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Post-Divorce LGBTQ-Parent Families: Navigating Loyalty Conflicts and Stepfamily Closeting

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The purpose of this study was to investigate underexplored dynamics of post-divorce LGBTQ-parent families.

Background: In LGBTQ-parent families in which children were conceived in the context of a prior different-gender partnership, children experience the coinciding events of parental separation and a parent's coming out as LGBTQ. In recent decades, research on LGBTQ-parent families formed following different-gender divorce has stalled, perhaps due to the increasing emphasis on planned LGBTQ-parent families, or families formed after parents have come out.

Method: Twenty-four adults who were born to different-gender married parents (i.e., mother/father families) who divorced when one parent came out as LGBTQ responded to a survey about their childhood experiences involving parental divorce and a parent coming out.

Results: Our data shed light on two themes: *navigating loyalty conflicts* and *LGBTQ stepfamily closeting*. When queer mothers divorced straight fathers, participants often described loyalties to their mothers, but when queer fathers divorced straight mothers, participants were less likely to describe divided loyalties and more likely to describe cooperative coparenting. Even once parents came out and formed LGBTQ stepfamilies, they often remained closeted at the family level in that participants kept the nature of their parent and stepparent's relationship hidden from family outsiders, typically to protect their families from real and anticipated heterosexism.

Conclusion: Our findings have implications for the present-day well-being of people who navigated family conflict and secrecy as youth. Amid renewed anti-LGBTQ hostility, our results highlight the invisible familial costs of adapting to systems of oppression.

Children of LGBTQ parents fall broadly into two groups: those who were born into a planned LGBTQ-parent family (i.e., de novo families), and those who were born into a heteronormative (different-gender) relationship that dissolved when a parent came out as LGBTQ. Although the proportion of planned LGBTQ-parent families is growing (Family Equality 2019), many LGBTQ-parent families are those in which the children were conceived in the context of a prior different-gender relationship

(Goldberg et al. 2014; Tasker and Lavender-Stott 2020). As such, many children in LGBTQ-parent families also experienced the dissolution of their parents' relationship or marriage, and a parent's coming out as LGBTQ.

Early research on LGBTQ parenthood in the United States focused on lesbian and gay parents coming out of a previous heteronormative relationship, with primary attention paid to their

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concerns about disclosure of their sexuality to children and their risk of being denied parental rights based on their sexual orientation (Allen and Demo 1995; Bigner and Bozett 1989; Elera and Fredriksen 1999; Lyons 1983; Patterson 1992; Rand et al. 1982; Rubinfeld 1994). Over time, research shifted to focus primarily on de novo LGBTQ-parent families, or children raised in LGBTQ-parent families from birth or early life (Farr et al. 2022; Johnson 2012; Reczek 2020). As a result, research on LGBTQ-parent families formed after the dissolution of different-gender unions has stalled. Given that many children experience the coinciding events of parental divorce and a parent's coming out (Goldberg et al. 2014), contemporary understandings of the covert dynamics embedded within this set of family transitions are critical for supporting families who, in an era of anti-LGBTQ hostility in the United States, remain vulnerable to hate, violence, and invisibility. In this study, we investigated the experiences of 24 adults who experienced parental divorce (in the original context of a different-gender marriage) after a parent came out as LGBTQ. Given that children in the present and future will surely navigate the experiences of parental divorce and a parent coming out as LGBTQ against the backdrop of persistent heterosexism and the invisibility of this particular family dynamic, our findings have critical implications for helping professionals supporting families on the margins.

1 | LGBTQ-Parenting after Different-Gender Divorce

Johnson (2012) described research on lesbian parenting as having occurred in waves. The first wave, beginning in the 1970s, focused mostly on lesbian mothers who had become parents while married to men. The second wave, beginning in the 1990s, shifted focus to women who became parents within the context of lesbian relationships (Johnson 2012). The first wave of research explored LGBTQ-parent families formed post-heteronormative relationship dissolution (PHRD) (Tasker and Lavender-Stott 2020). For example, scholars and activists drew attention to the economic and legal vulnerability of lesbian mothers leaving heteronormative marriages to men and their risk of being denied custody of their children—a fear that was realized for mothers in a number of high-profile US legal cases, including *Bottoms v. Bottoms* (1995), in which Sharon Bottoms lost custody of her young son to the child's grandmother after the mother was deemed an unfit parent on the basis of her sexuality (Duran-Aydintug and Causey 1996; Lyons 1983; Rand et al. 1982; Tasker and Lavender-Stott 2020). Gay fathers also worried about being denied custody or visitation based on their sexual orientation, contributing to fears of coming out (Bigner and Bozett 1989). The context of vulnerability surrounding a parent's coming out as LGBTQ, fueled by heterosexist stereotypes of LGBTQ adults as unfit parents, drove researchers to establish whether parents' sexuality impacted child well-being (Patterson 1992). Although findings were consistent in indicating that children raised in LGBTQ-parent families were *not* developmentally disadvantaged compared to children raised in heterosexual-parent families (Golombok et al. 1983; Patterson 1992; Stacey and Biblarz 2001; Tasker and Golombok 1997), the risk of losing access to children kept many LGBTQ parents in heteronormative marriages and delayed their coming out process (Bozett 1980; Clarke and Earley 2021).

1.1 | LGBTQ Parents Coming Out to Children

The process of LGBTQ parents coming out to children has been documented both from parents' perspectives (Breshears 2010; Bozett 1980; Charter et al. 2023; Giunti and Fioravanti 2017; Haus 2021; Lynch and Murray 2000) and from adult children's perspectives (Breshears and Braithwaite 2014; Goldberg 2007a; Joos and Broad 2007; Lytle et al. 2013). Early research focused on parents' perspectives, including if and how parents disclosed their LGBTQ identity to children and children's reactions to disclosures (Bozett 1980; Dunne 1987; Lynch and Murray 2000; Thompson 1992). Although findings suggested that children's reactions are mostly positive, the decision to disclose one's LGBTQ identity to children is fraught with fears and anxieties for many parents (Charter et al. 2023; Clarke and Earley 2021; Giunti and Fioravanti 2017). Newly identifying LGBTQ parents face the emotional complexities of balancing “twin desires for authenticity and wanting to live a fuller life” with uncertainties and anxieties about family change, including how to best support children through these transitions (Tasker and Lavender-Stott 2020, 10). Parents report that younger children and adult children tend to respond the most positively to their coming out, with adolescents sometimes being slower to adjust (Charter et al. 2023; Lynch and Murray 2000; White and Ettner 2006).

When coming out as LGBTQ to children, parents have generally been found to prioritize their children's well-being and comfort levels, navigating disclosures sensitively and with great concern for their children's needs (Charter et al. 2023; Lynch and Murray 2000). For example, gay and lesbian parents have described “adjusting their degree of openness” (e.g., limiting displays of affection with new partners) based on children's comfort levels (Lynch and Murray 2000, 11). Transgender parents have described slowing down or temporarily stopping their pursuit of gender affirmation in order to support children who are struggling to adjust (Charter et al. 2023). In what Charter et al. (2023) thematically labeled “balancing gender euphoria with the needs of the family,” parents indeed negotiated the complexities of both pursuing an authentic life and prioritizing the needs of their children (p. 1300).

1.2 | LGBTQ Parents Coming Out to (Ex-)spouses

Depending on the beliefs and ideologies of their (presumably) heterosexual partner, LGBTQ parents may also worry about how their partner will respond to their coming out, including how those reactions may influence post-separation coparenting and divorce proceedings (Tasker and Lavender-Stott 2020). LGBTQ parents have reported that their greatest fear of coming out to their partner is fear of losing custody of their children (Charter et al. 2023; Clarke and Earley 2021; Giunti and Fioravanti 2017). In fact, gay British fathers in one study reported keeping their sexuality private until after the custody proceedings for fear of it impacting the outcome (Clarke and Earley 2021). In Western political and legal contexts, where most research on LGBTQ-parent families has been conducted and where institutional hostility toward LGBTQ people persists, ex-partners can hold significant legal power in shaping access to children (Bermea et al. 2019; Clarke and Earley 2021; Goldberg and Romero 2019).

Spouses' reactions to their partners coming out as LGBTQ have ranged from supportive to devastated to outraged (Hines 2006; Lynch and Murray 2000; McCaulley and Coleman 2022). Buxton (2008) described the invisible trauma of spouses who are left by a gay or lesbian partner and the intense feelings of hurt, confusion, rejection, anger, and helplessness that often come with it. Many spouses struggle with feeling that their partners were never attracted to them and stayed married to them for the wrong reasons (Buxton 2008). While navigating these complex emotions, partners also must maintain and renegotiate their coparenting relationships (Emery 2011). LGBTQ parents whose coparenting relationships deteriorated after coming out to their spouses attributed the breakdown of their relationship more to the toll and buildup of secret-keeping than to coming out itself (Charter et al. 2023). This deterioration of the coparenting relationship may be what children struggle with more than their parents' LGBTQ identities (Charter et al. 2023; Tasker and Lavender-Stott 2020).

Research routinely suggests that the quality of post-divorce coparenting matters for children's well-being (Amato et al. 2011; Lamela et al. 2016). In post-divorce families where one partner has come out as LGBTQ, the heterosexual coparent's acceptance of the LGBTQ parent's sexuality is often a key factor impacting the quality of the coparenting relationship (McCaulley and Coleman 2022). In a study of gay fathers coparenting with their ex-wives, the primary distinction between adversarial and cooperative coparenting relationships was the extent to which ex-wives accepted or repudiated their ex-husbands' sexuality (McCaulley and Coleman 2022). Ex-wives who did not accept their ex-husbands' sexuality often held religious-based "homonegative beliefs," which appeared to "exacerbate feelings of anger and hurt and leave ex-wives stuck in anger" (McCaulley and Coleman 2022, 64). Even in the context of cordial coparenting relationships, LGBTQ parents have described the looming anxiety and precarity of being in a legally vulnerable position compared to their ex-partners (Charter et al. 2023; Lynch and Murray 2000).

1.3 | Forming LGBTQ Stepfamilies

After ending a different-gender marriage, many LGBTQ parents go on to form same-gender unions, thereby creating LGBTQ stepfamilies (Bergeson et al. 2020; Goldberg and Allen 2013; Lynch 2004). LGBTQ stepfamilies face many of the same challenges as hetero- and cis-normative stepfamilies, with the added burdens of prejudice and discrimination. For example, stepfamilies are created following the disruption of previous families, so losses are baked into the stepfamily's origin (Erera and Fredriksen 1999; Ganong and Coleman 2017; Sanner 2023). Children may struggle with these losses in ways that impact the newly-formed stepfamily—for example, by grieving the loss of their parents' marriage and rejecting the new stepparent (Fredriksen-Goldsen and Erera 2003). Children who are struggling with their parents' coming out as LGBTQ may be especially likely to reject their parent's new partner (Jenkins 2013).

LGBTQ stepparents may struggle with the ambiguity of the stepparent role—a challenge which has been well documented in heteronormative stepfamilies but may be even more acute for

LGBTQ stepparents, who lack clear scripts for the roles they should fulfill in stepchildren's lives (Erera and Fredriksen 1999; Ganong and Sanner 2023; Jensen 2021; Lynch 2004). This ambiguity can lead to stepfamily stress and undermine couples' relationship satisfaction (Ganong et al. 2022; Slotter et al. 2024). In one study of gay- and lesbian-headed stepfamilies, few couples discussed the potential challenges of stepfamily formation prior to moving in together (Lynch 2004). The rose-colored lenses that step-couples tend to have about stepfamily formation have been well documented among heteronormative stepfamilies, especially by stepfamily clinicians (Papernow 2013; Visser and Visser 1990). For parents who have recently come out as LGBTQ, the euphoric pursuit of authenticity may contribute to optimistic expectations of LGBTQ stepfamily life (Lynch 2004).

1.4 | Children's Perspectives

Much of the research on LGBTQ-parent families formed after different-gender divorce has been conducted from parents' perspectives (Tasker and Lavender-Stott 2020). A smaller body of research has explored the coinciding events of parental divorce and a parent coming out as LGBTQ from children's perspectives (Garwood and Lewis 2019; Goldberg 2007a, 2007b; Joos and Broad 2007; Lytle et al. 2013). Many adult children report that they learned about their parents' sexual orientation around the same time they learned about the divorce (Goldberg 2007a; Joos and Broad 2007) and that the family break-up was more difficult than their parents' coming out (Daly et al. 2015; Lytle et al. 2013). Those who experienced the divorce disclosure and LGBTQ disclosure simultaneously described struggling more with their parents' sexual identity than those whose parents came out as LGBTQ after their parents had already separated, suggesting that feelings about the divorce may complicate children's feelings about their parents' coming out (Daly et al. 2015).

Consistent with the divorce literature, the changes that accompany parental separation (e.g., changes in living arrangements, routines, relational dynamics) may be a large part of why parental divorce and a parent's coming out as LGBTQ is experienced as stressful, especially if there is coparenting conflict (Daly et al. 2015). In the event of acrimonious divorces between an LGBTQ parent and heterosexual parent, children may be vulnerable to loyalty conflicts, or the phenomenon of feeling caught in the middle of parental conflict and feeling pressure to choose sides (Baker and Brassard 2013). The phenomenon of "feeling caught" typically results from parental triangulation, or behaviors intended to draw children into a covert coalition with one parent against another parent (Afifi 2003, 729; van Dijk et al. 2022). From a family systems perspective (Cox and Paley 2003), loyalty conflicts signal a violation in the "natural boundaries of a hierarchically organized family system" (van Dijk et al. 2022, 1117). Adult children of divorce have retrospectively said that no single aspect of parental divorce was more distressing than feeling caught in the middle of parental conflict (Ahrns 2007). The phenomenon of loyalty conflicts has been studied extensively in post-divorce families, with findings indicating that higher levels of loyalty conflicts are related to worse adjustment in children (Afifi et al. 2007; Buchanan et al. 1991; Schrodtt and Afifi 2018; van Dijk et al. 2022). Children have described wanting to feel *centered* in their parents' attention and

concern, but not caught in the middle (Braithwaite et al. 2008). Lacking from the literature is a robust understanding of children's experience with loyalty conflicts in families where one parent comes out as LGBTQ. The power differential between an LGBTQ parent and a hetero/cis-normative parent may have unique consequences for the manifestation of loyalty binds, though to our knowledge, this experience has not been empirically explored.

2 | Exploring Hidden Topics in LGBTQ-Parent Families

Exploring hidden and challenging topics in LGBTQ-parent families is not without risk (Goldberg et al. 2024). LGBTQ-parent families have long had to prove their functionality and “normalcy” against historic efforts to bar their existence and deny them access to marriage and parenthood (Clarke and Demetriou 2016). Because of the necessary emphasis on resilience and functionality in LGBTQ-parent families, seldom have researchers explored more challenging topics in LGBTQ family life, likely for fear of such research being misused and weaponized in anti-LGBTQ political agendas (Goldberg et al. 2024). Indeed, children of LGBTQ-parent families have described feeling protective of their parents and are mindful of how they represent their family lives (Clarke and Demetriou 2016; Goldberg 2023; Goldberg et al. 2012). The result, however, is an incomplete picture of the complexities of family life, which so often happens to marginalized groups, who are not afforded the same multidimensional representation bestowed to the privileged (Farr et al. 2025). The purpose of this study was to render visible the hidden, complex, potentially difficult dynamics of post-divorce LGBTQ-parent families. In doing so, our study was guided by two theoretical perspectives: a normative-adaptive approach and feminist family theory.

3 | Theoretical Perspectives

Normative-adaptive approaches have long been used to advance multidimensional representations of post-divorce families and stepfamilies (Ganong and Coleman 1994; Ganong et al. 2025). In response to the tendency to study post-divorce families and stepfamilies from deficit perspectives, which emphasize problems and pathology over resilience and functionality, Ganong and Coleman (1994, 2017) have advocated for greater use of approaches that illuminate the challenging *and* rewarding aspects of (step)family life. Normative-adaptive approaches fundamentally position post-divorce families and stepfamilies as normative family structures (not as marginalized, rare, or inferior family forms) and seek to identify processes that contribute to adaptive family functioning. These approaches bring family complexity into the light and understand family challenges not as problems that are inherent to any particular family structure, but as connected to the social and cultural tendency to position certain family forms (namely, the heteronormative two-biological-parent family) as superior to others (Smith 1993).

This study also is grounded in feminist family theory, which calls attention to how systems of privilege and oppression fundamentally shape social and family life (Allen et al. 2009, 2022).

Feminist family perspectives understand family as a site where intersectional inequalities are both challenged and reproduced (Allen 2023). Second wave feminism called attention to the notion of a false divide between the private and public spheres, whereby families are allegedly “safe havens,” removed from structural violence, oppression, and inequity (Berlant 2009; Boyd 1997; Freedman 2002). Rather than conceptualizing families apart from history and power, feminist family theory understands personal family experiences as intimately connected to the social contexts in which families are embedded (Allen et al. 2009). Family problems—especially in families that have been historically marginalized and oppressed—are therefore understood in relationship to upstream structural oppressions (e.g., heterosexism, White supremacy, patriarchy, capitalism, colonization). Feminist perspectives move away from understanding family problems simply as a reflection of family type or the failings of individual family members, and toward understanding them as reflections of structured inequalities in society (Allen 2023). In the current study, we viewed invisible and difficult topics in post-divorce LGBTQ-parent families in relationship to the experience of navigating LGBTQ family life in a heterosexist society. We sought to understand family challenges not simply from a problems perspective, but as opportunities to unearth family strengths and resilience.

A second tenet of feminist theory that is central to the current study is that feminism challenges dualistic binaries that offer false oppositions of family life (Allen 2023). Born from post-Enlightenment emphases on categorization and hierarchy, Western social sciences have tended to view “human differences in simplistic opposition to each other”—for instance, to conceptualize families as either positive *or* negative, harmonious *or* conflicted, resilient *or* dysfunctional (Lorde 1984, 114). Feminist perspectives reject false binaries and instead recognize that “both human interactions and social structures are characterized by tensions and ambivalence” (Allen et al. 2009, 4). Exploring *ambivalence*, or the “coexistence of contradictory sentiments, expectations,” is central to feminist analysis of family and social life (Connidis 2015, 77). In the current study, we were sensitized to the importance of honoring the complexity of participants’ stories—to illustrating their embodiments of “both/and” logic about family challenges and upbringings. For example, in asking about hidden challenges in post-divorce LGBTQ-parent families (e.g., loyalty conflicts), we also asked about family strengths, giving participants room to construct multidimensional narratives of their family lives.

Finally, our study was grounded in feminist theory because we sought to center voices formerly silenced by institutional systems of oppression, such as heterosexism. Children of LGBTQ parents—like children of other marginalized groups—may carry the burden of representing their families in the best possible light to avoid heterosexist interpretations of family challenges, illustrating how systems of oppression silence their voices (Clarke and Demetriou 2016; Goldberg et al. 2012). Feminist theory emboldens scholars to ask the “previously unasked (and unaskable) questions about invisible family processes and structures” using a methodological approach that is “participant-centric,” inviting participants’ voices to be heard (Allen et al. 2009, 7). Feminism advances the right to be seen and understood as *fully and complexly human*, especially for

marginalized groups that have been boxed into monolithic narratives. This study was born from the desire to resist sanitized portrayals or incomplete depictions of the complexities of family life, and to move toward multidimensional representations of post-divorce LGBTQ-parent families.

4 | The Current Study

Although many LGBTQ-parent families are those formed after the dissolution of different-gender unions (Carone et al. 2021), children's perspectives of these family transitions remain relatively unexplored. For instance, researchers know little about the extent to which children experience divided loyalties or how they perceive the quality of coparenting between their LGBTQ parent(s) and straight parent(s) across households (Papernow 2021). Therefore, we inquired about the extent to which participants encountered loyalty conflicts in post-divorce LGBTQ-parent families and other potentially challenging family issues that they experienced in their childhoods, including the extent to which they felt pressure to keep family issues secret and their reasons for secrecy/nondisclosure. These experiences are *not* representative of LGBTQ family life. Rather, we recruited specifically for those who *had* experienced difficult and hidden topics in an effort to unearth these previously untold stories. Our study was guided by the overarching research question: What is the experience of navigating family challenges when parents divorce and one parent comes out as LGBTQ?

5 | Method

5.1 | Data Collection

Following IRB approval, an online Qualtrics survey titled "Difficult and Hidden Topics in LGBTQ Family Life" was distributed to adults who were raised in LGBTQ-parent families, either from birth ($n = 35$) or after different-gender relationship dissolution ($n = 24$). In the process of data analysis, it became clear that being raised in an LGBTQ-parent family from birth was a distinct life experience from having a parent come out as LGBTQ later in life (i.e., after the dissolution of a heteronormative marriage), and it did not make analytic sense to combine them into one group. The experiences of the latter group—those born to a mother/father family that dissolved when one parent came out as LGBTQ—became the focus of the current study.

Participants were recruited via LGBTQ organizations (e.g., COLAGE), as well as local and community listservs that were not LGBTQ-specific. Information about the study also was shared via snowball sampling, personal and professional contacts, and private social media accounts. Participants were told that the anonymous 25-min survey "examines adults with LGBTQ parents' experiences with hidden or difficult topics related to family life, including mental health challenges, divorce, violence, infidelity, substance use, loyalty conflicts, and other challenges or losses." Potential participants were provided information about the study and had the option to click "Yes, I consent to participant," or "No, I do not consent to participant." Individuals who consented proceeded to the survey, and anyone who did not exited out of the survey.

First, participants were asked a series of demographic questions, including gender, age, sexual orientation, relationship status, parenthood status, race, highest level of education, and employment status. Second, participants were asked a series of questions to better understand their origin story (e.g., how they were conceived or adopted) and family constellation (e.g., how many parents they had, how those parents were related to them, the timing of a parent coming out). For example, one question read:

Please use this space to describe your family constellation. For example: "I was raised by a queer single mom until I was 5, when she partnered with a woman I knew as my stepmom until age 15, when they split up. That woman had a child who lived with us part-time during that 10-year period."

Another question asked, "What age were you when your parent(s) came out (0 if you 'always knew'/your parents had or adopted you in the context of a same-gender or LGBTQ relationship)? Indicate if your age differs for different parents." Next, we asked if participants had experienced any of 14 potentially challenging family issues growing up (e.g., parent substance use/abuse, parent violence toward other parent, parent infidelity, parent divorce or separation). In a series of open-ended questions, we asked participants about the experience of navigating family challenges. For example, one question read:

If your LGBTQ parent(s) had challenges that felt sensitive or private: What was this experience like for you? If you did not tend to share with others, what were you afraid of? If you did share information with others, who do you tell? What did you share?

We also asked participants open-ended questions about the extent to which they experienced loyalty conflicts as well as the factors that contributed to loyalty conflicts. We asked them to reflect on the extent to which their parents had different or similar levels of power in the relationship and how that affected their coparenting dynamic. Finally, we asked participants about how having LGBTQ parents impacted them and if there was anything else they wanted to share about the hidden or less understood aspects of growing up with LGBTQ parent(s). The survey concluded with an opportunity to provide open-ended feedback about the survey. Participants had the option of being entered into a drawing for one of five \$50 Amazon gift cards, and/or the option of being emailed information about study findings when they are available.

5.2 | Data Analysis

Participant responses for this study ranged from one sentence (14 words) to 12 sentences (286 words). As illustrated by the study results, participants often provided detailed responses to the open-ended questions, allowing for robust analysis of qualitative data. Qualitative analysis followed the steps of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2019; Terry and Hayfield 2021). First, in a phase of data familiarization, the first and second authors read each file of participants' survey

responses in full to gain a holistic sense of the data. Qualitative responses for each participant were then extracted and compiled into a central file for analysis. The first author then analyzed and coded each open-ended response for thematic content. For example, statements such as “My dad threatened to raise mom’s sexuality in court” and “My father used his economic and political clout to slander my mother” were coded as *straight parent weaponizing homophobia*. Initial codes were analyzed for similarities and grouped into larger categories to form initial themes. For example, the initial codes *feeling caught between parents*, *feeling protective of vulnerable parent*, and *fear of losing the love of one parent or another* were combined to form the initial theme *navigating loyalty conflicts*.

In the next phase of analysis, developing and reviewing themes, the first author looked for links between initial themes and rearranged thematic content accordingly (Terry and Hayfield 2021). For example, initially, *straight parent weaponizing homophobia* and *navigating loyalty conflicts* were two distinct themes. However, it became clear as analysis continued that the first theme (*straight parent weaponizing homophobia*) played an important role in the second theme (*navigating loyalty conflicts*) in that having a parent weaponize homophobia shaped participants’ sympathies and loyalties toward their other parent. As such, the first theme was merged and became a dimension of the second theme.

Next, we engaged in the process of naming and defining themes (Terry and Hayfield 2021), which involved describing themes in detail and beginning to craft the narrative of the theme. At this stage, the second and third authors provided feedback on the theme names and narratives. For example, the theme *LGBTQ stepfamily closeting* was initially named *layers of closeting*, which was then renamed to *concealing family problems*. The first and second authors reviewed the theme names alongside the data, and their feedback informed the decision to rename and refine the theme to focus specifically on the phenomenon of *LGBTQ stepfamily closeting*, including the reasons for and the consequences of stepfamily closeting. The first author wrote a detailed definition of this theme and crafted the narrative of the theme, which was again reviewed by the second and third authors. The process of refining and crafting the narratives of the themes was an iterative process involving input from all authors, with the first author frequently revisiting the raw data to ensure that new developments were well supported by the data (Goldberg and Allen 2024). This process resulted in two robust and distinct themes grounded in the data: *navigating loyalty conflicts* and *LGBTQ stepfamily closeting*. Note that all participant names in the results are pseudonyms.

5.3 | Sample Description

The sample consisted of 24 participants who were born to different-gender married parents (i.e., mother/father families) who divorced when one parent came out as LGBTQ. Participants ranged in age from 21 to 64 years ($M = 36.6$). Fourteen participants (58.3%) were cisgender (cis) women, five (20.8%) were cis men, four (16.7%) were nonbinary/genderqueer, and one (4.2%) was a transgender (trans) man. Eleven participants (45.8%) identified as heterosexual, four (16.7%) as queer, three (12.5%) as gay,

three (12.5%) as lesbian, two (8.3%) as bisexual, and one (4.2%) as bisexual and demisexual. Most participants were White ($n = 21$; 87.5%), two were biracial (White/Hispanic, 8.3%), and one was Black/African American (4.2%).

Half of the sample ($n = 12$; 50%) had a college degree, nine (37.5%) had a master’s degree, one (4.2%) had a high school diploma/GED, one had some college/an associate degree, and one had a PhD/JD/MD. Participants endorsed growing up as middle class ($n = 9$; 37.5%), working class ($n = 7$; 29.2%), upper-middle class ($n = 4$; 16.7%), lower class ($n = 2$; 8.3%), and “something more complicated” (e.g., fluctuating between working class and lower class throughout childhood; $n = 2$). Their families lived in rural ($n = 5$; 20.8%), urban ($n = 6$; 25%), and suburban ($n = 10$; 41.7%) areas, with three participants (12.5%) describing their situations as “something more complicated” (e.g., frequent geographic relocations between rural and (sub)urban areas). Participants were from a range of states, including California ($n = 3$), Massachusetts ($n = 3$), Connecticut ($n = 3$), Florida ($n = 2$), Minnesota ($n = 2$), and one each from Arizona, Colorado, Delaware, Maryland, Missouri, New York, North Carolina, Oregon, Rhode Island, and Virginia. One participant was from the United Kingdom.

Participants were between the ages of 0–5 ($n = 8$), 6–11 ($n = 10$), and 12+ ($n = 6$) when a parent came out as LGBTQ. The average age at which a parent came out as LGBTQ was 8.5 years old. Ten participants’ parents came out in the late 1970s or 1980s, nine participants’ parents came out in the late 1990s or early 2000s, and five participants’ parents came out in the late 2000s or early 2010s. For 15 participants, their mothers came out; for nine participants, their fathers came out. We did not include a survey item that asked participants to explicitly name the sexual or gender identity of their parent who came out, though all identifiers within the LGBTQ acronym were represented in participants’ responses. Because the language that participants used to describe their parents’ sexual or gender identity was not always static (e.g., some used multiple descriptors interchangeably [e.g., gay, queer] for the same parent in their open-ended responses), we use the terms “LGBTQ” and “queer” for inclusivity purposes where appropriate, and we use more specific identifiers where possible (i.e., if a participant consistently used the same term to describe their parents’ sexual or gender identity).

For most ($n = 21$; 87.5%) participants, their parent’s divorce occurred around the same time as when a parent came out as LGBTQ. For three participants, at least 6 years had passed between their parent’s divorce and their parent’s coming out. In two of those three cases, participants’ mothers divorced straight fathers and remarried another straight man before coming out and repartnering with a woman. All but three participants were members of LGBTQ stepfamilies in that their LGBTQ parent, after ending a different-gender marriage, subsequently formed a same-gender union. In the three remaining cases, the LGBTQ parent remained single after divorce.

6 | Results

We identified two themes that characterized young people’s experiences with navigating family challenges in post-divorce

LGBTQ-parent families: *navigating loyalty conflicts* and *step-family closeting*. Together, these themes tell a story of the unique dynamics at play when separation, divorce, and stepfamily formation occur in concert with a parent coming out as LGBTQ. First, we discuss the theme of navigating loyalty conflicts, including how loyalty conflicts looked different depending on which parent had come out as LGBTQ. Second, we discuss the theme of LGBTQ stepfamily closeting, including its contributors and consequences.

6.1 | Navigating Loyalty Conflicts

Navigating loyalty conflicts between a straight parent and a queer parent involved feeling caught in the middle of divorced or separated parents' conflict. Some examples of loyalty binds were reminiscent of the literature on post-divorce families in general, where children in high-conflict divorces commonly report feeling pressured by one or both parents to choose sides (e.g., "Mom definitely hated my dad and wanted us to feel the same" [Jackie, age 45, White, heterosexual cis woman], and "My mother would expect my sister and I to side with her in all matters. If not, we were ungrateful or disloyal" [Alex, age 23, biracial, queer nonbinary participant]) (Afifi 2003; Braithwaite et al. 2008). However, the nature of parents' divorces in our study—that a heteronormative marriage dissolved, and one parent came out as LGBTQ—created unique dynamics. Namely, participants described feeling protective of their more vulnerable parent. When queer mothers divorced straight fathers, participants more often described loyalties to their mothers, who they perceived as more vulnerable after the divorce than straight fathers. However, when queer fathers divorced straight mothers, participants were less likely to describe loyalty conflicts and more likely to describe cooperative coparenting. We describe these subthemes below.

6.1.1 | When Mothers Came Out

When queer mothers divorced straight fathers, participants more often described feeling protective of their mothers, who they perceived as the more vulnerable parent. Feeling protective of mothers was especially acute when participants perceived that their fathers tried to weaponize their mothers' sexuality in the divorce proceedings. Of the 15 participants with queer mothers and straight fathers, more than half ($n = 8$) explicitly described what they perceived as their fathers' weaponization of their queer mothers' sexuality. When participants felt that queer mothers were subject to homophobic attacks from straight fathers, who were typically in a more powerful position in terms of both sexual orientation and financial status, participants expressed loyalties to their mothers. For example, Darcy, a 53-year-old White queer cis woman who was 10 when her mother left her father for a woman, described the sympathy she felt toward her mother because her father "threatened to raise mom's sexuality in court, so she let him give her an unfair settlement for the house. She never got any child or spousal support." Similarly, Parker, a 32-year-old White queer nonbinary participant who was 3 when their mother came out as lesbian, said, "I always felt a sense of loyalty to my mom," sharing:

My dad always resented my mom for leaving him and coming out as a lesbian... They went to court for a custody arrangement... My mom always talks about the fact that my dad could have outed her to the court and taken full custody.

Maeve, a 31-year-old White heterosexual cis woman who was 3 when her parents divorced and her mother came out, also said she "felt very protective of my mother" because of how her father used her mother's sexuality against her in a custody battle. She explained:

The divorce between my bio parents was difficult because my mother came out. She was threatened that if she didn't do what my dad wanted, she'd lose all custody because he could convince the courts she was unfit due to being gay. My dad got the say in most every agreement until I was old enough to advocate for myself around [age] 11/12.

Similarly, Phillip, a 30-year-old White heterosexual cis man who was 7 when his parents divorced and his mother came out as lesbian, described how his father's successful weaponization of his mother's sexuality resulted in his father receiving full custody of him and his sister. This placed Phillip in a loyalty bind that affected him deeply throughout his youth:

My father used his economic and political clout as a businessman in my community to slander my mother, embellish stories of her sexual degeneracy, and make her feel like a pariah, to the point that she felt it necessary to live in a different city fairly far away from me... I abstained from making my voice heard with regards to custody preferences for fear of losing the love of one parent or another... I often felt that I let my mother down for fear of alienating my father. This led me to experience great guilt and also great anger for the entirety of my childhood.

Phillip's quote, which illustrates the power imbalance between his heterosexual father and queer mother, demonstrates families as "contested sites of power" where oppression and privilege are systematically experienced and reproduced (Allen et al. 2009, 3). Women, especially lesbian women, have long been subject to social and legal vulnerability in family litigations (Hardesty et al. 2011; Watson and Ancis 2013). In Phillip's case, his father's exercise of power placed Phillip in the middle of an emotionally distressing loyalty bind.

6.1.2 | When Fathers Came Out

Of the nine participants with queer fathers and straight mothers, eight described relatively amicable post-divorce coparenting relationships, perhaps reflecting mothers' lesser position of financial and political capital amid the divorce. Only one described their mothers' using their queer fathers' sexuality against them in custody proceedings. When fathers came out as

gay and divorced their heterosexual wives, participants generally described mothers as being hurt but not vengeful or vindictive. Cooperative coparenting dynamics appeared more likely in these circumstances. Lewis, a 40-year-old queer cis man who was six months old when his parents divorced and 5 when his father repartnered to a man, was raised by his mother in one household and his father and stepfather in the other household. He shared:

My parents had joint custody and remained friendly, so I was raised by all 3 of them (a little more than half time with my mom, and a little less than half time with my dad and stepdad)...My parents remained on very good terms—so much so that I maybe didn't get behavior modeled to me on how to approach conflict. Everything was always "fine"!

Similarly, Andrea, a 49-year-old White queer cis woman, whose parents divorced when she was 8 years old, explained:

My biological parents (cis man and woman) were married right out of college. When my dad came out as gay, they separated and divorced. After they split, they had joint physical custody of me and my brother...my parents were very good about not putting us in the middle.

Bianca, a 23-year-old White heterosexual cis woman, who was 9 when her parents divorced and her father came out as gay, enjoyed shared custody between her parents across households, eventually consisting of her mother, her mother's husband, her father, and her father's husband. She described her parents as working well together, saying, "My parents really tried to limit loyalty conflicts." Similarly, Cameron, a 36-year-old White heterosexual cis woman, was 10 when her father came out as gay and her parents divorced, both eventually remarrying. She said, "I never really felt torn [between my parents], they both were remarkably supportive of each other and never talked badly about the other."

In one case, a participant thought that her straight mother went to great lengths to *protect* her gay father from being discriminated against. Morgan, a 49-year-old White heterosexual cis woman, who was 5 when her parents divorced and her father came out as gay and moved in with his partner, described how, even though her father was not a great parent, her mother did not want Morgan's father to be denied parenting rights due to his sexuality. She explained:

[My father] should have had been ordered parenting classes and anger management, but my straight mother was preoccupied with making sure that homophobia would not be weaponized against him. The fear of being seen as homophobic or the fear of furthering homophobia prevents us kids and our straight parents from seeking support, both informally (friends, peer support) and through formal mental health resources.

Although eight out of nine participants with queer fathers and heterosexual mothers described amicable post-divorce coparenting relationships, one participant offered a poignant counterexample of feeling caught in loyalty conflicts between her divorced parents. Amy, a 42-year-old White heterosexual cis woman, was an infant when her parents separated because her father came out as gay. She grew up primarily with her mother and stepfather, and she visited her father once or twice annually. Amy described how her mother's feelings of betrayal when her father came out made her feel protective of and loyal to her mother: "I always felt an emotional loyalty to my mom because she was 'left' by my gay dad and carried a lot of wounds around that throughout my whole childhood." Amy cited her father's abandonment of their family as contributing to her "feelings of protection and support towards my mom." She explained:

While he was in the midst of "finding himself" and exploring the gay community, he didn't really know what to do with me. A young child did not fit with his lifestyle at that time...He moved from [home state] to San Francisco when I was 8, and that felt even more uncomfortable because now I was leaving "home" and the comfort of my mom to go stay with him for 1+ weeks. While it was fun, I was surrounded by his adult male friends and activities...there were always queer jokes and lingo that I would try to keep up with to be "cool." Looking back, it felt very overwhelming and uncomfortable, but I didn't feel like I could show that. When I would come home from these trips, my mom would be very triggered and upset, which made the whole thing even more uncomfortable for me. They often fought about child support payments and him being the "Disneyland Dad" and her having to do all of the day-to-day parenting. I always felt caught between them and like I had to pick sides. It was a very difficult environment to grow up in.

What's more, when Amy's mother remarried her stepfather, the stepfather exacerbated these loyalty binds by denigrating her father: "My step-dad did not want me to say anything positive about my bio dad...I felt pressured to disregard the love I felt for my bio dad because he was gay and not 'normal.'" Her loyalty conflicts were "intense," she said, and the pressure to disregard her love for her father was especially distressing. "He was my dad," she shared, "and I so badly just wanted to love him, too. It felt so complicated growing up." Amy's case offers a moving example of the unique distress of feeling caught in loyalty conflicts (Braithwaite et al. 2008). She loved both her parents, and she wanted to be allowed to love them both, rather than feeling like she had to choose between them (Ahrons 2007).

6.1.3 | Growing Through Challenges

Even participants who struggled with navigating loyalty conflicts described having *grown through challenges* and emphasized their appreciation for their family experiences. Of the 24 participants, 20 described positive aspects of growing up with

LGBTQ parents, including being more tolerant and open to people of diverse identities and backgrounds and being more sensitive to issues of oppression and marginalization. For example, Amy, who navigated painful loyalty conflicts between her heterosexual mother and gay father, went on to say:

I like to think that I am a kinder, more loving, and more accepting human because of the challenges I endured growing up in a divorced, LGBTQ-parent family. I am certain these family experiences led me to become a therapist and taught me invaluable life lessons that I am now able to help my clients discover and understand within the context of their own life experiences.

Similarly, Laura, who was 10 when her mother came out as lesbian, described how her father would say “horrible disparaging things” about her mother after their divorce, which made her feel protective of her mother. Still, when reflecting on her family upbringing, she shared:

As painful as my experience was, I am so thankful for it. I have gained an appreciation of, and now advocate for, acceptance/diversity in life and love. This has impacted my relationships, friendships, parenting style and career choice. I openly support and nurture awareness and understanding.

6.2 | LGBTQ Stepfamily Closeting

In addition to navigating loyalty conflicts in post-divorce LGBTQ-parent families, participants also described the experience of hiding their parents' sexuality or relationship status, what we refer to as *LGBTQ stepfamily closeting*. Seidman (2002) defined *the closet* as “a state of gay oppression produced by a condition of heterosexual domination” (p. 8) and a “life-shaping pattern of homosexual concealment” (p. 25). Our data suggest that *the closet* is not only a space that LGBTQ individuals may occupy, but also space that their families may occupy if a member's LGBTQ status is known to family insiders but concealed from family outsiders. Participants in our sample described how, even once parents came out and established new relationships, forming LGBTQ stepfamilies, they often remained closeted at the family level in that participants kept the nature of their parent and stepparent's relationship hidden from family outsiders. Although the experience of hiding parents' sexuality from family outsiders has been documented in previous literature (e.g., Goldberg 2007a; Kuvalanka and Goldberg 2009), our data provide new insights into the factors that drove stepfamily closeting and the consequences of stepfamily closeting on participants' well-being. We describe these findings below.

Eleven participants described how, after a closeted parent came out as LGBTQ, ended their different-gender marriage, and formed a new LGBTQ relationship, they felt a certain pressure or expectation to keep their parents' relationship private. Many of them described the heaviness of concealing their parents' sexuality and keeping their family closeted. For example,

Jackie, a 45-year-old White heterosexual cis woman who was 10 when her parents separated and her mother came out as lesbian, explained:

I felt enormous pressure to keep my home life and my mother's relationship a secret... I felt I had to tell people my mom's partner was her “roommate” We also were not allowed to discuss it with my grandparents, who disowned my mother and would say horrible things about her.

Parker, a 32-year-old White queer nonbinary participant who was 3 when their mother came out as lesbian, was raised primarily by their mother and stepmother and saw their father on weekends. They shared:

My biggest anxieties as a kid were around my parents being closeted...I often lied and told friends that my moms were roommates...It was very stressful to try to manage everything at home and to never invite others over to my house.

The reasons for stepfamily closeting varied. Nine participants said their parents were not out in all contexts (e.g., at work, to extended family, in the community), and they feared retribution if their parent's sexuality was disclosed. For example, Jackie explained how her mother “was not out at work” and feared that her mother would “lose her job if her employer found out,” so she was discreet about her mother and stepmother's relationship.

Another reason for LGBTQ stepfamily closeting involved a desire to avert heterosexist interpretations of family problems. When participants were experiencing problems at home, they kept their parents' sexuality secret because they feared confirming negative societal views of LGBTQ parents. Parker, who experienced family legal challenges stemming from an abusive sibling, shared, “I was worried that if anyone found out my parents were gay, they would think that was the reason for any other issues going on in our lives.” Rue, a 23-year-old biracial (White/Hispanic) queer nonbinary participant, who was 7 when her parents divorced and her mother repartnered to a woman, grew up in section 8 housing and reported on family challenges including family violence, substance abuse, poverty, and emotional abuse. Rue said, “I did not want to paint a poor picture of queer parents by saying anything [about my family to outsiders].” This protective secrecy created a kind of “double closeting,” where participants not only concealed their parents' sexuality but also concealed family challenges that were unrelated to their parents' sexuality in an effort to protect their families.

Another reason why participants engaged in LGBTQ stepfamily closeting was that they wanted to fit in with their peers, and they feared the possibility of homophobic reactions. For example, Cameron, a 36-year-old White heterosexual cis woman who was 10 when her father came out in 1995, explained, “My dad came out during the height of the word ‘gay’ being very derogatory. I was a preteen and wanted no reason to stand out as different. I didn't tell anyone for years, though many knew through small town gossip.” Andrea, a 49-year-old White queer cis woman

whose parents divorced when she was 8, said about why she was not open about her father and stepfather's relationship, "I was afraid of being rejected by my peers." She shared, "the most stressful part [of my upbringing] was the feeling that I needed to keep dad's orientation a 'secret.'"

The burdens of LGBTQ stepfamily closeting took its toll. Participants described the anxiety of lying to friends and extended family about their home lives, which affected them into adulthood. As Jackie described, "I didn't trust anyone. I was closed off, anxious and angry, and unable to sustain meaningful relationships. I didn't tell anyone about my experiences until I was in college." James, who said that his father being gay "was never discussed in the family," went on to share, "Much of my issues are around how everything had to be hidden...I grew up in an environment of deep shame and secrecy, not just about sexuality, [but] about everything." Bianca, a 23-year-old White heterosexual cis woman, who was 9 when her parents divorced and her father came out as gay, shared, "I was secretive about having a parent who was LGBTQ, especially around middle school – it felt almost like I needed to protect my family from homophobia, but I was also really ashamed of being secretive."

Bianca's quote reveals a complicated bind that some participants found themselves in and around which they managed their relationships: they felt that protecting their families from heterosexism called for secrecy, but secrecy made them feel ashamed. The potential for discriminatory reactions from family outsiders incentivized them to help keep their families closeted, but this closeting contributed to a culture of secrecy that did not serve them, revealing the harmful effects of homophobia with which they were keenly aware. Participants both resented *and* protected the closet, resenting the state of oppression produced by concealment *and* contributing to concealment by helping keep their parents' sexuality hidden. At the same time, they were not victimized by it. The lessons of our data reveal that these youth raised in LGBTQ stepfamilies had the ability to recognize and make decisions about their circumstances, thereby revealing their agency.

Finally, given the burdens of stepfamily closeting and secrecy, participants expressed gratitude for efforts to illuminate and humanize the complexity of their family experiences. They recognized that not all families are afforded the privilege of being transparent about family challenges. For families who have been historically marginalized and oppressed, the risks of sharing or seeking support for family challenges are simply too great. Simone, a 26-year-old Black queer cis woman who was 6 when her mother came out as lesbian, reported being hesitant to share details of her family structure with outsiders. She shared, "I wish there was more understanding of what it is like for us who have parents that come out after the fact...." Taylor, a 38-year-old White heterosexual cis woman who was 16 when her father came out, shared:

If one parent comes out after the kid was born, it's usually not just the one thing. I don't know anyone with LGBTQ parents where one parent calmly sits people down and says, "I'm gay," and that's that... Keeping your sexuality secret from your family is

such a massive burden that it always co-occurs with other problems.

Bianca similarly desired more awareness and understanding of families like hers, sharing, "Doing anything to extend the visibility of these families is really powerful and important."

7 | Discussion

Our study sheds light on adult children's perspectives of two underexplored dynamics of post-divorce LGBTQ-parent families: loyalty conflicts between an LGBTQ parent and a straight/cis-gender parent, and LGBTQ stepfamily closeting. These dynamics are not representative of all or most LGBTQ-parent families, nor all families in general, but they do characterize some people's experiences with family complexity, and they offer empirical support and visibility for the barriers that many families face and yet remain underexplored. As we have noted, scholars have shied away from studying difficult topics in LGBTQ families, and yet we see these families on the forefront of unearthing both invisible problems and the ways families agentially cope with societal discrimination. Given their structural and often intersectional complexity, LGBTQ families are among those who do not have the luxury of conforming to a unified vision of family (Goldberg et al. 2024; Sanner et al. 2024).

Collectively, our findings illustrate the challenging and complex dynamics that some young people experience following parental divorce and a parent coming out as LGBTQ. Many were aware of the differences in power and privilege between their parents—especially between a heterosexual father and lesbian mother—which informed their feelings of protectiveness over their more vulnerable parent. Some felt caught in their parents' conflict and were put in the painful position of having to see their parents as flawed from a young age. When their LGBTQ parent repartnered, they were not only potentially navigating loyalty conflicts between their divorced parents, but they also were adjusting to their parent's new LGBTQ partnership and varied degrees of outness as a new LGBTQ stepfamily. For those who were closeted as an LGBTQ stepfamily, the culture of family secrecy bled into other areas of family communication, creating a form of double closeting where young people concealed not only their parents' sexuality but also other family challenges to avert heterosexist interpretations of family problems. And still, love and appreciation for family and recognition that these issues are ultimately rooted in lack of acceptance from broader society were evident in their narratives, illustrating the ambivalence that is championed by feminist perspectives and normative-adaptive approaches to studying families (Connidis 2015; Ganong and Coleman 2017).

7.1 | Extending the Literature on Loyalty Conflicts

Researchers have extensively documented that interparental conflict after divorce negatively impacts children (Amato et al. 2011; Lamela et al. 2016), especially when children are triangulated in parents' conflict and feel caught in a loyalty bind (Schrodt and Afifi 2018; van Dijk et al. 2022). Triangulating

children in parental conflict has been found to be especially harmful to their well-being when children report higher levels of empathy (van Dijk et al. 2022), suggesting that some children are particularly attuned to their parents' conflict and particularly affected by feeling caught in the middle. Although the distressing experience of loyalty conflicts has been widely researched in post-divorce heterosexual-parent families (Afifi et al. 2007; Buchanan et al. 1991; Baker and Brassard 2013), there has been limited understanding of how loyalty conflicts operate in post-divorce LGBTQ-parent families. Our findings extend this literature by illustrating the unique dynamics at play when a heteronormative marriage dissolves, and one parent came out as LGBTQ. Our participants spoke poignantly about the painful experiences of navigating loyalty conflicts and feeling protective of their more vulnerable parent.

An interesting finding involved the observed differences in loyalty binds depending on which parent came out as LGBTQ. When queer mothers divorce heterosexual fathers, coparenting appears to be more acrimonious, and loyalty binds appear to be more common than when queer fathers divorce heterosexual mothers. Through a feminist lens attending to issues of power, this finding is perhaps not surprising. Whereas fathers may have the financial and political capital to take a scorched-earth approach to their wives coming out as lesbian, mothers may not; they may be financially dependent on their ex-husbands in ways that necessitate cooperative coparenting. It is also possible that straight men's indignant reactions to their wives coming out as lesbian are rooted in hegemonic masculinity (e.g., feeling emasculated by their wives' non-heterosexuality) (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). Straight fathers may also be reacting to how quickly their (ex-)wives have moved on; Buxton (2008) found that lesbian mothers had already formed same-gender partnerships when they came out to their husbands more often than had gay fathers when they came out to their wives. Our data do not offer precise insights into these theories, but they do illustrate that many young people felt that their fathers handled their mothers' coming out poorly, that their fathers threatened to use their mothers' sexuality against them in legal proceedings, and that they felt protective of their mothers for these reasons.

7.2 | Lingering Legacies of Childhood Challenges

Although participants in our study are reflecting on challenges experienced in childhood, the present-day implications of their histories are evident in their narratives. From a clinical perspective, it is widely recognized and empirically supported that experiences in childhood go on to impact people throughout the life course (Ahrons 2007; Balistreri and Alvira-Hammond 2016; Hughes et al. 2017). From a family life course perspective, family-of-origin dynamics have a way of echoing through time, and participants gave voice to the lingering legacies of their childhood experiences (Bengtson and Allen 1993). The distress of loyalty conflicts and the anxiety of stepfamily closeting affect them into adulthood, shaping their orientation toward relationships and secrecy. Some struggle with opening up and trusting people—surely a learned response to their sustained diligence of protecting their families from unfair assessments of their family challenges. Some have lingering shame around being secretive about their family,

despite that their secrecy was protective, highlighting the invisible psychological costs of adapting to systems of oppression (Anderson 2019).

7.3 | Practical Implications

Our findings have clear implications for practitioners. First, we offer insight into a relatively hidden segment of the LGBTQ-parent family landscape. Although many children experience the coinciding events of parental divorce and a parent's coming out (Goldberg et al. 2014), research on LGBTQ-parent families formed after different-gender divorce has stalled, and our findings reveal fresh insights into potential dynamics embedded within this set of family transitions. Clinicians can use these findings to inform their assessments of the dynamics that may be at play for clients with this family background. In providing examples of how young people may be shaped by these dynamics into adulthood, our findings can sensitize practitioners to noteworthy lingering effects of navigating loyalty conflicts and LGBTQ stepfamily closeting.

Our findings also can enhance awareness of how dynamics related to parental divorce and separation are made more complex when a parent comes out. For example, the power differential between a newly-out LGBTQ parent and a hetero/cis-normative parent appears to have unique consequences for the manifestation of loyalty binds, such that children feel more protective of their more vulnerable parent, especially when they sense foul play by their heterosexual parent (e.g., weaponizing homophobia in legal proceedings). Dynamics related to stepfamily formation also are made more complex when a parent has recently come out, especially if the parent is not out in all contexts, which may require varying degrees of LGBTQ stepfamily closeting. In general, our findings speak to the need for practitioners to expand heteronormative ideas of divorce and homonormative ideas of queer parenthood.

8 | Conclusion

Our study offers insight into two dynamics potentially experienced in LGBTQ-parent families post-heteronormative relationship dissolution: navigating loyalty conflicts and LGBTQ stepfamily closeting. For youth who have experienced these dynamics in the past, the legacies of these dynamics linger and affect their lives into adulthood. Now, in an era of renewed anti-LGBTQ hostility within Western liberal democracies, children in the present and future will surely navigate the experiences of parental divorce and a parent coming out as LGBTQ against the backdrop of persistent heterosexism. Rendering visible their hidden experiences—holistically and with utmost compassion for them and their families—will be critical to supporting families on the margins and honoring the ever-complex realities of family life.

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