

Why LGBTQ adults keep ties with parents who reject them

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Families We Keep

LGBTQ People and Their
Enduring Bonds with Parents



RIN RECZEK AND
EMMA BOSLEY-SMITH

Credit: NYU Press

Even when they've been rejected by their parents, many LGBTQ adults take pains to keep relationships with their families—despite the conflict and heartbreak.

The question is: Why?

Two [sociologists](#) at The Ohio State University have made an effort to find out. They talked extensively with 76 lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer adults and 44 of their parents to learn why LGBTQ people try to make these [family relationships](#) work.

They report their results in the book "[Families We Keep: LGBTQ People and their Enduring Bonds with Parents](#)" (NYU Press).

"We found a sense of what we called 'compulsory kinship,'" said co-author Rin Reczek, a professor of sociology at Ohio State.

"There's this feeling among many LGBTQ people that the family is untouchable and should be maintained at all costs."

Three themes emerged as to why LGBTQ adults felt they had to keep these ties, said co-author Emma Bosley-Smith, a doctoral student in sociology at Ohio State.

The most common theme was what the authors called "love and closeness." But it wasn't the love and closeness as seen in most relationships.

"In many interviews, there was a lot of talk about the pain and suffering in the relationship with their parents, but then they would say they were close, or they loved each other," Bosley-Smith said. "It was contradictory."

In many cases, those interviewed "just repeated the language we use about family relationships, the language that hints about what is expected of family," Reczek said. "But it was often hard for them to explain how that related to their own relationships."

A second theme was the growth that the LGBTQ adults saw, or thought they saw, in their parents. Some did see real growth in how their parents accepted them over time. But for many, it was more of a sense of hope and optimism that it would happen eventually.

"There were these instances where they would say 'Well, they are a little better than they used to be,'" Bosley-Smith said.

The third theme was the uniqueness of the child-parent bond, Reczek said. This theme was often mentioned by people who had the worst relationships with their parents.

"We would hear things like 'There's not even any love in our relationship, but she's my mom,'" Reczek said. "It was this notion that the parent-child relationship is so unique that it can't be replaced or ended."

In order to maintain their relationships, LGBTQ adults interviewed for the book had to make serious efforts to stay bonded with their parents. It was what the authors called "[conflict](#) work," and the adult children tried different ways to do this.

Some stayed in the closet, hiding their sexuality altogether to avoid

parental rejection. Others went "under the rug," as the authors called it, never speaking again about being LGBTQ after coming out.

Some were able to "become normal" by getting married and having kids—but this option is generally available only to white gay and lesbian people, and not transgender people or those of other races and ethnicities.

When all else failed, some actually did move out of the family—but that move was almost always temporary, the authors found.

"If they did come back to their parents—and they almost always did—it was because of this notion of compulsory kinship," Reczek said. "The social forces that keep parent-child ties together are pressuring them to come back."

But compulsory kinship is not just an emotional and social tie, Bosley-Smith said. In the United States in particular, there are practical and financial reasons that keep adult children, especially young adults, tied to their parents.

"If your parents are how you get health care or pay your phone bill, that's another factor," Bosley-Smith said.

While the interviews showed that many LGBTQ adults do try to keep some type of relationship with their parents, the authors conclude that there should be a way to cut those ties if they simply won't work.

Part of the solution would require societal and structural change.

"We need to make it so adults can be less reliant on their parents," Reczek said. "For example, having a living minimum wage that would allow all adults to live on their own without having to rely on a

homophobic or transphobic parent."

But even beyond the practical and financial, there needs to be a "less compulsory kinship," Reczek said.

"We don't need to place our entire sense of self, our identity, on being a parent or child. Adult children should be able to be independent or even estranged from their [parents](#) without losing their sense of belonging, purpose and identity."

Provided by The Ohio State University

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