
Despite the many legal, social, and political gains achieved by the gay rights movement, lesbians, gays, and bisexuals (LBGs) still face discrimination. This has led some scholars to argue that LGB acceptance remains “incomplete.” Although familial rejection upon coming out is less common than it was just fifteen years ago, LGBs are said to experience acceptance that is only partial and depends on being seen as gender normative and apolitical. In this dissertation, I draw on in-depth interviews with LGBs and parents of LGBs to examine how LGBs and their parents manage the emotional strains that arise from incomplete acceptance after coming out. I find that much invisible emotion work goes into managing familial relationships after the disclosure of sexual identity. This emotion work takes three main forms: preventive, remedial, and palliative. Preventive emotion work is done by controlling how fast sexuality-related information is shared and with whom. Remedial emotion work, undertaken when preventive emotion work fails, is done by defining emotional strain as temporary. Palliative emotion work involves several component strategies—focusing on the future, focusing on progress, and using humor—that permit adaptation to emotionally straining relationships that are seen as unlikely to change. I argue that preventive, remedial, and palliative forms of emotion work are endemic to relationships between LGBs and their family members in an age of incomplete acceptance. I also argue that these forms of emotion work prioritize the emotional wellbeing of heterosexual family members and mask the heterosexism that necessitates emotion work in the first place.
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Emotion Work in an Age of Incomplete Acceptance: How Parents and LGBs Manage and Maintain Familial Relationships

by
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A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty of North Carolina State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my participants. Thank you for sharing your story.
BIOGRAPHY

Tyler Flockhart is from Mount Vernon, Iowa—a small town in the eastern part of the state. After high school he completed a degree in Criminology from the University of Northern Iowa. After a brief hiatus from academia (and the Midwest) he returned to pursue a master’s degree in sociology at Illinois State University and finally a PhD from North Carolina State University.
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CHAPTER 1: MANAGING FAMILIAL RELATIONSHIPS IN AN AGE OF INCOMPLETE ACCEPTANCE

In late 2016, a friend told me that he finally found the courage to introduce his partner to his parents. I was shocked by this decision, as he had previously told me that he would never do this. His parents, he had explained, were conservative, Christian, and unsupportive of him being gay. When I asked him how the introduction went, he said, “It was actually really good. A lot better than I thought it would go.” Their response surprised me even more than his decision to make the introduction. I was happy for him. Parents can, after all, surprise us. Apparently we had both misjudged his. About fifteen minutes into our conversation the details of the parent-partner introduction became clearer. His parents, I learned, told him that he and his partner were always welcome at their house as long as they did not “rub their sexuality in everyone’s face.” When he noticed my less-than-enthusiastic response to his parents’ reaction, he said, “Hey, I was afraid they were going to straight-up disown me and throw us out of the house, so it could have been a lot worse!”

My friend’s experience introducing his partner highlights an important feature of contemporary parent-LGB child relationships: LGB acceptance is “incomplete” and familial relationships are often fraught (Meyer 2015; Seidman 2002). On the one hand, LGBs live at a historical moment when many suggest that we are in a “post-closeted” society in which gay rights have been achieved and LGBs no longer feel the need to hide their sexuality from friends, colleagues, and family (Savin-Williams 2001, 2005). On the other hand, LGBs continue to experience disproportionate levels of emotional, psychological, and physical
abuse from family, coworkers, friends, and complete strangers (Roberts, Horne, and Hoyt 2015; Williams, Giuffre, and Dellinger 2009).

It is in this context of incomplete acceptance that LGBs navigate coming out and discussing sexuality with their family. While parents may be less likely to reject their child when s/he comes out today compared to twenty years ago (Denes and Affi 2014; Mezey 2015), familial relationships are not free of discrimination—as was demonstrated by my friend’s parents. The dominant form of discrimination against LGBs today is often more subtle. Burn, Kadlec, and Rexter (2005) call this “subtle heterosexism”—discrimination that is not necessarily directed specifically at LGBs but marginalizes them all the same. Here, LGBs are accepted to the extent that they adhere to certain criteria; namely, expressing gender normativity, linking sex to love and marriage, and defending family values (Broad, Crawley, and Foley 2004; Duggan 2002; Meeks and Xavier-Brier 2013; Richardson 2005). As my friend found, he and his partner can be included in the family, but their inclusion is conditional—they can be gay as long as their sexuality is barely visible.

To date, research has focused primarily on the separate experiences of LGBs and their parents as they navigate “coming out” in a context of incomplete acceptance (Beals and Peplau 2006; Johnson and Best 2012; Kaufman and Johnson 2004). Coming out, however, is something that must be navigated on an ongoing basis (e.g., when a partner is introduced for the first time or when LGBs come out to additional family members). It follows, then, that parents and their LGB children must deal with more than the initial disclosure of sexual identity (e.g., introducing a partner or coming out to other family members). In the present research, I consider how parents and their LGB children navigate relationships with each other and other family members on an ongoing basis—before, during, and after LGBs come
out—in a context where acceptance is often conditional. My findings suggest that much emotion work goes into maintaining these familial relationships. This emotion work, as I show in the following chapters, involves preventing, diminishing, and transforming feelings, and controlling what, when, and where sexuality-related information is shared, as well as how familial relationships are managed when they become strained.

RESEARCH METHODS

I began this project in 2016. At the time, I was interested in how parents and LGBs talk about sex, dating, and relationships with each other, and, more generally, with their experiences beyond the initial sexual identity disclosure. After completing interviews with nine LGBs and four parents, I began to realize that a great deal of emotion work goes into talking about these topics. LGBs and their parents, I learned, were afraid that discussing the formers’ sexuality would cause themselves, each other, and other family members discomfort, anxiety, shame, and anger. Emotion work was used to prevent, diminish, and transform these feelings. It seemed clear that without this emotion work, these family relationships could not be sustained.

Upon recognizing the importance of emotion work for managing familial relationships, I revised my interview guide (see Appendix A). I focused the interview questions more specifically on how parents and LGBs manage their own, each other’s, and other family members’ feelings as a way to preserve family relationships. These more focused interviews revealed different ways LGBs and their parents managed feelings in themselves and each other in the process of maintaining family relationships. The details of this emotion work began to emerge after writing several analytic memos. Relationship
management, I learned, relied on three different types of emotion work that, collectively, involved preventing bad feelings from emerging, and finding ways to diminish or transform existing noxious feelings once they emerge. My central analytic chapters examine these forms of preventive, remedial, and palliative emotion work.

Recruitment

I began recruiting parent and LGB participants during the spring of 2016 after obtaining approval from the IRB. Recruitment occurred through three channels. First, I relied on Raleigh-based friends within my social network. I provided these friends with a brief description of my research (and my e-mail address) and asked them to pass along my information to LGBs and parents of LGBs. Initially, I sought LGB young adults (18-25 years old) and their parents. After interviewing several LGB young adults, I decided to broaden the sample to include LGBs and parents of any age. My reason for this was rooted in the literature. For example, LGBs’ experience of coming out to family members has changed a lot over the last two decades. LGBs who came out to family in the 1990s and before were more likely to be rejected—and subsequently sever ties with family—compared to those who came out within the last several years (Ben-Ari 1995; Denes and Affi 2014; Savin-Williams 2001; Scherrer 2014; Schulman 2009; Seidman 2002; Walters 2014). The difference in experience reflects a range of changes in the United States, including legal gains (e.g., marriage and adoption rights) and greater visibility of LGBs in media, the workplace, and religious institutions (Kimport 2013). By including a more diverse sample, I hoped to capture the complexity of relationships and relationship management for LGBs—and parents of
LGBs—who, based on their age, may have had different experiences talking about sexuality-related issues with their family.

I also recruited participants through the use of a flier that described my project (see Appendix B). The flier directed interested parties to take a pull-off tab (connected to the flier) that included my name and university e-mail address. After receiving permission from the LGBT Center on NCSU’s campus and the LGBT Centers of Raleigh and Durham, I placed the fliers at these locations. I also posted electronic fliers (with the same information) on the following Facebook pages: LGBT Center of Raleigh, Duke LGBT Center, and PFLAG of the Triangle.

Finally, participants were recruited through “Parents, Families, and Friends, of Lesbians and Gays” (henceforth PFLAG). This involved e-mailing the organizers of PFLAG in Raleigh and Durham. I inquired about attending a meeting to explain my project. In total, I attended five meetings (three in Raleigh and two in Durham) after receiving permission from PFLAG leadership. At the meeting I gave a brief description of my project and handed out my recruitment flier.

The implications of recruiting through PFLAG are both positive and negative. On the one hand, research with PFLAG and similar organizations finds that the majority of members are white and middle class, thus making it less than ideal for finding a racially and economically diverse sample (Freedman 2008). On the other hand, participants attending PFLAG generally have an interest in learning more about LGB people and becoming more accepting of their LGB friends and family. Because of this, participants I recruited from PFLAG were excited to share their experiences.
I sought diversity in my sample in several ways. First, I have friends who are plugged into queer-people-of-color networks. These friends helped me find LGBs of color and parents of LGBs of color to interview. As a graduate student on a college campus, finding college-age LGBs was easy. Therefore, to increase diversity in age among my LGB and parent samples, I relied heavily on referrals. At the end of each interview I asked participants to recommend any LGB people or parents of LGB children in and outside of their age group whom they thought would be interested in being interviewed. PFLAG also helped me find a more diverse age range of participants, as many of its members are parents with children ranging anywhere from teenagers who have recently come out to adults who are married with children (see Broad et al. 2004). While my sample is diverse in terms of the lesbian, gay, and bisexual participants I interviewed, I was not able to interview any LGB parents of LGB children. I talk about the importance of including this group in my “future directions” section. In total, I interviewed forty-seven people. Thirty-two participants were LGBs and fifteen were parents of LGBs (see Appendix C for demographic characteristics of participants).

In-depth Interviews

After hearing about the project from any of the channels described above, interested parties contacted me. After agreeing to participate, I allowed participants to choose a time and place most convenient for them to be interviewed (in the Research Triangle area of North Carolina). In most cases, interviews took place on NCSU’s campus, or in coffee shops in Raleigh. For eight participants, interviewing in person was not possible. I used Skype to complete these interviews. With the permission of participants, I recorded all interviews and
transcribed them soon thereafter so that emergent themes could inform future interviews (Charmaz 2014; Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 2011). Analysis, then, proceeded inductively. I identified themes, patterns, and conceptual categories as they emerged (Esterberg 2002). My findings, therefore, were grounded in the empirical data and emerged throughout the course of data collection (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Strauss 1987).

I took several precautions to ensure the anonymity of participants. First, any identifying features mentioned in the interview were replaced with pseudonyms during transcription. These identifying features included names and background information—such as specialized majors or occupations—and locations such as street addresses and specific places where interactions took place (e.g., a restaurant).

My decision to protect anonymity beyond simply changing names reflected the sensitivity of the topic and anxieties and concerns noted by LGBs and parents during the interview. LGBs mentioned a fear of causing emotional harm—to themselves or other family members—if certain family members found out they were lesbian, gay or bisexual, or in a same-gender relationship. Younger LGBs, especially, were worried about being cut off financially. Parents of LGBs also disclosed information about their children, other family members, and partners whom they felt would be hurt by the information disclosed. I was thorough in removing identifying features to protect the wellbeing of my participants. I also erased audio files after they were transcribed. The transcriptions were stored on a password-protected computer to which only I had access.
Data Analysis

I used an inductive coding process to analyze my data (Charmaz 2014). Initially, I coded what could be defined and discovered in the data (Lofland and Lofland 1995). As the project was initially focused on how LGBs and their parents talk about sexuality, dating, relationships, and sex, much of what I initially coded centered on experiences related to these topics. After completing several interviews, it became clear that participants were putting a great deal of effort into circumventing topics that could cause themselves, each other, and other family members’ noxious feelings. At that point, then, I revised my interview guide to focus more specifically on the emotion work LGBs and parents of LGBs used to navigate relationships with each other and other family members. These more focused interviews revealed three different types of emotion work, which I came to refer to as preventive, remedial, and palliative. These three forms of emotion work became the focus of my three substantive chapters.

A Note on Positionality

I decided before I started collecting data that I would not disclose that I am gay to participants. I figured that participants would not ask, so this would not be an issue. I was wrong. For those who asked, I always responded honestly. I came out to eleven LGBs and seven parents. LGBs typically asked if I was gay before I even began asking questions from the interview guide. This typically led to a discussion of how I came out to my parents and what my relationship with my parents is like now. To this end, I found that coming out to LGBs facilitated a degree of rapport. It was not uncommon for LGBs to have similar experiences. Our informal conversation about sexuality was frequently the spark that got the
interview started. LGBs, upon hearing about my experiences with family, began talking about differences and similarities in their own.

Unlike LGBs, who frequently asked me about my sexuality before the interview even began, parents were more likely to ask if I was gay (and they always asked if I was gay, never if I was bisexual) at the end of the interview. I feel fortunate that they asked when they did based on the conversations their questions provoked. Parents’ responses to my disclosure were frequently reflective of the larger culture of “sameness” and “normalization” (Martin et al. 2009; Richardson 2005; Seidman 2002) that I discuss throughout my dissertation. Jeff’s comment illustrates:

See, I would have never guessed that you were gay. And why would I, you know? I mean, it is not what is important about you. You are getting a doctorate. You are doing all these great things…Sexuality is not what is important.

As I explain in chapter four, parents put a lot of effort into minimizing the importance of their child’s sexuality. Doing so allowed them to diminish some of the qualms they had about their child’s sexuality. I found that parents minimized the importance of my sexuality, as well. Kleinman (2007) suggests that men, during interviews, often learn what not to say about their feelings towards women. If parents put such effort into minimizing the importance of sexuality, then taking the time to disclose mine—at the beginning of the interview—may have been interpreted as an admission that sexual identity is important to me, or at least not something I minimize. Doing so might have affected what parents were comfortable saying about their experiences and feelings about their child’s sexuality.
THE IMPORTANCE OF EMOTION WORK IN FAMILY RESEARCH

Emotion work is the act of trying to change the degree, quality, or expression of a feeling. This work is shaped by “feeling rules,” which are the spoken and unspoken rules about what a person should feel in a given situation. For example, a person might feel confused and guilty when their feelings are not in line with dominant cultural expectations, thus requiring emotion work as a way to make their feelings congruent with these expectations (Hochschild 1979, 1983; Moon 2013). Emotion work in the family, however, is often invisible. Hochschild (1983) provides some explanation for why this is the case in her classic book The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling, in which she argues that, “The deeper the bond, the more emotion work, and the more unconscious we are of it” (p. 63).

Emotion work is not only invisible in families, but also seen as unnecessary. Erickson and Cottingham (2014) suggest that family is seen as one of the few spaces where people can truly be themselves outside of the influence of feeling rules. Said another way, love between family members is natural, therefore making emotion work unnecessary for the continuance of familial relationships. As scholars of emotion argue, though, no human interaction is unaffected by emotional norms (Froyum 2010; Hochschild 1983; Thoits 2004; Elliott and Umberson 2008). Sociologists studying emotion have therefore begun exploring how family members do emotion work on behalf of themselves and each other, and the consequences of this emotion work.

Family researchers’ exploration of emotion work rarely extends beyond romantic relationships—specifically, heterosexual marriage. In the rare case that other familial relationships are considered, emotion work is often addressed indirectly. For example,
parents of color sometimes avoid discussing racism with their children as a way to postpone their child’s awareness of racism (Van Ausdale 1996). Similarly, in her research on same-sex families, Benkov (1994) found that some lesbian and gay parents chose not to “come out” to their child’s teacher, believing that doing so would only make their child’s life more difficult. In both of these examples, emotion work appears to be implied by the analysis, though not explored directly. It is possible, for example, that same-sex parents choose not to disclose their sexual identity to teachers as a way to insulate their child from homophobia. Similarly, parents of color may choose to avoid or postpone talks about racism in order to protect their children from fear, anxiety, or discomfort.

In the present research, I focus on how, when, and with what consequences emotion work is used to navigate familial relationships on an ongoing basis. This focus is especially timely in an era where LGB inequality is often posited as a thing of the past. The reality, as I argue throughout these chapters, is that discrimination against LGBs has not ended, but has become more subtle and covert. In this context, emotion work remains necessary, despite the belief that familial love and acceptance are the natural state of affairs. As I show in the following chapters, this is far from the reality. Parents and their LGB children preserve familial relationships by preventing, diminishing, and transforming their, each other’s, and other family members’ feelings. My analysis makes visible the multiple forms of emotion work central to maintaining familial relationships in an age of incomplete LGB acceptance. This emotion work has unintended consequences. My analysis also shows how it reproduces inequalities within and outside of familial relationships.
Studies of how parents and LGB children navigate sexual identity disclosure similarly address emotion work in an indirect manner. Fear of parental rejection, in particular, remains an important factor shaping the decision to come out to one’s parents (Christler 2017; D’Augelli 2005; Doty et al. 2010; Savin-Williams 2001, 2005). Gray (2009) addresses this fear in her research with LGB teenagers in rural Kentucky. These young people report living in a climate that is frequently hostile toward minority groups who are scapegoated for the decline of manufacturing in these areas (see also Stein 2001). In response, some LGB young people remain closeted to avoid making themselves and their parents targets of verbal assault.

Barton (2012) reports similar findings in her research on LGBs living in the Bible Belt. Drawing on Foucault’s (1979) discussion of the panopticon prison, Barton found that Christian beliefs and practices permeate the local culture. In this context, LGB people describe a constant feeling of surveillance not only from their family but from everyone they meet. Closeted LGB people, as a result, feel they have two choices: disclose and potentially experience ostracism and rejection from parents (and the community more broadly), or stay in “the toxic closet,” a space characterized by secrecy and shame. Many choose the latter and justify their decision by citing an unwillingness to lose the love and support of their parents.

The most common reason for not coming out, Barton and Gray report, is a desire to preserve relationships with parents. Most LGBs do, however, eventually come out to their parents (Denes and Affi 2014; Mezy 2015; Savin-Williams 2001, 2005). Given the fear of rejection and desire to maintain these relationships, emotion work likely goes into
maintaining familial relationships after coming out as well—particularly at times when LGBs’ sexuality is extremely visible (e.g., introducing a partner, talking about a partner, and coming out to another family member). For example, Kaufman and Johnson (2004) find that being directly confronted with a same-gender relationship cements the LGB person’s stigmatized status because, in that moment, her/his sexuality, which is otherwise invisible, becomes visible (see also Doan, Loehr, and Miller 2014). It is one thing for an LGB child to come out to their family and for a family member to say they are accepting, but it is quite another for LGBs to actually talk about sexuality or introduce a partner. It follows, then, that when LGBs talk about their sexuality with family, feelings must be managed to preserve the relationship and ensure the interaction proceeds smoothly.

Research on parents of LGB children similarly focuses on responses to a child’s sexual identity disclosure and tends to overlook the emotion work parents use to maintain these relationships on an ongoing basis. Fields (2001), for example, argues that parents of LGBs experience a “courtesy stigma” (Goffman 1963) when their child comes out—the stigma they experience is a consequence of their child’s identification as lesbian, gay or bisexual. Some parents try to ward off this stigma and restore an image of themselves as “good parents” who have not failed to raise a well-adjusted child (see Johnson and Best 2012; Martin et al. 2009). Fields’s research, though focused primarily on the strategies parents use to restore their identities as good parents, raises important questions about emotion work. In the following pages, I move beyond identity work and consider how parents use emotion work to manage relationships with their LGB children, as well as relationships they and their LGB children have with other family members.
ORGANIZATION

What follows are three substantive chapters and a conclusion. Chapter two examines preventive emotion work. Here, I highlight the strategies parents and their LGB children use to keep unwanted feelings at bay in themselves and each other. This emotion work, I argue, centers on managing sexuality-related information and the settings and situations in which sexuality-related information is discussed. I discuss three strategies whereby this emotion work is done: concealing, testing the waters, and staging the situation. By preventing noxious feelings from developing in the first place, parents and LGBs protect their familial relationships from becoming strained.

For all their effort, sometimes feelings are hurt and familial relationships become strained. In these instances, LGBs and their parents must focus on trying to diminish or transform noxious feelings. This is done through what I call remedial and palliative emotion work. Chapter three is focused on the former. Parents and their LGB children are able to feel better about the emotion work they use to maintain familial relationships—that are a constant threat to their emotional energy—by envisioning a future in which the relationship is no longer strained. Focusing on progress eases emotional strain in the present but, as I show, this kind of remedial emotion work is only a short-term solution.

Not all parents and LGBs have hope that a strained familial relationship will improve in the future. When parents and LGBs anticipate continued relationship strain with each other and other family members, they use palliative emotion work. This strategy entails accepting and adapting to strain rather than envisioning a better future. Here, parents and LGBs minimize the importance of sexuality and relationships, redefine the meaning of hurtful comments, categorize expectations of emotional support from family members who cause
noxious feelings, and compare themselves to LGB-family relationships that are more strained.

In the conclusion I briefly review the major findings of the study and then discuss my empirical and theoretical contributions. I end with a discussion of the limitations of the study followed by a proposal for future research pertaining to relationship management, emotion work, and parent-LGB child relationships.

Today, discrimination against LGBs has become more subtle—what sexualities scholars call “subtle heterosexism.” Contemporary parent-LGB relationships likewise reflect the “incompleteness” of LGB acceptance. In the process of preserving their relationships, parents and their LGB children put the needs of heterosexual family members before LGBs, and overlook the heterosexism that necessitates their emotion work. This emotion work facilitates parents and LGBs in managing family relationships. But as the study shows, it also reflects and reproduces a larger culture of heterosexism that contributes to the incompleteness of LGB acceptance.

As the next chapters will show, my research highlights the temporality of emotion work. Past research has highlighted the role that emotional pasts play in shaping experience in the present (see Mattley 2002). I argue that emotional futures are also important for shaping behavior and feeling in the present. Envisioning a specific type of familial relationship in the future, I find, shapes how emotion work is used to manage family relationships in the present. Looking to the future, however, serves different ends depending on the emotion work it is paired with. When remedial emotion work is used, LGBs and their parents imagine a future where their familial relationship is less strained. The hope of a better future allows them to feel better about the persistent drain to “emotional energy” the
relationship causes in the present (chapter 3). In contrast, with palliative emotion work, the future relationship LGBs and their parents envision is bleaker. When they anticipate continued strain, parents and LGBs find ways to adapt to the strain while preserving the relationship (chapter 4). These are the consequences of incomplete acceptance, in families and in the world that surrounds them.
Parents and LGB children treat their relationships with each other as fragile. Before coming out, they worry about causing themselves and the other embarrassment, anger, anxiety, and discomfort. This fear continues after the disclosure as well. In this phase, they fear that how, when, and with whom they talk about same-gender relationships and sexuality will lead to discomfort for themselves and each other. In this chapter, I argue that LGBs and their parents use emotion work to prevent potential discomfort—on behalf of themselves and each other—before, during, and after LGBs come out. I call this practice preventive emotion work.

Emotion work centers on feeling management in family life through evoking new feelings, or transforming and suppressing existing feeling, in oneself—rather than feelings belonging to someone else (Erickson and Cottingham 2014; Hochschild 1983; Thoits 1996). I show how emotion work is also preventive and used to keep feelings at bay in oneself, but in others too. To this end, I identify three strategies of preventive emotion work that demonstrate how people keep themselves and others from unwanted feelings. Through information management, LGBs and their parents manage what, and whether, sexuality-related information is disclosed (concealment and selective sharing) and how quickly it is shared (testing the waters). Additionally, parents and LGBs manage situations in which sexuality-related information is shared (staging).

Preventive emotion work is akin to “preventive emotion management,” which Copp (1998) documents in the workplace. Employers, Copp observes, prevent employees from feeling the boredom and tedium of low-wage work through humor, emphasizing an ideology
of improvement, and encouraging solidarity among employees. Preventive emotion work is used to navigate and maintain relationships as well, but in a strained familial context rather than a tedious and monotonous workplace. Additionally, while preventive emotion management keeps others from experiencing certain feelings, preventive emotion work keeps feelings at bay in others and oneself. It is personal and interpersonal.

This chapter comprises five sections. First, I explain and provide examples of the three strategies of preventive emotion work introduced above. I discuss how concealment, testing the waters, and staging the situation aid LGB people and their parents in maintaining relationships. After outlining the three strategies, I conclude by positioning preventive emotion work in a larger context of “incomplete” LGB acceptance. I discuss how the preventive emotion work parents and LGBs used to manage relationships with each other and other family members was often made invisible, and attributed instead to other factors (being a “good parent” or “decent person”).

CONCEALMENT AND SELECTIVE SHARING

Parents and their LGB children concealed and selectively shared information about the latters’ sexual identity and same-gender relationships to keep feelings at bay in themselves and each other. The motivation and justification for using these strategies differed depending on whether LGBs were “out.” This section, then, examines concealment and selective sharing before and after coming out.
LGBs and their parents feared that the former coming out would create discomfort, disappointment, anxiety, fear, and anger. For some, the concern was over preventing oneself from being hurt by the other’s anger or disappointment. Others wanted to prevent their parent or LGB child from being uncomfortable or anxious. The strategy of concealing, especially, kept these feelings at bay—in themselves and each other—prior to LGBs coming out.

Cynthia, for example, concealed her knowledge that Collin (her 31-year-old son) was gay before he came out to prevent feeling like a failure as a mother:

He didn’t always do a great job deleting the internet history (laughs), so I had a pretty good idea [he was gay]. And I debated about how to broach the topic with him. This, well let’s see, this was when he was probably fifteen or sixteen… I just remember thinking about whether I would know how to be a good mother to a gay child. Like, would I know how to be supportive?...And actually I never did bring it up because I was afraid of what it would mean. Like, would I know how to be supportive? A good mother? Would I fail him?

Heterosexual parents may not be emotionally equipped to provide support to their LGB children (Doty et al. 2010). Concealing their knowledge of a child’s sexuality was one way to cope. Cynthia did not conceal her suspicion that Collin was gay because she was against it, but because she did not want to feel like a failure as a mother. By concealing, she kept her fear of failure, and the potential for it to become a reality, at bay.

LGB people also concealed their sexual identity to keep from being hurt by a parent’s reaction to them coming out. Anna, a 22-year-old bisexual woman, explained:

I sort of had the horror story in my mind about getting kicked out…So, for sure that kept me in the closet for a while. I mean, I don't think she [Anna’s mother] ever actually would kick me out, but I was afraid something would happen that would disrupt our relationship… I had friends who that happened to. So, yeah, the whole horror story scenario [was in the back of my mind].
The decision to conceal was based on an anticipated reaction, requiring what Gengler (2015) refers to as “anticipation work”—the work done to ward off anticipated feelings. Parents of seriously ill children, for example, prevent fear and anxiety by distancing themselves from people (e.g., physicians, family, and friends) who threaten their emotional wellbeing. For example, some parents shift informational updates to e-mail to avoid face-to-face interactions with physicians. In doing so, they diminish the risk of becoming upset by the way doctors deliver information (e.g, the physicians facial expressions when discussing treatments or prognoses). Their anticipation work is based on an initial interaction that caused emotional pain—a previous experience where a doctor caused them emotional pain. For LGBs and their parents, the decision to conceal was not based on an initial interaction but on a lack of knowledge about how an interaction would unfold and its potential consequences. Cynthia concealed her awareness of Collin’s sexual identity to prevent the possibility of feeling like a failure as a parent, while Anna did so to prevent a potential negative reaction from her mother.

Parents and their LGB children also exhibited empathy for each other and were concerned about making the other angry, embarrassed, anxious, or upset. In some instances, their fear was of hurting the other directly. Connor, a 23-year-old gay man, provided an example:

My grandma is a very anxious person. She always has been. She worries about everything and, like, one thing could upset her entire week and she will think about it and brood over it forever. So that was the main thing; like, protect them [grandma and mother] from this….So, hypothetically, if I was home visiting [in the town where Connor’s family lives] I wouldn’t, like, hold hands with a boyfriend in public or something, because that could get back to her [grandma] or my mom.

Lesbian, gay, and bisexual people described valued relationships with parents, siblings, and grandparents. The possibility of hurting these people and damaging their relationship—by
holding hands with a partner in public and having family members find out—was something they were unwilling to risk. Concealing information about their sexual identity or same-gender relationship prevented their parents/grandparents from being hurt by something they heard or saw.

LGB children’s concerns extended beyond hurting a parent/grandparent. LGBs also wanted to protect relationships between other family members. Lindsay (20 years old) concealed her bisexuality to prevent creating tension between her grandma and mother:

We definitely spend a lot of time at my grandma’s house. And my grandma has some really conservative friends. So, like, we will be talking and I will make jokes like how I am going to wait until I am out of college before I get a boyfriend. Because, inevitably, they will ask me about stuff like that…And I do this because I don’t want to put my mom or grandma and her friends in a really awkward position because I don’t see them that often anyway.

LGBs often felt responsible for how their sexuality might affect relationships other family members had with each other. Through concealment, they hoped to prevent straining these relationships.

Parents also concealed information to keep their LGB children from experiencing certain feelings. Here again this helped to protect relationships with other family members. Because LGBs usually do not come out to both parents at the same time (Bernstein and Naples 2010; Glennon 2012), the parent who knew was sometimes placed in a situation where they had to conceal this information from other family members to prevent their child from feeling betrayed (e.g., if a parent promised they would not tell others), or to prevent damaging the relationship a child had with other family members. Laurie, the mother of Trevor, her 28-year-old gay son, demonstrated how this situation played out:

L: Trevor told me before he told his father…And there was a period of about a year where I knew, and Carl, my husband, did not. I mean, it is not mine to tell…And
Trevor and his father had a really close relationship, too. So, you know, I needed to respect Trevor and be patient that he would tell his dad when he felt comfortable.

T: Was there strain on your relationship in the year you knew and Carl didn't?

L: Yeah, kind of. And I kept saying to Trevor, “Tell your dad!” But it was his choice, you know? It was his to tell. On his own schedule.

DeVault (1991) refers to the work parents do to maintain the family unit as “family work.” This work, for LGB people and their parents, was not one-sided or one-directional. It was done by parent and child, and on behalf of oneself and others. Said another way, LGBs and their parents used reciprocal emotion management—doing emotion work with others to achieve some emotional end (Lively 2000)—but preventively. Through concealment they worked to maintain familial relationships by preventing each other, themselves, and other family members from anger, anxiety, and feeling betrayed.

Concealing emotions is a form of what Goffman (1963) called “information management,” which is often done to prevent being disqualified from normal social roles and activities. For example, LGBs may be selective about who they come out to in order to keep a job or avoid stigma. Though Goffman was not focused explicitly on managing emotions, information management aids LGBs and their parents in the emotion work they do. Rather than managing information about one’s identity to avoid stigma, LGBs and their parents concealed sexuality-related information to keep themselves and each other from unwanted feelings that could strain their parent-child relationship. Information management, then, facilitates identity management and emotion work.

In sum, LGBs and their parents prevented themselves, each other, and other family members from unwanted feelings by concealing sexuality-related information. Parents sometimes avoided bringing up their suspicions that their child was LGB to protect
themselves from feeling like a failure as a parent, or to preserve their child’s relationship with other family members. Similarly, LGBs concealed their sexuality because they anticipated a hurtful response from their parents or because they wanted to prevent their parents or other family members (e.g., grandparents, aunts, and uncles) from experiencing anxiety or anger. Before an LGB is out to their parents, then, concealment was done fully and completely. As I show in the next section, concealment continued after LGBs came out as well. After disclosure, however, concealment was about being selective in what sexuality-related information was shared rather than concealing all sexuality-related information.

After Coming Out: Selective Sharing

Sociologists often treat concealment as something that is done fully and comprehensively. For instance, LGB people might manage stigma by separating themselves from people who may discredit their identity or be hurtful (Ghaziani 2014; Kaufman and Johnson 2004), or by hiding their sexuality from family (Orne 2011, 2013; Scherrer 2010). But concealment can be selective. After LGBs come out to parents, the goal was not to conceal all sexuality-related information (e.g., sexual identity and/or same-gender relationship), but rather to be selective about what was disclosed. Information management continued to be central to the concealing that occurred after an LGB child came out to their parents. After a child was out, however, the focus was on how much sexuality-related information was concealed.

The decision to selectively share was based on (1) previous interactions and the reactions provoked by disclosure; and (2) a desire to minimize emotional stress in oneself and others. LGB people, especially, took it upon themselves to continue protecting their
parents’ emotional wellbeing after coming out. David, a 20-year-old gay man, did this by selectively sharing about his romantic relationships:

I avoid telling them about the guys I date unless it is a really serious relationship. Because, like, what am I going to get out of it? Am I just going to introduce my partner out of spite? I would think about it logically. Like, do I just want to push things? Do I just want to stir stuff up?…I am trying to think about it from both perspectives, like theirs and mine…And they, but my mom especially, have been weird about it [about David being gay]…so I am careful about what I bring up and, like, what will stir stuff up with them…I mean, I get hurt in the process too.

Exercising discretion in what was discussed protected self and others from discomfort. In addition to exercising caution, LGBs also directed conversations toward safe and superficial topics. Brittany, a 33-year-old lesbian, did this with her parents:

I mean, if they [Brittany’s parents] wanted to bring up issues and have a discussion about it [Brittany being a lesbian] that would probably bring up different feelings. But they don't. They have gone there once and it ended poorly. So we just keep things kind of on the surface and amicable …Just because that seems like the best thing to do with people who can’t handle it.

Surface-level and amicable topics included mentioning a partner’s name, details of a recent vacation, or a plan to move into a new house. They did not include references, in any way, to an LGB child’s sexual identity, relationship dynamics, or sexual activity (e.g., LGB activism, same-sex dating, relationship struggles). Based on past experiences, these conversations had, as Brittany found, ended poorly. Concealing these subjects prevented hurt feelings and minimized strain in the parent-child relationship.

Parents also kept unwanted feelings at bay in themselves and their LGB children by avoiding certain topics. Like their LGB children, the decision to selectively share was rooted in their past experiences. Theresa, who was the mother of Fiona, a 19-year-old bisexual, explained:

Tyler: Do you think Fiona would say you are accepting [of her bisexuality]?
Theresa: I mean, I think I am. She may have a different take. She is just so sensitive when we talk about stuff like that. After [talking about this stuff], she has made remarks like, you said this! And you said all these things! And I am thinking to myself, that makes no sense to me. Because I am not the type of person to be homophobic. But, you know, I don't argue or spend too much on it with her because parents always get the blame for whatever.

Past emotional experiences shape our actions in the present (Mattley 2002; Mills and Kleinman 1988; Snow and Anderson 1993). LGBs and their parents invoked feelings such as “weirdness” and anger that surfaced in past interactions to justify their selective sharing and avoidance of sexuality-related topics in the present. By exercising caution in what they discussed, or focusing on superficial topics, they prevented discomfort in themselves and each other. Discussing LGBs’ sexuality, then, carried a risk that parents and their LGB children handled through selective sharing. Past experiences served as a guideline for what should be discussed and what should be avoided.

In addition to emotional pasts, LGBs and their parents also took current financial and emotional matters into consideration when deciding whether to share sexuality-related information. For younger LGBs, emotional and financial dependence weighed significantly on their decision to share. As Marco, a 21-year-old gay man, explained:

I mean, my mother and I used to be really close. Like, we would do stuff together. I would tell her about what’s going on in my life at school and with friends. But, like, through conversations where she responds badly and, like, her subtle jabs about gay people, it has definitely hurt our relationship. Like, a lot of times I don’t want to even talk to her, or like I will only talk to her about surface level stuff like the weather (laughs) and not substantive stuff like how I’m doing in school, or how I am coping with my new roommate, and certainly not details about relationships and stuff or how I’m doing with a boyfriend or any issue related to being gay…Because, like, she is my mom and, like, I want to talk to her and have that support, so I just have to sometimes not go too deep about sexuality stuff because I know it will create problems.
Lindsay, a 20-year-old bisexual, provided another example and emphasized how selective sharing about her sexuality prevented angering her father, but also protected their relationship and the financial support it provided:

I feel like I sort of need to protect myself from feeling awful all the time. But, also, like, creating more issues in our [Lindsay and her father’s] relationship. So, I will spend time with my dad when I can mentally handle spending time with my dad…Also, like, my dad has said, “If you tell x, y, z and it becomes a public thing, then I am not going to financially support you anymore.” So, that is another reason not to [talk about sexuality] much.

It was not uncommon, in the past, for lesbian, gay, and bisexual people to escape unaccepting parents by cutting ties with family and creating families of their choosing (i.e., “families of choice”). Today, more are maintaining relationships with their parents (Mezey 2015; Savin-Williams 2001; Schulman 2009). This is due, in part, to an increase in parental acceptance over the last few decades, and a rapid increase over the last ten years (Faderman 2015; Seidman 2002).

Recently, however, the extent and features of LGB acceptance have been questioned. Walters (2014) suggests that the term “tolerance” is more appropriate than acceptance, as the “acceptance” LGB people receive after coming out is often conditional and situational (see also Fields 2001; Glennon 2012; Robinson 2018; Scherrer, Kazyak, and Schmitz 2015).

Navigating relationships with unaccepting parents—or parents whose acceptance is situational or conditional—was especially hard for LGB young people who were emotionally and financially dependent on their parents. Preventive emotion work was one way to manage this situation. By selectively sharing, they were able to protect their parent-child relationship and the benefits it offered. For younger LGBs, selective sharing was a response to their current situation and a way to avoid potential repercussions that discussing certain topics could create. LGBs were, as Orne (2011) suggests, “strategically out”—a position that
requires constant management of sexual identity depending on situation and audience. For Lindsay and Marco, strategic outness was not about keeping their sexual identity from their parents (as they were out), but instead, being selective about the sexuality-related information they discussed with their parents. Through selective sharing they maintained their parent-child relationship and the emotional and financial support it provided.

LGBs were also concerned about exacerbating existing stressors in their parents’ lives. Danielle, a 20-year-old bisexual, limited how much she talked to her mother about her sexuality when her mother was going through a divorce:

T: So what keeps you from talking to your mother more about being bisexual?

D: Probably the divorce. Like, I want to be there for my mom more than anything. And, the divorce was pretty rough on her… I think that is the reason I don’t talk about it more and bring up my bisexuality. I don't want to upset her any more than she has already been hurt by him [dad]…I am just trying to protect her. She was really having a hard time with the divorce and just going through a lot of grief… like, it was just a stressful time…so I didn't want to create anymore stress for any of us.

Parents also considered the current emotional state of their children and how other family members’ knowledge of their child’s sexual identity could cause her/him emotional pain. As Jeff, the father of a 19-year-old gay son, Ryan, said:

My brothers’ kids have always been the ones who were the hunters and fishermen and crazy. They do sports. And Ryan, he is more intellectual and into computers. But, to my folks and my brothers, our kids have always been the ones who are going to go to college and have everything going for them; like our kids have no problems. So, Ryan is on this pedestal and could do no wrong. And now, all of a sudden, it was like, how will they react to Ryan being gay? …We don’t want him to get hurt or for his relationship with them to change…So we, and this was more so in the beginning [when Ryan first came out], were careful about what people we told and how much we told.

Selective sharing is similar to “emotional editing”—editing out emotions in oneself that may threaten the production of a sympathetic or rational response in others (Li and Arber 2006). While emotional editing is focused on editing emotions one displays in order to manage the
responses of others, selective sharing involved editing sexuality-related information to prevent unwanted feelings in others and oneself. LGBs and their parents kept unwanted feelings at bay and protected familial relationships by selectively sharing information about sexual identity or same-gender relationships.

Selective sharing and concealment focused on information management, and involved not talking about sexual identity altogether, or being selective about what and to whom information was revealed. Information management was also at the center of the next strategy of preventive emotion work: testing the waters. The focus here, however, was not concealing or selectively sharing sexuality-related information. Instead, the strategy was to prepare oneself and a parent/child to receive further information concerning LGBs’ sexuality.

TESTING THE WATERS

Testing the waters involved preparing, reassuring, and gradually revealing. Like concealment and selective sharing, the way LGBs and their parents “tested the waters” differed depending on whether a child was out to their parents. In the first section, then, I introduce the concept of “planting the seed.” LGBs used this strategy to prepare their parents for when they did come out, and parents, to reassure their LGB child that they were unconditionally loved regardless of their sexuality. In the second section, I discuss the strategy of “gradually revealing,” which was used by both groups after an LGB was out to their parents. By revealing new information about lesbian, gay, and bisexuality over time, LGBs and their parents hoped to prevent themselves, each other, and other family members from shock, surprise, and discomfort, and thus preserve their familial relationship.
Planting the Seed

Planting the seed was used to prepare others for a sexual identity disclosure and to diminish the intensity of feelings that were experienced when the disclosure occurred. LGBs did this by bringing up their sexuality in everyday conversation with parents to prepare them for when they finally did come out. For example, Joseph, a 21-year-old bisexual man, was not entirely certain about how his mother would respond to the news that he was bisexual. In the weeks before he came out to her he made subtle affirmations in support of same-sex characters on television—when watching with his mother:

In the weeks before I came out, I definitely was planting the seed (laughs) and getting her used to the idea… Like, there would be something on TV about a same-sex couple and I would be like, to my mom, “I just think that is so great!”… And it started as more general comments like, “I don’t think I see anything wrong with that”… And it became more deliberate and I would be like, “I just think that is so great!”

Joseph’s decision to plant the seed paid off, as his mother was not too surprised when he finally did disclose: “It was a bit of a relief, actually, because one of my fears was that she would just be completely taken off guard, thus the subtle hints!” Others were not as fortunate. Jennifer, a 21-year-old bisexual, gave hints to her parents that she was gay before coming out. Much to her surprise, they were still shocked when she finally did disclose:

When I came out to them as gay they were like, surprised, and I was like, how are you surprised? Like, I was very obvious about it; there were lots of clues left (laughs)… I mean, once I feel comfortable with myself I kind of don’t censor myself. With anything. So, I was definitely acting more flamboyant and stuff leading up to me coming out… so I feel like I really had prepared them for it, but they still were surprised!

Planting the seed was meant to prevent parents from being shocked or surprised when sexuality-related information (e.g., coming out or introducing a partner) was revealed. Chin (2000) found that parents of children applying to elite private schools use a similar strategy.
Because the schools are extremely competitive, parents prepare their child for potential rejection and manage their disappointment. When rejection does occur, parents may convince their child that the school they were rejected by was not the right place for them. Planting the seed served a similar purpose for LGB people. However, LGBs were not necessarily trying to prevent a feeling in its entirety; they were trying to lessen its intensity. By casually showing their support of same-sex relationships on television, or making changes in their gender expression in the days/weeks leading up to their disclosure, Joseph and Jennifer tried to prepare their parents for the eventual revelation, and thus diminish shock.

Parents also planted the seed to prevent their child from being afraid to come out. For parents, though, the focus was on managing the messages about LGB people and sexuality they revealed to their children. More specifically, parents reassured their child that s/he would be loved unconditionally if they came out. They prepared their child for coming out—even if they were unsure whether this would happen. Michelle, the mother of 22-year-old bisexual Reese, explained:

When we first moved to North Carolina, I was in a department store with Reese and I overheard a conversation between a mom and her little girl. The little girl must have been three or four years old. And she said, “I want to marry my best friend, Jenny, when I grow up.” And I expected the mom to say, “You can’t marry your best friend. Girls marry boys. And boys marry girls.” And the mom just really surprised me. She said, “Honey, you can marry whoever you want if you love them and they love you and you treat each other nicely.” And I was just so completely in love with that mom and that little girl’s conversation. That was like just such a moving moment for me to overhear. And that was well before Reese came out and long before she even really thought about being gay or coming out. But I remember telling Reese what happened and how beautiful I thought that conversation was. And I think telling Reese, that let her know that I accepted it before that conversation of Reese coming out ever happened… I just wanted her to know that her parents would always love her no matter what, because no matter how hard it is for a parent to accept a gay child, I know it is usually really really hard for a child to have the courage to come out to their parents.
Michelle conveyed to Reese that she would be loved and accepted if she came out as lesbian or bisexual by sharing the conversation she overheard between a mother and her daughter. Planting the seed of acceptance in casual conversation, in this way, was intended to prevent LGB children from feeling unloved or scared about being rejected. Their child would, as Michelle explained, be loved no matter what.

By planting the seed of acceptance, parents hoped to diminish their child’s fear of being rejected if they came out. Jodie remembered planting a seed of acceptance and unconditional love with her gay son, 42-year-old Jordan, when he was a child:

When Jordan was small, I suspected a little bit. He had effeminate characteristics. But, you know, I loved that about him. I didn’t care. And he would want to play with dolls sometimes, and his father would just get furious. He was like, “You are going to make him gay.” And I was like, “You know, I don’t think you can make anybody gay. But, if he wants to play with dolls, that is fine. And it is fine if he is gay.” So that was always the message that I tried to give to Jordan. You are loved, and what you play with and how you act is not a big deal to me. And certainly, being gay is not a big deal to me.

Though Michelle and Jodie managed information by giving their children subtle messages that they would be loved unconditionally if they were LGB, they did not come right out and say this. Rather, they showed their acceptance indirectly by not rebuking a son for playing with gender-variant toys, or by showing support for a mother who affirmed her young daughter’s plan to marry her same-gender friend. In these ways parents subtly planted a message of unconditional acceptance.

The emotion work LGBs did to avoid shocking their parents, and that parents used to prevent their child from feeling rejected or unloved, did not cease once a child came out. After the disclosure occurred, testing the waters continued, though with one important difference: the focus was on managing how fast additional sexuality-related information was disclosed.
**Gradually Revealing**

Coming out is often depicted as a singular event, something that happens once an LGB person comes out to family and is then considered officially “out” (see Ben-Ari 1995; Patterson 2000; Savin-Williams 2001, 2005). In contrast, the process model conceptualizes coming out as something that happens over time with different audiences (Kaufman and Johnson 2004; Plummer 1995). In this section, I show how coming out not only involved telling different people, but also coming out to the same people over time. LGBs did this by gradually revealing new sexuality-related information to those with whom they were already out. For example, Abby, a 29-year-old bisexual, gradually revealed new information about her sexuality after coming out at the age of seventeen. She did this to prevent her parents from discomfort as a result of receiving too much information too quickly:

T: Do you feel like your parents have always been pretty accepting of things you have talked about with them [regarding sexuality and relationships]?

A: Yeah, you know, I keep upping the ante every time we have a conversation and they keep on calling! (laughs) So, for example, I am a drag king. And so I came out to them about that after I came out about being queer. I was like, yeah, I impersonate men. And then later we had a conversation about how being a drag king and queer influenced my style and my gender expression…But that has been my experience so far. I have sort of slowly revealed new things to them, but not all at once, because I always sort of wonder if this thing will be what is too much for them, or too weird for them. So I do it over time, slowly. But then I talk to them about it and it turns out to not be big deal (laughs). So, I don’t think they actually have a limit [of what they are comfortable talking about]. Or if there is, I haven’t found it yet (laughs). Not to say that I have tried, but they could have drawn the line somewhere long ago, but they haven’t.

For Abby, coming out was not a one-time event. She first came out to her parents when she was in high school. Since then she had gradually revealed additional information about her sexuality. By doing this, she managed the risk of bad reactions. Jason, a 35-year-old bisexual man, also emphasized the importance of revealing sexuality-related information gradually:
I would say in general it is better to come out first. Don’t come out and then spring a partner on your parents all in one go. And again, this is so your parents have room to feel their feelings…Dan Savage gives some good advice on this front. He says you should give your parents a year to have a freak-out about your sexuality. But then, after a year, they owe it to you to get over it. So, yeah, my advice would be to come out first and do not necessarily spring your partner or a bunch of other stuff on them all at once. Give them time.

Doctors use a similar strategy of gradually revealing information about a terminal diagnosis. By focusing on treatment in the early stages, and then progressively shifting the narrative to palliative care, doctors try to ease their patients into a diagnosis (Broom et al. 2013). LGBs used a comparable strategy. Abby and Jason felt that revealing too much sexuality-related information at once would cause discomfort in their parents. By gradually revealing new information over time, they kept shock at bay and eased their parents into the idea of having an LGB child.

Parents, for their part, expected their children to be sensitive about how quickly sexuality-related information was revealed. As Jeff, the father of a gay son, Ryan, said:

I don’t think a child’s partner should ever be introduced until it is very clear that the parents are accepting of their sexuality; like until that conversation or the coming out happens. I think that is the hardest, like when a young person comes home and says, “Hey, this is my partner, and by the way, I am gay.” Like, that is too much for a parent to handle at one time.

Gradually revealing sexuality-related information to prevent unwanted feelings in oneself and others was meant to prevent noxious feelings and strained relationships. This strategy is similar to promising “emotional rewards” to members of twelve-step programs (Thoits 1989). Alcoholics Anonymous, for example, promises emotional rewards for those who first admit they are powerless over alcohol and then give their control over to a higher power (Donovan 1984). LGBs and their parents expected a similar emotional reward by controlling how quickly the former revealed sexuality-related information pertaining to sexual identity
and same-gender relationships. However, for LGBs and their parents, the emotional reward of gradually revealing accrued largely to parents. In other words, parents’ emotional needs were prioritized. Don, the father of 22-year-old bisexual daughter, Reese, further illustrated this point:

I think it is important for LGB people to know their relationship with their parents and other family members before they come out or introduce a partner or whatever. They need to have a good idea of what is acceptable and what is not acceptable to their parents. So, they should know how fast or how slow to share certain information, how much or how little to share…that is in part for their safety, you know…There is something to be gained from, you know, being sensitive to that.

LGBs and their parents agreed that parents deserved empathy. By gradually revealing, LGBs did emotion work on their parents’ behalf. This was meant to keep their parents from becoming shocked or uncomfortable, a form of preventive emotion work their parents expected. Gradually revealing sexuality-related information, then, was a way to prevent strain in familial relationships, but in a way that privileges the emotional wellbeing of parents.

Parents and their LGB children anticipated discomfort in talking about the latters’ sexual identity and/or romantic relationships. The strategies of selective sharing, concealment, and testing the waters, managed sexuality-related information to keep these feelings at bay in LGBs and their parents. Information management, however, is only part of the story. As I show in the next section, parents and their LGB children also did preventive emotion work by controlling the situations in which sexuality was discussed, how it was discussed, and the ways others react to these discussions.
STAGING THE SITUATION

LGBs and their parents also did preventive emotion work by using a strategy I call *staging*. Through staging, parents and LGBs controlled the situation in which sexuality-related information was discussed. This was accomplished in two ways: (1) orchestrating the setting in which an interaction took place; and (2) controlling who was present during an interaction.

*Orchestrating the Setting*

Parents and their LGB children orchestrated settings in which sexual identity and same-gender relationships were discussed. Ryan, a 19-year-old gay man, provided an example from when he came out to his parents:

I made sure that my dad was driving [when I came out] because it’s not like he could yell or hit me or anything. I mean, I didn't actually think he would do that, but it was a precaution (laughs). But stories of other people had me scared. And I told them with twenty minutes left in the car ride, that way we would have to talk about it, but for a limited amount of time. Because I really didn’t feel comfortable talking about it, and I knew I wouldn't want to after I told them. But I also wanted to make sure we had some time to talk about it after I said it.

Ryan staged the setting by controlling his parents’ ability to react. By coming out when his father was driving, he felt he could prevent an angry response; after all, his dad could not become too aggressive if he was focused on driving. Ryan also controlled *when* he came out. By coming out twenty minutes before arriving home, he was able to prevent the discomfort of having to spend too much time talking to his parents about being gay.

Other LGBs staged the situation to prevent themselves *and* their parents from experiencing emotional pain. Danielle, a 20-year-old bisexual, chose to come out to her mother at their favorite restaurant as a way to avoid spoiling good feelings:
So I chose to come out to her at a restaurant called The Oyster Shack because that was one of our favorite restaurants (laughs). And also, like, we had spent the day shopping together. It was just like a nice mother-daughter day that I had kind of created….And then I basically just told her.

When Danielle was in junior high she attempted to come out to her mother. At that time, her mother rejected the notion, reminding Danielle that she often commented on her attraction to male celebrities. Feeling dejected by her mother’s dismissal of the disclosure, Danielle decided to hide her bisexuality. By the time she was a junior in high school she decided that she no longer wanted to hide this from her mother; however, her guard was up. She wanted to make sure the revelation went well. By orchestrating a friendly mother-daughter day, Danielle hoped to get her mother in a good mood and prevent her from becoming upset, or potentially rejecting her a second time.

Medical students similarly manage unwanted feelings during contact with the human body. For them, avoidance is key, as they evade situations that provoke undesired feelings. Some students, for example, opt out of procedures that put them in contact with genitals—particularly those belonging to a sex that is not their own (Smith and Kleinman 1989). By avoiding certain situations, they keep their own discomfort or embarrassment at bay. LGB people managed emotions in a similar way by controlling how, when, and where sexuality-related information was discussed. This helped to prevent discomfort all around. Their preventive emotion work was personal and interpersonal.

Parents also staged the setting as a way to prevent their child and other family members from emotional pain. Eliza, the mother of a 19-year-old lesbian, Miranda, used her home as a safe space where her daughter and girlfriend could spend time together:

I used to joke with Miranda that I was harboring lesbians when her girlfriend was over. I would keep the front door locked because her girlfriend was not out to her parents, and I was worried her parents would burst in or something…I mean, it did
make me a little resentful, too, because it was like, why can’t Kylie [Miranda’s partner] just be honest with her parents? And also, I would have really appreciated having another parent to talk to about this stuff. But, I mean, I get it… I guess, if nothing else, my house was a place where they could be together and spend time together without the fear of, you know [not being accepted].

Eliza was aware that her daughter experienced bullying at school. She also knew that Kylie, her daughter’s partner, was not out to her parents. Eliza shielded Miranda and Kylie from unaccepting parents and peers by staging a setting (her home) where the two could spend time together. Theresa, the mother of a bisexual daughter, Fiona, also staged settings to prevent her daughter from emotional pain. She did this by orchestrating situations where Fiona and her father could spend time together:

Fiona and her father have a pretty strained relationship… I used to, when she was in high school, create things to do for them or recommend things where he [Theresa’s ex-husband/Fiona’s father] and Fiona could spend time together. Like, doing things that she likes and that would allow them to spend time together in an environment that she enjoys…So, like, buying tickets for them to go to the theatre, or telling him to take Fiona to Comic-Con.

Theresa explained that Fiona was sensitive and easily hurt in matters concerning her sexual identity. Though she did not think her ex-husband’s strained relationship with Fiona was entirely the product of Fiona being bisexual, she did not want to put Fiona in a situation where her father could say something hurtful. By orchestrating a setting for the two of them to spend time together—a setting that reflected Fiona’s interests—Theresa attempted to protect her daughter from being hurt by her father.

Parenting LGB children in a context of incomplete acceptance means confronting acceptance from some people and rejection from others, an experience that has been documented among LGB people (see Orne 2011, 2013; Schulman 2009; Walters 2014). A parent may accept their child’s sexual identity and same-gender relationship (Eliza and Theresa), but feel like they need to protect her/him from others’ homophobia (Eliza) or other
family members who might say or do something that hurts their LGB child (Theresa). Staging settings where LGB children felt safe or that put the LGB person or parent in a good mood was a way to encourage a smooth interaction.

Staging is similarly used in tourist settings. Tour guides stage authenticity by making tourists feel like they are being given a unique and authentic experience. This is done by blurring the boundaries between “front stage” and “back stage.” Between activities that are visible (such as actors on a stage) and invisible (the stage crew working behind the curtain) (Goffman 1959). By staging, tour guides lead tourists to believe that they are seeing something about a setting that is typically not visible to everyday tourists (MacCannell 1973). While tour guides stage experiences that are meant to evoke feelings of authenticity, parents and LGBs staged settings that allowed a parent-child interaction to proceed smoothly and that prevented hurt feelings (that could lead to strain in their relationship). Staging also involved controlling who was present during an interaction.

**Controlling Who Is Present**

In addition to orchestrating settings, LGBs and their parents controlled who was present during discussions about sexual identity or same-gender relationships. Jodie, the mother of 42-year-old Jordan, made sure she was present when her son came out as gay to extended family:

T: Did you give Jordan advice about how to come out to other family members?

J: Well, I made sure we did *that* together; like, that he did that with me. I would never let him face my mom alone. Never! I am not sure if she [Jodie’s mom] understands what it [being gay] means, anyway…I felt like I needed to be there to intervene, just in case.
Parents managed the potential for their child to be hurt by other family members by controlling who was present when sexuality-related information was discussed. They served as “emotional buffers” for their children. Orzechowicz (2008) observes a similar process in theatre. Stage managers protect actors from the everyday stressors of production such as unhappy audiences and costume issues. They cushion, or “buffer,” against stressors which would otherwise affect the actresses/actors. Parents provided a similar service to their LGB children by demanding to be present for the revelation of sexuality-related information. Jodie did this so she could “intervene” if the interaction went in a direction that could hurt Jordan’s feelings.

LGBs also controlled who was present during discussions of sexuality-related information with their parents. For them, the goal was to protect themselves from discomfort. Garrett, a 31-year-old gay man, explained:

My sister is actually a lesbian, too. So, when I introduced Kieran [Garrett’s partner] for the first time, I did it at a family thing where my sister and her girlfriend were there. So, it sort of took some of the discomfort out of the whole thing, because, like, there was already a gay couple there (laughs).

Siblings can serve as “third-party advocates” (Schulman 2009) for their LGB sisters and brothers. In this role, siblings stand up for, and provide moral support when, their sister or brother comes out or introduces a partner for the first time to family (Connidis 2012). In this situation, siblings knowingly give support. LGBs can also make siblings third-party advocates unknowingly; that is, even if s/he does not know they are providing this advocacy. By making sure his sister and her partner were present, Garrett’s sister unknowingly served as a third-party advocate. This advocacy helped Garrett influence how other family members responded to his new partner, and also protected him from the discomfort of being the sole focus of attention by his family once the disclosure happened.
Parents and LGBs also worked to keep certain people away from interactions where sexuality-related information was likely to be revealed. Caitlin, a 40-year-old lesbian, remembered going to great lengths to make sure her sexuality was kept hidden from her parents when she was dating then-partner Carrie:

> It was such a headache. Like when Carrie and I were dating, I mean, I had a separate apartment actually that I was keeping that I never stayed in. I had a roommate, like a real roommate, who I shared an apartment with and paid rent with. So I was paying for a bedroom that I never stayed in! But then when they [Caitlin’s parents] came to visit I am suddenly, of course, living in my apartment again; the one I never stay in, and Carrie can’t be present…I just had this terror feeling in my bones about like them maybe not being ok with it.

By keeping Carrie away when her parents visited, Caitlin protected this relationship and the potential damage that could be done if her parents were to find out that she and Carrie were a couple and not just “friends,” as her parents had been told. Parents also kept certain people away from their children as a way to protect them from emotional harm. Eliza, the mother of Miranda, provided an example:

> I did break up with my family for a couple of months. They already knew Miranda was gay, but it is one thing to know and another to see it. So, Miranda had posted a picture, on Facebook, of her and her girlfriend being affectionate. It was completely appropriate. And my mother and sister saw it and were worried that my niece was going to get picked on at school because she had a gay cousin. And I said, “What!”…And I finally said to her, [Eliza’s sister] like, I am not going to apologize for my daughter’s sexuality. And I really, honestly, don’t have (pause) I mean, I am sorry if Amy [Eliza’s niece] feels like she is going to be picked on for having a gay cousin. But it is not an issue. Like, it’s not my issue. And that went on for a while. We had a big family thing close to Christmas and everyone was going on a trip together. And we did not go. I wasn't going to let Miranda be around them. I basically said to my family, “Either you are completely on board and supportive of my kid, or you will not be around her or a part of her life.” So, I just intervened and separated us from them.

Orne (2011) observes a similar process of staging among LGBs who do identity work to ward off potential rejection. Here, LGBs minimize their interactions with people who might reject them and/or threaten their identities as lesbian, gay, or bisexual people. Parents and
LGBs staged situations to protect feelings rather than identity. By excluding certain people from interactions they protected themselves and each other from emotional discomfort.

In sum, staging involved manipulating settings and who was present during discussions of sexuality-related information. This type of preventive emotion work was similar to what Ortiz (2010) calls “control work”—ways in which resources, attempts, and tactics are used to achieve a specific interactional outcome. By controlling the setting and people present during discussion of sexuality-related information, LGBs and their parents prevented unwanted feelings.

**CONCLUSION: THE INVISIBILITY OF EMOTION WORK**

While there is a wealth of research on coming out (see Adams 2010; Denes and Affi 2014; Herdt and Koff 2000; Johnson and Best 2012; McLean 2007), we know less about how LGBs and their parents navigate this disclosure in the days/weeks/months/years that follow. My analysis of preventive emotion work suggests that a great deal of thought goes into coming out and managing parent-child relationships before, during, and after the disclosure occurs. In a context of incomplete LGB acceptance, preventive emotion work may be necessary to manage the emotional aspects of coming out, and the maintenance of relationships after. If the process unfolds smoothly, it is perhaps because of much invisible emotion work that precedes and follows the actual revelation.

A lot of emotion work is invisible because it does not appear to have anything to do with emotion. For example, a mother of a developmentally disabled child might advocate for her child’s rights in the classroom. She may have to do emotion work to cope with ignorance from teachers who are not used to working with developmentally disabled children,
principals who are unequipped to provide the necessary resources, and parents who feel that
time devoted to other children is time taken away from their child (DeVault 1999). Parents’
emotion work, however, is often made invisible by larger normative expectations
surrounding parenting. In the contemporary United States, parents and mothers especially,
are expected to selflessly spend time cultivating the needs of their children (Hays 1996;
Kaufman 2013; Lareau 2011). The work they do on behalf of their child is not seen as work,
but rather, an expectation for all good parents. The emotion work that goes into cultivating
their child’s potential, then, is made invisible and seen instead as a natural expression of
good parenting.

Parents of LGB children experienced similar issues. In a context of incomplete
acceptance, their preventive emotion work was made invisible. This, in part, reflects
expectations for “good” parents. In addition to serving the needs of children, parents are
expected to love their children unconditionally. This, however, is easier said than done.
Though more parents are accepting of LGB people today compared to just ten years ago,
parents often show more resistance and hesitancy when it comes to accepting their own LGB
child (Johnson and Best 2012; Schulman 2009). In this vein, when parents of LGBs “plant
the seed of acceptance” in their child by affirming same-gender relationships, it may not be
seen as emotion work, but as a simple expression of a liberal value. This, in turn, masks the
discomfort that some parents have over the prospect of their child being LGB. In a context of
incomplete acceptance, planting the seed allowed parents to fulfill the expectation of parental
unconditional love for their children without coming right out and saying they are ok with
their child being LGB. By conveying indirect support of LGB people, they can feel like
loving and supportive parents while putting off, for the time being, the possibility of their own child being LGB.

LGBs’ emotion work—on behalf of themselves and their parents—was either made invisible or diminished in importance. For example, after coming out LGBs grappled with issues such as introducing a partner and coming out to other family members. Many chose to conceal, selectively share, test the waters, or stage the situation to prevent discomfort, anger, or embarrassment for their parents’ sake. Like their parents, LGBs did not always see this as about emotion. For example, LGBs spoke of gradually revealing sexuality-related information to their parents as a way to keep their parents from being taken off-guard. However, LGBs also suggested that this precaution was not really work at all, but instead, what any decent human being would do. Jason, whom I discussed in the section on “gradually revealing,” made this point clear:

A lot of that, though, is just like being a decent human being. You shouldn’t just spring stuff on people if that stuff could make them uncomfortable. Like, its more just being a decent human being, you know?

Emotion work implies intent. It is something a person consciously does to change the degree or quality of emotion in oneself or another person. LGBs sometimes downplayed the emotion work they did to sustain relationships with their family, perhaps owing to the belief, noted earlier, that familial love should be effortless.

By suggesting that their preventive emotion work was attributable to some other factor (e.g., being a “decent human being” or “good parents”), LGBs and their parents overlooked the context of incomplete LGB acceptance that required them to do preventive emotion work in the first place. Concealing, testing the waters, and staging the situation would not have been necessary if parents did not have qualms about their child’s sexuality
and LGBs did not suspect their parents would become uncomfortable if made aware of certain sexuality-related information. Thus, it was not only emotion work that was made invisible—in the process of preserving relationships between LGBs, parents, and extended family—but the larger culture of heterosexism that necessitates its use. This is something I explore further in chapter 5.

Preventive emotion work was not always successful. What happens when parents’ and LGBs’ preventive emotion work produces noxious feelings and familial relationships become strained? How do LGBs and their parents feel about using emotion work to preserve strained familial relationships? I answer these questions in the following chapter by developing the concept of *remedial emotion work* and highlighting the short term/immediate uses of emotion work.
CHAPTER 3: REMEDIAL EMOTION WORK

Emotion work done in families is often interpreted as an expression of intimacy rather than something that is required for maintaining familial relationships (for an exception see Seery and Crowley 2000). This is unsurprising in a culture where love within family, particularly between parent and child, is understood as natural and expected (Blair-Loy 2003; DeVault 1991; Hays 1996). In this context, emotion work is viewed as a natural part of parenting a child. This is not always the case. Familial relationships—like all relationships—are subject to strain and hurt feelings and require effort, skill, and work to maintain.

In the previous chapter, I discussed how negative feelings were kept at bay within parent and child relationships through preventive emotion work. In this chapter and the next I explore how emotion work is used within families as a way to diminish or transform existing noxious feelings and repair strained relationships. I also show how emotion work within families is not one-sided. Children also do emotion work as a way to lessen emotional pain and repair relationships with their parents and other family members.

I identify two types of emotion work used in strained familial contexts, or situations where noxious feelings are present: remedial and palliative. Remedial emotion work—the act of transforming or diminishing noxious feelings—is a short-term strategy used on the assumption that one’s familial relationship, though strained at the moment, will improve. In contrast, palliative emotion work (discussed in chapter 4) is a long-term strategy used with the expectation that one’s parent-child relationship, or relationship with other family members, may always be strained.
The remainder of this chapter focuses on remedial emotion work and is organized into four sections. The first three correspond to different strategies of remedial emotion work. First, I show how focusing on progress made between oneself and other family members diminished unwanted feelings by transforming them into a momentary nuisance. Second, focusing on the future similarly diminished and transformed noxious feelings in oneself and others. By emphasizing the naturalness of love between parent and child, and the normalizing effect of heterosexual ritual (e.g., getting married and having children), parents and LGBs lessened the effect of anger, anxiety, and discomfort. In the future, when LGBs get married and have children, any lingering emotional pain will dissolve, or so it was hoped. The final strategy, humor, was used to convey acceptance, normalize sexuality, and incite greater comfort with non-heterosexuality. In time, LGBs and parents felt these strategies would no longer be necessary. Finally, I explore what the use of remedial emotion work among LGBs and their parents tells us about parent-LGB child relationships. I use Collins’s (2004) theory of emotional energy to explore the motivation for maintaining relationships with those who may threaten one’s emotional wellbeing.

FOCUSING ON PROGRESS

LGBs and their parents often focused on the progress they had made to diminish or transform noxious feelings. This occurred in two ways. One way involved emphasizing problematic behaviors that had been overcome. The other highlighted new, more positive behaviors. In both cases, accentuating progress relied heavily on identifying changes in behavior or talk, making comparisons to the past, and accentuating the positive.
LGBs and their parents were sometimes hurt by each other’s comments or behaviors. For LGBs, discomfort, annoyance, anger, and frustration sometimes resulted from something a parent said about their sexuality or about LGBs as a group. Focusing on progress, then, was a way to diminish the sting of these comments. This was done, in part, by making comparisons to the past and highlighting the hurtful things their parents no longer said or did.

Marco, a 21-year-old gay man, spoke of how his father had changed:

I think my dad is more accepting now, though by no means is he, like, ok with it [Marco being gay]. He is not as harsh as he was, though. I can remember there was a time that whenever anything came on the news [about gay people] he would say something negative, and, like, he doesn’t do that any more which makes me hopeful…Like, now I feel like if something comes on about gay people he is more likely to question it. Like, “Is that really true? Marco, have you heard about this?” Like, stuff like that. So, I think he wants to educate himself about LGBT people.

LGBs tried to reduce frustration, annoyance, anger, and discomfort that came from their parents’ continued rejection by comparing improved behavior in the present to worse behaviors in the past. Connor, a 23-year-old gay man, further illustrated:

C: I feel like, with the Orlando shooting, my family took that a lot better than they would have in the past.

T: How so?

C: So, my grandma said, “That man [the shooter] was crazy and it was awful what happened. But he shouldn’t have taken matters into his own hands even though those people weren’t walking with Jesus.” She said, “They [LGB people] will be judged in the end, but it is not man’s place to do the judging; it is God’s place.” So, like, I fully recognize that is an awful thing to say. But she just left it at that. So, honestly, the fact that she did not condemn them [the survivors] all to hell and say they got what they deserved, is actually an improvement. Which, like, is awful. I am not justifying it… You have to understand them [Connor’s family] to understand that is actually progress…My grandma may get there slower than the rest [of my family] but, I mean, I try to be hopeful that they will [become more accepting].
Identifying changes in behavior or comments—a decline in homophobic remarks or actions from their parents or grandparents—allowed LGBs to forgive some of the hurtful things family members said and did. Gray (2009) reports similar findings among queer youth living in the rural south. Teenagers and young-adults living in these places regularly stood up for townsfolk who made homophobic comments directed at LGBs as a group, and at times, at them specifically. Their shared connection to the South was used to justify this defense. Because they shared the same hobbies and interests and went to the same schools and churches, it was easier to forgive homophobic remarks and actions. LGBs similarly diminished anger and discomfort stemming from homophobic remarks made by their family. For them, it was not a shared attachment to region that diminished the effect of homophobic remarks, but evidence of “improvements” in their parents'/grandparents’ treatment of LGB people.

Comparing hurtful things parents or grandparents said in the past with the present also inspired hope that progress would continue. Sociologists call this “hope work”—reorganizing social interaction in a way that allows one to maintain a certain belief (Perakyla 1991). For example, parents of seriously or terminally ill children may interact only with people who allow them to maintain hope that their child’s condition will improve (Gengler 2015). The hope work LGBs did was less about reorganizing interactions with people and more about focusing on changes in a parent’s behavior in order to maintain hope that progress would continue. Caitlin, a 40-year-old lesbian, relied on this hope to feel better about her current parent-child relationship:

Like with the wedding stuff, you know, my parents ended up saying, “I don’t think we are going to be able to make it. But, we are really excited for you.” And my partner’s family sort of said the same thing. And, it was like, ok. And, it really truly was ok. And, an earlier version of me would have been like really pissed off and
angry and been like, “Oh you still should have come!” But, you know, I just knew that it was really hard for them to be witness to a wedding. They have made so much progress in other ways and they are still really trying hard to make progress. They show up at other times when we really don’t need them. So, compared to the past, there has been so much improvement. So, realizing they are not totally there yet is fine. They have progressed a lot and become more accepting. They will get there.

Being hurt by a parent was easier to bear when one believed a parent would continue to become more accepting. This, Orzechowicz (2008) argues, is a “focus strategy”—concentrating on internal or external distractions, such as goals, to suppress feelings. For LGBs, feelings were not being suppressed but moderated. Their parents’ and grandparents’ homophobic comments and behaviors had already hurt Caitlin, Connor, and Marco. It was the promise, or hope, of continued progress in their parents’ and grandparents’ feelings toward their sexuality that allowed them to diminish their anger, disappointment, and discomfort. The relationship would not, they reasoned, always be strained.

Parents of LGB children also made comparisons to the past to diminish unwanted feelings. The feelings they aimed to change, however, were their own and their child’s. Michelle, the mother of a 22-year-old bisexual, Reese, was an example:

My mother has always loved Reese. But when Reese came out, it was really hard for her [Michelle’s mother/Reese’s grandmother]. She was just heartbroken, honestly…So, there was some tension there for a while…But, six years later, my mom is more accepting of it…For example, she attended Reese’s college graduation, and Reese and her girlfriend were there together holding hands and everything. My mom didn’t make a stink about it. So, to me, and I told Reese this, like, that is progress. And there continues to be progress, so that feels really good for me… I also try to, you know, explain to Reese that she [Grandma] is getting there.

Parents aimed to restore relationships between their LGB children and other family members by comparing other family members’ past and present behavior. Michelle did this by emphasizing how Reese’s grandmother no longer disparaged Reese’s public displays of affection with her partner—something that created more tension when Reese first came out.
The act of restoring relationships is similarly discussed in relation to identity work. Here, people restore roles or identities that have been damaged by other people or situations (Crocker and Major 1989; Thoits 2010). Restorative strategies, as I show, may also operate through emotion work. For parents of LGBs, making comparisons between what family members said in the past with the present was meant to restore relationships their child had with other family members and diminish negative feelings that came from these strained relationships. Cynthia, the mother of a 31-year-old gay son, Collin, pointed to this:

Collin was devastated when he came out because his father basically said something akin to “you are not my son.” And, you know, he [Collin’s father] has gotten better. I mean, they have a relationship now. And it isn’t perfect. But, like I say to Collin, there is only so much you can expect from people. You cannot control them. So, he may not be entirely on board, which, for a mother, that is hard to see. But, you know, he is also improving. They love each other.

LGBs lessened their anger and frustration by highlighting their parents’ declining homophobia. For parents, comparing past rejection from family members with improvements in the present—in conversations they had with their child—helped to restore their child’s relationship with said family member. Restoring these relationships also diminished anger and frustration parents felt as a result of witnessing strained relationships between their child and other family members. As Cynthia noted, “For a mother, that is hard to see.” By focusing on the progress of other family members, parents diminished their own and their child’s noxious feelings.

LGBs stayed positive and hopeful that their parents would continue to become more accepting by comparing their parents’ feelings towards sexuality in the past with the present. This diminished some of the anger and frustration that came from parents’ continued homophobia. Parents, too, often found comfort in noting that other family members showed signs of progress. The declining use of homophobic comments, they reasoned, was a sign of
progress and an indicator of more positive changes to come. By focusing on these changes, parents and LGBs diminished sadness and frustration they experienced as a result of witnessing (parents) or experiencing (LGBs) strained relationships.

Citing a decrease in homophobic comments and behaviors was only part of the way narratives of progress were used. LGBs and their parents also highlighted new comments and behaviors that were defined as signs of progress. Focusing on these changes served a similar purpose: diminishing noxious feelings.

*Small Signs of Progress as Evidence of Big Changes*

Parents and their LGB children interpreted certain comments and behaviors as evidence of major progress. This involved exaggerating minor improvements in others’ behavior to fend off noxious feelings. David, a 20-year-old gay man, used this strategy with his mother:

She [David’s mom] is taking baby steps. We both have, actually... She has voiced how she can’t understand how I was born gay. She doesn’t really cite verses in the Bible, but she refers to it. So, she’s like, “The Bible says you can’t be with a guy.” And I am like, “I could tell you otherwise.” For the most part, though, I don’t really bring it up and she ignores talking about it [David’s sexuality]… I am hopeful, though, because she has made some baby steps. Like, even her acknowledging it [David being gay] is a major improvement (laughs).

Exaggerating minor improvements in a parent’s feelings and behaviors towards LGB people allowed LGBs to feel better about having to fully or partially conceal their sexuality. People with a stigmatized identity similarly exaggerate the positive. Gay men, for example, may highlight their interest in traditionally masculine pursuits, such as sport, to diminish the stigma associated with being gay (Anderson 2005; Connell 1995; Hennen 2008; Whitsel 2014); they “compensate” (see Schrock and Schwalbe 2009; Schwalbe 2014). For LGBs in
this study, it was not a stigmatized identity they were trying to transform or diminish, but rather anger, inauthenticity, and frustration that came from having to conceal their sexuality from family. Karah, a 43-year-old lesbian, explained further. For her, the mere mention of her partner in conversation with her mother was interpreted as comforting progress:

My mom and I did recently have a conversation about the engagement [Karah’s engagement with her partner] and it was really respectful. She asked questions and used Renee’s name and everything, and I think that was really positive. And recently she came and had lunch with me at work one day. And she asked to see my ring. Which, I didn’t think she would care about that at all. Also, another thing is that Renee and I have never spent holidays together. So I told my mom we are coming to Christmas together or I am not coming at all. And then Christmas came around and she asked about our plans and, like, she used to always be careful to only invite me, but she really surprised me and said, “What are y’alls plans?” And she invited us both to her house. So there have been a lot of really great first steps that are encouraging.

Past sexuality-related discussions with parents had, in some cases, led to mutual frustration and anger. In response, LGBs sometimes concealed their sexuality to avoid exacerbating noxious feelings. As David noted, “I don’t really bring it up and she ignores talking about it.”

The preventive emotion work they used (i.e., concealing or selectively sharing about their sexuality or same-gender relationship) was not without consequence. Sexual identity is important to LGBs. They wanted to have a relationship with their parents that allowed them to be open and honest about their sexuality. Feeling they could not do so without risking further strain in their parent-child relationship incited feelings of inauthenticity and shame, and also frustration and anger at their parents. Exaggerating small signs of progress on the part of their parents, then, was a way to alleviate some of the bad feelings, and thus maintain the relationship despite its strain.

There are two important differences in how LGBs and their parents exaggerated progress. Unlike LGBs, parents’ exaggeration of positive comments/behaviors had an interpersonal effect. Parents tried to diminish *their child’s* anger, sadness, or frustration by
exaggerating positive behaviors or comments made by other family members. Another important difference concerned the evidence parents used to make these exaggerations. While LGBs focused on their parents’ past behaviors, parents relied heavily on other family members’ past behavior as a way to accentuate the progress being made. Theresa, the mother of a 19-year-old bisexual, Fiona, used this strategy:

Any talk for them at all is a major improvement (laughs)…Like I said, she [Fiona] has a lot of anger [toward him]…But, I just try to tell her, you know, “Honey, this man is broken. It is nothing you did. He has an emotional disorder; it is just the way that he is.” So I try to kind of explain that, you know, he has his own stuff, and own past that has nothing to do with you.

Highlighting events or emotional hardships in a family member’s past was a way to rationalize some of the hurt they caused in the present and exaggerate the small improvements being made. Sympathy biographies serve a similar end (Clark 1987). Here, people use characteristics such as age, gender, or class, to determine whether sympathy is warranted for a person (Kolb 2011; Ponticelli 1999). For parents of LGBs, it was not a specific characteristic of a family member that was used to encourage their child to have sympathy, but rather, the family member’s “emotional past” (Mattley 2002). Parents, however, did not highlight past emotional hardships to justify sympathy; they did so to alleviate some of the anger or hurt their child experienced as a result of a family member’s behavior. By encouraging their child to change the way they feel about the family member who caused them emotional pain—by citing the past emotional hardships the family member went through—parents hoped to lessen some of their child’s anger toward the family member who had hurt them, and exaggerate the significance of small improvements (e.g., “any talk for them at all is a major improvement”).
Exaggerating small improvements or drawing attention to the decline in homophobic comments/behaviors among other family members allowed parents and LGBs to diminish noxious feelings. It was the belief that these strategies were necessary only in the short-term that made them so successful. Focusing on progress a parent or other family member had made incited hope that progress would continue. Focusing on progress, however, relied heavily on making comparisons to the past in order to demonstrate improvements (e.g., highlighting comments a parent no longer said or did, or emphasizing emotional pasts to explain hurt caused by other family members). In the next section, I show how LGBs and their parents also focused on the future as a way to diminish and transform noxious feelings.

FOCUSING ON THE FUTURE

LGBs and their parents lessened, and in some cases transformed, noxious feelings by focusing on the future. This was done in two ways, both of which emphasized the inevitability of a better future. First, both groups reasoned that the love they felt for each other would overcome anger, frustration, and discomfort. Current emotional states were thus defined as temporary. Second, parents and LGBs highlighted LGBs’ plan to marry or have children. Participating in these heterosexual rituals, they reasoned, would normalize LGBs and diminish any remaining anger, discomfort, or disappointment.

The Inevitability of a Better Future: Love Conquers All

Parents and their LGB children had been hurt by comments and behaviors made by each other, as well as those made by siblings and extended family. The belief that love between a parent and child would eventually heal strained relationships aided them in
diminishing and transforming the pain they felt. Christopher, a 29-year-old gay man, demonstrated the utility of focusing on the future to lessen and transform noxious feelings:

T: How do you feel about the relationship you have with your mom now?

C: I’m just, like, ok. I mean, you can’t waste your time dwelling on the anger and pain. I mean, I know she still loves me regardless of the things she has said. I don’t have any doubt about that. I do know that eventually she will just tire of being so spiteful. But if she wants to hold on [to the spite] for now and be nasty or whatever, that is fine. It is not doing me any harm and it is not going to do our relationship any harm…She loves me, and eventually she will tire of it [being angry about Christopher being a gay].

The certainty of a better parent-child relationship in the future transformed noxious feelings into a temporary irritation. The success of this strategy was rooted in the belief that love between parent and child would, in time, overcome hurt feelings. David explained further:

She [David’s mom] sees me being gay as a bad mark on our family. She didn’t want me to tell people…That was sort of hard to hear and, I mean, just frustrating …I also know that my mom will eventually just accept it. It might take some time, but she will [accept it]. And my dad, like there will be some more awkward conversations, but he will [accept me too]. They love me.

Believing that the power of love between parent and child would heal all wounds reflects what Gordon (1989) calls an “emotional culture”—belief and certainty about the nature, causes, distributions, value, and dynamics of emotions for a specific group of people. In the U.S. cultural context, children are taught to expect unconditional love and selflessness from their parents, while parents are expected to provide it (Hays 1996; Kaufman 2013; Lareau 2011). LGB children, then, viewed their relationship with their parents through a lens of unconditional love. Though there may be strain, tension, and arguments in the present, it was only a temporary inconvenience. Over time, they reasoned, their parent-child relationship would improve. The love between parent and child would eventually overcome anger, frustration, and annoyance.
Parents of LGBs also believed that unconditional love would repair strained relationships and relieve noxious feelings. For them, the logic extended beyond parent-child relationships to include other family members. Eliza, quoted in the previous chapter, went through a period where she and her daughter, Miranda, did not talk to some of their extended family (grandparents, aunts, and cousins). Eliza’s decision to avoid these family members was a form of preventive emotion work meant to keep Miranda, especially, from getting upset. Belief in the healing power of love between family members helped Eliza deal with some of the anger and loss she felt as a result of cutting ties with family:

It was a hard time. But, like I said, either you are with us or you are not. I will always side with her [Miranda]. I mean, she is my daughter…I sort of figured it would be better at some point. Like they would get over it. And they did. Everybody just kind of got over it… We are fine now. My mother and sister and nieces love Miranda...We are family.

Eliza did not think the strain between her, Miranda, and their extended family would last indefinitely. The promise that things would be better in the future transformed her loss into something temporary, thus lessening its intensity. Connie similarly diminished some of the initial concern she experienced when her son Grant, who is now thirty, came out as gay:

When he told me I may have been a little bit surprised. Gosh, I am trying to remember. It feels like so long ago [that Grant came out]! I think some of my initial concerns were more about his future and safety, and, like, is he going to be accepted? Is he going to get this, is he going to get that?....I also worried about there being strife between him and his siblings; which never happened, by the way. And, you know, that is just the thing. We love each other. Our family is close, so I just knew, like, he is my child and we all love each other. So I knew it would ultimately be a non-issue.

Parents used their belief in the healing power of love between family as a way to diminish initial concern about their child’s sexuality (Connie), or cutting ties with family members (Eliza). Wolkomir (2001) refers to this as an “emotional promise”—the promise of some emotional reward if one behaves a certain way (see Broad 2011). In the case of parents and
LGBs, it was not *behavior* that needed to change in order to transform noxious feelings. By focusing on the *belief* that love between family members would repair strained relationships, parents and LGBs placed an expiration date (albeit one that was unknown) on anger, sadness, loss, and strain. Knowing that these feelings would not last forever diminished some of their sting in the present.

Emphasizing the naturalness of love between family allowed one to embrace hope that strained familial relationships—and the unwanted feelings they created—would diminish. However, this strategy did not specify a time by which one could expect these feelings to lessen. In the next section, I show how the belief that LGBs would eventually get married or have children gave LGBs and their parents a more specific estimate for when they could expect emotional pain and familial strain to lessen.

*The Inevitability of a Better Future: Participation in Heterosexual Ritual*

LGBs and parents also emphasized the healing power of heterosexual ritual as a way to lessen noxious feelings in the present. An emotional promise came into play here, as well; both groups diminished anger, anxiety, and discomfort by telling themselves that future marriage and childbearing/childrearing among LGBs would resolve strain in their parent-child relationship. Marriage, especially, symbolizes normality and sameness to heterosexuals (Bryant 2008; Fields 2001; Kimport 2013; Seidman 2014). Its normalizing effect, then, can be used to diminish noxious feelings. Marco used this strategy to lessen the hurt caused by his mother’s lack of acceptance:

Deep down I know they [Marco’s parents] just want me to be happy. But, for them, ideally, that would mean me getting married to a woman, and more specifically, a Hispanic woman…. But I feel like over time she [Marco’s mom] is going to change to where she just wants me to be happy and drop the marrying a woman or Hispanic
woman altogether. Like, once she sees that I am in a relationship with a man and I am happy, she is going to be ok with it. I mean, she might be disgusted by it at first, but eventually she will come around because, like, she will see that we [Marco and his future partner] are no different [from heterosexual couples]. Like, that is part of her thing. She thinks gay couples are somehow bad and different... Once she sees we are just like everyone else and do the same things as everyone else, she will come around... That might be hopeful thinking on my part though (laughs).

Highlighting similarity between heterosexuals and LGBs, and downplaying difference, is a central way the contemporary Gay Right’s Movement achieved acceptance, assimilation, and legal rights (Bullough, Eaklor, and Meek 2006; D’Emilio and Freedman 1998; Ghaziani 2011; Seidman 2002, 2014). The guiding principle of what sexualities scholars refer to as a “politics of sameness” can be applied to strained parent-child relationships. The goal here is not to gain acceptance vis-à-vis heterosexuals, but to diminish noxious feelings and repair relationships with family. LGBs did this by subscribing to the belief that their future marriage would overcome any lingering anger or discomfort in themselves and their parents. This works, Marco noted, because marriage symbolizes normality to heterosexuals. Getting married would reveal to parents that being gay does not make one unacceptably different.

Parents also emphasized their child’s plan to get married as a way to lessen anxiety about their child’s future. For parents, though, having grandchildren was equally important. Jeff, the father of a gay son, Ryan, explained:

I mean, one of my biggest things was Ryan’s future. Like, he will never get married or have children. Like, he will never have those joys in his life. That was hard for me. And it is still sometimes hard for me, if I am being honest. But, I mean, I sort of began to realize hey, he can do that. He can have children, maybe not biological, but he can adopt. And he can get married... and now he can even do it legally.

Rachel, who was the partner of Jeff and mother of Ryan (mentioned in chapter 2), also focused on Ryan’s plan to have children and get married as a way to diminish anxiety about his future:
He has told me that he wants to get married… and have kids, too! So I am safe there! I mean, that is a big thing. But that is true for a lot of parents, though…we want grandchildren!

Parents of LGB children use heterosexual rituals such as marriage and having children as a way to normalize their child’s sexual identity and accentuate their identity as good parents (Fields 2001). Highlighting a child’s sameness to heterosexuals, however, did more than normalize the child. Parents eased their own fears, anxieties, and uncertainties—about having an LGB child and their child’s future—by simply envisioning a future where their child gets married and has children. Knowing that a child has this option (Jeff), or using past comments made by a child as evidence that this will eventually happen (Rachel), was a way to accomplish this.

LGBs were keenly aware of their parents’ desire for grandchildren, and were also confident in the healing effect that having children would have on their parent-child relationship. Veronica, a 29-year-old lesbian, provided an example:

I think their [Melody’s parents] major hope is that I am happy. Which is good. I think, for themselves, certainly, they want me to have children (laughs). Not that I need to give birth; adoption would be fine….But I have that goal, too, and they know that, so that sort of helps things.

Having children changes how one feels about oneself. In American society, becoming a parent is one of the central markers of adulthood (Aronson 2008; Furstenberg et al. 2004). In this study, LGBs saw having children as a way to repair strained familial relationships rather than as a marker of adulthood. Caitlin, a 40-year-old lesbian, remembered taking comfort in telling herself that the moment she had kids any remaining anger and tension in her relationship with her parents would dissolve:

Her [Caitlin’s mother] acceptance started to speed up more once we had kids. And we [Caitlin and her partner, Andrea] knew that was going to happen. Like, I always knew that would be the case, which was comforting. Like, I knew that the minute I bring
kids into the family the anger and fear would dissolve…and that was absolutely the case for my parents.

LGBs were confident that having children would dissolve tension and anger between themselves and their parents. Thomeer et al. (2018) observed a similar process among same-sex couples who experienced anticipatory stressors—negative events and strain that are not realities but are viewed as having the potential to become realities. For same-sex couples, merely thinking about buying a home for the first time is often enough to cause stress. The couples know they may face legal barriers when they purchase a home, thus complicating the experience. Diminishing noxious feelings by emphasizing a plan to have children in the future demonstrated a parallel process. LGBs anticipated a dramatic improvement in their parent-child relationship rather than more stress. They believed that participating in this heterosexual ritual would lessen any remaining anger, discomfort, or strain in their parent-child relationship, and they took comfort in this belief.

In sum, focusing on the future and emphasizing progress share an important commonality. By identifying the progress a homophobic family member had made and emphasizing the inevitability of a better familial relationship in the future (due to the naturalness of love between family, or LGBs’ intended participation in heterosexual ritual), LGBs and their parents transformed their own and each other’s noxious feelings into a temporary inconvenience. The familial relationship was either improving—which was used as evidence that the relationship would continue to improve (focusing on progress)—or would improve in the future (focusing on the future). The strain in their relationship was only temporary, and therefore the strategies were needed for only a finite period of time; they were short-term solutions to strain. In the next section, I discuss another short-term strategy:
humor. Using humor, however, is concerned more with speeding up the process of reducing strain and noxious feelings rather than envisioning a future where strain is less severe.

**USING HUMOR**

Parents and LGBs used humor to diminish noxious feelings in distinct ways. For LGBs, humor was meant to encourage their parents to become more comfortable with their sexuality, minimize the importance their parents attached to sexuality, and ease uncomfortable situations. In contrast, parents used humor to convey to their child that they were loved and accepted, but also to deal with discomfort they experienced when a child came out.

*Humor as a Route to Acceptance and Greater Comfort*

LGBs focused on progress and the future to diminish some of the discomfort, hurt, and anger they experienced in the present. They took comfort in knowing that eventually the relationship would be free of strain and that their parents—and other family members—would be accepting. Humor was used to speed up the process of becoming accepting. Joseph, a 21-year-old bisexual man, explained:

In the beginning she [Joseph’s mom] was more uncomfortable with it [Joseph being bisexual]. But she is getting there…Like, I will sometimes make jokes with her to sort of make it [being bisexual] more casual and normal. Because, with her, it is still such a huge deal. So, by like joking, I try to get her to not feel like it is this huge fucking deal…because, while I am proud to be queer, for her, it is like all she sees, you know?

LGBs tried to minimize the importance their parents attached to their sexuality by talking about it with humor. They hoped that, in doing so, their parents would become more comfortable and accepting of their sexuality.
Waskul and van der Reit (2002) report similar findings in their research on people with conditions that reduce control of their body. By turning their diagnosis into something humorous, they reduce anxiety. LGBs engaged in a similar process on behalf of their parents. Rather than using humor to diminish their own discomfort, LGBs used humor to diminish their parents’ discomfort. Whitney, a 35-year-old lesbian, spoke of how joking encouraged greater sexuality-related comfort among her parents:

With my parents, I will sometimes drop gay jokes or do things that would be flamboyant...Like, for example, we were in Miami over Christmas and there are tons of gay shops there. So we were shopping around there and there was a shirt that said something like, “Make the World a Gayer Place.” And she [Whitney’s mother-in-law] is a Trump voter and is like the last person to wear something like that (laughs). So, I was like, “Here, Peggy [Whitney’s mother-in-law]. Here is your Christmas present.” So I would just mess with her like that... But I also really feel like it normalizes it, too. Like, we [Whitney and her partner] are not going to hide it. We are married and we are not doing that. We are past any of that. So it is a way to kind of nudge her towards, like, being more comfortable with it. Because, like, it is not going to change (laughs).

LGBs felt that joking about their sexuality with their parents would normalize it and encourage greater sexuality-related comfort among their parents. As Whitney stated, “It is a way to kind of nudge her towards, like, being more comfortable with it.” Schweingruber and Berns (2005) discuss “emotional training” used in the workplace in a similar way. Employers train employees to think and feel a certain way about the work they do to encourage them to succeed at their job. LGBs similarly used humor to train their parents to think about sexuality as something that was not such a big deal. The goal, unlike emotional training in industry, though, was not individualized success (e.g., at one’s job). Rather, LGBs used humor to make parents more comfortable with sexuality in order to improve their parent-child relationship. The goal was a better parent-child relationship, not professional success.
In the above examples, joking encouraged parents to become more comfortable with their child’s sexuality. LGBs also used humor to diffuse discomfort during stressful and uncomfortable situations. In these contexts, the focus was on diminishing parents’ and one’s own noxious feelings. The disclosure of a sexual identity is one such situation where humor was especially useful for achieving this end. This was the case for Adeline, a 39-year-old lesbian:

We [Adeline, her mother, sister, and Adeline’s niece] were all having lunch together and my mom actually confronted me because of some photo she saw online. And I was like, “First of all, how you got that I was gay from that picture is a little bit ridiculous. But, you know what? That is ok, because I was actually going to talk to you about this and tell you that yes, I am gay.” …And then I said, and mind you my sister is sitting across from me and she is kind of putting her head down in her menu and giggling and then looking up and down and up and down constantly giggling. So, it was sort of uncomfortable. And of course, her little one-year-old is laughing like she knows what is going on (laughs). Which, of course, was adorable. And I turned to my mom and slapped her arm, like not in a hurting way, but in a playful way, and said, “What the hell did you and dad do wrong? (laughs) You have one daughter who dates chicks and the other who is married to a Black dude!” And then we all started laughing.

Humor is frequently used to direct attention away from the person(s) experiencing noxious feelings (Creeks 2013; Francis 1994; Greer 2002). LGBs were no exception. Rather than changing the topic, they refocused, or “offloaded,” attention on to other people. In Adeline’s case, calling attention to her sister’s marriage to a Black man offloaded some of the attention and discomfort she was feeling onto her sister. This strategy also served a more general purpose for those present during the disclosure. By following up her revelation with a humorous remark, Adeline diminished some of the discomfort of everyone at the table.

Jenna, a 35-year-old bisexual, similarly used humor to diffuse discomfort experienced by people present when her mother “outed” her:

My mom actually outed me back when I was in high school. I had a friend over at the time, and my mom was mentioning how this person who everyone in my family
knew, had passed away. I think he was a photographer and he took all the high school sports photos for volleyball. And my mom made some horrible comment about [sexual] innuendo. Like, something sexual about him and photographing high schoolers, you know? Something like that. And I was just disgusted by that comment. And, I was like, “No! That is totally not what he was like, Mom!” And I followed it up with, “If anything, he was probably more your type.” Because, like, he was slightly older and not really the best looking guy in the world. And she decided to clap back at me and say, “Well, it’s not like you like men anyway!” (laughs) And, at the time, like I said, my friend was there. So, we were all having dinner at this point and my sister was there, too. So, the whole room got really quiet. Like, super super uncomfortable for all of us. And, my friend was mortified. Like, she just sank in her chair and wanted to disappear, I’m sure. And I just sort of chuckled and turned it back over to my mom. Like (pause), I can’t remember what exactly I said, but I made some joke about my mom and the guy [who had died]. It was something inappropriate. But, it was like, what do you do? Like, it was embarrassing and that was my way to sort of (pause) diffuse the whole situation (laugh), like, changing the topic.

Thoits (2011) calls the refocusing or offloading of emotion “deflection”—a strategy to reduce or eliminate potential threats to one’s identity. For LGBs, the threat was not to their identity but to their feelings. Through humor, LGBs deflected—or offloaded—attention and diminished noxious feelings in themselves and others present during uncomfortable situations. LGBs were, in this sense, engaging in “face work”—upholding “face” or prestige in social interaction (Goffman 1967). The goal for them however was not upholding face, but instead, diminishing noxious feelings that may threaten familial relationships.

Acceptance through Humor

Parents of LGB children also used humor to diminish unwelcome feelings. Unlike LGBs, parents’ motivation for using humor was not to encourage comfort in the other, but instead to convey acceptance and diminish some of the shock they experienced when their child came out. Don, who was the father of a bisexual daughter, Reese, used this strategy:

D: She [Reese] had actually, a few months before, told us [him and his wife Michelle] that she was a vegetarian. So, I said to her, “Well, I guess all the signs were there. First you tell us you are a vegetarian and now you tell us you like women (laughs).” I
was just joking with her a bit. Michelle had actually already told me [that Reese was bisexual], because Reese told her first….I was, though, a bit shocked when she [Michelle] did tell me that, though. I guess I just (pause), I mean, she had dated guys. So, I don’t know, that [making a joke] was sort of the first thing that came to my mind (laughs).

T: How did Reese respond to this?

D: She laughed. I mean, she was clearly really nervous about telling me. She had been crying. I just wanted to basically show her that I wasn’t mad and that I love her no matter what.

Parents recognized that coming out is a big deal and can be stressful for their child, and for them as well (Mezey 2015; Savin-Williams 2001). Responding with levity, then, alleviated some of the anxiety and fear. By responding with humor, parents indirectly conveyed a message of love and acceptance. In its indirectness, however, this expression of acceptance suggested residual discomfort with their child’s disclosure. Just as “planting the seed” allowed parents to demonstrate acceptance without coming right out and saying they are alright with their child being LGB, joking similarly demonstrated indirect acceptance while also conveying lingering discomfort.

Using humor as an anxiety-reduction strategy was not without consequence, however. It relied heavily on stereotypes about LGB people. Therefore, in addition to conveying acceptance, and diminishing discomfort in oneself and child, joking also sent a subtle message to LGBs about what their parents saw as acceptable behavior. By invoking gays who act “flamboyant,” Rachel relayed a message about what type of gay man she expected Ryan to be:

R: It really just took us [her and her partner, Jeff] off guard. We were on our way home from a vacation and he [Ryan] just sort of out of the blue said, “I’m gay.”

T: What happened then?
R: (laughs)…Well, there was sort of a pause…I was trying to hurriedly figure out what to say…And I just turned around and I said, “Just don’t be one of those flamboyant ones” (laughs)…I just sort of played it off like that…I mean, I just wanted to reassure him that he is still my son no matter what and that I love him.

Eliza, the mother of a lesbian daughter, Miranda, likewise used humor to convey an expectation of conventionality:

I have said to her that she owes me grandkids. I tell her that all the time! Like, fine, you are gay. I do not care in the least. But that does not mean that you get out of having children (laughs). And, like I say it to her jokingly, like that is just sort of the relationship we have. I joke around with her a lot. Like, it is how I show my love to my kids (laughs)… But Miranda loves kids, too. So, like, if we are shopping and stuff and I am buying her all this expensive stuff I will throw that in there, like, “Just remember, you owe me some grandbabies some day!”

Joking about being owed grandchildren, or about flamboyant behavior, was a way for parents to comment on their child’s sexuality without appearing to criticize it. Masculinity is policed in a similar manner (Pascoe 2007). Through exaggerated, and what is perceived as humorous imitations of effeminacy (e.g., swissing hips and threatening to kiss or touch each other), teenage boys hold each other accountable to conventional masculine norms. Humor was also used by parents, perhaps with good intentions, to remark on the unconventionality of their child’s sexuality. The fact that these supposedly humorous remarks were coupled with expressions of acceptance obscured the subtle message: Parents are ok with their child being LGB as long as they do so in a way that is gender normative and socially acceptable (e.g., having children).

CONCLUSION

Randall Collins (2004) has argued that people seek interactions that generate “emotional energy”—a sense of elation, enthusiasm, warmth, confidence, or assertiveness. Once we experience heightened emotional energy in an interaction, according to Collins, we
begin seeking out similar interactions, initiating a process referred to as “interaction ritual chains.” What happens, though, when an interaction threatens or diminishes emotional energy but cannot be avoided or is seen as too important to lose? LGBs and their parents found themselves in this situation. In this section, I consider the conditions under which people maintain relationships with those who threaten and/or diminish their emotional energy, and how maintaining these relationships is justified.

Collins (2004) argues that people avoid relationships that produce noxious feelings. LGBs and their parents, however, did not avoid relationships with each other and other family. Even when the relationship produced anger or discomfort, parents and LGBs highlighted the importance they attached to it. Why didn’t they simply dissolve their familial relationship if it caused them emotional pain? Popular culture suggests that the reason is love. Parents and their children simply love each other and thus maintain their relationship despite anger, hostility, embarrassment, and rejection from the other. This, however, is not a sociological explanation.

LGBs’ motivation for maintaining relationships with their parents rested on the support the relationship provided, and a belief that the strain in their relationship was only temporary. For younger LGBs, financial support was especially important. Because they relied on their parents for tuition, housing, and spending money, cutting ties or angering their parents was risky. By focusing on progress their parents had made, or the promise of a better relationship in the future, LGBs justified maintaining parent-child relationships despite the threat to emotional energy that accompanied these relationships.

The parent-child relationship also provided emotional support, which LGBs were unwilling to forego despite bad feelings at time. Again, the hope of a better relationship with
their parents in the future, and evidence of greater acceptance compared to the past, provided justification for maintaining the relationship even though it caused them emotional pain.

LGBs’ belief in an improved relationship in the future reflects progress narratives associated with the contemporary Gay Rights Movement. For example, the “It Gets Better Campaign” popularized by journalist Dan Savage and his partner, Terry Miller, in 2010, sends a message of hope to LGBs living in the United States (Grzanka and Mann 2014). The principal message is that even if things are bad in the present, they will get better in the future. Under these conditions, LGBs I spoke with could be confident that strain in their parent-child relationship would not last. Focusing on the future, highlighting progress in their relationship with a parent or other family member, and using humor, aided LGBs in putting up with a family member’s homophobia—after all, the emotion work was only temporarily needed; things will, as Savage and Miller assert, “get better.”

Maintaining parent-child relationships may be especially important for LGBs. Seidman (2002) suggests that LGBs often lack social support as a result of homophobia and systemic forms of discrimination (e.g., in the workplace or school). It could be, then, that LGBs rely on relationships with parents, and the support they provide, more than heterosexuals. In a society where LGBs experience discrimination, exclusion, and harassment on a day-to-day basis, maintaining relationships that provide emotional support are all the more important. To justify maintaining a relationship that drains emotional energy, LGBs highlighted progress in their relationship and looked to a future in which the relationship would be better.

Parents also experienced anger, anxiety, and discomfort in relationships with their LGB children. The importance of maintaining this relationship (again despite occasional bad
feelings) for parents may reflect cultural ideas concerning what it means to be a good parent in U.S. culture. Being a parent is a “moral identity” (Kleinman 1996: 5). It requires “being there” for a child and providing emotional, psychological, and material support (see Edin and Kefalas 2005). In the past, when the dominant cultural view of LGBs was negative, parental rejection of an LGB child was considered more acceptable (Seidman 2002; Savin-Williams 2001; Schulman 2009). This is no longer the case. Cutting ties with a child for being lesbian, gay, or bisexual is no longer culturally acceptable—though, of course, many parents still do just that (Reczek 2016; Robinson 2018). As a result, parents feel they should learn to accept their child and deal with their qualms about sexuality; doing anything less may be seen as parental failure. The emotion work parents did allowed them to maintain their identities as good parents despite the qualms or noxious feelings they had concerning their child’s sexuality. For parents, then, preserving familial relationships that threaten their emotional energy may be rooted in their need to live up to cultural expectations concerning what it means to be a good parent.

Parents, especially mothers, also felt responsible for managing and maintaining relationships between LGBs and other family members—that is, doing “family work” (DeVault 1999; Hertz 2006; Shaw 2008). For mothers of LGBs, this sometimes meant working to preserve relationships between homophobic family members and their LGB child. Focusing on progress made by these relatives (e.g., how they made fewer homophobic comments over time), or how the power of love between family members would inevitably repair the strained relationship, helped to diminish the negative feelings the relationship caused their child, as well as a parent’s own emotional pain at witnessing this strained relationship. Like their LGB children, these strategies relied on the hope of greater
acceptance—in this case, among homophobic family members—in the future. Through their emotion work, parents—and mothers especially—preserved and justified maintaining strained familial relationships that caused themselves, and their LGB children, emotional pain.

In some cases, LGBs and parents gave up hope that parent-child relationships, or relationships between LGBs and other family members, would improve. They knew that the strain was unlikely to go away and that short-term solutions—such as focusing on progress, the future, and using humor—would not significantly diminish noxious feelings in the long run. In these cases, LGBs and their parents turned to other emotion management strategies. In the next chapter, I develop the concept of “palliative emotion work” to show how LGBs and parents navigated and maintained relationships that were unlikely to improve and that constantly threatened and diminished emotional energy.
Remedial emotion work was often successful because parents and their LGB children held out hope that the relationship would improve. LGBs and parents felt better about the noxious feelings the relationship created by using humor, pointing to progress already made in their relationship, and emphasizing a certainty that love between a parent and child would continue to improve their relationship. But what happens when the hope for a better relationship in the future does not exist? Sometimes parents were unwilling to change their views toward their child’s sexuality. In other instances, parents were unable to successfully transform the way a homophobic family member felt about their LGB child or the way their child felt about a homophobic family member. LGBs, for their part, sometimes conceded to a parent or family member’s homophobia and accepted that s/he would always have qualms about their sexuality. LGBs and their parents did not, however, dissolve familial relationships when strain was more permanent and/or acceptance had reached its limit. On the contrary, they continued to emphasize the importance of family relationships despite the discomfort, anger, and frustration these relationships caused.

In this chapter, I show how parents and their LGB children navigated and maintained family relationships that persistently created noxious feelings and drained emotional energy. Strain within these relationships ranged from outright rejection to mild discomfort. Strain was also situational. The same LGBs and parents who, in one instance, relied on remedial emotion work to diminish noxious feelings, at other times or in other situations, felt as though the strain was more permanent. Regardless of degree or context, when relationships were treated as more permanently strained, emotion work used to diminish noxious feelings
did not rely on hope of improvement in the relationship (e.g., in terms of a family member’s acceptance) to rationalize putting up with discomfort in the present. Instead, parents and LGBs adapted to the strain; they used palliative emotion work—diminishing or transforming noxious feelings in relationships that are strained and unlikely to improve.

Parents and LGBs found ways to maintain relationships when the hope of a better relationship in the future did not exist and the relationship was a frequent source of negative feelings. Navigating these strained relationships involved changing one’s thinking and feeling about relationships and sexuality. This was accomplished through the use of three strategies. One strategy, minimizing, downplayed the importance of sexual identity or relationships with homophobic family members. A similar strategy redefined homophobic comments and behaviors. Redefining was accomplished in two ways. One way involved coming up with an alternative explanation for homophobia. Here, parents and LGBs redefined hurtful comments as stemming from generational differences and religious beliefs. A second form of redefining went beyond constructing alternative explanations for homophobic comments and gave them new and more positive meanings. Homophobia was redefined as an expression of love and acceptance rather than rejection. In both instances—alternative explanations or creating new meanings for homophobic comments—the goal was the same: to diminish or transform noxious feelings that resulted from hurtful comments, and thus threatened the relationship.

LGBs and their parents used a final strategy that involved categorizing and comparing. Categorizing attached different expectations for emotional support to different relationships. Doing so diminished emotional pain; when the person making the hurtful comment was not expected to provide emotional support in the first place, the sting of the
comment was reduced. Similarly, parents and LGBs also *compared* their family or LGB child to relationships, and other LGBs, who “had it worse.” When making these comparisons, parents and LGBs lessened noxious feelings created by these relationships.

Finally, in the conclusion I situate palliative emotion work within a larger discussion of incomplete LGB acceptance. Here, I draw on Goffman’s (1963) discussion of “good adjustments” (p. 122). Through minimizing, redefining, categorizing, and comparing, parents and LGBs adapted to strained familial relationships, but at a cost: bolstering a system of homophobia and heterosexism that necessitated the use of palliative emotion work in the first place—a cost that I continue to explore in chapter 5.

**MINIMIZING**

Minimizing was one way parents and LGBs rationalized maintaining family relationships that caused anger, frustration, and discomfort. Minimizing took two forms. One form involved minimizing the importance of sexuality. The other form minimized the importance of relationships. In both cases, emotions were managed by giving less importance to what was seen as a source of conflict.

*Minimizing the Importance of Sexuality*

Minimizing the importance of sexuality allowed LGBs to rationalize maintaining familial relationships that were permanently strained. David, a 20-year-old gay man, held out hope that his mother would become accepting. He realized, though, that this might not happen. This possibility, he explained, was heartbreaking. Minimizing was a way to diminish some of the emotional pain that came from this prospect:
I mean, it is possible that she will not come around, which is a bit heartbreaking...I’m not sure I really care anymore [that David and his mom never talk about his sexuality]. Like, we still talk about other stuff, and like, I will talk to her about important stuff. But, for the most part, I just don’t feel like it is in anybody’s best interest to bring up stuff like that. Like, all it is going to do is hurt our relationship and, like, honestly, being gay is important to me, but it is just not worth damaging the relationship [with my mother] by, like, talking about it a lot.

Minimizing is often used as identity work (McQueeney 2009; Sumerau 2012; Thoits 2011). LGB young people, for example, emphasize how they are “ordinary people” by minimizing the importance of their sexuality and accentuating the importance of other identities (e.g., being a friend, athlete, or student) (Coleman-Fountain 2014a). Minimizing, for them, has the effect of elevating their status by demonstrating their similarity to heterosexuals (see Hegna 2007; Richardson 2004). LGBs I spoke with minimized the importance of their sexuality, but not to diminish stigma or elevate status. Rather, the purpose was to diminish frustration, anger, and discomfort that stemmed from a strained parent-child relationship. Homophobic comments from family stung less when one’s sexuality was less important to one’s sense of self. Jason, a 35-year-old bisexual man, spoke to this:

I don’t want to say that my sexuality is not important to me, but like in terms of my relationships with them [parents], it is just not something I feel I need to bring up. And I think maybe in part that has to do with me being bi instead of gay. So, I am not dead center on the Kinsey Scale. In fact, all of my relationships have been with women. But, when it comes to sexual attraction, I am pretty middle-of-the-spectrum...So, I mean, yeah, like in a perfect world I could talk to them about all the people I have been interested in. But, like, since I am with women more, I don’t really feel too bad about not talking to them about being bi because it is just not a big part of my life; it is not a big deal.

Minimizing is a form of what Hochschild (1979, 1983) calls “cognitive emotion work”—changing images, ideas, or thoughts in order to change the feelings they produce (see also Thoits 1985). There is, however, a subtle difference when cognitive emotion work is directed toward relationship management. Here, it was not images, ideas, or thoughts that were being
altered to diminish a feeling. Instead, the significance of an identity was being minimized to
diminish noxious feelings. LGBs were able to relieve guilt over concealing, or being
selective in how sexuality was discussed with their parents, by minimizing the importance of
their sexual identity.

Parents also minimized the importance of their child’s sexuality as a way to manage
discomfort. Theresa, the mother of a bisexual daughter, Fiona, provided an example:

I am fine with her being gay, obviously. It is a non-issue...But, I have to say, if Fiona,
and actually this goes for any gay child, like if they are constantly disrupting
everyone else’s lives with their “gaydom,” then I guess we need to address it...like, it
is not something that really needs to be discussed, you know?

Parents suggested that they accept their LGB child and are fine with them being lesbian, gay,
or bisexual. Nevertheless, their comments highlighted a limit to their acceptance. Theresa
preferred Fiona’s sexuality not be discussed at all. This, she explained, was not because she
had a problem with her daughter being gay. On the contrary, she thought her daughter’s
sexual identity should be a non-issue and therefore not discussed.

In the previous chapter I described how Jeff focused on the future—and the hope that
Ryan would get married and have children—to diminish lingering discomfort he had over
Ryan’s sexuality. At other times in the interview, though, Jeff’s qualms about Ryan’s
sexuality, and the strain it caused, were dealt with less through hope of improvement and
more by adapting to the strain. This involved minimizing the importance he attached to
Ryan’s sexuality:

At one point I said to Ryan, “Ok, I understand you are gay, but you don’t need to go
over the top displaying being gay. Just be a person.” So, we did have that talk and I
was a little concerned about that...like, it shouldn’t be a big deal. Because, it
[focusing on sexuality] just sets him apart from other people. You are basically just
labeling him based on his sexuality instead of saying he is a person. You know? At
the end of the day, why is sexuality getting any extra treatment, good or bad? I just
feel like it shouldn’t be an issue.
Parents diminished their discomfort, while appearing accepting, by minimizing the importance of their child’s sexuality. Both Jeff and Theresa said that their child being gay was not a big deal to them, but then went on to explain their desire for sexuality to not be discussed at all. Coleman-Fountain (2014b) refers to this as a politics of “getting over it.” Here, LGBs argue that people make too big of a deal out of sexuality. Emphasizing sexuality (e.g., marching in Pride parades), they contend, actually thwarts progress because it highlights LGBs’ difference from heterosexuals. Minimizing the importance of a child’s sexuality, then, reflects a larger cultural narrative that involves minimizing the importance of sexuality. While LGBs use this strategy to demonstrate their sameness to heterosexuals (e.g., if sexuality is unimportant than their sexual identity no longer distinguishes them from heterosexuals), parents minimized the importance of sexuality to deal with lingering discomfort they had about their child being lesbian, gay, or bisexual.

Minimizing sexuality was not only about diminishing one’s own noxious feelings. LGBs, especially, also minimized the importance of their sexuality to diminish their parents’ discomfort. This was the case with Lindsay, a 20-year-old bisexual woman:

My mom really did not want me to tell other people. She was really afraid, like, other people would find out and it would ruin my future and that I would be seen as a hypocrite...because I was, like, president of FCA [Fellowship of Christian Athletes] and really involved in the church...And that was a big fear of mine anyway. So, I was really up front with my mom. I was like, “You have zero things to worry about here. Because, I am not going to tell other people for a really long time.”...So, it [being a lesbian] was just not a big deal.

LGBs diminished their parents’ discomfort by minimizing the importance of their sexuality in parent-child conversations. Orne (2011) describes this as “deflecting the bullet.” Here, LGBs alter how they speak or what they say in order to prevent a potentially unaccepting person from responding with cruelty. In some cases, this may mean telling the person what
they want to hear to ensure the interaction proceeds smoothly. Deflecting the bullet, for the LGBs I interviewed, was not intended to alter their feelings but rather their parents’. The emotional bullet LGBs were deflecting was aimed at their parents rather than themselves; deflecting the bullet, then, was interpersonal.

Minimizing is a self-protective strategy—decreasing the importance of a problematic role or identity—people use to ward off discrimination associated with a stigmatized identity (Crocker and Major 1989; Thoits 2010; Wright 2010). When used by LGBs and their parents, minimizing extended beyond protecting oneself from discrimination and was applied to one’s familial relationships as well. By minimizing the importance of a lesbian, gay, or bisexual identity, parents and LGBs diminished discomfort the identity created in strained parent-child relationships. Rather than being self-protective, the strategy was relationship-protective.

Minimizing the Importance of Relationships

Parents and their LGB children also minimized the importance of familial relationships as a way to diminish noxious feelings. For LGBs, the importance of relationships—with their parents—was minimized as a way to assuage the pain caused by parents’ hurtful remarks. Karah, a 43-year-old lesbian, had a tenuous relationship with her father. When asked how she felt about her father never accepting her, she said:

I have a dad. We have never been close. We have always been like oil and water [when I was] growing up. And pretty much we can only talk about a few things. Sports and home improvement projects. And that is about it…And so my dad, I just don’t really care at all what my dad’s opinion is about my sexuality or my relationship with Maria. So him not being supportive is not a big deal to me because he is not really someone whose opinion I find important.

Minimizing the importance of relationships that cause emotional pain is a type of framing—manipulating how one thinks or feels based on the situation or context (see Ortiz 2010). For
example, Albas and Albas (1988) found that students minimized their fear of exams by framing them as quizzes. In doing so, the exam became less influential and therefore less scary. Similarly, LGBs such as Karah lessened the anguish caused by their parent’s homophobic remarks by minimizing the importance of the relationship. By framing the relationship as less important, the hurt it caused became less intense.

Minimizing the importance of a relationship with a parent also provided LGBs with the rationalization needed to maintain it despite the anger, frustration, and discomfort it caused. Danielle, a 20-year-old bisexual, had a strained relationship with her father. Her father knew that she was bisexual; he was not accepting. Despite the pain the relationship caused her, Danielle still valued it. Minimizing the importance of the relationship vis-à-vis other relationships was, ironically, a way to justify maintaining it:

He [dad] cheated on my mom and is very much against me being anything but straight… but, he is still my father and I guess, like, I mean he wasn’t really around a lot when I was growing up because he was deployed, and then the divorce happened and it honestly didn’t really change anything because I never saw him that much anyway…. I mean, he is not my mom. I mean, my dad provides financial support… my mom is who I have a close relationship with so what he thinks about it [Danielle being bisexual] is not [as big of a deal]… it would hurt a lot more if it was my mom was saying [homophobic] stuff.

In addition to minimizing the importance of a relationship, LGBs often prioritized their relationship with one parent over another. As Danielle noted, if it was her mom who was being homophobic, “it would hurt a lot more.”

 Mothers of preschoolers use a similar strategy to assuage guilt and frustration that comes from role conflict between expectations for motherhood and being a wife. To justify spending more time with their children than their partner, mothers “prioritize roles”—the act of placing greater value and importance on one role over another (Lois 2006). Instead of prioritizing roles, LGBs prioritized relationships. LGB people justified maintaining a
relationship that caused them frustration, discomfort, and sometimes anger, by minimizing the importance of one parental relationship—typically with the father—and placing greater value on the other.

As discussed in the previous chapter, parents felt responsible for repairing strained relationships between their LGB child and other family members. In some cases, these relationships were permanently strained. Under these conditions, parents diminished noxious feelings in their LGB child by minimizing the importance of the strained relationship.

Theresa, the mother of Fiona, provided an example:

I have tried to tell Fiona, like, who cares what your grandmother thinks. Because, she [grandma] is an incredibly conservative Christian and thinks we are going to go to hell, and the girls really struggle with that. They are like, “We don’t want to see her; she’s awful”…And she has said some really awful things over the years… But, I’m just like, “She might drop dead tomorrow so you need to have dinner with her”…And it’s also like we hardly see her. But yeah, she is not going to be around forever, you know?

When parents felt that a relationship between their LGB child and another family member was not likely to improve they minimized the importance of the relationship. Social network reorganizing serves a similar purpose. For example, a person may reorganize their social network in a way that protects them from being hurt by another’s comments or actions (Gengler 2015; Goodrum 2008). For parents of LGBs, the goal was not to prevent noxious feelings but diminish them; the point was to soothe their child’s hurt feelings, not their own. Rather than try to end a problematic intra-family relationship, parents tried to change the way their child felt about the relationship. If the relationships were of less importance, it would have less emotional impact.

In the previous chapter I described how Michelle emphasized the progress Reese’s grandmother had been making—in being accepting—to diminish some of Reese’s discomfort
and frustration. There were other family relationships, however, where strain was more permanent and not likely to change. In these instances, minimizing was useful:

We moved out of state and physically distanced ourselves from family before Reese even came out. But there has been some stuff… I have a sister-in-law who was very vocal in being against it. She made a comment like, “What kind of a world are we raising our children in if they allow gays to marry?” And she said she didn't want her kids to be around those people, and it’s like my daughter is one of those people. I unfriended her on Facebook… But, we are not close to that family physically or relationship wise. So, I mean, if something hurtful is said it’s like, [Reese knows] they are in our life, but they are not like really influential [relationships] in her life.

Minimizing the importance of a strained relationship was not meant to repair it. The intention, instead, was to encourage a child to minimize the significance of a relationship that caused them emotional pain. In this way, minimizing was a “survival strategy”—adapting to situations that cause emotional pain (DeVault 1999). Parents of color encourage survival strategies as well. They are aware that their children live in a racist society. They may avoid or put off discussing racism with their young children to protect them from the stress that comes with this knowledge (Van Ausdale and Feagin 1996). The aim for these parents is not to change to the racist system, but rather to operate within a racist context in a way that spares their child emotional pain. For parents of LGBs, minimizing was an analogous strategy of adaptation.

Emotions can be strategically manipulated in a way that reproduces inequalities or existing power relations (Ahmed 2005). Minimizing the importance of a relationship that creates frustration, anger, and discomfort does not resolve the problem of homophobia any more than it works to improve the strained relationship. It is a Band-Aid for a strained relationship, and more broadly, the larger problem of homophobia. Convincing oneself that a relationship with a homophobic family member was not really that important may allow LGBs and their parents to preserve a strained relationship, but it does not challenge the
homophobia that strains the relationship in the first place. In the next section, I explore this idea further by discussing another strategy, “redefining.”

REDEFINING

Parents and LGBs also maintained relationships with each other and other family members by redefining the meaning of homophobic comments. This was done two ways. One way involved transforming homophobic comments into expressions of religious or generational differences. Here, parents and LGBs suggested that family members did not mean to be homophobic when they said disparaging things about LGB people. Participants reasoned, instead, that these comments reflected a family member’s unique generational or religious background. The second form of redefining gave homophobic comments new meaning by transforming them into expressions of love or acceptance rather than rejection or discrimination. Both forms of redefining allowed LGBs and their family to maintain relationships, but at a cost. Redefining excused the person who made the comment and the homophobia it expressed.

“It’s Not Really Even Homophobia! It is Just Who They Are!”

Redefining facilitated relationship management by excusing homophobic comments. One way this was accomplished was by redefining homophobia as a matter of generational or religious differences rather than expressions of anger, disgust, or rejection. Keith, the father of Jamie, a 33-year-old lesbian, provided an example:

Jamie’s grandmother will say stuff sometimes that is off color…like her telling Jamie and her partner that they can’t sleep in the same bed when they visit her…which is frustrating to hear… But, she gets along with Jamie and Brooke [Jamie’s partner] and
has never refused them anything when they come to visit her even if she is a bit standoffish sometimes… So, it’s more just that she is in her 80s, you know?

Redefining was a useful solution for those who wanted to maintain relationships with homophobic family members. By redefining homophobia as intractable generational difference, parents and LGBs could more easily maintain the relationship.

Keith was able to lessen the impact of comments by Jamie’s grandmother by attributing her remarks to a generational difference. Brittany, a 33-year-old lesbian, also highlighted generational and religious differences to explain homophobic comments made by her stepmother:

Recently my stepmother expressed gratitude that Monica and I are not having children because if we did she would have to, you know, explain that whole situation to their friends. Like, how do two women have a baby? Like, that would be uncomfortable for them… But, you know, with that disappointment comes understanding that these people are from a different time. Well, mostly speaking of Monica’s parents [Brittany’s step-parents], they have like a different way of thinking about the world and, like, the idea of two women having children just, like, would blow their minds (laughs)…so they are happy they don’t have to deal with it, and, like, that is fine.

Transforming homophobic comments into expressions of generational difference excuses homophobia; it is a form of subordinate adaptation. One way subordinates adapt is by accepting their status while seeking to derive some compensatory benefits from those who are responsible for their marginalization (Schwalbe et al. 2000). LGBs and their parents used subordinate adaptation in this way, with similar results. The compensatory benefit they received from adapting came from the important familial relationship it allowed them to maintain.

By redefining homophobic comments as displays of generational difference, parents and their LGB children diminished the anger, frustration, and discomfort the comments created. Redefining, however, leaves unchallenged the ideology that is responsible for LGBs’
oppression. Redefining, then, had three related consequences. It allowed parents and LGBs to maintain the strained relationship, excused the person responsible for the homophobia, and reproduced the homophobia from which the hurtful comment proceeded.

Homophobic comments and the noxious feelings they create were also explained away by emphasizing the commenter’s religious beliefs. This was another form of subordinate adaptation. Karah, a 43-year-old lesbian, provided an example:

My partner and I stayed with my grandma about a month ago for Christmas. And I had no idea how she was going to react and if, like, she was going to let us stay in the same room, or what. But, you know, like, she is very religious. She doesn’t even believe in sleeping together or living together before marriage even, so the gay thing is even harder. And, you know what? I can respect that. That is her view. So, if she wanted me to sleep on the couch I would have done that. I just wanted to be able to spend time with her…if she thinks it is a sin, that is her thing; it is sort of an unavoidable religious belief I just have to put up with. It doesn't affect me and doesn’t reflect how she actually feels about us.

LGBs lessened noxious feelings by suggesting that homophobic comments were the result of unavoidable religious beliefs rather than a family member’s feelings toward LGBs.

Redefining serves a similar function for gay Christians. Instead of rejecting their religious beliefs—which conflict with their sexual identity—gay Christians may redefine how they think about their sexuality in the context of Christianity (Wolkomir 2001, 2006). Some gay Christians transform their sexuality into an expression of moral strength. By resisting their desire for men, gay Christians exhibit a strong and unwavering faith. Denying their sexuality becomes an expression of their commitment to Christianity instead of a threat to it (see also Creeks 2013).

For the LGBs I interviewed, redefining was not directed toward themselves or their identity, but instead toward homophobic comments made by family members. Like gay Christians, though, redefining a family member’s homophobia as an expression of their
religious beliefs left Christianity blameless for its role in the production of homophobia. For LGBs, especially, it also excused the family member’s behavior, and placed the onus of change on the target. LGBs were the ones that had to modify the way they thought or felt, not the family member who was responsible for their suffering.

Parents also excused homophobia among other family members by linking their comments to unchangeable religious beliefs. Jodie, the mother of a 42-year-old gay son, Jordan, provided an example:

I mean, I am not sure they all understand it [Jordan being gay]. Even now, after all these years. Because, again, they are still pretty religious…and Jordan knows that, he knows that they love him…they, yeah, are just really religious. I mean, his grandparents and aunts and uncles and cousins all adore him no matter what. So, they may say [homophobic] things or feel a certain ways about Jordan’s sexuality, but…they are just religious.

For parents, redefining was about convincing their child to feel differently about a family member’s homophobia. Sympathy work—the work one does to construct others or themselves as deserving of sympathy (Clark 1998; Kolb 2011)—served a similar purpose. Rather than constructing the family member as deserving of sympathy, however, parents tried to construct family members as deserving of forgiveness and worthy of a continued relationship. As Jodie noted, the homophobic comment might be hurtful, but it was not actually a reflection of how the family member felt about Jordan.

Suggesting that homophobia was a product of generational or religious differences allowed LGBs and their parents to preserve strained relationships with each other and others in their family. Redefining had the added consequence of preserving inequality by giving family members an excuse for their homophobia. “Emotional ignorance” serves a similar function for men. Teaching men that masculinity is about rejecting emotion simultaneously justifies their lack of emotional support in situations where it is warranted (e.g., toward a
partner or family member) (Pfeffer 2010). Said another way, emotional ignorance is built into what it means to be a man. This provides men with a ready excuse when they fail to provide emotional support. By suggesting that a grandma is not homophobic but religious, or that a grandparent is not unaccepting but from a different generation, LGBs and their parents provide an excuse for homophobia. This excuse, then, allows parents and LGBs to maintain familial relationships which create noxious feelings.

“That is like her saying ‘I love you!’”: Turning Hurtful Comments into Expressions of Love

A second form of redefining went beyond excusing homophobic comments. This form aimed to transform homophobia into an expression of love, acceptance, or support. Whitney, a 35-year-old lesbian, alluded to her mother’s attempts at this kind of redefining:

They [parents] support me in their own way. Like, she [mom] said to me recently, “I never wanted you to be a lesbian, but if you have to be a lesbian, I am glad you are with Sandra.” And I just about cried when she said that… That is like her saying “I love you!”

Redefining homophobic comments as expressions of acceptance is similar to the strategy of reframing—reshaping how one thinks or feels about a situation (Sanner and Coleman 2017; Vacarro, Schrock, and McCabe 2011). Reframing is especially useful for transforming meaning. Holden and Schrock (2007) provide an example in their research on members of a therapeutic organization who claim to be egalitarian. Here, seasoned members reframed newcomer complaints as personal troubles. Doing so allowed them to overlook the inequalities in the organization that were causing members to complain in the first place.

Redefining served a similar end for LGBs navigating strained familial relationships. Abby, a 29-year-old bisexual, provided another example:
For the most part, my parents have been good with the women I have introduced to them. There have been a couple of partners that they did not like so much. And, honestly, I think it was because of their [the partner’s] gender expression. They were more masculine presenting, which sort of (pause) my parents have a harder time with…which is frustrating, but you know, meh?... Honestly, I think they are just protective of me and just didn’t like seeing me with people they didn’t think I should be with…it wasn’t coming from a place of like, “I don’t want my daughter dating a woman!” It was more like they just have this image of who I should be with, and those women were not it (laughs).

Transforming homophobic comments into expressions of parental love and protectiveness allowed LGBs to diminish some of the noxious feelings the comments created. Used in this way, redefining creates what Hochschild (1989) calls a “family myth”—a lie married couples tell themselves to maintain domestic harmony. Constructing family myths allows women, especially, to feel better about an unequal domestic division of labor. While the myths may resolve tensions in a marriage, they also contribute to an unequal gender arrangement and the “stalled gender revolution” (England 2010; Gerson 2010).

The family myths LGBs used to diminish noxious feelings served a similar function and had a similar consequence. Through redefining, parental rejection of a gender nonconforming partner became a reflection of parental protectiveness, thus reducing the discomfort the rejection caused. Like family myths in marriages, though, convincing oneself that a parent’s homophobia is an expression of protectiveness reinforces inequality. While family myths emerge from and reinforce a sexist system, redefining homophobic comments—as expressions of parental protectiveness—emerge from and reinforce the homophobia and heterosexism upon which these comments are based.

Parents also redefined heterosexism and homophobia as expressions of protectiveness to diminish their own, and their child’s, noxious feelings. Though Jordan eventually developed a good relationship with his father, when Jordan initially came out, acceptance
seemed unlikely. In that circumstance, Jordan’s father’s partner, Jodie, tried to diminish Jordan’s discomfort by transforming her partner’s hurtful words into a display of parental concern rather than rejection:

J: He came out to us when he was in college and me and my ex-husband’s response was completely opposite. I was like, “Ok, that is great!” You know? And my husband, because we were married at the time… His response was like “No.” And it has been two decades, so my mind is fuzzy, but he was like, “You are not my son,” or that sort of thing….and Jordan was obviously very upset about that.

T: Did you say anything to him to sort of mend that relationship?

J: You know, for the most part, no… I think I said something like, “You know, he loves you no matter what. He is just, you know, shocked and probably concerned about your wellbeing”… Because, you know to be fair, my son was growing up during the AIDS crisis. In reality, though, he [Jodie’s ex-husband] is a very Daniel Boone sort of fellow. There is no convincing him otherwise of anything. So at that time I was, yeah, more concerned that he [Jordan] knew he had me no matter what, because I really wasn’t sure his father would come around.

Redefining homophobia as an expression of parental protectiveness was meant to reduce the emotional damage caused by homophobic comments. Just how effective this strategy was remains an open question.

Parents also transformed homophobia into expressions of parental protectiveness to diminish their own bad feelings. Jeff, on occasion, had asked Ryan to hide his sexuality from certain family members, though he felt guilty about making these requests. Redefining his request as an expression of parental concern helped to assuage his guilt:

We asked him not to tell some family because we didn’t know how some of them would react, you know? …I struggled with that… But, you know, he is my son. Telling him to not [come out to certain family members] was (pause) more me wanting to protect him. He is my son and I want to protect and take care of him, you know? I wanted to make sure I reiterated that point to him.
Jeff lessened some of his guilt by turning his request—that Ryan not come out to certain family members—into an expression of parental concern. While this strategy might have helped Jeff feel better, it did nothing to challenge the stigma his son faced.

In sum, parents and LGBs maintained strained relationships by transforming homophobia into expressions of generational differences, religious beliefs, or examples of parental love and protectiveness. The cost was the excusing of homophobic behavior and the reinforcement of heterosexism. These strategies also left the burden of change on those who were marginalized. A final strategy, categorizing and comparing, describes another way palliative emotion work served to excuse and reinforce heterosexism and homophobia.

CATEGORIZING AND COMPARING RELATIONSHIPS

Finally, LGBs and their parents preserved strained relationships by categorizing and comparing. Categorizing involved expecting less emotional support from different types of familial relationships. Hurtful comments, they reasoned, incited less anger, sadness, and discomfort when they came from a family member from whom they did not expect to receive much emotional support in the first place. Parents and LGBs also managed emotions by comparing relationships. LGBs compared their familial relationships to those of their LGB peers. Parents compared their LGB children to people who possess qualities they saw as less desirable. These acts of categorizing and comparing helped to diminish discomfort, anger, and frustration.
Categorizing Relationship Expectations

LGBs categorized relationships based on how much support they expected from those relationships. Ryan, a 19-year-old gay man, spoke about how this applied to his father:

My dad never really likes to talk about it [Ryan’s sexuality]. It was probably because it makes him uncomfortable. Which, like, whatever. I mean, it is a little bit crappy sometimes, but I mean, it is not like he is not acknowledging it [that Ryan is gay]. I just feel like there is no reason to push him with it when it makes him uncomfortable…My dad is more for other things; like, we talk about other things, like music, or school or something, or like joke around a lot…My mom, like, she is who I go to about stuff like that [sexuality].

LGBs diminished emotional pain by lowering their expectations for emotional support from certain relationships. Differentiating relationships, in this way, was a process of adjusting. For families of LGBs, adjusting is the work family members do to accommodate the shift in family dynamics an LGB child creates when s/he comes out (Bernstein 1997; Patterson 2000). The LGBs I interviewed were less concerned about adjusting their family in a way that incorporated them in it, and more concerned with categorizing family members in a way that lessened continued discomfort. By associating one parent with emotional support and the other with support that comes from shared interests, LGBs were able to diminish frustration the relationship caused.

Parents also categorized familial relationships as a way to manage their discomfort. Laurie, the mother of a gay son, Trevor, categorized during a period of time when she knew Trevor was gay, but her partner, Carl, did not. This strategy allowed Laurie to diminish some of the guilt she had over keeping Trevor’s sexuality from her partner:

That whole situation was hard. But, you know, we [Laurie and her partner] have always had a very divided relationship. He takes care of the work and I take care of the children. So, he asks how Trevor is doing and I say, “He is fine.” “How is our daughter?” And, it is the same thing, “She is fine too”…So, I interacted a lot more with the children than Carl… But, yeah, during that time it was hard because it was like their relationship was not entirely honest because there was this secret, and our
relationship [Laurie and Carl’s] wasn’t either because I was keeping Trevor’s secret, at Trevor’s request… So, you know, yeah, I sort had the two different ones [relationships]; they were separate.

An LGB child coming out, or being out to only certain family members, can create strain in families. Laurie explained that Trevor did eventually come out to his father, thus resolving the strain the secret created in their family.

In the example above, Laurie adapted to the strain of secrecy by categorizing the father-child relationship as less about emotional support than financial support. Seidman (2002) observes similar findings among gay men who first recognized they were gay in the 1950s and 1960s. To diminish the guilt of keeping their sexuality a secret from family and friends—for fear of rejection—gay men transformed their sexual identity into a secondary or “identity thread” (Seidman 2002); they prioritized other identities over their sexual identity (see also Coleman-Fountain 2014a; Ponticelli 1999). Parents of LGBs, however, were not prioritizing one identity over another to lessen their discomfort. Instead, they categorized relationship expectations—as a parent and partner—as a way to reduce emotional discomfort. Laurie felt less guilt over keeping a secret from her partner because, in their family, she was more involved in the day-to-day support of their children’s lives than her partner.

Parents also categorized their child’s relationships with other family members as a way to cope with emotional pain. Eliza, the mother of Miranda, did this when her daughter experienced bullying from her classmates. By telling Miranda to make her relationships with classmates about learning and academics, and her relationships with family about everything else, Eliza tried to comfort her daughter. Eliza explained her strategy:

When Miranda was in school, almost on a daily basis, there was bullying…just kids being (pause) homophobic bullies. Like there would always be something that happened to her. And this happened everyday…And it began to affect her other relationships, like at home… But, we handled it. I just told her, ok, school, was going
to be for education and not for social and fun time. That was going to be outside of school. And that is how we did it. We divided it. And I think that helped…Your relationships with classmates is going to be about learning, and getting good grades, and your family will be for everything else....It didn't stop the bullying but it helped her to get by.

Strained parent-child relationships were not exclusively the result of qualms a parent had about their child’s sexuality. In some cases, strain was caused by other relationships. Eliza diminished Miranda’s emotional pain by categorizing Miranda’s relationships with schoolmates as about academics, not emotions or feelings of self-worth. This solution did not stop the bullying Emma experienced or the tension the bullying created in Miranda’s relationships with family. Eliza did, however, feel that it lessened some of Miranda’s emotional pain.

When one experiences discomfort from certain people or relationships, adaptive work is useful—social or formal adjustments that allow one to exist under strained conditions (e.g., in the workplace or in relationships with others) (Werth 2014). Adaptive work is not only used by those who are directly experiencing discomfort from a relationship. Parents of LGBs worked to encourage adaptation by their LGB child in hope of reducing their discomfort. They did this by categorizing their child’s relationships as more or less important or as serving different purposes. Like minimizing and redefining, however, categorizing did not uproot the problem: homophobia (and, in Eliza and her daughter’s case, homophobic bullying).

“It Could be Worse!”: Making Comparisons

LGBs and their parents also lessened noxious feelings by making comparisons to people who appeared to be “worse off.” By making these comparisons, parents and LGBs
managed strained familial relationships through the use of a simple logic: “It could be worse.” Anna, a 22-year-old bisexual, described a tenuous relationship with her father. Though she did at times express hope that her father would become more accepting, she knew this might not happen. When asked how she felt about the possibility of her father never truly being accepting, she said:

I had a friend in high school who knew I was bisexual, and the way he came out to me was, he said, “Hey, you are bisexual, right?” and I said “Yeah.” And he said, “Me too. Don't tell anyone, though. My whole church will kick me out and my parents will leave me on the streets.” And I was like, wow, that is a lot. That is scary. And I felt awful just knowing that could happen to this person. Or anyone. And it felt so weird because he is such a good person, right? And the fact that his family would just put him out like that, it just really sucks…And it feels weird to say this, but like I know I will personally be ok. Because I know, like, my dad has said some really, like, homophobic things, and he has always been more Ok with gay people, just not his kid being gay, you know? But I know he would never do that [kick me out].

In the previous chapter I discussed how LGBs diminished noxious feelings by making comparisons to the past. In those instances, LGBs identified progress by comparing a parent’s homophobia in the past to his or her more accepting attitudes in the present. Comparisons were also useful in strained familial relationships where progress was less certain. By making comparisons to those who have it worse, LGBs were able to see their own relationships with family as tolerable. Garrett, a 31-year-old gay man, explained further:

When my sister came out to my parents it was messy…and she had, like, other stuff going on. Like, my sister is sort of a mess…But, yeah, in comparison, their reaction to mine [Garrett’s coming out to his parents] was better…It could have been worse!

Making comparisons to those who have it worse is also done by LGBs seeking to lessen stigma and by parents of LGBs seeking to diminish their courtesy stigma (Fields 2001; Martin et al. 2009). Glennon (2012) found that parents of LGBs do this by making “social comparisons” (see also Crocker and Major [1989]). By finding flaws in others, parents of LGBs felt better about their own stigmatized status. LGBs I interviewed used social
comparisons in a similar way. Rather than looking for fault in others, they looked for people whose familial relationships were worse. By identifying these worse relationships, they were better able to tolerate the imperfect behavior of their parents and other family members and thus preserve the relationship despite the noxious feelings it created.

Parents also used comparisons to diminish lingering discomfort they had about their child’s sexuality. The comparisons parents made moved beyond relationships to identifying types of people who, in comparison to their child, were worse off. Jeff provided an example:

He is my son and I love him. And, to me, that is the bottom line, you know? You are my son. I love you and accept you. But, yeah, was it the life I saw for him? No... You asked earlier if I was happy Ryan was gay, and honestly, (pause) am I happy that Ryan is gay? Probably not. Because his life will be harder...But, you know, I am much more accepting of Ryan being gay than him being a prisoner or someone who is in a lot of trouble or has so much trouble that they are in prison. No parent wants to have a prisoner as a child (laughs).

Parents compared their children not only to people they deemed inferior (e.g., prisoners or criminals) but also to LGBs they found unappealing. These comparisons usually positioned their LGB child against gender non-conforming LGBs.

Fields (2001) similarly found that parents of LGBs distance their child from LGBs who are gender deviant as a way to normalize themselves and their child. Some of the parents I interviewed used the same strategy of distancing. Cynthia, for example, described her gay son as:

[V]ery quiet and kind of introverted. He is just sort of a go-about-my-business kind of guy. He is definitely not one of those in-your-face type of gay guys or anything like that...Not flamboyant or anything at all.

This is similar to what Wilkins (2008) observed among college-age Christians who drew symbolic boundaries between themselves and their non-Christian classmates by defining themselves as happier and more authentic. Parents of LGBs draw similar symbolic
boundaries, but for the emotional effect it provided. Instead of bolstering their identities vis-à-vis their child, parents made comparisons to criminals and gender non-conforming people as a way to lessen any lingering discomfort they had regarding their child’s sexuality. As both Jeff and Cynthia said, they love their children; that is, as Jeff notes, the “bottom line.” This does not mean that they have no qualms about homosexuality or bisexuality. Making comparisons to stereotypical LGBs or people whose lives are worse enabled parents to diminish this discomfort and preserve their relationship with their child. The prevailing logic that parents used was the same as their LGB child’s: it could be worse.

CONCLUSION

Preventive emotion work diminished noxious feelings by protecting oneself and others from experiencing emotional pain in the first place. For all the effort that went into it, though, preventive emotion work was not always successful; remedial and palliative emotion work were also necessary. Remedial emotion work, discussed in the previous chapter, turned one’s hardship into a temporary inconvenience. Through humor, looking to the future, and focusing on progress, parents and LGBs were able to lessen some of the emotional pain they felt in the present. But sometimes a better future or major improvement in a strained familial relationship was unlikely. In these cases, palliative emotion work was needed to deal with chronic suffering. It was a form of adaptation to circumstances that were unlikely to change.

People with a chronic illness often similarly adapt by adjusting their attitudes, goals, the way they work with others, or the number of hours they work in a day, to maintain a strained relationship to a job (Brashers 2001). While this strategy may alleviate some of the tension that their illness causes them in the workplace, it does not change the workplace
environment that makes adaptation necessary. Palliative emotion work occurred under analogous conditions and produced similar results. Minimizing the importance of one’s sexuality, redefining homophobic comments, and categorizing and comparing relationships, might make life more tolerable, but these strategies did not change the source of the discomfort.

Adaptation through palliative emotion work constitutes what Goffman (1963) refers to as a “good adjustment”—when a stigmatized person participates in a group or relationship in a way that protects non-stigmatized people from discomfort (p. 121). Making good adjustments, Goffman explains, allows the stigmatized to feel as though they are accepted while, at the same time, protecting systems of inequality that necessitate their good adjustment. Said another way, the stigmatized adapt to an unequal situation; they do not seek to change it, but instead, learn to live in it.

Parents also manage their courtesy stigma through good adjustments. This may involve emphasizing a child’s similarity to heterosexuals in conversation with family, friends, and coworkers (Bryant 2008; Fields 2001; Johnson and Best 2012). The strategies LGBs and parents used to manage their stigma are forms of adaptation. They were not challenging the system of heterosexism and homophobia that delimited lesbian, gay, and bisexual self-presentation. Instead, they were making changes in behavior to manage their sexual identity in a context that allowed them to be “out” so long as their "outness" did not challenge the hegemony of heterosexuality.

Palliative emotion work aided LGBs and parents in achieving good adjustments as well, but not for the purpose of keeping stigma—or courtesy stigma—at bay. Instead, parents and LGBs minimized, redefined, categorized, and compared to manage and maintain strained
relationships that caused them emotional pain. Like stigma management, palliative emotion work facilitated good adjustments as strained familial relationships were maintained by bolstering a heterosexist system that necessitated the use of these strategies in the first place. In the next chapter I address this issue further, arguing that preventive, remedial, and palliative emotion work are all adaptations to a heterosexist context. Through the use of these forms of emotion work, parents and LGBs contribute to the “incompleteness” of LGB acceptance.
CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

Contemporary LGB acceptance is “incomplete” (Seidman 2002). On the one hand, there have been many legal gains over the last two decades, including the passage of marriage equality (Kimport 2013). On the other hand, LGBs continue to experience disproportionate levels of physical and emotional abuse from employees, peers, family, and complete strangers (Thomeer et al. 2018; Meyer 2015; Williams and Dellinger 2009). Adding to this incompleteness, the experience of acceptance is often conditional. The message LGBs often receive is that they are accepted to the extent that they are gender normative and non-threatening to heterosexuality; as long as they are, as Richardson (2004) puts it, “good gay citizens” who are similar to heterosexuals in relationship structure and gender expression.

To date, research exploring the relationships between LGBs and their family in a context of incomplete acceptance has focused primarily on coming out. This research has alerted sociologists to the identity work parents and LGBs do to deal with stigma and courtesy stigma when the latter come out (Fields 2001; Orne 2011, 2013). My research turns the conversation away from sexual identity disclosure and stigma management to examine the emotion work parents and LGBs do to manage familial relationships.

I found that parents and LGBs put a lot of work into navigating and maintaining relationships with each other and other family members. However, in a context of incomplete acceptance, this emotion work does not simply allow parents and LGBs to preserve relationships; it also reproduces inequalities within and outside the family. Through preventive, remedial, and palliative emotion work, parents and their LGB children rationalize
maintaining family relationships that create noxious feelings while leaving intact the culture of heterosexism that necessitates the use of these strategies in the first place.

This chapter is split into five main sections. First, I briefly recap my major findings. Next, I turn to the empirical contribution. Then I discuss how my analysis of preventive, remedial, and palliative emotion work can be useful for understanding emotion in family life more generally, with particular attention to how these concepts can make heterosexism invisible. A further theoretical contribution, discussed in the section on emotional futures, is the attention I draw to the temporality of emotion work. Specifically, I advance Markus and Nurius’s (1986) discussion of “possible selves” and consider its application to relationship management. After discussing these theoretical and empirical contributions, I highlight some of the limitations of this research. Finally, I identify future areas of inquiry that may contribute to our understanding of emotion work and relationships between LGBs and their family.

MAJOR FINDINGS

Parents and their LGB children put a great deal of work into navigating relationships with each other and other family members, especially when these relationships are strained. One way these relationships were navigated is through preventive emotion work—the work of keeping feelings at bay in oneself and others (see chapter 2). This form of emotion work involved managing information through concealment, selective sharing, testing the waters, and staging situations. Concealment entailed keeping information about sexuality and/or romantic relationships from certain family members to avoid anger, frustration, and disappointment. Selective sharing, by contrast, involved less comprehensive concealment.
A second form of preventive emotion work, testing the waters, also made use of information management. Prior to coming out, LGBs tested the waters by preparing their parents for when they did come out. In doing so, they tried to keep shock, anger, and disappointment at bay. In contrast, parents tested the waters by reassuring their child (prior to her/him coming out) that they would be loved no matter what. After coming out, parents and LGBs tested the waters by gradually revealing new sexuality-related information to each other and other family members. This was done to prevent family from being caught off guard or shocked by the revelation of new sexuality-related information.

Finally, preventive emotion work was done by staging situations. Here, parents and LGBs kept negative feelings at bay in themselves, each other, and other family members, by orchestrating the setting in which sexuality was discussed, and controlling who was present when these discussions took place.

Sometimes feelings got hurt and familial relationships became strained despite the effort parents and LGBs made to prevent noxious feelings. In these situations, the goal was not to ward off negative feelings—as these feelings were already present—but instead to diminish or transform them. In these cases, remedial emotion work was necessary (see chapter 3). Often this involved emphasizing an expectation for a better familial relationship in the future. Here, LGBs and their parents diminished noxious feelings by pointing toward progress they, the other, or other family members had made in accepting LGBs’ sexuality. This involved comparing strained familial relationships in the past with better, more accepting relationships in the present, or exaggerating small improvements in a family member’s feelings towards LGBs.
A second form of remedial emotion work transformed noxious feelings in the present into a temporary nuisance by emphasizing the inevitability of a better family relationship in the future. Two important beliefs facilitated this process: a certainty that love between a parent and child would eventually mend strained relationships, and that LGBs’ future participation in heterosexual ritual (e.g., marriage or having children) would overcome any lingering strain in the family relationship.

The final form of remedial emotion work was the use of humor. For LGBs, humor was used interpersonally. Talking about their sexuality with humor, LGBs reasoned, would push their unaccepting family toward greater acceptance. In contrast, parents used humor to diffuse their shock during uncomfortable situations and to stall for time as they figured out how to respond to their LGB child during uncomfortable situations (e.g., a child coming out).

Sometimes familial relationships were permanently strained, despite efforts to diminish or transform noxious feelings. In these cases, palliative emotion work was used (see chapter 4). In these situations, LGBs and their parents adapted to strain rather than emphasized hope that strain would eventually dissolve. The strategies parents and LGBs used required changing one’s thinking and feeling about sexuality and relationships. Minimizing was central to this process. Anger, frustration, and discomfort—stemming from strained familial relationships—were lessened when the relationship was given less importance. In the same way, a hurtful comment made about sexuality incited less intense negative feelings when the importance of sexual identity was downplayed.

A similar strategy, redefining, involved attributing different meanings to hurtful comments made by family. Here, homophobic comments were interpreted as expressions of generational or religious difference rather than examples of rejection or a refusal to accept
LGBs. A second form of redefining went beyond imputing alternative meanings to homophobia. Instead, homophobic comments were redefined as expressions of love and acceptance.

Categorizing and comparing were the final ways parents and LGBs adapted to strained familial relationships. Hurtful comments, LGBs and parents reported, produced less anger and discomfort when they came from family members who were not expected to provide much emotional support in the first place. In contrast, comparing LGBs—and relationships between LGBs and unaccepting family members—to other LGBs who seemed to have it worse also diminished noxious feelings. By making these comparisons, parents assuaged some of their discomfort about having an LGB child. LGBs, for their part, could feel better by imagining that many LGBs had it worse.

EMOTION WORK, FAMILY LIFE, AND MASKING HETEROSEXISM

In this section, I first highlight how my analysis of emotion work can be used to understand parent-child relationships more generally—particularly those relationships that are at risk of becoming, or are already, strained. Next, I discuss what emotion work used by parents and LGBs reveals about how inequalities are reproduced. I argue that emotion work often masks the heterosexism upon which it is based. In this way, contemporary heterosexism reflects contemporary sexism and racism: It has become subtler and therefore unseen or unacknowledged.
Emotion Work and Family Life

Love between parent and child is conventionally understood to be normal and natural. Because of this, emotion work is seen as unnecessary (see Erickson and Cottingham 2014). These relationships do, however, become strained—as I have shown throughout the dissertation. This strain, for parents and their LGB children, is rooted in homophobia and heterosexism. There are, of course, other reasons parent-child relationships become strained. Clark and his colleagues (1999) found that parent-child relationships develop conflict due to differing beliefs about religion, work or household maintenance, communication styles, lifestyle choices, and childrearing practices. While many people simply dissolve relationships that become strained, this does not appear to be the case for parent-child relationships. These relationships tend to persist despite strain. In fact, several LGB and parent participants suggested that the relationships they had with each other were the most important ones in their life even though, ironically, it was these relationships that caused them the most emotional pain.

In chapter three I highlighted how, and with what purpose, parents and LGBs preserved relationships with each other despite the noxious feelings and persistent negative emotions the relationship caused. In this section I broaden this focus by considering how other strained parent-child relationships might be preserved through emotion work, how this relationship management is rationalized—despite the negative feelings the relationship creates—and the potential consequences of using emotion work to maintain strained relationships.

Family sociologists should consider how emotion work is used to preserve other strained parent-child relationships. For example, identifying progress in a strained
relationship—a strategy of remedial emotion work—allowed parents and LGBs to be hopeful that the relationship would continue to improve. The “It Get’s Better” campaign served a similar function for LGB youth by giving them the message that the suffering they experienced—from friends, family, peers, and complete strangers—would not last forever. They should, the message suggested, wait it out because things would improve (Grzanka and Miller 2014). “Progress narratives” (Polletta et al. 2011) were a form of emotion work for the parents and LGBs I interviewed. Sociologists interested in relationship management should explore this use of remedial emotion work in other strained parent-child relationships.

Researchers could, for example, consider how noxious feelings are dealt with in strained parent-child relationships by focusing on progress or the possibility of a better relationship in the future. Additionally, how might focusing on progress in a strained relationship transform noxious feelings into a temporary nuisance?

Remedial emotion work is less useful when a parent-child relationship is more permanently strained. Under these circumstances, parents and children find ways to preserve the relationship despite the noxious feelings the relationship creates. Ortiz (2010) found that women married to professional athletes dealt with strained relationships with their mother-in-law through “control management”—a process of gaining, managing, exerting, and enforcing control in situations, interactions, and relationships. The goal, for these women, was not to resolve the strain, but to adapt to it. Parents and LGBs also adapted to strain and used palliative emotion work to diminish the noxious feelings the relationship caused. How might palliative emotion work serve a similar function for other strained parent-child relationships? How, for example, might parents and children manage strained relationships with each other—or other family members—by redefining the meaning of hurtful comments,
minimizing the importance of the relationship causing them emotional pain, or comparing themselves to people who have even greater strain in their relationship?

Emotion work, as a form of relationship management, is not without consequence. LGBs, for example, privileged the feelings of their heterosexual family members. This emotion work was used not only to prevent strain (i.e., preventive emotion work) but also to preserve familial relationships that were already strained (i.e., remedial and palliative emotion work). The paradox was that LGBs were privileging the feelings of those who necessitated that they do emotion work in the first place.

Family sociologists should consider the consequences of using emotion work to preserve other strained parent-child relationships and how this emotion work privileges certain people’s feelings. For example, a major source of conflict among parents and their adult children is clashing religious beliefs (Birditt et al. 2010; King, Ledwell, and Pearce-Morris 2013). These relationships—like strained parent-LGB child relationships—are often preserved despite negative feelings they create. Researchers who identify this tension, however, do not explain how the relationship is maintained and the consequence of its maintenance for parent and child wellbeing. Do adult children, in order to preserve strained familial relationships, conceal or selectively share information about their religious beliefs when around family members with views different from their own? How might this concealment privilege the feelings of those for whom they are doing emotion work? Relatedly, how might using emotion work to preserve strained relationships reinforce or strengthen the rights and beliefs of dominant groups (e.g., those who hold Christian beliefs)?

The emotion work used to preserve strained parent-child relationships is often made invisible. This is yet another reason family sociologists should explore how emotion work is
used to preserve relationships and its consequences as a form of relationship management. In chapter 2 I discussed how LGBs diminished the importance of, or completely made invisible, the emotion work they used to manage relationships with each other and other family members. Parents, for example, suggested that giving subtle affirmations in support of same-sex couples (i.e., “planting the seed of acceptance” prior to their child coming out) was really just being a “good parent” and therefore not emotion work at all. LGBs suggested that gradually revealing sexuality-related information to their parents was meant to prevent their parents from becoming uncomfortable or shocked, but also was something any decent human being would do. The emotion work parents and LGBs used to preserve their relationship, then, was diminished in importance (LGBs) or made invisible (parents).

Diminishing or making invisible the emotion work used to preserve familial relationships is all the more dangerous when it privileges the feelings of certain family members (e.g., heterosexual family members). In these cases not only are heterosexual family members benefitting from their LGB family members’ emotion work, but the emotion work used to preserve the relationships is often not even visible. How might other strained parent-child relationships be dependent on invisible emotion work? How might the invisibility of this emotion work serve to protect members of privileged groups and larger systems of inequality (e.g., heterosexism and homophobia) that necessitate emotion work?

I explore the protection of larger systems of inequality further in the next section. In a culture of incomplete acceptance, the emotion work used to preserve strained parent-LGB child relationships also masks heterosexism. To this end, the emotion work used to maintain these relationships actively reproduces inequality by masking emotion work and the heterosexism that makes the emotion work necessary.
Masking Heterosexism Through Emotion Work

It was not only emotion work that was made invisible (or diminished in importance) in the process of maintaining strained familial relationships, but also the larger culture of heterosexism that required its use. For example, parents worried that they would make their LGB child angry, anxious, or upset by bringing up her/his sexuality. Theresa (discussed in chapter 2) did not bring up Fiona’s bisexuality—that is, she “concealed”—because she was afraid that broaching the topic would make Fiona uncomfortable or angry. Theresa diminished the importance of the emotion work. She went on to suggest that concealing was “no big deal.” Her daughter, she explained, is very sensitive and it was not worth creating a huge fight. By suggesting that the decision to conceal was about protecting a child’s feelings, parents need not reflect on the context that provokes discomfort in the first place. Theresa suggested that she just wanted to spare her daughter’s feelings, thereby overlooking the larger culture of heterosexism that made her daughter uncomfortable talking about sexuality in the first place. Using emotion work to manage familial relationships, then, made heterosexism invisible.

The masking of heterosexism was also apparent with palliative emotion work and, more specifically, with the strategies of redefining and minimizing. LGBs diminished noxious feelings created by homophobic remarks, suggesting that the remarks were expressions of religious or generational differences—not rejection or hatred. In contrast, parents diminished some of the lingering discomfort they had with their child’s sexuality by minimizing the importance of their child’s sexuality. In both examples, the heterosexism—which made the emotion work necessary—was made invisible. Minimizing and redefining not only allowed parents to maintain a relationship with their LGB child, but also to avoid
challenging their qualms about their child’s sexuality. In contrast, these strategies for LGBs left unchallenged the heterosexism that caused their distress. Preserving the familial relationship did not involve challenging the source of the conflict (heterosexist and homophobic family members), merely soothing its sting.

Masking heterosexism reflects a larger narrative of incomplete acceptance in the United States. The passage of marriage equality symbolized, for many, the end of anti-LGB discrimination. Heterosexuals, as well as LGBs and their parents, expressed this sentiment (Ghaziani 2014; Kimport 2013). Coleman-Fountain (2014b) calls this way of thinking a “politics of getting over it.” In this context, people feel that asserting “Gay Rights” is no longer necessary because such rights have already been achieved. This belief is reflected in the redefining and minimizing parents and LGBs used to manage relationships with each other and other family members. Homophobic and heterosexist remarks became invisible in an environment where LGB acceptance was already achieved. Instead, these comments became expressions of, as several LGBs explained, love and acceptance. For parents, lingering discomfort was dealt with by simply minimizing the importance of their child’s sexual identity altogether. If sexuality is unimportant, then the discomfort it creates can be diminished. This logic fits well with the larger politics of “getting over it.” The issue, of course, is that sexuality-based inequality persists (LaSala and Frierson 2012). Preventive, remedial, and palliative emotion work demonstrate some of the subtle ways this occurs—in familial relationships—in a culture that characterizes LGB discrimination as a thing of the past.

Heterosexism is not the only form of bigotry that has become less overt. Racism and sexism have as well. The overt racism that was dominant earlier in the twentieth century has
been replaced with colorblind racism (Bonilla-Silva 2010; Brooks, Ebert, and Flockhart 2017). The prevailing belief in an era of colorblindness is that racism has been abolished and that race no longer dictates or shapes experience in the United States. Here, a white person choosing not to date or form a friendship with a person of color is seen as a personal preference rather than a product of institutional racism.

In a post-Title IX, post-Title VII, and post-Equal Pay Act era, sexism is also seen as a thing of the past. As with racism, though, sexism is still pervasive. It operates through a form of “gender-blindness” (Stoll, Glenn, and Pinter 2016). A woman doing the majority of housework or childcare in this context may be seen as exercising individual choice rather than accommodating their male partner’s refusal to split domestic work equitably (Lamont 2013; Stone 2007).

Contemporary racism, sexism, and heterosexism all share an important feature: they rely on less overt forms of discrimination that preserve, protect, and mask the power of the dominant group. In this context, racism is colorblind, sexism is gender blind, and heterosexism is sexuality blind. Here, hurtful comments are a product of religious or generational differences, not an expression of heterosexism. The preventive, remedial, and palliative forms of emotion work used to deal with these comments are divorced from the heterosexist context that necessitates their use.

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¹ Overt racism does, of course, still exist. I am suggesting, as Bonilla-Silva (2010) has, that the dominant form of racism has become more covert.
EMOTIONAL FUTURES: EXPANDING THE SCOPE OF EMOTION WORK

Emotion work is often done with consciousness of time. Remedial emotion work relies on hope of a better relationship in the future. This hope transforms noxious feelings in the present into a temporary nuisance. Palliative emotion work also looks to the future to diminish and transform negative feelings in the present. When one anticipates a future of continued relationship strain, minimizing the importance of the relationship, redefining the meaning of homophobic comments, categorizing expectations of emotional support from unaccepting family members, and comparing one’s own family situation to those who are worse off, help to diminish bad feelings. In this section, I first discuss the temporality of emotion work. Next, I turn to an often overlooked use of time as it pertains to emotion: the role of emotional futures in shaping how feelings are managed in the present. I also highlight the utility of distinguishing between short-term and long-term uses of emotion work.

Emotional pasts are used as the foundation for our behaviors in the present, as well as how we think and feel about ourselves vis-à-vis others (Maines, Sugrue, and Katovich 1983; Mattley 2002; Mead 1932). This is apparent in Snow and Anderson’s (1987) discussion of “fictive storytelling” among the homeless. By embellishing things they did in the past (e.g., being heroic)—a practice Snow and Anderson call “identity talk”—the homeless paint a positive image of themselves in the present. Invoking the past, then, is a way to manage feelings and identity in the present.

Manipulating feelings in the present is also central to our behaviors and relationships with others in the present. Hochschild (1989), in her research with married couples, shows how rethinking feelings and expectations about the domestic division of labor allows women to manage the anger that the domestic division of labor creates in their life. Constructing
“family myths” is central to this process. By convincing themselves that the domestic division of labor is equitable (even when it is not) women are able to diminish some of the resentment they feel towards their partner—a solution that may not have a lasting effect.

Less attention has been given to the role that emotional futures play in shaping our behaviors, thinking, and feelings in the present (Barsic, Van der Linden, and Argembeau 2016; Beckert 2016). Markus and Nurius’s (1986) research on “possible selves” is an important exception. Possible selves serve two functions for people’s current behavior. First and foremost, possible selves serve as motivation. For example, fear that one may be financially insecure in the future may serve as motivation for working harder and taking less financial risk in the present. Possible selves can also be symbols of hope. Imagining a promising career allows an unemployed person to maintain positive self-regard in the present. Barsic et al. (2016) extend this idea in their discussion of “emotional future thinking” (EmoFT). Instead of self-concept, they consider how focusing on the future can regulate emotion in the present. For instance, by thinking about one’s future in a positive light, one can maintain a positive mood (especially happiness) in the present.

My research shows how emotional futures are useful beyond regulating self-concept and mood, and need not only be used to shape one’s own feelings. Focusing on the future can also be used to manage relationships—and rationalize maintaining relationships—that cause emotional pain in oneself and one’s family. This is accomplished through preventive, remedial, and palliative emotion work.

It is easier to put up with the discomfort, anger, and frustration relationships cause when one anticipates an improved or more accepting family relationship in the future. This was evident with remedial emotion work. In my study LGBs reasoned that the progress their
parents had made in becoming accepting was a sign that they would become even more accepting in the future. Similarly, parents emphasized progress that unaccepting family members made—in accepting their LGB child—in order to convince themselves and their child that such progress would continue in the future. In both cases, it was the hope of continued improvement that rationalized maintaining relationships that caused negative feelings in the present.

Anticipating a better familial relationship in the future also transformed emotion work into a short-term strategy; it was something that would not always be necessary. This was important for parents and LGBs whose emotional wellbeing—or “emotional energy” (Collins 2004)—was frequently threatened by their family members’ homophobic comments or behaviors. Believing that they would not have to put up with homophobia forever allowed them to feel better about preserving relationships that sometimes induced negative feelings.

The value of hope lessens when one is uncertain that the strained relationship will improve in the future. Under these conditions, LGBs and their parents traded short-term strategies of remedial emotion work for long-term strategies of palliative emotion work. The goal, under more permanently strained conditions, was to adapt to one’s circumstance rather than rely on the hope of improvement. This also involved looking to the future. When parents and LGBs expected their future relationships to remain strained, they minimized the importance of the relationship, redefined the meaning of homophobic comments, and rethought their expectations for emotional support from family who caused them emotional pain.

Brashers (2001) made a similar observation among people living with HIV in the late 1990s. The uncertainty and unpredictability of their future, and the expectation that the virus
would not go away, created anxiety and discomfort in the present. People with HIV adapted to their situation by rearranging goals and expectations. Parents and LGBs used palliative emotion work in a similar way, albeit with two important differences. First, there was no uncertainty. LGBs and their parents accepted that the familial relationship would remain strained. In response, they reevaluated how they felt about relationships that caused them emotional pain. Second, adaptation not only had a personal effect, but an interpersonal one as well. Parents and LGBs minimized, redefined, categorized, and compared not only to diminish and transform their noxious feelings, but each other’s—and other family members’—noxious feelings as well.

In sum, the emotion work LGBs and their parents used to navigate strained familial relationships relied on how they envisioned the future of the relationship. If they anticipated improvement, emotion work was fueled by hope. The hope of improvement also rationalized maintaining a relationship that caused negative feelings in the present. When one anticipated a better relationship in the future, the emotion work put into managing it was transformed into a temporary nuisance—a short-term rather than permanent effort. Sometimes familial relationships were unlikely to improve. Adaptation was necessary under these conditions. The strategies of emotion work, then, transformed from short-term to long-term solutions. Minimizing, redefining, categorizing, and comparing facilitated parents and LGBs in this process.

Our emotions are managed in part through imagining time travel. We live in the past and future as much as in the present. In this study, I have suggested that focusing on the future, especially, not only allows people to diminish and transform noxious feelings in
themselves and others, but also to preserve important relationships. Looking to the future is what makes the present bearable.

LIMITATIONS

In this section I focus on three limitations of this study. The first has to do with racial diversity. Second, I highlight the importance of including parent-LGB child pairs. Finally, I address issues of bias in my parent-sample.

Parent-LGB child relationships are shaped by race. Black gay men in Stacy’s (2011) sample feared that they would have to give up their racial identity if they embraced their sexual identity. Others feared that family members would reject them if they came out. In this context, some LGBs of color choose to stay in the closet. Doing so requires rationalization. Acosta (2013) found that queer Latinas justified hiding their sexuality from their parents by believing that maintaining their racial heritage and relationship with their parents was more important (see also Moore 2011). It follows that LGBs of color continue to experience racialized family dilemmas after coming out to their parents. This racialization is a potentially complicating factor.

Eleven of the thirty LGBs I interviewed were people of color. While I did not observe notable differences regarding how these LGBs used emotion work to manage familial relationships, I also did not probe about race. Future research should not only consider how race shapes relationship management and emotion work on an ongoing basis, but also how preventive, remedial, and palliative emotion work might reproduce racism as well as heterosexism.
Nor did I observe differences in how parents of color managed relationships with their children. However, this may be because I interviewed only four parents of color. Past research highlights the necessity of attending to race when exploring how parents feel about their LGB child’s sexuality. LaSala and Frierson (2012) spoke to parents of color who worried about their gay sons experiencing discrimination not merely because of homophobia but also because Black masculinity emphasizes toughness, control, emotional stoicism, pride, and hyper heterosexuality (see also Collins 2004). Future research should consider how parental concern for a child’s sexuality shapes the way parents manage their own, their child’s, and other family members’ feelings.

Schalet (2011) highlights the benefits of interviewing parent and child pairs in her research on the meanings teenagers and parents give to teenage sexuality. She found that in some cases they had similar views of sexuality. In other cases, both teenagers and parents saw teenage sexuality as dangerous. In other instances, their views diverged. Some parents thought that sex was not that important to their teenagers, yet many of their teenage children were not only thinking about—and having—sex, but felt as though talking to their parents about sex would be scary and/or out of the question. This possibility of widely divergent views suggests the importance of looking at parent/child pairs.

Eight of my participants were parent-LGB child pairs. This was due, in part, to methodological constraints (an inability to find LGBs willing to recommend their parents to be interviewed, and vice-versa). From these eight pairings, however, I learned that parents and LGBs did not always agree on how understanding or accepting the other was. Theresa, the mother of a bisexual daughter, Fiona, provides an example. When asked whether she thought Fiona would describe her as supportive, Theresa said, “I mean, I think I am. She may
have a different take.” Fiona did have a different take, as I found out when I interviewed her.

Though Fiona described her mother as accepting, she also highlighted frustration with her mother who, at times, seemed to not take her bisexuality seriously. Though it was beyond the scope of this project, future research should consider how parents and LGBs differently interpret acceptance and what it means to be accepting in a culture where acceptance is incomplete and conditional. How might these different interpretations exacerbate existing strain or create new strain? Including a sample comprised entirely of LGBs and parents who are related to each other would be a way to address questions like this.

A final limitation of this study concerns variation in levels of parental acceptance. All fifteen parent-participants said they were accepting of their LGB children. This is partly a product of sampling. Parents recruited from PFLAG are typically accepting of their LGB children, or are working on it (Broad et al. 2004; Freedman 2008; Johnson and Best 2012; Martin et al. 2009). I also suspect that parents who were recommended for interviews from their LGB children—whom I also interviewed—were more likely to be accepting. This is based on my assumption that LGBs would not feel comfortable recommending their parents for an interview about sexuality if their parents would be uncomfortable with it—an assumption that was confirmed by LGBs I interviewed.

It is likely that the emotion work of parents who are more accepting, or are working toward greater acceptance, looks different than the emotion work done by parents who have major qualms about their LGB child’s sexuality. Including parents who vary widely in degree of acceptance is all the more important in light of the three forms of emotion work I observed. How might parents who have religious and moral opposition to their child’s sexuality maintain ongoing relationships with their LGB children? How do these parents
maintain relationships with their LGB children when they have reached a plateau in their acceptance (e.g., due to religious beliefs) or are unwilling to accept their child’s sexuality? Researchers might also consider how religion plays a part in both generating and managing emotions related to sexuality and parent-child relationships (Wolkomir 2006).

**FUTURE DIRECTIONS**

Future research should focus more specifically on differences between lesbian, gay, and bisexual, people. Watson (2014) suggests that bisexual women sometimes come out as lesbian to their parents (instead of as bisexual) to avoid monosexist remarks from family—such as bisexuals being promiscuous. Similarly, bisexual men sometimes come out as gay because they fear people will not believe they are bisexual. This is due, in part, to the belief that all bisexual men are gay but unwilling to admit it (Scherrer et al. 2015). Future research might look at how strategies of preventive, remedial, and palliative emotion work reflect one’s sexual identity. Research might also examine the types of “controlling images” (Collins 1990) about sexuality LGB people contend with and how are they are dealt with in the process of managing familial relationships. This is important for LGB parents as well. Kane (2012) found that same-sex parents felt greater accountability to their child’s gender expression because of their own sexual identity. Do same-sex parents experience accountability to their child’s sexual identity as well? This was a question I was not able to answer because my sample of parents was all heterosexual. Future research should consider how LGB parents deal with controlling images about sexuality and how emotion work might be used to manage relationships with their LGB children.
Focusing on gender can illuminate the unequal burden that is placed on lesbian and bisexual women as they manage family relationships. Family work, as DeVault (1999) argues, falls disproportionately on women. It is unsurprising, then, that the work of concealing an LGB child’s sexuality would fall more on mothers than fathers. As I argued in my discussion of remedial emotion work, keeping a child’s sexuality a secret from family members can be stressful. This was the case for Laurie (discussed in chapter 3), who kept her son Trevor’s sexuality a secret from her partner, Carl. While this secret was ultimately revealed, it caused stress when the secret was active. Future research should consider the burden that “family secrets” (Hochschild 1989) place on mothers of LGBs, the reason mothers feel a need to keep these secrets, and how emotion work might circumvent or intensify familial strain.

As I was writing the three substantive chapters of this dissertation, I thought about how emotion work might help us understand experiences in romantic relationships. Remedial emotion work relies on the hope that a relationship will improve. Focusing on progress or the future allowed LGBs and their parents to transform discomfort they experienced in the present into a short-term inconvenience. We might generalize this principle and ask how couples in a romantic relationship similarly look to the future and focus on progress to transform negative feelings—in the present—into a temporary problem.

Similarly, how might palliative emotion work allow couples to manage permanently strained romantic relationships? Lois (2006) found that mothers of preschoolers diminished guilt they experienced over spending more time with their child than their partner by prioritizing their role as parent over their role as partner. Prioritizing did not require a change in the amount of time devoted to their partner or child. The unequal distribution of time—
which created their guilt—remained the same. I found that LGBs and their parents similarly
minimized the importance of familial relationships and lowered expectations of emotional
support from some family members as a way to diminish discomfort. Researchers might
explore these processes in other contexts. Do couples manage more permanent strain in their
relationships through palliative emotion work? How might minimizing the importance of the
relationship—or one’s role as a spouse—diminish or transform hurtful comments made by a
partner? How might categorizing expectations of emotional support from a partner allow
couples to manage and maintain relationships that elicit negative feelings on a regular basis?

I see preventive, remedial, and palliative emotion work as “generic processes”
(Blumer 1969; Hughes 1958; Schwalbe et al. 2000) that can be found in other relationships—
as noted above—and other settings. Copp (1998) found that employers use preventive
emotion management to keep negative feelings at bay under poor working conditions. I
showed how preventive emotion work was similarly used to keep noxious feelings at bay
among LGBs and parents of LGB children. This suggests we can pose broader questions
about these processes. How might remedial and palliative emotion work be used to
understand experiences in the workplace? Do employees diminish or transform negative
feelings when their careers are not going as they had hoped? How might focusing on the
future, or identifying small signs of progress, be used to manage guilt and anger in
relationships with managers and colleagues in the workplace?

Finally, future research should consider the role that emotional futures play in
shaping how feelings are managed in the present. My research focused on parent-child
relationship management. It follows that emotional futures might shape other types of
relationships and the doings of emotion work in other contexts. Relatedly, emotion work can
have short-term and long-term uses. We might thus conclude how short-term and long-term uses of emotion work help manage strained friendships, or romantic and professional relationships, and how hope of a better relationship in the future or adaptation to strain might help people manage strain in other types of relationships and other contexts.

CONCLUSION

Improvements in the lives of LGBs over the last decade often obscure the reality: equality on the basis of sexuality has not been achieved. U.S. society is not, as some have argued, “post-gay” (Savin-Williams 2005) any more than it is “post-racial” or “post-gender.” Fewer LGBs may be kicked out of the home when they come out compared to twenty years ago, but these relationships are not, as I have shown, tension-free. As Walters (2014) argues, “tolerance” may be a better term to describe the experiences of LGBs in the United States. The contemporary Gay Rights movement has not overcome the heterosexism that oppresses LGBs, as I have demonstrated throughout this dissertation. Rather, LGBs and their parents have adapted to heterosexism; they have learned how to maintain familial relationships in a context of incomplete acceptance. Preventive, remedial, and palliative emotion work constitute some of the ways family relationships are managed in this context. In each case, it is heterosexual family members whose interests and feelings are protected. By working to prevent, diminish, and transform noxious feelings—in themselves, each other, and other family members—LGBs and their parents are able to preserve familial relationships, but at a cost: maintaining a heterosexist system that makes their emotion work necessary.
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APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW WITH LGB PEOPLE

1. Tell me about when you first realized you were LGB?
   PROBES: How old were you? What was going on in your life? What was going through your mind at the time? What were some things you were concerned or excited about? Did you have a hard time accepting that you were LGB? If so, how did you deal with these feelings? Were you worried about your parents finding out you were LGB? How do you think they would have reacted had they found out? Did you do anything to ensure they did not find out? Why?

2. Did you confide in anyone prior to telling your parents you were LGB? If yes, tell me about this experience.
   PROBES: What did you say? How did you feel going into this discussion? How did you feel during and after? What was it about this person that made you feel like you could tell them? How did they respond? How did you think they would respond prior to telling them? What kept you from telling certain people? What keeps you from telling certain people now (e.g. afraid come back to family)?

3. Tell me about when you first told a parent you were LGB?
   PROBES: How did you prepare yourself for telling your parents (psych self out)? How did you anticipate they would respond? Did you prepare your parents for this exchange? For example, did you tell them in stages, or did you just come right out and say it? What was your motivation for telling them one way over another? What was it about this time in your life that made you feel it was the right time to tell them (what kept you from telling before then)? How do you remember feeling before, during and after? How did your parents respond? How did you feel about their reaction? If you were upset about their reaction, was anything done to “fix” the situation? Has your relationship improved since coming out? Worsened? Have you done anything to improve your relationship with your parents? Have your parents done anything to improve your relationship with them?

4. Have your parents ever confided/asked advice from others regarding your sexuality after you came out? Talked with others? How do you feel about that? What was the purpose of them seeking out this advice or having these conversations?

5. Have your parents ever given you any advice regarding how or if you should come out to other people?
   PROBES: family members? Friends? Neighbors? Were there “rules” about
who you should/shouldn’t tell? How did you feel about this? Did you feel the rules/suggestions were justified?

6. Did you come out to both of your parents at the same time? If no, how did you determine which parent you would talk to first?
   PROBES: Did this parent give you any advice about coming out to the other parent? If yes, what did they say?

7. Have you talked to your parents about your sexuality since coming out? If so, tell me about a time you had this conversation with your parents.
   PROBES: What was the purpose of this conversation and how did they respond? If you have not talked to your parents about your sexuality since coming out, why not? How did you feel before, during, and after having these conversations? Under what circumstances would your sexuality come up in conversation (e.g. something g-ma said, X-mas, siblings, etc.)? Are you ok with this set up?

8. What role do friends play? Do you talk to them as way to cope with not being able to talk to parents? How do you feel about this? Are there other entities that you use to deal with not being able to talk to parents?

9. Are there some things about being LGB and/or your relationships with partners that you do not talk to your parents about? WHY (TO PROTECT THEM)? How do you decide what to talk to them about?
   PROBES: Have you ever broached a topic about your sexuality, dating, relationships, that led to an uncomfortable encounter with your parents? What happened? What did you do? What did your parents do? Did attempt to make things right?

10. What types of topics pertaining to your sexuality, dating, and/or relationships are you likely to talk to your parents about? What is it about these topics that make you more comfortable? (e.g., about marriage, dating, relationships. Things they can better relate to maybe?)

11. Have your parents ever said anything about your sexuality that made you uncomfortable? Did they seek to fix the situation later? Did you seek to fix the situation later? How did you make things better? Why do you think they say these things? How do you feel about this?

12. Do you think your parents’ feelings about your sexuality have changed throughout your life?
   PROBES: What sorts of things have they said to make you think their feeling have or have not changed? Are there changes you would like to see in terms
of how your parents think about LGB people? Are there changes you would like to see in terms of how your parents think about your sexuality? Do you consider your parents to be “accepting”? If so, what does this look like (e.g., JOKING)? How do they show they are accepting? Do you wish they were more accepting? What would this look like (e.g., in a perfect world/future)? If they are not accepting, how do they convey their feelings about your sexuality to you? Why do you think they feel the way they do (e.g., their upbringing, etc.)? Do you think they will ultimately “come around”?

13. If you had a question about dating/relationships/sex which parent/parental figure would you talk with?

PROBES: What is it about this parent that makes them more approachable? What is it about the other parent that makes them less approachable? Tell me about a time when you talked to this parent about dating/relationships/sex. How did this parent respond? Had you discussed this topic with your other parents how do you think they would have responded?

14. Have you ever introduced a same-sex romantic partner to your parents? Describe this experience.

PROBES: How did you feel before making this introduction? How did you feel during? How did you feel after? How did your parents react? If they responded negatively, did they apologize or attempt to “make things right” later? Did you try to make things right later? Were there certain things you said your parents to prepare them for this introduction?

PROBES: If you have never introduced a romantic partner, how does the idea of introducing a romantic partner to your parent’s make you feel? What would need to happen for you to feel comfortable introducing a partner? How do you think they would react to an introduction? Why do you think they would react this way? How do you feel about not being able to introduce a partner to your parents?

15. Have you and your parents ever talked about a partner spending the night? If yes, were there “rules”? For example, staying in the same room, etc.? In general, have your parents ever given you rules about having a partner over at the house? If you have siblings, are these rules similar for them? How do you feel about these rules? Are they fair? Thinking back to when you came out, did you parents have any rules? For example, sleepovers, having the door open, etc.? how did you feel about these rules?

16. Have you ever introduced a romantic partner to other family members? Tell me about this.
PROBES: Were you nervous? Anxious? Afraid? How did you feel before, during and after? What was it about this family member that made you feel you could tell them? Are there certain family members who are not aware of your romantic partners (past or present)? Why is this? What do you think would happen if you did introduce a same-gender partner to these family members.

Advice Questions and Closing

17. What advice would you have for a parent of a gay or bisexual young person about what not to do or how to be supportive when it comes to their dating relationships?

18. What advice would you have for a lesbian, gay or bisexual child who is navigating relationships, dating and parents?

19. Thank you for chatting with me today! Is there anything that I didn’t ask about that you think is important for me to know regarding issues LGB young adults have with their parents in terms of relationships?

20. Do you have any questions for me?
1. Did you ever suspect that _____________ was LGB? If yes, how did you know?

How did you feel about the prospect of _____________ being LGB?

PROBES: Were you concerned about _____________’s future? About how others would perceive her/him? How others would perceive your family? How did you make yourself ok with the prospect of _____________ being LGB? Did you talk to your partner about your suspicions? Did your partner suspect too?

2. How old was _____________ when s/he first told you s/he was gay? What happened? How did you respond? How did you feel before, during and after this admission?

PROBES: were there specific fears/concerns you had? Do you have any regrets concerning how you responded? How might you respond differently today? How did you show _____________ how you felt about them being LGB? Did you talk to your partner about this admission? What did you say?

3. How has your relationship with _____________ changed since s/he came out to you?

PROBES: has your relationship improved? Are there certain things that you find difficult to deal with? If so, how do you cope? How do you feel about _____________ being LGB now compared to when they first came out? How do you show _____________ that you feel this way? Have your feelings about LGB people changed since _____________ came out? How so?

4. Have you ever sought advice (e.g., from friends, family, professionals) about _____________ being LGB, or relationships among LGB people?

PROBES: If yes, tell me about this, and what encouraged you to seek advice. For example, a desire to “get it right,” be supportive, anxieties or fears regarding LGB sexuality?

PROBES: If no, can you think of a time when you discussed _____________’s sexuality with another person? What was discussed and how did you come to have this discussion with this particular person? What did you hope to get out of this discussion?

5. Tell me about a time you talked about _____________’s sexuality with your partner or another family member.

PROBES: when _____________ came out to you what did you say to your other children? To your partner?
6. Tell me about a time you talked about dating/relationships with _________. What was going on at that time that led you to talk about dating/relationships with _________?
   PROBES: How did ____________ respond? How did you feel about having this discussion? How did you feel during and after this conversation?

   PROBES: If you have not brought up dating/relationships with __________, why do you think this is? What kind of feeling come up when you think about talking about dating/relationships with ________________?

7. Are there certain topics pertaining to ______________'s sexuality that you are not comfortable talking to ______________ about? How do you deal with this discomfort? Do you think __________ is aware of your discomfort?

8. Have you ever broached a topic about __________’s sexuality that led to an uncomfortable encounter?
   PROBES: What happened? What did you do? Did you talk to anyone about this discomfort?

9. Has ______________ ever asked you questions about dating or relationships with someone of the same sex (pressure to date, fear of how others would respond to their relationship, etc.)? How did you respond?
   PROBES: If __________ has not asked you questions about dating or relationships with someone of the same sex, why do you think this is?

10. If __________ had a question about dating/relationships which parent would s/he be most likely to talk with?
    PROBES: What is it about this parent that makes them more approachable? What is it about the other parent that makes them less approachable? How do you feel about this?

11. Has ______________ ever introduced a romantic partner to you? Tell me about some of these encounters.
    PROBES: How did you feel during and after? Did you prepare yourself for this introduction? Do you think ______________ was nervous about introducing their partner?

    PROBES: If no, how do you think you would feel if ______________ did introduce a partner?

    PROBES: Are there any rules you have about ____________ having a partner in the house (e.g., sleeping in the same room, etc.)? Did you institute rules after __________ came out?
12. How would you feel if ______________ introduced a partner that was stereotypically gay (e.g., butch lesbian or effeminate gay man)? What about a partner of a different race?
   PROBES: Would you have any concerns? How would you address these concerns?

13. Has ______________ discussed being gay and/or introduced a partner to other family members? Tell me about this. Are there certain family members who are not aware of ______________’s sexuality and/or romantic partner (past or present)?
   PROBES: If there are certain family members that are not aware, how do you think these family members would respond if they found out? Are there certain family members you would prefer ______________ not to discuss their sexuality/relationships with?

14. Have you and ______________ ever talked about sex? (pressure to have sex, sex related issues that might pertain specifically to LGB people, etc.).
   PROBES: If yes, who brought up the conversations? What was going on at the time that led to this discussion? How did you feel before, during and after the discussion?
   PROBES: If you have never talked about sex with ______________ how do you feel about the thought of doing so?
   PROBES: If you have other children, have you ever talked to them about sex? What was that like? How do you think it would be different to do so with ______________?

Advice Questions and Closing Questions

1. What advice would you have for a parent of a gay or bisexual young person about what not to do or how to be supportive when it comes to their dating relationships?

2. What advice would you have for a lesbian, gay or bisexual child who is navigating relationships, dating and parents?

3. Thank you for chatting with me today! Is there anything that I didn’t ask about that you think is important for me to know regarding issues LGB young adults have with their parents in terms of relationships?

4. Do you have any questions for me?
LGB People and Parents of LGB Children
Are you lesbian, gay or bisexual? Are you the parent of a lesbian, gay or bisexual child? If so, you are eligible to participate in a study of how parents and their LGB children talk about sexual orientation, coming out, dating and relationships with each other.

To sign up for a one hour interview or to learn more, e-mail Tyler Flockhart at tyler_flockhart@ncsu.edu

All information is confidential. Privacy is carefully protected.
APPENDIX C

LGB SAMPLE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Sexual Orientation</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
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