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How LGBTQ Adults Maintain Ties with Rejecting Parents: Theorizing "Conflict Work" as Family Work

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Abstract

Objective: The present study examines how LGBTQ-identified adults maintain relationships with parents who reject their LGBTQ gender and sexuality.

Background: Parents often reject their children's LGBTQ gender and sexuality, sometimes leading to relationship dissolution. But how LGBTQ adults maintain parent-child relationships despite parents' LGBTQ rejection is less known. We answer this question with an empirical study of how LGBTQ adults maintain relationships with parents who reject their child's LGBTQ identity, drawing on conflict management theories and the concept "family work," or the work done to promote family functioning.

Method: Qualitative in-depth interviews with 76 LGBTQ young adults are analyzed, supplemented with data from 44 of their parents.

Results: LGBTQ adults do extensive work to maintain their intergenerational bonds through what we theorize as "conflict work." We define conflict work as the effort done to manage severe conflict in a way that ensures family functioning, often at the expense of personal needs. Conflict work includes *conflict education work* (e.g., educating parents about LGBTQ identities), *conflict avoidance* work (e.g., don't ask, don't tell about LGBTQ identities), *conflict acceptance work* (e.g., ongoing but accepted conflict about LGBTQ identities), and *conflict boundary work* (e.g., asserting boundaries from parents over LGBTQ related conflict).

Conclusion: LGBTQ adults maintain the parent-child bond by managing parents' rejection of their gender or sexuality identity through "conflict work." In doing so, LGBTQ adults reveal an important new type of family work aimed at supporting family functioning during intensive conflict, often at the expense of the conflict worker's personal needs.

Keywords

family theory; intergenerational relationships; LGBTQ; parent-child relationships; transgender

Introduction

Wide-spread societal anti-LGBTQ beliefs are entrenched in one of the most cherished and long-lasting social relationships: those between parents and children (Herek, 2007; Swank,

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Fahs & Frost, 2013). Many parents experience a child's LGBTQ identity as a threat to their expectations of heterosexual and cisgender respectability and normalcy leading to significant and unique intergenerational conflict, and even estrangement (Montano et al., 2018; McGuire et al., 2016; Ryan et al., 2010; for a list of terms see Table 1). Given this relationship-damaging conflict over a child's LGBTQ status, LGBTQ people often leave the parental home and reduce or eliminate contact with parents who reject their identities (Carrington, 1999; Watson, 2014; Weston, 1991). These parental anti-LGBTQ biases are at least in part responsible for higher rates of poverty and homelessness as well as worse mental and physical health outcomes among LGBTQ people relative to their cisgender heterosexual counterparts (Russell & Fish, 2016; D'amico et al., 2015; Klein & Golub 2016).

Yet, while parents' disapproval of an LGBTQ identity is a unique and potentially devastating form of conflict that can result in estrangement, recent research suggests that the majority of LGBTQ adults *remain in* their parent-child relationships even in the face of ongoing rejection (Fischer & Kalmijn 2020; Hank & Salzburger, 2015; Norwood 2013; Reczek, 2016a, b; Ocobock, 2013). What remains underexplored in the existing literature is specifically *how* LGBTQ adults maintain intergenerational relationships in the midst of parental rejection of their gender and sexuality (Oswald 2002; Stone, 2020). This research question is the focus of the present study. To answer this question, the present study analyzes in-depth interviews with 76 LGBTQ adults, supplemented with interviews with 44 of their parents. To situate our research question and analysis, we draw on conflict management theories, or how people approach family conflict (Birditt et al., 2019; Rusbult et al., 1998), and "family work," or the work done to promote family functioning (Erickson, 1993; 2005). An examination of how LGBTQ adults manage parental rejection to stay in parent-child ties will provide a key piece of the larger puzzle on the resilience of LGBTQ family of origin relationships, and further contribute to our theoretical understanding of the maintenance of intergenerational ties amidst serious conflict.

Background

Contextualizing Conflict between Adults and their Parents

Parents and children remain closely tied even after legal independence (Bengtson, 2001). The vast majority of adult children and parents remain in consistent contact, even as 94 percent of adult children also report conflict with their parents at some point in their adult life (Birditt et al., 2009; Gilligan, Suitor & Pillemer, 2015). Conflict tends to arise when adult children do not fulfil expectations around employment, finances, lifestyle, health, college completion, the amount of contact, or moving out of the parental household (Kalmijn & De Graaf, 2012; Hammersmith, 2018; Birditt et al., 2009). While the intergenerational bond remains intact for nearly all parents and adult children, families of color report especially close bonds in part due to the importance of intergenerational kinship in the face of institutional and interpersonal racism (Hill, 2003; Stack, 1975) as well as specific emphases on cultural norms dictating close ties between family members (Acosta, 2018; Cordova et al., 2014; Asencio 2011).

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As in the general population, LGBTQ adults have conflict with their parents about jobs, school, politics, finances, and—if living with their parents—household tasks and rules (Birditt et al, 2019). However, LGBTQ adults have an additional and unique source of potential conflict due to their socially stigmatized sexual or gender identity (Reczek 2016a, b; Montano et al., 2018; Robinson, 2018; Choi et al, 2015). Given that gender and sexuality are core dimensions of identity, LGBTQ-related conflict is not a result of what adult children (or parents) *do*, but because of *who LGBTQ people are*. Because parents are most often cisgender and heterosexual (Hasenbush et al., 2014), LGBTQ identity is a key a point of difference, not similarity, between generations, making this type of conflict often more damaging and long-lasting than other forms of intergenerational conflict. Parents across all racial-ethnic identities reject children's LGBTQ identities, but the rationales, forms, and impacts of parental rejection are shaped by socio-cultural norms and structural racism (Murphy & Hardaway, 2017; Robinson, 2020; Schmitz, Robinson, & Sanchez, 2020; Tan, 2011; Ocampo 2014; Acosta 2013). Conflict with parents may be further shaped by geographic region and urbanity/rurality as LGBTQ people in different geographical contexts may modify their own negotiations of gender and sexuality in relation to their parents in line with local norms (Kazyak, 2011; 2012; Brown-Saracino, 2019).

The degree and nature of conflict with parents about an LGBTQ identity is most often studied in adolescence (typically ages 13–18), with research showing LGBTQ adolescents are significantly more likely to report conflict and less likely to report feeling supported, attached to, and close to their parents compared to their cishet peers (Andersen & Blosnich, 2013; Klein & Golub, 2016; Montano et al., 2018). Further, LGBTQ youth are more than twice as likely to be homeless because of parental conflict than are cishet youth (Morton et al., 2018; Watson, et al., 2019). The risk of poverty and being unhoused appears particularly pronounced among LGBTQ youth of color (Murphy & Hardaway, 2017; James et al., 2016), although this is not because parents of color are more homo/bi/trans phobic than white parents but because of the intersection of structural and interpersonal racism that shapes parents' ability and resources to support their children (Murphy & Hardaway, 2017; Robinson, 2018; Toomey et al., 2017; Schmitz, Robinson, & Sanchez, 2020). Additionally, a small number of studies show that those who do not neatly fall within the category of cisgender—what is sometimes called "gender expansive" (Robinson 2020)—are at an even greater risk of parental conflict than cisgender people (Robinson, 2018; Ryan et al., 2010). Half of transgender youth report either an emotional or physical break with parents post disclosure, and most transgender youth who are not out to their parents are fearful that their parents will reject them in the future (McGuire et al, 2016).

Parents' rejection of an LGBTQ status appears to continue into adulthood (Jhang, 2018; Scherrer, Kazyak, & Schmitz, 2015). Qualitative studies on mostly white LGBTQ people show that LGBTQ adult children still report conflict in their parent-child relationships including daily putdowns as well as magnified distressing interactions related to an LGBTQ identity (Reczek, 2014a; 2016a, b). Additionally, certain milestones (e.g., deaths, weddings) provide opportunities for previously ignored conflicts to re-emerge or resolve (Ocobock, 2013). Importantly, strained relationships between transgender, gender nonconforming (GNC), and other gender expansive people and their parents persist and solidify in adulthood (Norwood, 2013). In a qualitative study of 20 transgender adults in Minnesota, transgender

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people had to disclose their gender identity multiple times to family members well into adulthood due to parental rejection and lack of understanding (Brumbaugh-Johnson & Hull, 2018), reflecting other research that highlights coming out not as one moment, but as a continual process that is context specific (Orne 2011; Schmitz & Tyler 2018). Yet, research on gender expansive or non-cisgender adults and their parents is relatively understudied (Acosta, 2013).

Taken together, past research has begun to explore LGBTQ-related conflict in LGBTQ intergenerational ties, often in the form of parental rejection, but has not fully examined how LGBTQ adults manage this rejection and conflict while maintaining the parent-child tie. In order to provide a theoretical framework from which to empirically explore this question, we first draw on existing conflict management theories, followed by a discussion of the concept "family work."

How Adult Children Manage Conflict with their Parents

The strategies for navigating intergenerational conflict are wide-ranging in form and consequence. Estrangement, or little to no contact between parents and children, is one key "destructive" strategy for managing conflict, ending the intergenerational relationship (Birditt et al., 2019; Hartnett, Fingerman, and Birditt, 2018). Estrangement is relatively uncommon with most studies suggesting 2–6% of parents and children are estranged, although some research suggests up to 12% of parent-child relationships are estranged if a more inclusive definition of estrangement is used (e.g., little contact or lack of affection versus no contact; Gilligan et al. 2015; Conti 2015; Pillemer et al., 2007). Research on parent-child conflict management strategies beyond estrangement include four primary types of approaches to conflict in intact parent-child ties: engagement, avoidance, confrontation, and acceptance (Blanchard-Fields, Stein, & Watson, 2004; Fingerman, Miller, & Charles, 2008; Rusbult et al., 1998). *Engagement strategies* focus on the use of more positive approaches to resolving conflict mindfully and cooperatively. *Avoidance strategies* are typified by avoidance of conflict altogether, while *confrontation strategies* operate through engagement of conflict in a direct or aggressive way. Finally, *acceptance strategies* occur when no resolution can take place but there is an acceptance of interpersonal differences (Birditt et al., 2019).

While significant attention has been paid to the types of conflict management styles in intergenerational relationships, two interrelated gaps remain. First, it is likely that at least to some extent the type of conflict relates to the specific conflict management styles used, but the type of management style an individual chooses to undertake when there is *serious, seemingly unresolvable* conflict is undertheorized. Second, and relatedly, this body of work has not fully articulated the conflict management strategies used by LGBTQ adults when a parent rejects their LGBTQ identity—a type of conflict that fits with the notion of a serious and often unresolvable conflict (Weston, 1991). A study of conflict management in the face of LGBTQ-related conflict is an ideal source of conflict to explore these research gaps. Unlike other forms of conflict – around, say, employment status—LGBTQ-related conflict is unique in that it occurs when one member rejects another member's core sense of self. Conflict in LGBTQ child-parent ties has led to the emphasis on estrangement in

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both popular culture and research as a central pathway many LGBTQ people take (or are forced to take) due to parental rejection (Cayleff, 2008; Watson, 2014; Weston, 1991). Given that it appears this relationship is at greater risk for dissolution for LGBTQ adults when parents are anti-LGBTQ, and given the unique type of unresolvable conflict that stems from a parents' rejection of a child's LGBTQ status, a study of LGBTQ adults' specific conflict management strategies will provide important clues as to which styles of management operate in the face of intense conflict. An additional theoretical paradigm—family work—is needed to help theorize such processes.

Theorizing How LGBTQ Adult Children Manage Conflict with their Parents: Family Work

In order to theorize the specific conflict management approaches LGBTQ adults use in their parent-adult child ties, we draw on the theory of "family work." "Family work" is broadly conceptualized as the effort done to promote family functioning (Erickson, 1993; 2005), and was originally formed to demonstrate the disproportionate labor cishet women do in the home to care for the household and children. This work is often invisible and not framed as valuable work in everyday family interactions, making cishet women's disproportionate labor a site of gender inequality and stress in the family. Erickson, drawing on Hochschild (1983), added "emotion work" as a part of the family work lexicon, theorizing that the efforts to either hide or change one's own emotional state to convey a curated sense of self through the face or body play a role in family functioning (Erickson 2005). Like housework and childcare, emotion work is more likely to be disproportionally done by cisgender women married to cisgender men and not seen as "real" work, with again detrimental effects on gender equality in the family. Lastly, the concept "kin work" was added to the family work concept to highlight the efforts done to manage communication with extended family ties by maintaining multi-household family correspondence through letters, visits, gatherings, and gifts (Di Leonardo 1987; Pfeffer, 2017; Reid & Golub, 2018; Stack & Burton, 1993). This concept, like other family work components, illustrates that cisgender women are more likely to do kin work. Stack and Burton (1993) demonstrate how Black women in particular do kin work to "regenerate families, maintain lifetime continuities, sustain intergenerational responsibilities, and reinforce shared values" in a society that does not support Black kinship (p. 160; also see Madhavan & Roy 2012; Reid & Golub, 2018; Roy, 2004 for how Black men do kin work).

The umbrella concept of family work and its subsidiaries cover much of the intentional labor done to keep the family unit functioning and intact, with at least some negative consequences for those who disproportionately do this labor. However, missing is consideration of the *specific work of maintaining family functioning when there is serious conflict between one or more family members*. Just as housework, kin work, childcare, and emotion work are shown to be labor that maintains relational functioning, so too does the specific labor done to *manage conflict*—labor that has not been fully addressed in existing concepts. Thus, we theorize family work should be expanded to include "conflict work," which we define as *the effort done to manage severe conflict in a way that ensures family functioning*. Much like other forms of family work, conflict work privileges family functioning over an individual's needs (Erickson 1993; 2005; Hochschild 1983; Stack &

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Burton 1993). In the case of our study, LGBTQ people privilege the persistence of their parent-child tie over social ties that accept and value their personal identity.

We now apply our conflict work concept to the aforementioned conflict management paradigms to hypothesize how LGBTQ people will manage parents' LGBTQ-rejection to maintain their parent-child ties. We theorize that LGBTQ adults will do conflict work through positive *engagement strategies* when faced with LGBTQ-related conflict in order to address conflict *and* maintain the parent-child relationship, but not *confrontation strategies* as confrontation strategies will be more likely to end the parent-child tie due to the nature of parental discrimination and lack of acceptance. It is also likely that LGBTQ adults will do conflict work with *avoidance strategies* to avoid conflict altogether; this approach may mean that an individual does not come out or hides personal information about their LGBTQ identity from a parent to manage conflict (Birditt et al., 2019). Alternatively, LGBTQ adults may develop new ways to do conflict work not previously typologized by conflict management scholars due to the *specific source of the conflict and its potential for ending their bond*. For example, as Stone (2020) shows, gay and lesbian adults do "comfort work," which involves concerted efforts to increase parents' comfort levels with their sexuality by facilitating their entrance into LGBTQ spaces. Further, in line with an intersectional framework, LGBTQ people of color may have unique approaches to conflict work given some evidence that Black and Latinx families report especially high importance of family connections (e.g., familism, Acosta 2013). For example, Schmitz, Robinson, and Sanchez (2020) show how Latinx LGBTQ adolescents and young adults use what they call "identity management strategies" such as the work done to perform "strategic outness" (Orne, 2011) or deciding when one makes their identity visible to family, in family interactions to protect their mental well-being in the face of discrimination. Thus, given the wide range of possibilities, we examine qualitative data to examine what form of conflict work occurs in LGBTQ adult relationships with parents.

Method

Data collection.

The current study draws on data collected between 2015–2017 in a mid-sized midwestern city and the surrounding metropolitan and rural areas. In the Midwest, 3.6% of adults identify as LGBT, and an estimated 20% of all LGBTQ individuals live in the Midwest (Hasenbush et al., 2014). The study site was chosen because research on LGBTQ people has disproportionately been conducted in the coastal urban areas, and thus a missing perspective has been one that focuses on midwestern LGBTQ lives (Stone, 2018; Herring, 2010). Recent research emphasizes the role of geography in shaping LGBTQ experiences due to religiosity, political context, access to LGBTQ-affirming legal rights and protections, and a sense of LGBTQ community (Brown-Saracino, 2019; Stone, 2018).

Led by the first author, the project was developed to examine the parent-child relationships of LGBTQ adults. Following IRB approval and with written or verbal (in the case of a phone interview) informed consent from each participant, 76 interviews were conducted with LGBTQ-identified adults. Whenever possible, the researchers included the parents of the 76 LGBTQ adults; 44 parents of 40 LGBTQ adults were interviewed (4 children had

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multiple parents interviewed). When asking to interview parents, we relied on individual's definition of parents, and including biological parents, stepparents, and adoptive (legally or not) parents based on who the LGBTQ individual suggested we interview. Parents and children were interviewed separately, as is consistent with a dyadic approach (Reczek, 2014b). We only contacted parents to participate with the explicit permission of the LGBTQ adults; all parents who were contacted participated. Therefore, the parent sample is biased towards those LGBTQ who felt comfortable asking a parent to participate and includes those with more positive relationships with their children. Additionally, in the parent interviews we allowed the parent, not interviewer, to disclose the identity of their child; the vast majority of parents talked about their child's LGBTQ status without us asking. If a parent did not disclose a child's LGBTQ identity to the interviewer, the interviewer very subtly (and without outing the child) asked about any child's potential LGBTQ status at the end of the section on parent-child conflict (see Appendix B). However, it was imperative that we never outed a child to their parent; thus, even when we asked if any of their children are LGBTQ, two of the parents we interviewed talked vaguely about their child's LGBTQ status in a way that we could not directly ask follow-up questions without outing a child. As a result of these limitations, we focus on the narratives of adult children in this study.

The interviews were conducted by a team of five researchers. The first author is white and identifies as queer and gender non-binary, another interviewer is white and identifies as a queer cisgender woman, two interviewers (one of them being the second author) were white, cisgender, straight women, and one interviewer was a Black cisgender straight man. Interviews averaged about 90 minutes but spanned from 45 minutes to 3 hours. Respondents received a $20 gift card as incentive for participating; this amount is consistent with current best practices and does not create undue coercion to participate. The majority of interviews occurred in person and the location was always chosen by the respondent. Private offices were offered for every interview and preferred by the researchers due to privacy and confidentiality concerns, but in a small number of cases interviews took place in a public setting such as a coffee shop at the request of the interviewee. In these cases, effort to create privacy during the interview was paramount, but the risk of being overheard was possible. A small percentage were conducted over the phone when transportation or geographic distance was an impairment to in-person interviews.

Respondents were recruited through a variety of methods. Most respondents were recruited through flyers distributed throughout the city center in LGBTQ friendly locales, through social media, participation in transgender and gender non-conforming specific events, and through a booth at local Pride events. In addition, a small number of respondents were recruited via snowball sampling techniques. A main priority of the recruitment strategies was to have a racially and economically diverse sample of LGBTQ adults. Thus, interviewees were screened from a wider pool of interested subjects based on diversity in gender and sexual identity, age, race-ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. We used an initial screening tool via a web-based platform that allowed us to screen out participants who were in groups that were already represented in our data. Notably, once we included proportional representation of a privileged racial or class category (e.g., white cisgender men with an advanced degree), we stopped recruiting from this group; we also worked to oversample people from disadvantaged groups (e.g., racial-ethnic minorities, those without

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college education, gender minorities). We also did targeted recruitment from LGBTQ people of color organizations in order to further diversify our sample. Pseudonyms were given to all participants to protect anonymity, and we use the pronouns the participants indicated in their interviews throughout the text below. In order to protect participants, as well as their relationships with their parents, we did not engage in member checking our findings with our participants.

Participants.

After the initial screening that included questions on race-ethnicity, income, education, gender, and sexuality, the research team sent an electronic baseline survey to those chosen to be interviewed—this survey is primarily used to provide sample demographics in the current study and was given over the online platform *Google*. Survey questions were taken from existing surveys in order to address standardization, including from the *National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health* and the *National Longitudinal Survey of Youth*. This survey collected information on socioeconomic status, race, experiences of discrimination, measures of support and conflict in each parent-child tie, a household roster, and health from both parents and children. Basic demographic data from this survey is used in this paper to contextualize findings and is not meant to imply the data is nationally representative.

We included the demographic information from this survey for our LGBTQ adult sample in Table 2, including age, self-reported race, gender identity, sexuality, and household income. In the baseline survey, respondents were able to choose more than one category or write in an identity status for gender, sexuality, and race-ethnicity responses. We then constructed mutually exclusive response categories in order to construct the demographic Table 2. For gender identity, a mutually exclusive gender category was constructed with the following categories: cisgender, transgender, gender non-conforming or gender queer, multiple gender categories selected, and no response given. For this variable (see Table 2), those who selected “woman” or “man” as their gender identity and listed their sex at birth as “male” or “female” and gender and sex at birth were consistent were listed as cisgender. Those who chose only gender queer or gender nonconforming are in that category, while all those who indicated transgender as a component of their gender identity are listed in the transgender gender category. Three of the 76 individuals selected more than one gender identity and are thus in the “multiple response” category (for example, those who selected “woman” and “gender fluid”). The construction of the sexuality variable represented in Table 2 followed a similar process, with a wide variety of options presented, and then a mutually exclusive categorical variable was constructed with the categories: gay or lesbian, queer, bisexual, multiple categories selected, and other (such as pansexual, fluid, straight, etc.). Nine of the 76 respondents (12%) selected multiple sexuality categories and are included as such in Table 2. Importantly, when we quote individuals in the findings section, we detail the identities they self-selected rather than the researcher-constructed variables used in Table 2 to provide a specific and individualized picture of respondents’ identities.

Table 2 shows that LGBTQ adults in our sample have an average age of 31 with a range of 18–60. The average age of LGBTQ individuals in the Midwest is 40 (Hasenbush et al.,

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2014), but our average age is younger than that of the Midwest because we focused on recruiting younger adults. The racial and ethnic identity questions on the baseline survey had multiple options available to choose from and more than one could be selected: White, Black or African-American, Asian/Pacific Islander, Hispanic or Latino, Native American or American Indian, or Other. Our sample is 71% white (n=54), 24% non-white (n=18), and 5% (n=4) not disclosed; more detail on the race and ethnicity of our sample is in Table 2. This composition is consistent with the racial composition of LGBT individuals in the Midwest (Hasenbush et al., 2014) and the advantages and limitations of our sample demographics are discussed further in the limitations section. Additionally, we provide the demographic information for the parents we interviewed in Table 3 (n=44).

Analysis

The semi-structured interviews covered a wide range of topics, including parent-child relationships, health, and coming out experiences, from childhood to adulthood. The interview guides for both parents and children are shown in Appendix A and B. For the present study, we focus on those aspects of the interview that discuss conflict and the management of conflict in the parent-child tie. All interviews in the present study were coded using NVIVO qualitative software. We followed Deterding and Waters' (2018) flexible coding approach. This approach was developed for projects with semi-structured interviews of relatively large sample sizes (e.g., greater than 30), and includes a combination of inductive and deductive coding techniques. The strengths of this approach include the ability to "facilitate reliability, validity, and transparency" (Deterding and Waters, 2018, p. 8–9). This process led us to our findings which reflect the way respondents framed the connections between their LGBTQ identity, parent-child conflict, parent rejection, and the management of conflict.

Both authors became familiar with the data by initially sorting the interviews into broad descriptive codes based on the questions asked in the interview. For example, these descriptive codes include "parent-child conflict," "parental rejection," and "coming out experiences." After this descriptive coding the first author (only) then delved into the "parent-child conflict" and "parental rejection" codes and created more detailed codes that were broken up into 1) topics of conflict and 2) management of conflict. In relation to the topics of conflict, all adult children respondents in the sample discussed conflict with at least one parent. The majority of adult children respondents — 65 out of 76 —explicitly discussed *enduring and severe rejection of their LGBTQ-identities*, often by multiple parents (including stepparents). Accounts of a parent rejecting an LGBTQ child's identity were further coded by the first author into these non-mutually exclusive categories that describe respondents' descriptions of conflict topics: 1) a lack of acceptance of a specific LGBTQ identity (n = 53; 70% of the adult child sample), 2) a lack of acceptance of LGBTQ intimate partner and becoming an LGBTQ parent (n = 24; 32% of the adult child sample), and 3) conflict around mental and physical health issues that relate to an LGBTQ status, such as gender affirming physical changes and mental health stress regarding an LGBTQ status (n = 16; 21% of the adult child sample). Despite almost everyone (n=65) indicating that their parents reject their LGBTQ identity to some extent, almost all respondents indicated desire to stay in relationship with their parents. Those that did not talk about conflict with

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a parent over their LGBTQ-status (n=11; 14% of the adult child sample): 1) tended to have more noteworthy life course conflict with their parents around issues of substance use and abuse and mental health; these other issues overshadowed any LGBTQ conflict, which appeared secondary or not as important (n = 3), 2) were not out to their parents (n = 5), or 3) consider themselves close with their parents and only had minor conflict when they were children (n = 3). Because the present study examines conflict about LGBTQ identity, we focus on conflict related to the LGBTQ experience, although other issues such as growing up and substance use emerge in the findings presented below when overlapping with LGBTQ-specific conflict.

Next, the first author coded the "management of conflict" into themes and subthemes. After coding the LGBTQ adult children's experiences, we analyzed the parent interviews to see to what extent their perspectives were similar or different to their children's. For example, the first author would examine the LGBTQ adult child's narrative around their coming out process, and then match it with their parent's interpretation of the same event. For the most part, their perspectives matched or were similar, but we highlight those instances where there are contradictions in the findings. Once the adult children interviews had been fully coded, the same process was followed for the parent interviews—initial "descriptive" codes followed by analytical codes. After the parent interviews were coded, the first author matched the corresponding child-parent interviews to note consistencies and inconsistencies across accounts. The parents interviewed also described conflict with their children over children's LGBTQ identity; two people who did not report fighting about their child being LGBTQ at any point did not discuss their child's LGBTQ status explicitly in their interview. Rather than provide a separate analysis for parents in this paper we provide parent data to show an additional perspective on the adult child's perceptive; overall parents' interviews are consistent with the accounts provided by adult children.

Results

In this paper, we ask how LGBTQ adult children manage LGBTQ-related conflict in their intergenerational ties, with supplemental data from parents on the same topic. The analysis shows four primary, non-mutually exclusive strategies that adult children use to manage conflict in ways that maintain their parent-child ties. With ***conflict education work*** (n = 44; 58% of sample), LGBTQ respondents discuss how they directly engage with their parents through education around their LGBTQ identity to resolve conflict with their parents and stay bonded together. With ***conflict avoidance work*** (n = 36; 47% of sample), LGBTQ respondents remain engaged with their parents, but disengaged from conflict through the avoidance of discussing their LGBTQ identity and do not attempt to resolve or address this conflict. Third, LGBTQ respondents use ***conflict acceptance work*** (n= 32; 42% of sample) when they accept the underlying strain in their relationship with parents around their LGBTQ identity to stay in relationships with family. Finally, LGBTQ respondents use ***conflict boundary work*** (n = 17; 22% of sample) to set significant boundaries with their parents to manage rejection while also staying bonded. We find that a slightly higher percentage of people of color use education and acceptance approaches than is found among white respondents. Throughout, supplementary parent data show that parents agree with the assessment of how children do conflict work. Additionally, parents (and children) suggest

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that parents mirror their children's conflict avoidance, acceptance, and boundary work but only sometimes mirror their child's conflict education work. As such, we discuss parents' perspectives whenever relevant in the themes below, but do not discuss them as a separate findings section due to our analytical focus on adult children's perspectives. We also note LGBTQ respondents take different approaches at different points in their life course with parents, so respondents are reflected in multiple categories. Most LGBTQ adults' conflict work "career"—meaning how they do conflict work over time—follows the order of the results below: education then avoidance, followed by either acceptance or boundary work; parents' approaches mirrored this same trajectory.

Conflict Education Work

In the first analytical theme, respondents actively try to resolve LGBTQ-related conflict with parents through education work. This was the most used conflict work strategy in our sample, with 44 of the 76 individuals (58%) utilizing this approach at some point during adulthood. The primary way this strategy is used is through attempts to educate parents about an LGBTQ status in the hopes that their parents will become more accepting over time. This educational effort is framed as a way of maintaining relationships with their parents by actively resolving intergenerational conflict around their LGBTQ status. Those that use conflict education work do not fit neatly within previous conceptions of conflict management strategies: either engagement strategies (resolving conflict mindfully and cooperatively) or confrontation strategies (engagement in conflict in a direct or aggressive way) (Birditt et al., 2019). Because of the rejection of a core part of respondent's identity, educational attempts to conflict can be cooperative and relatively calm or can be direct or more contentious and that depends on how both members of the parent-child tie engage in that conflict and are willing (or not willing) to learn and change.

Percy (25 years, white, gay cisgender man) and his mom were estranged for about two years because she could not accept him being gay. However, in an attempt to manage her rejection while also maintaining their relationship, Percy performed conflict education work to help his parents accept him. Part of this educational work was showing his mother that he has a solid intimate relationship that deserves respect. After Percy found a significant other, bringing his partner around is a way to educate parents about how "normal" it is to be gay; this education facilitated reconciliation between the pair and supports the continuation of their relationship today:

> I will say they're evolving on that stance, because for the longest time they thought it was a choice and they thought you know, things were gonna go away eventually. Like this is just a phase, but I think they're realizing they see my investment in Andrew and they see we cohabitate, we've talked of marriage, we've done all of these things, so I think they're slowly realizing that oh, this is something that is permanent, it's not gonna go away. So it's an evolving process for sure.

Percy's mother, Rosa (54, white, cisgender, straight woman), echoes Percy's sentiments and acknowledges her reaction as "very bad." when Percy first came out. Rosa says she:

> Didn't understand, and my first reaction after hearing that, oh my God, my son is going to be made fun of, my son's going to have, you know, all of these terrible

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> things that the world has against gays and lesbians, it was just total fear at first. No, no, no…I am a fifty-four-year-old rural Catholic raised, Catholic educated, Catholic school for eight years, and so I kinda had to figure out and educate myself.

Rosa, with Percy and his partner's help, did work to educate Rosa on their relationship and what it means to be in a gay couple today. One of the ways this education happened, at Percy's request, was through therapy. Rosa explains: "we went to therapy and we both worked through that and I think our relationship is now stronger than it's ever been…he gave me a lot of good information from some of the things he was reading and the therapist gave me some really good websites to look at and read…it was just a lot of that." Both Percy and Rosa now focus on how Rosa's education worked to reconcile their relationship and continues to help them navigate Rosa's homophobia, keeping them bonded.

Transgender, GNC, and GQ respondents have the especially taxing job of educating their parents about their gender identity, and this education is critical to maintain this bond. This is because gender transitioning involves the use of new pronouns, a change in appearance, and a new gender-affirming name; if not for educational work many of these intergenerational ties would end. Alyson (23 years, white, transgender and GQ, queer) uses ze/hir/hir pronouns to signify hir gender, although ze allows hir parents to use they/them pronouns as it's easier for them to comprehend (notably, they still fail at appropriately gendering hir) (For explanation of different pronouns, see Tobia 2016). Ze works hard to educate hir parents about hir trans and genderqueer identity, reporting some successes and some failures. Alyson says, "Last time I saw [my parents], my father called me the wrong name. And I was like, 'Hey. That's not me. Try again.' And then he was like, 'Oh, that's right.' And it really bugs me when people won't correct themselves after I say something." Alyson goes on to explain, "I know it's kind of persnickety but I want people to be like, 'Oh sorry. Alyson.' That's the one. Because saying it will reinforce that that is [my name]. And then it will help them in the future remember not to do that." Unfortunately, this does not occur with hir mom:

> She was saying something about me to him, we were both standing there, so she said 'she.' And I didn't say anything until after she had finished her sentence, and stopped talking, and then was like, "Hey, by the way, still 'they'. Good try. But still 'they'" And then she flipped. "Oh, don't be mad."

While Alyson sees some progress from hir parents in that they at least try to get hir pronouns and name correct, Alyson still has to consistently work to educate hir parents as a way to manage and hopefully someday resolve this conflict. We interviewed Alison's mom, Margaret (55, white, cisgender straight woman), who had a similar if not more contentious view of their relationship. Margaret reflects on Alyson's engaged style of communication, saying, "She'll [referencing Alyson] just jump all over you if you accidently say "her" …she gets very angry. I just handle her with gloves." Later in the interview Margaret acknowledges her struggle with pronouns even in the context of the interview, saying, "I felt like, I'll be honest, when she did that, I'm going to quit worrying about this pronoun when it's just me and you. It's just throwing my speech pattern off and it's just making nervous. So we just won't tell her that- But I just want to talk normal." Matters of Alyson's gender identity are still deep sources of conflict in their relationship, but Alyson continues to use the

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strategy of education to address this issue in a way that allows Alyson to be in relationship with hir parents.

Similarly, Alicia (41 years, Native American or American Indian, bisexual transgender woman) also works to educate her mom (who was not interviewed) about her gender transition in order to facilitate and maintain her parent-child relationship. While this education is not always successful, her continued educational efforts continue to bond the two together. She says:

> She still calls me son on the phone, and I still have to correct her much to chagrin. And sometimes … she'll do good, she'll do good, she'll do good, and then she'll slip up. And it's like, "Oy." It's more aggravating than anything. Because every time she does it …. I do a face palm and it's like, "Oy." And it's like, "No mom. I'm not your son anymore. I'm your daughter." "I'm sorry son. I mean daughter." And she'll get mad at herself and she'll kind of start stuttering. It's like, "It's okay."

Alicia's engagement in education around her identity reflects the ongoing process of parent-child relationship management, which also turns to conflict avoidance work, which we'll discuss next, as Alicia explains, "And then I have to go on to another subject and defuse it so she won't beat herself up too much" when her mom misgenders or deadnames her. In addition to educating, Alicia noted actively including her mother in her transition process by asking for her help choosing a name. This points to other collaborative strategies parents and children may use to improve their relationship (for other examples, see Oswald, 2002).

Respondents in this category actively worked to educate their parents as a way to work through conflict to maintain their parent-child relationship. These educational efforts further operated through introduction of partners and children in a way that increases parental understanding and acceptance of their identity, solidifying the bond between parents and children even when parents are rejecting of an LGBTQ identity.

Conflict Avoidance Work

In the second most common theme in our analysis, and in stark contrast to conflict education work, respondents work to *avoid* the topic of their LGBTQ status altogether to manage conflict and stay in their parent-child relationship. Respondents keep their sexual identity under a low profile—sometimes even hiding it after initial disclosure—to not create additional conflict with their parents. This avoidance of conflict allows respondents to remain connected to their parents in the presence of enduring conflict around an LGBTQ identity. 36 of 76 respondents (47% of the sample) indicated using this strategy at one point or another.

Clarence (46 years, white, gay cisgender man) describes this approach, saying: "My family, they're more of a 'listen, don't rock the boat' kind of family. … It's never really that 'in your face'" and Clarence respects that culture to manage potential conflict with his parents and maintain the parent-child relationship. This "don't ask, don't tell" approach occurs even when parents *know* their child has an LGBTQ identity. When Clarence's mom, Gayle (72, white, cisgender straight woman), was asked about her feelings about Clarence being gay she said, "I just want him to be happy, and live his life like he feels he should, and be

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accepted for who he was meant to be" and considers their relationship still "very, very close." But, when asked if she has ever had a conversation about Clarence's identity "as a family, no. No." She explains that her husband has "cousins and brothers [that have been gay] and so it's always been something that has been always, I'll say, in the closet…they didn't address it in his family." This speaks to a larger familial culture of not talking about topics like sexuality. While there is acceptance towards Clarence, it is something that is not talked about within their family to keep the peace and avoid conflict.

Elle (30 years, Black, genderqueer, sexually queer) cut their parents (whom we did not interview) out of their life when they were an adolescent. But today, they discuss the way this relationship was reconciled by using a conflict avoidance approach:

> It kind of became a "don't ask don't tell" after 16, so I was like, I can live with that. …I don't think she knew how to deal with the information and so we never talked about this. … It was awkward when it came up. Let's not make it awkward anymore. You don't have that type of relationship. So let's move on… I feel like I can't be that straightforward with my mother because as strong as my mother is she's also quite fragile.

As an attempt to avoid conflict and pain for their mother by bringing up their gender and sexuality, Elle avoids the topic. This strategy keeps them connected to one another, protects a "fragile" mother, and allows Elle to go on without acceptance from their mom.

Similarly, Bruce (60 years, white, gay cisgender man) discusses how he and his parents work to not talk about his sexuality or his HIV-positive status. When asked if his parents were there for him when he was diagnosed with HIV, he says:

> No, they don't talk about that. They don't wanna know about that. …my father, my mother, my step mother, my step father, my brothers, they cannot handle that. Because it's not in… their repertoire of what they can deal with. They can only deal with me if I stay on a level that they're willing to live in. That level is this is my world, this kind of stuff doesn't exist. If it does exist, I don't see it, you know what I mean? They all act like it's okay, but it's like one of those — "yes, it's okay with me, but don't talk to me about it. Don't ask me questions, don't ask me how I feel about it, don't bring it up." So they really aren't okay with it.

As a result of knowing any mention of his sexuality will make his family uncomfortable, Bruce does not discuss his personal life to avoid additional conflict. Laurie (71, white, cisgender straight woman), Bruce's stepmother, echoes this, saying, "It didn't do any good to talk about the negative things because there wasn't anything you could do about it… what good does that do?" Laurie expands on the family dynamic of not discussing certain topics to minimize conflict: "I'm not a helicopter mom…you don't talk about specific things like they're having a problem here, they're having a problem there." In both Bruce's and Laurie's interviews they acknowledge avoiding certain conversations around Bruce's sexuality. Whether this reluctance to talk about an LGBTQ identity is driven by a parent or a child, avoiding talking about the topic is a key way LGBTQ adults negotiate conflict with parents in order to navigate and maintain the parent-child tie.

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Bonnie (20 years old, Asian/pacific islander, lesbian cisgender woman) has to reimagine her relationship with her parents in order to sustain it. Bonnie frames her relationship with her parents as based in quality time and talking with them often. However, she acknowledges there is some conflict under the surface around her LGBTQ identity, especially for her mom who does not accept her sexuality because "she's Korean so I think she kind of derives from that from a more traditional sense of what she wants her child's family to be like." Bonnie manages this conflict through avoidance of topics related to her sexuality:

> I'm close with my family, but it's … I don't know. We don't really talk about those kinds of things [like sexuality and gender]. … We hang a lot, I guess. I see them a lot. But we don't really talk about … I don't really like talking about mental illness stuff with them or emotional things or sexuality or just basically anything that I'm uncomfortable with, I guess.

Bonnie actively redefines her expectations of her parents so that she can continue the parent-child relationship. Respondents in this category negotiated their relationships with their parents by making choices about what to discuss and what not to. Individuals often sensed discomfort around their LGBTQ identity and thus chose to maintain the relationship through avoidance of discussing their LGBTQ identity.

Conflict Acceptance Work

While the above theme of conflict avoidance work illustrates how respondents explicitly do not discuss their sexuality as a conflict management strategy, others accept conflict and choose to "let it go" to stay bonded in their intergenerational tie. These respondents do not necessarily avoid talking about or hide their LGBTQ identity as is the case with conflict avoidance work, nor do they seek out trying to explain themselves as in conflict education work. Instead, these respondents see that the best course of action for them staying in the family is to present who they are and accept the conflict that arises as part of the relationship. 32 of our 76 respondents (42%) indicated using this conflict management style at one point in their relationship with their parents. For these respondents, having a relationship with a parent —even a conflictual one— *and* being openly themselves maintains the relationship, which is the most important thing to them even if that relationship is conflictual.

Cheryl (28 years, Black, lesbian cisgender woman) believes that her mother (whom we did not interview) is never going to fully accept her. Cheryl does not expend energy trying to change her mom, gain acceptance, or look for an apology. However, she is determined to not be avoidant either and shares her LGBTQ identity with her mom. Cheryl says:

> I grew up and I just learned to stop looking for an apology and for things to be perfect. It's just not worth it. It can't be, because she'll never be what you're looking for. Just move past that expectation that she would ever apologize or be the mother that I would want her to be. Any of what she said or how she treated me. So I just let it go. … because I knew it would just poison the relationship that we do have now. So I just let it go. I just don't think about it.

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Cheryl does not hide her identity, but also does not try to change her mother any longer or engage in past conflict around her identity. This allows her to maintain a relationship with her mom, but also embrace her own LGBTQ status.

Like Cheryl, Pam, a 20-year-old white bisexual woman, has now accepted that her dad will not change his rejection of her identity, "I've reached the acceptance stage. It's like this is just how you are, and I can try to make a dent in it, or I can remove myself. It's just, like, this is how you are, and I just have to accept that 'cause you're my dad, and that's how you are." Pam recognizes that she *could* leave this relationship, but chooses not to and thus has to accept the rejection. Maryanne (50, white, cisgender straight woman), Pam's mother, also notes this management of tension in the relationship between Pam and her dad. Maryanne says:

> I've had [Pam] get pissed at me. "Mom, why do you let him argue and you don't say anything?" And I tell her, honey, that's because I don't care to fight about it. There's no winner. I fought and fought when they were younger about [political] stuff and it doesn't make you feel good. It doesn't, there's no resolution, there's not satisfactory resolution. …And so, I just learned over the years…that it's not worth it mentally and emotionally to me to engage in that conflict."

As their quotes illustrate, both Cheryl and Pam know there is conflict, but accept this conflict as part of family life even if they wish it would be different. They frame conflict as inherent in the relationship, and that this relationship must be maintained no matter what. How they do so is through acceptance of what is.

Like others, Kellie (42 years, white, queer, cisgender woman) says that the conflict around her sexuality is not resolved with her parents (whom we did not interview), she does not "believe in spending a lot of energy on things I can't control." She wants to maintain this relationship, and as a result she must "accept it [their rejection] even if it makes me sad sometimes." Kellie explains that she moves the locus of acceptance internally, saying, "like, acceptance of things that I can't control and try to like, appreciate the good, and what I do have versus what, you know, my ideal would be." Kellie privileges the positives in the relationship with her parents over an imagined ideal to preserve the parent-child tie and minimize conflict and discomfort. She wants to stay in this relationship and thus believes she must accept who they are, even when they are rejecting.

Similarly, Geoff (36 years, white, trans and genderqueer/gender non-conforming (GQ/GNC), sexually queer) deploys a strategy of acceptance to maintain conflictual parent-child relationships. Geoff reflects on this:

> I've always loved [my dad]. He's a good man. And so I guess I've just been able to see that he's a good man. He works hard. He loves his god. He loves his family. What else can you ask? He does what he thinks is right. Even if I don't think it's right, like we're not going to agree, that doesn't mean he's not a good man.

Despite tension and conflict around Geoff's sexuality and gender identity, Geoff focuses on the good qualities they see in their father, enabling them to maintain this relationship because of the good qualities. Geoff's mother, Monica (68, white, cisgender straight

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woman), echoes the combination of tension and acceptance in their relationship. When asked how her husband reacted when Geoff came out as a transgender man, Monica suggests that they took more of an avoidance approach, saying, "You know, we didn't really discuss it. That sounds terrible. We're realizing now more that things that we didn't discuss Geoff has kind of begun to tell us… there wasn't a lot of discussion." The conflict and tension between Geoff and his parents is navigated by strategies of conflict acceptance work by Geoff, and conflict avoidance work by their mom.

The respondents in this theme want a connected relationship with their parents, but are rejected by them. As a result, they have decided they do not want to fight with their parents over their LGBTQ status, especially when it's clear there will not be a change as this fighting could mean estrangement. At the same time, they also refuse to be anyone but who they are and vow to let their parents' ignorance or disrespect go so they can stay connected. Respondents do not directly address the conflict like those who use conflict education work, do not hide or refuse to discuss their LGBTQ identity like those who use conflict avoidance work, but instead accept conflict by working to let go of any pain caused by unsupportive parents while remaining as close as possible to their intergenerational tie.

Conflict Boundary Work

In the final theme, respondents set boundaries around conflict for a period of time, often through the setting of strict boundaries around contact, with the ultimate effect of managing rejection in a way that allowed them to maintain a long-term relationship with parents. In a minority of cases in our sample, LGBTQ people ran away, left home, set boundaries, or stopped talking to parents for a period of time as a way to manage an unhealthy and unsupportive environment. This theme again extends beyond other typologies of conflict management (Birditt et al., 2019) by highlighting boundary setting as a form of conflict management. For example, Darrin (30 years, white, cisgender gay man) was rejected from his home by his parents, and afterward did not talk to them for a few years, saying "When I came out at 15, we didn't talk again until I was almost 18. After they kicked me out, I didn't really have any relationship with my parents for the remaining teenage years. … So I just lived through friends or [was homeless]." Darrin stayed in touch with his parents after he moved out on account of the distance; the strain continued but it was bearable given his boundaries.

Similarly, Brad (19 years, white, gay transgender man) experienced significant rejection around his transgender identity from his father. First, he disengaged from his father for a period of time in order to set stronger boundaries; however, he now maintains some form of relationship with his dad, saying: "I don't want to be without a dad. I went like that for a couple years and I didn't like it. I wouldn't talk to him or have anything to do with him." Thus, Brad changed his style of management from cutting his father out to slowly finding a relationship through boundary management and less contact.

As a way to help explain how approaches change over time, we return to a discussion of Alyson. Above, Alyson talked above about working to educate hir parents about hir identity. But, prior to these educational efforts xi set strict boundaries with hir mom, Margaret. "They were not being supportive of my relationship with my wife or anything else about

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me," Alyson explains, "They were not supporting my life choices, and my mother was constantly threatening to cut off my phone and other things like that if I did not do what she wanted." Alyson decided to set strict boundaries around contact with hir mom for a period, dictating little contact, but Alyson and hir parents have since returned to more contact in their relationship where Alyson has tried to educate hir mom. Alyson explains, "It's not a very good relationship, but I do try to have like casual social contact as well. It was much less openly hostile." Alyson found this conflict untenable, and in turn used multiple conflict strategies—first conflict boundary work, then conflict education work—to navigate their conflict and ultimately stay in this relationship.

Max (37 years, Black, transgender and GQ, sexually queer) also reflects on the role of boundaries and shifting the norms in his parent-child relationship as a necessity for their parent-child relationship. When Max came out to his dad, his dad responded by telling Max, "You're Black, you can't be gay too. The world is just gonna be so bad for you." This reaction deeply damaged his relationship with his father and was very painful for Max:

> I decided maybe four or five years ago to start setting up more boundaries. For a while I had rules like if I go home and I see you fighting I will leave immediately. You know now I own my own car, I don't have to rely on you for this, that or the other. I worked really hard to make myself financially independent so that I could be like, "No, I won't stand for this. I won't be in this space, I'm out of here." I'll stay in a hotel if I have to, and I can afford that now, you know? That kind of thing.…So I have very strict rules around [my parent's] engagement in my life. And since I've done that, I know it seems kind of sad, but it's not. It's very healthy. I've learned that the saddest part of it was when I was still so hopeful that things would change, then I would be like, "Oh yeah, come and visit, come and do this. It's gonna be great." Then it wasn't different, you know?

Max actively sought to be financially independent so that he could then engage in significant boundary setting and physical distancing.

Taken together, respondents in this theme demonstrate the ways reducing contact with an unsupportive parent is a way to manage deep hurt and strain—and is especially useful with fathers who are non-coresidential. While for some this reduction of contact is simply limited, others make a strict cut preventing any contact with parents when conflict is too severe. Respondents in this theme disengage with parents to disengage with conflict, often trying to engage again after some time has passed, allowing for the long-term preservation of the parent-child tie. Respondents in this theme used strategies from other themes in the results prior to or after cutting their parents off, suggesting shifting strategies after a period of estrangement.

Discussion

Relationships between parents and children are among the longest lasting and closest social ties, and as such, conflict in these relationships impacts children's life chances far beyond adolescence (Birditt et al., 2009). LGBTQ individuals routinely experience intense intergenerational conflict due to parents' rejection of their LGBTQ identity in ways unique

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to this socially marginalized population (James et al., 2016; Montano et al., 2018). While a vast number of studies show that estrangement is one way LGBTQ adults deal with rejection (Cayleff, 2008; Watson, 2014; Weston, 1991), the specific ways LGBTQ adults maintain intergenerational relationships in the midst of parental rejection of their gender and sexuality is underexplored. Grounded in theories of conflict management and family work, we show how LGBTQ adults do what we call "conflict work" to maintain the functioning of the parent-child tie even as a parent rejects aspects of their core identity. While family scholarship has primarily assumed that parent-child ties are *permanent* and thus not in need of labor to be created nor sustained, our concept of conflict work shows that in the presence of conflict around a core aspect of the self, there is in fact intensive work done to maintain the parent-child tie. Below, we further articulate our concept of conflict work as a contribution to family theory and show the specific forms of conflict work used by LGBTQ adult children within a broader cultural frame that prioritizes the sustaining of parent-child ties.

Our concept of conflict work provides an important addition to the family work lexicon. Conflict work highlights how the work done to manage conflict and keep the family—and the parent-child tie more specifically—functioning and intact is unequally distributed within the family unit and in society more broadly. For example, family work—including emotion work, housework, and childcare—is unequally distributed in the family because of broader systems of sexism and gendered family traditionalism (Erickson, 1993; 2005; Hochschild, 1983) while kin work is more visible in racial-ethnic minoritized families due to social forces such as racism and racial violence (e.g., policing) that pull families apart rather than keeping them together (Stack & Burton, 1993; Reid & Golub, 2018; Roy, 2004). In a similar vein, we argue that as a result of societal, legal, institutional, and interpersonal rejection over something that is core to the self – gender and sexuality identity (Stone 2020) —LGBTQ adults make the work done to maintain the parent-child tie *exceptionally visible*. LGBTQ adults do significant work to keep their relationship functioning when a parent rejects them by managing conflict in very specific ways.

This case study of LGBTQ adult children makes conflict work dynamics more apparent as parents' anti-LGBTQ beliefs and biases are often so damaging that LGBTQ adults have work diligently to navigate parents' homophobia or transphobia just to exist in their relationships (Andersen & Blosnich, 2013; D'Amico et al., 2015; Montano et al., 2018). This work is done at the expense of LGBTQ individuals' personal needs—including the need to feel accepted by parents, the need to feel one can be authentic and true to oneself in the presence of parents, and the need to be secure in the stability of the parent-child tie (Robinson, 2018; Montano et al., 2018). Notably, while the narratives of LGBTQ people and their parents were crucial in revealing conflict work theory, additional theory development and empirical testing of conflict work can and should be done on other parent-child and family ties in order to advance and refine this concept.

The specific conflict work strategies used by LGBTQ people provide a clearer view of exactly how this trade-off between individual needs and family functioning takes place. Two of the conflict management strategies found in our sample mirror those in the general population (Birditt et al., 2019; Blanchard-Fields, Stein, & Watson, 2004; Fingerman,

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Miller, & Charles, 2008): LGBTQ adults stay in relationship with parents but *purposefully* do not discuss their LGBTQ identity (*conflict avoidance work*) or stay in touch with parents while accepting that their parents will not fully accept their LGBTQ identity (*conflict acceptance work*). In both cases, respondents know that parents will not support their LGBTQ identity, and believe it is their individual responsibility to cope with parents' disapproval while still maintaining their parent-child tie. These types of conflict work are a painful personal bargain for adult children, as LGBTQ people in these themes note the psychological toll of parental rejection alongside the need to do emotion work to hide the pain of parental rejection. In order to maintain this tie, children believe they can come to terms with their parents' rejection of their identity, a unique experience compared to other parent-child conflicts where conflict is more likely to be about what one *does* rather than who one *is*. LGBTQ adult children believe that privileging the relationship with parents over their own needs is necessary to maintain their relationships, and so still do "conflict work" to maintain these relationships, even when these relationships are not supportive or accepting.

In addition to avoidance and acceptance strategies, educational conflict work is a resolution style uniquely revealed in LGBTQ child-parent relationships. We believe that this is in part because the conflict regards a core aspect of the self that is stigmatized in society more broadly, and thus requires explanation (Stone, 2020). Education conflict work is both confrontational and conciliatory and as such it straddles past conceptualizations of conflict as either confrontational (direct or aggressive) or engaging in conflict (calm, cooperative). This form of conflict work includes calling out parents for using terms incorrectly, pointing out assumptions about the meanings of sexuality or gender, and responding when parents make anti-LGBTQ statements. This maintains the parent-child tie not by ignoring an LGBTQ status, but by making it the center of both conversation and arguments with the goal of reaching understanding or resolving the conflict. The ability to talk through conflict regarding an LGBTQ status may be central to the preservation of these parent-child ties but is only an effective strategy when both members of the parent-child tie are open to change and learning and have a commitment to cooperative conflict work (Stone, 2020). Notably, doing education conflict work appears especially important for maintaining the family ties of transgender and gender expansive (e.g., GNC/GQ) adults. We posit this is because gender expansive and transgender adults often cannot easily hide their gender, as one is sometimes (but certainly not always) able to do for sexual identity (Zimman, 2009), and gender expansive people may be more likely to experience stigma or discrimination for their identity from their parents than cisgender adults (James et al., 2016; Choi et al., 2015). Additionally, there are higher levels of bigotry regarding transgender and gender expansive individuals relative to the more socially accepted and understood gay and lesbian identities today (Norwood, 2013; James et al., 2016; Brumbaugh-Johnson & Hull, 2018), requiring transgender and gender expansive individuals to do more educational efforts to explain their identities to maintain the parent-child tie.

Finally, when LGBTQ adults are unable to resolve conflict or were unwilling or unable to use avoidance or acceptance strategies, boundary work strategies create a stopgap around the parent-child tie that both allow for the relationship to continue while also reducing harm to the LGBTQ adult. This strategy also appears outside the current model of conflict management theories, likely because it occurs primarily when conflict is serious and has the

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strongest potential for estrangement. When the cost of other types of conflict work become too high for the LGBTQ adult, boundary work is used to reset the borders of the parent-child relationship to preserve the self; adult children in this theme gain distance from parents and heal from a hurtful response to disclosure or failed educational, avoidance, or acceptance attempts. We see these different forms of conflict work operating in a sequential order, with boundary work often the last stop before entertaining permanent estrangement. As such, it may be that only the most conflictual intergenerational ties find boundary work a useful strategy.

Limitations.

This study makes significant contributions to our understanding of specifically *how* LGBTQ adults maintain intergenerational relationships in the midst of parental rejection of their gender and sexuality, as well as introduces conflict work as part of the family work umbrella, but limitations must be acknowledged. While we engage with how conflict work differs for those who are gender minorities versus those who are sexual minorities, future research should explore how biphobia, transphobia, and homophobia are shaped by racism and classism, likely influencing the level and necessity of conflict work. We analyzed our data by race and class and find very few differences across groups, although we do find that a slightly higher percentage of people of color use education and acceptance approaches than is found among white respondents (Acosta, 2013; Lei & South, 2016; Schmitz & Tyler, 2018a). We also find that at least some parental responses to an LGBTQ identity are viewed as explicitly raced by respondents. Importantly, the majority of the research team was white, which likely shaped what respondents, particularly people of color, may have felt comfortable (or not) sharing with us, shaping the type of data that was collected. Further research examining how conflict work is done by LGBTQ people of color within structures of racism and homophobia is central (see Schmitz, Robinson, & Sanchez 2020). Moreover, the sample includes adult children and their parents that inhabit different age, period, and cohort groupings (adult children are ages 18–60 with the mean age of 30). As a result, children and their parents have grown up during several different eras with different levels of anti-LGBTQ laws, experiences, and public opinion. We did not see clear age/period/cohort patterns in the data although we do note that our older LGBTQ adults came out much later (if at all) to their parents than our younger LGBTQ adults and were also more likely to use multiple strategies of conflict management. Future work should pay more attention to age/cohort/period differentiation in the management of conflict in LGBTQ intergenerational ties.

Finally, we are limited by the fact that only half of our LGBTQ adults agreed to have their parent be interviewed. This creates sampling bias in relation to the parent sample; as seen in Table 3, our sample of parents is disproportionately white, cishet women. We find that those who had a parent interviewed were more likely to use educational and avoidance work; those without a parent interviewed were more likely to use boundary and acceptance work. To explore further how conflict work varies by gender of the parent and child, as well as race, a more diverse sample of parents is necessary in future research.

Moreover, adult children usually have more than one parent that exist within a "family system" — including mothers, fathers, stepfathers, stepmothers, and other parent-figures but also siblings, aunts, uncles, and grandparents (Broderick, 1993; Fingerman & Bermann, 2000). Because the family is a constellation of ties, different family members may engage in different forms or degrees of conflict work, contributing to changes over time. Examining how different approaches are used with different family members within extended families is a fruitful site for future research. We also note that while we have focused our analysis on the conflict work of adult children, some parents, especially mothers, also undertook conflict work in their attempts to deal with conflict with their child—including doing conflict work with the child's father to keep the father-child relationship intact. Future work should explore how the gender of the parent matters in conflict work processes.

Conclusion

This study breaks new ground by demonstrating the pervasive conflict work done by LGBTQ adults to maintain intergenerational ties the face of parental rejection. This study emphasizes the forces of resilience in parent-child ties, even under strained conditions, driven by the intensive labor done by LGBTQ adults. The variety of conflict work strategies done to keep parents and children bonded— from avoiding conflict (*conflict avoidance work*), to accepting the parent-child conflict (*conflict acceptance work*), to trying to educate parents (*conflict education work*), to setting significant boundaries around the parent-child tie (*conflict boundary work*)— suggests a flexibility in how adults approach relationships with parents over time. Findings from this study show the complexity of the parent-child tie when a fundamental aspect of identity is socially contested (i.e., sexuality and gender identity), and provides new insight into how conflict with parents can be effectively managed by adult children within a broader cultural frame that prioritizes remaining in the family. Conflict work is a new theoretical tool to help us explain how family relationships persist beyond the LGBTQ context and can be applied to and tested in other family and social ties that experience significant conflict but remain intact.

Supplementary Material

Refer to Web version on PubMed Central for supplementary material.

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Table 1:

Key Terms

Terms	Definitions
LGBTQ	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning, Asexual, Intersex, and other sexual and gender minoritized identities
Cisgender	A person whose assigned sex at birth aligns with their current gender identity and expression
Transgender	A person whose gender identity is other than their sex assigned at birth, and/or someone who takes a trans identity that can include transwoman, transman, or transgender person
Gender Queer	A person who eschews the binary sex and gender system; a person whose gender identity and expression lies outside of the system of contemporary normative gender categories of man and woman
Gender Non-conforming	A person whose gender expression and identity differs from or lies outside of the traditional gender categories and identities of man or woman
Asexual	A person who does not have sexual attraction to or sexual interest in other people; a person who identifies as an asexual
Heterosexual	A person who is primarily attracted to people of a different sex; a person who identifies as a heterosexual or straight person
Bisexual	A person who is attracted to men and women; a person who is attracted to people of any gender
Pansexual	A person who is attracted to people of any gender

This table of key terms is a truncated version of that found in Reczek (2020). We note that terminology is always changing and varies across subcultures; this is the most accurate representation of terms at the current moment.

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Table 2:

Demographic Information on Adult Children Sample

Total Number of Respondents: 76			
Self-Identified Sexuality		**Household Income**	
Gay or lesbian	39 (51%)	$1–$49,999	34 (45%)
Queer	13 (17%)	Above $50,000	33 (43%)
Bisexual	12 (16%)	No response	9 (12%)
Multiple categories selected	9 (12%)	**Gender**	
Other (pansexual, fluid, straight)	3 (4%)	Cisgender	47 (62%)
Age		Transgender	18 (23%)
Average	31	Gender queer/Gender nonconforming	6 (8%)
Range	18–60	Multiple gender categories selected	3 (4%)
Education		Not disclosed	2 (3%)
Some High School	1 (1%)	**Race**	
High School Graduate	7 (9%)	White	54 (71%)
Some College or Technical School	16 (21%)	Black	10 (13%)
Current Student	11 (14%)	Asian or Pacific/Islander	3 (4%)
College Graduate	20 (26%)	Multi-Racial	2 (3%)
Post-graduate or professional	18 (24%)	Hispanic or Latinx	2 (3%)
No response	3 (4%)	Native American or American Indian	1 (1%)
		No response	4 (5%)

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Table 3:

Demographic Information on Parent Sample

Total Number of Respondents: 44			
Self-Identified Sexuality		**Household Income**	
Straight	40 (91%)	$1–$49,999	11 (25%)
Queer, Bisexual, or Fluid	4 (9%)	$50,000–$99,999	17 (39%)
Age		$100,000 or above	15 (34%)
Average	59	No response	1 (2%)
Range	42–77	**Gender**	
Education		Cisgender man	10 (23%)
High School Graduate	8 (18%)	Cisgender woman	34 (77%)
Some College or Technical School	11 (25%)	**Race**	
College Graduate	12 (27%)	White	40 (90%)
Post-graduate or professional	12 (27%)	Black	3 (7%)
No response	1 (2%)	Hispanic or Latinx	1 (2%)