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# When Your Sibling is Trans Too: How LGBTQ Siblings Help LGBTQ Youth Navigate Cisnormativity and Heteronormativity in the Family

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## ABSTRACT

Scholars have recently emphasized the importance of siblings in the lives of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) people. However, most of this literature assumed that these siblings are heterosexual and cisgender. This study considers how LGBTQ siblings may impact the experiences of LGBTQ youth, particularly as the youth navigates cisnormativity and heteronormativity within the family. We analyzed interviews with 26 LGBTQ youth who have LGBTQ siblings from the Family, Housing, and Me (FHAM) project. We find that LGBTQ siblings offer positive social support to LGBTQ youth, particularly for transgender and nonbinary youth who have transgender or nonbinary siblings. For most of the youth, having mutual disclosure of their gender/sexual identity with the siblings strengthened their relationship and built sibling solidarity. LGBTQ siblings were a consistent source of LGBTQ identity support and often shared the burden of confronting cisnormativity in family life. This work has implications for understanding the social support available for LGBTQ youth.

## KEYWORDS

LGBTQ; sibling; youth; support; family; heteronormativity; cisnormativity

## Introduction

Siblings are an important family relationship for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) people, particularly for LGBTQ youth (Bosse et al., 2022; Boyd et al., 2023; Reczek et al., 2022; Toomey & Richardson, 2009). One piece of evidence of this importance is that LGBTQ people often disclose their gender and/or sexual identity to siblings first, possibly “testing the waters” for disclosure to other family members (Grafsky et al., 2018; Mathers, 2019; McLean, 2007; Savin-Williams, 1998). Sibling acceptance following disclosure can positively impact the mental health and well-being of

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lesbian, gay, and bisexual adolescents (Bosse et al., 2022, 2024; D'Augelli et al., 2008; Pariseau et al., 2019), along with cultivating more solidarity with one's sibling (Grafsky et al., 2018; Hilton & Szymanski, 2011).

Moreover, while research on LGBTQ people's sibling relationships often focuses on disclosure to siblings, recent work has further explored the intra-generational conflict, solidarity, and ambivalence between LGBTQ adults and siblings (Reczek et al., 2022). Even for LGBTQ adults, sibling ties can be conflictual, tangential, or solidary, in which solidary bonds cultivate high levels of support and connection (Reczek et al., 2022). Siblings may act as a buffer with unsupportive family members, by protecting their LGBTQ siblings from their parents' negative reactions and encouraging their parents to be more accepting (Haxhe et al., 2018; Reczek et al., 2022). Notably, there is limited research on the siblings of trans and nonbinary people, but some research suggests that trans family members experience more harmful rejection from siblings compared to cisgender LGB people due to the persistence of the gender binary and transgender stigma despite increased social acceptance of sexual diversity (Factor & Rothblum, 2007; Reczek et al., 2022).

Notably, most research on LGBTQ people and their siblings either does not mention the gender and sexual identity of siblings or assumes that the siblings of LGBTQ people are cisgender and heterosexual (Bosse et al., 2022, 2024; Godwin et al., 2024). This gap is noticeable as solidarity between LGBTQ family members is critical for theorizing about how cisnormativity and heteronormativity are sustained and disrupted in family life (Robinson & Stone, 2024). To fill this gap, this study turns specifically to LGBTQ youth who have LGBTQ siblings. In doing so, this study questions how having LGBTQ siblings impact the way LGBTQ youth navigates cisnormativity and heteronormativity within the family. Cisnormativity is a range of systemic sociocultural practices that maintain the assumption that people embody gender expressions aligned with the gender they were assigned at birth and that alignment is natural and normal (Robinson, 2016). Heteronormativity also relies on binary and essentialist understandings of gender as part of privileging heterosexuality as normal and natural (Robinson, 2022). Families are a gender and sexuality factory (Stacey, 2021) with deep investments in the perpetuation of cisnormativity and heteronormativity (Robinson & Stone, 2024), which contributes to the isolation of LGBTQ youth within families (Stone et al., 2022).

Additionally, much of the work on the relationships between LGBTQ siblings draws on white samples (Bosse et al., 2022, 2024), which neglects how racism at institutional and interpersonal levels may shape the relationships between LGBTQ siblings of color, which may bring them closer together or put strain on the relationship. We seek to address these limitations in the present study by drawing on our racially diverse sample (approx. 69% of our sample are youth of color) of LGBTQ youth, many of whom identify as trans and/or nonbinary. Through the analysis of semi-structured interviews with 26

youths, we argue that LGBTQ siblings having mutual disclosure build solidarity in sibling relationships, provide LGBTQ identity support within the family, help youth navigate disclosure to family, and share the burden of education work and challenging cishnormativity and heteronormativity in family life.

### **Cishnormativity and heteronormativity in the family**

Family life in the contemporary United States involves considerable investments in both cishnormativity and heteronormativity, which contributes to the isolation and marginalization felt by LGBTQ people (Robinson & Stone, 2024). These investments are bolstered by the invisibility of LGBTQ people within families (Stone et al., 2022), but also through specific cishnormative investments reinforced by gender policing and refusing the gender of trans and nonbinary family members (Robinson & Stone, 2024; Stone & Gallin-Parisi, 2024). These cishnormative investments are deeply impacted by the intersectional stressors of racism, sexism, and classism faced by family members, which may increase pressure to maintain cishnormativity and heteronormativity in the family (Robinson, 2016; Robinson & Stone, 2024). For example, Latinx LGBTQ people may experience intense investments in gender conformity, religious devotion, and heterosexuality from parents to maintain family cohesion, prosperity, and respectability (Acosta, 2013; Ocampo, 2022; Patron, 2021; Schmitz et al., 2020). Due to historical associations between whiteness and heterosexuality, LGBTQ youth of color may have to confront associations of queer culture with “white culture” or with “American culture” for children of immigrants (Ocampo, 2022; Patron, 2021). Confronting these investments often requires labor of LGBTQ people.

Investments in cishnormativity may be particularly deep and unchallenged. Reczek et al. (2022) suggest that LGBTQ, and especially transgender, adults do extensive work to educate their parents about gender and sexuality in an effort to confront parents’ deeply held, taken-for-granted cishnormative beliefs. This form of family work may be onerous for trans and nonbinary youth in particular, who may have to engage in more work to educate and challenge family members’ cishnormative beliefs (Reczek et al., 2022). There is conflicting evidence on the effectiveness of siblings in supporting trans and nonbinary people in this work. Reczek et al. (2022) find that the sibling relationships of transgender adults were often conflictual, suggesting that gender minority sibling ties are more precarious due to cishnormativity. Alternately, quantitative research from Bosse et al. (2022) find that transgender and nonbinary young adults rank their siblings as significantly more supportive than their parents.

LGBTQ siblings may be part of broader processes of divestment from cishnormativity and heteronormativity in family life. LGBTQ relatives such as bisexual aunts and gay cousins may help LGBTQ youth navigate family communication norms around gender and sexuality, including insight into

family interactions and resistance to heteronormativity in the family (Stone et al., 2022). When other LGBTQ relatives come out first, LGBTQ youth may benefit from the education work about teaching family members about gender or sexual identity that has already happened within the family (Barrow & Allen, 2020; Stone et al., 2022), including expanding cultural understandings of gender and sexuality. Trans or nonbinary siblings may help LGBTQ youth divest from cisnormativity in family life. We contend that LGBTQ siblings may be in a strategic position to share some of this education work with parents and other family members. However, even this limited work on LGBTQ relatives does not consider the role of having other trans or nonbinary relatives for trans and nonbinary people, thus most findings address the presence of cisgender gay, lesbian, and bisexual relatives.

### **Siblings, familial ties, and LGBTQ youth**

Many researchers have studied the positive implications of sibling relationships, as there are many social benefits of being close to one's siblings (Buist et al., 2013; Stormshak et al., 1996; Sulloway, 2010). Siblings are often the longest-lasting relationship that individuals have, and sibling relationships are often characterized by emotional intimacy, intensity, and reciprocal services (Cicirelli, 2013). Siblings also can play an important role in each other's everyday lives as social partners, role models, and foils (Lamb et al., 2014). Moreover, lower stakes interactions with siblings as young children may serve as "trial-runs" that help develop social skills (Feinberg et al., 2013). Importantly, siblings are a horizontal family relationship that on average are more likely to be characterized by egalitarianism and reciprocity when compared to vertical family relationships. This horizontal relationship can enable sibling relationships to be a family relation that provides more intimacy and openness that may not be found in more hierarchical family relations such as between a parent and child (Grafsky et al., 2018).

Despite the lack of research on LGBTQ sibling relationships, there are reasons to believe that having LGBTQ siblings could be beneficial for LGBTQ youth. First, other research has suggested that having commonalities brings siblings close together. Having strong, emotionally close sibling relationships may be particularly beneficial to Black and Hispanic youth (Padilla et al., 2021; Updegraff et al., 2005). Kin support for Black youth involves shared ethnic solidarity (Stack, 1975), and siblings may be important for racial-ethnic identity formation and solidarity with families (Cardwell & Soliz, 2020; Su-Russell & Finan, 2022). Scholarship in crip studies examining the relationships between siblings with disabilities suggests that the shared experience of having a similar disability has a positive effect on sibling closeness and enhances siblings' reciprocity and mutual support (Burbidge & Minnes, 2014; Gibbons & Gibbons, 2016). These findings from Black kinship

and crip studies point to the potentially supportive role of relationships between siblings who share a marginalized identity.

Second, research on LGBTQ youth has long established the importance of peer support from other LGBTQ youth, particularly intersectional social support between youth of similar sexual, gender, and racial identities (Robinson et al., 2024; Singh, 2013; Singh et al., 2014). Because siblings are often close in age and have a horizontal relationship that allows for more intimacy and reciprocity (Grafsky et al., 2018), LGBTQ siblings, who share social class backgrounds, (often) racial identities, familial histories, and LGBTQ identities, may create a form of intersectional social support within the family that is not found in other familial relationships. This intersectional social support may be most important for youth of color and transgender and nonbinary youth. When people reach out for social support, they reach out to *significant others* such as partners, relatives, and friends, but they also benefit from reaching out to *similar others*, or people who have had the same stressful experience as the person (Thoits, 2011, 2021). We argue that researchers have failed to take into consideration that LGBTQ youth may be surrounded by more *similar others* that also happen to be significant to them (i.e. family members). LGBTQ siblings, then, are a particular kind of similar others who have shared a similar experience of navigating cisnormativity and heteronormativity within their family's dynamic. Having a sibling who is both a significant and similar other may then be advantageous. Lastly, to note, current research on LGBTQ people and sibling support has considerable limitations regarding the gender and racial diversity of the samples.

## Methods

This article is based on a subsample of 26 LGBTQ youth from the FHAM project. The FHAM Project is a longitudinal study of family and housing for 83 LGBTQ youth (16–19 years old) in South Texas and the Inland Empire of California. All interviews in this article come from the summer of 2022 and 2023, the first and second interviews in this longitudinal study examining LGBTQ youth and their relationships with non-parental family members. The LGBTQ youth were recruited through an online prescreening survey distributed via social media, paid social media ads, and local LGBTQ organizations' mailing lists. The short pre-screener survey included basic sociodemographic questions, the youth's current housing situation, and three questions modified from the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS) ("I get the emotional help and support I need from my parents," "I can talk about my problems with my parents," and "One or more of my parents are supportive of my gender and sexual identity") (Dahlem et al., 1991; Zimet et al., 1988). Research team members selected youth from the pre-screening survey based on the following criteria: residence in Inland Empire or South Texas, ages

16–19 years old, being housing dependent (answered “No” to the question “Do you pay rent or contribute to household expenses in your current housing?”), and having low or ambivalent parental support (answered “Strongly Disagree” “Disagree” or “Neither Agree or Disagree” to the MSPSS questions).

Through this prescreener, we recruited 41 youths in South Texas and 42 youths in the Inland Empire, most of whom are transgender and/or nonbinary youth of color who are still in high school. The analysis in this paper is limited to 26 youths who reported having an LGBTQ sibling (sample demographics can be seen in [Table 1](#)). Although some youth participants described LGBTQ friends as chosen family or “like a sibling,” those relationships were not included in this study because they did not match the patterns in relationships between LGBTQ siblings who were related by blood or law. Most of these youths are Hispanic or Latinx teens who identify as transgender, nonbinary, and/or another gender-expansive identity. Among these 26 youths, around 70% of the youth (18 youth total) are 16 and 17 years old. Around 70% of the youth (18 youth total) are Latinx, Hispanic, Black, Asian, Indigenous, or another racial identity that is not non-Hispanic white. About 73% of the youth (19 youth total) identify as trans, nonbinary, gender non-conforming, questioning, and/or another gender identity that is not cisgender. Furthermore, around 40% of the youth (11 youth total) are from non-major metropolitan areas such as the Rio Grande Valley, Texas-Mexico border towns like McAllen, rural areas such as Nuevo and Winchester, and other places such as Indio and Hemet.

This research has been approved by the IRB at Trinity University. LGBTQ youth younger than 16 years old could not be included in the study due to IRB restrictions. Youths 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 (Macapagal et al., 2017; Miller et al., 2006; Sims & Nolen, 2021).

The qualitative interviews mapped out youth’s family connections, identifying significant family members in youth’s lives. These interviews also examined housing situation, family life, familial support and conflict, and interactions with other people and institutions such as school, religion, work, and friends. Youths were also asked about their feelings of safety, housing security, and support in their current home. All interviews were semi-structured and conducted over Zoom by a person on the research team. 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 & Paul Catungal, 2022). Interviews lasted from 1 h to 3 h with the majority lasting around 90–120 min. Youths were asked



at the start of each interview if they felt safe discussing sensitive topics at their current location; if they did not, the interview was rescheduled. Each participant received a \$40 Amazon gift card for each interview. All names are pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality, and youth selected their own pseudonym. The interview questions most relevant to this article asked respondents about their sibling relationships, if they have come out to any family members and how those family members responded to their gender and/or sexual identity disclosure, and which family members are supportive of their gender and/or sexuality and how they have shown their support (full questions are available in the [Appendix](#)).

The qualitative interview data were professionally transcribed through a transcription service and cleaned by a team member. Transcripts were entered into NVivo and coded using flexible coding techniques (Deterding & Waters, 2018). To analyze the definition of family, the research team coded for which members of the family (e.g., grandmothers, aunts, siblings) were referenced by the youth in their interview. Members of the research team performed axial coding by combining the initial sibling and LGBTQ family member codes into prominent themes throughout the interviews such as “Disclosure” and “Sibling Came Out First.” Multiple team members read through the transcript sections about LGBTQ siblings to identify the dominant themes mentioned by youth interviewees. Then, team members met to compare themes with each other and to existing theories (Boyatzis, 1998). 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 LGBTQ youth and their siblings.

## Results

Youth consistently mentioned themes of sibling solidarity, gender and sexual identity support, and burden sharing with parents when they discussed their LGBTQ siblings. This sibling solidarity included mutual disclosure and improved closeness with siblings, even if the siblings were previously more distant or tangential. LGBTQ siblings provided complex LGBTQ identity support and helped navigating cisnormativity and heteronormativity within families, particularly when youth shared transgender and/or nonbinary identities. LGBTQ siblings also shared the burden of disclosure and education work with parents and other family members. Although some youth reported indifferent relationships with their LGBTQ siblings, most LGBTQ youth emphasized the positive impact of having an LGBTQ sibling on their well-being.



**Table 1.** Demographics of youth interviewees.

Name/ pronouns	Age	Race/ethnicity	Sexual orientation	Gender identity	Sibling information, as reported by interviewee
Adella (she/her)	16	Hispanic or Latina	Bisexual	Female	Trans older sister
Alister (any)	17	Hispanic and White	Bisexual	Bigender	Nonbinary asexual sibling & Genderfluid bisexual sibling
Aslan (they/ them)	18	Hispanic	Lesbian	Nonbinary	LGBTQ little sister, possibly more siblings
Biscuit (he/they)	16	Hispanic, Puerto- Rican and Mexican	Queer	Nonbinary	Two LGBTQ siblings (possibly both trans)
Camilla (she/her)	16	Hispanic and White	Bisexual	Cis female	Transgender and gay brother
Celeste (she/her)	17	3rd generation Philippine/ American	Lesbian	Trans woman	Asexual sister
Clay (he/ him)	16	White	Pansexual	Trans man	Pansexual sister
Dollie (she/ they)	18	Black, African- American	Pansexual	Gender non- conforming	Lesbian sister
Eddy (he/ him)	19	White	Bisexual	Trans man	Nonbinary older sibling & lesbian half sister
Goose (they/ them)	19	White	Gay	Nonbinary	Nonbinary lesbian older sibling, nonbinary younger sibling
John (they/ them)	16	White	Pansexual	Nonbinary	Lesbian sister
Ki (he/it, he/they)	16	White	Queer	Fluctuate around gender	Gay older sister, bisexual younger sister
Love (he/ they/she)	19	White with Native American ancestry	Bisexual	Genderfluid, Nonbinary, trans man	LGBTQ siblings
Luna (any/all)	19	African-American, Mexican, Latino	Lesbian	Cis woman	Nonbinary middle sibling & lesbian younger sister
Maia (she/her)	17	White	Lesbian	Woman (questionable)	LGBTQ sister
Mantis (he/ him)	16	White	Complicated, Queer	Trans guy, nonbinary	Nonbinary sibling, lesbian stepsister
Margo (she/ they)	17	Latine, Mexican	Pansexual	Nonbinary	LGBTQ sister
Mariposa (she/her)	17	Hispanic, Mexican	Lesbian	Woman	Gay older brother
Oxi (she/her)	16	White	Bisexual	Cisgender, genderqueer	LGBTQ older sister & nonbinary half sibling
Pepe (they/ them)	19	Hispanic and White	Bisexual	Nonbinary	Gay older brother
RR (he/him)	16	Hispanic/White	Gay	Desire to be a woman, but currently identify as a boy	LGBTQ younger sibling
Sara (she/ her)	17	Hispanic	Lesbian	Female	Lesbian sister
Sarah (she/ they)	17	Latino	Bisexual	Transfem	Trans younger brother
Sofia (she/ her)	18	Filipino-American	Bisexual/ bicurious	Cis woman	Lesbian sister

*(Continued)*

**Table 1.** (Continued).

Name/ pronouns	Age	Race/ethnicity	Sexual orientation	Gender identity	Sibling information, as reported by interviewee
Stratus (he/they/ she)	17	Hispanic, Caucasian, and Native American	Pansexual	Nonbinary, genderfluid	Trans brother
Zoe (she/ they)	17	Hispanic	Bisexual	Female	LGBTQ step siblings

### Strengthening ties through mutual disclosure

LGBTQ youth participants described mutual disclosure between themselves and their siblings that led to increased solidarity and closeness in their sibling relationship. This intragenerational solidarity was a possibility but not guaranteed, as sometimes mutual disclosure did not transform sibling relationships.

Almost all LGBTQ youth described mutual disclosure of their gender and sexual identity with their siblings, a disclosure that at times happened before parents knew. Sarah (17, Latino, bisexual, transfem) lived with her parents and brother with considerable conflict between Sarah and her parents about Sarah's gender expression. She has a trans brother and explained that he became one of their biggest supporters in the family after they both disclosed their trans identity to each other. Specifically, he "will back me up when I'm trying to explain how important things are to my parents," even though Sarah's brother is not out to their parents. However, even though Sarah and her brother could support each other in some ways, Sarah explained she does not go to him for everything, explaining "My brother is three years younger than me, so I'm the oldest of my siblings . . . I don't really have anyone in the home I can turn to like that." Although mutual disclosure facilitated support between LGBTQ siblings, other factors, such as outness to other family members and sibling birth order, contributes to the kinds and degree of support exchanged between LGBTQ siblings. First born children, particularly within Latinx families, may bear the largest responsibilities in guiding their younger siblings, and hence, may feel pressured to support them but not get the same support in return.

The connection between several LGBTQ youth and their siblings increased after their mutual disclosure, often transforming distant or conflictual relationships into closer ones. Shared LGBTQ identity became an opportunity for siblings to connect through a newly discovered similarity, which may bring once distant or even conflictual siblings closer together and build solidarity between them. Straus (17, multiracial, pansexual, nonbinary/genderfluid) explained that their

relationship with their brother changed after their brother came out as trans:

When me and [my brother] were little, we didn't get along very well . . . But in the past two-ish years, when he came out as trans, we weren't as focused on differences as much as we were on our similarities. We became a lot more open. We started spending more time not just with each other but with our parents, because we all found a way to coexist and learn more about each other and educate ourselves on different traits that we have.

Mutual disclosure was the catalyst for an improved relationship with Straus, their brother, and their parents. Not only did their shared gender non-conformity facilitate more emotional intimacy and support, Straus and their brother also bonded over mutual interests, such as anime and movies, and began spending more time together. For youth of color, such as Straus, who may have to navigate homophobia and transphobia within the home and racism within LGBTQ communities, this sibling bond can take on significant meaning of finding support for being accepted and supported as a multiracial, pansexual, nonbinary youth. Like Straus and their brother, siblings bonded over shared interests that may have gained more meaning due to their shared gender or sexual identity. Mantis (16, White, complicated queer, nonbinary trans guy) felt significantly closer to their sibling after they both came out as trans. Mantis bonded with their sibling over the things they have in common in addition to being trans, explaining they also like “same kind of music and things and TV shows and video games, so we really get along, they're so cool, I love them.” Like Mantis and Straus and their trans siblings, LGBTQ siblings may experience increased solidarity in their relationship after they came out to each other. Mutual disclosure of marginalized gender and sexual identities may facilitate connection and a sense of solidarity, even in sibling relationships that were previously weak or disconnected.

However, not all youth with LGBTQ siblings experienced mutual disclosure or developed solidarity. A few youth reported ambivalence toward their LGBTQ siblings that became a barrier to support and solidarity. For example, Ki (16, white, queer, “fluctuate around gender”) had recently moved closer to his older half-sister, who he believed to be LGBTQ because she is in a same-sex relationship. Ki explained that she has offered to support him but described her offer as paternalistic. In particular, he felt she was “trying to be this big mighty person” and that she treated him like he is “stupid” by offering to teach him “skills that I need to be an adult.” Ki noted it may be “really weird” that he is apprehensive about accepting his sister's offer to help, explaining “usually, people would want someone on their side, and I've gone so long without someone on my side like that.” After experiencing neglect and abuse from his parents and in foster care and taking on a more parental role with his two younger sisters, Ki may be more suspicious of people who offer to support him. Other factors within or external to the sibling relationship may shape the

degree of solidarity and emotional intimacy between LGBTQ siblings, such as the quality of the relationship before siblings came out or how support has been modeled to youth and their siblings. However, for many LGBTQ youths having a sibling who was LGBTQ created new bonds of solidarity and emotional closeness. This solidarity fostered a relationship where their gender and sexual identity could be supported and validated within the family.

### **LGBTQ identity support**

Increased solidarity and connection in LGBTQ sibling relationships meant that siblings could rely on each other for advice related to LGBTQ life and navigating cisnormativity and heteronormativity, particularly within their shared family. Youth participants also reported how their LGBTQ sibling helped in navigating challenges regarding romantic feelings, gender discomfort, and gender exploration. For example, Adella (16, Hispanic or Latina, bisexual female) felt comfortable talking to her mom about the boys that she likes, but she can only talk about the girls she likes to her trans sister. Adella explained that when she had a crush on her close friend and “didn’t really know how to deal with it,” she was able to talk to her sister about it and get the advice she needed to “just go with my instinct to do what I thought was best.” Although the advice her sister gave was not unique to queer relationships, Adella was comfortable talking to her sister about her romantic feelings and relationships because they are “both a part of this community.” Whereas bisexual youth, like Adella, might feel comfortable talking to parents about different gender crushes without raising any questions about their sexuality, having LGBTQ siblings provides LGBTQ youth with a source of support and advice about same-gender crushes and relationships within their families of origin. Within Latinx families, where pressure to conform to heteronormativity can be shaped by respectability in the face of racism, siblings can provide an outlet to challenge this heteronormativity and support queer relationships.

Some LGBTQ siblings fostered their relationships by participating in activities related to their LGBTQ identity together, such as support groups. Eddy (19, white, bisexual, trans man) explained that they have reconnected with their nonbinary sibling through attending a local LGBTQ young adults’ support group. Both Eddy and their sibling provide each other with mutual support at these support group meetings, as Eddy is a supportive presence for his autistic sibling in the meeting where they might feel uncomfortable talking by themselves. Eddy sees these support group meetings as an important resource for both of them to “get out of the house” and participate in a shared activity that they might not go to alone or with a parent. Attending this LGBTQ support group together reconnected Eddy and their sibling by providing a space to open up, learn more about their identities, have fun, and strengthen their relationship.

However, sharing an LGBTQ identity between siblings did not always translate into solidarity or support. Sibling relationships were described as more ambivalent when siblings' identities were perceived to be farther away from each other. For example, Mantis shared he did not feel as connected to their lesbian sister because she cannot relate to his experience as a transgender person. Although Mantis somewhat agrees they can talk to her about his gender and sexuality, he felt that the differences in their lived experiences, one as a trans person and the other as a cisgender lesbian, created a "disconnect" between them at a "fundamental level." Mantis felt this disconnect was because she has not experienced depression and distress for her identity "to the extent" that Mantis has because "there are laws against me existing in other states," referring to ongoing political hostility in the United States against trans youth. Differences in lived experiences between transgender and cisgender sexual minority siblings may become barriers to solidarity when these differences are experienced as resentment, jealousy, or strain.

For trans and nonbinary youth who had trans and/or nonbinary siblings, getting gender advice and support from another trans or nonbinary family member was deeply meaningful. Much like how intersections of race, gender, and sexuality shape social support in LGBTQ youths' friendships (Robinson et al., 2024), trans and nonbinary youth described solidary ties with their siblings as related to their similar gender experiences. When their hormone therapy treatments were delayed, Mantis recalled their nonbinary sibling provided emotional support by reassuring them that "it's okay, it's going to get better soon, it's only a couple months." For Mantis, it was meaningful that "they were comforting me about something that was related to my transition." Even if parents and cisgender siblings are generally supportive of youth's gender identity and transition, experiencing specific forms of emotional support and comfort in the face of difficulties receiving gender affirming care, for example, may be especially helpful or meaningful from another trans family member.

Additionally, having another trans or nonbinary person in youth's family of origin may provide trans and nonbinary youth with someone from whom they can more easily receive support. Like Mantis, Eddy explained that he normally goes to his nonbinary sibling for things related to gender. He explained this was because "I don't want to have to explain why something is upsetting . . . With my sibling, I would be like, 'This is the thing that upsets me and this is why,' and they get that," whereas he anticipated his parents "still wouldn't grasp it as well as I would like." Trans and nonbinary youth, like Eddy, may expect their similar other siblings to more easily understand their problems, such as why they would be upset about being misgendered, than cisgender family members.

In addition to emotional support, solidarity between trans and nonbinary siblings also manifested through mutually supportive gender practices and

practical forms of support. For example, Goose (19, white, gay nonbinary) and their nonbinary sibling provide each other with practical support in the process of seeking gender affirming care by “helping each other find clinics that have the most affordable hormones and looking for places to stay together when we both get top surgery.” Through practices of mutual identity support, such as affirming each other’s gender, and more practical forms of support, such as looking for clinics, trans and nonbinary siblings help each other divest in familial cisnormativity by creating a space within their family of origin where they can affirm one another’s gender, normalize talk around gender embodiment, and provide tangible support and encouragement.

This solidarity around LGBTQ issues may be particularly meaningful for LGBTQ youth who have ambivalent, unsupportive, or strained parental ties, as youth and their siblings share both marginalized gender and sexual identities and family history. The support that LGBTQ siblings provide to each other becomes essential in addressing this conflict as they are experiencing similar negative family responses. For example, RR (16, Hispanic, gay, desire to be a woman, but currently identify as a boy) shared that he would talk with his nonbinary sibling about their identities, feelings, and problems, especially the difficulties that came from concealing their gender when their parents “don’t really believe that being transgender is a thing.” Shared family history between LGBTQ siblings fosters connections and promotes a shared understanding for how siblings can support each other when faced with familial cisnormativity and heteronormativity. Whereas LGBTQ youth could bond with their friends over their shared sexual or gender identity and with siblings over a mutual understanding of their family history, participants felt that their LGBTQ siblings would understand both things, making them equipped to provide support that targets both of those areas. This support may be especially important because of the way that the youth’s LGBTQ identities could interact with their family situation, such as if other family members express anti-LGBTQ religious stigma. Within Latinx families, trans and nonbinary youth often have to navigate precarious familismo, whereby cisnormativity can shape experiences of rejection for some Latinx LGBTQ youth within their families of origin. This shared context, then, of both family background and gender and sexual identity may allow LGBTQ siblings to better understand the ways they can challenge the family’s cisnormativity and heteronormativity and invest in each other’s queerness and transness.

### **Sharing the burden of disclosure and confronting family cisnormativity and heteronormativity**

The youth described feeling as though their sibling was a partner in their effort to confront cisnormativity and heteronormativity in the family. They spoke

about how having a sibling, or being a sibling, that has already disclosed their gender and/or sexual identity to the family eases the burden of disclosure for the other LGBTQ sibling and “primes” the family, resulting in less education work for the other sibling.

In many cases, the sibling who was first to disclose to family served as an important information gathering tool for the other sibling(s) by providing the other sibling(s) with information on how the rest of the family felt about LGBTQ people. For the youth in the study, their family’s attitudes toward LGBTQ people might not have been apparent until a family member came out. The youth in the study were attentive to how family members reacted when a sibling came out. They perceived both initial reactions and underlying attitudes toward that person. Mariposa (17, Hispanic/Mexican, lesbian, woman) said that her family did not react well when her brother came out as gay. After describing all the ways that they treated him badly, she admitted that she was only out to her brother. She explained that she had not disclosed to her sister because “I think I’m scared myself for what she does with my brother, uses that he’s gay against him . . . I think I’d get too angry if she did that with me.” Youth participants treated how other family members reacted when another sibling disclosed their LGBTQ identity as a proxy for how they might react to their own disclosure. If family members, such as Mariposa’s sister, did not respond in a supportive manner, the youth might desire to conceal their gender or sexuality from those family members in order to preserve familismo and their family relationships.

Even if siblings did not think that their family members would react the same way to different siblings coming out, disclosure still gave them important information about family attitudes. John (16, White, pansexual, nonbinary), for example, reported about their parents’ biphobia, saying “ . . . they thought you’re either gay or straight, there’s no middle ground.” John’s parent’s blatant biphobia made John and their lesbian sister assume that their parent’s would not have an issue when John’s sister disclosed her sexuality. This ended up being true, as John reported that his parents expressed how they were comfortable with them not being heterosexual, explaining “they told me ‘if you’re gay we understand’” after their sister disclosed being lesbian. Even if siblings do not expect the same reaction to different siblings coming out, they can still gather valuable information from the other sibling, thereby sharing the burden of planning their disclosure.

The sibling that discloses first often acted to prepare parents or other family members to be accepting of LGBTQ people more generally—“priming”—which made it easier for subsequent siblings to come out. Many youth, particularly Latinx youth, explained that their families did not know anything about the LGBTQ community and/or they were not accepting of LGBTQ people before one of the siblings came out. A sibling coming out first helped initiate some education work on LGBTQ identities and issues. Having to



interact with someone in the LGBTQ community on a regular basis could increase family members' acceptance and understanding of others, which often helped when other sibling(s) came out. When asked if there is anyone who is not supportive of their identity, Aslan (18, Hispanic, lesbian, nonbinary) responded "I feel like it would be more distant relatives that I don't really care that much about, and maybe my grandma or my grandpa kind of. But I feel like, with my older siblings coming out, they kind of have to." While their distant family members might not have been supportive before their sibling came out, having to interact with their sibling regularly forced them to foster an acceptance for LGBTQ people. Notably, birth order may have shaped this process, as Aslan's older sibling shouldered the responsibility of testing the waters first. Within Latinx households, older siblings often bear more responsibilities, including perhaps responsibilities around challenging heteronormativity. Indeed, when Aslan later came out, it made their experience doing so easier than their siblings had been.

Priming is not a process that is guaranteed to condition family attitudes. For example, Eddy's disclosure did little to prepare their father for his sister's transition, who was more supportive when Eddy came out as trans but was "taking it a lot harder" when Eddy's sister came out as trans. Eddy explained that this may be because of their father's masculinity:

But with [my sister] coming out, he's taking it a lot harder. We're assuming mainly because [my sister] was his only son that he had . . . But he puts a lot of pressure on her to do these masculine things with him. Having [my sister] coming out was not something that he wanted.

Eddy's story describes the tenacious nature of cisnormativity in the family. His father's feelings toward Eddy's sister coming out were rooted in his traditional ideologies about masculinity, which were not challenged by Eddy's disclosure. Although his disclosure did not prime their father for his sister to come out, Eddy was able to share her burden of managing family conflict, such as by becoming like a "buffer" between his dad and sister. Youth perceive disclosure to be a laborious endeavor that is shared among LGBTQ siblings, as LGBTQ sibling mediate both the burdens of disclosure to family members and maintaining family relationships after disclosure.

## Discussion

This study builds on previous work about siblings and LGBTQ people by focusing in on LGBTQ youth and by focusing on siblings who are also LGBTQ. In filling these empirical gaps, this study shows how LGBTQ siblings provide unique and important solidarity bonds for LGBTQ youth as they navigate their gender, sexuality, and family dynamics. The findings of this study illustrate the experiences LGBTQ youth and their LGBTQ siblings

undergo as they navigate cisnormativity and heteronormativity in the family. More specifically, this study finds that LGBTQ siblings provide essential identity support to their siblings and share the burden of confronting cisnormativity and heteronormativity in the family, including doing education work within the family. These findings demonstrate, then, how LGBTQ siblings can potentially provide unique and crucial support in helping LGBTQ youth navigate the family, without having to retreat or leave the natal home.

One notable finding of this study is the importance of mutual disclosure between LGBTQ siblings. For LGBTQ siblings who mutually disclose, LGBTQ sibling relationships offer a space to recognize and affirm one another's queerness and/or transness, despite familial cisnormativity and heteronormativity. Similar to how aunts were a familial resource for youth to have identity-related conversations (Robinson et al., 2023), LGBTQ siblings can divest from cisnormativity and heteronormativity by creating a space within their family of origin where they can affirm one another's gender and sexuality, normalize talk around gender embodiment, and navigate queer romantic feelings through practices of mutual identity support. In this regard, LGBTQ siblings become a unique type of social support. LGBTQ siblings are both a significant other—a family member—and a similar other—also LGBTQ. While significant others and similar others often provide different types of social support (Thoits, 2011, 2021), LGBTQ siblings may be able to provide both types of support to the LGBTQ youth in this study. LGBTQ siblings also do not require LGBTQ youth to leave the natal home to build “families of choice” with other LGBTQ people (Bailey, 2013; Dewaele et al., 2011; Pollitt et al., 2023), but the LGBTQ youth in this study could find some LGBTQ-specific support within their family of origin from their LGBTQ sibling.

Furthermore, the youth in this study described their LGBTQ siblings as partners in navigating and challenging family cisnormativity and heteronormativity by sharing the burdens of disclosure and education work. As a form of labor, this family conflict work is exhausting and usually taken on by the LGBTQ family member (Reczek & Bosley-Smith, 2022). However, LGBTQ youth with LGBTQ siblings do not do this work alone. Siblings' identity disclosure to the family functions as cisgender and heterosexual divestments (Robinson & Stone, 2024) that challenge family arrangements and subjectivities. We find that when one sibling discloses their LGBTQ identity to their family, subsequent LGBTQ siblings gather information about other family members' attitudes and degree of acceptance to assess whether it is safe for them to disclose. Additionally, the first sibling to disclose an LGBTQ identity primes the family for future disclosures by reducing the education work subsequent siblings have to do when the first sibling has prompted the family to begin divesting from cisnormativity and heteronormativity. We find that not only do some LGBTQ youth test the waters for family disclosure by coming out to siblings first (Savin-Williams, 1998), but when youth disclose

their LGBTQ identity to family, they set the stage for future LGBTQ siblings to disclose. Of course, this pathway toward family acceptance is not always straightforward, and other family members may still hold onto cisnormative and heteronormative notions of gender and sexuality. Nonetheless, this priming process and this education work show the importance of LGBTQ siblings in the lives of LGBTQ youth as they navigate disclosure and cisnormativity and heteronormativity within the family.

We find that mutual disclosure of marginalized sexual and gender identities facilitates connection, builds solidarity, and strengthens ties between some LGBTQ siblings. However, our analysis shows that solidarity is not guaranteed and can be nuanced and complicated. That is, there are heterogeneous changes to relationships between LGBTQ siblings after disclosure. In particular, our findings suggest transgender and nonbinary youth experience varying degrees of solidarity and ambivalence within the family in part due to their ties to their LGBTQ siblings. Previous work suggests that transgender and nonbinary young adults perceive their LGBTQ siblings to be more supportive after identity disclosure compared to cisgender and heterosexual siblings (Bosse et al., 2022), but the present study examines how solidarity forms between transgender and nonbinary youth and their LGBTQ siblings. Whereas sexual minority youth describe more solidary ties with their LGBTQ siblings, there was more variability in the LGBTQ sibling ties of the gender minority youth in this study. Solidarity between LGBTQ siblings is not guaranteed for transgender and nonbinary youth, as narratives from transgender and nonbinary participants suggest that solidarity is difficult to form between transgender youth and their cisgender sexual minority siblings. Indeed, we find that LGBTQ siblings, and especially those who share more closely related gender and/or sexual identities, are a particular kind of similar others (Thoits, 2011, 2021) due to the shared experiences of navigating cisheteronormativity within their family dynamics. However, this similar other should not conflate all LGBTQ people together as transgender and nonbinary youth did not always build close bonds with their cisgender sexual minority siblings. Similar to how differences in the forms of disability contribute to role asymmetry and power differentials in relationships between disabled siblings (Gibbons & Gibbons, 2016), the different stressors and experiences of transgender and cisgender sexual minority siblings may impede the development of solidarity between certain LGBTQ siblings. This finding suggests that cisnormativity may be an enduring and unique force in the families of LGBTQ youth, requiring divestment that differs from that of heteronormativity.

Notably and importantly, these sibling bonds may take on unique forms of acceptance and support for LGBTQ youth of color. As LGBTQ people of color often have to navigate homophobia and transphobia within families and racism with LGBTQ communities (Schmitz et al., 2020), sibling bonds can provide an important source of support for one's racial, gender, and sexual

identities. Furthermore, because of racism and classism, Latinx LGBTQ people often experience intersectional stressors because of family investments in gender conformity, religious devotion, and heterosexuality to maintain family cohesion, prosperity, and respectability (Acosta, 2013; Ocampo, 2022; Patron, 2021; Schmitz et al., 2020). Precarious familismo captures how because of how heteronormativity, cismnormativity, race, and culture shape Latinx families, LGBTQ people often have disparate experiences of acceptance and rejection within their families (McCandless-Chapman et al., 2024; Patron, 2021). Sibling bonds, though, can challenge this precarious familismo by offering family support and simultaneously challenging cismnormativity and heteronormativity within the family. Birth order, though, can shape this support. The first-born child seems to bear more responsibility in testing out the waters within the family around gender and sexuality, whereby other siblings who come out later might have an easier path. Nevertheless, race, culture, and birth order can shape the importance of sibling bonds in challenging cismnormativity and heteronormativity in unique and significant ways.

This study has a few limitations, namely the sample size, recruitment, and interviewing process. This sample of youth represents LGBTQ youth with low or ambivalent parental support who were dependent on others for housing at the start of the study. This sampling method may result in LGBTQ youth who need more support from siblings or who have siblings who are more involved in buffering negative or ambivalent parents. The youth may also need more identity support to combat against parental nonsupport. For youth who are experiencing ostracization from most of their family, a sibling who understands their experience and is living through something similar becomes a valuable asset, regardless of what they do or talk about when they are around each other. The interviews also were not explicitly focused on LGBTQ relatives or siblings, and not all interviewers asked follow-up questions about LGBTQ siblings, the timing of their disclosure, the specificities of siblings' gender and sexual identification, and other details. Future scholars should consider more systematic research on LGBTQ youth and adults who have LGBTQ siblings.

The time has come to study non-parental relatives in LGBTQ youth's lives, including the significance of LGBTQ non-parental relatives such as LGBTQ siblings. Indeed, this study is an important contribution to understanding the family lives and support systems of LGBTQ youth, along with the perpetuation of and divestment from cismnormativity and heteronormativity in families. This study builds on research on the importance of LGBTQ relatives and nonparental relatives such as aunts and grandparents (McCandless-Chapman et al., 2024; Robinson et al., 2023; Stone et al., 2022) to understand how LGBTQ siblings may provide important forms of social support. As this study shows by turning to LGBTQ siblings, LGBTQ youth's support systems are more expansive than parents and chosen family. Having an LGBTQ sibling combines the shared family life with a shared LGBTQ identity, creating a form of

intersectional social support (Robinson et al., 2024) that provides similar other support as chosen family without having to retreat from the family of origin. Understanding the complexities, then, of LGBTQ youth's support networks is necessary for developing programs and policies to improve the health and well-being of youth. These programs and future research should not just focus on parents and families of choice. Understanding the role of LGBTQ relatives in general and LGBTQ siblings in particular in the lives of LGBTQ youth is critical for understanding how youth navigates cisnormativity and heteronormativity in family life and in society more broadly. This work moves forward the growing body of research on the investment and divestment in cisnormativity and heteronormativity in the family (González-López, 2015; Robinson, 2016; Robinson & Stone, 2024), an important family process long overlooked by scholars. Full comprehension of how these processes operate in families is critical for understanding how all family members—LGBTQ or not—are shaped by cisnormativity and heteronormativity. This research suggests that when LGBTQ family members band together, they may effectively burden share the disruption of cisnormativity and heteronormativity with collective action. LGBTQ siblings are helping to pave a path forward by expanding families of origin to include queerness and transness.

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## Appendix

The interview questions most relevant to this article were the following:

- Tell me a little bit about who you live with right now.
- Can you describe for me what life is like in your current home?
- In your current home, can you tell me about who you can turn to for help during a stressful situation?
- Let us talk about your siblings. Do you have any? Are they close to you? How would you describe your relationship with them?
- Do you suspect or think any of your family members are LGBTQ? How did your family react to them? Tell me more about your relationship with them?
- Which of your family members are the most supportive of you in general? How are they supportive? Can you give me an example of a time when they supported you?
- Which of your family members are supportive about your gender/sexual identity? What do they do that is so supportive? Can you give me an example of a time when they supported you?