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# The Complexity of Family Reactions to Identity among Homeless and College Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Young Adults

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## Abstract

Familial responses to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) young people's identities range on a spectrum from rejection to acceptance, and these reactions strongly impact family relationships and young adult well-being. Less is known, however, about how family members' reactions may differ based on young people's contexts of socioeconomic status. Through a qualitative, life course analysis of in-depth interview data from 46 LGBTQ college students and LGBTQ homeless young adults, our study highlights the diverse, contextual nuances of young people's "linked lives" within their families. We find that the context of socioeconomic status influenced how a young person managed family rejection. Conversely, processes of familial acceptance were also connected to life course transitions that worked in some cases to enhance LGBTQ young adults' family relationships. Finally, the intricacy of familial reactions to a young person's LGBTQ identity transcended socioeconomic contexts as many respondents shared similar experiences of rejection and acceptance. These findings have implications for understanding how young people manage family relationships across different contexts of socioeconomic status and how these experiences can shape their life course trajectories. Results from this study can inform LGBTQ youth service providers by tailoring intervention programs that account for contextual social diversity.

**Keywords:** LGBTQ young adults, gender identity, sexuality, family relationships, sexual orientation

## Introduction

The number of sexual and gender minority young people is growing, with approximately 6.4% of young adults in the United States aged 18–29 identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT) (Gates & Newport, 2012). LGBT young adults' identities and sense of self are shaped internally and externally through social interactions, cultural contexts, and intersecting sources of oppression (Jones & McEwen, 2000). Societal structures create unwelcoming realities for sexual and gender minority young adults that can shift across socioeconomic contexts and relationships, resulting in feelings of alienation and stigma (Flowers & Buston, 2001). As young people develop their sexual and gendered selves, a sense of family connectedness and support is especially crucial for maintaining positive mental health, especially when youth do not subscribe to dominant norms of gender and sexuality and fall somewhere on the LGBT spectrum (Needham & Austin, 2010).

Studies in this area emphasize both positive and negative influences of parental relationships and family dynamics on sexual and gender minority young people's mental health (Bregman, Malik, Page, Makynen, & Lindahl, 2013; Carastathis, Cohen, Kaczmarek, & Change, 2017; Ryan, Russell, Huebner, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2010). Family support is often a crucial indicator of promoting positive mental health among LGBT youth, particularly in comparison with nonfamily sources of support, such as from friends and significant others (McConnell, Birkett, & Mustanski, 2015). Parental closeness and support can serve as a source of resilience for LGB young people in bolstering their health and well-being (Carastathis et al., 2016; Needham & Austin, 2010). Increased levels of family acceptance, for example, promote positive self-esteem and can buffer against depression and substance abuse for LGBT young people (Ryan et al., 2010). Conversely, some research finds that family rejection can have deleterious effects on sexual minority young people's well-being, particularly their mental health status (Ryan, Huebner, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2009).

Familial responses to young people's gender and/or sexual identities range on a continuum from rejection to acceptance, and these reactions strongly impact family relationships and young adult well-being (Needham & Austin, 2010). While much research has examined lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) young adults' experiences of coming out within their families, which can result in changing relationship dynamics (Denes & Afifi, 2014) or even being kicked out of their family home (Choi, Wilson, Shelton, & Gates, 2015), less is known about how family members' reactions may differ based on young people's socioeconomic status and their social context. We conceptualize "the context of socioeconomic status" (used interchangeably with "socioeconomic context" throughout the paper) to refer to the influential economic environments in which young people are embedded and have strong influence over their experiences and outcomes, such as school enrollment and residential stability status (Horn, Kosciw, & Russell, 2009).

Social environment is key to understanding LGBTQ young people's well-being, especially when the positive influence of peer groups and the LGBTQ community can serve to counteract negative impacts of families and institutions (Higa et al., 2014). Through a qualitative, life course analysis of in-depth interview data from 46 LGBTQ college students and LGBTQ homeless young adults, our study emphasizes the unique role of socioeconomic

contexts in shaping young people's "linked lives" (Elder, 1994) within their families by directly comparing these two distinctive groups of LGBTQ young people. We examine the following research question: How do LGBTQ young people embedded in varying contexts of socioeconomic status (e.g., homelessness and college campuses) navigate familial reactions to their gender and/or sexual identity?

## Literature Review

### *LGBT Young Adults*

Family social networks can serve as critical sources of support for all LGBT young adults in maintaining positive mental and emotional health (Goldfried & Goldfried, 2001). Research has primarily highlighted the descriptive characteristics of LGBT young adults' family relationships, with little attention given to the intricate dynamics of how youth navigate complex family dynamics. Specifically, Bregman et al. (2013) identified elements of both sexual orientation-affirming parental support and parental rejection as being the most predictive of whether an LGB youth felt positively or negatively about their sexuality. A sense of family social support can be critical in helping an LGB young person develop their sexual identity (Dickenson & Huebner, 2016) and promoting health and well-being (Rosario, Scrimshaw, & Hunter, 2008). Perceptions of general social support, including that from friends and family, can lower LGBT college students' levels of depression and improve their overall life satisfaction (Sheets & Mohr, 2009). Increased feelings of family acceptance and support among LGBT young adults can also act as a protective factor against adverse mental health outcomes, such as depression and suicide ideation (Ryan et al., 2010).

Family rejection, meanwhile, has been shown to adversely impact LGBT young people's health and well-being, such as significantly increasing their likelihood for exhibiting depressive symptoms (Ryan et al., 2009) and developing negative views regarding their identities (Willoughby, Doty, & Malik, 2010). Young people who identify as gay and lesbian report higher levels of suicide ideation when they are closeted from their parents or their parents are unaccepting of their sexual orientation (D'Augelli, 2002). Additionally, LGB youth engage in elevated substance use when they perceive less family support (Pearson & Wilkinson, 2013). A young person's coming out may heighten their experiences of rejection, as parental awareness of a youth's nonheterosexual orientation can increase the prevalence of sexual orientation-related verbal abuse from their parents (D'Augelli, Grossman, & Starks, 2005).

### *LGBT Homeless Young Adults*

Sexual orientation-based discrimination from family members can be a critical factor in paving youths' pathways to homelessness (Castellanos, 2016; Gattis, 2009). Sexual minority young adults may feel compelled to seek out alternative social supports in the absence of family connectedness, which can exacerbate their exposure to risk-laden situations (Bird, LaSala, Hidalgo, Kuhns, & Garofalo, 2017), as approximately 30–45% of service-using homeless youth identify as LGBT (Durso & Gates, 2012). Research finds that LGB homeless youth have an earlier awareness of their sexual orientation and sexual behavior initiation

when compared to nonhomeless LGB youth (Rosario, Scrimshaw, & Hunter, 2012). Once on the street, sexual minority youth are at increased risk for numerous adverse health consequences, including suicide attempts and substance abuse (Van Leeuwen et al., 2006), engaging in survival sex (Tyler, 2008; Walls & Bell, 2011; Whitbeck, Chen, Hoyt, Tyler, & Johnson, 2004) and HIV risk behaviors (Tyler, 2013). LGBTQ homeless youth also experience greater discrimination in homeless youth housing and other services based on their sexual orientation, which can hinder their usage of social supports (Hunter, 2008).

Given the unique interactions between LGBT youth and their families, research is needed to understand the specific experiences of LGBTQ young adults related to their multifaceted family dynamics within varying socioeconomic environments. In particular, it is unclear how young people's identity-related experiences can shape their complex family relationships in ways that can shift across contexts of socioeconomic status. Finally, further research is needed to unpack how young people interpret and manage their family relationships in light of their unique sexual and/or gender identities and socioeconomic contexts.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Life course theory is a valuable framework for assessing the circumstances that shape young people's life trajectories (Elder, 1998), such as experiencing homelessness or attending college. In this way, an individual's early life history creates a chain of opportunities, disadvantages, or some combination of the two possibilities, which result in multiplicative effects. As such, positive or negative life events can either improve or exacerbate present conditions as well as future opportunities for young adults. Specifically, for LGBT college students, the coming-out process can act as a critical life course milestone that shapes their identity, social networks, and developmental trajectories (Evans & Broido, 1999). Youths' family backgrounds and specifically timed "events," such as instances of abuse, can lead to unstable child developmental trajectories and a youth's abrupt exit from a housed environment through either formal institutional removal or the young person's running away (Tyler, 2006). Moreover, instances of familial rejection may include a youth being kicked out of his or her home because of sexual orientation (Choi et al., 2015). Pathways leading to homelessness often begin in an individual's formative years of childhood and adolescence, thus setting the stage for adult life trajectories (Lee, Tyler, & Wright, 2010).

Life course theory also is useful for exploring individual transitions and trajectories that shape future outcomes through a lens that simultaneously considers the influence of social, historical, and cultural contexts (Elder, 1998). The social dynamic of "linked lives" of individuals helps to explain how family members and peer groups inhabit interconnected trajectories (Elder, 1994; Moen & Hernandez, 2009). A family unit in discord can drastically alter a youth's life, leading to detrimental consequences for his or her social and emotional development (Cavanaugh & Huston, 2006). Family relationships are integral to understanding life course processes among LGBT individuals as sexual orientation coming out trajectories can lead to complex family dynamics (LaSala, 2010) and these negotiations can continue throughout the life course (Denes & Afifi, 2014). For example, young people coming out as gay and lesbian to their family networks often strategically manage this process

by carefully planning the timing, context, and language used with family members (Valentine, Skelton, & Butler, 2003). Family reactions to this process can also impact familial relationships through experiences of rejection or affirmation of the LGB young person's identity (LaSala, 2010).

## **Method**

### *Participants*

Though the terms lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) refer to sexual identities, transgender (T) denotes a gender identity, and queer (Q) can refer to both gender and sexuality, we included these identities together based on their societal subjugation in reference to heterosexuality and gender conformity (Jackson, 2006). To promote inclusivity, additional sexual and gender minority identities were welcome to participate, such as gender queer, questioning, and pansexual; however, the focus remained on LGBTQ young adults (Ryan et al., 2010).

Both groups of participants resided in the Midwestern United States, and both groups were recruited from medium-sized metropolitan areas where they were currently living. Relatedly, both homeless and college young adults were living in the same cities from which we recruited so that they shared a similar wider community environment. Although both groups of respondents lived in the same mid-sized cities, college students had access to numerous campus-sponsored LGBTQ-friendly resources, while homeless young adults had access only to general local homeless services, with few directed explicitly at LGBTQ populations. Eligibility required participants to be between the ages of 19 and 26 and self-identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or another diverse gender and/or sexual identity. We recruited participants for the college student sample by advertising the study through campus bulletin boards and email listservs (e.g., Women's and Gender Studies program and the LGBTQA+ Resource Center and Women's Center). College students were recruited from large, public, state universities that are relatively affordable in the area. We recruited homeless young people through local service agencies (e.g., homeless shelters and drop-in centers) that served this population. Homeless youth had to currently reside in a shelter, on the street, or independently because they had run away, had been pushed out, or had drifted out of their family of origin (National Center on Family Homelessness 2011). Both samples were recruited using a nonprobability method of convenience and snowball sampling. We screened out college students experiencing homelessness to maintain the focus of this study in examining distinctive contexts of socioeconomic status.

### *Procedure*

The first author conducted all of the interviews. Study participants completed one in-depth, face-to-face interview that lasted approximately 1 h and a short demographic questionnaire. All interviews were tape-recorded. College students were interviewed at a private location, such as a reserved room at a public library or a small conference room. Homeless young adults were interviewed in a private room at a participating agency or at a public library. Study procedures were explained to participants and informed consent was ob-

tained prior to the interview. Participants received \$20 in exchange for their time. All respondents were asked the same series of open-ended questions surrounding LGBTQ identity and family relationships. Pseudonyms were used to ensure respondent confidentiality. Both groups were provided with lists of available resources (e.g., college students provided with campus resources such as counseling services, and homeless young adults provided with agency resources such as transitional living). The university institutional review board approved this study.

We performed all data analyses using MAXQDA. All interviews were transcribed verbatim, and Word documents of these transcriptions were uploaded into MAXQDA. We first utilized the method of initial coding to determine emergent themes and categories that corresponded with concepts of interest, such as LGBTQ identity formation and family relationships (Charmaz, 2014). Next, we employed focused coding to home in on the participants' subjective interpretations. The final themes emerged inductively from the data. The combination of initial and focused coding allows for a constructivist perspective to emphasize the participants' understandings of their lived realities and the meanings they attach to their experiences (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2002).

To enhance the credibility of the findings, participants had the option of being recontacted to engage in member checking, whereby they reviewed the raw data and assessed the accuracy of assigned codes and themes (Creswell & Miller, 2010). Eighteen college students (75%) and ten homeless young adults (45%) provided feedback over email on both the accuracy of their interview transcripts and earlier versions of the themes that included brief, generalized descriptions of the major codes and subcodes. Participant feedback was highly consistent with the authors' coding schema. Member checking improved the validity of the findings by allowing participants to ensure their intended meaning was captured and that our interpretations were legitimate.

## Results

### *Sample Demographics*

Concerning young people's socioeconomic contexts, 24 (52%) were full-time college students and 22 (48%) were currently experiencing homelessness. Our sample included 24 women (52%), 18 men (39%), and four (9%) respondents who identified outside of the gender binary, such as bigender or genderqueer. Of the total, eight respondents identified as transgender. Concerning sexual orientation, seven people identified as lesbian (15%), 11 as gay (24%), 20 as bisexual (43%), and eight people identified outside of the LGB spectrum, such as asexual or pansexual. Ages ranged from 19 to 26 years, with a mean age of 21. Thirty-two respondents were white (70%), five African-American (11%), two Asian-American (24%), and seven biracial or multiracial (15%). Regarding their family class status while growing up, 11 (50%) of homeless young adults labeled it as working class, while only seven (29%) of college students fell into this category. Additionally, 15 (63%) of college students reported their parent's highest educational level as a bachelor's or professional degree, and only five (23%) of homeless young adults reported this. Table 1 presents demographic information for the total sample and the two subsamples by their context of socioeconomic status.

**Table 1.** Respondent demographics by context of socioeconomic status

	College (N = 24)	Homeless (N = 22)	Total (N = 46)
Age (in years)			
Mean	21	21	21
Range	19–26	19–26	19–26
Race/ethnicity			
White	21 (88%)	11 (50%)	32 (70%)
African-American	0	5 (23%)	5 (11%)
Asian-American	1 (4%)	1 (4%)	2 (4%)
Bi-/multiracial	2 (8%)	5 (23%)	7 (15%)
Sexual orientation			
Lesbian	3 (12%)	4 (18%)	7 (15%)
Gay	5 (21%)	6 (27%)	11 (24%)
Bisexual	9 (37%)	11 (50%)	20 (43%)
Queer	4 (17%)	0	4 (9%)
Other	3 (13%)	1 (5%)	4 (9%)
Gender <sup>a</sup>			
Woman	13 (54%)	11 (50%)	24 (52%)
Man	8 (33%)	11 (50%)	19 (41%)
Transgender	4 (17%)	4 (18%)	8 (17%) <sup>b</sup>
Other	3 (13%)	0	3 (7%)
Family class status growing up			
Working class	7 (29%)	11 (50%)	18 (39%)
Middle class	13 (54%)	10 (45%)	23 (50%)
Upper-middle class	4 (17%)	1 (5%)	5 (11%)
Parental education			
Some high school	1 (4%)	4 (18%)	5 (11%)
Graduated high school	4 (17%)	7 (32%)	11 (24%)
Some college	3 (13%)	3 (14%)	6 (13%)
Associate's degree	1 (4%)	1 (4%)	2 (4%)
Bachelor's degree	5 (21%)	4 (18%)	9 (20%)
Professional or advanced degree	10 (42%)	1 (5%)	11 (24%)
Other (GED)	0	2 (9%)	2 (4%)

a. Categories not mutually exclusive

b. Out of participants who identified as either a woman or a man

Our findings reveal both the importance of early family histories and socioeconomic contexts in shaping how family members react to participants' identities. Family members' responses to young people's culturally diverse gender and sexual identities varied on a continuum from rejection and acceptance that corresponded to the youth's socioeconomic context of homelessness or being in college. First, experiences of familial rejection interacted with young people's socioeconomic context of residential instability or college campus life by impacting how young adults managed family rejection, such as pushing them to homelessness or shaping their disengagement from family relationships after leaving



for college. Conversely, processes of familial acceptance were connected to the life course transitions of becoming homeless or leaving for college that worked in some cases to enhance LGBTQ young adults' family relationships. Finally, the intricacy of varied familial reactions to a young person's LGBTQ identity transcended socioeconomic contexts as many respondents, both college students and homeless young adults, shared similar experiences of rejection and acceptance.

### *Familial Rejection Interacting with Socioeconomic Contexts*

Responses of familial rejection related to the young adult's LGBTQ identity interacted with their socioeconomic context and shaped young people's unique experiences as they navigated identity-related family conflict. In this way, experiences of identity-related family rejection were key in shaping many LGBTQ young adults' dynamic life course transitions, such as experiencing residential instability or transitioning into college. In many ways, family rejection influenced the pathways that the young adults pursued. For example, LGBTQ homeless young adults linked patterns of ongoing family rejection to both their LGBTQ status and their residential instability, while LGBTQ college students recounted more subtle displays of rejection that damaged their wider family relationships.

A common trajectory for many homeless young people was a history of sustained residential instability that was closely intertwined with problematic family relationships often exacerbated by the youth's diverse sexual and/or gender identity. For example, some homeless young adults described being kicked out or placed in foster care as an outcome stemming from their coming out. These unexpected, abrupt, and forced transitions were difficult for young people to manage as they often lacked key sources of social support and coping mechanisms. Yolanda, a homeless bisexual woman, described her parents' negative reaction to her sexuality in the following way:

They [parents] got scared and they blamed me being bisexual on society, they blamed it on schools and the teachers, the kids, but they never really looked at the real problem. They never really looked at "Well, maybe we should accept our kid" or "Maybe we should see what the kids are doing to her." They would always make some type of excuse for it . . . they ended up throwing me back in the [foster care] system.

In a similar vein, Henley, a homeless transgender lesbian woman, felt that her "really low self-esteem" was tied to her conflicted relationship with her stepmom where "anything I would do was wrong . . . I actually started to think I wasn't worthy of friends." Because of this troubled relationship, Henley stated, "I got taken out of my house by the state at 16 for marijuana possession, it was a little bit too late to try and do anything." These blatant examples of parental rejection were distressing for Yolanda, Henley, and other homeless LGBTQ young adults as they were often left with very limited social support networks following sudden forced detachments from their families. Furthermore, parental rejection of this nature was especially problematic as it coincided with LGBTQ young people's individual and interpersonal identity-related struggles, such as being discriminated against by peers.

Other homeless young adults linked their experiences of family rejection to wider conflict that stemmed from their deeply embedded feelings of alienation within their family circles. This phenomenon of identity-related family detachment is captured in the words of Melanie, a homeless bisexual woman:

My relationship with my family has never really been very good. I've always kind of been like the black sheep in the family. I wouldn't conform to how they wanted me to think or be or . . . and they didn't like that. So we butted heads quite often. I think that's why I bounced around so much as I grew up is because I became so opinionated against them. They were closed minded and I was very open minded and they didn't like that.

In Melanie's case, her marginalized sexual identity was one of many factors that enhanced her feelings of family detachment, and her resulting experience of being "bounced around" during middle school between multiple different family members' homes, institutional placements, and bouts of homelessness. Family conflict combined with residential instability in her formative years throughout middle school disrupted Melanie's life course by forcing her into numerous abrupt, unstable transitions that further solidified her detachment from sources of familial social support.

While many homeless young adults shared experiences of family conflict and estrangement that contributed to their homelessness, others were careful to distinguish when leaving home had a positive effect on their lives. One such case is Bernard, a homeless gay man, who had endured years of familial rejection related to his sexual identity and was eager to liberate himself from a stifling home life at age 17:

I'd be always out, trying to socialize and get people to be friends with me, rather than being at home, 'cause I distanced myself with my family 'cause I didn't know if they'd accept me. I just felt lost in the world at that time, 'cause I knew I was gay but then I knew I was different because everybody else I felt was straight . . . I was so ready to leave home. I was very excited, I felt like I was free, I was getting away from everything that was kinda holding me back, like I just felt trapped inside the house.

Since the age of 12, Bernard had felt alienated within his family when he started to explore a gay identity and kept it hidden from his family members, until he came out to them at age 15 and "it was not supportive . . . their reaction was just 'we already knew'." These examples of profound fractured "linked lives" within family networks directly interacted with many homeless LGBTQ young adults' unstable life pathways and their socioeconomic context of homelessness. These homeless young adults' experiences of leaving home at young ages often left them with few resources to draw from as they transitioned into a life on their own.

While LGBTQ college students also endured familial rejection, these adverse experiences were typically tempered by more choice-laden, stable transitions of leaving home to

attend school. When college students experienced identity-related rejection, they sometimes viewed leaving for college as an escape from judgmental family members. In stark contrast to homeless young adults, college students' departures from home were much more deliberate in that these exits were planned out in advance. Moreover, the campus environment and broader community provided young people with several opportunities to access varied sources of support, which typically were unavailable to homeless young adults. Charlie, for example, a pansexual demigirl college student, believed that attending college away from her family was beneficial to her well-being:

My mental health has gone up since being able to be in a community such as [name of socially liberal city] where I don't actually have any family members and I can actually go out and hold hands with my girlfriend and I can kiss her if I want to.

Other college students, however, noted how leaving home for school worsened tenuous family ties, such as Sophie, a bisexual woman college student: "my oldest sister and I were friendly and had a good relationship for about 5 years . . . when I moved here and started going to school, things fell apart for us. Actually, my sexuality is what I think made us not talk anymore . . . she's very intolerant and very conservative." The dynamic life course transition of leaving for college is an important consideration in understanding LGBTQ college students' family relationships, as it can shape their own well-being on a personal level as well as the quality of particular family connections.

The experience of higher education and changing life experiences during college was also transformative for some LGBTQ college students' family relationships. Stacy, a bisexual college student, placed importance on sharing her broadened perspectives with her family members, which in turn strained her relationship with her stepfather:

It made things a little bit more complicated because I became more educated and I would go back home and talk to my siblings about biopsychology and evolution . . . it definitely caused some more conflict between my stepdad and I, because he didn't want me sharing this stuff with them. He just wanted them to stay ignorant about it.

Paige, a lesbian college student, also associated her transition into college and her living situation as complicating the relationship with her father:

I think we were good and he was dealing with it, and then we [respondent and girlfriend] moved in together and we didn't talk hardly at all for a couple of months and we're just now kinda starting to talk again. I just think it's hard for him to understand, he's so conservative . . .

The life course shift into college coupled with transformations in a young person's intellectual capacities or living arrangements with intimate partners can add layers of complexity to how LGBTQ youth manage their identities within family relationships.

Some college students also experienced the nuances of familial rejection when a family member did not afford them respect regarding their identity development. Gabriel, a queer transgender man who was a college student, described the conflicts of being forced by his mother to simultaneously balance his gender transition and his status as a new student:

It's all been a very stressful time for me. I kind of jumped head first into everything . . . I came out to my mom and then she came out to everybody for me. I don't think it is necessarily one or the other but just a combination of me trying to learn to deal with my trans identity and dealing with being a student.

The intersecting experiences of life course pathways, such as gender transitioning and starting college, can be especially challenging for LGBTQ young people when family members strip them of the power to control disclosure processes. As there is often no ideal timing for coming out or gender transitioning for young people, regardless of socioeconomic context, they may face additional obstacles in this developmental process.

#### *Familial Acceptance as a Process Tied to Transitions*

Familial acceptance, meanwhile, was a dynamic process for these young people that interacted with their life course transitions, such as becoming homeless or leaving for college. In a variety of ways, family members needed time to come to terms with the young person's disclosure of their nonconforming sexual and/or gender identity. This process of acceptance involved more drastic transitions for homeless young adults, such as their expulsion from their homes by parents, while for college students the journey toward familial acceptance was intertwined with their transition into higher education. Though both groups of young people reported cases of family acceptance that mapped onto their departures from home, the key difference is that homeless young adults' pathways from home were varied (e.g., foster care, treatment facilities) and occurred early on in their lives, often amid family conflict. College students' transitions, meanwhile, were singular and goal-oriented in nature and were in accordance with widespread societal expectations regarding educational attainment. This important distinction can shape the dynamics of family acceptance, such as having an impact on the quality and depth of a family member's supportive attitudes and behaviors.

In several young adults' experiences, family members' beliefs about what it means to attend college and pursue an advanced degree shaped their responses to young adults' disclosures of their identities. Some LGBTQ college students, like Stacy, who identified as bisexual, experienced more trouble in garnering parental acceptance because her mother originally believed her sexual orientation to be a "phase" related to being in college:

She [my mom] had a hard time really accepting it [at first]. I think she thought that it was just a phase. I'm in college; I'm taking all these classes. I want to seem more unique and all of that, and so yeah, I'll identify as bi. I mean, the more that I talked to her about it throughout the next several weeks and what not, she came to accept it . . .

In this case, Stacy's mother initially framed bisexuality as an illegitimate, transitory sexuality that will ultimately reorient itself back to stereotypical cultural standards, though her mother eventually accepted Stacy's bisexuality after extensive discussions. Though middle-class values dictate that young adults pursue higher education following high school, this transition can shape their experiences of family acceptance regarding their sexual identity. Family members may erroneously subscribe to stereotypes of college student development, such as the belief that college is a time of sexual experimentation, which can lead some family members to reject an LGBTQ young person's identity.

Other LGBTQ college students recalled how their own journeys of self-discovery that coincided with leaving for college facilitated more open, supportive relationships with family members. In describing how her transition to college positively shaped both her own self-acceptance and "authentic" communication within her family with the help of a therapist, Clark, who claimed a queer sexual identity, responded in the following way:

I've become much better at being direct about my emotions with my family. . . we were talking about something that felt kind of fragile to me and rather than just being quiet about it, I was like "This is what I think is messed up about this situation and I'm upset about it" and my family reacted wonderfully and actually my sister was like this awesome advocate and was like "you are absolutely right, we need to be holding you most securely in this situation before anything else. You are the priority here." So at this point it feels safer to be more vulnerable with my family and it feels more honest.

The structured life course transition of leaving home to attend college can be construed as a shift in social contexts for LGBTQ young people that can provide them with crucial time and resources to work on mending fractured family relationships.

For several homeless LGBTQ young adults, lacking a regular place to live strengthened family relationships over time, and shared hardships helped to gradually build emotional closeness among family members, but it often took substantial time. Some parents, like Harris's (homeless gay man), eventually came to understand their child's struggle with being both homeless and LGBTQ:

They support me a lot better when I finally sat down and told them about being gay. Because they were more kind of in a wrong spot when I first told them and they kicked me out. They're [my parents] definitely giving more support than normal because they know now that it's tough and rougher for people like us out there, you know, the LGBT who are homeless.

Though Harris finally reconnected with his parents at age 23, it was a lengthy process of acceptance, as his parents had kicked him out at 16 when he came out as gay, which forced his sudden transition into homelessness. Relatedly, Felicity, a homeless lesbian young adult, believed that moving out at age 17 into a transitional living facility improved her relationship with her mother as she stated, "We started getting along a lot better 'cause we weren't arguing a lot and we talk and have fun now." Though being kicked out or leaving

home at a young age is certainly a conflict-laden experience for young people that places them on an unexpected trajectory, these transitions altered family relationships for some youth in positive ways that helped both parties relate better to one another. While homeless young adults' out-of-home transitions were unplanned and abrupt in nature, they also afforded youth the ability to work on repairing rifts in family relationships. The distinction, however, is that college students likely had more economic and social resources at their disposal when they left home, compared to their homeless counterparts, which is evidenced in their stark social class demographic differences.

Family relationships among homeless LGBTQ young people were also dynamic in how a shift in one relationship can impact another familial tie after a youth leaves home. Henry, for example, took stock of her parental relationships after she became homeless and was able to see things from her stepmother's point of view:

My dad gave up on me. It strengthened the relationship between me and my stepmom, because it made me realize, you don't ever know what you have until it's gone . . . I finally realized that she wasn't the enemy. She was just trying to help me, she just didn't necessarily know how to do it right.

While the shift into homelessness is undoubtedly wrought with poverty, conflict, and stress for LGBTQ young people, it has the potential to reframe certain family relationships in a positive light that was not previously possible.

#### *Familial Rejection/Acceptance Across Socioeconomic Contexts*

Family rejection and acceptance was commonly expressed across both socioeconomic contexts, as both homeless and college students often experienced mixed reactions from family members and they struggled to interpret and manage these complex reactions. LGBTQ college students emphasized how parental rejection shifted over time into something resembling acceptance. Gavin, a bisexual transgender man who was a college student, outlined these changing dynamics in the following way:

He [father] sort of threatened to kick me out of the house at one point but that was just out of anger and since he's calmed down he was like "I didn't mean that. I would never abandon you like that" and he actually just told me that even 20 years down the road if I have a full beard and my voice can be 3 octaves lower but he's always going to call me by my birth name.

While Gavin's father acknowledged that he would never "abandon" his child, his refusal to fully accept Gavin's transgender identity reflects a type of conditional support that hinged on the parent's terms.

Other LGBTQ young adults recognized how parental rejection was especially harmful to their overall well-being. One such example is Lucy, a bisexual college student, who recounted:

It was not well received by my mom. She said some things that really, really hurt me . . . when I finally told her “You know, if you can’t accept it, then I can’t really have you in my life because I was suppressing this and denying it for years and I can’t continue to do that.”

Homeless young adults underwent similar rejection experiences, such as Yolanda, who characterized her parents’ enduring rejection of her:

To this day they’re not supportive . . . it’s not even just because I’m bisexual, they’re not supportive at all. They always find some mistake that I did, or some flaw . . . they never can accept that, even though I went through everything I went through, I’m still standing.

LGBTQ young people from varying socioeconomic contexts were united in the sense that they often recognized how parental rejection greatly worsened the challenges they already faced in their lives related to their identities.

Across contexts of socioeconomic status, many family members attempted to shape young people’s identity to fit more heteronormative models, such as encouraging heterosexuality as the preferred, expected sexual orientation. For both groups of LGBTQ young people, fathers were identified as key figures in their families. Bianca, a bisexual homeless woman, described an indirect type of disapproval from her father that stemmed from his inability to understand more diverse sexualities:

He’s [father] never like reacted negative towards me. He would just be like “No, you don’t need to be with no girl . . . you need to get you a man and just be with the man. I don’t understand how you females can like females and these men can like men.” My dad’s old school so he doesn’t understand it at all.

Among some college students, fathers also emerged as primary enforcers of stereotypical norms surrounding gender and sexuality at the expense of a young person’s identity. Regarding his gender transition, Alex, a gay transgender man who was a college student, came to understand his father’s unaccepting beliefs in the following way: “Because of his [father’s] religion, the female body is so sacred it needs to be pure and that’s how he sees me still. He’s just obsessed with me not doing anything because I’m his little girl and he doesn’t want anything to ruin that.”

Regardless of socioeconomic context, the heteronormative beliefs and expectations held by parents were strong motivators in promoting socially conforming behaviors among both groups of LGBTQ young adults. Many young people reported creating a type of façade where they performed heterosexuality for their family members. Despite knowing “I wouldn’t ever be with a girl,” Bernard, a homeless young man, shifted his outward sexual identity to garner his parents’ acceptance:

After I came out to my parents, we never really talked about me being gay again, so I still kinda dated girls to cover it up, because it switched from being gay to

being bisexual, to kinda hopefully get the support from my parents that okay, I still might date a girl and marry a girl.

Phillip, a gay man college student, felt compelled to express heteronormative desire to his parents in a similar way in hopes of conforming to his parents' conservative religious ideals:

It's kind of awkward because my parents expected me to have a serious girlfriend and probably having kids within the next few years . . . because that's what good Catholic people do and they're unhappy that I've shown no interest in trying to have a wife and kids. Like I fake it . . . I say that I'm pursuing women when I'm not.

These performances placed undue strain on the young people and their family relationships as they strived to attain a heteronormative ideal forced upon them through familial norms. Furthermore, LGBTQ young adults sometimes recalled being pleasantly surprised at their family's support and acceptance when they feared that the outcome would be rejection. In these cases, familial responses to participants' gender/sexual identities overrode contexts of socioeconomic status and unified LGBTQ young people's lives. For both college students and homeless young adults, grandparents often exceeded the youths' expectations of acceptance. Morgan, a gender queer, gay man college student, recounted his grandfather's casual acceptance of his nonconforming identities: "My grandfather probably took it the best. He didn't say anything. It was not anything he was really worried about or anything he really even had a comment about. It was just like whatever." In a similar way, Abby, a homeless straight transgender woman, was shocked at her grandmother's reaction, whose background made Abby fear her reaction:

My grandma has come up to me and told me "Even though I don't quite agree with how you're living your life, you're still my grandbaby and I still love you and support you and even though it might be hard for me, I'll call you by the name you prefer." That was a major shock for me coming from a grandparent that's also a Catholic schoolteacher.

Though beliefs surrounding older generations' disapproval toward diverse gender and sexual identities shaped young people's fear of rejection, the explicit acceptance from elder family members, such as grandparents, strengthened LGBTQ young people's networks of social support.

Other LGBTQ young people struggled with disclosing their identity to particular family members, but ultimately were surprised when their anxiety was unfounded. One example of this is Harper, a transgender lesbian woman who was a college student, who in hindsight could see how her mother's positive reaction to her identity was informed by her mother's status as an academic:

She was the one that I was most nervous about . . . it's like a casual intimidation when someone is in a position of life that you would like to be in at some point.



But, she had no sort of worries and she asked me about pronoun usage . . . I mean, it's just sort of the idea of "Whatever you do just be good at it" and being in academia . . . it's a more inclusive environment. I had prepared myself for the worst of things . . . and then pleasantly everything was awesome.

A family member's ability to exceed an LGBTQ young adult's expectations of their responses was oftentimes a critical factor in stabilizing, or even enhancing, family relationships after identity disclosure.

## Discussion

This study demonstrates the need to consider LGBTQ young people's early life histories and contexts of socioeconomic status to better understand the nuances of their family relationships and how this impacts their lives. Through a simultaneous exploration of LGBTQ college students and homeless young adults, our findings underscore the critical role of socioeconomic context in shaping young adults' encounters with complex family reactions to their identities. While research often addresses challenging family relationships in the lives of LGBTQ young people by framing them as a monolithic social group (Horn et al., 2009), our study explicitly examines the role of socioeconomic context by directly comparing two unique groups of LGBTQ young adults. A young person's socioeconomic context of homelessness or being in college interacted with their experiences of family rejection in complex ways that largely shaped their life course transitions. Additionally, family acceptance of a young person's identity was also dynamically influenced by their socioeconomic context of homelessness or being in college. Finally, young people's experiences of family acceptance and rejection shared similarities across contexts of socioeconomic status.

Moreover, the timing of life course transitions, such as the age at which young people leave home and the circumstances under which they depart, has important implications for these two groups of young people, as this timing will significantly impact all aspects of their future life course trajectories, including relationships with family members and other individuals. Positive resources of social support are especially crucial for young adults as they attempt to successfully navigate the complex pathway to adulthood (Spencer & Patrick, 2009). Furthermore, sexual and gender identity can shift across the life course as individuals experience changing social roles, relationships, and self-concepts (Diamond & Butterworth, 2008), which could also include their trajectories throughout college or bouts of homelessness. For homeless young people, the oftentimes forced exit from their family home was coupled with the additional stressors that surrounded their transition into homelessness. That is, young people had to manage the daily struggles of finding food and shelter while remaining safe with extremely limited resources and support, which is common among those who experience sudden, often conflict-laden transitions (Pearlin, Schieffman, Fazio, & Meersman, 2005). In contrast, college students typically had a planned trajectory that resulted in their leaving home under circumstances which were more planned out and structured. Moreover, the support of a campus environment coupled with

greater family and social resources likely aided college students in their life course transition, while homeless young adults' lack of long-term social support can make it more difficult to exit homelessness and establish residential stability. In these ways, LGBTQ young adults' experiences of coming out were intertwined with their disparate socioeconomic contexts and transitions from home, and these processes largely determine a young person's access to life course capital in the form of social support, economic resources, and individual coping mechanisms (O'Rand, 2006).

A life course perspective considers the integral role of socioeconomic contexts as well as the interplay among individuals' social relationships and interacting identities (Elder, 1998), especially the unique influence of gender and sexual identities. Our study demonstrated how LGBTQ young adults' social environments and socioeconomic contexts created distinctive social convoys (e.g., nuclear and extended family relationships) in shaping their pivotal life course transitions (Moen & Hernandez, 2009). The intricate dynamics of family relationships and the shifting quality of these relationships across the life course are important factors in determining how well young adults are able to cope with life's challenges (Needham & Austin, 2010). Much research has documented the widespread familial conflict experienced by homeless LGBTQ young adults (Castellanos, 2016; Gattis, 2009), and LGBTQ young adults in the general population also endure familial discord related to their gender and/or sexual identities (LaSala, 2010). Family rejection, however, can have enduring adverse consequences for LGBTQ young people, such as harming mental health outcomes in later life and constrained social support networks (Puckett, Woodward, Merish, & Pantalone, 2015). The context of socioeconomic status, therefore, provides further clarity on how young people cope with familial rejection, particularly if they can draw from campus-based supportive resources (Poynter & Tubbs, 2008) or are pushed to pursue more risk-laden subsistence strategies on the street (Bird et al., 2017).

In turn, the major life course transition of leaving for college or becoming homeless fostered connectedness between some young people and their family members. Familial social support in the lives of sexual and gender minority youth can oftentimes come from unexpected sources, such as grandparents (Scherrer, 2016). Furthermore, some research finds that social support from family is one of the strongest predictors of positive life adjustment in LGBT young adulthood (Snapp, Watson, Russell, Diaz, & Ryan, 2015). Exploring the unique role of life course transitions across socioeconomic contexts can expand understandings of how distinctive groups of LGBTQ young adults may foster increased levels of acceptance with family members, despite their histories of conflict and discord (Samarova, Shilo, & Diamond, 2014).

The complexity of family responses to young adults' identities also surpassed socioeconomic context in that many LGBTQ young people reported similar processes of acceptance and rejection within their family networks. While it is necessary to acknowledge that LGBTQ young adults are not a homogeneous, static social group, there may also be aspects of family dynamics in the coming out process that unify LGBTQ young people across disparate environments. For example, several LGBTQ homeless young adults and college students identified fathers as key enforcers of heteronormative expectations, which supports previous research highlighting fathers' committed roles to fortifying stereotypi-

cal norms of masculinity and femininity among sons and daughters, respectively (Castellanos, 2016; Solebello & Elliott, 2011). Also, many young adults from both groups in our study described how suppressing their identity within family relationships took a damaging toll on their well-being. Coming out to family members is a delicate process that LGBTQ young people have to navigate, and familial responses can never be fully anticipated. In sum, familial reactions to youths' coming out demonstrate the pervasiveness of social and cultural stigma surrounding nonconforming sexual and gender identities (Jackson, 2006).

The sameness across the two groups of LGBTQ young people present in this study may be due in part to sampling effects whereby most respondents identified as white (70%). While beyond the analytic scope of this study, some research finds that people of color may be conflicted in adopting a stigmatized sexual identity because of its conflation with white, mainstream culture (Meyer & Ouellette, 2009), while other studies did not find support for a clash between racial/ethnic and LGB identities (Meyer, 2010). In our study, half of LGBTQ homeless young adults identified as people of color, while only 12% of LGBTQ college students were nonwhite. While the LGBTQ young adults of color in this study did not often mention the influence of race/ethnicity in their lives, its role can be instrumental in the well-being of homeless young adults (Gattis & Larson, 2016) as well as LGBT youth of color in the general population (Kuper, Coleman, & Mustanski, 2014). For college students, racial microaggressions are a detriment to self-esteem (Nadal, Wong, Griffin, Davidoff, & Sriken, 2014), which can further interact with on-campus homophobic slurs (Nadal et al., 2011) for LGBTQ college students of color. Additional research is needed to explore how LGBTQ young people of color's lives are shaped by the intersecting matrix of systems of oppression that adversely affect marginalized people (Collins, 2009).

In addition to potential variation across race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status may also impact LGBTQ young adult identity development. For example, more college students (42%) than homeless young adults (5%) identified outside of the LGBT spectrum, such as queer or asexual, which could point to social class differences in choosing or rejecting non-mainstream gender and/or sexual identities. Though our respondents in both groups overall were similar in their general reports of both family rejection and acceptance, socioeconomic class is important to consider in its influential role of shaping young people's future outcomes. Furthermore, LGBTQ college students overall reported higher family social class background and parental education levels compared to LGBTQ homeless young adults. Research concludes that LGBT youth from higher socioeconomic standings enjoy more social support from a variety of different sources (McConnell et al., 2015), which is a key indicator of young people's well-being and future outcomes.

Our findings also pose clinical implications for tailoring services aimed at LGBTQ young adults that take into consideration the dynamics of socioeconomic context and family relationships that can create barriers to healthy coping strategies, especially in light of their increased risk of substance use and victimization while homeless (Van Leeuwen et al., 2006) and in college (Woodford, Han, Craig, Lim, & Matney, 2014). The influential role of changing contexts of socioeconomic status in potentially enhancing family relationships points to the possibility of family-based interventions for young people who are struggling to assert their gender and sexual identities in conflicted home environments (Diamond et al.,

2013; Ryan, 2010). Further explorations of young people's contexts of socioeconomic status can also shed light on the resources they can access, such as those aimed at LGBTQ homeless populations or LGBTQ supports available on college campuses, and how effective these are in addressing the unique experiences of LGBTQ young people in managing family rejection and acceptance. A contextually comprehensive approach to improving the lives of LGBTQ young adults and their family relationships can more fully address their needs across multiple domains of young adulthood, such as the complexity of their own family formation beyond a heteronormative model (Rabun & Oswald, 2009).

This study has limitations that require consideration. Convenience-sampling methods created a constrained sampling frame that captured a particular subset of LGBTQ college students and homeless young adults. For example, some college students were recruited from LGBTQ-related campus email listservs and social justice-oriented classes and majors, which could have primed these participants for thinking about their gender and sexual identities in contexts that expressly encouraged this type of critical thinking. Further, homeless young adults were primarily recruited from service agencies, so that this sample does not represent the experiences of homeless youth who do not use services and therefore are possibly at greater risk. Future research should attempt to sample both college and homeless LGBTQ young adults using more diverse sampling methods to capture a wider breadth of these individuals' experiences. Another barrier to this study is the retrospective nature of the young people's accounts that were captured at one point in time and its limited definition of how young adults can experience sexual and gender minority statuses. LGBTQ young adults may misremember their coming out experiences, especially if this process led to traumatic events that they have blocked from or minimized in their memory as a coping strategy (Rosario, Hunter, Maguen, Gwadz, & Smith, 2001).

The role of the researcher must also be considered within the contexts of the college and homeless environments and sexual and gender minority identities. The sensitive subject-matter of the interviews (i.e., diverse sexual orientations and gender identities) required careful consideration of how questions were asked and subsequently interpreted (Lee & Lee, 2012). As a gender-conforming, heterosexual, white graduate student whose sexual orientation was unknown to participants, I remained cognizant of how my positions of social privilege influenced the interviewing dynamics of LGBTQ-identified individuals by encouraging their active participation in defining their experiences and shaping the interview process (Levy, 2013).

## **Conclusion**

The role of family relationships in the study of LGBTQ young adults' linked lives is an essential element in addressing the unique challenges they face related to their gender and sexual identities. Family members' response to a young person's diverse sexual and/or gender identity can largely shape life course trajectories by determining access to sources of support. Through an in-depth examination of the influence of distinctive social and socioeconomic contexts in the lives of LGBTQ young adults, it is clear that experiences of homelessness or transitioning into college were key drivers in how family relationships shifted across young people's lives. This study can guide policy interventions as well as

future research through its systematic demonstration of the importance of recognizing contextual diversity as an additional component at work in LGBTQ young adults' lives.

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