

ARTICLE

Latinx LGBTQ+ youth and grandparents: Intergenerational solidarity, precarious familismo, and cisnormativity

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Abstract

Objective: This study documents the importance of grandparents for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) Latinx youth and how cisnormativity shapes these relationship dynamics.

Background: Most research on LGBTQ+ youth's family relations centers on the parent–child relationship. Grandparents are important for racially marginalized families, particularly Latinx families. Additionally, Latinx LGBTQ+ youth are impacted by precarious familismo—the disparate experiences with family members in which their gender and sexuality are simultaneously accepted and rejected.

Method: The data for this project are from the Family Housing and Me (FHAM) project, a landmark longitudinal study on the impact of non-parental relatives on the lives of LGBTQ+ youth. This paper analyzes a subsample of 35 qualitative interviews with Latinx LGBTQ+ youth (16–19 years old) who live in South Texas or the Inland Empire of California, the majority of whom are transgender or nonbinary.

Results: Grandparents played an important role in the lives of Latinx LGBTQ+ youth interviewees, including providing many of the positive benefits of familismo. The youth also described “disparate experiences” of precarious familismo in how their grandparents simultaneously attempted identity support of their gender identities and reinforced cisnormativity. Youth often navigated these experiences by expressing low expectations that their

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grandparents would fully understand their gender identities, which we refer to as *generational gender expectations*.

Conclusion: Research on LGBTQ+ youth should integrate the study of non-parental relatives to fully understand support networks and family systems for LGBTQ+ youth. Additionally, cisnormativity plays an important role in family life and familismo.

KEYWORDS

grandparents, Hispanic/Latino/a, housing, LGBTQ, transgender, youth

INTRODUCTION

Family members like grandmothers and aunts are a central part of family life, especially Black, Latinx, Asian, Indigenous, and low-income family life (Gerstel, 2011; Sarkisian et al., 2012; Stack, 1975). For instance, grandparents often play an important role as caregivers and supporters of youth in marginalized families (Attar-Schwartz et al., 2009; Hayslip & Fruhauf, 2017; Monserud, 2008). However, almost all scholarship on the families of origin of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) youth prioritizes the relationship between LGBTQ+ youth and their parents, overlooking emotional and material support provided by other family members (e.g., Grossman et al., 2019; Watson et al., 2016). This study asks the research question of how do Latinx LGBTQ+ youth experience their relationship with their grandparents, specifically the support of these grandparents? We show that non-parental relatives, particularly grandparents, play a significant role for LGBTQ+ youth in their everyday lives. More specifically, we capture the practices of grandparents that help LGBTQ+ Latinx youth. We argue that grandparents and other non-parental relatives should be included in research on LGBTQ+ family life.

Additionally, this study examines how LGBTQ+ Latinx youth say that grandparents enforce cisnormativity in family life—a process that impacts all youth. Cisnormativity is the structures and practices that privilege people who identify with their assigned birth and who embody and enact gender expressions aligned with this assigned birth gender (Robinson, 2022). We examine this cisnormativity within the dynamics of *familismo* or familism, the use of solidarity and interdependence to prioritize the family unit over individual family members in Latinx family life (Patrón, 2021b). Intergenerational solidarity refers to the quality of contact and emotional exchanges between grandparents and LGBTQ+ youth and is focal to the examination of grandchild–grandparent relationships (Reczek & Bosley-Smith, 2022). We build on Oscar Patrón (2021b) theory of “precarious familismo,” which emphasizes “disparate experiences” or the complex, simultaneous experiences of support and rejection for queer Latinx people in their families of origin. As Patrón shows, patriarchy and heterosexism structure familismo, and thus these disparate experiences; yet, how cisnormativity also shapes these institutional origins of familismo has not been studied. Indeed, little is known about the precarious familismo of transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary Latinx LGBTQ+ people (Patrón, 2021b). We argue that family scholars and social scientists need to examine how cisnormativity is part of the institutional origins of familismo for Latinx LGBTQ+ family members and for family processes more broadly.

We analyzed 35 qualitative interviews of Latinx LGBTQ+ youth (16–19 years old) from the Family Housing and Me (FHAM) project—a study in South Texas and the Inland Empire of California that examines LGBTQ+ youth and their experiences of housing stability. Most youth interviewees are transgender, nonbinary, or have another gender-diverse identity. LGBTQ+ interviewees described their grandparents as adhering to values of familismo,

including emotional closeness, quality time, and housing together. These youth also documented the “disparate experiences” of precarious familismo in how their grandparents both attempted identity support of their gender identities and reinforced cisnormativity within the family. Youth also diminished their grandparents’ cisnormativity by applying narratives of generational gender expectations to justify their grandparent’s deadnaming or misgendering them to maintain the intergenerational solidarity that is part of familismo.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Grandparents and LGBTQ+ youth

Research on LGBTQ+ youth often ignores the importance of grandparents due to the idealization of the nuclear family and parent–child relationship (Reczek, 2020). In the United States, the idealized family is a white, middle-class nuclear family, a married, heterosexual couple and their children (Gerstel, 2011). However, the nuclear family is not the empirically dominant family form (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022). In the United States, a majority of adults live within an hour of other relatives, such as uncles and aunts (Hurst, 2022), and more than one-third of U.S. children lived with non-parental relatives at some point in their childhood (Cross, 2018). Addressing these shifts calls into question the historically unwavering importance placed on the parent–child relationship (Reczek & Bosley-Smith, 2022). The parent–child relationship is maintained by compulsory kinship, or the expectations that these relationships are unique, enduring, and worth preserving even if a parent is toxic (Reczek & Bosley-Smith, 2022).

Despite the significance of grandparents in family life, especially for people of color and working-class people’s lives (Gerstel, 2011; Sarkisian et al., 2012; Stack, 1975), research still focuses on the parent–child relationship, reifying the idealization of the nuclear family and erasing the role of other relatives in the support, safety, and care of children and youth. Grandparents are important for Latinx families, as Latinx families tend to have closer relationships with non-parental family members rather than isolating as nuclear family units (Gerstel, 2011).

Grandparents may be more important now than they have ever been, particularly for Latinx children and youth. As life expectancy increased from the twentieth to the 21st century, people are more likely to have living grandparents (Hayslip & Fruhauf, 2017). Additionally, Latinx adults tend to have children earlier, allowing grandparents more time with their grandchildren (Hayslip & Fruhauf, 2017). This heightened longevity has increased the involvement of grandparents in their grandchildren’s lives. Increased time also increases the types of support a grandparent may provide these children, including financial, emotional, and housing support. Grandparent involvement decreases depressive symptoms for youth, especially in single-parent households (Ruiz & Silverstein, 2007) and ones where grandchildren have strong relationships with their parents (Dunifon, 2013). There has been research into grandparents raising children (e.g., Pittman, 2023) but not how grandparents support youth’s housing stability. This study builds on this research to document LGBTQ+ Latinx youth’s relationships with their grandparents.

Only a few studies consider the relationship between LGBTQ+ adults and their grandparents, and none of those studies focus on LGBTQ+ youth or LGBTQ+ youth of color. Studies show, though, that many LGBTQ+ adults and their parents fear grandparents’ reactions to their grandchildren “coming out” (Scherrer, 2010), particularly due to perceived generational differences in homophobia. LGBTQ+ youth often see grandparents as a vertical, hierarchical relationship like their parents, and hence, see grandparents as authority figures, raising the stakes in disclosing their gender and sexuality to them (Grafsky et al., 2018). Parents may have deeper investments in their children’s gender and sexuality than other relatives (Stacey & Padavic, 2021). Thus, despite their age, grandparents often surprised their families by being

unconditionally and emotionally supportive of their LGBTQ+ grandchildren (Scherrer, 2010, 2016). Grandparents may be an unexpected form of emotional, instrumental, and housing support for LGBTQ+ grandchildren. Grandparents may position themselves as unconditionally loving and supportive, along with not interfering with their child's parenting, to guarantee close contact with their grandchildren (Fruhauf et al., 2019). To follow the social expectations of the grandparent role, such as unconditional family caretakers, grandparents may exhibit indifference toward the sexuality or gender identity of their grandchildren (Fruhauf et al., 2019). These conditions may ease the investment in grandchildren's LGBTQ+ identification, leading to more intergenerational solidarity between grandparents and grandchildren, including emotional closeness (Dolbin-MacNab, 2019).

Intergenerational solidarity is a key component of Latinx family relations. This study explores, then, this solidarity in LGBTQ+ Latinx youth's grandparent relationships and examines solidarity rationales, or the narratives youth employ to maintain these intergenerational ties (Bosley-Smith & Reczek, 2022). Solidarity rationales are a type of intergenerational work that LGBTQ+ people engage in to maintain ambivalent ties (Bosley-Smith & Reczek, 2022; Reczek & Bosley-Smith, 2022). In doing so, this study builds on this previous work by studying LGBTQ+ youth specifically LGBTQ+ Latinx youth. Youth may be in a different position than LGBTQ+ adults in previous studies about grandparents, as LGBTQ+ youth often have to rely on family members for financial, material, and housing support differently than adults. This study centers LGBTQ+ Latinx youth and their grandparents to capture the meanings of grandparents in their lives.

Precarious familismo and cisnormativity

Latinx families often embrace the cultural value of familism or *familismo* to support and uplift family members. Familism is linked to religion as well as dominant gender ideologies and practices like *marianismo*, *machismo*, and *caballerismo* (Gattamorta et al., 2019; Mendez-Luck et al., 2016). Notably, *familismo* applies to the entire family, as Latinx households are more likely to be intergenerational (Gerstel, 2011). By extension, *familismo* may increase the importance of grandparents in Latinx families. While still understudied, grandparents' role in Latinx youth's upbringing has been shown to significantly improve adult outcomes (Cortes Barragan et al., 2023). Such findings further exemplify the important and differential role grandparents have on Latinx youth. This study, as previously discussed, seeks to focus on the levels of solidarity or support grandparents are said to provide.

Scholars often emphasize the positive elements of familismo, including solidarity and unconditional support (Patrón, 2021b). Solidarity in familismo is built through everyday activities like extensive time together and interdependence in daily life (Acosta, 2010; Patrón, 2021b). Parents may teach the youth about the importance of devoting their resources, including time and money, to the family (Yahirun et al., 2015), which can develop a strong sense of emotional connectedness (Steidel & Contreras, 2003). Shared daily activities and shared living spaces may be particularly important for fostering familismo as well (Calzada et al., 2013). This cultural value has been empirically shown to improve Latinx children's well-being, including improved mental health and greater school attachment (Przeworski & Piedra, 2020; Stein et al., 2015).

There are unexplored gaps, though, between the value of familismo and how it is experienced by Latinx people (Gattamorta et al., 2019; Mendez-Luck et al., 2016). Values of solidarity in *familismo* and loyalty in *caballerismo* may facilitate the coming out process for Latinx sexual minorities (Abreu et al., 2020; Gattamorta et al., 2019). However, the value of interdependence and family cohesion, along with disdain for effeminacy within *machismo*, can be stressful for LGBTQ+ people (Abreu et al., 2020; Patrón, 2021a). *Familismo* may compound the stress of LGBTQ+ people with the fear of disappointing their family members due to their

gender and/or sexual identities (Gonzalez et al., 2022; Patrón, 2021a; Schmitz et al., 2020). Indeed, Patrón (2021a) found that the emotional and instrumental support derived from *familismo* may be withheld from some family members due to their sexual orientation. What makes *familismo* precarious is that “queer Latinos do not know if values of *familismo* will persist” if they are open about their sexuality (Patrón, 2021b, p. 31). Thus, LGBTQ+ Latinx family members often have “disparate experiences,” simultaneous acceptance and rejection by family due to heterosexism and patriarchy within *familismo* (Patrón, 2021a). These disparate experiences may also be related to other Latinx family values like *machismo* or *marianismo*, which rely on dualities between feminine ideals of caregiving and sacrifice and masculine ideals of patriarchal leadership (Mendez-Luck et al., 2016). These disparate experiences capture the ambivalence that is common in LGBTQ+ family relationships (Reczek, 2016) and the work LGBTQ+ youth undergo to manage stressors within their families, or conflict work (Reczek & Bosley-Smith, 2022).

Patrón (2021a, 2021b) is critical of the way that family scholars have not adequately conceptualized how patriarchy and heterosexism are centered in *familismo*, which creates this precarity for LGBTQ+ family members. Most of this scholarship is focused on Latino gay men, with limited work on Latina women (Acosta, 2010). Notably, there is almost no scholarship on Latinx transgender and nonbinary people’s family relations. Furthermore, cisnormativity is rarely examined in family studies and not at all in the study of *familismo* (Patrón, 2021b). This study examines precarious *familismo* in the relationships of Latinx LGBTQ+ youth and their grandparents but also considers the role of cisnormativity as an overlooked structure and ideology undergirding *familismo*. As we will show, cisnormativity is a critical component in the creation of disparate experiences in the relationships between grandparents and LGBTQ+ grandchildren. That is, grandparents simultaneously support their LGBTQ+ grandchildren and (at times) engage in gender-affirming practices while also upholding cisnormativity.

METHODS

The FHAM project is a longitudinal study of the impact of non-parental relatives on the housing, support, and safety of 83 LGBTQ+ youth (ages 16–19 years old). The youth live in South Texas and the Inland Empire, both areas with high Latinx populations that are heavily working-class, helping to capture the lives of LGBTQ+ youth, especially LGBTQ+ youth of color, in “ordinary” towns and cities (Stone, 2018). The study began with the summer 2022 qualitative interviews. The research team then followed the youth for a year using monthly surveys and did follow-up qualitative interviews about events of the past year in summer 2023. The first qualitative interview is analyzed in this article. This research has been approved by the IRB at Trinity University. Youth who are 16 and 17 years old could participate in this study without parental consent. Studying mature minors without parental consent is a common practice in the study of LGBTQ+ youth to protect them from their gender and/or sexual identity being revealed to parents (Mustanski, 2011; Sims & Nolen, 2021).

Recruitment

The 83 LGBTQ+ youth were recruited through an online prescreening survey distributed via social media, paid social media ads, and local LGBTQ+ organizations’ mailing lists in spring 2022. Information and recruitment materials were given to community organizations in South Texas and the Inland Empire that would likely fit the study’s research criteria. The research team also advertised the study on Instagram, Twitter, TikTok, Reddit, and Discord through posts and paid advertisements. The short prescreening survey included basic demographic

questions (zip code, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, gender identity, and SES), the youth's current housing situation (who they live with, whether they pay rent), and a modification of the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS) (Zimet et al., 1988) that focuses on parents rather than family more broadly.

Research team members selected youth from the pre-screening survey. All youth selected were between the ages of 16–19 years old, lived in Inland Empire or South Texas, were dependent on others for housing, and self-reported that their parents were ambivalent or low supportive on the MSPSS questions. Only LGBTQ+ youth aged 16–19 years old at the time of the first interview were included in the study to follow them during a time of transition of family relations (from adolescence into early adulthood), to make cases more comparable, and to ensure all participants remain within the young adulthood age bracket at the end of the study. Almost 40% of the youth are from non-major metropolitan areas such as the Rio Grande Valley, Texas-Mexico border towns, rural areas, and mountain communities, filling another gap in the literature as scholars know little about LGBTQ+ youth who live outside of major metropolitan areas (Curry et al., 2020).

This selection criteria were used to capture youth facing housing instability (who in turn are more prone to familial ambivalence) and may have more negative experiences regarding their minoritized identities. Eligible youth were then contacted by email or text. In all, over 1000 people took the recruitment survey, and 83 youth enrolled in the study. Bad actors were screened for through the baseline interviews, which resulted in the elimination of three interviewees. Through this prescreener, we recruited 41 youth in South Texas and 42 youth in the Inland Empire (83 total youth).

Sample

This paper focuses on 35 Latinx interviewees from the larger research project. We use the term Latinx to speak about this group as a whole, respecting the fact that many of the participants were trans or nonbinary. Although 20 participants identified as only Latinx, Hispanic, or a similar identity, almost half the participants identified as belonging to multiple racial/ethnic groups. These multiracial identifications included White ($n = 8$), Native ($n = 2$), African American ($n = 2$), East Asian ($n = 1$), Caucasian and Native American ($n = 1$), and Black, White, Native American ($n = 1$). Participants ranged from age 16 to 19 with the median age of this subgroup being 17. Sexual identities included bisexual/pansexual ($n = 22$), lesbian ($n = 5$), gay ($n = 3$), queer ($n = 3$), demisexual ($n = 2$), and asexual ($n = 2$).

Almost two-thirds of interviewees identified as transgender, nonbinary, or other gender-diverse identities. These gender identities included nonbinary ($n = 10$), other gender expansive identities ($n = 7$), woman ($n = 11$), trans man/masculine ($n = 3$), man ($n = 3$), and trans-feminine ($n = 1$). The demographics of the participants are displayed in Table 1. When we write about the demographic information about each interviewee, we use the words the interviewee uses to describe themselves, including how they describe their Latinx identity.

Interview

The research team completed 83 semi-structured in-depth interviews in the summer of 2022. Each interview was conducted on Zoom and lasted around 60–240 min with the average interview duration being 120 min. Notably, Zoom interviews can extend recruitment reach and inclusivity, allow people to use the chat feature to disclose more sensitive topics and build deeper rapport, are more accessible, and have no travel requirements (Gray et al., 2020; Oliffe et al., 2021; Tungohan & Catungal, 2022). As many youth in this study relied on parents for

T A B L E 1 Demographics of interviewees.

Name (pronouns)	Age	Race/ethnicity	Sexual orientation	Gender identity	Education status	State
Adella (she)	16	Hispanic, Latina	Bisexual	Female	H.S. Student	TX
Alister (any)	17	Rican	Bisexual	Bigender, Trans, GNC	H.S. Student	TX
Blaise (they/he)	17	Hispanic	Queer	Nonbinary	H.S. Student	TX
Bob (any)	17	Hisp., White, Mex-American	Lesbian	Nonbinary	H.S. Student	TX
Camilla (she)	16	Hispanic, White	Bisexual	Bio Female	H.S. Student	TX
Charles (he/they)	17	Latinx, White	Demiboy, Bisexual	Nonbinary	H.S. Student	CA
Clay (he)	16	Hispanic	Pansexual, Unsure	Trans Man	H.S. Student	TX
Denise (she)	19	Mexican, Hispanic-Am.	Bisexual	Nonbinary	College Student	TX
Diego (he)	17	Latino	Strictly gay	Male	H.S. Student	TX
Elio (he/they)	17	Hispanic	Gay	Demigender	Dual Enrollment	CA
Elizabeth (she)	18	Hispanic, Native American	Pan	Female	College Student	TX
Jax (they)	19	White, Hispanic	Pansexual	Nonbinary	College Student	TX
Karina (she)	18	Hispanic	Bisexual	Female	College Student	CA
Lorren (any)	18	Chicana	Bisexual	Nonbinary	College Student	CA
Lumen (he)	16	Black, Latino	Bisexual	Transmasculine	H.S. Student	TX
Luna (she)	19	African-Am, Mexican, Latino	Lesbian	Cis Female	College Student	TX
Manuel (he)	18	Latino, Chicano and Guachichil	Queer	Man	College Student	TX
Marie (any)	19	Hispanic	Bisexual	Gender Fluid, GNC	College Student	CA
Mariposa (she)	17	Hispanic, Mexican	Lesbian	Woman	H.S. Student	CA
Mark (they)	17	Mexican-Latinx	Asexual	Agender	Enrolled in College	CA
Mary (she/they)	17	Hispanic, Latina	Omnisexual	Gender Non-Conforming	H.S. Student	CA
Merdan (she)	18	Hispanic, White	Lesbian	Cis Female	College Student	CA
Pepe (they/he)	19	Hispanic, White	Bisexual, Pansexual	Nonbinary	College Student	TX
Pikachu (she)	20	White, Hispanic	Demisexual	Girl	College Student	TX

(Continues)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Name (pronouns)	Age	Race/ethnicity	Sexual orientation	Gender identity	Education status	State
RR (he)	16	Hispanic, Latino	Gay	Boy	H.S. Student	TX
River (he)	17	Hispanic/Latino, Black, White, Native	Bisexual	Trans, Nonbinary	High School Diploma	TX
Remi (any)	19	Chicano, Latino	Asexual, Bisexual	Gender Non-Conforming	College Student	TX
Ruby (she)	17	Latina	Pansexual	Cis	H.S. Student	CA
Sara (she)	17	Hispanic	Lesbian	Cis Woman	H.S. Student	TX
Sarah(she/they)	17	Latino	Bisexual	Transfeminine	College Student	CA
Silvio (he/they)	18	East Asian, Latino	Bisexual	Transgender Male	College Student	TX
Star (she/they)	16	Latina, Hispanic	Queer/Unlabeled	Other	H.S. Student	CA
Stratus (any)	17	Hisp, Caucasian, Native Am.	Pansexual	Nonbinary, Genderfluid	H.S. Student	TX
Tina (they)	17	Mexican	Pansexual	Nonbinary	Dual Enrollment	CA
Zoe (she/them)	17	Hispanic	Bisexual	Female	H.S. Student	CA

transportation, Zoom allowed the research team to reach a broader demographic and allowed some youth to use the chat feature to discuss sensitive topics. Participants were also compensated for their interviews with a \$40 Amazon gift card. Interviews were conducted by undergraduate research assistants who had extensive training and supervision in interviewing, along with a post-baccalaureate and post-doctoral research assistant. The majority of team members identify as Latinx, Black, or Asian, and almost all team members are LGBTQ+-identified.

The qualitative interviews in the summer of 2022 mapped out youth's family connections, identifying the 5–10 most significant family members in youth's lives, and the specific practices family members engaged in that youth find supportive, ambivalent, and hostile. These interviews also examined housing situations, family life, familial support and conflict, and interactions with other people and institutions such as school, religion, work, and friends. The interview questions most relevant to this paper were as follows: How would you describe your relationship with your grandparents? Grandparents also came up in general questions about family support such as, Which one of your family members is the most supportive of you in general? Can you describe for me a time in the past year that your guardians supported you? Can you tell me about how your family members have shown support for your gender and sexuality over the past year? Interviewers asked extensive probing questions to develop responses to each of these questions.

Data analysis

After the interviews were completed, the audio file was transcribed by a professional transcriptionist. Upon transcription, the researchers removed identifying information and changed the names of the interviewees to the pseudonym of the interviewee's choosing. The interview transcripts were then put into NVivo where members of the research team performed open coding of the transcripts (Khandkar, 2009). All mentions of grandparents were open-coded by one author, including codes like “grandma misgenders me but she tries” and “enjoy cooking together.” Then two authors performed axial coding by combining the initial grandparent codes into prominent themes based on what type of support the youth described (Scott & Medaugh, 2017). Themes like Everyday Activities, Gender-Affirming Practices, and Negativity from Grandparents evolved out of the discussion between authors about trends in the data. This abductive approach to developing themes was re-iterative between ideas in the existing literature on precarious familismo and emerging themes in the interviews (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). Most negative experiences described by Latinx youth interviewees were behavior from grandparents that enforced gender conformity and cisnormativity. Through this process of oscillating between the small details and overarching themes, members of the research team analyzed the codes to understand the unique relationships between Latinx LGBTQ+ youth and their grandparents.

FINDINGS

Latinx LGBTQ+ youth had “disparate experiences” as part of their precarious familismo. Throughout the interviews for this project, Latinx LGBTQ+ youth emphasized that they were close to their grandparents and experienced many of the positive benefits of familismo, including intergenerational solidarity, emotional closeness, quality time spent together, and some gender-affirming practices. Simultaneously, some youth participants described ways that their grandparents reinforced cisnormativity within the family. Even with these disparate experiences, LGBTQ+ youth often framed their grandparents as providing some meaningful emotional and identity support for their gender and sexual identities. These findings push scholars

forward in taking seriously the role of grandparents in LGBTQ+ youth's lives and in examining the role of cisnormativity in shaping family relations and familial social support.

Solidarity and familismo

Youth emphasized the supportive, positive components of familismo when describing their relationships with grandparents. The everyday elements of familismo, including quality time together, interdependence, and emotional closeness, were common themes.

Emotional closeness

A majority of our sample (26 of the 35 youth in this study) reported having an emotionally close relationship with at least one of their grandparents. Youth from South Texas were most likely to voice this sentiment (18 of the 21 youth). Some participants from the Inland Empire claimed to lack close relationships with their grandparents. Eight participants did not have close relationships with their grandparents while six did. The reasons that the participants provided for not being close to their grandparents included physical distance, death, or blatant homophobia/transphobia.

This closeness was often described in emotional terms, as a kind of affectual solidarity. Manuel (18, Latino, Guachichil, queer, man), said that “my mom’s mom, my abuela, she’s close with all her grandkids. All her grandkids just adore her. She’s an amazing woman!” Blaise (17, Hispanic, nonbinary, queer) described their grandmother as “literally the best grandma ever. I’m the closest to her.” Sarah (17, Latino, bisexual, trans-feminine) noted how important her grandparents and step-grandparents are in her life. She described that her late step-grandfather and her current girlfriend “are the two I really talk to the most about my emotional stuff...they’re the ones that have supported me just by allowing me to open up and let them in, I guess.” For some Latinx LGBTQ+ youth, grandparents can serve the role and support of emotional closeness, allowing youth to open up to someone in their family.

Quality time

All youth who were in regular contact with their grandparents described quality time spent together with their grandparents, which they framed as emotionally important and rooted in everyday activities like shopping and spending leisure time together. Jax (19, White and Hispanic, pansexual, nonbinary) explained their close relationship with their grandmother through the driving lessons they do together every Sunday. “I love her,” they explained, “she’s helping me pass my driving test because I have to take it soon, so after this [interview] I’m going to go practice with her driving, because she’s much more patient.” For Jax, their grandmother provided instrumental support in helping them learn to drive, a key component of becoming an adult.

Quality time spent with grandparents also included leisure activities such as relaxing, eating, making food, and shopping. However, these activities are brought to life through the emotional significance that the participants associated with these activities. Luna (19, African-American and Mexican, lesbian, woman) enjoyed spending time with her grandfather, because “he’s a very giving, loving person, and I like to be with him because there’s no expectation. Like you can just hang out with him and it’s perfectly fine.” She described her grandfather as “always running around trying to do everything for you,” such as grabbing her a bottle of water. He encouraged her to “put on the TV, do whatever you want.” She reflected that “you just get to

relax and it's like perfect." Spending time with her grandparents provided her with a refuge from the heartbreak and stress of recently losing her mother. Due to her mother's passing, Luna adapted to a life with more responsibilities. Thus, Luna cherished the peaceful, leisurely times she spent in the care of her grandparents. These feelings of safety, interdependence, and care were expressed by over half the interviewees.

Eight youth emphasized that they chose to spend frequent leisure time with their grandparents. Camila (16, Hispanic and White, bisexual, woman) said that "every once in a while, I would like come and sleep in her [grandmother's] room and watch TV with her." Remi (19, Chicano, nonbinary, bisexual, asexual) described spending most of their free time last semester at their grandparents' ranch and intending to spend even more time in the future. "I spent a lot of my time, my summer there." Remi's grandparents' ranch was not only a place of comfort but it was also a place where he felt safe. When asked about where he felt most safe to be himself, Remi noted both their grandparents' ranch and their former college campus. Remi's grandparents "have been very clear that they genuinely very deeply care about how I am doing, make sure that I'm at my best within their means." This sense of comfort and dedication to spending time together reflects the everyday practices of familismo, in which family members are encouraged to spend quality time together. This familismo and quality time translate into youth feeling a sense of safety at their grandparents' home. This sense of safety with their grandparents could potentially translate into youth having a refuge to go to if they need a place to stay or destress.

Living together

Indeed, some youth interviewees sometimes experienced this quality time as part of grandparents living in their home or close by. Fourteen participants had lived or were currently living in the same home as their grandparents. Remi (17, White and Hispanic, bisexual, demiboy) described his grandparents' history of living with him or close by. His grandparents currently live about 5 min away, and "I'm very close to them because my grandma specifically, she would take care of me." He remembered that his grandmother lived in the house when he was born and would watch him. Charles and four other participants described living close to their grandparents. Proximity is a factor in maintaining familism and intergenerational family solidarity (Kiilo et al., 2016; Silverstein & Long, 1998). This proximity allowed the participants to develop close relationships with their grandparents and be cared for by them.

Almost one-third of the interviewees said that they would choose to live with their grandparents if they lost their current housing. Pikachu (20, White and Hispanic, demisexual, woman) chose her grandmother when asked where she would prefer to go if she could no longer live with her parents or in her college dormitory, "My grandma would be the first person I would ask. She has a small apartment with one room, but I would ask her first." Despite having little space to accommodate her, Pikachu would prefer to live with her grandmother because of their emotional connection. Pikachu described her grandmother as "a psychologist so she knows a lot about people and she has similar interests to mine. She's an artist as well, and she's just the sweetest and I know that I could help her and she would like having me around. Mostly that she would like having me around." Youths like Pikachu expressed that they felt a strong sense of emotional closeness and solidarity with their grandparents such that they would prefer to live with them. This finding demonstrates how emotional closeness, quality of time, and familism can translate into anticipatory material support, as many youth felt they could rely on their grandparents for care and housing if needed. Intergenerational solidarity could translate into important material support practices for keeping youth housed and safe.

Disparate experiences and cisnormativity

Youth interviewees often described complex, disparate experiences of support and rejection from their grandparents about their LGBTQ+ identities. Trans, nonbinary, and other gender non-conforming youth mentioned disparate experiences about gender expression and misgendering with their grandparents, and even cisgender youth described enforcement of gender conformity at times. Youth often tempered their disappointment about these disparate experiences by expressing low expectations that much older adults like their grandparents would fully understand their gender identities, which we refer to as *generational gender expectations*.

Disparate gender-affirming practices

These disparate experiences were notable around gender-affirming practices such as correct name and pronoun use. However, small gestures could be meaningful to the youth. Charles described his grandmother as “one of my biggest supporters and stuff, even though she sometimes misgenders me. I don’t blame her for it, because I’m like ‘oh, you know, she’s *trying*.’ So, I still love her a lot and appreciate her.” He also talked about his grandmother taking him shopping, “Well, it’s not much, but my grandma, she’ll allow me to buy men’s clothing and she’ll, like, we’ll go shopping and she’ll allow me to do certain things that normally my parents wouldn’t allow me.” Charles noted that his grandmother is “trying,” using the rationale of love to play down being misgendered (Reczek & Bosley-Smith, 2022). Simultaneously, Charles talked about gender-affirming shopping practices with his grandmother, even though he minimized it by calling it “not much.”

Furthermore, Charles navigated a close relationship with his grandfather through an agreement to not talk about queerness, “He just said he loves me for how I am and things like that. He said he just doesn’t care really to speak about, like, things LGBT-related. And I’m like, ‘Okay.’ Like, I mean, he still misgenders me, but I don’t really expect him to, like, change or anything. He’s just an old guy.” Although Charles cannot talk about LGBTQ+ issues with his grandfather, he almost expects this kind of reaction from someone of an older generation and emphasizes the fact that his grandfather loves him regardless. Youth often use generational gender expectations to rationalize their grandparents not being gender-affirming, seeing their grandparents from a much older generation who cannot fully understand the complexities of gender and sexuality.

Remi navigated certain boundaries with his grandmother who affirmed his gender expression but not a name change, “I thought about changing my name and I brought the idea to my grandma and she didn’t really like that. But I’ve told, I said sometimes I’ll do stuff like paint my nails, wear earrings, I’d have my hair long, stuff like that, and she seems fine with it.” Remi’s grandmother showed discomfort with some aspects of their identity but tolerates others. While Remi’s grandmother seemed to be “fine” with expansive expressions of gender, her not acknowledging or supporting a name change can generate ambivalent ties as it points to the cisnormative limits of the grandmother’s support, affirmation, and love.

Grandparents’ attempts to understand

Despite these disparate experiences, interviewees appreciated their grandparents trying to understand and the youth highlighted the closeness they experienced with grandparents. The fact that their grandparents even tried to understand their LGBTQ+ identity was meaningful to the youth, considering the generational gender expectations. For instance, Star (16, Latina/Hispanic, queer, “still trying to figure out my gender”) described an experience with her

grandmother as not fully understanding queerness, but despite that, they still share a close, positive relationship, “The first person that comes to mind is my grandma because I know that I can talk to her about anything. And although she isn’t really up to date with everything, as long as she just listens, that’s all that really matters.” In this case, Star centers her grandmother’s willingness to listen as a form of emotional support that she deems as more significant than her grandmother being “up to date.”

Alister (17, Rican, bigender, trans, bisexual) also maintained a loving relationship with their grandmother as they saw the grandmother’s attempt to understand LGBTQ+ identities.

My grandma sent a paragraph, it was like, [in a funny accent] “Hey, yo. I still love you for you, sweetie.” But when it comes to practice, when it comes to using the right pronouns and the right names, a lot of times... And when you correct her, sometimes she just won’t fix it or she’ll say the wrong name...I know she’s trying to get better... But it’s difficult. I think she’s a product of her time, but I don’t know. I just know that there’s empathy in her and that she still loves us, even if it just might be a little complicated for her to understand.

Alister grapples with their grandmother’s frequent deadnaming and misgendering. Despite this deadnaming and misgendering, Alister concluded that at the end of the day, the grandmother loves them and their sibling. Alister went on to describe some reinforcing of heteronormative dating scripts, such as his grandmother adamantly insisting that their male date to a school dance buy the ticket. They stated that “the age gap between us and the generational gap... is, I think, the main reason why I don’t think we’ll ever completely understand each other.” Yet again, youth such as Alister made sense of these disparate experiences by framing them as the grandparents attempting to emotionally support them but being restricted by generational differences. This generational solidarity rationale becomes a response to the cisnormative and heteronormative limits of the grandparent’s support. It is a rationale that maintains the grandchild–grandparent tie. But it is also labor put back on the youth to navigate the cisheteronormativity of the family. Their grandmother’s attempts to understand are heartwarming to Alister—she has been held to generational gender expectations since she was older.

Substantial barriers

Only a few trans or nonbinary youth described substantial barriers to closeness with grandparents due to the ways that grandparents enforced cisnormativity in the family. Sarah noted the way that her grandfather reacted poorly to her feminine gender performance. “He’s really goofy in that way,” she explained. “every once in a while, like in what I chose to wear for a birthday recently, he went off because of the way I dressed. I was wearing a skirt and he did his weird, old-man thing...It’s kind of just passive-aggressive language, and being, like, ‘Oh, you look ridiculous.’ That’s a pretty specific thing, like, ‘Ugh, I don’t get it.’” Sarah explained that she was close to her grandfather in other ways “because maybe I need a ride to school or something and I can call him up and he’ll still show up and help me out.” This way that he showed up for Sarah co-existed with the ways he would “be weird and old...whenever something related to being queer comes up.... it’s kinda hard to deal with him, it’s hard to let him in in that way.” Sarah concedes that this behavior is transphobic, but at the same time, she acknowledges that her grandpa supports her in other ways. In this regard, Sarah’s grandpa provides general social support, but this support has its cisnormative limits. These limits create barriers to Sarah becoming close to her grandpa or letting “him in.” But again, she also rationalized his behavior through generational gender expectations of the grandfather being an “old man.” Youth in this

study seem to think that the significant generational gap between them and their grandparents is part of the cisnormative limits of their grandparents fully accepting them.

Ultimately, the way that the youth understand their relationships with grandparents is extremely nuanced. The youth acknowledge that grandparents sometimes have problematic beliefs due to their growing up in a different time, and they express frustration with having to tolerate these beliefs. The youth engage in the solidarity rationale of love and closeness to maintain these ties (R. Reczek & Bosley-Smith, 2022), but this solidarity rationale came with a generational spin of generational gender expectations, the youth justifying their grandparents' gender non-affirming behaviors because of the significant age gap. This rationale is labor on the youth's part for them to navigate the cisnormativity of the family and the grandchild–grandparent relation. Nonetheless, the youth see their grandparents as having a positive impact on their lives because they appreciate that their grandparents try to understand them. Small gestures like shopping for gender-affirming clothes felt deeply meaningful.

DISCUSSION

This study shows how *familismo* and its everyday beliefs and practices influence the relations and closeness of LGBTQ+ Latinx youth with their grandparents. This study also documents how grandparents are an important source of support and *familismo* for Latinx LGBTQ+ youth, expanding our understanding of the role of non-parental relatives in the lives of LGBTQ+ people. Indeed, *familismo* may act as a protection against family rejection for Latinx LGBTQ+ people even with older generations. This strong bond between family members could allow older generations to be open to accepting their LGBTQ+ family members—to an extent—and especially when they are emotionally close to them.

Moreover, we also show how cisnormativity undergirds the “disparate experiences” of LGBTQ+ Latinx youth with their grandparents, as cisnormativity accounts for the rejecting and ambivalent experiences from and with grandparents. This study builds on Patrón's (2021a, 2021b) concept of “precarious familismo” through centering trans, nonbinary, and gender non-conforming Latinx youth and by examining how cisnormativity shapes Latinx familial processes. As Acosta's (2010) work has shown, Latina mothers may accept a daughter's non-heterosexuality as long as she is gender-conforming, leading one to presume that gender processes and cisnormativity may operate differently than heteronormativity within families—and specifically within Latinx families. While youth in this study (who were mostly trans, nonbinary, and gender non-conforming youth) experienced solidarity with their grandparents and even felt gender and sexuality identity support from their grandparents, this emotional and identity support had cisnormative limits.

Grandparents may engage in some gender-affirming practices, but would often misgender and deadname their grandchild. Gender-affirming clothing and practices can have social, emotional, psychological, and physical benefits for trans and nonbinary youth (Rine, 2022). Name changes are an important part of gender-affirming care and social affirmation (Mills et al., 2022). While trans youth can have complex relationships to their birth name, deadnaming can harm youth, with research showing the importance of using someone's name as a way to support them (Sinclair-Palm & Chokly, 2023). Misgendering can have a negative association with social support while also furthering psychological distress (McLemore, 2018). These limits show how the family is often invested in maintaining cisnormativity, perhaps even more so than heteronormativity. Family scholars must center and examine how cisnormativity operates in families and not conflate the concept with heteronormativity.

Because of these cisnormative limits of grandparents' emotional and identity support, youth often engaged in solidarity rationales to maintain the grandchild–grandparent tie and to uphold *familismo*. Participants deemed grandparents' support as imperfect but acceptable. Youth

engaged in solidarity rationales but with generational gender expectations, or the notion that grandparents were from such an “older” generation that they could not comprehend the complexities of expansive expressions of gender and gender identities. Notably, previous literature demonstrates that young queer people and their parents often fear grandparents’ rejection of their grandchild’s LGBTQ+ identity due to their generational differences and supposed conservative beliefs (Scherrer, 2016). This fear of family rejection was real for some youth in this study, but no youth described outright rejection by their grandparents based on their identity. This solidarity rationale, though, of generational gender expectations puts the work on youth to engage in these rationale strategies to navigate misgendering and cisnormativity in the family (Reczek & Bosley-Smith, 2022).

Moreover, solidarity rationales, especially generational gender expectations, worked to maintain the love and closeness between the youth and grandparents. This work maintains and promotes family functioning (Reczek & Bosley-Smith, 2022) and even familismo, but it can keep the family cisnormative. Nonetheless, youth acknowledge their grandparents as significant sources of support and love. Most youths experienced emotional closeness and solidarity through familismo with grandparents but also disparate experiences with precarious familismo around gender-diverse expressions and identities. Familismo had its cisnormative limits.

Limitations and implications

The scope of the participants does not necessarily represent the experiences of all LGBTQ+ Latinx people. This study only explores LGBTQ+ Latinx youth in South Texas and the Inland Empire. Participants were also selected based on criteria that may have skewed the data, including less acceptance by parents and housing dependence. Future studies should investigate more broadly the role of grandparents in the lives of all LGBTQ+ youth, not just those with ambivalent or unsupportive parents. Additionally, studies into the family should not only consider non-parental family members when studying family dynamics but also meaningfully reconceptualize the nuclear family ideology to avoid diminishing the importance of non-parental family members. This can be done by centering other family members instead of using them comparatively or as a side point to parents.

The Latinx community is diverse, and this study did not collect the specific geographical ancestry of participants nor specifics on the meanings of Latinx identities. The findings, then, in this study are not necessarily generalizable to all Latinx LGBTQ+ youth, but they provide us with a baseline understanding of some Latinx LGBTQ+ youth’s experiences. Future research should consider the vast geographical and cultural differences in the lives of LGBTQ+ youth and the ways that these differences influence the manifestation of familismo in LGBTQ+ family life.

This research has implications for counseling and family services for LGBTQ+ youth. Grandparents may be a heretofore untapped resource for gender affirmation and support for Latinx LGBTQ+ youth, along with contributing to the housing stability for the youth. Youth service programs should consider activities to strengthen this bond between grandparents and youth, as it may support well-being and solidarity with the family. Counselors, therapists, and family services may also consider working with grandparents to address cisnormativity within Latinx family life and the lives of all youth.

CONCLUSION

This study extends family studies to move beyond the over-focus on the parent–child relationship and to expand theorizing on how cisnormativity shapes familial relations. Our findings

demonstrate that grandparents can be a significant emotional, material, and identity support for Latinx LGBTQ+ youth. The emphasis on parents in research on LGBTQ+ youth and the family leaves a gap in a comprehensive understanding of U.S. families that should no longer be ignored. Indeed, grandparents and extended family members should be included in conversations about LGBTQ+ youth as they may be an untapped source of support, love, and acceptance. Emotional closeness from family and friends can buffer against the mental health effects of discrimination for LGBTQ+ people, including LGBTQ+ youth (Fuller & Riggs, 2018; Ueno et al., 2009). This emotional closeness can also strengthen familism, which can both strengthen intergenerational solidarity and young people's well-being (Lee et al., 2016; Monserud, 2008). Importantly, quality time is a key component of familismo and building close familial relationships (Rama et al., 2020). Notably, with grandparents, this quality time can come with no expectations, as grandparents may not want to overly interfere in youth's lives to keep a close tie with their grandchildren (Fruhauf et al., 2019). The grandparent relationship, then, can allow youth to feel emotional closeness through quality time in a relaxing environment.

However, cisnormativity can create limits to this support, and scholars need to examine specific ways that cisnormativity shapes family life and how to challenge it. For example, Charles's grandmother being more willing than his parents to buy gender-affirming clothes shows that grandparents might not be as accountable for their grandchildren's gender and sexuality as parents (Robinson & Stone, 2025). Nonetheless, the old, ageist notion that grandparents are too fragile or obstinate to learn about gender, sexuality, and LGBTQ+ identities is false. Older generations are perfectly capable of adapting to new understandings of gender and sexuality. If we treat them as such, there are wonderful possibilities for stronger familial bonds and acceptance of LGBTQ+ youth.

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