

**TITLE:** Conditional Families and LGBTQ Youth Homelessness: Gender, Sexuality, Family Instability, and Rejection

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**KEYWORDS:** family instability, gender, homelessness, poverty, sexuality, youth

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**CONDITIONAL FAMILIES AND LGBTQ YOUTH HOMELESSNESS:  
GENDER, SEXUALITY, FAMILY INSTABILITY, AND REJECTION**

**Abstract:** Existing research on LGBTQ youth homelessness identifies family rejection as a main pathway into homelessness for the youth. This finding, however, can depict people of color and/or poor people as more prejudiced than white, middle-class families. In this 18-month ethnographic study, I complicate this rejection paradigm through documenting the narratives of 40 LGBTQ youth experiencing homelessness. I examine how poverty and family instability shaped the conditions that the youth perceived they were rejected because of their gender and sexuality. This rejection generated strained familial ties within families wherein the ties were already fragile. Likewise, I show how being gender expansive, more so than sexuality, marked many youth's experiences of familial abuse and strain. This study moves beyond the family rejection paradigm by proposing the concept of *conditional families* to capture the social processes of how poverty and family instability shape experiences of gender, sexuality, and rejection for some LGBTQ youth.

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One in ten young adults, ages 18 to 25, experience homelessness over the course of a year (Chapin Hall, 2017). Following the economic re-structuring of U.S. society, especially the erosion of many social assistance programs and state services (Lee, Tyler, and Wright, 2010), people of color, women and their children, and unaccompanied youth now comprise the bulk of people experiencing homelessness (Wright, 2009 [1989]). Notably, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and/or queer (LGBTQ) youth are disproportionately among the youth homelessness population. LGBTQ youth comprise approximately 5-8 percent of the U.S. youth population, but comprise at least 40 percent of the population of youth experiencing homelessness (Ray, 2006; Durso and Gates, 2012). Existing research identifies family conflict about the LGBTQ youth's gender and/or sexuality as a primary reason for experiencing homelessness (Whitbeck et al., 2004; Rew et al., 2005; Durso and Gates, 2012). Seventy-three percent of gay and lesbian and 26 percent of bisexual youth experiencing homelessness report parental disapproval of their sexual orientation as the main reason for their homelessness, and service providers who work with LGBTQ youth experiencing homelessness indicate that 68 percent have experienced family rejection (Rew et al., 2005; Durso and Gates, 2012).

This attention on family rejection often portrays the parents of LGBTQ youth experiencing homelessness as unaccepting of their child. Statistical surveys, however, often limit people to marking their one cause of homelessness from a list of categories presented to them, eclipsing the structural, interpersonal, and individual factors that converge to lead particular people to experience homelessness (Wright, 2009 [1989]). In effect, this singular focus on *the* cause of homelessness often erases the *processes* and *contexts* behind the youth's family rejection as well as the youth's own narratives of navigating the *meanings* of gender and

sexuality within the family. Addressing this void within the literature is critical towards furthering scholarly understandings of familial life and LGBTQ youth today. Without asking *how* and *why* particular practices around gender and sexuality result in rejection among certain families, scholarship risks pathologizing the families of the youth as homophobic and transphobic. Considering that LGBTQ youth experiencing homelessness are disproportionately youth of color and from backgrounds of poverty, this family rejection narrative could cast families of color and/or poor families as inherently more prejudiced than white, middle-class families (Page 2017; Wheeler, Price, and Ellasante, 2017).

In conducting 18-months of ethnographic fieldwork and 40 in-depth interviews with LGBTQ youth experiencing homelessness, I address this empirical gap by examining LGBTQ youth's narratives about their "families of origin" and their pathways into homelessness. I introduce the concept of *conditional families* to provide a framework to understand the social processes of how poverty and family instability can shape the conflict surrounding the families' rejection of the youth's gender and/or sexuality. This conflict often furthered familial strain within families wherein the ties were already fragile. By showing how youth, especially poor LGBTQ youth of color, say they negotiate and navigate gender and sexuality in particular family environments, I provide new theoretical insights into how social practices around gender and sexuality are enforced in LGBTQ youth's lives today, specifically within the institution of the family, and outline the potential consequences of these enforcements.

## **BACKGROUND**

### ***GENDER, SEXUALITY, THE FAMILY, AND YOUTH***

Sociological research consistently demonstrates that interactions parents and children often reproduce hegemonic patterns of gender relations and uphold heteronormativity. For example, parenting advice websites and childcare books sometimes warn parents against raising boys and girls similarly, under the assumption this parenting style is a form of condoning non-heterosexuality. This advice conflates and presumes that children's expansive gender behaviors (e.g., boys playing with dolls) may be associated with same-sex attraction that will be expressed later in life (Martin, 2005). Parents, especially fathers, are often consciously aware of trying to make their sons live up to hegemonic ideals of masculinity (Kane, 2006), and mothers often assume their children are heterosexual, discuss love and dating in terms of heterosexuality, and may erase LGBTQ people from their children's lives (Martin, 2009). Distinctly, gender expression more than sexuality may be what parents try to regulate and discipline, as gender is often a more public display than sexuality and how sexuality is often read onto the body.

In confronting and navigating these interactions around gender and sexuality within the family, some LGBTQ youth may "come out," or disclose their sexual and/or gender identity (Tilsen and Nylund, 2010). Today, the average age of coming out for LGB youth is 13 years old, and a quarter of transgender youth come out before the age of 18 (Cray, Miller, and Durso, 2013). As youth come out, they contend with how practices around gender and sexuality may be enforced within the family. A paradox occurs. Within this moment of increased LGBTQ visibility and acceptance, many young people are coming out at earlier ages, but the youth must negotiate practices around gender and sexuality within their families for a longer period of time. But how do LGBTQ youth navigate negotiations of gender and sexuality within their families, especially as they are coming out at a younger age?

Advancements in rights do not always mean acceptance, as some married gay men experienced renewed parental rejection and loss of familial support after getting married (Ocobock, 2013). Furthermore, scholars have shown that parental and peer rejection and discrimination may occur as a result of people's expansive expressions of gender, which is associated with anti-LGB prejudice (Landolt et al., 2004; Gordon and Meyer, 2008). In a study on "sexually non-conforming" Latinas, for instance, families often accepted Latinas' non-heterosexuality as long as the women embodied and enacted aspects of hegemonic femininity (Acosta, 2013). Likewise, middle-class parents may provide more leeway in allowing their children to choose to embody more expansive expressions of gender and/or sexuality (Kane, 2012). Parents of transgender and gender expansive children have to do a great deal of labor to account for their child's gender expressions and to access affirming professionals and advocacy organizations (Meadow, 2011). This privilege may not be available to marginalized families, who are already constrained by multiple forces of inequality. Therefore, in this study, I document the perspectives of LGBTQ youth experiencing homelessness – an understudied sample that is mainly poor LGBTQ youth of color – to empirically show how LGBTQ youth who grow up in poverty and instability negotiate their gender and sexuality within the family. Through this documentation, I extend theoretical insights about how poverty and instability can shape social processes around gender and sexuality for LGBTQ youth in relation to their families of origin.

### ***FAMILY INSTABILITY AND YOUTH HOMELESSNESS***

A great deal of scholarly research has focused on how family instability shapes a child's life outcomes (Fomby and Cherlin, 2007; Cherlin, 2010; Schoon et al., 2011). Scholars have found that a major disruption in a family environment – an *event* – influences a child's well-

being more than the *statuses* of people in the family (Wu and Martinson, 1993; Fomby and Cherlin, 2007). These events can include economic hardship, parental marital and romantic transitions, residential movement, familial conflict and abuse, family alcohol and drug use in the home, and parent's mental health challenges. Family instability and the compounding events associated with this instability can drastically upset people's lives, including children and youth.

Furthermore, family instability is more common among families living in poverty, and family instability can also result in impoverishment (McLanahan, 2009). As incomes have become more stagnant and volatile over the decades, children in poor families often experience social, economic, and developmental disadvantages that negatively impact their life outcomes (McLanahan, 2004; Western et al., 2016). Residential movement, which can disrupt school, neighborhood, and friendship ties, is also a major stressor in children's lives (Astone and McLanahan, 1994). Residential mobility is often related to poverty, such that economically disadvantaged parents do not voluntarily move but are displaced because of social and economic crises at the household level (Schafft, 2006; Desmond, 2012). Death or incarceration of a partner, relative, or close friend, and loss of a job or income contribute to family transitions as well (Ackerman et al., 1999). Mass incarceration is experienced more among poor communities of color, and the collateral damage of incarceration detrimentally influences the children who have a parent in prison (Wildeman, 2009). These major stressors can accumulate across a child's life (Cavanagh and Huston, 2006, 2008).

One result of these familial transitions and instabilities is youth homelessness. The main pathways into youth homelessness are abuse and neglect, family breakdown, and aging out of government programs (Thompson et al., 2010; Gibson, 2011). Youth experiencing homelessness

often report neglect, family conflict, physical and sexual abuse in the home, moving frequently while growing up, family alcohol and drug use in the home, parents experiencing mental health challenges, parental relationship transitions, and parental legal problems, as part of their histories (Whitbeck and Hoyt, 1999; Tyler, 2006; Mallett and Rosenthal, 2009; Thompson et al., 2010). These scenarios create strained family ties, and youth experiencing homelessness often leave families that have little to hold them (Whitbeck and Hoyt, 1999).

Although family instability is discussed within the larger youth homelessness literature, family instability is often not discussed as a narrative that helps scholars and service providers to understand the precursors of LGBTQ youth homelessness. Documenting then how family instability and transitions affect some LGBTQ youth can show how practices around gender and sexuality can unfold in particular familial contexts and the ramifications of family instability and poverty for some youth. As there is little qualitatively known about family instability and the meanings ascribed to this instability from youth's perspectives, I ask: how do family instability and strain shape the perceived pathways into homelessness for some LGBTQ youth?

I propose the concept of *conditional families* to capture the childhood circumstances of poverty and family instability that the LGBTQ youth said they experienced prior to homelessness and how family instability and familial strain can shape the youth's experiences of gender and sexuality within families of origin. The goal is to move away from pathologizing families of color and/or poor families as being more homophobic and transphobic than white, middle-class families, and instead to examine how poverty and instability shape the social processes around gender and sexuality that influence why some parents may reject their child. As LGBTQ youth experiencing homelessness often have strained familial ties, their experiences can



make known the conditions in which familial ties can be ruptured and how familial strain is related to gender and sexuality. This knowledge puts forth new insights on how gender and sexuality can shape experiences of family instability and its consequences for certain youth.

## **METHODS**

This study is a multi-site ethnography on LGBTQ youth homelessness, conducted primarily at two organizations that provide services to youth experiencing homelessness in central Texas. I volunteered weekly at a youth homelessness drop-in center in Austin, Texas, from March 2015 to May 2016, and a youth homelessness shelter specifically for LGBTQ youth in San Antonio, Texas, from January 2015 to June 2016. At the drop-in center, I volunteered twice a week mainly in the clothing closet. In San Antonio, I did weekly overnight shifts at the shelter from 10p.m. to 7a.m.

“Hanging out” at services or sites that serve hard-to-reach vulnerable populations is one of the best approaches in making initial contacts with marginalized populations (Liamputtong, 2007). Fieldwork involved getting to know the people in the social settings, their daily routines, developing relations with the people, and observing them (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw, 2011). I did over 700 hours of fieldwork, and I wrote extensive field notes each time I left a field site.

I also conducted 40 in-depth interviews with LGBTQ youth experiencing homelessness. All interviews were digitally audio-recorded and lasted around an hour. The interviews covered four major topics: the youth’s perceived pathways into homelessness, the present needs of the youth, their resiliency, and their everyday experiences. The findings presented in this study are derived primarily from the qualitative data based on in-depth interviews about the youth’s narratives of their lived experiences prior to homelessness. Conducting in-depth interviews with

LGBTQ youth experiencing homelessness can show how they make sense of their childhood and families and how they see these experiences in relation to their current life. All interviews took place in-person, because face-to-face interactions help the researcher to establish rapport with the interviewee, affording a more meaningful and in-depth interview (Weiss, 1994). The interviews were semi-structured, so as to capture youth's experiences and document specific issues and needs. Researchers should listen to the needs of youth (Talbert, 2004), and face-to-face in-depth interviewing is a strong methodological approach to accomplish this goal.

The majority of the youth were recruited through the two field sites, though 4 youth came from a transitional living program associated with the Austin field site, and 2 youth came from a children's shelter in Austin licensed by Child Protective Services (CPS). Youth knew I was a researcher, and the youth who were interviewed voluntarily agreed and were informed about all processes of consent. The Institutional Review Board at my university gave approval to interview youth ages 13 to 25 years old, and youth experiencing homelessness fall under the Regulatory Requirements for a Waiver of Parent/Guardian Permission. At the end of each interview, I asked the youth their demographic data. One youth was 17, two were 25, and the rest were between 18 and 24. Thirty of the 40 identified as youth of color. I describe their gender, sexual, and racial/ethnic identities using the language they used to identify themselves. All names have been changed to keep confidentiality.

I transcribed each interview. I then uploaded all field notes and interview transcriptions into MAXQDA, a qualitative data analysis software. I coded these transcriptions and field notes following a grounded theory approach. I coded the data by first attaching labels to segments of the data, describing what each segment is about (Charmaz, 2006). This initial line-by-line open

coding included codes such as “growing up,” “getting kicked out,” “feeling unwanted,” “being perceived as gay,” and “experiencing abuse.” I also wrote memos about the action occurring within the coding of the data. I then engaged in more focused coding in order to move the analysis to a more conceptual level, while also being able to compare similarities and differences across the interviews. Focused codes included “abuse,” “being LGBTQ,” “gender,” “sexuality,” “family,” “rejection,” and “violence.” Finally, I did axial coding in order to identify the relationship between the focused codes (Charmaz, 2006), such as how being LGBTQ within the family was related to experiences of abuse, rejection, and violence. Through this inductive approach, I found that poverty and family instability and its relation to familial negotiations of gender and sexuality were a central experience in the youth’s narratives about their lives prior to homelessness. The validity of the findings was confirmed through prolonged engagement in the field, whereby I could hear the youth talk about these accounts with each other, and through member checking, where I discussed the emerging findings with the youth and with the service providers at the field sites in order to confirm their credibility (Creswell and Miller, 2000).

More specifically, I use the concept of conditional families as an *in vivo* code of the youth talking about their parents not loving them unconditionally; that is, the notion of conditional families inductively came out of what I documented in the data. Conditional families are families wherein certain terms or conditions related to gender and/or sexuality had to be met in order for the youth to be a part of the family. I also use the term, though, to capture how the conditions of poverty and family instability influenced the youth’s experiences of familial conflict and strain in relation to their gender and sexuality. In effect, I document the youth’s perceptions of how their experiences of rejection are related to gender and sexuality but also the

effects of this rejection within the larger social conditions that shape the experiences of some LGBTQ youth from marginalized families. Through this documentation, this study extends research on how youth negotiate gender and sexuality within particular family environments, while empirically showcasing youth's voices to see how poverty and family instability can shape LGBTQ youth's experiences of familial strain, abuse, and rejection.

## RESULTS

### *Family Instability in the Lives of LGBTQ Youth Experiencing Homelessness*

All 40 of the youth in this study experienced family instability, though these experiences varied based upon the youth's intersecting social location. In this section, I show the multifaceted ways in which the youth described experiencing family instability, and I document how sexuality, gender expression, and race compounded these experiences of poverty and instability. These experiences of family instability shaped the conditions in which the youth said their families of origin rejected them.

Although not explicitly mentioning sexuality or gender expression, Obadiah's story sets the stage for understanding the compounding experiences of instability that the youth in this study described. Obadiah, a 20-year-old white man, who dates transgender women, described his family life before going into CPS custody at 8 years old:

I used to go to school with bruises all over me when I was little. And my mom was a drug addict, and I remember when I was little, me and my brothers had to literally frickin' take off the door knobs to the restroom – took it apart – and we found her in there shooting up with this guy, when my dad was in jail. My dad was always an alcoholic. He spent more times at bars than anything.

Most families with an incarcerated parent are economically impoverished, and incarceration adds financial strain on already vulnerable families, as well as parental strain and emotional stress (Geller and Franklin, 2014; Lee and Wildeman, 2011). Additionally, of the 40 youth interviewed, 21 of them mentioned having some contact with CPS during their childhood. Children from impoverished families and/or children who are from homes with parental substance abuse have the highest chance of entering CPS and of being re-referred back into CPS custody (Connell et al., 2007). For Obadiah, these conditions set him up to be separated from his family and to experience more instabilities in CPS, whereby he was further separated from his siblings and moved from different placements frequently.

Being a person of color and one's sexuality shaped experiences of familial instability as well. For example, Rosario, a 21-year-old bisexual black woman, talked to me about growing up on the East Coast. She said, "My mom was a real bad IV [intravenous] user. She was a prostitute. My dad was a child molester; stole drugs. So, I started off with a rough life and everything." "White people" in Texas adopted Rosario, but Rosario said she was "too different" from her adoptive parents. She explained, "They want me to be like this rich, preppy black girl, and I just wanted to be a normal person. I actually like want to work for my stuff, not just have it handed to me on a silver platter." Talking specifically about her bisexuality, Rosario said that her adoptive mom "kind of freaked out," when Rosario disclosed her attraction to women. Rosario stated that her adoptive parents "didn't like it at all. They're real – we'll kick you out. But I went behind their back." Rosario told me that her adoptive parents "supported me, but not the support that I need." She went on to explain, "'Cause at one point, it's like, they love you. And then, the next

point, it's like, you're going to hell 'cause you don't believe in God [...] One minute, they love you; next minute, you're just a disgrace."

For Rosario, race is a dominant framework and marker for how she understood her never belonging within a family. Later in the interview, Rosario described her early childhood as a "ghetto life." Being a child of drug users seemed to make Rosario want "to be a normal person," which for her entailed not having things handed to her. Rosario said she could not perform or embody being "preppy," whereby preppy is often racialized as a white form of embodiment and is seen as the opposite of being "ghetto" (Chun, 2011). This almost impossible juxtaposition of trying to be a "rich, preppy black girl" created conflict within her adoptive home. Furthermore, on top of these already strained ties around race, Rosario's adoptive parents' negative reactions toward her sexuality was a point of contention as well. Rosario experienced ambivalence through her family loving her, but this love only being based upon certain conditions – when she was not a "disgrace." Familial support and acceptance then can become conditional, even when parents state that their love is unconditional. In effect, a families' negative reactions to certain types of sexual identities and behaviors complicates or challenges some families' unconditional love of their child, potentially generating ambivalent familial ties (Reczek, 2016).

Gender expression can also complicate familial conflict and strain along with race and sexuality. During our interview, Justice, an 18-year-old black heterosexual transgender woman, told me, "Growing up, I was raised with my grandma and my grandpa. They wanted to take me in because they didn't think my mom was suitable for the job." After her grandparents died, Justice lived with her mother. As Justice dolefully told me:

I don't really have any family now. My relationship with my mom – it was always kind of rocky. Up until I got to be like 14, when she got a new boyfriend, and then, I guess her boyfriend didn't really like black people – me being half-black, half-white kind of bothered him, especially because I was his girlfriend's daughter. And he didn't like the fact that I was trans. He thought that faggots were going to hell – quote quote. So, he was just a very ignorant, ignorant man. He caused a lot of friction between me and my mom's relationship.

Transgender people of color, especially black transgender people, report the highest levels of transphobic experiences nationally (Lombardi, 2009). Justice linked her hostile living environment to her mom's boyfriend's racism, homophobia, and transphobia, though she noted that her ties with her mom were already "rocky." Familial transitions and Justice's mom's partner were salient aspects in how Justice described experiencing the conditions of not being accepted and of experiencing prejudice, showcasing how a parent's romantic transitions can shape a youth's rejection within a new family structure. At 15 years of age, Justice went into CPS custody until she aged out at 18 years old.

### ***Gender Expression and Familial Conflict within the Context of Instability***

Similar to Justice, the majority of the youth in this study experienced familial conflict and strain because of their families' negative responses to their gender expansive enactments and embodiments. The 10 youth in this study who identified as transgender and the two youth who identified as gender fluid all discussed experiencing familial strain because of their families' policing of their gender behaviors during childhood. Likewise, 15 other youth in this study were also gender expansive, and 10 of those 15 youth discussed how their gender expressions affected

life in their family as well. I document, then, how the youth's gender expansive presentations shaped their familial experiences, whereby gender policing and familial strain were salient in the youth's narratives of how they negotiated gender and sexuality within the contexts of family instability.

Some youth reported running away when their parents attempted to control their gender expressions. Prada, a Hispanic heterosexual transgender woman, who was 23 years old, was living with her father until he threatened to kill her. She explained, "He said, 'I'm going to kill you, then I'm going to kill myself. Because I'd rather die, than people know that I have a faggot for a son.' So, I'm like – I took the initiative. I ran away at 17." A year earlier, Prada had contacted her mother, and Prada stated, "And I told her [Prada's mother], I really don't want to be here anymore [with her father] because I'm scared for my life because I would have to act straight." Eventually, Prada moved in with her aunt and uncle – both pastors. After they read her journal and found out that she was attracted to men, Prada said her aunt asked her, "'Is this true?' And I'm like, 'Yea. I'm not going to change who I am for anybody. I rather die before I change myself to please anybody.' And then, she's like, 'Well, if you want to stay here, you can't be doing that.' I'm like, 'Okay. Pay for my bus ticket. Send me back to [where her mother was living].'"

Prada's statement that her father would rather die than have "a faggot for a son" reveals the power of how not failing at fatherhood is often linked to masculinity, and this link is also part of raising one's son to be masculine and heterosexual (Skelton and Valentine, 2005; Kane, 2012). Prada was scared for her life because she would have to "act straight." Straight-acting is the enactment of traditional notions of masculinity and expressing negative feelings toward



effeminacy (Sánchez and Vilain, 2012). Being Hispanic also compounds these experiences because familial support is often important for Hispanics and Latino/as in surviving and dealing with racism and poverty. Violating family expectations and risking familial rejection can lead to social alienation, low self-esteem, and psychological distress (Díaz et al., 2001). In mentioning that her aunt and uncle who rejected her were pastors, Prada also ties her experiences to religion, whereby the religious ideology of people being an “abomination” influences religious people’s negative attitudes and behaviors toward LGBTQ people (Barton, 2012). All of these multi-layered conditions shaped the familial conflict that Prada said she experienced, whereby her gender expression and attraction to men, within these already strained familial environments, were reasons she saw of why she was not accepted by family members and why she ran away.

Perceived rejection because of one’s gender identity also shaped experiences of familial strain. Zoe, a 19-year-old Hispanic heterosexual transgender woman, started living on the streets at the age of 13. Before then, Zoe’s father was in and out of jail. Zoe also spent some time in CPS. During the interview, she attributed her homelessness to her drug use, and she explained to me why she started using drugs. She said, “The only reason I started doing dope was because I felt unwanted from my family. Gay was a big issue. Me liking boys was a big issue. I tried to kill myself by doing the dope – to hurt my family.” Zoe said that she “didn’t know how to come out to tell them that I want to be a girl. And I didn’t know if they were going to accept me.”

Substance use is higher among LGBTQ adolescents compared to heterosexual adolescents often because drugs help LGBTQ youth to cope with feeling marginalized, to seek relief for feeling depressed and isolated, and/or to alleviate experiences with chronic stress (Jordan, 2000). The conditions of Zoe’s life and already experiencing familial conflict because of

her families' reactions to her sexuality may have contributed to her drug use. The perception of potentially being rejected and of feeling unwanted because of one's gender or sexuality can further familial strain and experiences of instability. As the familial ties in Zoe's life were already tenuous, her perceived rejection of her gender identity compounded with these other experiences, whereby she dropped out of school in the seventh grade to live on the streets.

Similar to Rosario, many youth appeared to experience ambivalent familial ties when their parents told their child that they were loved, while simultaneously rejecting their child, often because of the family member's negative reactions to the youth's gender expression. Jenelle was a 21-year-old Hispanic heterosexual transgender woman, whose parents got divorced when she was a teenager. A turning point with her mom happened when Jenelle "came out when I was 12. And you know how people say a mother's love is unconditional? When I was 12, I figured out that my mother's love was conditional." Jenelle described her father as a "bigot," and he "calls me by my birth name and uses 'his' pronouns. And it just – it was heavy on my soul. After a while, you just have to live your true self, and you can't deal with that bullshit anymore." She went on, "My dad is probably going to die a bigot. When I was 16, he basically looked me in the eyes, and he said, 'I love you. You're always going to be my son. But you know you are going to die of AIDS, right?' And I – that's a horrible thing to say to your kid."

Jenelle's parents' negative reactions to her gender presentation and sexuality served as points of contention within her family – a family wherein the ties were already fragile as Jenelle told me that she grew up in a household that was fighting all the time. Jenelle's father would misgender her through his constant use of inaccurate gender language, such as using the incorrect gender pronouns (Shelton, 2015). This misgendering is a main form of microaggression

against transgender and gender expansive people, whereby misgendering relays the message that the person is different and marginalized (Nordmarken, 2014). Likewise, Jenelle's father linked HIV/AIDS with death and same-sex attraction – a common homophobic tactic since the rise of the epidemic (Gould, 2009). These experiences of being told that one is loved, yet experiencing prejudice and rejection, appeared to make some youth see that they only belonged based upon certain conditions, generating ambivalent familial ties (Reczek, 2016). Within the context of family instability, whereby familial ties are often already strained, these ambivalent experiences of being told one is loved but not accepted, often because of one's gender expression, was stated as why many LGBTQ young people in this study perceived they were experiencing homelessness.

### ***Instability, Abuse, and Heteronormative Compliance***

Abuse has been documented as a common experience among youth experiencing homelessness and as a main pathway into homelessness (Whitbeck et al., 2004; Gibson, 2011; Durso and Gates, 2012). For LGBTQ youth experiencing homelessness, 54 percent have experienced some form of physical, emotional, and/or sexual abuse in the family (Durso and Gates, 2012), and 43 percent of LGB youth experiencing homelessness have experienced physical and sexual abuse as a child (Whitbeck et al., 2004). Twenty-six of the 40 youth in this study discussed experiencing abuse while growing up. In this section, I document how abuse is related to policing the child's gender and sexuality and the youth's perceptions of this abuse as generating more familial strain and shaping their perceived pathways into homelessness.

Verbal abuse from family members was common among youth, especially if they were gender expansive. Xander was a 19-year-old black gay youth. He was fairly effeminate, and he

told me that even before coming out that his “dad accused me of being a pansy. He called – my nickname was twinkle toes.” Xander’s parents were never together, and at the age of seven or eight, he moved in with his father. Xander described life at his dad’s house:

I was in the 4th grade [when his dad started calling him twinkle toes]. I dealt with this stuff all my life. He had such a negative connotation for me that I have extremely low self-esteem because of it now. [...] I was picked on by my dad and my little brothers – they helped ‘cause they didn’t want to be the ones in the fire.

When I came out, things got even worse, that’s when he started kicking me out.

Similar to the “fag discourse” deployed among heterosexual adolescent boys to police each other’s masculinity (Pascoe, 2007), “pansy” and “twinkle toes” can be seen as forms of verbal abuse to try to make Xander act masculine and be heterosexual. This investment can be both the father trying to prove his own masculinity, but also as a way to protect one’s black child from experiencing further stigmatization for being non-heterosexual and/or gender expansive (McGuffey, 2008). Racial inequality along with other facets of family instability may shape experiences of verbal abuse, whereby gender policing may be a way to try to protect a child from experiencing further marginalization, though this policing can strain familial ties.

In addition to verbal abuse, many youth experienced physical abuse because of their gender expression and sexuality. Alaina, who went into CPS custody at the age of five, was a 19-year-old white Hispanic lesbian. In a foster home Alaina was previously living in, the foster parent “did not agree with the tomboy lifestyle. She just did not. And it was hard for me there because she always locked me in a room ‘cause I was gay. And I would always say that [I was gay], and then eventually I just took off and ran away.” When Alaina later was living with her

grandma, her grandma read Alaina's journal, which mentioned Alaina liking girls. After reading the journal, Alaina's grandma "beat me with a broom because 'you're not supposed to be looking at girls like that.' Even after I left my dad and went back into [CPS] care, I tried to come back, but my grandma wouldn't let them take me back because I was gay. So, I kind of just got stuck in there [CPS]."

Although the idea of "tomboy" may allow for more gender fluidity among girls than among "sissy" boys (Craig and LaCroix, 2011), this protection is often temporary, and in Alaina's case – as a poor, Spanish-speaking, gender expansive lesbian – this protection seemed to never exist. Her foster parent's rejection of her gender expressions and being a lesbian were distinct reasons as to why she experienced abuse. This rejection is also why she believed she bounced between CPS, family members' places, and other living arrangements. Other markers of instability – the later death of her father, residential movement, CPS – compound this abuse and rejection in Alaina's life. From Alaina's perspective, these conditions along with her gender expression and sexuality led to many moments of abuse, violence, and instability.

I end with Naomi, whose experiences of abuse within the family showcases how some LGBTQ youth experience their gender expression and sexuality within the contexts of family instability. Naomi, who had turned 18 years old a month before I interviewed her, was a bisexual transgender Latina, who told me about her life growing up with her single father. She explained:

I grew up in a Christian household, so being the way I was wasn't really okay.

Like my dad, when he first found out, he was like, "You like it in the ass?" And the way he put it was just so downgrading to me as a kid, and I was like 12 when I came out. [...] I had to hide my makeup in the ceiling from him 'cause whenever

I would come – I was in like middle school, I was in like 7th grade – and I would hide my makeup in the roof cause whenever he'd find it, he would just throw it away. I'd save all my lunch money, and I would go to the dollar store, and I'd get me makeup and eyelashes and all that. And I got a hold of my sister's extensions, and I glued them to my hair. I remember one time when my dad first saw me with them, he tore them off my hair. Like grabbed me by the hair, and they were glued on to my scalp, so when he tugged that shit, it ripped off my scalp, and I was bleeding, and he like rubbed my face in the carpet. He was obviously stronger than me, so I couldn't do nothing about it. It was just – it wasn't ok.

When Naomi went to go live with her mother, the relationship was not better:

My mom knew something was different about me, but she abused me as a kid. My family would see slap marks on me, and they wouldn't say nothing about it. And they already knew what she was doing, but looking back, I honestly think she did that 'cause she knew that I had took away her son. What she wanted was a boy, and I felt like now, looking back, that's the reason why she beat me, 'cause she knew that I was going to end up being different, and she was worried about that.

Statistically, over one-half of transgender people in the United States have experienced some form of violence and abuse in the home (Stotzer, 2009). Like Prada, Naomi partly linked religion to this experience with violence. Naomi also experienced verbal abuse, perhaps as a way to discipline her to be masculine and heterosexual. The verbal abuse she experienced was “downgrading,” and this abuse eventually escalated to physical abuse for being gender

expansive. As Naomi noted, she felt that the abuse was because her parents worried about her “being different” – different in a society that she already had to navigate as poor and as a racial minority.

These lived experiences present an understanding of abuse that is about policing gender and sexuality, as the youth were often targeted for being gender expansive. Abuse is shaped by cultural values: patriarchal values of men dominating women, generational authority of parents dominating children. The forms of violence discussed by the youth in this study are what González-López (2015) calls “heteronormative compliance,” or ways of trying to police gender expansive children in order to reproduce heterosexuality as the norm within families and society. From the youth’s perspectives, the families abused them to try to change their gender behaviors, whereby these expansive expressions of gender were often conflated with being non-heterosexual. For some youth, this heteronormative compliance strained the ties that bind LGBTQ youth to their families of origin, wherein the ties were already fragile.

## DISCUSSION

This study empirically documents some of the most marginalized LGBTQ youth’s experiences in order to extend scholarship on family instability, especially through providing the youth’s perspectives, and to expand theorizing about negotiations of gender and sexuality within particular familial environments during this time of advancing LGBTQ rights. I introduced the concept of *conditional families* to capture how poverty and family instability can shape the conditions in which the LGBTQ youth perceived they were rejected within their family. Many of the youth discussed that their families’ negative reactions toward their gender expressions, and at times sexuality, led to familial conflict and abuse, shaping their perceived pathways into

homelessness. Abuse and rejection may become ways in which to attempt to police and change the child's gender behaviors, but this *event* of experiencing heteronormative compliance, while sometimes being told one is also loved, can generate ambivalent ties and further familial strain, leading to more disruption in this context of poverty and instability and potentially pushing certain LGBTQ youth to the streets.

These findings and the concept of conditional families help to move beyond the slippery assumption that poor people and/or people of color are more homophobic and transphobic than middle-class, white people. Instead, scholars, service providers, media, and others need to examine the role of family instability and poverty in some LGBTQ youth's childhoods. Family rejection is the dominant narrative of the main pathway into homelessness for LGBTQ youth experiencing homelessness (Whitbeck et al., 2004; Rew et al., 2005; Durso and Gates, 2012). But understanding family rejection within the framework of conditional families moves the narrative and literature forward in order to focus on how particular familial environments may shape LGBTQ youth's experiences and negotiations of gender and sexuality. By focusing on poverty and instability, the violence of marginalization and its connection with familial strain – rather than class and race itself – become more structural ways of understanding how rejection, homophobia, and transphobia may transpire within under-resourced environments.

Another key implication of this study is that it appears as certain forms of same-sex sexuality are becoming accepted in U.S. society (e.g., same-sex marriage), there may be a re-entrenchment on upholding the gender binary, which transgender and gender expansive youth, especially youth of color and/or youth from marginalized familial backgrounds, may bear the biggest brunt of this re-entrenchment. That is, being gender expansive, more so than sexuality or



“coming out” as LGBTQ, may be the salient part of many youth’s experiences of abuse and strain within their families. As sociologist Katie Acosta (2013) documents in her study of sexually non-conforming Latinas, the Latinas’ families could often accept the women’s non-heterosexuality as long as the women embodied and enacted hegemonic aspects of femininity. For the youth in this study, their gender expansive presentation intersected with race and poverty, as at times their conflict may have been an expression of marginalized families trying to prevent further marginalization and stigmatization for children who are already poor and/or non-white. As gender expression is often more visible than sexuality (and often how people read sexuality in the public sphere), this fear of and attempt to change the youth’s expansive expressions of gender may be a way to try to make the youth uphold the dominant relations of gender and sexuality in the family and within society.

Furthermore, these processes of heteronormative compliance within the contexts of poverty and instability is part of *why* youth say they have experienced familial strain and are experiencing homelessness. Studies have shown that family instability is a main cause of youth homelessness (Whitbeck and Hoyt, 1999; Gibson, 2011). But within this context of instability, abuse and rejection for being gender expansive and/or non-heterosexual can be another *event* of family instability. Experiencing ambivalent familial ties through families professing unconditional love while policing their child’s gender and sexuality can generate further strain, whereby experiencing homelessness may be a consequence for some LGBTQ youth. This study then begins to address Pfeffer’s (2017) call for family scholars to see all families as families of choice, as families of origin also decide or choose under what conditions a child may be a part of the family. Through developing the concept of conditional families and in documenting some of

the social processes of rejection for LGBTQ youth experiencing homelessness, I provide a deeper understanding of how gender and sexuality can shape family ties and familial strain, and particularly how these processes are tied to poverty and instability for some LGBTQ youth.

Given these findings, policy solutions aimed at reducing or ending homelessness for LGBTQ youth need to become more intricate. Family reunification is often a main solution in trying to end youth homelessness (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2012). For LGBTQ youth, where the focus is on family rejection, services to assist families in understanding the youth's sexual and/or gender identity have been a main strategy used in attempt to reunite the youth with their parents (Cochran et al., 2002). However, strategies of family acceptance and reunification have to account for how poverty and instability can shape the effectiveness of these approaches. Indeed, certain families may not be able to access therapy or other services that help families accept one's LGBTQ child. Poor families and/or families of color may not know about, feel comfortable in, or be able to access spaces such as Parents, Family and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG). For example, in both cities where this study was conducted, PFLAG meetings were only in the evening, which presumes people work a typical nine to five work-schedule. Many people may be working in the evening, cannot find childcare arrangements, need adequate transportation, and may face other structural constraints to accessing these meetings. Furthermore, LGBTQ organizations and community programs, at times, also frame parents as the wrongdoers and disengage from the parents. This approach and framework may be off-putting to parents, especially in working with parents to accept their child. Likewise, this framing of the parents as the enemies ignores the larger social, political, and economic contexts within which family rejection may take place. In effect, new ways to engage with and help parents,

especially under-resourced and marginalized parents and families, are needed if one wants to help LGBTQ youth, and specifically, LGBTQ youth experiencing homelessness.

### **LIMITATIONS**

Moving forward, comparative studies of LGBTQ youth experiencing homelessness and other LGBTQ youth who experienced rejection but not homelessness are warranted in order to capture the different ways homophobia and transphobia operate within different family contexts and how different familial resources may shape the consequences of rejection. LGBTQ youth from middle-class families are also sometimes rejected (Schmitz and Tyler, 2017); however, they do not appear to be experiencing homelessness. Rejected youth from middle-class families may have more kin and friendship networks to turn to in order to avoid experiencing homelessness. Research then needs to continue to explore how resources and social class are consequential markers in how youth experience gender and sexuality within the family.

Studies comparing LGBTQ youth experiencing homelessness and heterosexual and cisgender youth experiencing homelessness along with comparing families from stable and unstable environments can also help document if heteronormative compliance within the context of family instability is a driving cause for the disproportionate number of LGBTQ youth among the youth experiencing homelessness population. Research needs to also explore how other institutions (e.g., schools, religious institutions, CPS) also shape how youth, especially poor youth, experience and negotiate gender and sexuality. Understanding why other LGBTQ youth within marginalized families do not experience homelessness will be helpful in thinking about prevention strategies. Interviewing the parents of the youth may provide a different perspective in how negotiations of gender and sexuality operate within the context of poverty and instability

and may further complicate and contextualize the narrative of family rejection. The interviews presented in this study are from the youth's perspectives of instability, possibly missing other aspects of family dynamics unfolding within their households. However, centering the youth's perspectives moves beyond the past family instability literature that has often focused on mothers' reports of instability. The youth's perspectives and the meaning they ascribe to family instability also matters for how they perceive why they ended up on the streets.

### **CONCLUSION**

Returning to Jenelle's comment about her mother's love being conditional, what are the conditions to allow for unconditional love? Poverty and instability in conjunction with heteronormativity and the gender binary can shape particular experiences of negotiating gender and sexuality within conditional families. Within under-resourced families, being LGBTQ, especially being gender expansive, may result in ambivalent familial ties as well as conflict and strain. This study is one of the first to document youth's perspectives of family instability, paving a way towards understanding how poverty and instability can influence how youth perceive familial acceptance, belonging, or rejection. Likewise, in showcasing the lives of some of the most marginalized LGBTQ youth, I proffer up new ways of understanding how gender and sexuality are negotiated within particular family environments during these current times of advancing LGBTQ rights. A variety of youth's perspectives and experiences are needed in moving forward in order to understand how youth perceive and experience family instability and how youth negotiate gender and sexuality, especially when some youth are coming out earlier, while simultaneously relying on parents and other adults for longer periods of time. The concept of conditional families lays the groundwork in understanding some LGBTQ youth's lives and

how poverty and instability can shape some of their experiences of gender, sexuality, strain, abuse, ambivalence, and familial ties. More work is needed though to understand these social processes and their relation to the lives and well-being of LGBTQ youth today.

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