Beyond Family Rejection:
Gender, Sexuality, and Family Instability in the Lives of LGBTQ Homeless Youth

Abstract: Most research and media attention on lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) homeless youth spotlight family rejection as the youths’ main pathway into homelessness. Based on findings from an ethnographic project of LGBTQ homeless youth, I situate this family rejection narrative within the larger framework of family instability. Findings demonstrate that a non-heterosexual and/or gender non-conforming child who “comes out” as or is perceived to be LGBTQ increases family instability, especially for LGBTQ youth in working-class and poor families, who already face many structural constraints. In this marginalized familial environment, abuse and/or the act of kicking a child out for being LGBTQ is a form of heteronormative compliance to discipline the child to be heterosexual and/or gender conforming. I propose a renewed investment in all families through welfare polices and social safety nets along side of LGBTQ education and challenging heteronormativity as solutions to preventing LGBTQ youth homelessness.

Keywords: family instability, LGBTQ, homelessness, youth, gender, sexuality
Most research on LGBTQ homeless youth has focused on family rejection as the main pathway into homelessness for the youth. Lesbian, gay, and bisexual homeless youth are more likely to be kicked out or runaway because of conflicts in the home about their sexuality and sexual behaviors compared to heterosexual homeless youth (Whitbeck et al. 2004), where 73% of gay and lesbian and 26% of bisexual homeless youth have reported that they are homeless because of parental disapproval of their sexual orientation (Rew et al. 2005). In a more recent report, service providers who work with LGBTQ homeless youth indicated that 68% of LGBTQ homeless youth have experienced family rejection and 54% have experienced abuse in the family (Durso and Gates 2012).

In conducting the first ethnographic study of LGBTQ homeless youth in Texas, I qualitatively complicate this picture of family rejection by situating this narrative into the larger story of family instability. Family instability is often defined as economic hardship, parental marital transitions, residential movement, disruption in family routines, and other negative life events (Ackerman et al. 1999). Given this definition, I ask then, how do norms around gender and sexuality within the context of family instability affect LGBTQ youth?

In addressing this question, the goal is to move beyond pathologizing working-class and poor families as being more homophobic and/or transphobic than other families, and instead, to reveal how and why particular practices around gender and sexuality transpire within families that have limited social and economic resources. In foregrounding the context of familial poverty and instability, I contend that the rejection of a LGBTQ child operates differently in marginalized families, not because destitute families are more prejudice but because they contend with larger structural constraints that generate particular ways of responding to and enforcing the gender and sexual norms of society.
Literature Review

The changing landscape of U.S. families from higher divorce rates to more premarital cohabitating couples has engendered a host of research on family structure and instability (Fomby and Cherlin 2007). Wu and Martinson’s (1993) watershed finding that premarital birth was related to the number of transitions women experienced growing up lends support for the instability and change hypothesis. This hypothesis argues that a major disruption in a family environment – an event – influences a child’s well-being more than the statuses of people of the family (Wu and Martinson 1993). For example, children of parents who remarry do not fare better than children raised by single-parents (Coleman, Ganong, and Fine 2000). Adding a stepparent or another person can create instability as new relations and routines may need to be navigated. Residential movement, which can also disrupt school, neighborhood, and friendship ties, can be another major stressor on children and youth’s lives (Astone and McLanahan 1994). These major stressors in a child’s life cumulate with each transition (Cavanagh and Huston 2006).

Indeed, disorganized families are seen as a main cause of youth homelessness (Whitbeck and Hoyt 1999), where pathways into homelessness for youth are abuse and neglect, family breakdown, and aging out of government programs (Gibson 2011). In a study with adult homeless people, it was also found that they came from backgrounds of family instability and poverty, where childhood backgrounds and family experiences are crucial in explaining risk for homelessness (Koegel, Melamid, and Burnam 1995). Homeless youth often experience physical and sexual abuse in the home, where the choice to runaway may seem to be the most rational (Whitbeck and Hoyt 1999). Many homeless youth also report always moving growing up, alcohol and drugs problems in the home, as well as mental health problems and problems with
the law. These scenarios create loose family ties, where youth leave families that have little to hold them (Whitbeck and Hoyt 1999).

**Theoretical Framework**

Michael Warner (1991) coined the term “heteronormativity” in order to show how the privileging of heterosexuality permeates society, granting social and political privileges to those who are heterosexual and relegating those who are not to a marginal status position. Heteronormativity is a hegemonic system of norms, discourses, and practices in society that constructs heterosexuality as natural and superior to all other expressions of sexuality (Warner 1991; Valocchi 2005). This sexual binary also relies upon the gender binary of man and woman, where under heteronormativity, the gender roles of masculine men and feminine women are naturalized (Valocchi 2005).

In studying LGBTQ homeless youths’ lived experiences, I will show how gender and sexuality plays out within the context of family instability. As being some of the most sexually marginalized people, LGBTQ homeless youth can provide situated knowledge about how social organizations and institutions, which drastically influence their lives, contribute to certain youth becoming homeless. By turning to youth, who are cast out onto the streets, one can understand how social formations and institutions have led to the production of LGBTQ youth homelessness.

**Methodology**

For this research project, I implemented innovative qualitative methods in working with a marginalized population. This project is a multi-site ethnography with also one-on-one in-depth interviews. Ethnographic methods can help illuminate why marginalized populations do what they do (Auerswald and Eyre 2002), and they can reveal how things happen (Ragin, Nagel, White, and the National Science Foundation 2004). Specifically, in Austin, Texas, I volunteer at
a homeless youth drop-in center, and in San Antonio, Texas, I volunteer at a specific LGBTQ youth homeless shelter. “Hanging out” at services or sites that serve hard-to-reach vulnerable populations is one of the best approaches in making initial contacts with marginalized populations (Liamputtong 2007). I write field notes every week upon leaving each field site.

In addition to taking field notes at both sites, I conducted 40 in-depth interviews with LGBTQ homeless youth. The findings presented in this paper are mainly from these interviews and not from the ethnographic field notes because the findings are about their past lives growing up. I have designed an interview guide in accordance with my research questions. All interviews are in-person because face-to-face interactions help the researcher to establish rapport with the interviewee, affording a more meaningful and in-depth interview (Weiss 1994). The interviews are semi-structured. This approach captures youths’ present experiences to uncover specific issues and needs that they face. Researchers need to listen to the needs of youth, instead of assuming their needs (Talburt 2004), and face-to-face in-depth interviewing is the best approach to accomplish this goal.

**Findings**

**Instability**

Obadiah is a 20-year old white youth who dates trans-women. When I first met him during the summer of 2015, he had moved to the LGBTQ youth shelter in San Antonio after living in his grandpa’s shed for about a year. A skinny, tall, and fairly quiet man, Obadiah could easily get angry and go into fits of rage. However, during my interview with him, he was calm as he described to me his family life before going into Child Protective Services (CPS) at eight years old, where he was separated from his brothers while in CPS. He told me:
I use to go to school with bruises all over me when I was little. And my mom was a drug addict, and I remember when I was little, me and my brothers had to literally frickin’ take off the door knobs to the restroom - took it apart - and we found her in there shooting up with this guy, when my dad was in jail. My dad was always an alcoholic. He spent more times at bars than anything.

After aging out of CPS, Obadiah needed a place to stay, so he called his grandpa. His alcoholic father got him a job in the oil field business; however, Obadiah tried to avoid his dad at work. One day, he gave his mother money because he thought she was going to buy meat and other stuff at the corner store, but “after 80 bucks, I gave her, she came out with her purse right here, and it was hanging right there, I saw blood dripping. I took it off of her, and I saw needle marks like right there. I got so mad like I walked home that day - I walked home that day. I could not ride in the car with her.” Obadiah wanted to start community college, which is paid for by CPS, so he decided to move to the shelter to get away from his toxic family and to be closer to where he could take public transportation to school.

Dante, a 22-year old bisexual black youth, was emancipated at 15. He grew up “all over the east coast” from Louisiana to Vermont to Illinois to New Jersey to North and South Carolina because his “mom liked to runaway from her problems.” Dante’s father is a drug smuggler, and Dante said that his mother always put the men in her life before him. Before coming to the shelter in San Antonio, he was working construction but got laid off. During my interview with him, he talks to me about how his mom only got pregnant with him to get kicked out of her parents’ house:

And I guess through the years, she regretted it. I'm the oldest. I was her first child, so I got treated bad. I got beat. I was abused - mentally, physically, and sexually
while growing up. And it got to a point where I broke. I see one of her boyfriends touching on my sister, so I broke him. I put him in the hospital, so she kicked me out. She chose a man over her own son.

**Sexual Violence & Abuse**

Camila, a 22-year old Hispanic trans-woman, was mainly raised by her sisters because her parents were “kind of neglectful” and her “mother always put her boyfriends before everybody. My dad was a truck driver for most of - up until - I don't know a long time. So he wasn't around much.” However, at one point, Camila was briefly staying with her dad in San Antonio, and as she recounts:

Well my dad had - he's the reason why I had been put out when I was 12 because my mom let him know what I told her about my sexuality. And he didn't want me in the house. And then, I was living there last year, and I woke up in the middle of the night to my dad in my room beside my bed completely naked. After he had put me out for my sexuality, and then he turns around and does something like that. And so, I just couldn't live there. I couldn't be around him.

Harper, a white 20-year old non-binary trans-guy, has divorced parents, with an alcoholic father and a mother, who would “wake up, go to work, come home, and then she'd zone out. She'll tell you, I'm just a zombie.” Harper was kicked out from his mom’s house because of his mental health problems, which he has been hospitalized for 8 times. He then lived with his gay uncles in Houston for a while before eventually coming to Austin. Harper also describes to me the sexual abuse he experienced from his father:

I was molested and sexually abused the summer between my 8th grade and 9th grade year. So by the time I actually got to high school, I was already such - I was
already in such a bad place. Because during that summer, right when the summer started, I was forced - well I wasn’t forced - but I was really pressured into moving in with my dad. And that was also a set-up. That was well planned and set-up on his sick mind path. Because he knew whenever I moved in that I couldn't stand my stepmom. So - and he's a truck driver. So he knew that I'd ride with him in his long truck rides so that would happen. So I'm very aware that that was all planned. [...] But I couldn't like - after awhile it all happening. And I even lost it before too, so before that. So whenever it actually happened, I didn't know what was going on. I just thought this was normal because it had already happened to me twice before that.

**Coming Out**

Jenelle is a 21-year old Hispanic transgender woman, who when I first met her, she had bright red hair with piercings on the sides of her lips and on the sides of her nose near her eyes. Jenelle is a very touchy, affectionate person, who likes to give me long hugs and lock arms with me when I see her every week at the shelter in San Antonio. Jenelle’s dad is a truck driver and her mom is a nurse, who were never really home, and she tells me, “Growing up wasn’t the easiest I guess cause my parents were always fighting. And they were never really in love.” Jenelle’s parents got divorced about 5 years ago, but a turning point in her relationship with her mom came when Jenelle “came out when I was 12. And you know how people say a mother’s love is unconditional? When I was 12, I figured out that my mother’s love was conditional.” Jenelle also described her father as a “bigot,” and that he “calls me by my birth name and uses ‘his’ pronouns. And it just - it was heavy on my soul. After awhile, you just have to live your true self, and you can’t deal with that bullshit anymore.” She went on, “My dad is probably
going to die a bigot. When I was 16, he basically looked me in the eyes, and he said, ‘I love you. You’re always going to be my son. But you know you are going to die of AIDS, right?’ And I - I just – that’s a horrible thing to say to your kid.”

Prada, another Hispanic trans-woman at the shelter in San Antonio, is a 23-year old, who was one of the original founding youth of the shelter. Prada was originally living with her father in Los Angeles, but when he found out that she was gay, he threatened to kill her:

He said, “I'm going to kill you, then I'm going to kill myself. Because I rather die, than people know that I have a faggot for a son.” So, I'm like - I took the initiative. I ranaway at 17. Instead of going out the door - and luckily, this is funny - because my room happened to be right when you go up the driveway - the first one that you see there, that was my room. So I took the initiative. Packed up some clothes, packed up whatever I needed to take with me, whatever I could take with me. Ran out the window. Heh, well I climbed out the window, and luckily it was a one-story house.

Prada was “scared for my life because I would have to act straight,” so she used her birthday money to fly to Laredo, Texas, to find her mother. Prada lived there for a year and a half, but her mom started dating a drug dealer, where they all had to escape back to California in fear of their lives. Prada then moved in with her aunt and uncle in Palm Springs, but they were pastors, who read her journal and found out that she was attracted to men. Prada’s aunt asked her:

Is this true? And I'm like, yea. I'm not going to change who I am for anybody. I rather die before I change myself to please anybody. And then, she's like, well if you want to stay here, you can't be doing that. I'm like, okay. Pay for my bus
ticket. Well then, send me back to Laredo. Send me back home. Send me anywhere but here then. She's like, okay, we'll pay for it. Okay, send me back to Laredo.

After getting back to Laredo, Prada bounced around other parts of Texas before coming to San Antonio, where she lived on the streets until the LGBTQ youth shelter opened. As she tells it: Nobody wants nothing to do with me to the point where the last time I talked to my family, they said I was a disgrace to the family name, and that I needed to change my name because they wanted nothing to do with me. Because they didn't want a disgrace in their family or an abomination as they call it now.

Conclusions

The main arguments put forth in this article are two-fold. First, scholars, service providers, media, and others need to move beyond the narrative of family rejection about LGBTQ homeless youth to examine the role of family instability and poverty in these youths’ previous home lives. Secondly, in turning to the lived experiences of LGBTQ homeless youth, one can begin to see how gender and sexuality operate for some youth within the contexts of family instability and poverty.

As stated at the opening of this article, family rejection is the dominant narrative of the main pathway into homelessness for LGBTQ homeless youth (Whitbeck et al. 2004; Rew et al. 2005; Durso and Gates 2012). However, the findings presented above complicate this discourse by revealing how LGBTQ homeless youth come from disorganized families. The youth have experienced economic hardship, parental marital transitions, residential movement, disruption in family routines, and other negative life events, especially death of a family member and sexual abuse. These are the exact traits of family instability (Ackerman et al. 1999; Fomby and Cherlin...
2007; Schoon et al. 2011), and in line with the literature, this instability is marked by poverty for the majority of these youth (Litcher, Shanahan, and Gardner 2002; Schoon et al. 2011).

Following the instability and change hypothesis, this study shows how the events of transition have drastically affected LGBTQ homeless youths’ lives, and the stressors from these events were cumulative (Cavanagh and Huston 2006). The youth have lost a sense of trust in their parents (Fomby and Cherlin 2007), and homelessness becomes another outcome along with the other negative psychological and behavioral problems that go along with being a child or youth within the context of family instability (Forman and Davies 2003).

Given this finding, the policy implications become more nuanced. Family reunification is often the main solution in trying to end youth homelessness (National Alliance to End Homelessness 2012). For LGBTQ homeless youth, where the focus is on family rejection, services to assist families in dealing with their youths’ sexual and/or gender identity have been the main strategy to potentially reunite the youth with their parents (Cochran et al. 2002). Although educating all of society, including the parents of LGBTQ homeless youth, about LGBTQ topics is important in combatting heteronormativity, the results that family instability is the larger lived experiences of the youth suggests that LGBTQ education will not immediately solve LGBTQ youth homelessness. The parents of LGBTQ homeless youth are exhausted from working hard as single-parents, are broken up, are abusive, are dead, and face a host of other problems. A renewed investment in all families through welfare polices and social safety nets – policies that have been eroded since the neoliberal re-structuring of society - will be needed if people truly want to prevent LGBTQ youth homelessness.

Another note on the family rejection narrative is to move beyond the slippery assumption that people of color and/or poor people are more homophobic and transphobic than white,
middle-class people. The majority of the youth in this study are LGBTQ youth of color, similar to previous research that has also documented that LGBTQ homeless youth are disproportionately youth of color (Cray, Miller, and Durso 2013). If the reasoning for these youth being homeless is just family rejection – that their parents are homophobic and/or transphobic – then people can believe that people of color are just more homophobic and/or transphobic. By contextually the youths’ lives within family instability, one can see how the social environments of the youth and their families are under-resourced and extremely marginalized, suggesting that investing in these families may lessen the homophobia and transphobia experienced. By focusing on impoverished families and environments, race and class become not dominant ways of understanding rejection, homophobia, and transphobia.

Moreover, the central argument of this piece is that the mechanism creating the disproportionate number of homeless youth to be LGBTQ is how gender and sexuality operates within family instability. Studies have already shown that family disorganization is a main cause of youth homelessness (Whitbeck and Hoyt 1999; Gibson 2011). However, I argue that heteronormativity within the contexts of family instability is why the disproportionate number of homeless youth is LGBTQ.

Martin’s (2009) study on mothers revealed that most mothers assume their children are heterosexual, describe their children’s romantic lives as only heterosexual, and make gay and lesbian people invisible to their children. Under heteronormativity, many parents want their child to be heterosexual and gender conforming in order to have more privileges bestowed upon them. However, as Kane (2012) discussed, middle-class parents may have more leeway in allowing their children to choose to experiment or express their gender and/or sexuality in non-normative ways. This privilege is often not available for working-class and poor families, who are already
constrained by so many structures in society, where a non-heterosexual and/or non-gender conforming child may add more instability to the family and add fear that the child will not succeed. Therefore, heteronormativity affects all families and their child-rearing, but it can be more detrimental to disorganized families that can barely offer any support to their child whether they are LGBTQ or not. As a result, the threat or the act of kicking a child out for being LGBTQ may be a form of heterosexual compliance in trying to discipline the child to not be non-heterosexual and/or non-gender non-conforming in order to avoid more instability in the family or in wanting the child to possibly succeed (González-López 2015).

To be clear, not all LGBTQ youth who grow up within the context of family instability will become homeless. I have just turned to the extreme case of LGBTQ homeless youth in order to illuminate how norms around gender and sexuality can unfold within disorganized families – families that are fragile and extremely marginalized. Future research should continue to explore the lives of LGBTQ youth within the contexts of family instability, particularly youth who are not homeless. Research should also explore how other institutions (e.g., schools, religious institutions, CPS) may also complicate the pathways into homelessness for LGBTQ homeless youth as well as the youths’ own personal and inter-personal behaviors (e.g., drug and alcohol use, peer networks). Interviewing the parents of LGBTQ homeless youth may also provide a different perspective in how gender and sexual norms operate within the contexts of family instability and may complicate the narrative of family rejection as well.

Nevertheless, I have shown how family rejection needs to be understood within the contexts of family instability. The solutions to ending LGBTQ youth homelessness become expanded then to re-investing in marginalized families along with LGBTQ education and challenging heteronormativity. Also, I have revealed how norms around gender and sexuality
within the contexts of family instability affected LGBTQ homeless youth. In already disorganized families, heteronormativity becomes even more detrimental and adds more instability, leading the youth in this study to become homeless. LGBTQ homeless youth are some of the most marginalized individuals in society, and although these youth are the future, they are also here in the present, living devastating lives, and they need complex and nuanced theories and solutions in order to help them.

**Works Cited**


