Scholarship positions most families in the United States as oriented toward reproducing heterosexuality, specifically creating gender-conforming family members who are attracted to the “opposite sex” (and only the opposite sex) (e.g., González-López 2015; Martin 2009; Scherrer, Kazyak, and Schmitz 2015; Sumerau and Holway 2022). Families are often a site of heteronormative compliance, coercive practices to reproduce heterosexuality within the family (González-López 2015). For Black and Latinx lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) people, their families of origin are affected by intersections of racism, classism, and sexism under capitalism, which leads to pressure on these families to enforce heteronormative compliance in order to survive (Robinson 2018; Schmitz, Robinson, and Sanchez 2020). These heteronormative practices create environments in which LGBTQ people are “outsiders within” family life (Oswald 2001, 2003), isolated and estranged from family members and family practices.

Scholars often examine the family as an institution that can be perilous for LGBTQ youth in particular. These youth engage in complex navigations of disclosure, interaction, and conflict within their families of origin (Doan and Mize 2020; Orne 2011; Scherrer et al. 2015). In this article, we ask, What impact do LGBTQ family members such as gay uncles and bisexual sisters have on LGBTQ youth? In this research we consider whether having LGBTQ relatives helps LGBTQ youth navigate family practices and communication norms within the family, along with counteracting the isolation and heteronormativity of family life.

We consider the positive benefits of having other LGBTQ family members in the lives of LGBTQ youth, especially for Latinx youth. Abundant scholarship demonstrates that having supportive parents helps LGBTQ youth with their education, housing stability, and mental health (e.g., McConnell, Birkett, and Mustanski 2016; Schmitz et al. 2020; Watson, Grossman, and Russell 2019). There is little research on the impact of having LGBTQ family members on these youth, apart from studies that focus on the experience of being raised by same-sex parents (e.g., Averett 2016; Kuvalanka 2010).
et al. 2018; Moore and Stambolis-Ruhstorfer 2013). Indeed, there is little scholarship at all on the ties between LGBTQ people within the same family of origin. This research also rarely considers the involvement of extended family members and siblings in the lives of LGBTQ youth, despite evidence that these relationships are meaningful, particularly for low-income, Black, or Latinx youth (Attar-Schwartz, Tan, and Buchanan 2009; Beam, Chen, and Greenberger 2002; Gerstel 2011). This study is important for examining positive ways that LGBTQ youth navigate family environments, along with illustrating the way heteronormativity is resisted within families.

We interviewed a racially diverse group of 26 LGBTQ youth in South Texas to understand the complex ways that LGBTQ family members are involved in the lives of youth. Most youth interviewees had or suspected they had lesbian, gay, or bisexual family members as siblings or extended family members; Latinx youth interviewees were particularly likely to have lesbian, gay, or bisexual relatives. Youth interviewees often tried to figure out who in their family might be LGBTQ, with a lot of speculation over bisexuality within the family. We argue that LGBTQ family members are generally supportive of LGBTQ youth and help these youth navigate family communication norms and practices around gender and sexuality. Our research suggests that LGBTQ family members may provide insight into unspoken communication norms and translation for reading family interactions, as much is communicated but left unsaid about sexuality in the family. This research is an important contribution to understanding how LGBTQ youth navigate heteronormative compliance within the family through connections with LGBTQ relatives.

Beyond Social Support

Broader research about the importance of family support and LGBTQ role models for youth suggests that there are several reasons why having LGBTQ family members may be important for youth. LGBTQ family members may be part of a social support system for youth interviewees. Studies document that youth without supportive families experience high rates of homelessness, suicidality, and mental health disorders (Russell et al. 2018), and youth with supportive families are more able to cope with emotional stressors related to their sexuality (Kibrik et al. 2019; McConnell et al. 2016; Watson et al. 2019). For Latinx LGBTQ people, family support is the biggest predictor of whether they are out (Pastrana 2015, 2016). LGBTQ family members may recognize the gender identity of transgender or nonbinary youth or express unconditional, familial love, supportive behaviors that have been shown to reduce depressive symptoms in LGBTQ youth (Russell et al. 2018).

However, analysis of LGBTQ youth’s family experiences is more complex than demonstrations of social support. LGBTQ youth are operating within family environments that are profoundly heteronormative and gender conforming, and family practices and communication are often structured to reproduce this heteronormativity and gender conformity. Gloria González-López (2015) defined heteronormative compliance as “the beliefs and practices of obedience established by parents, siblings, and other relatives with the purpose of policing and reproducing heterosexuality as the norm within families and society at large” (p. 184). The isolation and sense of being an “outsider within” family life (Oswald 2001) stem from the strength of this heteronormative compliance. We argue that LGBTQ family members play an additional critical role: these family members help LGBTQ youth navigate family environments, specifically family practices and communication norms around gender and sexuality.

Families have their own distinct family practices around gender and sexuality (Gabb et al. 2020; Robinson 2018; Schmitz et al. 2020). Family practices around gender and sexuality include expectations about sexual behavior and heteronormativity. Family practices are influenced by race, class, and ethnicity, and complicated by factors such as family instability and poverty (Robinson 2018). In this study, many LGBTQ youth interviewees identify as Latinx, and their families may include family practices such as promoting machismo or family strategies to prevent gender nonconformity (Ocampo 2012; Schmitz et al. 2020). Latinx families may place more importance on the needs and values of the family rather than an individual family member, a phenomenon named familism (Acosta 2010; Muñoz-Laboy et al. 2009). As part of familism, Latinx youth may avoid interpersonal conflict in an effort to maintain familial stability (Acosta 2010).

Family communication norms are beliefs and patterns about how family members should communicate with one another, including communication about sensitive subjects. These communication norms may not be unitary and often include divisions and conflicts in how communication happens within families (Ritchie and Fitzpatrick 1990). Family communication norms include expected practices regarding discussions about sexuality (Acosta 2011; Decena 2011; Martin 2009), but these communication norms and practices are not always explicit. LGBTQ youth often manage what scholars refer to as paradoxical family practices, including “the pervasive lens of heteronormativity and the attendant intra-family dynamic” (Gabb et al. 2020:550). This stressful emotion work includes deep reading of interactions with family members in order to ascertain the meaning of interactions (Gabb et al. 2020).

Race and ethnicity can affect LGBTQ youth’s family experiences. Katie Acosta (2011) noted that in some Latinx families, homosexuality is an open secret, in which LGBTQ people live in the “in-between spaces,” neither wholly in nor out of the closet. Some of these family environments may include secrecy or ambiguity about gender and sexuality. In the immigrant Dominican families studied by Carlos Decena
family communication norms included an agreement that sexuality is a private matter that is not openly discussed with others. Operating tacitly can be a complex form of visibility and liberation, particularly for LGBTQ people of color. Decena (2011), in a translation from the Spanish sujeto tácito, wrote about the tacit subject, “neither silent nor secret.” The Dominican immigrant gay men he interviews both assert their homosexuality through contextual references and avoid allowing it to be an explicit discussion or confrontation with family; “in thinking that their homosexuality is knowable in a tacit way to the people close to them, my informants assume that many people have the requisite skills to recognize and decode their behavior” (Decena 2008:346). Different from being closeted, the tacit subject keeps “the closet door ajar,” allowing others, in the right contexts, to peer inside. The closet itself is not the most accurate metaphor; other scholars have suggested that in Black and Latinx families, LGBTQ identities can be “under the rug” (Reczek and Bosley-Smith 2022). For example, sometimes Black lesbians engage in “covering” (Goffman 1963; Yoshino 2007) with their families of origin by minimizing public expression of their lesbianism to reduce “sticky” stigma associated with that identity (Moore 2011:194).

Youth operate in the family as strategic actors balancing family communication with their own safety and well-being. LGBTQ youth’s health and safety may depend on adequately reading or decoding family communication norms and practices. Speaking about one’s sexuality in a family that requires tacit communication or heteronormativity can lead to parental rejection, homelessness, or violence (Barton 2012; Roe 2017; Ryan et al. 2009; Shelton and Bond 2017). Decoding family practices may be a form of risk assessment. This decoding may allow youth to be strategic about who in the family they are out to and who they are not, often using a “cost-benefit analysis” (Schmitz and Tyler 2018). For example, Lain Mathers (2019) suggested that bisexual people are likely to come out to siblings first as a “test case” before other family members. Bisexual family members used language strategically during disclosure to family members in order to influence their responses to be more positive (Scherrer et al. 2015). Jason Orne (2011) described this identity management as “strategic outness—the continual contextual management of sexual identity” (p. 682). When LGBTQ youth see the negative experiences of other LGBTQ family members, they experience what Orne referred to as explosive knowledge, “the belief that identity management is necessary to prevent these dangerous outcomes” (p. 694). Navigating this explosive knowledge may be a key part of managing heteronormative compliance.

In this project, we consider how LGBTQ family members who are out may contain clues as to how receptive parents might be about communication about sexuality and nonheteronormative practices, beyond just coming out, along with providing affirmation that family members can resist heteronormative compliance. This work is a novel contribution to the study of how LGBTQ youth navigate family life, particularly the way LGBTQ family members may disrupt heteronormative compliance within families.

**Methods**

We selected sociological qualitative interviews as our method to understand the networks of family members of LGBTQ youth in South Texas, as qualitative interviews allow researchers to understand the social meanings and general life-world of the interviewee (Kvale 1983; Rinaldo and Guhin 2022; Weiss 1995).

**Recruitment**

Interviewees were recruited through a 2019 online survey of 2,005 LGBTQ-identified adults and youth (16–81 years of age). The survey research was funded by the Interdisciplinary Research Leaders program and was part of a larger community-based participatory research project, Strengthening Colors of Pride (SCoP), on resilience in LGBTQ adults and youth (16 years and older) in San Antonio that began in 2017. The SCoP survey was collected in South Texas, specifically the city of San Antonio and 20 surrounding counties. This survey was collected by A.L.S., B.A., and R.S. as part of a larger team of researchers working on the SCoP project. The SCoP survey of LGBTQ+ South Texans asked a range of questions about health, family relations, and personal resilience. The survey was collected through community mailing lists, paid ads on Facebook, and contact with LGBTQ individuals at Pride events, and all valid participants received a $10 Amazon gift card. At the end of the survey, participants could opt into being contacted for future studies and provide their contact information. In this survey, more than 150 youth 16 to 20 years of age provided contact information and permission for recruitment into future studies. In June 2020, the Texas Queer Youth Covid Study team contacted 150 of these youth via e-mail or text to ask if they were willing to participate in a yearlong study of LGBTQ youth’s experiences with family members. Only the contact information from the SCoP survey was used. Twenty-six youth agreed to participate, and no additional youth were recruited because of recruitment time limitations.

The Texas Queer Youth Covid Study was funded by the American Sociological Association Fund for the Advancement of the Discipline. Both projects were approved by the institutional review board of Trinity University. Both of these projects involved institutional review board approval of 16- and 17-year-old youth research participants without their parental consent on the basis of their status as mature minors. All minors received and signed the same consent form as adults. This research process follows the precedent of bypassing parental consent in studies of LGBTQ youth in order to protect youth...
from being inadvertently outed to their parents (Macapagal et al. 2017). Additionally, the 2020 interviews with youth, which happened over Zoom, included a check-in question before the interview started asking if the interviewee felt safe talking about personal things at their current location, with the awareness that some interviewees were living with family members and that those family members might be at home.

**Interview**

In this longitudinal study, LGBTQ youth were interviewed in the summer of 2020 and 2021 and also filled out monthly surveys in the intervening 10 months. The data for this article are an analysis of only the first interview in 2020. These interviews were conducted during the coronavirus disease 2019 quarantine period in June and July 2020, using Zoom.

All interviews were conducted by youth interviewers, summer undergraduate research participants involved in the SCoP research lab. Undergraduate research participants all had previous experience conducting interviews and additionally received six hours of training and conducted two practice interviews before beginning interviews for this project, along with receiving weekly mentorship and supervision. These practice interviews were also used to pilot the interview guide for this project. For the 2020 interviews, youth interviewers identified as Latinx nonbinary persons (two students), a Black lesbian woman, a White lesbian woman, and a White nonbinary person.

The interviews conducted for this project were semistructured qualitative interviews that focused on the development of information (Weiss 1995). Interviews lasted between 30 and 120 minutes, with most interviews lasting 60 minutes. Participants received a $40 Amazon gift card to compensate them for their time. All interviews were conducted in English; many interviewees used Spanglish terms during English interviews. The research team included multiple Spanish-speaking students, including two fluent speakers, and all research materials were translated into Spanish. However, no youth opted for Spanish-only interviews. All interviewees used the same interview guide, which included questions about youth’s relationship with family members and how these relationships have been shaped by the coronavirus disease 2019 quarantine and political protests in the summer of 2020. The majority of responses used in this article came from the question “Do you suspect or think any of your family members are LGBTQ? How did your family react to them? Tell me more about your relationship with them.” Other interview questions asked about supportive and unsupportive behaviors from family members with attention to youth’s extended family and siblings.

**Sample**

The 26 LGBTQ youth in this interview study range in age from 16 to 21 years, with an average age of 18 years. Younger youth lived with their parents or other family members, and the oldest youth were living with friends or partners. Youth had diverse gender identifications, including identifying as women (n = 10), nonbinary (n = 6), trans men (n = 3), genderfluid (n = 2), a man (n = 1), a genderfluid man (n = 1), and agender nonbinary (n = 1). Half the youth identified as bisexual or pansexual, and 7 youth identified as queer. The remainder of youth identified as lesbian (n = 4), gay (n = 1), or asexual (n = 1). Eleven youth interviewees identified as Latino/Latina/Latinx or Hispanic. Eight of the youth interviewees identified as non-Hispanic White, and other youth identified as American Indian and Asian (n = 1), Black (n = 1), Black and Latinx (n = 2), Latinx and White (n = 2), and American Indian, Latinx, and White (n = 1). Throughout this article we use Latinx more broadly to refer to a range of LGBTQ Latino, Latina, and Hispanic identities; although contested, Latinx is used in the LGBTQ community in San Antonio and was used by a few interviewees. For education, the youth are currently enrolled in high school (n = 6), have a high school diploma or GED (n = 5), did not finish high school (n = 1), are currently enrolled in college (n = 7), have some college (n = 4), or have a four-year college degree (n = 3). Interviewee demographics are shown in Figure 1.

**Data Analysis**

All interviews were transcribed by the youth research assistants on the basis of transcripts generated by Zoom and entered into NVivo. All youth were given pseudonyms from lists of baby names relevant for their race and gender. Nonbinary youth were given gender-neutral names from online lists. An experienced graduate student assistant then did flexible, open coding of the transcripts (Deterding and Waters 2021) in coordination with the first author, who is in charge of the project. The graduate student coded every discussion of LGBTQ family members as “LGBTQ family,” including both the responses to the explicit interview question about LGBTQ family members and all other mentions of that family member in each transcript. The first author then did detailed open coding of the “LGBTQ family” code, noting themes such as “suspect bisexuality” and “introduced me to their partner” (Khandkar 2009). Youth research assistants then met together and organized the open codes into categories, engaging in axial coding with the first author (Scott and Medaugh 2017). The first and third authors then met and did thematic analysis (Boyatzis 1998) within these axial codes, noting trends and patterns between and within interviews. Interviewees described LGBTQ family members as helping youth assess risk in navigating family environments and engaging in supportive behavior.

**LGBTQ Family Members**

Almost all youth described having a cousin, an uncle, an aunt, a sibling, or another relative whom they either knew or suspected was lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB). Of the 16
Table 1. Demographics of interviewees.

| Name                | Age | Race/Ethnicity | Sex. Orient. | Gender Identity | Highest Degree          |
|---------------------|-----|----------------|--------------|-----------------|-------------------------|
| Sasha (she/her)     | 18  | Latinx         | Bisexual     | Woman           | HS Diploma/ GED         |
| Juliesta (she/her)  | 17  | Latinx         | Queer        | Woman           | Some College            |
| Angel (they/them)   | 16  | Latinx         | Bisexual     | Non-Binary      | HS student              |
| Awwena (she/he)     | 21  | Am. Indian, Asian | Bisexual | Non-Binary | Some college            |
| Martin (he/him)     | 18  | White          | Gay, Queer   | Trans, Man      | HS Diploma/ GED         |
| Azul (they/them)    | 18  | Latinx         | Bisexual     | Non-Binary      | HS Diploma/ GED         |
| Claude (they/them)  | 17  | Latinx         | Lesbian      | Non-Binary      | HS Diploma/ GED         |
| Troy (he/him)       | 17  | Latinx         | Bisexual     | Trans, Man      | HS student              |
| Catalina (she/her)  | 17  | Black, Latinx  | Bisexual     | Women           | HS student              |
| Costanza (she/her)  | 17  | Latinx         | Asexual      | Woman           | HS student              |
| Natalia (she/her)   | 16  | Latinx, White  | Bisexual     | Woman           | HS student              |
| Emily (she/her)     | 19  | White          | Lesbian      | Woman           | HS Diploma/GED          |
| Ginez (they/them)   | 19  | Latinx         | Pansexual    | Non-binary, agender | College student |
| Tim (he/him)        | 18  | White          | Gay          | Trans, Man      | HS student              |
| Nancy (she/her)     | 18  | White          | Bisexual, Pansexual | Women | College student |
| Fernanda (she/her)  | 18  | Latinx         | Pansexual    | Woman           | College student         |
| Jaylin (they/them)  | 18  | Black          | Queer        | Genderfluid     | College student         |
| Dani (they/them)    | 21  | Latinx         | Queer        | Agender         | College degree          |
| Imani (she/her)     | 18  | Black, Latinx  | Bisexual     | Woman           | College student         |
| Elia (they/them)    | 21  | Latinx, White  | Queer        | Non-binary      | College student         |
| Ximena (she/her)    | 20  | Am Indian, Latinx, White | Lesbian, Queer | Woman | Some college |
| Michael (he/him)    | 20  | White          | Bisexual     | Man             | Some high school        |
| Jon (he/any)        | 21  | White          | Bisexual     | Man, gender fluid | College student |
| Castel (they/them)  | 19  | Latinx         | Queer        | Non-binary      | Some college            |
| Anna (she/her)      | 21  | White          | Lesbian      | Woman           | College degree          |
| Madison (she/her)   | 21  | White          | Bisexual     | Women           | College degree          |

Figure 1. Demographics of interviewees.

youth with Latinx identification, only 5—Sasha, Claude, Ginez, Dani, and Elia—did not mention LGB family members. Most of these LGB relatives were not parents; youth interviewees described LGB aunts, uncles, siblings, cousins, and grandparents. Three Latinx and one Anglo youth—Catalina, Juliesta, Martin, and Azul—described having families that had many LGB-identified people in them. Catalina, a 17-year-old Latinx asexual woman, had three cousins who were out, including one who co-owned a gay bar and another who did drag. Catalina described her large extended family as warm, close, and congenial with one another. Azul, an 18-year-old Latinx bisexual nonbinary person, had a mother and several relatives on their mother’s side who are bisexual. When Azul came out as pansexual to their mother, their mom said, “Well I’m bi, so it’s not like a big deal.”

Only one youth, Martin, a 18-year-old White gay queer transgender man, mentioned a transgender or nonbinary relative. He did not know about his trans aunt until he came out. “Of course, I immediately messaged her,” Martin explained. “And I was like ‘this is awesome. I’m not the only one. Like someone with the same DNA as me is also trans.’” For Martin, it was deeply meaningful that a family member who was biologically related to him was also trans identified. However, he was not made aware of his aunt until after he came out, denying him the experience of having a trans role model in the family as he was figuring out his gender identity.

Many youth interviewees mentioned extended family members that they suspect are lesbian, gay, or bisexual, but they have no confirmation. These accounts of suspected family members came up for Anglo, Latinx, and Black youth in similar ways. Troy, a 17-year-old Black and Latinx trans man, described that a distant relative, his uncle’s brother, was gay, but he had never met him and had only learned about him through Troy’s mom. Azul had strong suspicions that multiple extended family members were gay or bisexual, including an uncle, a cousin, and an aunt. These youth often used clues about their relatives to figure out if they were LGBTQ. Jon, a 21-year-old White bisexual genderfluid man, said a family member once hinted to him that his uncle is gay, but he could not remember if it was true. “But you know, he is 50 or whatever and unmarried and he has an earring,” explained Jon. For Jon, his uncle’s age, marital status, and earring were all signals that the rumors about his uncle could
be confirmed. Jaylin, a 18-year-old Black queer genderfluid person, suspects some of their cousins might be LGBTQ because they’re pretty open with me. Most of them are older than me, and they’ve discussed experiences they’ve had with partners, but they never like said who the partners were and just stuck with the term “partners,” which made me think it might not be one specific gender.

Ximena, a 20-year-old multiracial Latinx lesbian woman, described her brother as gay because “he skips everywhere” and likes dress up and pageantry. Julieta, a 17-year-old Latinx queer woman, had seen some of her cousins at Pride and suspected they were LGBTQ but was open to the possibility that they were strong allies. Nancy, a 18-year-old White bisexual woman, was talking about her sister’s kids, and described her nephew as “acting a bit feminine” and her niece as “giving off some bisexual vibes. I can read it.” The clues—Pride attendance, references to partners, gender non-conformity and marital status—may be a way of picking up coded, in-group references to one’s sexuality or gender identity. These signals may also be a way of keeping the “closet door ajar” without openly talking about family members’ sexuality.

Youth interviewees disproportionately speculated about the bisexuality of sisters, aunts and mothers in their families. Julieta saw her cousins at a Pride event but also suspects her aunt is bisexual, because “whenever she sees, like, a beautiful woman, she’s like ‘oh my god that woman is so beautiful.’” Martin suspects his mother is bisexual, because she has dated girlfriends and boyfriends, although she has never identified herself as bisexual to him. Martina and Julieta both suspect their sister is LGBTQ because she’s “very very supportive.” Julieta, a 17-year-old Latinx queer woman, remembers that her sister “one time she told me—like showed me a picture of her friend, and she’s like, ‘Oh my God, how could you not like women? Like, look at her!’” Nancy’s sister came out to her as bisexual after kissing a friend, even though she was married. Youth were attentive to the signs that these family members were LGBTQ.

These stories of suspected LGBTQ relatives suggest that youth interviewees are hyperattentive to whether other family members identify as LGBTQ. Just the presence of a family member who was or might be LGBTQ was meaningful to youth. Furthermore, youth interviewees expressed how supportive it was to them having an LGBTQ family member.

Supportive Behavior

Many youth interviewees brought up the ways that their LGBTQ family members were supportive, including helping them navigate unsupportive parents and introducing them to LGBTQ culture and community. These types of social support may reduce the social isolation of LGBTQ youth in their families and help them resist efforts to enforce heteronormative compliance.

LGBTQ relatives helped youth interviewees navigate unsupportive parents, particularly for younger interviewees. Natalia, a 16-year-old Latina lesbian girl who lives in the rural community on the outskirts of San Antonio, said her LGBTQ older sister is supportive of her. She explained,

“Whenever my parents like talk to me bad or say something rude, she’ll like stand up for me, and she’s been to Pride with me. And she just supports me and she helps me. Whenever I feel sad because someone yelled at me or something, she cheers me up.

Natalia described her sister as emotionally supportive and strategic in standing up for her with their parents. Nancy described how one of her sisters that she is close to recently came out to her as bisexual, and they “both sit on the sidelines” together when her mom says something homophobic. Nancy’s sister provided solidarity around homophobic and biphobic relatives, a comrade in arms against resisting efforts at heteronormative compliance from their mother. For Martin, having a trans aunt helped reassure him about his transphobic father. He described how often they talk and how his aunt reassures him that it’s okay, my dad’s the way he is, you know. He just, he’s just like that. He’s just a weird guy. But she’s very, very sweet. She was so supportive, telling me that I was brave.

For these interviewees, LGBTQ relatives provided solidarity and validation with unsupportive or conflictual parents, helping do some of the emotional work of managing unsupportive parents (Recek and Bosley-Smith 2021). Not having to endure this conflict work alone may be an important source of support for LGBTQ youth. For Martin, his aunt’s words reassured him that his father’s transphobia and attempts at heteronormative compliance were not the norm within his family.

LGBTQ family members often introduced Latinx youth interviewees to LGBTQ community norms and same-sex relationships between adults. Azul’s mother took them to Pride for the first time after Azul came out. Azul was impressed that their mother wanted them to go to Pride and took them. They explained that “basically like going to Pride was her way of saying ‘Yeah, this is cool to me.’” For Azul, having a bisexual mother was a gateway to the broader LGBTQ community, as they said that “like more than half of the friendships she mentions to me are probably like bi or lesbian or something,” which has made Azul have access to a broad network in the LGBTQ community. For Castel, a 19-year-old Latinx nonbinary queer person, their lesbian sister “was the first person I had that was exposing me to the LGBT community.” Catalina had two long-distance gay cousins who do drag, and “they’re awesome, the whole family’s awesome….I love their family so much!”
Catalina also had a younger cousin who is engaged to his boyfriend and getting married next March. Being socialized into LGBTQ culture by fellow family members was a strong disruption of the reproduction of heterosexuality within the family.

A few youth also tried to foster these supportive family environments. Nancy suspected her teenage niece was queer and waited until a private moment to tell her that

okay, if it does turn out that you do like girls or anything, like, you know that, like, I’m okay with that. And you have someone to talk to you with that. Obviously, you know I’m bisexual. And if you ever need, like, a little homo leader and all that.

Nancy explained that she “tried to give her that environment that I wish I had.” Awena, a 21-year-old American Indian and Asian bisexual nonbinary person, helped out her mom’s boyfriend’s son who came to her for same-sex relationship advice. These youth wanted to be helpful for potentially LGBTQ relatives and help these relatives navigate heteronormativity within the family.

This connection to LGBTQ culture and other LGBTQ people may reduce the isolation of youth. Nancy has a fictive kin grandmother, Miss Lenelle, whom she bonds with over being attracted to women. Nancy describes going shopping with Miss Lenelle and her mom, and Miss Lenelle and Nancy bond over rainbow-themed products and made inside gay jokes:

My mom has no fucking idea, because she’s so almost in denial about that stuff. So yeah, me and Miss Lenelle will be like “haha, gay joke!” And Miss Lenelle will bring up, like, an old girlfriend of hers. My mom will think she’s talking about, like, “Girls going out with the girls.” But I know better! I know how she’s talking!

For Nancy, her mom’s denial about sexuality was a stark contrast to the inside jokes and coded queer content that she shared with Miss Lenelle. Being an insider, someone who knew that Miss Lenelle was talking about girlfriends, was important to Nancy. It may have been part of being included in the LGBTQ community and seeing herself as akin to other LGBTQ people.

Having an LGBTQ relative may increase social support for youth and reduce their feelings of isolation within the family. Having support during homophobic, transphobic, and biphobic experiences in the family or being socialized into LGBTQ culture within the family was also a strong resistance to practices of heteronormative compliance within the family.

Navigating Family Communication Norms, Assessing Risk

LGBTQ family members often helped youth navigate family communication norms and practices. Several youth described watching closely how other relatives were treated when they talked about their sexuality with the family. Sometimes this examination included an affirmation that it was safe to be LGBTQ. For Catalina, who has a cousin that owns a gay bar, family members are enthusiastic about the bar:

Ay, it’s a bar! Let’s go! It’s pretty cool! So everyone is always hanging out there with him. We’re all super close, so like, nobody really cares. Like, okay, that’s one more thing to love about you.

Catalina went on to describe feeling embraced and reassured by her family’s enthusiasm about her cousin’s sexuality and by extension her own. In Catalina’s family, she could see first hand how LGBTQ friendly her family was, to the extent that they hang out at her cousin’s gay bar.

More often, youth interviewees navigated complicated family environments and expectations about communication. For Ximena, she noticed how her parents reacted differently to her brother’s being gay. “Weirdly enough, my mom is like ‘I have the next Queer Eye son,’” she explained. “But my dad is still in denial. It’s bizarre for somebody who told my brother to dress up as Elton John for his birthday.” Azul lived with mostly their mother’s side of the family, in which there are many LGBTQ family members. “So it’s kind of like not a new thing you know? I came out like almost immediately. It’s never been a problem, really,” Azul explained.

Azul described their dad’s side of the family, however, as more suspect. For Azul, who had suspicions about multiple potentially gay or bisexual relatives on their dad’s side, said that “the rest of my family isn’t accepting so that maybe they couldn’t say anything.” In this case, the silence of not openly discussing the gender and sexuality of family members made Azul cautious about the family communication norms and practices on that side of the family. These youth illustrate that receptiveness to nonheteronormativity in these Latinx families varied depending on the person or side of the family, in which some sides of the family or people were more receptive to these discussions. Some sides of the family may be more invested in family practices and communication that support heteronormativity.

Sometimes older LGBTQ family members were pathbreakers whose sexuality disclosure was initially tumultuous for the family, but they ultimately created a family environment in which communication was easy and nonheteronormative practices were accepted. For these youth, seeing other LGBTQ family members receive welcoming and supportive responses from the extended family helped youth feel comfortable talking about their sexuality with family. When, more than a decade ago, Martin’s grandfather “out of nowhere decides to marry a man,” Martin is certain the family had a big shock. Back then, I can see people being upset with him, but now I don’t see anyone who has a problem with them. I don’t think anyone cares too much now.
In Martin’s family, nonheteronormative practices were accepted. This environment of extended family members helped Martin understand and depersonalize his father’s homophobia. Martin knew that his father was “very bigoted,” even when he “grew up pretty much surrounded by drag queens and queer people.” Martin’s dad has “always had issues with my grandpa, calling him names and stuff like that.” Seeing that his father was unusual in his family helped Martin discount his father’s opinion and turn to other relatives, framing his father as the family member who was not conforming to the family’s practices and communication. His transgender aunt affirmed this for him as well, asserting that his father had always been transphobic.

Even more ambiguous situations gave youth information about the family communication norms and practices around them. Imani, an 18-year-old Black and Latina bisexual woman, is not certain she wants to tell her “old fashioned” father about her sexuality, but she knows that he has a lesbian sister so “he does know that people like that exist.” Imani examines her father’s relationship with his sister to speculate on how her father would react to her potential disclosure. “I don’t think her being lesbian or anything like that, you know, makes him not want to talk to her,” Imani explained.

I mean, she’s even sent him pictures of her recent wedding that she had. Or when we went down there and visited her, we met her partner that she was with at the time. He doesn’t really react, I guess, I don’t know.

For Imani, who is trying to figure out if there is risk in her father knowing about her sexuality, his neutral response to her lesbian aunt helps Imani assess whether her father would react badly to her own potential disclosure. But, even without speaking about her sexuality to her father, Imani is reassured that her father is aware of nonheteronormative practices and does not distance himself from them.

Discussion

Having an LGBTQ relative was deeply meaningful for LGBTQ youth. Youth interviewees were attuned to who in their family might be LGBTQ, often suspecting relatives of being lesbian, gay, or bisexual. Latinx youth were more likely to report having a known or suspected LGB relative and also to describe their family as full of LGB relatives. These relatives were occasionally parents or siblings, and youth interviewees were well aware of which cousins, aunts, and grandparents may be lesbian, gay, or bisexual. The three Black-identified interviewees—Troy, Jaylin, and Imani—described a family environment that was ambiguous about LGBTQ acceptance, potentially ones in which that sexuality was “under the rug.” This study only had a small sample of Black-identified youth interviewees, and future research should examine this question of LGBTQ relatives for Black youth.

This research confirms that within families, much is communicated but left unsaid about gender and sexuality. Family members may directly communicate heteronormativity (Martin 2009), but what is left unsaid is also a form of communication. Some of these LGBTQ family members were suspected, not confirmed. Suspicion that family members are LGBTQ involves the deep reading and identification of codes of other family members. LGBTQ people have a cultural history of reading coded queer or transgender themes in popular movies, books, and other works of art (Halperin 2012; Henderson 2021), and a history of using coded language and behavior to identify other LGBTQ people (Chauncey 1994). Latinx LGBTQ youth also described navigating experiences with glass closets, tacit subjecthood, or the closet door ajar, which has been described by others’ work (Acosta 2011; Decena 2008). They often mentioned bisexuality among women in their families. Most often, youth interviewees were reading the potential bisexuality of their sisters, mothers, and aunts. The most visible form of nonheteronormative practices in most of these families was bisexuality. Many youth interviewees were bisexual, and they searched for signs of communication about bisexuality and openness as to the practice of bisexuality. There is a limited body of literature on bisexuality and families of origin in the United States (Flanders, Dobinson, and Logie 2015; Mathers 2019; Scherrer et al. 2015; Tasker and Delvoye 2018; Todd, Oravecz, and Vejar 2016; Fahs 2009). Existing work suggests that bisexual women are more likely to reject the disclosure imperative in LGBTQ politics and, if they do disclose their bisexuality, are more likely to do so in a casual manner in an everyday conversation (Doan and Mize 2020; Wandrey, Mosack, and Moore 2015). Azul’s mother followed a common practice of bisexual women, the casual disclosure of bisexuality in everyday conversation rather than a formal coming out discussion. Most of this bisexuality focused on women in the family, as youth speculated about the greater sexual fluidity of women (Diamond 2008). Women in the family may be less gender policed for expressing attraction or interest in women as well, part of the greater acceptance of homoerotic behavior in women than men (Fahs 2009).

The presence of LGBTQ relatives may reduce youth’s isolation and disconnection within the family, along with providing solidarity. Just the presence of known or suspected LGB family members signaled that family practices include same-sex attraction and sexuality, which may counterbalance pressure for heteronormative compliance. Seeing LGBTQ relatives be openly LGB and observing the reaction of their parents and other relatives of importance gave youth interviewees important information about what kind of reception they may receive if they disclosed their own sexuality, particularly if this disclosure was a kind of explosive knowledge. Additionally, youth interviewees learned about family responses to the open discussion of these nonheteronormative identities. For Latinx LGBTQ youth, having identifiable
family members who were lesbian, gay, or bisexual may help cultivate family environments that support nonheteronormative practices (Robinson 2018; Schmitz et al. 2020). Being initiated to LGBTQ culture, relationships, and events such as Pride through family members is a resistance to families being a site of heteronormative compliance.

However, it may be more difficult to challenge the cisnormativity of the family. Apart from mentioning relatives who do drag, youth interviewees never described affirmation of gender-expansive identities as part of having LGBTQ family members. This visibility of LGB family members did not extend to transgender and nonbinary family members. Only Martin mentioned having a transgender or nonbinary relative, his transgender aunt, and he did not learn about her or get in touch with her until after he came out to his family as transgender. Throughout his interview, Martin was adamant about how many openly visible LGB people there were in his family. Apart from his homophobic father, Martin described his family as largely accepting of nonheteronormative practices. However, even in this purportedly LGBTQ-friendly family, transgender practices and communication about transgender life were largely invisible to youth. Many scholars have documented the power of cisnormativity in family life (Symeruw and Holway 2022). Although half of the interviewees were transgender, nonbinary, or gender nonconforming, no interviewee outright mentioned the lack of transgender or nonbinary family members. Future research should consider the impact of having or being denied these transgender or nonbinary family members.

There is evidence that transgender family members can alter the practices around gender for the whole family through challenging cisnormativity in family life (McGuire et al. 2016). Similarly, LGB family members being visible within family life may alter the family practices around sexuality and heteronormative compliance by providing visible alternative pathways, support, and initiation into LGBTQ culture. This research contributes to theories about how heteronormativity is reproduced and resisted within the family. Not only were LGBTQ relatives a type of support for LGBTQ youth, but they were part of a broader resistance to heteronormativity within family life, potentially reworking family practices and communication. Rather than framing families as committed to heteronormative compliance, this research suggests that LGBTQ relatives within families create networks of support, demonstrate nonheteronormative practices as part of family life, and resist this heteronormative compliance collectively. Youth interviewees were attentive to these resistances from other LGBTQ relatives within their families, and they were interested in being part of the change within their family.

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