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Approaches Mainline Protestant Pastors Use to Work with LGB People and Their Families: Implications for Family Therapists

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Abstract

When a loved one comes out as lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB), families often seek the assistance of a trusted professional. For many families that involves seeking the consultation of a religious leader. This queer theory informed qualitative study sought to explore how Christian pastors work with LGB individuals and their families. Additionally, this study explored how pastors' approaches to working with LGB individuals and their families varied based on the degree to which families were accepting or rejecting of their LGB family members. Twenty-one mainline Protestant Christian pastors were interviewed. Thematic analysis identified three themes

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and a number of subthemes that provide new insights for family therapists by highlighting that pastors engaged in theological conversations with families to encourage acceptance, walked with families in their journey of navigating external discrimination, and provided resources such as connection to community services and referrals to family therapy.

Keywords: Family acceptance, family rejection, LGB sexual orientations, mainline protestant Christian pastors, religion

Introduction

When families experience a loved one disclosing their marginalized sexual orientation, they often seek out the assistance and perspective of a professional, such as a therapist or religious leader. When families struggle with responding to a member coming out as lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB), that struggle is often based on their own religious beliefs and the teachings of their faith communities. Because of this, families often reach out to religious leaders (Baiocco et al., 2015; McCormick & Krieger, 2020; Raedel et al., 2020; VanderWaal et al., 2017). Beyond what is written about “ex-gay” organizations (Flentje et al., 2013; Huffington Post, 2017; Sacks, 2011), little is known about how religious leaders engage with families who are accepting or rejecting of their LGB loved ones. This exploratory study sought to begin to fill this gap in the literature by exploring how religious leaders approach working with families who seek their assistance, with the goal of providing clinicians new insights into how to provide therapy to religious families who have an LGB member.

Framed by queer theory, this study seeks to acknowledge and critique the organizing structure of heteronormativity in the context of religious leaders working with families with LGB members (Oswald et al., 2005; Warner, 1999). Queer theory fundamentally questions what has been normalized and what is seen as normal within categorical understandings of sexuality, gender, and families (Butler, 1990; Oswald et al., 2005; Warner, 1999). Queer theory is useful in conceptualizing how Christian pastors, therapists, and families may consciously or unconsciously uphold heteronormativity, as well as how they may shift away from heteronormativity as they navigate what it means to have an LGB family member. As queer theory emphasizes the importance of deconstructing and moving beyond binary categories

of experience (Butler, 1990; Tilsen, 2013), this study seeks to understand how pastors may be able to move beyond binary systems of either/or options including how they embrace working with LGB people and their families. This is particularly relevant given that dominant discourses about Christian religious institutions that can include the normalization of heterosexuality and the exclusion of LGB people, and thus families with LGB members.

Pastors working with LGB people

The limited scholarly literature on religious leaders working with LGB individuals or addressing topics related to LGB identities has almost entirely focused on Christian pastors (Bowland et al., 2013; Cadge et al., 2012; Cadge & Wildeman, 2008; Dewey et al., 2014; Raedel et al., 2020). For example, in a study focused on how mainline Protestant Christian pastors (i.e., Presbyterian U.S.A., Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, and United Methodist) discussed LGB sexual orientations within their religious communities, the researchers found these participants first situated their discussions within the context of fear (Cadge & Wildeman, 2008). In particular, the pastors in the study by Cadge and Wildeman (2008) focused on acknowledging their parishioners' fear of LGB individuals and struggles to understand what is stated in the Bible about sexual orientation demonstrating a normalization of heterosexuality (Cheng, 2011). Cadge and Wildeman (2008) further found that in terms of their own identities or roles in these discussions that these pastors existed on a continuum from being neutral facilitators to actively engaged advocates for LGB rights. In a later study, Cadge et al. (2012) found that the majority of the Christian pastors they interviewed were "uncertain" about their views on LGB identities and about how they should talk about or act toward these populations.

Expanding on this research, Fahs and Swank (2021) emailed 255 Christian churches as a person who was seeking to join a church community but wanted to understand the churches' stance on "homosexuality." Although the researchers did not specify the role (e.g., pastor, a lay member of the church, etc.) of the person who responded to these inquiries, the findings of this study provided insight into how religious leaders may approach working with LGB individuals. Fahs

and Swank (2021) found that the vast majority of the churches who responded expressed some level of homophobia and nonacceptance of LGB people, thus upholding the structure of heteronormativity in Christian religious contexts (Butler, 1990; Warner, 1999).

In contrast to these studies, Dewey et al. (2014) interviewed 13 Christian pastors about their ally identities and how through their outreach, preaching, and conversations with their parishioners created Christian communities that were welcoming and affirming. The findings from the study by Jones and Cox (2009) support this notion of pastor allies as they found that the majority of their sample of 2,658 mainline Protestant Christian pastors are more supportive of LGB rights (e.g., adoption rights, nondiscrimination and hate crimes legislation) than the general public. However, the theme of uncertainty about how to engage with LGB people that Cadge et al. (2012) documented is also apparent as 30% of the sample was strongly supportive of LGB rights and people, 30% was not supportive and opposed LGB rights, and the remaining 40% was uncertain about LGB rights in that they supported some rights and opposed others (Jones & Cox, 2009).

Lesbian and gay Christians have reported that they want therapists and pastors to have “historical perspective, self-awareness, and a non-judgmental attitude” as well as “understanding the power of words” when working with LGB Christians (Bowland et al., 2013, p. 321). Further, researchers have found that the most helpful strategies to LGB Christians are “reframing scripture and tradition, supportive pastoral relationships, affirming Christian communities, peer support, and educational resources” (Bowland et al., 2013, p. 321). There is less known about if pastors are working with LGB people and their families in these ways described in the study conducted by Bowland et al. (2013), which this present study seeks to address. However, pastors have reported that they need resources that would help with preventing homelessness and suicide in LGB populations to best support the mental health of LGB individuals (Raedel et al., 2020). In our current study, queer theory is useful for raising the question of how Christian pastors can and do move beyond heteronormativity to work with families with LGB members (Tilsen, 2013).

Role of religiosity in family acceptance and rejection

Supporting the studies that found pastors were uncertain to non-accepting of LGB identities, the views of LGB people on religion and religiosity have often illustrated a pattern of distrust and hurt due to experiences of being ostracized and harmed by religious communities and leaders (McCormick & Krieger, 2020; Murphy, 2015; Sherkat, 2002). Some research participants have reported that even in religious communities that are explicitly more progressive, they have experienced non-affirmation related to their LGB identity (Lomash et al., 2019). Utilizing a queer theory framework, this study highlights that these experiences documented in the literature can be located in the context of heteronormativity in which LGB identities are pathologized and othered, while heterosexual identities are normalized and seen as superior (Oswald et al., 2005).

Religion is often practiced as a family ritual (e.g., Coburn et al., 2019), making these experiences in church communities particularly relevant to families' degree of acceptance or rejection of LGB members. A study by McCormick and Krieger (2020) found that the majority of their sample of LGB young adults tied experiences of being bullied and the bullying they witnessed to religion with the most severe religious bullying coming from family members. Religious family members who are not affirming of LGB people have been reported to engage in rejecting behaviors, such as commenting to their children that LGB people go to hell, cutting off contact with their LGB children, and/or removing their children from their home when an LGB identity is disclosed (Beagan & Hattie, 2015; Murr, 2013). Thus, like therapists, religious leaders may play an especially significant role in working with families with LGB members when families are rejecting to various degrees, but research is needed to identify how pastors might approach working with these families.

Some LGB people report seeking out inclusive religious communities as well as benefiting from relationships with affirmative religious leaders and family members (Coburn et al., 2019; Foster et al., 2015; Hickey & Graftsky, 2017), which is important for therapists to know. In a study exploring LGB individuals' perceptions of whether different religious traditions were friendly or unfriendly, Barringer (2020) found that the majority of LGB individuals sampled felt mainline Protestant

and Jewish traditions were viewed as “friendly/neutral,” while Evangelical Protestant and Catholic churches were viewed as “unfriendly” toward LGB communities. Similarly, Murphy (2015) found that the vast majority of LGB participants labeled Evangelical Protestant and Catholic churches as “unfriendly” and just under half (i.e., 44%) felt mainline Protestant churches were “unfriendly.”

Given the limited literature on how religious leaders work with families with an LGB loved one, this exploratory study sought to begin to fill this gap by interviewing Christian pastors. In particular, this study focused on how Christian pastors work or seek to work with families who are accepting or rejecting of their LGB member with the hope of providing new insights to therapists to help them more competently work with religious families with an LGB member. Since the majority (70.6%) of those living in the United States identify as Christian (Pew Research Center, 2014; Public Religion Research Institute, 2021), we began this exploration by focusing on Christian religious leaders to build on what is already known in the literature.

Research question

Given the review of the literature and the exploratory nature of this study, the following research question was utilized: How do or might Christian pastors’ approaches to working with families with an LGB member vary based on if the family is rejecting or accepting?

Method

We used queer theory-informed thematic analysis to explore the research question for this study (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Butler, 1990; Fish & Russell, 2018; Nowell et al., 2017; Warner, 1999). By using queer theory to inform our methodology, we were seeking to see beyond the potential false binary that people are either LGB and non-religious *or* heterosexual and religious. This binary idea can be a taken-for-granted narrative perpetuated by mainstream discourse as well as by interpretations of academic literature that has documented how LGB people have been harmed by Christian religious communities (e.g., Hickey & Graftsky, 2017; Murr, 2013). Queer theory was used

to consider and explore that Christian pastors may be working with LGB families in various ways that could offer insight for family therapists in their work with LGB families. Queer theory-informed thematic analysis allows for awareness of and reflexivity on the social context (e.g., heteronormativity, religious ideology, religious communities, family relationships) informing the lives of LGB people and their families when coding and developing themes for in-depth qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Participant recruitment and description

Participant recruitment occurred utilizing a purposive snowball sampling method (Nelson & Allred, 2005). Initially, a group of diverse Christian pastors working in the Upper Midwest, identified by the first author and a pastor who served as a consultant for the study, were sent a recruitment e-mail. Once the initial interviews occurred, we relied solely on a purposive snowball sampling method, which involved asking each participant at the conclusion of their interview who they would recommend we interviewed next (Nelson & Allred, 2005). Based on these recruitment efforts, 21 Christian pastors were interviewed for this study whose religious affiliation could be described as mainline Protestant (i.e., pastors who are members of non-evangelical Protestant Christian traditions). Specifically, eight participants were ordained within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), four in the United Church of Christ (UCC), four in the United Methodist, three in the Presbyterian (U.S.A.), and two within the Episcopal denomination. The pastors had been ordained from 18 months to 43 years ($M = 15.89$, $SD = 11.78$). The pastors in this sample are described as existing on a continuum from holding supportive views of LGB people to more neutral views, which to large extent reflects the stances of mainline Protestant faith traditions. Within the mainline Protestant Christian denominations, the majority have adapted inclusive stances on LGB identities and relationships, with the notable exception of the United Methodist Church, which views LGB relationships as sinful (HRC, n.d.). Within Christian denominations, mainline Protestant traditions profess some of the most affirming views on LGB people and their relationships; however, individual religious leaders and churches can vary in the degree to which they follow the stances of their national leadership.

In terms of personal demographics, the participants ranged in age from 30 to 70 years old ($M = 50.14$, $SD = 12.92$) and identified primarily as White, with the exception of one participant who identified as Biracial. Additionally, the majority of the participants identified as heterosexual, with three participants identifying as gay men. In terms of gender, 10 participants identified as cisgender women and 11 as cisgender men. These pastors were currently serving churches in rural and small urban communities in the Upper Midwestern region of the United States that ranged in size from 10 to 5,000 members ($M = 776.43$, $SD = 1,233.20$). The pastors had been in their current positions for two months to 25 years ($M = 4.52$, $SD = 5.48$).

Procedures

Potential participants received an e-mail instructing them to contact the first author if they were interested in being interviewed for the study. Participants were asked if they preferred to be interviewed in person ($n = 17$) or by telephone ($n = 4$). The interviews varied in length from 70 minutes to 3 hours; however, the length of the interviews did not appear to vary based on the format (i.e., phone or in person). The two authors for this study served as the interviewers for all 21 interviews, which occurred between the fall of 2017 and spring of 2018. The interviews began by going over the informed consent document. After the participants consented, they completed a brief demographic questionnaire and then the first question on the interview guide was asked. The procedures for this study were approved by an Institutional Review Board at a Midwestern university in the United States (#HE18058).

Data collection

A semi-structured interview guide that included open-ended questions and probes to seek more details from participants was used for this study. The questions for the interview guide were created after an extensive review of the literature and in consultation with a Christian pastor who had experience working with LGB individuals and offered a valuable religious perspective. Prior to conducting the interviews for this study, we did two pilot interviews, which helped to

further revise the interview guide. The finalized interview guide included questions such as: “Have you had the opportunity to work with an individual who was either out or in the process of coming out? Can you tell us about that experience? Have you had the opportunity to work with family who has/had a member who was either out or in the process of coming out? Can you tell us about that experience? What advice would you give to a family in your congregation who is rejecting of their LGB family member? What would you see your role with this family who is rejecting their LGB loved one? What advice would you give to a family in your congregation who is accepting of their LGB family member? What would you see your role with this accepting family?” We conducted interviews until saturation was reached, in that participants were not providing new insights into how they worked with LGB individuals and their families (Patton, 2015). At the point we felt we reached saturation, we decided to conduct three more interviews to ensure that saturation was reached.

Analysis

The verbatim transcripts that were created from the digital audio recordings were analyzed using thematic analysis, with the intent of identifying any themes and subthemes that might exist within the data related to the study’s research question. Braun and Clarke (2006) describe thematic analysis as “a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within the data set in (rich) detail” (p. 79). Following the guidance of Braun and Clarke (2006), we (i.e., the authors for this study) began the analysis process by immersing ourselves in the data, which involved reading the transcripts three times. Next, we individually identified the sections of the transcripts that were related to the research question as the interviews asked the participants to reflect on topics (e.g., sexual orientation change efforts) that are beyond the scope of this current study. Once we had each identified the sections of the transcripts that we thought were relevant to code for this study, we met for our first peer debriefing session (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). At this first peer debriefing session, we discussed the similarities and differences in the sections we thought needed to be coded and came to a consensus about what we should code.

The next phase of the analysis process focused on identifying keywords or phrases from within the transcripts that could serve as initial codes. After we individually identified potential codes, we met again for a peer debriefing session, this time focused on discussing the potential codes until we agreed. Once codes were selected, we each individually coded the transcripts and then met for a peer debriefing session to discuss how we coded the data. When we reached consensus on how to code the data, we each went through the coded data to identify any possible themes or subthemes related to the research question. Themes are larger patterns of insight or understanding that occur across and within individual transcripts, while subthemes are more nuanced patterns of understanding that exist within a singular theme (Braun & Clarke, 2006). After individually identifying themes and subthemes, we met for one last peer debriefing session to reach consensus on the findings of this study. Informed by queer theory, during each of our peer debriefing sessions we sought to be mindful of how heterosexism might be influencing our analysis process by discussing how heteronormative assumptions may be influencing the coding process.

The purpose of integrating peer debriefing sessions throughout the analysis was to increase the trustworthiness of the coding process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In addition to peer debriefing sessions, we used member checking to ensure that the themes and subthemes presented in this manuscript accurately represented our participants' perspectives. In particular, all of the participants were invited to provide input on this article. Nine participants chose to provide feedback, which was integrated into the article. Finally, to further increase the trustworthiness of our analysis process we engaged in active reflexivity, which involved discussing how our own positionalities could influence the analysis process (Chilisa, 2012). The purpose of these discussions was to move our unconscious assumptions, blind spots, and biases to our consciousness in an effort to deconstruct their influence on the coding process. To situate our identities, we offer these brief versions of our positionality statements. The first author is a White, heterosexual, cisgender woman, who participates in a church that affiliates with the ELCA. The second author is a White, queer, nonbinary person, who was raised in the Southern Baptist denomination of Christianity but is not active in any religious community at this time and does not identify as religious.

Results

The queer theory-informed thematic analysis revealed three themes that described how pastors work with families with an LGB member. These themes reflected the wide range of experiences (e.g., direct experience; reflections on what they might do) that the pastors had working with families. These approaches to working with families were similar in some ways when working with families who were rejecting or accepting of their LGB members and differed in specific ways related to different conversations and resources pastors would incorporate into their work. It is important to note that participants shared similar approaches, and within those approaches, the participants who identified as gay men mentioned how their work with LGB people and/or their families was informed by their own shared lived experiences and how family members' perceptions of them as gay men could have led to people being more or less willing to approach them about LGB-related experiences. Overall, the approaches for working with accepting and rejecting families used by all participants in this study are detailed in the identified themes: (1) Have Conversations to Encourage Family Acceptance, (2) Walk with and Help with Coming Out as a Family, and (3) Provide Resources. Within each of the themes we identified a number of subthemes. Themes and subthemes are illustrated with verbatim quotations from the data (See, Figure 1).

Have conversations to encourage family acceptance

When asked how they would work with a family who was rejecting their LGB member, the mainline Protestant Christian pastors in this sample were quick to describe how they would have a conversation with these families in an effort to encourage acceptance. It is important to note that none of the participants in this study stated that they would accept a family's rejection of their LGB member, but instead the pastors talked about how they sought or would seek to have intentional conversations that would promote love, acceptance, and the continuation of family relationships. The following quotes illustrate the data coded in this theme:

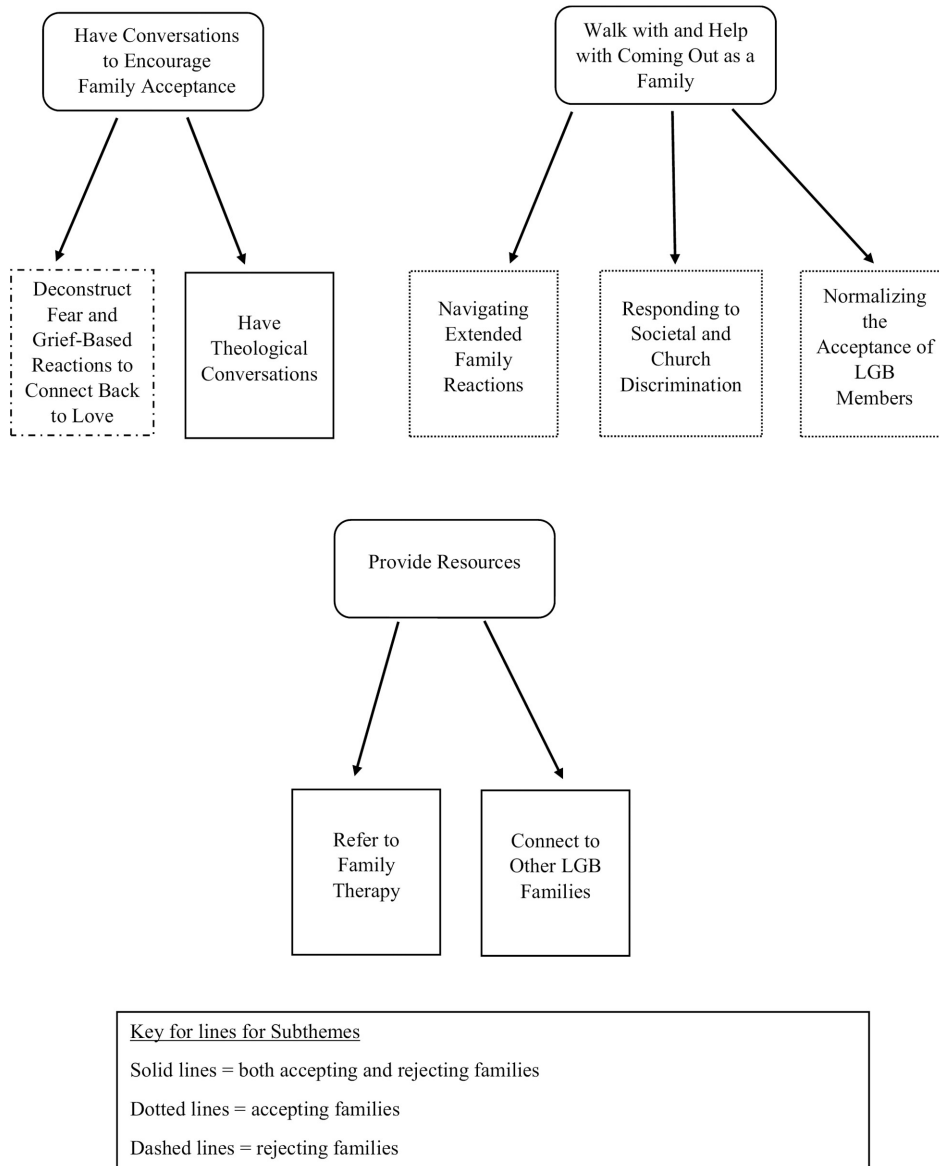


Figure 1. Findings.

Gabby: I would ask them to try to hang together. And to try to understand each other in the midst of that time. Families are so complicated and I'd, but I would try to remind them of their underlying connection to each other. I would think just think about this child that you've raised from birth that, that this is still your child and how can you still love them through something you may not understand. Man, that's got to be hard.

Holly: To help them to be able to reconcile in a way that, you know, acknowledges their confusion. And helps them to gain some acceptance.

Quinton: And just to continue to give time and give time for understanding. And to ask the questions of why don't I understand or why do I feel this way and to let folks who are struggling with that just have the time to ask the question . . . The first belief is that God's already blessed them with this child. And that this life is an amazing gift from God. And if God doesn't reject them, why would they reject?

Deconstruct fear and grief-based reactions to connect back to love

Within this theme of "Have Conversations to Encourage Family Acceptance" two subthemes were identified that represented nuanced ideas about the content of these conversations. The first subtheme, Deconstruct Fear and Grief-Based Reactions to Connect Back to Love, reflected how these pastors would work with families who were rejecting their LGB loved one to reframe their rejection as fear and/or grief in an effort to ultimately reconnect them with the love they had for their LGB member, as highlighted below:

Felicity: I would start with an invitation as I try to in all difficult situations, to approach everything in prayer and to not, and not to pray for a different situation and not to pray for anything too tangible but to invite God to open our hearts to see the love of God in the midst of one another. To open our hearts to – and part of why they, part of my questions would be why they aren't affirming? Are they scared about the theology that they've been taught? Are they horrified by that which is unknown? I mean most, most rejection is going to be based in fear I think. And so, trying to work through the roots of that fear. And trying to offer a place for them to know that there is another way of thinking and being as we seek to focus on that which we hold together and not that which separates us.

Patty: I think for the family it would be – there's probably some grieving that goes on. It's different than what they expected. And so, I would want to talk with the family about how that feels and how else they might think about some things, and no different than other things that I consider losses or things we would grieve over. I think I'd probably treat it a little more as trying to touch their own feelings and how that could impact their relationship with this child over time. At least start to help them move toward some health or at least to be able to have respectful conversations with one another . . . I think in this case I would just kind of start with helping them kind of work through some of their own stuff so that they could then maybe start building relationship back with their child.

Quinton: We needed more time just to be able to just talk, put things on the table and say this is what I understand, and this is what I don't understand. And this is what I'm fearful about and this is what I'm not fearful about. And I think a lot of times for families, families are fearful of what others are going to say. It might not even be the family that's so fearful. It's what's our reputation now in our community? How does this impact my work? And we're not even thinking about ourselves anymore, we're thinking about what the other judgment and reaction is going to be.

Have theological conversations

The second subtheme, Have Theological Conversations, reflects how the pastors would engage with families to share their beliefs about how the Bible and the theology of their denomination supports and affirms LGB individuals and calls families to do the same. The first set of quotations illustrates the participants' responses related to working with families who at a particular moment are choosing to reject their LGB loved one.

Gabby: A lot of the folks who have an issue based on religious difference just know there are those verses, but they haven't actually sought them out. I would welcome that. That would be such a wonderful time of saying let's look at each of these verses, let's also look at some of the words of Jesus, some of the words of the Apostles in

the New Testament. What does it mean that there's no longer Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, if some of these dichotomies no longer exist, does that also stand for straight or gay? I mean if we are putting love as the primary operating principle, does that then change if those attributes, love and all of the other attributes underneath love, are found in a homosexual relationship? But and that is scary because the the dichotomies make life like categorized for us and help us, it's nice to have a box, it's nice to have a framework and if you get out of one framework what framework can you get into that would be a healthy framework. And so, I would be able to help people see maybe this framework doesn't exist anymore, what's another framework you could put over this so that love, what would love look like in your family and what values could you hold onto? I would welcome that, I think that would be so fun just because that would be such an honor to dig in to something real. Like this is actually stuff in the Bible that is useful and this is stuff in the Bible that is not useful, but it's all there, and it would be great to talk about it.

Isaac: Where does that come from? Is it rooted in scripture? Is it rooted in teachings you've heard? Is it just because you feel that that's what Christians think? I've heard all of those things. I really feel that a part of my work is to . . . what's known as Christianity, particularly in the world today, is nonbiblical. However, portions of what public Christianity contains are definitely biblical, but it's not a witness to the meta-narrative of scripture. So, I seek to introduce that story to people through my pastoral care, through my teachings, through my preaching, small scales and large all across the board.

Jim: I would very strongly encourage them not to reject them. I would focus on biblical stories as a way of illustrating my point that you know all of these people that society were rejecting in biblical times, Jesus was welcoming. There is just a long list of the least, the last, and the lost is one phrase that this society had rejected people for a great variety of reasons and every single time Jesus reached out to them and welcomed them and invited them in exactly as they were. Did not judge them but instead gave them the

gift of unconditional love and that's what we are called to do for our family even if they are doing something that we don't agree with.

Sally: I would say I know that this faith and your religious beliefs and what the source of those beliefs is, I mean I can point people in exactly six places where explicit same sex sexuality is forbidden in the New Testament and the Old Testament, in our Christian Bible. Only a half dozen of them. God is much more unequivocal about his hatred of divorce with heterosexual people than about any kind of same sex sexuality. And then when you start looking at the way in the scripture that same sex sexuality in context, there's always a power differential or a religious element that makes it [same-sex relations] idolatry rather than simply an expression of love. So, we're not talking apples and apples here, we're talking apples and pears. I don't know, I mean usually, people are just way too mad to even listen thoughtfully and see, but that's one reason that doing some teaching if you have the permission to do it or don't have anybody forbidding it.

This next set of quotations reflect the theological discussions that the participants would like to have with families who are accepting their LGB loved one with the intent of trying to further bolster that support.

Edwin: If we read the gospels, you know, we don't see a Jesus who- Jesus never once says anything about people being gay. Jesus preaches a message of love and acceptance and all the times that people say yeah, but he also says blah blah blah. Yeah, he's talking to the Pharisees, the ones that are rejecting the outsiders. And he's not talking about our eternal salvation necessarily; he's talking about our acceptance around the table and its, I would help them. I think that's, I think that's how religious identity can inform peoples' beliefs on this. It's showing them how the gospel is inclusive, and the gospel does not condemn in the way that they think it does.

Nancy: I'd probably help them to strengthen their understanding of the gospel and what the Bible says and how to understand the Bible in a way that's not harmful. Continue to support them. Support, probably help them understand what their child is going through.

The pastors also shared their desires to have theological conversations with the LGB person directly, which are reflected in these quotes.

Betty: I do my best to be able to offer an equally valid, different voice of a theology that loves and accepts who they are. That is not the only, that one held belief by their family does not represent the voice of God. End of story period. There's more of a diversity there, there is a more accepting way to think about that.

Patty: I could imagine one thing that could happen is somewhere down the road there would be a lot of questions and wondering and where did people get that idea about the church and still some seeking kinds of things. Looking for a way to trust God. And I think I would be willing to just kind of sit down with them and explore kind of where they were at right now. Some of it might be going back and looking at verses in the Bible and whatever may have been used against them and talking about what that really meant. The other part would be acknowledging that human beings are sinful people. We got a whole church full of us and we were never intended to be perfect. God alone is perfect. Try to see if that person would be open to having that kind of conversation. If they're not, I probably would just say, 'Well, know you are always welcome and that I know that God always loves you regardless.' And I would try to leave them with a moment in time that they felt that maybe God was ok. But I also know that when people have been deeply hurt by the church it takes more than that to build relationship and trust, but I would certainly support them and work with them to the best of my ability.

Walk with and help with coming out as a family

Throughout the interviews, the mainline Protestant Christian pastors in this study spoke of how they would *be* a pastor to both accepting and rejecting families with LGB members through supporting them emotionally and with resources in their journeys. This was demonstrated by Holly saying, "Well, I'd still be their pastor, whatever they needed." Across the interviews the pastors spoke to their experiences of "walking with families." The pastors explicitly talked about ways they would help accepting families in their journeys of supporting

their LGB family members and navigating extended family reactions and societal discrimination, which was characterized by the second theme, Walk with and Help with Coming Out as a Family. Patty and Ruth explained:

Patty: I certainly would be in contact with them, and I would offer anything that I could do that would help you within the church, I would be more than glad to do that. If there was anything else you think I could be helpful with, I'm here, I'm available but if they seem to have some other outside resources and they seem to have worked through some things I wouldn't automatically assume they must need me too. But I would certainly offer it.

Ruth: I would want to be, want them to really know that I'm an ally. I would be very, very intentional about knowing that they would be supported by me. I guess just the proverbial 'my door is always open.' You know that if they hit roadblocks or have concerns that they know they can always call me. And if they're members, I would hope that they would already know that, but I think I'd be intentional about letting them know.

Navigating extended family reactions

In addition to overall support provided by pastors of families with LGB members, the pastors in this study also spoke to specific avenues of support that emerged as subthemes within this theme. These subthemes included, Navigating Extended Family Reactions, Responding to Societal and Church Discrimination, and Normalizing the Acceptance of LGB Members. The first subtheme, Navigating Extended Family Reactions, captured ideas expressed by the participants that families may be worried about extended family members' reactions to their LGB family member and/or need to have conversations with extended family members who are not accepting of their LGB member. Alice shared her experience pastoring accepting families by saying, "I mean one of the things that families that are accepting come to me with is 'how do I talk to my friends, how do I talk to my larger family' or, 'we're accepting but grandma.'" The pastors in this study talked about how they would provide support through any negative responses from extended family members as exemplified by Betty and Edwin.

Betty: Well there are lots of very loud voices of condemnation. And any time that you, sometimes when it comes to a situation where you are, you have a family member or a loved one who is, who is in the process of coming out, you have to deal with those first. And figure out some kind of response to that and those messages which is a conversation of which a pastor, a pastor who's an ally can really help having those reframing to really reframe or restructure and look at it really carefully, what it is that we believe and why.

Edwin: I would want them to know too, well as you experience rejection from other people, make sure that you, you lean on us when you, like lean on me when you need to when you have maybe relatives or friends who suddenly just aren't talking to you anymore like, I would want them to know that, you're not alone. Because that is a reality too. That's a huge reality. Where close family friends all of a sudden don't know each other anymore, and it gets unfortunate like why?

Responding to societal and church discrimination

The second subtheme, Responding to Societal and Church Discrimination, represents the pastors' awareness that families who are accepting of LGB members may be concerned about their LGB family member having to face societal discrimination, as well as the family encountering negative reactions from the larger society and their church communities. Pastors in this study talked about wanting to provide a safe place for families to talk through these experiences, advocate for families, and help prepare families and LGB members for dealing with any discrimination they faced. The following quotes demonstrate this subtheme:

Betty: Most of the families I have worked with, their parents have been generally affirming but have been very concerned about their child. Because by wrestling with this it opens them up to all kinds of bigotry and hatred, and this means that they are going to be going on a tougher path and as parents that's really difficult to watch your, to watch and to try to support your child through that . . . find out all of the ways that you could come to their defense and because they

have a hard, hard road essentially against them. To celebrate just who they are and who they are becoming and their understanding of themselves. But that, I mean, it becomes then a different kind of relationship of how to listen to a family as they are trying to walk alongside and being frustrated with, with the obstacles that are in their child's way.

Felicity: And then we would talk through, especially in this community, they would be well aware of some of the risks or harms, and so I think we would talk through what some resources would be. To help them be prepared for that, help them have the tools to talk about it, to help them to, I mean, I hate to say it but there is just a lot of harm all around us in the language people use, so how do we prepare one another to protect our hearts but also to have intelligent conversation to show that there is more than one way of thinking through it . . . that community judgment, they would have to deal with some fear of what that looks like both to themselves but also I think the fear for their loved ones.

Normalizing the acceptance of LGB members

The final subtheme within the second theme, Normalizing the Acceptance of LGB Members, depicts how the pastors in this study would take active steps to normalize acceptance of LGB identities. In particular, the participants spoke about how they would work with families who are accepting of LGB members the same as they would work with any family in their community. For example:

Gabby: I think the same with any family within the congregation of how to get plugged into this greater worshipping community. Of just yes, you're already affirming, that's great! Come to this Bible study, it's great, I'd say that to anybody.

Sally: I would definitely say don't ever feel shy about bringing them [LGB member] here. We're happy to have them. We don't have to ask questions one way or the other about their gender identity or their sexuality. They neither have to become our poster child or someone we look the other way when we see. They're just regular people.

In addition to normalizing LGB identities and acceptance of LGB members, the pastors also reflected on ways they would take steps to overtly celebrate the LGB member if that was something that the family and LGB member wanted:

Holly: And just ask are there things that they need. Is there a celebration they need to do? I mean if somebody said they would like to do a coming out celebration, I've never had anybody ever do that, but I would be all over that!

Isaac: Oh, I'd encourage them to tell their story, I mean in their networks of people and their spheres of influence. I would have them; I mean I'd encourage all kinds of things. Invite your friends and neighbors and talk about this wonderful news. You know that we are whole in the midst of things that are breaking or burdensome or wounding for so many families and yeah. We have to celebrate good things.

Keith: We would probably celebrate it. We'd find some way to celebrate it. I have not ever had that opportunity. That is a really good thing. I've heard of congregations that actually do have like a form of celebration for those kind of things. And when you think about it, I'm just thinking out loud here, this is just as it's happening. It's sort of very similar to confirmation or something like that. I mean it's a move to your identity, it's a move to adulthood. Well not necessarily even, I'm assuming often times in our experience it's been teenagers, but now we see younger and younger people identifying. I think it really needs to be an opportunity for celebration, and it should be seen as that. And what I would hope, if there was a family in my congregation had a child who was doing this, that they would do it during the announcement time, our announcement times are often the times when we celebrate a situation. So, I open it up to people and say are there any issues or anything in the family, in your families or anything. That would be a time where the congregation can show their support of this. And we would. And you know we would say good for you, good for this move on your part.

Provide resources

The final theme, Provide Resources, reflects a range of ideas that the pastors had about their desire to provide resources to families with an LGB loved one. For some of the pastors, they spoke about specific resources that they would or had shared with families, while others provided general ideas about the types of resources they had or wanted to provide families, and still other participants acknowledged that they needed to learn more about the resources in their communities in order to adequately work with families with an LGB member. To illustrate, some of the specific resources the participants in this study would share:

Alice: Like I said, Matthew Vines book [*God and the Gay Christian*] is amazing and I have given that to folk who are, were in the process of being rejected by their family to share with their family. Because it's written from an Evangelical Christian perspective, from somebody whose primary goal was not to give up his Evangelical Christian identity. And there is a very honest exploration of scripture from the Evangelical perspective. If it is a theological rejection that people have, that's a really good tool.

Dennis: [Name of an LGB community center] would probably be one, just to plug in there, there are so many, but that's one of the big clearing houses in our community.

Holly: Probably GLAAD. For the person coming out I would probably refer them to the local pride center if they weren't already familiar with it. The following set of quotations highlights the realization that some of the participants shared that they would need to do research to learn about the resources in their communities to support the LGB families they might work with as a pastor.

Edwin: I need to get, and I need to get a refresher in the best resources for families right now. But, but yes, I would, I would definitely. Even if that included helping them to just reach out to someone, you know? Pointing them in the direction of somebody who could help them with it.

Patty: I would have to do some research myself because I don't know who or what would be available in the area. I'd probably call you guys now and say direct me to where it is that I need to do that. But I would want to give them some other resources to look at if they hadn't already received something. I'd need to find out. I'm new enough back in town that I don't know where the right places are to do that.

Betty: To be perfectly honest I don't know of a whole lot of resources that are in this area. Of family support groups and counseling services and welcoming communities and that kind of thing, I would have to be doing some more nose to the grindstone kind of, finding of resources for them. I know that they exist. I don't know how much they exist out here.

Refer to family therapy

Although many of the participants talked about the importance of resources in general, there were two types of resources that were discussed across nearly all of the interviews. The first being the importance of referring families to therapy, especially when their needs were beyond what could be provided within a pastoral care context. Refer to Family Therapy was the first subtheme within this larger theme of Provide Resources. The pastors in this study mainly discussed the importance of therapy for families struggling with rejecting their loved one to some extent, but there were a few incidents when they stated that they would make a referral to therapy for families who were accepting of their LGB member, which are highlighted here.

Felicity: I think that as those struggles, depending on the personality, some of us deal well those than others. I personally wouldn't bat an eye if it were me, right? I handle it, and it's fine. Other persons bruise more, and I'd be looking into resources, like let's maybe look into some counseling and make sure we are talking about this and having the tools that we need and checking up on them and those sorts of things. Because it weighs on all of us differently.

Ruth: I know that if my child came out to me, I would immediately want to make sure that my child was healthy, was emotionally in a good place. And if that meant even to see a therapist just to be on the safe side. I mean I think everybody should have a therapist. I have no qualms at all about people seeing a counselor or a therapist. Just to make sure that they're good. That they're not hiding some anxiety or some concern or some doubts or some whatever. So, I think that's how I would help a family. Making referrals.

The pastors spoke extensively about the importance of referring families who were rejecting their LGB loved one to therapy, which is illustrated by the following quotations.

Felicity: I know that there are counseling centers in the geographical area that are set up for families to help with that transition, and I think that counseling is always, I think that we should all go to counseling all the time if we are honest. So, I would ask that the family meet together with a licensed professional, not just their pastor, to try and work through some of that in healthy and safe places . . . Just to be clear, that that counselor that I would refer them to would be open and affirming.

Gabby: So I often refer people out to a counselor because especially with this whole family issue, I mean there is a lot of complicated things and we always tell people that we are not trained counselors as pastors. We are kind of like introductory level, we'd love to hear your story, we'd love to maybe help you sift through a few things and pray for you and then refer you to actually trained counselors who could accompany you on a greater journey. But yet we will just walk beside you like an auxiliary.

Keith: I would, I definitely think it would be a counseling issue. They would probably have to, if they really could not accept this, I think that would be the next option. That they would have to find some sort of counseling. But what I would continue to maintain with them is, you know, if you are having issues with this, have your issues with it but don't reject. Just work on this, try to move forward on this in some way. And so, if you need the therapy, get the

therapy. If you need me, I'm here for you but just do whatever you can to move beyond this. It's just not worth losing a child over.

Connect to other LGB families

The second subtheme, Connect to Other LGB Families, reflects the other common resource that the pastors discussed in their interviews. The participants expressed how helpful it can be to connect families to those who had been where they are, as well as connecting the LGB individual with others in LGB communities who might have shared lived experience and offer support. Below, Alice, Isaac, and Ruth illustrate the different ways that these connections can occur and be a resource.

Alice: It's also good for them to be connected to other families who are like that. My daughter goes to [name of a community LGB youth support group], and so that's a great place to be connected if you have a young person in your family who's LGBT. And even just pick up and drop off you still chat with the other parents in ways that you, I don't at the high school. But the [name of a community LGB youth support group] I still do because people want to know that there are other families in town who are raising LGBT children in an affirming and positive way.

Isaac: My resources have been other families who have gone through or are in the midst of those things to come together. And so sometimes that's within the congregation, sometimes it's me calling another pastor and saying hey, who do you know? Who would be open for conversation? Sometimes I know those people, sometimes I don't. It's, no matter what it's really hard for people to feel like they are alone in anything so, yeah.

Ruth: Maybe someone who's in the gay community themselves who could offer some advice. Maybe serve as some sort of a role model or coach, that's not the right word, but sponsor, you know, something that would be helpful to the individual.

Discussion and clinical implications

Although the mainline Protestant Christian pastors in this study offered unique approaches to working with families who engage in rejection versus acceptance of their LGB members, it is interesting to note that there were also similarities in their approaches. For example, in both circumstances, pastors talked about having theological conversations and connecting families to community and religious resources. It makes sense that pastors would want to have theological conversations with families given their training, however, what was more central to gaining insight into these pastors' approaches to working with families was the purpose of these conversations. Participants in this study sought to share their understandings about how the Bible and the specific beliefs of their denomination support and affirm LGB identities. In this way, the participants in this study resisted heteronormativity by affirming LGB people and LGB families (Tilsen, 2013).

In their conversations with families who were rejecting their LGB member, the pastors sought to deconstruct the religious beliefs that might be guiding this rejection and reeducate families on sociohistorical contextually situated meanings of the Bible that are affirming of LGB people reflecting an application of queer theory (Cheng, 2011; Guest et al., 2006). In these conversations, the pastors were not seeking to be neutral facilitators as described by Cadge and Wildeman (2008), but instead were engaging in reframing or queering theological understandings as sought by the lesbian and gay Christians in the study by Bowland et al. (2013). This approach provides an important example for how family therapists might want to engage their clients in similar conversations and also highlights the possibility of therapists seeking out affirmative religious leaders to assist them in helping religious families who are struggling to accept their LGB loved ones.

In order to have these conversations, family therapists need to develop a comfort with discussing religion and at least a basic understanding of religious teaching related to sexual orientation. The theological conversations pastors had with families who were already accepting of their LGB loved one focused on strengthening or enhancing their theological understanding so that these families

would be prepared for any discrimination that they experienced from extended family members and/or society, acknowledging the heteronormative social context that LGB people and their families face. This is also an important approach that family therapists could take as they could assist accepting families in developing responses to others who might attempt to use religious doctrine to discriminate against their LGB loved one. When working with LGB individuals, family therapists could explore the relationship that they want to have with religion and the extent to which religion is a source of support or harm.

Based on the theological conversations the participants described, a central finding of this study was that the mainline Protestant pastors interviewed were not accepting of rejection, which provides encouragement for family therapists to take a similar stance. These participants did not see familial rejection of LGB members as an option, instead, they viewed their role as actively working to move these families to a place of acceptance, which is a powerful model for family therapists. This stance aligns participants in this study with previous research on pastors as advocates or allies (Cadge & Wildeman, 2008; Dewey et al., 2014); in the context of this data, the pastors were being allies within family systems and not discussing how to be allies in the larger society. Given their stance that rejection was not an acceptable option for families, the pastors sought to reframe rejection as a sign of fear or grief by family members that could be connected to the love they felt for the LGB family members.

Although previous research has found that pastors have discussed LGB identities within a framework of fear (Cadge & Wildeman, 2008), the approach described in this study was different as it was not about a fear of LGB people, but instead reflected a more intimate fear about what could happen to or become of LGB people. Our participants also sought to discuss rejection as a sign of grief about the life that they perceived that their LGB loved ones would not get to live or the milestone events (e.g., prom, weddings, having children) that they might not be able to share together with their families. This idea of grief is connected to heteronormative assumptions about families and relationships and more accurately could be framed as heteronormative grief, grief based on false (i.e., heteronormative) assumptions about what is impossible for LGB people. This framing of family rejection

as heteronormative grief or fear could also be a helpful approach for family therapists as they assist families in becoming more affirming of their LGB loved one and could be a helpful reframe for LGB individuals as they make sense of familial rejection.

This study focused on mainline Protestant pastors' work with family systems, not just LGB individuals, and the results of this study highlighted how participants were concerned with maintaining family relationships, mirroring work family therapists often do. The pastors' focus on family level interventions of promoting greater familial acceptance reflects the literature documenting how family acceptance and support of LGB members is a protective factor against negative mental health outcomes, such as depression, suicidality, and substance abuse (McConnell et al., 2016; Ryan et al., 2010). Participants in this study were inclined to normalize and celebrate families' acceptance of LGB family members demonstrating their commitment to positive family relationships, as well as overall inclusiveness of LGB people.

Consistent with the focus on the family unit, it was noteworthy that the participants in this study highlighted the impact of having an LGB family member on the entire system in that families may encounter discrimination and negativity from extended family members or broader society, as well as new relationships with other LGB families and communities, which is important for family therapists to also consider and ask about. The participants' systemic conceptualizations of families with LGB members may reflect pastors' inherent involvement in systems (e.g., church communities, community outreach), which has implications for how religious leaders and family therapists can be part of promoting positive systemic changes for LGB people and their families. From a queer theory perspective, the participants' challenged heteronormativity by normalizing family acceptance of LGB members, thus not pathologizing queer identities. However, family therapists should also be mindful of not enforcing homonormativity (i.e., normalization of only certain lesbian and gay people – White, cisgender, monogamous, able-bodied, etc.; Duggan, 2002). This is especially important in providing just and inclusive therapy as “normative” narratives of LGB identities can further marginalize queer identities that challenge or do not fit these norms and/or that are continually marginalized by society (e.g., genderqueer individuals, consensually non-monogamous relationships).

In their work with families with LGB members, the mainline Protestant pastors in this study voiced their awareness of families' needs for resources regardless of whether families were rejecting or accepting, which adds to the literature documenting how open pastors are to various resources to support the mental health needs of LGB people (Raedel et al., 2020). Results of this study indicated specific resources that participants were likely to refer LGB families to including community resources such as local community centers that serve LGB populations, as well as to mental health services for needs beyond pastoral care. Based on the likelihood of pastors referring families to mental health providers, family therapists should be prepared to work with families who are not accepting of an LGB family member for religious reasons and to support LGB people in their journeys. This may mean family therapists need to seek out additional training on LGB affirmative therapy, as well as do their own self-of-the-therapist work in order to meet the needs of this population (Coburn & McGeorge, 2019).

Research has shown that LGB young adults from religious families benefit from mental health providers who are able to provide space for the exploration of religiosity, family, and sexual orientation, and that involving families in therapy can be a necessary part of the therapeutic process in helping families move toward acceptance and celebration (Heiden-Rootes et al., 2021). Further, results of this study found that pastors are aware they need to know the community and mental health resources in their local area. The participants in this study were clear that they would want to provide affirming and inclusive resources to LGB people and their families, but that this may require doing some of their own research if they were not as familiar with the available resources. There could be an opportunity for LGB community organizations, universities, and/or family therapists to collaborate with local religious leaders by providing them with a list of LGB affirming resources and being willing to partner with pastors to best serve the needs of families. In order to offer this assistance to pastors and the families they serve, therapists may need to educate themselves about the LGB affirming resources in their community.

Limitations and suggestions for future research

Although this exploratory study does have a number of strengths, the primary limitation is the lack of racial, sexual orientation, and gender identity diversity within the sample. This is a fairly privileged sample and future research studies need to recruit more diverse samples to explore additional approaches to working with families, especially families with marginalized racial identities. In these future studies, scholars could further the application of queer theory by intentionally exploring how heteronormativity may or may not be enforced in religious contexts and in religious leaders' work with LGB people and their families. Additionally, future researchers could replicate this study with Christian faith traditions beyond mainline Protestant denominations and replicate this study with religious leaders from diverse faith traditions (i.e., non-Christian traditions). Moreover, this study needs to be replicated with a focus on working with families with a member with a marginalized gender identity. Finally, in an effort to triangulate the findings of this study, future research could focus on interviewing or surveying families who have worked with a religious leader after or as a loved one is coming out to gain insight into their perspectives on this experience of seeking assistance from a religious figure. Additionally, it would be helpful if future researchers interviewed LGB individuals to learn about how they want religious leaders to assist their families in becoming more affirming and how family therapists can assist with this process.

Conclusion

Mainline Protestant Christian pastors can have an important role in working with families with LGB members, especially when these families are struggling with accepting and affirming an LGB family member. The findings from this queer theory-informed qualitative study suggests that pastors engaged in conversations with families to encourage acceptance, walked with families in their journey of navigating any external discrimination, and provided resources such as connection to community resources and referrals to family therapy when needed. Pastors have the ability and willingness to have theological

conversations with families who may benefit from exposure to LGB inclusive understandings of theology, and thus affirming religious leaders could be an important resource to both families and therapists. We hope the findings of this study encourage family therapists to expand their conceptualization of LGB resources to include LGB affirming religious leaders and religious communities, especially when the people and families they encounter need religious support and additional community resources.

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