having experienced higher levels of parental acceptance and less rejection from their fathers during childhood were more likely to later disclose their sexual orientation. Among youth who had disclosed, the mother's acceptance following disclosure was significantly associated with better psychological adjustment, although the father's acceptance was not. These findings highlight the importance of general parental acceptance in predicting disclosure and the impacts of reactions to disclosure on the mental health of sexual minority youth. They also raise questions about how different parent's reactions may have differential impacts and how these overall events might unfold over time.

In an effort to better capture these changes over time, especially given the lack of longitudinal research in this area, D'Augelli, Grossman, Starks, and Sinclair (2010) conducted a longitudinal study of 196 LGB youths over a period of approximately two years, which included a group that was out at the start of the study (out youths), a group that came out during the course of the study (came out youths), and those who did not come out (closeted youths). The authors found that, at the start of the study, out youths were the least afraid of parental victimization related to sexual orientation, though they reported the most past parental victimization. At the start of the study, participants who would eventually be categorized as came out youths reported greater fear of parental victimization, but reported having experienced less past victimization than out youths. Out youths also reported significantly decreasing levels of parental victimization over the course of the study. In contrast, those who came out during the course of the study

reported only a modest decrease in parental victimization across the follow-up period. The researchers suggest that parents of the youth who more recently came out may still be in a transitional period, which the parents of the out youth may have transcended previously. Finally, at the start of the study, youth who would remained closeted throughout the study reported the least past victimization and the highest fear of victimization among all three groups, and were the only group for whom this fear did not decrease over time. These findings raise questions about how parental reactions may change over time. Noting how few studies have focused on parental reactions changing over time, Samarova et al. (2014) conducted a retrospective study of LGB youth in Israel and found that, among respondents whose parents initially rejected them following their coming out, close to half of parents ultimately became more accepting.

In a review, Willoughby, Doty, and Malik (2008) noted that few empirically tested models have emerged to describe parental or family reactions following disclosure. Highlighting the fact that earlier models assumed a sequential process in which a parent moved from shock to acceptance, based on stages of grief models—although both the grief and the parental reactions models lacked empirical support—they described more recent work that suggested that an array of parental reactions might occur simultaneously (Willoughby, Malik, & Lindahl, 2006). Noting that these earlier theories also did not explain parental reactions, Willoughby et al. (2008) proposed drawing on family stress theory, which was developed to understand how a family adjusts to a stressful event. They described three factors that might determine parental reactions to a child's coming out, such as what type of capabilities the family has available to manage the stress, the

meaning they apply to the stressful event, and the presence of other stressors. While family stress theory may provide valuable applied insights, there remains a need for theory grounded in, and emerging directly from, data regarding the experiences of LGBTQ youth coming out.

Following a review of the literature on LGB youth disclosure to their families and factors associated with positive outcomes, Heatherington and Lavner (2008) proposed a preliminary model, based upon previously published findings, along with their hypotheses. Specifically, they suggested that individual-level demographic variables of LGB youth and family members (e.g., gender, race, religion, etc.), and relationship-level family variables (e.g., cohesion, adaptability, etc.), influence family members' initial reactions to LGB youth's disclosure. They proposed (a) that initial reactions also impact the relationship-level variables; (b) that each individual family member's initial reactions impact other family members' initial reactions; and (c) that these individual-level variables, relationship-level variables, and initial reactions influence family members' evolving reactions to disclosure and general family interactions, both of which are reciprocally related to the family and child's well-being and acceptance of sexual orientation, are also reciprocally related to each other. Finally, Heatherington and Lavner (2008) called for additional research to refine this model in the hopes that better understanding what predicts positive family adjustment to a member coming out may help guide interventions for LGB youth and their families. Their model, while very useful for understanding dynamics within the family, does not address societal-level

variables, which are likely influencing the family member's reactions to LGB youth's disclosure of sexual orientation.

Recognizing both the lack of empirical testing of post-disclosure models and the lack of diversity in studies of LGBQ youth, Potoczniak, Crosbie-Burnett, and Saltzburg (2009) conducted a qualitative study that included four focus groups with Black, Latino/a, and White youth regarding their experiences with or expectations regarding disclosure. The researchers noted that similarities emerged between their findings and previous findings, while highlighting the potentially unique finding that losing family support might have particular meaning for ethnic minorities for whom family affiliation is an important point of cultural identity. Also of note was the finding that many Black youth were temporarily expelled from their homes following disclosure, highlighting both the serious potential implications of disclosure and also the potential strength of the families to ultimately adapt to a stressor by eventually accepting the youth back into the family. These insights underscore the importance of utilizing diverse samples when developing theory to describe a phenomenon. While an important study due to its predominantly racial minority sample, the authors cautioned that this is a secondary data analysis of data that was originally collected for an advocacy organization striving to address homelessness, and so this focus may have narrowed the breadth of topics covered in the interviews. In addition, due to external restrictions and an admirable desire to protect participants' confidentiality, the focus groups were not audio-recorded and so analysis was based upon notes taken while they occurred, which may have impacted the trustworthiness and depth of the analysis.

**Parental rejection related to other milestones.** Outside of the focus on reactions to initial disclosure, a handful of qualitative studies of same-sex couples have highlighted a potentially wider arena of research that could explore parental reactions to other milestones (Almack, 2008; LaSala, 2000b; Rostosky et al., 2004). Almack (2008) conducted a qualitative study of lesbian couples in England who became parents, exploring in particular how the women negotiated relationships with their families of origin. Importantly, the study findings highlighted unique challenges that might arise at this milestone that are different from parental rejection in response to coming out; for instance, one mother of a member of a lesbian couple threatened that, if the lesbian couple were to have children, she would ensure that they were “taken away.” While occurring within a somewhat different cultural context than that which exists in the United States, this vignette highlights the potentially painful experiences of parental rejection that can occur at different important life events throughout a sexual minority person's lifespan.

The limited research exploring the impact of negative parental reactions on same-sex couples has yielded some mixed results. In an older qualitative study of 20 gay male couples, respondents described being out to parents as conferring important benefits to their romantic relationship (LaSala, 2000b). Specifically, the participants describe the relief of not hiding combined with the sense of validation of their relationship leading to increased intimacy within the dyad, despite the frequent negative reactions by parents. These findings suggest that coming out to family, regardless of the outcome, may serve to strengthen some same-sex relationships.



In contrast, a study of 14 same-sex couples found that most respondents perceived the presence or lack of family support to have a negative impact on their relationship (Rostosky et al., 2004). These results suggest that low family support might negatively affect a same-sex relationship, although there are no data that would allow us to determine the relative harm associated with this situation compared to that which would result from remaining closeted. These insights and open questions are unique to studies of adult couples and, again, highlight the value of exploring parental reactions in response to different milestones. As these studies suggest, exploring parental rejection and its impacts across the lifespan is important for revealing the widest array of challenges that may arise, and the different requisite coping strategies that might be required in response.

**Links between parental rejection and internalized heterosexism.** Given the negative impacts of parental rejection on the well-being of LGB people across the lifespan, researchers also have sought to better understand the pathways that ultimately lead to negative psychological problems, in particular looking at the construct of internalized heterosexism (e.g., D'Augelli et al., 2010; Feinstein, Wadsworth, Davila, & Goldfried, 2014; Puckett, Woodward, Mereish, & Pantalone, 2015). Both disclosure of sexual orientation to parents and parental reactions can have a significant impact on internalized heterosexism. In a longitudinal study of LGB youth (described previously), D'Augelli et al. (2010) found that youth who were out to their parents over the course of the study reported the least internalized homophobia, whereas youth who remained closeted throughout the study reported the most internalized homophobia. This finding

can be interpreted bi-directionally—either that greater internalized homophobia renders one more likely to remain closeted, or that coming out has a positive impact by reducing internalized homophobia, or both.

Recognizing the importance of sexual orientation disclosure, it also is important to assess the impact of parental reactions to disclosure on one's own internalized heterosexism. In a recent study of 241 sexual minority adults, researchers found that respondents who remembered their parents as having been more rejecting when they came out reported higher current levels of anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation, consistent with prior research (Puckett et al., 2015). Moreover, they conducted path analyses and determined that social support and internalized homophobia mediated the relation between rejection and psychological distress. This study evidences the potential long-term impacts of negative parental responses to youth coming out. In addition, this work by Puckett and colleagues (2015) begins to elucidate the important role of internalized homophobia in explaining the relations between parental rejection and negative mental health symptoms, as well as the potentially buffering effects of other sources of social support.

Similarly, Feinstein et al. (2014) explored the relations between parental responses, internalized homophobia, and mental health issues, though they conceptualized parental acceptance and overall family support as moderators. These authors found that parental acceptance moderated the relation between internalized homophobia and depressive symptoms. While not a longitudinal study, this type of finding, once again, suggests that parental acceptance may be an importance protective

factor, shielding those who have experienced internalized homophobia from developing depressive symptoms. Taken together, these studies highlight the importance of exploring the experience of internalized heterosexism when studying parental rejection related to sexual orientation.

**Coping with parental rejection.** It is important not only to document the negative impacts of parental rejection, but also to explore the potentially adaptive responses by LGBQ people to these negative experiences. Prior to initiating the current study, I could locate no published studies that have focused on how LGBQ people cope with parental rejection. Since completing data collection, one study has been released, conducted in an Australian context (Carastathis, Cohen, Kaczmarek, & Chang, 2017). This qualitative study of 21 GL individuals who faced family rejection used thematic analysis to describe the experience and impact of rejection, along with how participants fostered resilience. The authors used descriptive categories to describe rejection, including subtle or blatant, and described how the persistence of these types of rejection over time was related to worse mental health. In addition, the authors described how the participants understood the rejection they experienced as a form of conditional love and a rejection of a core part of self. They noted how, despite challenges, participants fostered resilience through seeking out social support, including connecting to other LGB people, self-acceptance, and using concealment. While this study is an important contribution to the literature in terms of beginning to describe the experience of coping with parental rejection, the study predominantly included White participants in one particular region and did not include the perspectives of any bisexually identified individuals.

Despite the paucity of research on this important topic, several studies have reported findings that may also be relevant to the current study. First, the set of complex decisions—of whether or not an individual should disclose, whether to do so directly or indirectly, and to whom to disclose—have been found to be influenced by concerns of losing family support (Carpineto, Kubicek, Weiss, Iverson, & Kipke, 2008) and, therefore, may be viewed as a pre-emptive act of coping with potential family rejection. An array of coping strategies that may be relevant to LGB people facing family rejection have been documented within broader qualitative studies of LGB experiences of family rejection, minority stress, and coping or resilience. Perhaps the best-documented method of coping with rejection by families of origin involves the creation of families of choice (e.g., Asakura & Craig, 2014; Oswald, 2002; Weeks, Heaphy, & Donovan, 2001). For instance, in a recent qualitative study of videos from the *It Gets Better* social media campaign, Asakura and Craig (2014) relayed how some video participants described their lives improving when they surrounded themselves by individuals who affirmed their LGBTQ identities, and that creating a chosen family was particularly important for those who had experienced rejection from their families of origin. In addition to developing these informal family networks, respondents described affiliating with formal LGBTQ groups as a unique form of social support, and often a way to facilitate building families of choice (Asakura & Craig, 2014). For sexual minorities who are also racial minorities, coping with heterosexism and racism may involve developing networks with similar others, as described in a recent literature review on resilience among Black LGBT people (Follins, Walker, & Lewis, 2014).

In addition to network building, the use of other coping strategies by LGB individuals has been documented in the extant literature. For example, one coping strategy described by same-sex couples involved setting boundaries in the romantic relationship to create a safe and affirming space, while still remaining open to any available support from families of origin (Glass & Few-Demo, 2013; LaSala, 2000b). In another qualitative study of same-sex couples, Rostosky et al. (2004) described the range of strategies reported by couples who are coping with family rejection, highlighting the two most common strategies as relying on the couple relationship for support and potentially hiding the relationship itself from families of origin. Other strategies that participants mentioned less frequently included trying to change the beliefs of family members so that they became more positive, and proactively rejecting family members because of their intolerance. Another documented method of coping by LGB individuals was physically leaving a hostile community or family environment, such as when leaving home for college (Asakura & Craig, 2014; Scourfield, Roen, & McDermott, 2008).

The broader resilience literature includes a description of strategies for coping with heterosexism and bias incidents, which could be helpful for LGB people in managing reactions to specific, overt incidents of parental rejection. In a recent qualitative study of young gay men, the authors identified eight coping strategies for use in response to anti-LGB prejudice incidents (Madsen & Green, 2012). Strategies included several aforementioned themes, such as confronting the perpetrator, or turning to LGB friends and community for support—as well as some novel strategies, such as engaging in LGB activism, finding ways to distract oneself or engage in soothing

activities, regulating immediate responses, proverbially 'choosing one's battles,' recognizing the role of ignorance, and viewing the event in a broader perspective by noting the situation's impermanence. Similarly, in another qualitative study of LGB youth, participants noted two other relevant strategies for responding to various forms of heterosexism, including family rejection: self-acceptance and drawing on empathy and perspective taking to understand negative parental reactions (Diamond et al., 2011). Finally, LGB people have described the important ways that their struggles with oppression have defined core parts of their identities (Meyer, Ouellette, Haile, & McFarlane, 2011), which has potential implications for those coping with family rejection. While these studies were not focused on coping with parental rejection per se, taken together, these coping strategies suggest potential areas for further elaboration in the context of parental rejection.

Based upon the extant research reviewed here, we know that parental support and rejection play important roles in influencing the mental health and well-being of LGB people, potentially across the lifespan. Additional research on parental rejection and support among LGB people is needed across the lifespan, looking at their role at different milestones, rather than focusing solely on the initial coming out disclosure. This research should attempt to capture the complexities of parental rejection, as it may change over time, vary based on scenario or milestone, and co-occur with instances or aspects of acceptance. These experiences of rejection are situated within the larger context of heterosexism and other forms of oppression. As such, there is a need for more racially, ethnically, and geographically diverse samples. Qualitative research, in particular, is

well-suited to capture the complexity of parental responses, initially and over time, to sexual orientation disclosure and other milestones in the lives of LGBQ people—as well as to aid in the development of better theories grounded in data to describe parental responses. In the current study, I have developed a more nuanced understanding of the experience of parental rejection across the lifespan, as well as a deeper exploration of the coping strategies used by participants in the face of the deleterious minority stressor of parental rejection.

## CHAPTER 2

### RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

I conducted a qualitative study of LGBTQ people experiencing and coping with heterosexist rejection by their parents using a grounded theory approach as detailed in this section. The project received approval by the University of Massachusetts Boston Institutional Review Board, and followed the American Psychological Association's (2010) ethical guidelines on the treatment of research participants.

#### **Participants**

**Interviewees.** Participants included 15 self-identified lesbian (3), gay (5), bisexual (3), and queer (4) individuals who self-reported having coped with past experiences of parental rejection of their sexual orientation. Participants included eight cisgender females, six cisgender males, one transgender non-binary individual and ranged in age from 24 to 54 (mean age = 32.9). In terms of race, participants identified as Black (2), White (7), Asian (1), Hispanic/Latino (White) (1), White Native American (1), multiracial: Black and White (1), multiracial: Asian and White (1), and Hispanic/Latino (White) and White (1). All participants had received a college degree or graduate degree. With regard to regions where participants primarily grew up, two hailed from a rural/farm area, four from a small town, three from a medium size town/suburb, three from a small city/large suburb, and four from an urban region (one participant is counted twice here



and in the census region listing that follows, as they reported that their childhood was evenly split between two regions). Childhood U.S. census regions were evenly represented: West (4), South (4), Northeast (3), and Midwest (4), along with one internationally born participant. All participants were living in the United States at the time they experienced the rejection and at the time of the interview. Current regions broke down as follows: West (7), South (4), and Northeast (4). Most participants had changed their religious affiliation from childhood, with four reporting no current religious affiliation, two describing themselves as agnostic, two as spiritual with no specific religious affiliation, two as Unitarian Universalist one as Religious Science, one as Jewish, and three retaining their religious affiliation (Jewish, Catholic, and Buddhist “with issues”). Please see Table 1 for detailed demographic information by participant. Some of the data described here are not reported in the table to protect participant confidentiality.

**Researcher.** The faculty mentor is a White, Jewish, femme-identified, cisgender, lesbian clinical psychologist. The graduate student is a White, Jewish, queer-identified clinical psychology graduate student who grew up in an upper middle-class urban environment. The graduate student researcher has been involved in research and education regarding LGBTQ competency training for physicians, completed a master's degree in public health with a focus on sexuality and health, and has prior experience with other qualitative methods. The faculty researcher has a history of researching LGBTQ communities and has methodological expertise in a range of qualitative methods,

especially grounded theory, having led professional trainings and taught graduate courses on this method.

I approached my data from a constructivist perspective, as I was interested in how my participants create meaning out of their experiences of rejection, acceptance, and coping, as well as accounting for the impact of my own expectations and experiences. My epistemological perspective was rooted in methodical hermeneutic and feminist frameworks (see Levitt, 2015; Rennie, 2012). Rennie (2000) viewed qualitative research approaches, such as grounded theory, as synthesizing both relative and realist approaches to knowledge; a method is used to interpret (a relativist aspect) empirical data from participants' reports constructed from their experiences in the world (a realist aspect).

By feminist epistemology, I mean that I approached my analysis with the awareness that people's experiences and my analysis can be profoundly influenced by social biases that often marginalize the experiences of minority or oppressed groups (Fine, 2012; Harding, 1986; Levitt, 2015). As such, I recognized that context and power differentials are influential in understanding another's perspective, and so I prioritized the development of deep understanding in shaping categories that are closely tied to participants' experience, as well as attempted to minimize the potential power dynamics in my research approach. For instance, I strived for this deep understanding by seeking consensus between two researchers who were immersed in the research over an extended period of time. As an interviewer, I communicated to participants that I saw them as the experts on their life story.

## **Procedure**

**Recruitment.** Participants were recruited nationally and interviews were conducted by video conferencing (e.g., Skype) or phone. Participants received an Amazon gift card in the amount of US\$40 to thank them for their participation. Recruitment was conducted via several methods: advertising the study on social media, emailing flyers to LGBTQ organizations as well as to contacts within the LGBTQ community to distribute, as well as distributing flyers at local LGBTQ events and settings. Participants were invited to refer others who may have been interested in participation; although snowball sampling did not ultimately yield any participants, as I was seeking diversity across many characteristics and found people were more likely to refer those with whom they shared similar experiences and identities. As is common practice in grounded theory studies, I utilized a process of theoretical sampling (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), in which additional participants were recruited to answer questions that were raised during the preliminary analyses and that were deemed to require further exploration.

To be included, participants had to be over 18 years of age, currently live in the United States and speak English, identify as LGBQ or another sexual orientation minority (e.g., sexually fluid, pansexual), and endorse having coped with a significant experience of parental rejection. The term "parent" in this study was meant to be inclusive of both biological and adoptive parents as well as legal guardians. Because I wished to capture rejection experiences of varying intensities, the construct of significant parental rejection was participant-defined, as participants self-selected when they volunteered. However,

after the first several interviews, I found that the majority of participants had not experienced more severe forms of rejection, and so I began to focus my recruitment efforts on participants who had experienced abuse or been kicked of their homes, as is consistent with theoretical sampling. Ultimately, I included participants who reported a diverse array of parental rejection experiences, not only with reference to severity, but also regarding pattern. These experiences included rejection from parents that did not change over time, and combinations of rejection and acceptance within or across parents or over time. For instance, rejection and acceptance may have been experienced concurrently—such as rejection in one domain and acceptance in another (e.g., acceptance of having a same-sex partner, but not of introducing that partner to children in the family of origin) or rejection from one parent and acceptance from another parent. Finally, the participant may have experienced rejection at one point in time and acceptance at another point in time from the same parent in the same domain.

I also sought diversity in the realms of race, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, gender, age, and U.S. regions—to capture a range of experiences and provide a richer, fuller description of the phenomena under study. Diversity across demographic categories helped expand the types of experiences of parental rejection that were described, as these experiences were shaped by these varied intersecting identities. As such, I also attended to demographic characteristics consistent with theoretical sampling. However, given the need for a small number of participants in qualitative research, it was not feasible nor necessary for the participants to contain every form of diversity in every category. In qualitative analysis, theoretical saturation is defined as the point at which

incoming data no longer seem to lead to new understandings (i.e., categories) and so new data added after this point would be redundant. Overall saturation was reached after 12 interviews, as the last three interviews did not add additional categories, and so data collection was considered complete after 15 interviews. The fact that the hierarchy has reached saturation, especially with a group of participants that has demonstrated diversity in so many ways, speaks to its comprehensiveness.

**Interviews.** A total of 15 interviews were conducted via a video conferencing program (e.g., Skype) or phone. Each interview lasted approximately 90-120 minutes in duration (mean length of recording = 99.7 minutes). Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. I conducted the interviews, as I have prior experience conducting qualitative interviews, and received additional training from my faculty mentor. Before the interview, participants were asked to complete a short demographic questionnaire (Appendix A). This included questions regarding their assigned sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, religion, racial identity, ethnicity, class background, and immigration status. It was adapted from a demographic questionnaire designed by University of Massachusetts Boston faculty and students for use in research (Suyemoto et al., 2012). A semi-structured interview protocol was developed to address the central question: "What is your experience of coping with parental rejection and acceptance about your sexual orientation?" The interview protocol (Appendix B) included questions about the participant's experiences with sexuality-related parental rejection and acceptance, emphasizing changes over time, and differences between people and domains, as well as coping methods used and whether some were more successful than others. As described

previously, much of the research on LGB people and parental rejection has focused on coming out experiences. Although, for many, this is an important milestone, a narrow focus on this experience may miss other important milestones, as well as rejection that occurs in the absence of an explicit sexual orientation disclosure. As such, I developed the interview guide to invite participants to share what, if any, experience led up to the rejection by their parents, and then, if disclosure to parents did not arise naturally in the course of the interview, there is an explicit question about coming out to parents. The interview protocol continued to be adapted as the interviews were conducted, as is typical practice when using grounded theory methods, to flesh out aspects of the developing understanding (the original version appears in the Appendix).

### **Grounded Theory Analysis**

Grounded theory analysis is a qualitative method that initially was designed by two sociologists to generate, rather than validate, a theory; in other words, the goal in grounded theory studies is to reach an understanding of a phenomenon, rather than an explanation for it (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Different approaches to grounded theory have evolved since the method was first introduced (e.g., Fassinger, 2005). In the current study, I adapted an approach to grounded theory method based upon the work of psychologist David Rennie (e.g., Rennie, Phillips, & Quartaro, 1988).

The interview transcripts were divided into units of text called *meaning units* (Giorgi, 1985), which each conveyed one main idea related to the experience of parental rejection and coping with parental rejection, and were labeled as such. Using the process of constant comparison, I compared these unit labels to one another and organized into

descriptive categories to reflect shared meanings. Each category was labeled to reflect the commonalities within the shared experiences it contained. I aimed to develop category titles that represented when there were patterns within participants' experiences and, at the same time, captured the complexity within commonalities. During this inductive analysis process, the commonalities and differences identified often led me to support or revise a category title, or to remove or relocate a category (Rennie, 2012). I compared these initial categories to each other, identified similarities, and grouped them into higher order categories. In this way, a hierarchy of categories was generated, culminating in one core category that reflected the central meaning in the analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This process and data collection continued as new units were added to the analysis until saturation was reached.

Via a process referred to as *memoing* in grounded theory approaches, I maintained records of my beliefs and perceptions, as well as thoughts and decisions regarding methods and coding (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This process helps researchers to recognize and limit the influence of their biases on the data collection and analysis, by creating a forum in which they explicitly acknowledge their biases and address them as much as possible, while recognizing that it is impossible to do so fully.

**Credibility Checks.** To determine the thoroughness and accuracy of the interviews and analysis, I used three forms of credibility check. First, at the end of their interview, interviewees were invited to share any thoughts about their experience of rejection, acceptance, and coping that were not discussed at another point in the interview. This question served to confirm that data collection was complete, as

interview protocols may not capture participant experiences that fall outside the researchers' awareness. Second, I sought consensus for my interpretations when developing the hierarchy by having my faculty mentor review the developing meaning units and categories and then working together to consider alternate interpretations. This check provided support for the credibility of our findings and resulted in interpretations of data that are evident to more than one person. Third, I invited the participants to provide feedback on the results.

I provided all participants with a summary of the findings, and invited their qualitative and quantitative feedback on how well it represented their understanding of the experience of parental rejection and coping. When responding, participants were asked to keep in mind that these findings reflected commonalities across all participants, and that each of them may not have personally had every experience included. Participants were instructed that their rating should reflect whether they believed this description represents what the parental rejection experience and related coping may include for LGBTQ people overall, although some participants' comments suggest that they may still have based their ratings on whether they experienced an event personally. Participants were asked to rate each cluster on a Likert-type scale from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very well), with 4 labeled as "somewhat," and were also invited to comment on each cluster. In addition, participants were asked two general questions—whether the overall study accurately (a) reflected or (b) contradicted the types of experiences that constitute experiencing and coping with heterosexist parental rejection for LGBTQ people. Thirteen participants responded and, on average, strongly rated the overall findings as accurate



reflections (6.2/7.0) and did not believe (1.3/7.0) that the findings contradicted their understanding of the phenomenon. Participant ratings and feedback, and any changes made in response to this feedback, are described at the end of each cluster and the core category below.

## CHAPTER 3

### RESULTS

I divided the 15 interviews into a total of 632 meaning units, which formed the bottom level of a six-level hierarchy. Moving up the hierarchy, the top four levels of the hierarchy included 133 “subcategories,” above which rested 23 “categories,” above which were six “clusters,” which fed into the single “core category,” located at the top of the hierarchy. See Table 2 for a complete list of the core category, clusters, categories, and subcategories and the number of participants who contributed to each. Upper level categories are written in the third person, to convey the findings in the form of developing theories, whereas subcategories, are written in the first person when possible to evoke a sense of the emotion and 'grounded experience' of the interviews. In this manuscript, I will focus on the top three levels of the hierarchy, first describing each of the six clusters and the relevant categories underneath each, and then reviewing the core category. I will use the following terms to denote the number of participants whose data contributed to an idea: all = 15; most = 12-14; many = 8-11; some = 5-7; and few = 2-4. These numbers do not reflect participants' endorsements of the data, as not all participants were asked the same questions in the same order, given that these were semi-structured interviews, and so can be understood only to reflect the salience of themes.

**Cluster 1: Participants were torn between openly expressing their sexual orientation and constraining their behavior to avoid parental rejection, knowing that each promised both healing and damage.**

All 15 participants contributed to this theme, which described the challenges and impact of making decisions about coming out and, once out, expressing their identities fully with parents. This cluster contained three categories, described in detail below.

**Category 1.1: Prior to coming out, participants feared rejection but also anticipated new opportunities and lifting the burden of secrets, which had itself been damaging.** All 15 participants contributed to this category, which described how, before coming out, they suffered from the emotional weight of carrying the secret and anticipated coming out with both fear and excitement. For many participants, even prior to explicitly coming out, their parents expressed explicit or implicit anti-gay bias or gender policing. This implicit rejection often led to many participants delaying coming out to their parents to avoid pain and explicit rejection, sometimes even lying when asked directly. Some hoped that they could change their sexuality or that their queerness would go away if they ignored the feelings and did not act on them. Even before they were explicitly rejected, many lived in fear of rejection and with the stress of hiding, which was damaging in of itself. Reflecting on how it felt to hide, one participant described her internal experience:

I always felt like this – worry and this pain... like a big, “Oh no,” like, “I hope that I'm not gay.” Um, but like I was also like really intimately involved with my best friend for like two years of high school. Um, so, you know, there was a lot of

like maybe dissociation... or just like really just hiding parts of self. Um, but it was unpleasant... I just like couldn't fully be myself.... My dad... was like obsessed about talking to me about getting married, and so I... would... respond to him, like, “Yeah, okay,” but like inside my body, just like try to like kind of ignore it or push it aside or something, or like dissociate from it. (P-09)

Here, this participant not only expresses the pain and worry of hiding, but also the emotional damage of having to actively hide part of herself from her father. Despite the fear of rejection, many participants described their decision to come out because of the stress of not coming out, especially regarding lying when they had a partner or were going through a breakup. In anticipating coming out, a few participants described experiencing both excitement and fear—namely, they were scared of the doors that might close with their parents but excited about the new doors that could open. Some participants described preparing for coming out almost as if they were preparing for battle: they either built up an arsenal to prevent rejection or armor to protect against the inevitable, whereas others were ambushed and outed. For instance, one participant described how she prepared herself emotionally for losing her parents’ support once she came out:

I was already like preparing myself, like I knew... when I came out to my parents, we had already planned that I would come out that Christmas, I kinda had already like accepted like, ‘This is gonna be the end of my relationship with my dad’... I had already anticipated that that would be it, that he would disown me... I even

spent a significant amount of time in therapy like, you know, working on accepting and mourning my relationship with my father. (P-07)

This emotional preparation reflected the significant emotional expenditures required of LGBQ people even in advance of coming out.

**Category 1.2: Constraining their gender and sexual expression and aspects of their LGBQ life because of the fear of parental rejection had harmful consequences.**

There were 14 participants who described the negative impacts of limiting the open expression of their gender or sexual identity with parents. Many participants described how rejection or the fear of rejection can pressure LGBQ people to live a double life, out with peers but closeted at home. Even once they came out, many described how they walked on eggshells or minimized anything related to their sexual orientation especially around their parents, including gender expression and partners to avoid rejection. In considering on how her perspective had changed over time, one participant recalled:

I used to be able to kind of weirdly rationalize that and have them treat me weirdly just because this is their perspective [laughter]. Now I'm like... no, that's not okay. But it took me... it's been 15 years to get to the point of no, I deserve to be respected... who I love deserves to be respected as my partner. Before I was... I guess the shame comes in in being willing to hide and being willing to put who I am under a cover so that I can spend time with my family. (P-01)

Namely, she spent much of her adulthood hiding who she was to be able to spend time with her family because she felt she had to respect their religious beliefs. In this vein, some participants described how they tried to appease their parents by dating people of a

different gender, and a few even considered or actually pretended it was just a phase and went back into the closet.

**Category 1.3: There was a defiant freedom and pleasure in self-expression even against the backdrop of parental rejection.** There were 11 participants who explained that, despite the pain of parental rejection, there was some pleasure in self-expression. Specifically, many described that there was a sense of relief and less constricted self after expressing their sexual identity even when their parents' reactions were negative. Alternatively, some described a tendency to 'flaunt' their identities in other settings, saying they found themselves rebelling or 'flaunting it' to counter the invisibility of the closet or pain of rejection, though this defiance was sometimes bittersweet or entailed risk. For example, one participant reflected: "because of the, uh... the emotional burden of having to like, be secret with it, um... I feel like I kind of over compensated on you know, dialing up the gayness to the people that I was out with" (P-12). In other words, he felt that he had to compensate for his time in the closet by performing his sexuality more emphatically in other, safer settings.

Thirteen participants evaluated how well this cluster represented their understanding of the experience on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much). The participants gave this cluster a mean rating of 6.1, meaning that they generally found it to represent a component of LGBQ people experiencing and/or coping with heterosexist parental rejection. One participant in her 50s noted that she did not feel much anticipatory excitement regarding coming out, which she attributed to the time

period in which she came out—given the limited opportunities she foresaw compared to coming out today.

**Cluster 2: Parents perceived coming out as dangerous disobedience or risk-taking, and so used disciplining strategies to make their children straight which, paradoxically, had the potential to endanger the participants.**

All 15 participants contributed to this theme, which described parents' reactions to their sexual orientation and efforts to control their behavior that, even when sometimes motivated by a desire to protect their child, ultimately led to greater harm to participants. This cluster contained four categories, described in detail below.

**Category 2.1: Parents enacted rejection via discipline and control, treating their child like a problem to fix versus a child to support, which led to harm or even danger.** All 15 participants described how parents related to them as if they were a problem to fix, which often either led to direct harm or indirect harm via participants engaging in risky behavior or lacking a safety net. Under this category, many participants described how parents and other family members blamed them as if they were the problem (and not their parents' rejecting behavior), with parents failing to take responsibility for the damage they caused through their rejection of their child. Treating them like disobedient children, many participants also described how their parents used their power as authorities to punish them—sometimes by restricting their freedom or financial support, with some parents even willing to harm them psychologically or physically to make them straight, via abuse or conversion therapy. Recalling a

particularly harrowing scene in which her parents tried to kidnap her as an adult to send her to conversion therapy, one participant described:

My parents then tried to come over to my home. My dad had a hypodermic needle. He owns pharmacies and he tried to inject me with something to be able to take me off to a place called [name of ex-gay ministry]. Um, I was able to pull out of my shirt and get away from my father. Um, while my mother was on her knees praying and screaming out to God, my dad is trying to inject me. It was... And I'm telling my girlfriend at the time to run next door [to escape]... (P-15)

This interviewee's experience highlighted for her that her parents were so intent on "correcting" her sexual orientation, they were willing to directly harm her physically and emotionally. Relatedly, many participants described how their parents distanced themselves from them, often refusing to have contact or making the participants unwelcome in their home for extended periods. This distancing also often led to a lack of safety for participants. For instance, many participants describe how rejection meant they lacked a parental safety net and affirmative structural support, which often led to harm or risky behavior. A participant who struggled for years with a substance use disorder described the impact of this lack of parental support:

I think it definitely fueled my drug addiction. And I also think, without having anybody there checking up on me like that, I think it allowed my, my kind of self-medication and, to get to a, to get to a, a very extreme, kind of out of control level. Um, there was nobody there telling me, "Hey, like you should reel it in,"



you know?... Um, and maybe if my, if there was some like parental unit there, like – they would have recognized maybe some of those changes in me. (P-08)

This lack of oversight and structural support—though it may have originated from parents’ efforts to “protect” their child—ended up leaving them vulnerable to untold risks and dangers. Compounding outside risks, some participants also described how their parents did not support them in times of primal need when they experienced emotional suffering or outside dangers, making home another unsafe space. For instance, one participant recalled receiving little support after a sexual assault, becoming tearful as he wondered if his parents even remembered that this happened.

**Category 2.2: Parental rejection may stem from disgust or fear because their ignorance leads to their reliance on negative stereotypes of sexual minorities.** All 15 participants explained that their parents’ rejection was rooted in negative emotions that sometimes appeared to be a result of their ignorance and reliance on harmful stereotypes of LGBTQ people. Some participants described that their parents lacked good information, positive images or experiences with LGBTQ people before they came out, which led to their enacting rejection. In response, interviewees described the vulnerability of having to defend their sexual orientation and educate their parents and others just as they were coming out. This type of ignorance was enacted in several ways. Some participants described how their parents were surprised when they came out because they did not see the ‘signs’—either they were not familiar with common signifiers or did not realize not everyone displays signifiers. Many participants described how their parents pathologized their being gay—perceiving it as a mental illness to be

treated or searching for an etiology. Illustrating how this experience of being pathologized might impact LGBTQ people, one young woman recalled her father asking: “‘I don't know what I did wrong’ like ‘Why do you feel like this is who you are?’ like basically just making a correlation of, you know, you're gay so that's bad, and so obviously it I did something wrong as a parent to make you that way, or something” (P-13). She understood that her father’s searching for the cause of her sexual orientation implied that there was something pathological about it and, thus, it required an explanation.

In trying to explain some of the reasons behind their parents’ rejection, most interviewees reported that their parents associated being LGBTQ with other sexually stigmatized identities (e.g., being HIV positive) or unrelated sexual practices (e.g., engaging in pedophilia). Interestingly, sexual stigma could be expressed by parents either via the over-sexualization or de-sexualization of their children—assuming their child was extremely sexually active or treating their child as if they were not sexual. As part of enacting this rejection that relied on stereotypes, some participants described how their parents bullied them by insulting them, insulting LGBTQ people and things (e.g., books with lesbian characters), and calling their children names, which felt dehumanizing. One interviewee recalled how, soon after coming out, he returned home to get his belongings and his parents were “yelling at me, calling me all of these names, and you know, I mean, just really awful stuff, like, ‘Oh, you know his breath smells like cock.’ And my dad wouldn’t, I went to get a drink of whatever, and he was like, ‘I don’t want an AIDS case drinking off of my cups’” (P-04). This painfully illustrated the way

that parents could shift into bullies with their own children and the risks faced upon coming out. Outside of specifically sexual stereotypes, a few participants shared that their parents perceived LGBTQ people as failures and did not recognize their accomplishments. While some stereotypes seemed based on disgust, others seemed based on fear, as some participants described how their parents were torn between their love for their child and their fear of their child's sexual orientation. In particular, many parents expressed concern for their child's well-being related to their sexual orientation (e.g., fears of HIV, gay bashing, divine retribution), which informed their rejection. However, as highlighted in the category above, this concern unfortunately led to rejection, rather than protection, which only served to increase the participants' suffering and risk of harm.

**Category 2.3: As part of rejection, parents often rejected anyone or anything they perceived as 'tainted' by their child's LGBTQ identity, trying to shape their child into the straight child of their dreams.** All 15 participants explained how the rejection extended beyond their individual self to anything or anyone that their parents associated with their sexual orientation in an effort to change them. Many interviewees described a dynamic in which their parents ignored their sexual and gender expression, ostensibly hoping that would make it go away. Using a more direct approach, many parents expressed disappointment that their children would not fulfill their own dreams of their child getting married or having a family in the way their parents had hoped. Capturing this disappointment, one participant relayed: "I think that it still really bothers them that, um, you know, that traditional marriage won't happen, you know, children, grandchildren

probably won't happen for them. I think that they've just had a lot of expectations and, you know, little dreams for themselves that, you know, just didn't work out for them.”

(P-04) This quote highlighted how his parents' dreams were not based on his own passions, but rather that their dreams for him were actually for themselves.

In particular, many parents rejected participants' same-sex partners or aspects of their lives (e.g., professional interests) related to their sexual orientations as if asking their kids, “Don't rub it in our faces.” As a result, some interviewees recalled having felt worried and ashamed about their parents hurting other people they cared about in the process of rejecting them, such as friends or partners. Relatedly, some participants highlighted instances in which their parents were more supportive of them dating people of a different gender, even encouraging pre-marital sex that was not values congruent (except in comparison to being LGBTQ). Participants' gender expression was also targeted by some parents, which exacerbated the heterosexist rejection. Similarly, a few participants described how their parents rejected their partner specifically because of their partner's gender expression.

**Category 2.4: Parental rejection stemmed from internalizing social or cultural heterosexist norms regarding gender and sexuality that require conformity and sublimation.** All 15 participants highlighted that their parents' rejection was not taking place in a vacuum but, rather, was deeply informed by social or cultural norms that they upheld. Many participants explained that their parents were ashamed of what their community or other family would think about their sexual orientation or gender

performance. One participant highlighted how their parents' shame also led to their own fears of public reactions:

Nothing made me more paranoid and anxious than going out in public with my mom and being afraid of being mis-gendered. Somebody saying sir or man or bro or whatever to me in front of my mother. It terrified me. It happened all the time and my mom would always have a conniption about somebody mis-gendering me because I didn't look like a pretty girl anymore. (P-10)

This memory underlined how parents' concerns about their child's sexual orientation and gender expression often reflected larger societal norms. In this vein, some participants explained that their parents had internalized their particular ethnic community's cultural norms that enforced traditional gender and heterosexuality and felt pressure to conform themselves, and similarly some interviewees attributed the rejection to their parents' being from a conservative region or community. Discrimination justified by religious beliefs also played a role in influencing parental rejection, with some reporting that their parents condemned them, saying things such as "gay people are going to hell," or using religion to reject them, which was sometimes reinforced by members of a religious institution. Religion could also play an indirect role, as a few reported that parents rejected them not because of religious conflicts, but rather traditional cultural expectations that were religiously informed.

Thirteen participants evaluated how well this cluster represented their understanding of the experience on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much). The participants gave this cluster a mean rating of 5.5, meaning that they

generally found it to represent a component of LGBTQ people experiencing and/or coping with heterosexist parental rejection. This score was somewhat lower than other clusters, and was impacted by low scores (1, 2) from two participants, neither of whom had been primarily raised by their rejecting parent(s), which may explain their lower ratings—as they may not have perceived their parent(s) as wielding significant authority or control over their lives, which one participant explicitly noted. This participant also stated that he thinks his parents did not perceive his actions as disobedient, but rather as "risky" and thus, in order to better capture this type of experience, I adjusted the language of the Cluster and Category 2.1 to better include those experiences.

**Cluster 3: Participants attempted to build a new social foundation via seeking affirmative connections to minimize the damage of internalizing their parents' conditional love and fill the painful void it left.**

All 15 participants contributed to this theme, which referred to participants' use of social coping strategies to counter the harm of their parents' rejection. This cluster contained five categories, which are described in detail below.

**Category 3.1: In response to parents' conditional love, compounded by societal oppression, participants—especially those with intersectional marginalized identities—struggled against internalizing a message of being broken.** All 15 participants described how they experienced the rejection as a sign of their parents' love having been conditional, and that they struggled with internalizing the message of being broken in some way because of their parents' rejection compounded by other experiences of heterosexism; this was especially challenging for interviewees who held more than one

marginalized identity. Many described how they at least partially internalized this message of “being the problem,” struggling to appropriately assign blame to their parents.

Reflecting on their adolescence, a participant recalled:

There's a song by Sara Bareilles. "Satellite Call" is the name of the song and, every time I hear that song, that's all I can think about. I can't remember the lyrics exactly but she's essentially saying this song is for the lonely child that believes all the chaos around them is their fault. That is how I felt as a teenager, was just everything going wrong in my family and my life was my fault for something I can't control. (P-10)

This participant highlighted the pain of feeling at fault for parental rejection and its many consequences on the family, rather than perceiving their parents' heterosexism as to blame.

For most participants, parental rejection was compounded by a lack of LGBTQ role models, as well as heterosexism and gender norms enforced by society or their community. For many, heterosexist parental rejection was compounded by other forms of oppression such as racism, sexism, biphobia, ableism, transphobia. Recalling her adolescence, one participant shared, “I'm a Black kid, you know, trying to... fit in.... There was racism and... I'm dealing with my sexuality... alone.... it had caused suicidal ideation.... All of this interconnected... me being gay, and me not having the social support” (P-11). This participant went on to highlight the challenges inherent in facing several forms of oppression in multiple settings, with no supports tailored to her experience, which led to a deep sense of hopelessness.

In response to the parental rejection, most participants struggled with poor self-image, shame, and internalized heterosexism, even questioning the validity of their life. In response to messages from parents such as, “Your happiness is making us miserable”—some internalized being responsible for their family’s shame and suffering, including parents’ illness or suicidal ideation. This blaming process led to a role reversal for some participants in which they metaphorically 'became the parent,' losing the experience of receiving caretaking and instead having to take care of their unaccepting parents and ensure their comfort. The tendency of participants to self-blame was apparent even in the interviews, as many interviewees were self-critical about their difficulty coping successfully with parental rejection. In some cases, participants also described themselves as generally self-critical or I observed them speaking in a self-critical manner throughout the interview.

**Category 3.2: Parental rejection injured self-esteem and therefore obstructed interpersonal and professional growth via processes such as attachment difficulties, fear of negative evaluation and rejection sensitivity.** There were 14 participants who described the harmful impact on their individual and relational well-being as a result of the rejection. Most participants reported that rejection had negatively impacted their romantic relationships via poor dating choices, difficulty coping with relationship challenges, or even avoiding dating altogether. In describing the process of how rejection led to these difficulties, some explained that because of the rejection they felt unlovable, which manifested in several ways, such as via social anxiety, difficulty trusting or



conversely trusting the wrong people, as well as anxious or avoidant attachment.

Illustrating this connection, one participant poignantly explained:

The message... I was given as a child, was that there are all sorts of different kinds of love, but there is absolutely no form of love that trumps the love of a parent for their child. That romantic love, any intimate love, friendship love, anything. Nothing.... And so when you face rejection, it is your parents telling you that they don't love you in some capacity. If your parents are telling you that they don't love you enough, how could anybody else in the world possible love you, including yourself. (P-10)

That is, experiencing a disruption in love from ones' parents led to difficulty with both loving oneself and engaging in healthy loving relationships. This difficulty with connecting also impacted relationships with the interviewees' family of origin, as many participants said that they been distant with other family to protect themselves from further rejection. A few participants relayed that, although it can be helpful to cope via cultivating fierce independence and not relying on anyone else, they could also take it too far by becoming isolated.

In addition to personal relationships, rejection also impacted participants in other arenas that rely on interpersonal relationships. Some interviewees explained that rejection had impacted their professional lives by disrupting their developmental trajectories with regard to school and work. For example, these disruptions could include their temporarily dropping out of college because of logistical barriers (e.g., losing financial support) and self-esteem problems, which created obstacles to achieving their

goals. Speaking more broadly, some also described how they learned that asserting their needs was met with rejection, so they responded by not asserting their needs in life. Relatedly, some explained that rejection led to a fear of negative evaluation, which manifested as difficulty interacting with authority figures and engaging in perfectionism.

**Category 3.3: Relationships with extended family of origin were superficial and participants often felt painfully invisible because their whole self was not welcome.** All 15 participants described how the rejection extended to impacting other relationships with their family of origin. Although some participants explained that their siblings or extended families shared their parents' views, or that they held even more extreme views, many others described how parental rejection limited their opportunities to connect with other family members. For example, some stated that other people in their family or community did not explicitly know they were LGBTQ. Not surprisingly, some participants expressed having felt invisible in their family because their sexual identity and relationships were hidden, so that family members knew nothing about the participants' lives but instead focused on their own experiences. One participant shared the dehumanizing experience of family members relying on him for support.

I very much became the sort of the, the rock of this family in this really weird kind of way because it's, uh—there's no, it's not reciprocated. Like I'm expected to be there for everyone, to do everything, to listen to everyone's problems, to, you know, help them deal with their relationships in their lives. You know, my sisters call me for any sort of emotional problem that they're experiencing, um, but there's never any sort of, “well let me” stop and, you know, ask how I'm

doing. You know, no one ever says, you know, “[Participant], what's going on in your life?” or, “How are you doing?”... it's a little dehumanizing... (P-06)

This lack of focus on the participants’ life, combined with the contrasting expectation that he would support the family, revealed the non-reciprocal nature of these relationships between this participant and his family of origin. Similarly, some described how their relationship with their parents was superficial rather than deep because their parent loved and engaged with only a part of them, avoiding personal matters and relationships. Given how painful this process was, some participants reflected that it would almost be better if they had been completely or explicitly rejected than this partial or implicit rejection, which felt like a painful erasure of the self.

**Category 3.4: Losing parental support led to feeling devastated both by the void and the realization that their love had been conditional since they now devalue one's LGBTQ self.** All 15 participants painted a painful picture of the absence of their parents’ support and the realization that their parents’ love was dependent on their being straight. Most participants expressed feeling devastated by the void left when their parents rejected them and yearning for their love, support and understanding. In describing the pain and vulnerability of coming out to potentially face parental rejection, interviewees often used vivid metaphors—such as having their skin ripped off, jumping off a cliff, or floating in nothingness. Remembering the pain of rejection, a participant powerfully described:

I feel like I'm crying and, uh, there's a – what does it feel like? Oh, um – like to feel alone, ehh, I can't even, I don't know that I can articulate it with words. It's

just, uh, it's like me floating in a universe where I see absolutely nothing. It's *scary*. It's fear. I feel *fear*—when I think, like when what comes up, and feeling like—like loss and a, and a, and a sadness knowing that it doesn't have to be that way. Like we're here together and still *alive* but still not connected—because you won't just get over already that, like, I am who I am. (P-02)

This haunting description reflected the pain and terror of being abandoned emotionally by a parent through the experience of rejection. Many felt heartbroken that their parent loved only a part of them, devaluing the rest—the LGBTQ part. In reflecting on the deepest hurt, a few participants expressed that there was something particularly painful about a parent choosing something over their child—religion, their marriage, or new sibling. Similarly, some reported feeling particularly hurt and angry that their parents prioritized their own hurt and lacked any consideration of the participant's feelings. The effects of this rejection were significant, as most interviewees reported that anticipated or actual rejection led to or exacerbated their symptoms of anxiety, depression, self-harm, and substance abuse.

**Category 3.5: Coping via social processes to find alternative forms of support and acceptance for one's LGBTQ self led to decreased self-blame and increased independence from hurtful family of origin.** All 15 participants highlighted the healing potential of finding other forms of social support and engagement to mitigate some of the harm of parental rejection. All participants expressed that acceptance and support from others buffered the pain of rejection, and that they had attempted to fill both the emotional and structural void left by their parents. In particular, many relayed that

participation in LGBTQ community, advocacy, and media consumption was an important part of coping because it provided models and support from people who understood their experience. Some participants highlighted that moving to a more affirming geographical region or even a more accepting proximal environment opened up their social world to facilitate exploration of their sexual identity.

In terms of how social support was helpful, some participants described the particular importance of expressing their pain to others—that saying things aloud and having others share the weight of the pain helped to mitigate the pain of parental rejection. Acceptance from others also led to a greater sense of independence for many participants, making them feel braver about demanding more from their parents because they relied on them less. In addition to greater independence, a few participants explained how building their own family through romantic partnerships, raising children, and caring for pets made them less tolerant of parental heterosexism because they had other living beings to protect. Acceptance also had healing qualities, with some remembering how acceptance and unconditional love from others helped them stop seeing themselves as broken, which improved their self-image damaged by the rejection, and allowed them to self-actualize and realize their potential.

A few interviewees reflected on how acceptance from one parent, or a previously rejecting parent, aided with self-acceptance and buffered against the damage of parental rejection. In addition to drawing on traditional social support, a few people described how they coped by drawing on their connection to their ancestors or their ethnic heritage.

One participant reflected on how she honored her Black grandmother's legacy by maintaining faith that her relationship with her mother would improve.

It's about faith. My grandmother held the faith... I was gonna be college-educated. I was gonna be able to travel the world... My grandmother, ninety-year-old Black woman in Texas, much less America, is not gonna, like, she didn't have those choices. But she held the, she had the faith... that there was gonna be a time that, where things looked different... I can't just sit in like, 'Oh, the world, how things are in my own life, this is how they're always gonna be and I can't imagine anything different.' I have to imagine something different in honor of her, because it's like it's her, she left the legacy of her faith that I have adopted, and now I'm running with it. (P-02)

This powerful reflection highlighted the creativity of LGBQ individuals when coping with rejection, to draw not only on the strength of traditional social supports, but also of their family history and values. Similarly, some participants discussed how reclaiming religion or spirituality helped with healing from parental rejection by connecting them to something larger and accepting.

Thirteen participants evaluated how well this cluster represented their understanding of the experience of coping with parental rejection on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much), giving this cluster a mean rating of 6.5. This reflects a strong endorsement of this category.

**Cluster 4: Things got better if parents changed their thinking, but often the change was not linear because the rejection experience reflected complex family dynamics.**

All 15 participants contributed to this theme, which described the varying patterns of change and family dynamics over time and contained four categories, which are detailed below.

**Category 4.1: Parents who become more accepting undertook a cognitive shift to accept the new reality, quelled their prior fears, and chose their child.** There were 12 participants who described how parents were able to change and become more accepting, or conversely how parents stayed stuck in their ways. Parents' realizing they might lose their child if they did not become accepting was identified as a turning point by some participants, though a few painfully suggested that their parents were not motivated by this potential loss. In that vein, one interviewee whose parents remained rejecting recalled, "My dad, when he first found out that I was even gay, he said, um, 'I'd rather see in your grave than see you live like this'" (P-15). In contrast, another participant recalled setting an ultimatum for her dad:

I think he just has accepted, like, 'cause I... wrote him... a letter... saying like, "If you want to have a relationship with me, like, [name of wife] is gonna be in my life and I mean, you're going to have to accept it. I'm not asking you to meet her. I'm not asking you to fly out and visit me. I'm just asking you, like, if you do want to be in contact with me you're going to have to um, tolerate this."... I think that... jolted him to be like, "Oh she's, like, serious, you know. Like, I'm gonna have to tolerate this in order to have a relationship with her," 'cause I think deep down he does love me. He just doesn't know how to show it. (P-13)

These highlighted the choices parents made between becoming more accepting or not, when realizing they were risking losing their child. Poignantly, a few participants believed their parents had become more accepting when they realized the specific harm they had inflicted through their rejection. Alternatively, some participants believed things had improved over time when their parents' dire and fear-based predictions did not come true, and a few viewed the shift as part of a developmental process—with their parents accepting that their child's LGBTQ identity was not a phase to be disciplined away and, instead, began to treat them like adults with their own self-determination. Participants reported that outside events could also lead to acceptance shifts within parents, as some interviewees attributed parental change to social pressure, support, or education they received, and, in a few instances, to a life event that gave their parents a greater perspective on the importance of family—such as parenting a new child or mourning the death of a family member.

**Category 4.2: Patterns of acceptance and rejection were often non-linear and the quality of change ranged dramatically, depending on parents' unpredictable and uncontrollable emotional journeys.** There were 12 participants who challenged the narrative of “it gets better,” noting that patterns of change were often surprising, both when the situation became unexpectedly worse or better. In recalling their parents’ reactions to their coming out, many participants felt that their parents’ responses caught them off-guard—whether the experience was anti-climactic or frightening and dramatic. This lack of predictability continued, as many participants also expressed that they had been surprised and disappointed to find that things initially worsened after they came out,



sometimes even after parents had seemed somewhat supportive at the time of disclosure. In considering the overall pattern of change, some explicitly noted that rejection and acceptance was not linear—it got better and got worse, and change could be gradual or exponential. Similarly, a few participants reported that their parents sent mixed messages of both acceptance and rejection of their sexual orientation.

When parents did become more accepting, there was variability in how this occurred as well. Some interviewees addressed whether parents ever expressed an apology—noting the power of a receiving a formal apology for the ways in which they had wronged the participants in the past, and the challenges when parents instead expressed their apology exclusively through changed actions. Moving beyond basic acceptance, a few participants relayed how parental acceptance grew from unconditional love to LGBTQ culturally informed support. Finally, a few expressed that, despite the damage of past rejection, they felt a sort of tentative joy about being reconnected and regaining support that had been lost.

**Category 4.3: Even if general family dynamics did not directly foreshadow the rejection, they often informed how it was expressed and impacted participants.**

All 15 participants described how the role of their general family dynamics influenced the parental rejection processes. For example, many interviewees described how their parents' tendency for conditional support and favoritism continued into the heterosexist rejection. Remembering her early childhood experiences prior to coming out, a participant recalled how her parents supported her only when her gender expression conformed to their expectations:

My mom put me in... beauty pageants and all of that, like really tried to raise me like JonBenet Ramsey. And any of the things I was drawn to, um, that were, you know, anything that was, you know, supposed to be boy or girl and I lean towards the boys, any type of athletics or anything, um, I was told that that was too boyish.

(P-15)

This type of conditional support for gender normative activities foreshadowed the rejection that this participant experienced when she later stopped conforming to her parents' expectations for her sexual orientation. Most participants described how parents often influenced each other regarding rejection or acceptance, and that differences between parents and changes over time often reflected underlying family dynamics and personality characteristics. Influential family dynamics also included family members other than parents. For example, a few believed that their parents responded negatively to their coming out due to negative associations with other LGBTQ family members. More commonly, many interviewees also described how their relationships with their siblings impacted their experience of rejection via triangulation processes—such as siblings mediating on behalf of the participant, joining the parent in rejection, or simply being caught in the middle. Participants also highlighted family communication and coping styles as significant, as a few participants believed that their families' general difficulties with emotional communication negatively impacted their coming out, their parents' rejection, and their ability to cope. Some participants expressed that the parental rejection reflected larger cultural and values conflicts between their family of origin and themselves, whereas some noted that, although their coping abilities were initially shaped

by their cultural background and family culture, exposure to new cultures often enabled them to expand their coping repertoire.

**Category 4.4: Rejection from previously supportive parents was painful because the loss is shocking, whereas rejection from unsupportive parents compounds prior trauma.** There were 13 participants who described different challenges in the experience of rejection that related to the quality of their parental relationship prior to the rejection. Many participants described that rejection felt shocking and damaging when their parents had been previously supportive, but that rejection was still painful although less surprising when it seemed consistent with a poor prior relationship. For some interviewees with historically dysfunctional family relationships, parental rejection could be another loss or trauma on top of a troubled childhood. One participant described her troubled relationship as follows: “my dad [sighs] has never been someone I could count on my whole life.” (P-05). Nonetheless, she later related tearfully, “Even though he's not supportive, and he's extremely selfish, and he never helped out – in my ent—, I just miss him.” This reflected the sense of continued longing she had for her rejecting father, despite his never having fulfilled the promises of being a supportive parent even prior to her coming out.

Thirteen participants rated this cluster on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much), giving this cluster a mean rating of 6.5. This mean indicates that, overall, they found it to strongly represent a component of LGBQ people experiencing heterosexist parental rejection.

**Cluster 5: Accepting the situation involved balancing the competing needs for a safe distance, motivated by self-protection and anger, with needs for closeness motivated by yearning, compassion, and obligation.**

All 15 participants contributed to this theme, which referred to tension they experienced between needs for both distance and closeness with parents as part of the coping process. This cluster contained four categories, which are described in detail below.

**Category 5.1: The push and pull between needing distance and yearning for closeness.** There were 14 participants who described how they experienced a sense of being torn between competing needs. Many described how they felt both a need to protect themselves via distance and a yearning for closeness with their parents; these reactions paralleled how a few expressed feeling torn between anger at and empathy for rejecting parents who, although perhaps “doing their best,” were not engaging in “good enough” parenting. Participants often felt torn because of being forced to make impossible choices. For instance, some described feeling obligated to their parents despite the rejection and their desire for distance, because of shared cultural values or parental obligation. Another participant remembered how his uncle, his primary care giver, gave him an ultimatum:

‘You know by doing this that you're not, you know, your brothers are still with us and we have control of your brothers, and so that you will not have any contact with them.’ And so it was a hard moment because I had to make a choice of like

whether or not I wanted to just continue dealing with all of this or, you know, bran--, you know, take my own kind of independence. (P-08)

He went on to describe the guilt he experienced in choosing his freedom to be himself and thereby losing contact with his younger brothers, reflecting the painful choices that some participants were forced to make and the complex emotional consequences that they were then left to manage.

**Category 5.2: Reconnecting with a parent who was previously rejecting is challenging because of both damage done and prior coping that required building a life without them.** There were participants who discussed the challenges of re-integrating with parents who had become more accepting. Some explained that it was challenging to accept the parent who had once rejected them, because of residual anger and hurt, and difficulty trusting them in the present. One participant explained that it was difficult to re-integrate with parents when they become more accepting because she had found joy in new traditions and identities that she created without them. She relayed:

I actually kind of like have gotten really used to and enjoying our like life. It's not very heteronormative, you know? And, and actually like enjoying the fact that we don't have to go to the ob--, obligatory... in-law stuff, the Christmas stuff, and we could kind of do our own thing with our girls and start our own traditions. You know, um, and maybe that's how we coped, you know?... So when both of our parents... started coming around, were like, 'Hey, we, we wanna repair, we wanna have a relationship with you guys. Hey, let's go on vacation. Hey, you guys coming for thanksgiving?' [Partner] and I... sometimes we struggle with

*that.* So we'll be like, 'Damn, why did our parents have to like all of a sudden start to be affirming,' [laughs], 'and now we like have to go do all this like heteronormative stuff,' you know? (P-07)

While this participant expressed throughout the interview how healing it was for her that her parents had ultimately become more supportive, this sentiment reflected the complexity of trying to reconnect and the ripple effects of rejection. Adding to this complexity, a few participants also explained that it was painful when people did not understand their choices to either continue to relate to their parents or cut them off.

**Category 5.3: Compassion for parents' limitations helps with moving on from the pain of parental rejection because it helps increase understanding without condoning their heterosexism.** There were 12 participants who explored the role of developing compassion for their parents without accepting their heterosexism. Many described how they had coped through compassion for the parent who rejected them by understanding the societal influences that shaped their parents' reactions. A participant who moved from a conservative rural area to a more progressive urban region described how this compassion decreased over time.

Earlier on, if he would've talked to me about, you know, how it must be for my dad, I would feel sad that he had to feel ashamed. I would feel understanding... that he felt ashamed, um, which is kind of I feel like fucked up just to say that I would understand his being ashamed, but it's just like rural [Midwestern state] is just such a different world and... *he* would be rejected because of the fact that he had a gay son and... if he were accepting or... defended me... he would be I

guess the laughing stock, he would be, people would be disgusted with him... that like, um, he makes me feel bad for him. But at the same time... there's this like feeling inside of me, like I'm, like I am your son. Like I am, you raised me and it's *messed up* that you are going to feel ashamed when you talk about me. (P-03)

His compassion for his father allowed him to see the rejection as the father's limitation only in conjunction with labeling the context as heterosexist. In addition to understanding rejection in the context of heterosexism, some participants explained that they could accept their parent despite their personal limitations, often based upon trauma—without condoning their parents' heterosexist rejection. Moving beyond compassion, a few participants expressed that part of their coping process was forgiving the parent who rejected them so they could unload that painful burden, whether or not they reconciled with the parent directly. Looking toward the future, some interviewees explained that they would be open to reconnecting with the family members who previously rejected them if those individuals could take, or had taken, the rupture as an opportunity to grow and change.

**Category 5.4: Part of coping was setting boundaries for self-protection and growth that could lead to standing up to rejecting parents, which relocated the onus for the need to change onto the parents.** There were 15 participants who focused on the importance of protecting themselves via setting boundaries and how this also could entail shifting the responsibility of change onto their parents. Most interviewees expressed that setting boundaries created emotional or physical distance from their parents to enable their self-exploration and protection, as well as sometimes encouraging

parental change. For many, this was a developmental shift, with interviewees realizing that by deferring to their parents they were enabling them, so they instead demanded their parents address their heterosexism. Standing up to rejecting parents was considered to be an empowering experience by many participants because it located the problem with the parents and placed the onus on them to change. In an effort to change rejecting parents, a few participants recalled how they desperately pleaded with them by letting them know how high the stakes were. One participant recalled painfully: “I, um, fell in front of my mom, begged and pleaded and – I remember saying, saying something along the lines of like, ‘Would you rather have a gay daughter or a dead daughter?’” (P-07). While her parents ultimately became more accepting, change was not immediate and she did not see her parents for a few years after this incident. Realizing that change may not be possible, some participants explained that they coped by lowering their expectations for their rejecting parent, and accepting the situation for the reality of what it was—to protect themselves from further disappointment.

Thirteen participants evaluated how well this cluster represented their understanding of the experience on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much). The participants gave this cluster a mean rating of 6.2, meaning that they generally found it to represent a component of LGBTQ people experiencing and/or coping with heterosexist parental rejection. One participant whose parents never became more accepting rated the category a “4,” expressing concern that it might take away from the significance of chosen family as a replacement for family of origin.



**Cluster 6: Growth could be achieved through sustainable coping that involved expressing emotions, whereas crisis-based coping involved avoiding pain and hindered growth if over-utilized.**

All 15 participants contributed to this theme, which described a range of emotion-based coping strategies used by participants, including both adaptive and damaging strategies. This cluster subsumed three categories, which are described in detail below.

**Category 6.1: Whether or not things get better, participants often developed resilience and positive growth in this painful process, though their parents left a void.** There were 14 participants who described how they managed to achieve resilience despite this painful experience, while still acknowledging the damage of the experience. When their relationships with their parents did not improve when they tried to set boundaries, some interviewees relayed that they instead learned to cope better with the rejection. Some reflected that despite the costs, coping with rejection also has led to positive intense personal growth and independence. However, it is important to note that a few participants felt that there was a limit to the amount of healing that was possible using emotional acceptance without their parents coming to accept their sexual orientation. The impact could also be mixed, as some interviewees insightfully shared that, although the rejection inspired them to achieve professionally, it may also have reflected an attempt to prove their parents wrong in response to their conditional love—or to appease them by succeeding professionally since they had “failed” personally. One participant had received the implicit message that LGBTQ people could not be successful

and coped with this painful experience of rejection through pursuing her education and professional goals.

My education and my, and, and work. I've, my, my, all of my energy every day just, you know, having that, knowing that I have a future of, you know, um, knowing that not that I have future, but knowing that, you know, I, you know, am accomplishing things and so it really helps, has helped a lot. (P-11)

Focusing on her future and accomplishments has helped her heal from the pain of rejection as her parents never became more supportive. Finally, some explained that they coped with the degradation of rejection by fighting heterosexism via activism, career, or daily interactions to create change.

**Category 6.2: While compartmentalizing may be necessary, long-term emotional avoidance is generally maladaptive, whether enacted directly or indirectly via substances, sex, self-harm, or workaholism.** There were 14 participants who reflected on the limits of avoidance-based coping that might be helpful in the short-term, but ultimately could lead to more harm. Many reflected that they had coped by avoiding the painful emotions that made them feel vulnerable as well as dissociating. As an interviewer, I observed a few participants detaching emotionally when overwhelmed or minimizing emotions for self-protection during the interviews. Interviewees also described a number of risky methods of avoiding intense emotions. For instance, many participants described how they had used or had seen others use sex and substances to socially lubricate and/or suppress painful emotions, which they warned against as ultimately harmful, especially for those who developed substance abuse problems. While

on the surface more adaptive, some participants recognized that they coped by focusing on professional or academic success, but noted this might be a form of avoiding their emotional pain or personal life. Finally, a few interviewees said that the pain was so overwhelming that they engaged in self-harm—cutting themselves, developing an eating disorder, or making a suicide attempt.

**Category 6.3: Adaptive, emotion-based coping involved processing the pain and practicing self-acceptance, sometimes via expressive modes like therapy or art.**

All 15 participants described the importance of engaging in adaptive emotion-based coping processes. Most prominently, all participants had at some point participated in therapy, whether they sought therapy directly related to coping with parental rejection or rejection came up in the context of other therapy. All interviewees reported that therapy was helpful, if a therapist was culturally competent and tailored therapy to the client's needs regarding whether to emphasize validation, change, processing, or skill-building. In addition to therapy, some participants recalled that learning to express and accept their emotions helped them cope—whether through talking to others, journaling, art, or internal processes. Participants described other forms of emotional coping, as a few interviewees explained that they transformed their initial pain or shame into a more empowering emotion such as anger, externalizing versus internalizing their hurt. Some found that engaging in self-care, like exercise and communing with nature, could also be helpful ways to process emotion and practice self-love and embodiment. More generally, many expressed that focusing on self-acceptance could be healing when parents were rejecting, and could potentially set the tone for others to be more accepting. Focusing on

self-acceptance as his most important goal, a participant reflected that it might have a spiritual ripple effect on others.

When I don't feel loved and supported externally I, I think it's hard to see that the ultimate source of, uh, support and love that is sustainable and lasting comes from within. So, I'm into, um, to, uh, sum up within myself a sense of self-love and self-care, uh, kind of much more, uh, [inaudible] and sustainable... at the risk of sounding provocative (laughs), uh, you know, at the end of the day I find that, uh, while others might reject, my-- My parents may have 'rejected' me, I think the, the more important point to emphasize is that I had rejected myself... when I stop rejecting myself and celebrating myself for who I am, um, I find that the world around me starts to do so as well. (P-14)

Although this quote highlighted the powerful nature of self-acceptance, it is important to recognize the context of rejection that led to the lack of self-acceptance in the first place and not blame participants for causing their own rejection. Time also played a role in healing; some held onto hope for things to improve in the future, which helped them maintain a connection to their rejecting parent. Finally, some felt that simply the passage of time made them feel less raw and accept the pain instead of fighting it, which allowed them to move through it more effectively.

Thirteen participants evaluated how well this cluster represented the experience of coping with parental rejection on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much). The participants gave this cluster a mean rating of 6.2, meaning that they generally found it to be representative. I changed the word "stymied" to "hindered" in

the cluster title as a participant commented on “stymied” being a less accessible term.

Although I did not receive feedback on the term under Cluster 3, I changed the term from stymied to “obstructed” in category 3.2 for this reason as well.

**Core category: Parental rejection was experienced as harmfully corrective and then internalized; reframing the rejection as heterosexism mitigated internalized heterosexism and enabled adaptive acceptance strategies. (15)**

The overarching theme introduced the insight that LGBTQ people experienced their parents’ rejection as a form of punishment or control, as if they had acted in a disobedient or risky manner (see Clusters 1 & 2). Participants described that these experiences led to feeling that their parents’ love for them was conditional/dependent upon being straight. This feeling often was internalized and could lead to self-blame for the rejection and/or a sense of shame regarding their LGBTQ identities, but that attempts to build a new social foundation via seeking affirmative connections could minimize the damage of internalizing their parents’ conditional love and fill the painful void it left (see Cluster 3). Interviewees highlighted the importance of recognizing that their parents’ heterosexism was to blame for their rejection, because this lessened how much they internalized self-blame and shame (see Clusters 2, 3 & 5). Finally, participants found that recognizing that their parents’ limitations were to blame also helped them change their emotional coping strategies (see Clusters 2, 5 & 6), even as expressions of rejection might change over time (see Cluster 4). Specifically, it helped them minimize the use of strategies that involved emotional avoidance and instead focus on more helpful long-term strategies that involved accepting their pain and the situation, as well as finding

acceptance in themselves and from other more affirmative social supports (see Clusters 3 & 6). When asked what advice he would give to LGBTQ people experiencing parental rejection, one participant provided the following insight:

Unhealthy coping behaviors, a lot of them, are actually okay as long as you do them in moderation. Like, if you're in crisis and you're crying and eating a whole tub of ice cream will make you feel a little better right now so you can get to sleep? I don't think that's so bad, but if you do that you know, every night, for two years, then you're gonna have an issue... I think it's about maintaining balance between what you need to do to make yourself feel better right now when you're in a crisis, um... and what you need to do to make everything better in the long-term and actually solve the problem. (P-12)

This core category highlighted the importance of balancing short-term crisis based coping with long-term and more sustainable strategies to manage the painful experience of painful rejection over time.

Once again, 13 participants evaluated how well the core category captured the experience of coping with heterosexist parental rejection by rating it on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much). The participants gave this cluster a mean rating of 6.1, meaning that they generally found it to represent their experiences. After reviewing the core category and noticing it took participants time to absorb its meaning, I shortened it somewhat so that it still retained the original ideas but would be more accessible. One participant who rated the category as a 6 reflected that he never felt “punished” by his parents, although I would categorize the experiences he described (e.g.,

being cut off from internet) as corrective. Another participant who rated the category as a 5 noted he did not find the experience corrective, but reiterated that his parents did not wield much authority over him, given the family configuration, and that his parents may have been dually motivated out of a desire to protect him from further rejection and also to minimize their own shame. Given that ratings were relatively high, and this description captured my sense of the participants' experiences, I opted to retain this language for the core category. In addition, other participants did not express concerns regarding the description of correction and some explicitly appreciated the framework of disobedience and discipline when it was raised in Cluster 2; it also alluded to the sense of brokenness described by participants in Cluster 3.

## CHAPTER 4

### DISCUSSION

In this study of 15 LGBQ individuals, I investigated the experiences of LGBQ people coping with parental rejection using grounded theory methods to develop a hierarchy of themes and identify a core category. The core category that emerged from analysis of the interviews described how participants experienced parental rejection as a harmful corrective experience, and captured both the disciplinary power that many parents held over their children as well as its damaging effects. Namely, this corrective experience often was internalized by the participants and led to harms including individual mental health struggles along with professional and interpersonal difficulties. Several contextual factors influenced the expression and impact of heterosexist parental rejection, including societal heterosexism, developmental factors, and family dynamics. As noted earlier, parental rejection must be understood in the context of minority stress (Meyer, 2003), with regard to how societal heterosexism influences parental rejection, and also compounds other types of rejection experiences faced by LGBQ people. Relatedly, the very ubiquity of heterosexism makes it both that much more invisible and insidious in its effects, as relayed in this study in which participants experienced a normalization of heterosexism that made them question their own validity. By eventually



recognizing the parental rejection as rooted in heterosexism, and relocating the problem as their parents' limitations rather than their own brokenness, participants were able to challenge internalized heterosexism and choose adaptive acceptance strategies over maladaptive avoidance strategies. The core category was rooted in six clusters that defined the processes through which participants experienced rejection and developed coping strategies.

**Discipline and Control: Parental rejection as a harmful corrective experience in the context of societal oppression and family dynamics**

Attachment theory posits that parents' crucial roles as early attachment figures in childhood development means that the quality of these relationships has significant impacts throughout the lifetime (for a review of attachment and development, with an emphasis on childhood emotional abuse, see Riggs, 2010). Empirical studies have demonstrated that a lack of parental support negatively impacts mental health into adulthood (e.g., Adam et al., 2011; Reed, Ferraro, Lucier-Greer, & Barber, 2014) and that attachment styles influence later romantic relationships (e.g. Holmes & Johnson, 2009). A lack of perceived parental support for sexual orientation, in particular, also has been associated with anxious or avoidant attachment in adulthood (Mohr & Fassinger, 2003). Given the significant impact of parental relationships, here we explored the myriad long-term impacts of heterosexist parental rejection. Participants described their parents as having perceived their coming out and continued expression of their sexual orientation as risky and/or disobedient. As such, parents often relied on disciplinary techniques to control the participants' behavior and shape them in an effort to fulfill their longing for a

heterosexual child who would go on to marry and have children in the way they had anticipated. As such, these disciplinary acts reflected a complex process of socialization and were part of a larger cultural normalizing endeavor. Drawing upon gender and sexuality scholarship from other disciplines (e.g., Warner, 1999; D’Emilio, 1983), the family can be understood as a site of disciplinary practice in which heterosexuality is replicated, rendering the notion of discipline in this context both literal and symbolic. That is, on a literal level, participants were disciplined through traditional forms of punishment, such as a parent threatening to cut off the internet, which would impede access to social support. On a symbolic level, this disciplinary power corresponded to the systemic control over identities to conform to societal norms of heterosexuality.

In an effort to bridge these theoretical ideas to a more grounded conceptualization of how the family may be a site of discipline, I return to Heatherington and Lavener’s (2008) proposed model, in which they sought to understand initial and ongoing family responses to a LGBTQ child coming out by focusing on the relations between individual- and relationship-level variables within the family. Working within this model, it is possible to organize many of my findings into individual- and relationship-level variables. These variables fit well with my findings regarding how individual differences between parents influenced the rejection, how parents and other family members influenced each other, and the role of prior family dynamics—which influenced how parents expressed rejection and how participants were impacted by and coped with rejection. The results of the current study suggest that it may be valuable to add to the proposed model a layer of societal-level variables, such as regional norms, to reflect these

additional influences on family rejection. However, it is also useful to expand upon this model to understand these family dynamics within a larger context of societal dynamics and imposed values that shape how a family reacts to this coming out experience.

**A Sense of Brokenness: Failure to recognize the heterosexist roots of rejection leads to internalized heterosexism, rejection sensitivity and avoidance processes**

In this study, participants frequently spoke both about how they ultimately recognized that their parents' rejection was rooted in societal heterosexism and, in some cases, highly context dependent—either reflecting local norms in socially conservative regions, religious beliefs, or specific ethnic community values. However, participants did not necessarily have this perspective when they first were experiencing the parental rejection and so, instead, internalized the sense of being broken and needing to be fixed. While more overt discrimination might be apparent to marginalized groups, such as LGBTQ people, it can be particularly challenging for those targeted to recognize micro-aggressions, especially when they are enacted by a trusted family member; prior research has suggested that these early experiences of discrimination can also frame normative expectations and make it more difficult to recognize heterosexist micro-aggressions later in life (McClelland, Rubin, & Bauermeister, 2016). In addition, participants' experiences of rejection often were compounded by their experiences of societal heterosexism, so that they were receiving negative messages about their sexual orientation from multiple sources, which further gave them the sense that there was something deeply wrong with them. For participants with multiple minority identities, this experience of alienation and lack of safe harbor could be particularly profound. This finding is in line with prior

research demonstrating that sexual minority youth are more likely both to experience victimization, and less likely to have the buffering protection of social support, compared to heterosexual youth (e.g., Button, O'Connell, & Gealt, 2012). What have been added by the current study are the rich descriptions of this sense of alienation, and the emphasis on how multiple sources of oppression can both have a compounding impact—and also be particularly isolating and harmful for sexual minority individuals who hold other minority identities in terms of their experiences of parental rejection. In addition, my findings document stages that participants underwent, though these did not necessarily take place in a linear fashion, and not all participants described experiences corresponding to each of these processes. The main stages identified can be captured in a model of coping with heterosexist parental rejection: (1) *Internalizing*: Internalizing parental and societal heterosexist beliefs and perceiving oneself to be flawed; (2) *Constraining*: Constraining expression of sexual orientation and engaging in internalizing/avoidance behaviors to minimize rejection; (3) *Developing Recognition and Acceptance*: Developing understanding of heterosexist roots of rejection, re-assigning blame to parents, and finding acceptance and support to counter parental heterosexist narratives; (4) *Coping*: Developing adaptive strategies to cope with parental/societal heterosexism; (5) *Building Compassion*: Potentially reconnecting to parents, especially those who become accepting, and understanding rejection via a lens of compassion without condoning heterosexism.

Consistent with prior research, participants described several negative problems, including individual mental health issues and risky behavior (e.g., Bouris et al., 2010;

Ryan, Huebner, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2009) and difficulties functioning in relationships (Rostosky et al., 2004), due to their experiences of parental rejection. Prior research has also proposed that internalized heterosexism may be a mediator between parental rejection and psychological distress (Puckett et al., 2015) or, alternatively, that parental rejection might be a moderator between internalized heterosexism and mental health problems (Feinstein et al., 2014). Although, based upon my qualitative data, we cannot assess a quantitative question such as whether a moderating or mediating process is the better fit, my findings do appear to fit with a conceptualization of internalized heterosexism as a mediator between parental rejection and psychological distress. If understanding internalized heterosexism as a mediator, my findings elaborated on this understanding by describing a process in which participants experienced rejection as a form of conditional love, and then internalized this sense of themselves as being broken, which led to a sense of shame about their sexual orientation and, ultimately, left them vulnerable to poor mental health and problems negotiating relationships. This notion of experiencing parental rejection as a form of conditional love was similarly described in the recent literature (Carastathis et al., 2017), providing some triangulation for the current findings. In addition to the emotional impacts of parental rejection, respondents highlighted the important loss of structural support that increased the likelihood that they would engage in risky behaviors with more significant, dangerous outcomes.

My findings also recognized three mechanisms by which parental rejection influenced relationships. First, participants described coping with rejection by avoiding relationships and focusing on professional achievements to avoid the pain of rejection.

Second, participants described a tendency to either have difficulty trusting others or to trust the wrong people that they linked to their prior rejection, having had their trust with their parents so deeply damaged through the rejection process. Third, participants described difficulty with attachment spurred on by a deep fear of repeated rejection, leading to patterns of both anxious or avoidant attachments. General parental rejection in childhood has been associated with rejection sensitivity into adulthood (Ibrahim, Rohner, Smith, & Flannery, 2015). The relations between rejection sensitivity regarding sexual orientation, sexual minority stressors (including parental rejection), and negative mental health have been explored previously in the literature (Pachankis, Goldfried, & Ramrattan, 2008; Dyar, Feinstein, Eaton, & London, 2016; Feinstein, Goldfried, & Davila, 2012; Feinstein et al., 2014). Research has found support for parental rejection as a moderator between rejection sensitivity and negative mental health symptoms, suggesting that parental acceptance might serve as a protective factor (Feinstein et al., 2014). In addition, researchers have conceptualized rejection sensitivity as a negative outcome of parental rejection, with internalized heterosexism as a mediator (Pachankis et al., 2008). My findings add to this literature by providing evidence of both the short-term (see Category 1.2) and long-term (see Categories 3.2 and 3.3) damage related to rejection sensitivity. My findings also documented the impact of parental rejection on professional relationships related to participants' difficulties with authority figures, which has not been previously described in the literature.

**Cultivating Acceptance: Engaging in emotional expression, developing compassion while setting boundaries, and building affirmative support**

Among my findings, perhaps most important are those related to successful adaptive coping, as prior research on coping with parental rejection is limited to one prior study (Carastathis et al., 2017). Although the participants described maladaptive coping, including substance use and self-harm, generally they were reflecting on these as past experiences—suggesting that it is possible to develop new skills or heal over time. At the same time, it is important to note that those who suffered the worst consequences of parental rejection may not be alive to participate in this study, as tragic as it is to imagine. A particularly powerful theme that emerged from the interviews was the notion of boundary setting. Prior studies of same-sex couples have described the use of setting boundaries with family of origin, while remaining open to support from families of origin (e.g., Glass & Few-Demo, 2013; LaSala, 2000b). Similarly, here individuals reported on the importance of boundary setting, but also highlighted the painful experience of being torn between needing both distance and closeness with parents. Specifically, participants reflected on the difficult choices they were called on to make, such as losing contact with younger siblings or forcing themselves to remain connected to family due to cultural values despite the psychological cost.

While this study did not focus on developmental differences between or within individual participants, there did appear to be patterns in trajectories of change over time. Specifically, it was common for parents to become more accepting over time due to some type of cognitive shift in which they managed their prior fears and accepted the reality of

their child coming out, rather than risk losing them, although these changes were often non-linear. At the same time, other changes in rejection and coping dynamics that participants described were not dependent on parents' reactions but, rather, reflected the participants' positive adaptation. Prior research has suggested that parental support may matter less to older adults than support from friends (Masini & Barrett, 2008), although these data are minimal and far from conclusive. In the current study, older adult participants had come out when they were younger, and so had a longer time to develop adaptive coping skills and develop emotional independence, which included adjusting their expectations and building affirmative supports. Nonetheless, it was notable that the three oldest participants in the study all remarked that they were surprised that they became emotional at various points during the interviews—reflecting the deep wounds inflicted by parental rejection even many years later.

Participants also reflected on what enabled them to develop greater self-acceptance, set healthier boundaries with parents, and engage in more adaptive coping. For example, they spoke about developing new, affirmative supports—and the power of chosen family, which has been discussed in depth in the literature (e.g., Asakura & Craig, 2014; Oswald, 2002; Weeks, Heaphy, & Donovan, 2001). However, participants explained how the reliance on chosen family related to parental rejection in particular noting, for instance, that having their own children and a partner to protect motivated them to set boundaries with rejecting parents. Participants also re-affirmed the importance of less commonly described strategies, such as engaging in LGBT activism (Madsen & Green, 2012). Prior studies also have elucidated the importance of self-



acceptance and developing empathy toward parents who are rejecting (Diamond et al., 2011), which are expanded upon in this study. Specifically, by developing compassion for parents and understanding that their rejection was rooted in heterosexism or their own trauma, participants could recognize that they, themselves, were not the root of the problem. Participants also described novel forms of social coping, such as drawing on connections to their ancestry for support and inspiration, which is a finding that we have not seen in other studies of LGBTQ coping.

Prior studies have suggested that choosing not to disclose one's sexual orientation may be a form of pre-emptive coping with parental rejection (Carpineto, Kubicek, Weiss, Iverson, & Kipke, 2008; Carastathis et al., 2017). While this dynamic was described in the current study, participants also highlighted the stress of both initially being closeted and continuing to minimize anything related to their sexual orientation when interacting with parents in order to reduce the likelihood of rejection. Also, participants highlighted that, even prior to disclosing their sexual orientation, parents expressed implicit rejection of perceived signifiers of a sexual minority identity, such as via gender expression policing. As such, it is important to recognize both the complexities of non-disclosure, which may be preferable to coming out in certain contexts, as well as the harms associated with concealment, as identified in the prior literature (Meidlinger & Hope, 2014; Pachankis, 2007).

### **Implications for Clinical Practice**

These findings serve not only to document the breadth of coping acts used by LGBTQ people but also may aid in the development of resources to support LGBTQ people

facing parental rejection. For instance, these findings may be useful to clinicians working with LGBTQ people who are experiencing parental rejection or suffering negative mental health effects of this key stressor as they work with clients to develop successful coping strategies and heal their damaged self-image. In addition, research may lead to the development of resources that could be useful to groups such as PFLAG in supporting those who do not seek out or have access to psychotherapy. Specifically, these findings highlight the enormous losses faced by LGBTQ people who experience parental rejection along with several associated risks. These include both the loss of parents as a potential buffer against other minority stress experiences, and the compounding of the parental loss with these other experiences of heterosexism and intersectional experiences of oppression—which can lead to a deep sense of being broken and the source of the family strife. Therapists can share the common stages described in the coping with heterosexist parental rejection stage model to promote a sense of hope for change. They can facilitate, in particular, the Developing Recognition and Acceptance stage, which is central to enabling the Coping stage to promote recovery. Therapists can draw upon feminist and multi-cultural approaches (Russell & Bohan 2007; Brown, 2009) to understand the experience of rejection within a larger social context, to enable LGBTQ people to enable themselves to develop skills to engage in more adaptive coping. Adaptive coping may include setting boundaries with parents, accepting the limits of the relationship based on parents' personal limitations, accepting and processing painful emotions, seeking affirmative supports, and honing self-acceptance.

In addition, the current research was a reminder that LGBTQ individuals may be at greater risk for the use of maladaptive coping strategies, such as substance abuse and self-harm, and explained these tendencies as a form of avoidance-based coping exacerbated by the lack of structural support by parents—as captured in the Internalizing and Constraining stages. Clinicians can use this understanding to foresee risks to clients considering disclosure, and also to identify appropriate support strategies for those who have disclosed to their parents or anticipate disclosing soon. Relatedly, because of the ubiquity of messages focused on coping with coming out and the promise that it gets better, it is crucial for providers to understand that things may get worse, rather than better, after coming out and that parental changes over time are often not linear—and to communicate this to clients to set expectations accurately.

Providers also can draw upon more experiential modalities of therapy (e.g., Hardtke, Armstrong, & Johnson, 2010; Levitt, Whelton, & Iwakabe, in press) with clients to help explore overwhelming and frightening emotions that they may be prone to avoid or a range of other affirmative approaches to treating internalized heterosexism (e.g., for feminist therapy, see Negy & Mickinney, 2006; for CBT, see Pachankis, Hatzenbuehler, Rendina, Safren & Parsons, 2015; for family therapy; see LaSala, 2000a; for a review of the treatment literature on internalized heterosexism, see Puckett & Levitt, 2015). In fact, there were participants who highlighted the potential value of experiential modes of therapy in particular, noting the limits of skill-based interventions alone to cope with the rejection experience. That is, clinicians can draw upon various modalities to help clients both develop the skills needed to cope as well as emotionally process the pain of the loss

and develop some form of acceptance for a situation that might not change, while clearly identifying the problem as their parents' heterosexism.

In addition to understanding the losses and risks faced, clinicians must understand the impact of rejection and the potential for internalized shame and difficulty navigating other healthy relationships due to the damage to this primary relationship. One participant noted the importance of therapists understanding that this might be a lifelong issue and require ongoing therapy throughout the lifetime as various challenges arose. Another challenge that clinicians may help clients with is determining how to best navigate relationships with parents in a manner consistent with their values, which might involve both boundary setting and maintaining some level of closeness. For instance, participants noted that it would be problematic for a clinician to assume that the solution was to simply cut off clients' parents, in particular if they belonged to a cultural group that highlighted family connectedness. This is consistent with previous research that clinicians must flexibly attend to both systematic factors that impact LGBQ people, while recognizing individual variation and needs (Quiñones, Woodward, & Pantalone; 2017). Finally, clinicians can further help LGBQ people mitigate internalized heterosexism and develop greater self-acceptance by identifying affirmative forms of social support, such as chosen family, LGBQ community, spiritual communities, in addition to potentially engaging in LGBQ advocacy, along with more novel forms of coping such as reaching out to ancestral connections.

## **Limitations**

This study utilized self-identified volunteers primarily recruited through social media and email and who were able to participate in an interview by phone (or in person in the Boston area), which limited the sample to those with electronic access, a common concern for internet recruitment. As such, LGBQ people who have been most marginalized by parental rejection, including currently homeless LGBQ youth, were unable to participate. At the same time, due to the use of theoretical sampling, I was careful to include participants who had more severe past rejection experiences and consequences, even if they were currently living in more stable circumstances. Similarly, given the sample size and the focus on finding commonalities that is inherent to the type of grounded theory analysis I conducted, I was not able to fully explore differences between groups. Finally, readers should exercise caution when transferring these findings to other contexts of LGBQ rejection or other types of familial rejection.

## **Future Research**

A strength of this study is its diverse participants, especially with regard to region, race, sexual orientation, and age, allowing for a greater exploration of intersectionality and the opportunity to reflect on diverse experiences. Future studies with larger samples or using methods less focused on finding commonalities (such as quantitative survey research) might allow for greater focus on comparisons between groups based on significant characteristics such as age, regional origin, gender, sexual orientation, race, religion, and ethnicity. In addition, I had hoped to further explore differences between sexuality-specific support and general social support, but I found these constructs

intertwined and difficult to separate within the interviews and in the analysis. Nonetheless, future studies could continue to investigate whether LGBQ people experience sexuality-specific and general support as separate constructs in relation to their parents and the implications of each. Finally, a future quantitative study could validate the proposed model of coping with heterosexist parental rejection.

### **Conclusion**

This study contributes to the empirical understanding of, and potentially the development of additional theory to describe, the experiences of LGBQ people with parental rejection related to their sexual orientation as a harmful corrective experience. In particular, I have documented a coping with heterosexist parental rejection stage model, from internalization to adaptive coping. The current study also adds to the burgeoning literature on coping strategies used by LGBQ people, with a relatively novel focus on coping with parental rejection specifically and how recognizing the influence of heterosexism may minimize internalized heterosexism and allow for more adaptive forms of acceptance influenced coping processes. Taken together, these findings provide insight into the complex processes involved in experiencing and coping with heterosexist parental rejection.

Table 1

*Participant Demographics*

<i>Subject</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Sexual orientation</i>	<i>Gender identity</i>	<i>Race</i>	<i>Class identity growing up</i>	<i>Religion growing up (if any)</i>	<i>Region growing up</i>
1	34	<i>Bisexual; Mostly gay</i>	<i>Cisgender female</i>	<i>White</i>	<i>Affluent</i>	<i>Catholic</i>	<i>Midwest</i>
2	50	<i>Queer</i>	<i>Cisgender female</i>	<i>Black</i>	<i>Middle class</i>	<i>Christian</i>	<i>South</i>
3	25	<i>Gay</i>	<i>Cisgender male</i>	<i>Multi-racial: Asian &amp; White</i>	<i>Middle class</i>	<i>Baptist</i>	<i>Midwest &amp; West</i>
4	32	<i>Gay</i>	<i>Cisgender male</i>	<i>White</i>	<i>Middle class</i>	<i>Roman Catholic</i>	<i>Midwest</i>
5	36	<i>Queer</i>	<i>Cisgender female</i>	<i>Multiracial: Black &amp; White</i>	<i>Working class</i>	<i>Zen Buddhist</i>	<i>West</i>
6	26	<i>Gay</i>	<i>Cisgender male</i>	<i>Hispanic/Latino (White)</i>	<i>Working class</i>	<i>Catholic</i>	<i>Midwest</i>
7	29	<i>Lesbian</i>	<i>Cisgender female</i>	<i>White Native American</i>	<i>Middle class</i>	<i>Southern Baptist</i>	<i>South</i>
8	34	<i>Gay</i>	<i>Cisgender male</i>	<i>Hispanic/Latino (White) &amp; White</i>	<i>Working class</i>	<i>Christian non-denominational</i>	<i>West</i>
9	26	<i>Queer</i>	<i>Cisgender female</i>	<i>White</i>	<i>Middle class</i>	<i>Jewish</i>	<i>Northeast</i>
10	26	<i>Queer</i>	<i>Transgender non-binary</i>	<i>White</i>	<i>Middle class</i>	<i>Catholic</i>	<i>West</i>
11	42	<i>Lesbian</i>	<i>Cisgender female</i>	<i>Black</i>	<i>Middle class</i>	<i>Baptist</i>	<i>Northeast</i>
12	26	<i>Gay</i>	<i>Cisgender male</i>	<i>White</i>	<i>Middle class</i>	<i>Christian</i>	<i>South</i>
13	24	<i>Bisexual</i>	<i>Cisgender female</i>	<i>White</i>	<i>Middle class</i>	<i>Somewhat Christian</i>	<i>Northeast</i>
14	29	<i>Bisexual</i>	<i>Cisgender male</i>	<i>Asian</i>	<i>Middle class</i>	<i>Anglican &amp; Syrian Orthodox Christianity</i>	<i>Southeast Asia</i>
15	54	<i>Lesbian</i>	<i>Cisgender female</i>	<i>White</i>	<i>Middle class</i>	<i>Southern Baptist</i>	<i>South</i>

Table 2

*Cluster, Category, and Subcategory Titles Including Number of Contributing Interviewees*

<b>CORE</b>	<b>Parental rejection was experienced as harmfully corrective and then internalized; reframing the rejection as heterosexism mitigated internalized heterosexism and enabled adaptive acceptance strategies. (15)</b>
<b>Cluster 1.</b>	<b>Participants were torn between openly expressing their sexual orientation and constraining their behavior to avoid parental rejection, knowing that each promised both healing and damage. (15)</b>
Cat. 1.1.	Prior to coming out, participants feared rejection but also anticipated new opportunities and lifting the burden of secrets, which had itself been damaging. (15)
1.1.1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>BATTLE - I prepared for battle, built up arsenal to prevent rejection or armor to protect against the inevitable; or I was ambushed and outed (7)</i></li> </ul>
1.1.2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>CAME OUT - Despite fear of rejection, I decided to come out because of the stress of not coming out, especially regarding lying when I had a partner or breakup (9)</i></li> </ul>
1.1.3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>DELAY - I delayed coming out to my parents to avoid pain and rejection, sometimes even lying if asked directly (9)</i></li> </ul>
1.1.4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>HIDING - Even before I was explicitly rejected, I lived in fear of rejection and with the stress of hiding, which was damaging in of itself (11)</i></li> </ul>
1.1.5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>MIXED - I was both excited and scared to come out—scared of the doors it might close with my parents but excited about the new doors it could open (3)</i></li> </ul>
1.1.6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>PHASE - I hoped that I could change my sexuality or that my queerness would go away if I ignored the feelings and did not act on them (7)</i></li> </ul>
1.1.7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>POLICING - Even prior to explicitly coming out, my parents expressed explicit or implicit anti-gay bias or gender policing (11)</i></li> </ul>
Cat. 1.2.	Constraining their gender and sexual expression and aspects of their LGBQ life because of the fear of parental rejection had harmful consequences. (14)



1.2.1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>DATING STRAIGHT - I tried to appease my parents by dating people of a different gender (6)</i></li> </ul>
1.2.2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>DOUBLE LIFE - Rejection or fear of rejection can pressure LGBTQ people to live a double life, out with peers but closeted at home (10)</i></li> </ul>
1.2.3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>EGGSHELLS - Even once I was out, I walked on eggshells or minimized anything related to my sexual orientation, including gender expression and partners to avoid rejection (10)</i></li> </ul>
1.2.4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>RECLOSET - I considered pretending or actually pretended it was just a phase and went back into the closet to appease my parents (3)</i></li> </ul>
Cat. 1.3	There was a defiant freedom and pleasure in self-expression even against the backdrop of parental rejection (11)
1.3.1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>REBELLING - I found myself rebelling or 'flaunting' it to counter the invisibility of the closet or pain of rejection (7)</i></li> </ul>
1.3.2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>RELIEF - There was a sense of relief and less constricted self after expressing my sexual identity even when reactions were negative (8)</i></li> </ul>
<b>Cluster 2.</b>	<b>Parents perceived coming out as dangerous disobedience or risk-taking and so used disciplining strategies to make their children straight, which paradoxically had the potential to endanger the participants. (15)</b>
Cat. 2.1	Parents enacted rejection via discipline and control, treating their child like a problem to fix versus a child to support, which led to harm or even danger (15)
2.1.1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>CONVERT - My parents were willing harm me psychologically or physically to make me straight, via abuse or conversion therapy (7)</i></li> </ul>
2.1.2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>FREEFALL - Rejection meant I lacked a parental safety net and affirmative structural support, often led to harm or risky behavior (8)</i></li> </ul>
2.1.3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>PROBLEM - Parents and family blamed me as if I were the problem and not their rejecting behavior, failing to take responsibility (10)</i></li> </ul>
2.1.4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>PUNISH - My parents used their power to punish me like I was a disobedient child—by restricting my freedom or financial support (9)</i></li> </ul>
2.1.5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>UNSAFE - Parents did not support me in times of primal need when I experienced emotional suffering or outside dangers, making home another unsafe space (6)</i></li> </ul>
2.1.6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>UNWELCOME - Parents distanced themselves from me, often refusing to have contact with me or making me unwelcome in their home for extended periods (8)</i></li> </ul>

Cat. 2.2	Parental rejection may stem from disgust or fear because their ignorance leads to their reliance on negative stereotypes of sexual minorities (15)
2.2.1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>BULLYING - As part of rejection, parents bullied me by insulting me, insulting LGBQ things, and calling me names—dehumanizing me (6)</i></li> </ul>
2.2.2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>EDUCATE - I had to defend my sexual orientation and educate my parents and others just as I was coming out (7)</i></li> </ul>
2.2.3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>FAILURE - My parents perceived LGBQ people as failures and did not recognize my accomplishments (2)</i></li> </ul>
2.2.4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>IGNORANCE - My parents lacked good information, positive images or experiences with LGBQ people before I came out, which informed their rejection (7)</i></li> </ul>
2.2.5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>PARENTS TORN - My parents were torn between their love for me and their fear of my sexual orientation (7)</i></li> </ul>
2.2.6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>PATHOLOGIZE - My parents pathologized being LGBQ—perceiving it as a mental illness or searching for etiology, including wondering what they did wrong (8)</i></li> </ul>
2.2.7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>SEX STIGMA - My parents associated being LGBQ with sexually stigmatized identities that informed their rejection (12)</i></li> </ul>
2.2.8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>SIGNS - My parents were surprised when I came out because they did not see the “signs”—either were not familiar with common “signs” or did not realize not everyone has “signs” (5)</i></li> </ul>
2.2.9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>WORRIED - My parents expressed concern for my well-being related to my sexual orientation e.g., HIV, gay bashing, divine retribution, which informed their rejection (9)</i></li> </ul>
Cat. 2.3	As part of rejection, parents often rejected anyone or anything they perceived as 'tainted' by their child's LGBQ identity, trying to shape their child into the straight child of their dreams (15)
2.3.1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>DATING - My parents more supportive of me dating people of a different gender, even encouraging pre-marital sex that was not values congruent (6)</i></li> </ul>
2.3.2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>DREAMS - My parents expressed disappointment that I would not fulfill their dreams of my getting married or having a family in the way they expected (9)</i></li> </ul>
2.3.3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>GENDER - Gender based rejection by my parents exacerbated heterosexist rejection (7)</i></li> </ul>
2.3.4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>HURT OTHERS - I worried and felt ashamed about my parents hurting other people I cared about in the process of rejecting me (5)</i></li> </ul>
2.3.5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>IGNORE - Parents sometimes ignore my sexual and gender expression hoping that would make it go away (8)</i></li> </ul>

2.3.6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>PARTNER BUTCH - Parents rejected my partner because of my partner's gender expression (2)</i></li> </ul>
2.3.7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>REJECTION BY ASSOCIATION - My parents rejected my same-sex partners or anything related to my sexual orientation—"don't rub it in our faces" (9)</i></li> </ul>
Cat. 2.4	Parental rejection stemmed from internalizing social or cultural heterosexist norms regarding gender and sexuality that require conformity and sublimation (15)
2.4.1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>NORMS - My parents rejected me because they have internalized their ethnic community's cultural norms that enforce traditional gender and heterosexuality (6)</i></li> </ul>
2.4.2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>REGION - My parents rejected me because they were from a conservative region or community (6)</i></li> </ul>
2.4.3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>RELIGION- My parents told me LGBTQ people were going to hell or used religion to reject me and were reinforced by a religious institution (7)</i></li> </ul>
2.4.4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>SCANDAL - My parents were ashamed of what community or other family will think about my sexual orientation or gender performance (10)</i></li> </ul>
2.4.5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>TRADITION - Parents rejected me not because of religious conflicts, but rather traditional cultural that was religiously informed (4)</i></li> </ul>
<b>Cluster 3.</b>	<b>Participants attempted to build a new social foundation via seeking affirmative connections to minimize the damage of internalizing their parents' conditional love and fill the painful void it left. (15)</b>
Cat. 3.1	In response to parents' conditional love, compounded by societal oppression, participants—especially those with intersectional marginalized identities—struggled against internalizing a message of being broken (15)
3.1.1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>"Your happiness is making us miserable" - I internalized blamed for my family's shame and suffering, including parental suicidal ideation, because I came out (7)</i></li> </ul>
3.1.2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>HETEROSEXISM - Parental rejection was compounded by lack of LGBTQ models, heterosexism and gender norms enforced by society or my community (14)</i></li> </ul>
3.1.3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>IH - In response to the parental rejection, I struggled with poor self-image, shame, and internalized heterosexism, questioning the validity of my life (14)</i></li> </ul>
3.1.4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>INTERSECTIONALITY - Heterosexist parental rejection was compounded by other forms of oppression such as racism, sexism, biphobia, ableism, transphobia (8)</i></li> </ul>

3.1.5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>OBSERVE SELF-CRITICAL - Interviewer observes or participants recognizes that they are very self-critical, which reflects the impact of rejection (4)</i></li> </ul>
3.1.6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>PROBLEM - Because I was I was told I was the problem, I at least partially internalized this message, struggling to appropriately assign blame to my parents (9)</i></li> </ul>
3.1.7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>REVERSAL - I became the parent and had to take care of them and ensure their comfort instead of them taking care of me (5)</i></li> </ul>
3.1.8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>SELF-CRITICAL OF STRUGGLE - Participant is self-critical about their difficulty coping successfully with parental rejection (9)</i></li> </ul>
Cat. 3.2	Parental rejection injured self-esteem and therefore obstructed interpersonal and professional growth via processes such as attachment difficulties, fear of negative evaluation and rejection sensitivity (14)
3.2.1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>ASSERT - I learned that asserting my needs was met with rejection so I "coped" by not asserting my needs in life (5)</i></li> </ul>
3.2.2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>AUTHORITY-PERFECTIONISM - Rejection led to a fear of negative evaluation which manifests as my having difficulty interacting with authority figures and perfectionism (5)</i></li> </ul>
3.2.3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>BAD DATING - Rejection has negatively impacted romantic relationships via poor dating choices, poor coping with relationship challenges, or avoiding dating (12)</i></li> </ul>
3.2.4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>BAD INDEPENDENCE - While it can be helpful to cope via cultivating fierce independence and not relying on anyone else, I can also take it too far (3)</i></li> </ul>
3.2.5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>PROFESSIONAL - Rejection has impacted my professional life via arrested development because of logistical and self-esteem barriers to achieving my goals (6)</i></li> </ul>
3.2.6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>REJECTED FAMILY - I have been distant with other family to protect myself from further rejection (8)</i></li> </ul>
3.2.7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>TRUST SOCIAL ANXIETY - Because of rejection I felt unlovable, which manifested as social anxiety, difficulty trusting, trusting the wrong people, anxious or avoidant attachment (7)</i></li> </ul>
Cat. 3.3	Relationships with extended family of origin were superficial and participants often felt painfully invisible because their whole self was not welcome (15)
3.3.1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>FAMILY SECRET - Because of parental rejection, other people in my family or community did not explicitly know I am LGBTQ though may have guessed (6)</i></li> </ul>
3.3.2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>FAMILY "VALUES" - My family shared parents' views or held more extreme views and rejected me or would reject me which compounded parental rejection (7)</i></li> </ul>

3.3.3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>IMPLICIT</i> - It would almost be better if I had been completely or explicitly rejected than this partial or implicit rejection, which felt like a painful erasure of self (5)</li> </ul>
3.3.4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>INVISIBLE</i> - I felt invisible in my family because my sexual identity and relationships were hidden so they knew nothing about my life whereas we focused on theirs (6)</li> </ul>
3.3.5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>LIMITED FAMILY</i> - Parental rejection has limited my relationships with other family members, including being kept from others' children to "protect them" (11)</li> </ul>
3.3.6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>SUPERFICIAL</i> - My relationship with parents is superficial rather than deep because my parent loved and engaged with only a part of me, avoiding matters of the heart (6)</li> </ul>
Cat. 3.4	Losing parental support led to feeling devastated both by the void and the realization that their love had been conditional since they now devalue one's LGBTQ self (15)
3.4.1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>CONDITIONAL</i> - I felt heartbroken that my parent loved only a part of me, devaluing the rest of me - the LGBTQ part (9)</li> </ul>
3.4.2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>MARTYR/SELF-CENTERED</i> - I was hurt and angry that my parents prioritized their own hurt and lacked any consideration of my feelings (6)</li> </ul>
3.4.3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>MENTAL HEALTH</i> - Anticipated and actual rejection led to or exacerbated my symptoms of anxiety, depression, self-harm and substance abuse (13)</li> </ul>
3.4.4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>PAIN METAPHOR</i> - Participants described pain and vulnerability of coming out to rejection, often using vivid metaphors—it felt like my skin was ripped off, like I was jumping off a cliff, or floating in nothingness (8)</li> </ul>
3.4.5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>SECOND CHOICE</i> - There is something particularly painful to me about a parent choosing something over their child—religion, their marriage, or new sibling (4)</li> </ul>
3.4.6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>YEARNING VOID</i> - I was devastated by the void left when my parents rejected me because I yearned for their love, support and understanding (14)</li> </ul>
Cat. 3.5	Coping via social processes to find alternative forms of support and acceptance for one's LGBTQ self led to decreased self-blame and increased independence from hurtful family of origin (15)
3.5.1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>ACCEPTANCE</i> - Acceptance and support from others buffered the pain of rejection and I attempted to fill both the emotional and structural void left by my parents (15)</li> </ul>
3.5.2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>ANCESTORS</i> - I coped by drawing on my connection to my ancestors and my ethnic heritage (4)</li> </ul>

3.5.3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>COMMUNITY - Participation in LGBTQ community, advocacy, and media consumption was an important part of coping because it provided models and support from people who understood (11)</i></li> </ul>
3.5.4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>DESERVE and BRAVE - Acceptance from others and becoming independent made me braver about demanding more from parents because I relied on them less (8)</i></li> </ul>
3.5.5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>NEW REGION - Moving to a more affirming region or environment opened up my social world to explore my sexual identity (5)</i></li> </ul>
3.5.6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>OWN FAMILY - Building my own family through partnership, kids and pets made me less tolerant of parental heterosexism because I had others to protect now (4)</i></li> </ul>
3.5.7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>PARENTAL CHANGE - Acceptance from one parent or a previously rejecting parent helped me accept myself and buffered against damage of parental rejection (4)</i></li> </ul>
3.5.8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>SELF-IMAGE - Acceptance and unconditional love from others improved my self-image damaged by the rejection, allowing me to self-actualize and realize I am not broken (5)</i></li> </ul>
3.5.9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>SPIRITUALITY - Reclaiming religion or spirituality helped with healing from parental rejection by connecting me to something larger and accepting (7)</i></li> </ul>
3.5.10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>VERBALIZING - Saying things aloud and having others share the weight of your pain helps with coping with parental rejection (5)</i></li> </ul>
<b>Cluster 4.</b>	<b>Things got better if parents changed their thinking, but often the change was not linear because the rejection experience reflected complex family dynamics (15)</b>
Cat. 4.1	Parents who become more accepting undertook a cognitive shift to accept the new reality, quelled their prior fears, and chose their child (12)
4.1.1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>EVENT - Things got better because of a life event that gave my parents perspective on importance of family (3)</i></li> </ul>
4.1.2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>HARM - My parents become more accepting when they realized the harm they had done by rejecting me (3)</i></li> </ul>
4.1.3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>LEARNING - My parents became more supportive because of social pressure, support, or education they received (6)</i></li> </ul>
4.1.4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>LOSS - It was common for parents to eventually chose accepting child over losing them, but sometimes extremists would rather their kid dead or gone (7)</i></li> </ul>
4.1.5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>REALITY - As part of a developmental process, my parents accepted this was not a phase to be disciplined away, and began to treat me like adult (3)</i></li> </ul>

4.1.6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>UNFULFILLED PROPHECY - Things improved over time when my parents' dire predictions did not come true because they saw I had a good life that I was proud of (6)</i></li> </ul>
Cat. 4.2	Patterns of acceptance and rejection were often non-linear and the quality of change ranged dramatically, depending on parents' unpredictable and uncontrollable emotional journeys (12)
4.2.1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>APOLOGY - Parents might express an official apology, and challenges arose when they instead expressed their apology exclusively through their changed actions (5)</i></li> </ul>
4.2.2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>CULTURAL COMPETENCE - Parental acceptance can grow from unconditional love to culturally informed support (3)</i></li> </ul>
4.2.3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>DIFFERENT - My parents' reaction to my coming out caught me off-guard—whether it was anti-climactic or full of scary drama (8)</i></li> </ul>
4.2.4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>IT GOT WORSE - I was surprised and disappointed to find that things got worse after I initially came out (8)</i></li> </ul>
4.2.5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>JOY OF RECONNECTION - Despite the damage done, there is a tentative joy to being reconnected and regaining support lost (4)</i></li> </ul>
4.2.6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>MIXED - My parents sent mixed messages of both acceptance and rejection of my sexual orientation (4)</i></li> </ul>
4.2.7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>NON-LINEAR - Rejection is not linear—it got better and got worse, and change could be gradual or exponential (7)</i></li> </ul>
Cat. 4.3	Even if general family dynamics did not directly foreshadow the rejection, they often informed how it was expressed and impacted participants (15)
4.3.1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>CONDITIONAL - My parents' tendency for conditional support and favoritism continued into the heterosexist rejection (8)</i></li> </ul>
4.3.2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>CULTURE - My coping was shaped by my cultural background, but if/when I was exposed to new cultures, I was able to expand my coping repertoire (7)</i></li> </ul>
4.3.3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>FAMILY COMMUNICATION - My family's difficulties with emotional communication negatively impacted my coming out and their rejection and my ability to cope (4)</i></li> </ul>
4.3.4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>LGBT Family - My parents responded negatively to my coming out due to negative associations with other LGBQ family members (3)</i></li> </ul>
4.3.5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>PARENT DIFFERENCES - Parents often influenced each other regarding rejecting or accepting, differences between parents and changes often reflected family dynamics and personalities (13)</i></li> </ul>
4.3.6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>SIBLINGS - My relationship with siblings impacted my experience of rejection via triangulation processes (10)</i></li> </ul>
4.3.7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>VALUE GAPS - The rejection simply reflected larger cultural and values conflicts between my family of origin and me (7)</i></li> </ul>

Cat. 4.4	Rejection from prev. supportive parents painful because the loss is shocking, whereas rejection from unsupportive parent compounds prior trauma (13)
4.4.1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>ANOTHER LOSS - For me, parental rejection was another loss or trauma on top of a troubled childhood (7)</i></li> </ul>
4.4.2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>STILL LOSS - Despite relationship being problematic prior to rejection making the rejection unsurprising, rejection was still painful and entailed a loss (5)</i></li> </ul>
4.4.3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>SURPRISE LOSS - Rejection felt shocking and damaging if my parents had been previously supportive, but it was still hard but less disappointing if it was consistent (11)</i></li> </ul>
<b>Cluster 5.</b>	<b>Accepting the situation involved balancing the competing needs for a safe distance, motivated by self-protection and anger, with needs for closeness motivated by yearning, compassion, and obligation. (15)</b>
Cat. 5.1	The push and pull between needing distance and yearning for closeness (14)
5.1.1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>BOTH - I felt both a need to self protect via distance and a yearning for closeness with my parents (8)</i></li> </ul>
5.1.2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>LOSE SIBLING - I had to choose between my younger siblings and my freedom to be me and choosing myself led to intense guilt (4)</i></li> </ul>
5.1.3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>OBLIGATION - I felt obligated to my parents despite the rejection and my desire for distance, because of shared cultural values or parental obligation (7)</i></li> </ul>
5.1.4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>TORN - I was torn between anger at and empathy for my rejecting parents who may be doing their best, but it was not good enough (4)</i></li> </ul>
Cat. 5.2	Reconnecting with a parent who was previously rejecting is challenging because of both damage done and prior coping that required building a life without them (9)
5.2.1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>NEW TRADITIONS - It was challenging to re-integrate with parents when they became more accepting because I had found joy in new traditions and identities without them (1)</i></li> </ul>
5.2.2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>OTHERS UNDERSTAND - It was painful when people did not understand my choices to either continue to relate to my parents or cut them off (4)</i></li> </ul>
5.2.3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>REINTEGRATE TRUST - It is challenging to accept the parent who once rejected me, because of leftover anger and hurt, and difficulty trusting them (6)</i></li> </ul>
Cat. 5.3	Compassion for parents' limitations helps with moving on from the pain of parental rejection because helps increase understanding without condoning their heterosexism (12)



5.3.1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>ACCEPT LIMITATIONS - I could accept my parent and their personal limitations, often based trauma, without condoning or internalizing their homophobia (5)</i></li> </ul>
5.3.2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>FORGIVE - Part of my coping process was forgiving the parent who rejected me so I can unload that painful burden, whether or not we reconcile (3)</i></li> </ul>
5.3.3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>INFLUENCE COMPASSION - I was coping via compassion for parent who rejected me by understanding societal influences (8)</i></li> </ul>
5.3.4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>OPEN TO CHANGE - I would be open to reconnecting with the family that previously rejected me if they take the opportunity to grow and change (7)</i></li> </ul>
Cat. 5.4	Part of coping was setting boundaries for self-protection and growth that could lead to standing up to rejecting parents, which relocated the onus for the need to change onto the parents (15)
5.4.1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>BOUNDARIES - Because my parents often lacked appropriate boundaries, my setting boundaries created emotional or physical distance from parents to enable my self exploration and protection, as well as encouraged parental change (14)</i></li> </ul>
5.4.2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>DEMANDS - After deferring to my parents, I hit a breaking point because I was enabling them, so I demanded they follow my lead and address their homophobia (9)</i></li> </ul>
5.4.3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>EMPOWERING - Standing up to rejecting parents can be empowering because it locates the problem with them and places the onus on them (8)</i></li> </ul>
5.4.4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>LOW EXPECTATIONS - I coped by lowering expectations for my rejecting parent and accepting the situation for what it is so I was not disappointed (7)</i></li> </ul>
5.4.5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>PLEADING - I desperately pleaded with my rejecting parents to change by letting them know how high the stakes were (2)</i></li> </ul>
<b>Cluster 6.</b>	<b>Growth could be achieved through sustainable coping that involved expressing emotions, whereas crisis-based coping involved avoiding pain and hindered growth if over-utilized. (15)</b>
Cat. 6.1	Whether or not things get better, participants often developed resilience and positive growth in this painful process, though their parents left a void (14)
6.1.1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>CAREER SUCCESS - While rejection inspired me to achieve professionally, it may also have reflected an attempt to prove them wrong in response to their conditional love or to appease them by succeeding professionally since I failed personally (6)</i></li> </ul>
6.1.2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>GOOD INDEPENDENCE - Despite the negatives, coping with rejection has also led to positive intense personal growth and independence (7)</i></li> </ul>

6.1.3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>I CHANGED - My relationship with my parents did not get better even when I tried to set boundaries, but I learned to cope better (5)</i></li> </ul>
6.1.4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>NEVER HEALS - There was a limit to the amount of healing possible using emotional acceptance without parents coming to accept (3)</i></li> </ul>
6.1.5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>PROFESSIONAL QUEER - I coped with the degradation of rejection by fighting heterosexism via activism, career, or daily interactions to create change (7)</i></li> </ul>
Cat. 6.2	While compartmentalizing may be necessary, long-term emotional avoidance is generally maladaptive, whether enacted directly or indirectly via substances, sex, self-harm, or workaholism (14)
6.2.1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>AVOID - I coped by avoiding my painful emotions that made me feel vulnerable and dissociating (11)</i></li> </ul>
6.2.2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>OBSERVED AVOID - Interviewer observed participant detaching emotionally when overwhelmed or minimizing emotions for self-protection during interview (3)</i></li> </ul>
6.2.3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>SELF-HARM - I coped via self-harm—cutting, eating disorder, or suicide attempt (4)</i></li> </ul>
6.2.4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>SEX DRUGS - I used or have seen others use sex and substances to socially lubricate and suppress painful emotions but ultimately harmful (9)</i></li> </ul>
6.2.5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>WORKAHOLIC - I coped by focusing on professional or academic success to avoid my emotional pain or personal life (6)</i></li> </ul>
Cat. 6.3	Adaptive, emotion-based coping involved processing the pain and practicing self-acceptance, sometimes via expressive modes like therapy or art (15)
6.3.1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>EMOTIONS Coping - Learning to express and accept my emotions helped me cope—whether through talking to others, journaling, art, or internal processes (6)</i></li> </ul>
6.3.2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>EXERCISE - Self-care like exercise and communing with nature can also be helpful ways to process emotion and practice self-love and embodiment (6)</i></li> </ul>
6.3.3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>FUTURE Coping - Having hope for things to improve in the future helped me maintain a connection to my rejecting parent (6)</i></li> </ul>
6.3.4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>SELF ACCEPTANCE Coping - Self acceptance can be healing when parents are rejecting, and may also set the tone for others to be more accepting (10)</i></li> </ul>
6.3.5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>THERAPY - Therapy is helpful if a therapist is culturally competent and tailors to client needs regarding whether to emphasize validation, change, processing, or skills (15)</i></li> </ul>

6.3.6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>TIME ACCEPTANCE Coping - The passage of time made me feel less raw and accept the pain instead of fighting it allows me to move through it (5)</i></li> </ul>
6.3.7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>TRANSFORM Coping - I was able to transform my initial pain or shame into a more empowering emotion such as anger, externalizing versus internalizing (3)</i></li> </ul>

## APPENDIX A

### DEMOGRAPHICS QUESTIONNAIRE

The following questions are to help us get a better sense of who is participating in these interviews. Some of the questions may be related to the other things we will ask about in the interview, but many of them we don't expect to be related. We just want to be able to describe the people who are interviewed so that we can clearly see how our findings might relate to people from different backgrounds. We know that these categories do not fully capture the complexities of each individual's experience, however they are an attempt to reflect the diversity of people's identities.

**Remember that you are free to choose not to respond to any questions that you are not comfortable answering.**

1. What is your current age? (*please write in answer*): \_\_\_\_\_

2. What is the biological sex that you were given when you were born (i.e., on your birth certificate)?

Male

Female

Intersex

3. What is your gender identity?

Man

Woman

MTF  
Transgender

FTM Transgender

Genderqueer

Other (Please Specify): \_\_\_\_\_)

4. What is your sexual orientation?

Bisexual

Lesbian

Gay

Queer

Other (Please Specify):  
\_\_\_\_\_

5. With what religion or spiritual practice (if any) do you currently identify?  
\_\_\_\_\_

6. With what religion or spiritual practice (if any) were you raised?  
\_\_\_\_\_

### **Racial and Ethnic Background**

We're interested in getting a complete picture of your racial and ethnic background. Because this information can be so complex, we are going to ask you several questions about your race and ethnicity in order to get as complete a picture as possible.

7. Racial categories are based on visible attributes (often skin or eye color and certain facial and bodily features) and self-identification. **In your own words, to which racial group or groups do you belong?**

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8. Ethnicity typically emphasizes the common history, nationality, geographic distribution, language, cuisine or dress of groups of people rather than their racial background (such as Cuban, Haitian, Cambodian, African-American, Ukrainian, etc.). **In your own words, with which ethnic group or groups do you identify?**

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9. In what country were you born?

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10. If you were not born in the United States, in what year did you move to the United States? \_\_\_\_\_

11. Which group below most accurately describes your racial background? (check all that apply)

- Alaskan Native/Native American/Indigenous (*please specify tribal affiliation if applicable*) \_\_\_\_\_
- Latino(a)/Hispanic (White)
- Latino(a)/Hispanic (Non-White)
- Black
- Asian
- Pacific Islander/Native Hawaiian
- White
- Multiracial (*please specify*) \_\_\_\_\_
- Other (*please specify*) \_\_\_\_\_

12. Who was your primary caregiver while you were growing up? (if you had more than one primary caregiver, you will be given a chance to respond to these items for additional caregivers)

- Mother
- Father
- Grandmother
- Grandfather
- Aunt
- Uncle
- Other family member
- Legal guardian
- Other (*please specify*): \_\_\_\_\_

13. Did you have another caregiver while you were growing up?

- Yes
- No (If no, please skip to question #15).

14. If so, who was this person?

- Mother
- Father
- Grandmother
- Grandfather
- Aunt
- Uncle
- Other family member
- Legal guardian
- Other (*please specify*): \_\_\_\_\_

15. Were either of your primary caregivers born outside of the United States?

- Yes
- No

16. What is the highest grade in school, year in college, or post-college degree work you've completed?

- 8<sup>th</sup> grade or less
- 1-3 years of high school
- 12<sup>th</sup> grade, high school diploma
- Vocational school/other non-college
- 1-3 years of college
- College degree (B.A., B.S.)
- Master's degree (e.g., MA, MBA, MS)
- Professional degree (e.g., MD, JD, PhD)

17. What is your current occupation (*please write in*): \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

18. Currently, your total household annual income level is:

- \$0 - \$15,000
- \$15,001 - \$25,000
- \$25,001 - \$35,000
- \$35,001 - \$50,000
- \$50,001 - \$75,000
- \$75,001 - \$100,000
- \$100,001 - \$200,000
- More than \$200,000

19. What is the total number of people who currently rely on this income (including yourself)?: \_\_\_\_\_

20. How would you describe your current socioeconomic status?

- Poor
- Working Class
- Middle Class
- Affluent

21. Growing up, how would you describe your family's socioeconomic status?

- Poor
- Working Class
- Middle Class
- Affluent

22. Growing up, how would you describe the financial situation of your family?

- Routinely unable to purchase sufficient food or other basic necessities
- Occasionally unable to purchase sufficient food or other basic necessities
- Never worried about having enough money for the necessities
- Had more than enough money for necessities and some luxuries

23. Among the parent(s) who raised you, (mother, father, step-parent, legal guardian/s), what is the highest level of education completed?

- 8<sup>th</sup> grade or less
- 1-3 years of high school
- High school graduate
- Vocational school/other non-college
- 1-3 years of college
- College degree
- Master's degree (e.g., MA, MBA, MS)
- Professional degree (e.g., MD, JD, PhD)

24. In what sort of community were you primarily raised?

- Farm/rural
- Small town
- Medium-sized town/Suburb
- Small city/Large suburb
- Urban



APPENDIX B  
INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

*Today I'm interested in learning about your experiences with both rejection and acceptance by your parents related to your sexual orientation and hope you have coped with this over time.*

Just to start, can you tell me a little bit about the make-up of your family? If you have siblings, who raised you, etc.?

**Rejection experience**

- I'm interested in how generally supportive your parents [or primary caregivers] were before you experienced rejection related to your sexual orientation. Tell me a little bit about your relationship with your parents before you experienced this rejection.
- What led up to your experience of rejection related to sexual orientation?
- (If you not addressed yet): Have you come out to your parents?
  - *If so*, how long ago was this? How has coming out related to your experience of parental rejection?
  - *If not*, how has not coming out related to your experience of parental rejection?
- Tell me about this experience of rejection by parents?
  - (If not described, ask: Were there differences between your parents (if more than 1 parent)?
  - How long ago did the rejection begin?

- Sometimes people describe parents being rejecting in some ways and accepting in others about their sexual orientation. Was that your experience? Tell me more about that...
- Are there things you wish they had done differently? What was the impact of parental rejection on you? Tell me about how this may have shaped how you felt about yourself and your sexual orientation...
- What was your relationship like with them more generally during this time when you experienced rejection? (was there general support for things outside of your sexual orientation?)
- In what ways have your experiences of parental rejection influenced your relationship with other family members with respect to your sexual orientation? (e.g., siblings and extended family) Friends?
- Earlier, you filled out a questionnaire that asked about other aspects of your identity. Are there ways that you think any of those aspects of your or your parents' identities, such as gender or culture, might have impacted your experience of parental rejection?
- Have your parents' responses to your sexual orientation changed over time?
  - If they have changed:*
    - How have they changed?
    - Were there differences between your parents in their changing reactions (if more than 1 parent)? How so?

- Sometimes changes in parents' reactions happen more gradually, and other times there is a specific event or moment people remember. What was this process of change like in your case?
- What factors do you think may have led up to this change? (if unclear, probe: personal events, people, larger changes in culture)
- Tell me about the impact of this change upon your experience?

For those who experience a change toward greater parental acceptance:

- Are there ways you still feel rejected?

***If they have not changed:***

- Can you describe how the rejection was expressed by your parents over time?

**Coping**

I'm really interested in learning about how LGB people cope with parental rejection related to their sexual orientation.

- Thinking back now to when things were particularly hard with (one/both of) your parents, how did you react?
- Were there certain things you did to cope? If so, what were they?
  - Were you aware at the time that you were trying to cope? How did you feel about your efforts to cope?
  - I'm wondering, did you find that some things helped more than others? If so, what were they?
  - Did you cope in different ways over time? In different situations? If so, how?

- Were there things that got in the way of your coping? If so, what were they and how did you manage them?
- Are there things you wish you had done differently? If so, what were they?
- Are there ways that any aspects of your or your parents' identities, such as gender or culture, might have impacted how you coped? If so, how did this play out?
- If your parents became more accepting, I'm wondering, how has it felt for you? Has your experience of coping changed? If so, how?
- If a friend was experiencing parental rejection related to their sexual orientation, which coping strategies might you recommend as most successful? What might you warn them to avoid?
- Have you had experiences with seeking psychotherapy for support with parental rejection?
  - *If so*, what elements of psychotherapy were most useful?
  - Which were least helpful or even detrimental?
  - *If not*, why not? Was it something you ever considered?

### **Credibility Questions**

- Is there anything else that we haven't discussed that seems relevant to your experience of these initiatives or movements? If so, can you describe it now?
- Do you think there was anything that was harder to tell me about because I am (a White cisgender woman working in an academic setting)? Or things that you think others might be reluctant to tell me in future interviews? If so, what?
- Do you have any feedback for me regarding this interview process? Is there anything that you might like to have been done differently or that you think might

be helpful with future interviews? If so, do you think this kept you from describing any part of your experience? If so, can you describe it now?

- Would it be okay for me to reach out to you again to ask for your feedback on the results of this study?

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