The Intergenerational Relationships of Gay Men and Lesbian Women

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Objectives. Despite the demonstrated importance of intergenerational ties across the life course, few studies examine relationships between gay men and lesbians and their later life parents and parents-in-law. The present study examines how midlife to later life gay men and lesbians in intimate partnerships conceptualize these intergenerational ties.

Method. Qualitative analysis of 50 in-depth interviews collected with midlife to later life gay men and lesbians (ages 40–72) in long-term intimate partnerships.

Results. Findings reveal 4 central ways respondents describe supportive parent–child and parent–child in-law relationships: integration, inclusion through language, social support, and affirmations. Findings reveal 3 central ways individuals distinguish strained parent–child and parent–child in-law relationships: rejection in everyday life, traumatic events, and the threat of being usurped. Findings further articulate how intergenerational ambivalence is distinguished through descriptions of a parent as simultaneously supportive (via subthemes of solidarity) and rejecting (via subthemes of strain).

Discussion. Findings from this study provide empirical evidence of how support, strain, and ambivalence in intergenerational ties are identified and experienced by gay men and lesbian women. This study reveals a new lens to view relationships between midlife to later life adults and their aging parents and parents-in-law and further identifies linkages between solidarity–conflict and ambivalence paradigms.

Key Words: Ambivalence—Gay men and lesbians—In-law relationships—Intergenerational relationships—Midlife to later life—Solidarity–conflict.

THE parent–adult child tie is central to both generations across the life course; intergenerational ties have consequences for overall well-being and "provide the context within which individuals age, the way [individuals] mark their own ageing, and the relative value that is attached to that process" (Lowenstein, Katz, & Biggs, 2011, p. 1079). Despite the demonstrated significance of intergenerational ties, few studies investigate relationships between midlife to later life gay men and lesbian women and their later life parents—a relationship that may be typified by distinct dynamics due to gay men and lesbian women's stigmatized sexual minority status (Averett & Jenkins, 2012; Connidis, 2012). Moreover, gays and lesbians in romantic partnerships also have relationships with their partner's parents (i.e., "in-laws"). These in-law ties are even less understood, yet may have unique dimensions due to a lack of relationship legality (Biblarz & Savci, 2010). The present study analyzes 50 qualitative in-depth interviews with midlife to later life gay men and lesbian women in long-term intimate partnerships (e.g., 7 years or more together) with the aim to examine how adult children conceptualize relationships with their—and their partner's—parents. The perspectives of both partners in an intimate tie are analyzed in order to achieve multiple vantage points of both the parent–child and "in-law" relationship. The term "in-law" is used in order to most easily demonstrate the nature of relationships between an individual and the intimate partner's parents. Because same-sex marriage is not legal federally, nor legal in the state where the study took place, there is not necessarily a legal connection between "in-laws" and gay men and lesbians. This term is used for both ease of discussion and because respondents used this term in their interviews. The analysis is framed within the context of intergenerational solidarity–conflict and ambivalence perspectives.

Theoretical Approaches to Parent–Child and In-Law Ties

Although parent–child and in-law ties have unique dimensions, both types of intergenerational relationships are primarily theorized within a solidarity–conflict perspective (Birditt, Tighe, Fingerman, & Zarit, 2012). This approach emphasizes that both solidarity and conflict are normative aspects of intergenerational ties from adolescence to later life (Bengtson, Rosenthal, & Burton, 1995; Lowenstein, 2007; Silverstein & Bengtson, 1997) and highlights six dimensions of intergenerational relationships: affectual solidarity (e.g., emotional attachment), associational solidarity (e.g., frequency of contact), consensual solidarity (e.g., agreement on values), functional solidarity (e.g., exchange of resources), normative solidarity (e.g., commitment to family obligations), and structural solidarity (e.g., structural contexts) (Bengtson, Giarrusso, Mabry, & Silverstein,

2002). Research demonstrates that parent–child and parent–child in-law relationships are both generally positive (Santos & Levitt, 2007; Silverstein & Bengtson, 1997) with the generations living in close proximity with frequent contact, support exchanges, and emotional closeness (Cooney & Uhlenberg, 1992; Peters-Davis, Moss, & Pruchno, 1999). However, both parent–child and parent–child in-law ties are also shown to have dimensions of conflict (Bengtson et al., 2002; Clarke, Preston, Raksin, & Bengtson, 1999), typified by disagreements on a variety of topics including finances, politics, and lifestyle.

Although the solidarity–conflict approach is most commonly utilized in research on intergenerational ties, intergenerational ambivalence has increasingly become a central paradigm in this area (Luescher & Pillemer, 1998). Intergenerational ambivalence brings together psychological ambivalence (i.e., opposing feelings) and sociological ambivalence (i.e., conflicting norms) to call attention to how parents or children experience simultaneously "opposing feelings or emotions that are due in part to countervailing expectations" for how each generation should act (Connidis & McMullin, 2002, p. 558). Intergenerational ambivalence posits that solidarity and conflict *coexist simultaneously* in parent–child and parent–child in-law relationships (Peters, Hooker, & Zvonkovic, 2006); according to recent studies, about 30%–50% of parents and adult children report some degree of ambivalence in their relationship with the other generation (Fingerman, Hay, & Birditt, 2004). Willson, Kim, Shuey, and Elder (2003) report higher rates of ambivalence in adult children's relationships with in-laws than in relationships with parents.

Gay Men and Lesbian Women's Intergenerational Relationships

The intergenerational ties of gay men and lesbian adult children may be typified by unique dimensions of conflict, solidarity, and ambivalence, although few studies address this possibility. A child's nonheterosexual identity has been shown to be associated with negative interactions with later life parents (D'Augelli, 2005); later life parents may be especially unable to accept their gay or lesbian child, or their child's partner, "because of the sociopolitical climate of their child-rearing years, when homosexuality was viewed as an unspeakable moral sin or a deep psychological pathology" (Savin-Williams & Cohen, 1996, p. 134). As evidence of this intergenerational strain, midlife to later life gay men and lesbian women appear to have fewer family confidants than heterosexuals (Balsam, Beauchaine, Rothblum, & Solomon, 2008; Dewaele, Cox, den Berghe, & Vinke, 2011; Grossman, D'Augelli, & Hershberger, 2000; Rostosky et al., 2004) and tend to rank social support from friends as more consistent and important than support from family (Biblarz & Savci, 2010; Graham & Barnow, 2013; Kurdek, 2004, 2006; Lyons, Pitts, & Grierson, 2013).

Additionally, research shows shared values and achieved expectations are related to greater intergenerational solidarity and lower conflict (Fingerman et al., 2004). Gay men and lesbian women are historically unable to fulfill widely valued expectations and values, including most notably heterosexual marriage (Heath, 2012; Schulman, 2009). Thus, gay and lesbian intergenerational ties may be high on the dimension of conflict and low on levels of solidarity (Balsam et al., 2008; Kurdek, 2005; Solomon, Rothblum, & Balsam, 2004). This may be particularly salient in the in-law tie; midlife to later life gays and lesbians have restricted access to legal and socially sanctioned marriage relationships, yet parents-in-law are formally predicated on a legally recognized relationship (Oswald, 2002). Notably, however, recent changes in state and federal marriage laws allow for the possibility of participation in same-sex marriage (Hull, 2006; Lannutti, 2007; Ramos, Goldberg, & Badgett, 2009), and a growing body of research suggests that gay men and lesbian women experience supportive and meaningful bonds with parents and in-laws (Fredriksen-Goldsen & Muraco, 2010; Goldberg & Smith, 2011; Oswald, 2002). In addition, gay men and lesbians tend to maintain contact with parents, even if parents are disapproving of children's sexual identity (LaSala, 2001, 2002; Ocobock, 2013). Based on research on heterosexuals, relationships with parents that remain intact even when there is conflict around an adult child's life decisions tend to be characterized by the presence of ambivalence (Birditt, Fingerman, & Zarit, 2010). Despite these possibilities, few studies directly examine how intergenerational interpersonal dynamics are understood by gay men and lesbian adult children as supportive, strained, or ambivalent. This study advances this previous body of work with the aim to examine how adult children conceptualize relationships with their—and their partner's—parents.

METHOD

Procedures

The present study analyzes 50 qualitative in-depth interviews conducted with 22 lesbian-identified women and 28 gay-identified men in intimate relationships self-defined as committed for 7 years or longer. The original study included 60 interviews with gay men and lesbians; the sample analyzed in the present study includes only the 50 individuals who were older than 40 years at the time of the interview. The analytical sample was restricted to individuals aged 40 and older to situate the analysis in theory and research on midlife to later life adults (Birditt et al., 2010; Moen & Wethington, 1999). Both members of a couple were interviewed separately in order to obtain independent accounts (Sechrist, Suitor, Vargas, & Pillemer, 2011). In four sample couples, one individual was younger than 40 years and one individual older than 40 years; the individual older than

40 years remained in the analytical sample, whereas the individual younger than 40 years was removed in order to adhere to the age restriction of the study; partners younger than 40 years who were not analyzed are listed with a superscript letter "a" in Table 1. The author conducted the majority of the interviews, while a research assistant performed a minority of the interviews. With institutional review board approval and informed consent given, each

Table 1. Sample Socio-demographic Characteristics

Pseudonym	Relationship duration	Age	Race-ethnicity	Occupation	Education
Sarah	11	48	White	Inventor	College
Jessica		56	White	Store owner	Advanced degree
Jeffery	27	55	White	Piano technician	College
Michael		48	White	Student	College
Marissa	10	45	White	Human resources	College
Janice		40	White	Consultant	Some advanced
Belinda	13	48	Hispanic	Self-employed	Advanced degree
Christina		47	White	Marketing	Advanced degree
Kirk	23	53	White	Professor	Advanced degree
Brett		49	White	Attorney	Advanced degree
Adam	23	50	White	Human resources	College
Paul		48	White	Architect	Advanced degree
Bobby	17	44	White	Program specialist	Advanced degree
Terry		48	Hispanic	Hospital staff	Advanced degree
Edwin	13	49	South American	Administrative assistant	Advanced degree
Kevin		55	White	Social worker	Advanced degree
Gus	23	42	Hispanic/white	Student	Some college
Andrew		44	White	Software technician	Some college
Melissa	10	43	White	Advertising	College
Kristen		43	White	Management	College
Emilia	10	42	White	Managed care	Some advanced
Diana		43	White	IT project manager	College
Gretchen	8	46	White	Attorney	Advanced degree
Danielle		47	White	Legal assistant	High school
Raymond[a]	14	35	White	Firefighter	High school
Christopher		42	White	Software account manager	Advanced degree
Janet	15	40	White	Teacher	Advanced degree
Courtney		50	Latina	Sales consultant	Advanced degree
Tim	23	58	White	Not reported	Advanced degree
Donald		72	White	Architect	Some college
Stanley	16	42	White	Product manager	Advanced degree
David		41	Latino	Hair stylist	College
Albert[a]	23	31	White	Computer analyst	College
Larry		51	Latino	Finance	Advanced degree
Aidan	10	49	White	Interior design consultant	Advanced degree
Max		50	White	Physician	Advanced degree
Elliot	25	49	White	Self-employed/production	Some advanced
Spencer		49	White	Social worker	Advanced degree
Stokes	23	43	White	Program analyst	College
Noah		46	White	Actor, teacher	Advanced degree
Marcus	20	43	White	Contract administrator	Advanced degree
Austen		62	White	Supervisor	College
Jody[a]	12	34	White	Psychotherapist	Advanced degree
Elaine		42	African American	Teacher	College
Paige	25	44	White	Teacher	Advanced degree
Karen		45	White	Teacher	Advanced degree
Karla	15	41	Jewish/white	Professor	Advanced degree
Olivia		47	Jewish/white	Director of non profit	Advanced degree
Ann	14	49	White	Engineer project manager	Advanced degree
Jullian[a]		39	Hispanic	Research scientist	Advanced degree
Darcy	27	50	White	Psychotherapist	Advanced degree
Carrie		60	Jewish/white	Psychotherapist	Advanced degree
Rex	34	57	White	Investment	College
Tucker		64	White	Operations manager	Some college

Notes. [a]Not included in analytical sample because they were younger than 40 years; demographic information is included in Table 1 because partner is in analytical sample.

interview took place in a midsized southwestern city, was recorded, professionally transcribed, and lasted 1–2 hr. Respondents were recruited through a variety of methods including distribution of flyers at local coffee shops and in gay and lesbian community bulletins, a booth at the annual gay and lesbian pride event, informal talks at local gay and lesbian community groups (e.g., churches, gay and lesbian social groups, and community organizations), and the posting of study information on gay and lesbian community e-mail listserves (e.g., local gay men's chorus). Additionally, word of mouth snowball sampling was utilized. The interviews took place between 2006 and 2007 in respondent homes and University offices. The main purpose of the interview was to obtain narratives on long-term relationship dynamics; topics included relationship quality and satisfaction, relationships with parents, and mental and physical health. The sample was restricted to couples of 7 years or longer because the goal of the project was to capture the dynamics of long-term committed relationships; the highest risk of dissolution is in the first 7 years of a relationship (Kreider & Ellis, 2011); thus, intimate ties beyond 7 years are considered long term.

Participants

Respondent age, race-ethnicity, relationship duration, occupation, and education level are listed in Table 1; basic demographics are consistent with current data on U.S. same-sex couples (Gates & Ost, 2004; Lau, 2012; although see Gates & Newport, 2012). Pseudonyms were given to all respondents to protect anonymity. Household income ranged from $40,000 to $120,000. The average age was 50 years for gay men (range of 41–72 years) and 46 years for lesbian women (range of 40–60 years); average relationship duration for gay couples was 21 years and 15 years for lesbian couples. Notably, although demographic characteristics may be similar to some population-based estimates, this sample is not generalizable as it is not drawn from a nationally representative sample. Uniform demographic information about respondents' parents (e.g., age) was not obtained because the interview focused on adult children's interpretations of the parent–child tie; however, interview data and general population estimates place parents between approximately 60 and 90 years old; about one seventh of parents were deceased at the time of the interview. Respondents with deceased parent(s) may experience recall bias, describing parents either in more positive or negative ways than they would if the parent was still alive; this may be particularly true for those whose parent(s) are recently deceased (Higginson, Priest, & McCarthy, 1994; Umberson, 2003).

Measures

A semistructured interview guide facilitated in-depth discussion. The present analysis is focused on responses to

several open-ended questions in the interview guide, most centrally: "What is your and your partner's relationship like with your parents?" "What is your and your partner's relationship like with your partner's parents?" and "Are you 'out' to your parents/is your partner 'out' to his/her parents? If so, tell me that story; if not, why not?" Other structured interview questions relevant to the current study included: "Tell me about times when your/your partner's family had a positive/negative effect on your partnership" and "Has being with your partner had an impact on your relationship with your family?" A series of follow-up questions elicited in-depth accounts. For example, if a respondent said that he does not speak to his mother frequently, the interviewer would follow up to ask, "Why not? When was the last time you spoke? What was the conversation like?" or "How do you feel about not talking to your mom frequently." Notably, approximately one quarter of respondents describe that they are not officially "out" to at least one parent (i.e., they have never discussed their gay/lesbian identity or relationship). However, these respondents believe parents and in-laws are aware of their identity and relationship. Respondents were not required to be "officially out" to their parents/in-laws to be included in the study because research consistently shows that outness is not a discrete event but rather an ambiguous and sometimes indefinable status that shifts over time (Weeks, 1990). Thus, a requirement of outness may have caused confusion as to whether participants were eligible for the study. Additionally, outness was not an inclusion criteria because many current midlife to later life gay men and lesbians are less likely to be out their family of origin due to stigma (Meyer, 2003; Fredriksen-Goldsen, Kim, Barkan, Muraco, & Hoy-Ellis, 2013); excluding this group would remove a portion of the sample perhaps most likely to experience parent–child and in-law conflict.

Analysis

All interviews were independently analyzed by the author using a standardized method of inductive data analysis that emphasizes the dynamic construction of codes for the purpose of developing analytical and theoretical interpretations of data (Silverman, 1997). NVIVO qualitative software was used to house the data only; no NVIVO programs were run to code the data. The utilization of one data analyst is limited in that analytical categories are not verified by another researcher or community member ((Cobb & Forbes, 2002). However, this approach is part of a standardized qualitative methodology that draws on interpretivist and constructionist epistemology; the systematic and rigorous interpretation of conceptual findings by one data analyst is a highly reliable and valid approach to qualitative research (Esterberg, 2002). The author used inductive reasoning to guide the analysis, identifying patterns and conceptual categories as they emerged from the transcripts. In line with a standard approach to qualitative data analysis, the author read the

transcripts multiple times to ensure understanding of the content of the interviews; thereafter, the author took a three-step coding process. First, the author conducted line-by-line, data-driven categorization in order to summarize each piece of data as it related to the relationship between adult children and their parents/parents-in-law. Next, the author performed "focused" coding to develop categories regarding adult children's perceptions of the parent/in-law and child tie by connecting initial line-by-line codes together for conceptual purposes. Descriptions of the parent–child and parent-in-law–child relationship were treated as distinct relationships. In the final stage of analysis, the author created conceptual memos to develop categories and subcategories that related to one another on a theoretical level; these themes form this final stage are discussed below. Although the parent–child and parent-in-law relationships were analyzed as distinct conceptual relationships, there were virtually no differences in the thematic coding of parents and parents-in-law relationships. This is likely due to the dyadic nature of the data wherein both partners describe parents and in-laws in similar ways, as well as the overlapping dynamics of these intergenerational ties within the context of long-term intimate ties. Therefore, we discuss the themes of both types of intergenerational ties in tandem below.

Results

Respondents articulate relationships with both their—and their partner's—later life parents as including dimensions of support, conflict, and ambivalence. Respondents identify different intergenerational relationships with different dimensions of support, strain, and ambivalence (e.g., mother as supportive, partner's father as strained); therefore, the below themes are not mutually exclusive but reflect the range of responses represented in the data. Notably, there were virtually no differences in thematic coding developed from analyzing parent–child and in-law ties; therefore, the analytical themes below are inclusive of both types of relationships unless otherwise noted.

Conceptualizing Family Solidarity

A large majority of respondents ($n = 43$) describe relationships with at least one of their own/their partner's parents as supportive. This evidence of support is typified in four primary subthemes: integration, inclusion through language, social support, and affirmations.

Integration.—Respondents ($n = 23$) typify parents as supportive when parents integrate respondents into everyday and special family events. Karen, partnered to Paige, discusses how such integration demonstrates that both partners' parents are supportive: "When we bought [our] house they started addressing things to Karen and Paige. [We've been] always included." Diana describes this theme

in relation to her own parents: "For the last three years we have got our tradition where they all come here and share Thanksgiving at our home with our family, which I think is huge. It makes us feel like more of a family." Noah similarly speaks of integration into holidays as an important transitional mark of solidarity after he disclosed his partnership to Stokes:

> [My dad] told me that night [I came out], he goes, "Now, tomorrow morning you will call Stokes, make sure he's here on Christmas Eve and we'll have presents for him, he's part of the family now. He always was but now he's officially a part of the family."

Inclusion in funerals was described as an important marker of integration and, therefore, solidarity. Terry's parents included his partner Bobby in Terry's brother's funeral services:

> My brother passed away about a year ago. When they had the obituary and the funeral, Bobby was included like a spouse for me. It was my sister and her husband's name and my brother and his wife's name and me and Bobby's name right next to it. The funeral, he was in the front row with us.

For Terry and others in this sample, parents' and parents-in-laws' efforts at inclusion are a clear marker of acceptance. This inclusion affirms and sometimes reveals positive relationships via integration into everyday and special family events.

Inclusion through language.—The second primary way respondents ($n = 16$) characterize positive intergenerational relationship is through the use of inclusive language like "daughter," "son," or "in-law." This theme was the only subtheme described primarily in relation to in-laws, as these relationships require explicit decisions regarding language. Christopher describes this theme when discussing how his partner Raymond is "treated like one of my mother's son-in-laws. And I am the number one sister-in-law." Similarly, Gus describes that his partner Andrew's parents have accepted their gay relationship as evidenced by language inclusion: "They have always been kind of like my family, too. They had always called me their son." Andrew similarly says of his own father: "My father calls Gus one of his sons…. It would be, 'These are my sons.' It definitely makes Gus feel more a part of the family." Although it is possible that the use of the term "son" rather than "son-in-law" may in fact obscure the gay partnership by placing emphasis away from the marker of gayness, Gus and Andrew both understand the use of this language in private and public settings as inclusive. Thus, respondents in this theme demonstrate how the use of language typically used to characterize in-laws in heterosexual relationships provides evidence of acceptance regardless of legal status.

Social support.—Respondents ($n = 11$) describe parents' reliance on adult children and their partners to provide

social support in the face of aging-related events as evidence of solidarity. Noah describes above how his father was supportive of his relationship with Stokes. However, Noah says his mother was reluctant to welcome Stokes into the family until her husband passed away:

> [When] my dad passed away she became dependent on Stokes for support in that time of crisis and has ever since. He does her taxes all the time. She's so funny, she'll call up and like leave a message and she won't even say hello to me. She's like, "Stokes, um, well, I got my tax stuff." So she'll send all her taxes. He's useful to her.

Noah's mother's acceptance is marked by her reliance on Stokes for social support. Above, Terry describes that Bobby was included in Terry's brother's funeral. In his interview, Bobby demonstrates how his own parents accept Terry via their reliance on Terry's social support:

> There are things that he does that nobody else can do. He understands medicine, so he can be like taking blood pressure and giving them their pills and talking about their diet. Or look at a doctor's orders and say, "No, you are doing that wrong. It is supposed to be this, not that." So they appreciate him for that. Now that my parents are older, they are just unable to cook. The fact that Terry is just a fantastic chef and they really appreciate [that].

As Bobby reveals, respondents identify ties with parents as positive due to their acceptance of instrumental support—just as they would from any other adult child—in the face of needs that arise with aging. Kirk, partnered to Brett, also construes solidarity via support provision when Brett's parents downsized their home—a central life course event:

> I was part of the [family]. We go and often spend about a week with them. When they were putting the parent's house on the market, I went down with Brett and three other siblings helped clean things out. I feel in many ways a part of his family.

Kirk demonstrates that, just like Brett's siblings, he is a part of the family through the support provision both he and Brett provided during Brett's parents' life transition.

Affirmations.—Respondents (*n* = 7) report receiving affirmations specifically about their gay or lesbian identity from parents and parents-in-law; these affirmations are deployed as evidence of support. Spencer's dad demonstrated his support verbally when he could not attend his son's commitment ceremony:

> On the phone just the other evening, [my dad] really expressed a lot of things about, "When your son gets married, that's an important day in your life. I'm really sad that I can't be there too to be part of that." Wow, that was just so good. That just felt so affirming and nice.

Others experience support via parents' explicit participation in pro-gay or lesbian activities, such as Kristen: "My parents are going to protest [gay rights]. They are 100% supportive. All gay rights." Melissa, Kristen's partner, agrees: "Her mother and father were members of PFLAG.

They were real flag wavers, support my daughter, very, very proud. I think it was really genuine." Respondents, like Melissa, Kristen, and Elliot, describe affirmations as indicators of parental support.

Conceptualizing Family Conflict

Respondents (*n* = 39) describe relationships with at least one of their or their partner's parents as conflictual by way of three types of evidence: rejection in everyday life, traumatic events and statements, and the threat of being usurped.

Rejection in everyday life.—Respondents (*n* = 19) understand family relationships as conflictual via descriptions of omnipresent negative or extremely limited interactions. Elaine discusses her partner Jody's parents as unsupportive, evidenced by the fact that they do not attempt to connect to either Elaine or Jody; when they do connect they are unpleasant:

> We moved to Texas partly to separate from them. They don't go out of their way to connect with us. Any connection has been on our initiation. Elaine basically gets hurt over and over, each time she reaches out. They are just mean. We visited them last summer and it was horrible.

Diana describes above how her own parents are supportive but describes her partner Emilia's parents' absence as an indicator of rejection of both Diana and Emilia:

> Her parents totally did not accept our relationship. Initially she really stopped her relationship with them, which was really sad. She would like her parents to be more a part of our lives and I [feel] like it is their loss. And they have been here maybe three times. There is no acceptance. It is almost back to don't ask, don't tell.

This subtheme demonstrates the use of omnipresent negative or absent interactions as evidence of conflict, strain, and disapproval.

Traumatic events and statements.—In contrast to omnipresent feelings of rejection and conflict, other respondents (*n* = 15) use discrete traumatic events to distinguish a relationship with parents and parents-in-law as negative. Gretchen describes that after coming out to her mother, "Her response was to send me an amended will. No letter. No nothing." Darcy discusses a similar traumatic event that epitomized the negative parent/child and in-law relationship:

> Carrie's mother has this brain tumor. She is going to die. This woman barely acknowledged my existence. She was like, "Holy God, what do I tell my friends." So I am telling her goodbye and thanking her for Carrie. I said, "I want you to know that whatever happens, I will always be there for Carrie." Now this is a woman whose brain tumor had eaten the part that controls speech. So, I tell her this thing, with my heart overflowing, and she goes, "I don't approve."

As these illustrations suggest, moments of highlighted rejection provide a key way respondents understand themselves as being rejected by a parent/in-law.

Threat of being usurped.—Although respondents above characterize relationships with parents and in-laws as strained due to omnipresent interactions or punctuated negativity, a minority of respondents ($n = 8$) believe a parent or in-law is rejecting due to evidence that the couples' wishes may be usurped if either partner were compromised with a health issue. Ann says that she would marry her partner Jullian:

> Just for just legally, where you don't have to worry about it. We have our wills in place and we have our power of attorney and all that. We've had to do that before surgeries, because you don't have any rights. You have to worry about her parents, especially. Trust me. If something happened to her they'd be swarming. For sure. I'm certain that they would fight.

Both Austin and Marcus describe how his cancer diagnosis prompted his reframing Austin's parents as unsupportive: "I was planning on, well if I croak, how much insurance can he get and how can he make sure that he has this house and what are we going to do to make sure that he doesn't have the family coming in and trying to take everything away from him." Austin and Ann, like others in this sample, draw on the perception that parents will not respect their wishes at illness or death as evidence that these ties are conflictual.

Conceptualizing Ambivalence

In the final theme of the analysis, respondents ($n = 17$) reveal a parent/in-law as simultaneously supportive (via subthemes of solidarity) and also rejecting (via subthemes of conflict). Although respondents do not use the term "ambivalent" explicitly, their descriptions epitomize one way of conceptualizing ambivalence—wherein they believe a parent is not *solely* experiencing feelings of negativity or support but are experiencing both support and strain simultaneously. Ambivalence is illustrated by Gus and Andrew, introduced above. Here, Andrew describes how Gus' mother expresses her acceptance of Gus in everyday interactions but will simultaneously demonstrate her ambivalence through traumatic events: "She has actually gone as far as sending birthday cards to Gus that say, 'You will always be my son, I love you even though you are going to burn in hell.' That is quite a birthday card to get." With Andrew's parents, Gus is generally seen as "a member of the family"; yet, Andrew describes that there are traumatic moments of nonacceptance from Andrew's mother:

> My mom was fairly kind hearted but she never really accepted it on religious reasons. But she accepted us, and she kept her point of view to herself. Except on very rare occasions when she would just say something out of the blue. One Christmas, we were all here together celebrating Christmas together at our house. And my mom just out of the blue said, "Well, what someone really ought to get y'all separate beds."

Here, Gus both experiences solidarity with Andrew's mother while also experiencing rejection.

Melissa and Kristen both describe how Melissa's mother, who has passed away, kept both her Kristen at arm's length while simultaneously showing solidarity:

> She accepted Kristen just fine, [but] you felt like it was a second class treatment. She would always call my brothers-in-law on their birthdays, but she didn't always call Kristen on her birthday. There was definitely some discrepancies. I know that being gay is not what parents dream of, but when it happens, it seems to me that you are going to almost go out of the way to make them feel welcome. And my mother just wasn't emotionally capable of doing that. She accepted her just fine and there was never any discord shown. But it wasn't this warmth, "Oh you are my wonderful daughter-in-law" either. She didn't know what to do with her, I guess.

These respondents clearly identify both dynamics of support and strain in a parent–child and in-law relationship—a dynamic typified as ambivalence.

Discussion

A long legacy of research in social gerontology suggests that relationships between midlife to later life adult children and their later life parents are central social ties for both generations across the life course (Bengtson et al., 1995); when adult children are partnered, so called "in-law" relationships become an important, albeit unique, intergenerational tie (Willson et al., 2003). However, little is known about these intergenerational ties in the context of a non-heteronormative sexual identity and relationship (Connidis, 2012). This study draws on the solidarity–conflict and ambivalence paradigms to understand how midlife to later life adult gay men and lesbian women in intimate ties conceptualize relationships with their own—and their partner's—later life parents. Findings reveal that respondents draw upon a range of solidarity, conflict, and ambivalence dimensions to frame parents as supportive, conflictual, and simultaneously supportive and conflictual. Findings enhance an understanding of intergenerational relationships in three central ways.

First, this study extends previous research by articulating how the intergenerational ties of understudied group—gay men and lesbian women—can be clearly conceptualized within, and contribute to, the solidarity–conflict framework (Clarke et al., 1999; Silverstein, Chen, & Heller, 1996). The finding of being included in everyday communication and special family events can be viewed as an aspect of associational solidarity, whereas being rhetorically identified as family by the use of language such as "daughter"

or "son-in-law" may be an aspect of normative solidarity (Bengtson et al., 1995). Becoming integrated into family life through associational and normative solidarity in ways similar to all other adult children appears to be central evidence of parents' supportiveness, likely because, as Weston suggests, "self-identified lesbians and gay men experience rejection as an ever-present possibility structured by claiming a stigmatized sexual identity" (1991, p. 74). This is perhaps especially true for a cohort of midlife to later life adults who have historically experienced higher rates of discrimination and homophobia than younger cohorts (Powell, Bolzendahl, Geist, & Steelman, 2010). Therefore, the primacy of integration as a way to understand parents and parents-in-law as supportive may be a finding unique to this population, as notions of integration may be taken for granted by individuals who are not threatened with disownment over a central component of their identity (Weston, 1991). Moreover, reliance on adult children and their partners for social support is an indication of functional solidarity among gay and lesbian intergenerational ties; this support may be critical for parental well-being (Parrott & Bengtson, 1999). In addition, affirmation made by parents in support of a gay or lesbian identity is a type of consensual solidarity. These findings presented on solidarity counter previous research suggesting the gay or lesbian adult child–parent tie is characterized by low levels of support (Dewaele et al., 2011; LaSala, 2001), wherein respondents in this study describe at least one parent/in-law as being supportive in these specific ways.

Although support was clearly highlighted through notions of associational, functional, normative, and consensual solidarity, the gay and lesbian intergenerational tie was also typified as conflictual via a lack of consensual and structural solidarity. The themes of traumatic everyday rejection, rejecting statements around a gay or lesbian identity or relationship, and the threat of being usurped reveal an apparent lack of agreement on values and norms regarding being gay or lesbian or in a gay or lesbian relationship (i.e., consensual solidarity). These themes are also indicators of structural solidarity, wherein the broader structural constraints of homophobia and heterosexism contour family interactions (Bengtson et al., 1995; Biblarz & Savci, 2010). As a result of low levels of consensual and structural solidarity, these intergenerational relationships may also experience low levels of affectual, associational, normative, and functional solidarity. Conflict in the present study appears to be experienced in ways that are similar to conflict regarding other central aspects of identity or life circumstances, such as religious values, finances, and unemployment (Birditt et al., 2010).

Second, although findings reveal a general understanding of a parent or in-law as *either* supportive *or* strained, respondent accounts suggest the simultaneous presence of support and strain (i.e., ambivalence) (Connidis, 2012). This was predominantly the case when the parent–child tie was viewed in the legacy of a multidecade relationship, wherein historic and contemporary acts of rejection and support are combined in contemporary descriptions of parents. Previous work suggests that ambivalence may be present when adult children do not meet commonly held expectations (e.g., unmarried child) (Kiecolt et al., 2011; Pillemer et al., 2007). Therefore, ambivalence may be particularly apparent in this study because the gay and lesbian intergenerational tie is embedded within broader institutional norms of heterosexuality and homophobia (Connidis 2012; Luescher & Pillemer, 1998). Notably, previous research shows ambivalence occurs in both objective, "indirect," or "potential" ways such as those described in this study, wherein there is a co-occurrence of positive dimensions of solidarity and negative dimensions of conflict (Willson et al., 2003), but also via "direct" measures of ambivalence that manifest as felt emotion (i.e., mixed feelings) (Luescher & Pillemer, 1998; Newby-Clark, McGregor, & Zanna, 2002; Suitor, Gilligan, & Pillemer, 2011; van Harreveld, van der Pligt, & de Liver, 2009). Thus, respondents in this study describe coexisting conflicting perceptions of intergenerational ties yet may not conceptualize these relationships as "direct" ambivalence (Petty, Tormala, Briñol, & Jarvis, 2006). This study opens the potential for future work to engage with more direct assessments of ambivalence in gay and lesbian intergenerational ties. Nevertheless, by empirically illuminating ambivalence, this study provides an empirical account of how solidarity–conflict and ambivalence paradigms operate in tandem to demonstrate a more complete range of gerontological phenomena (Giarrusso, Silverstein, Gans, & Bengtson, 2005; Hogerbrugge & Komter, 2012). Third, findings from this study provide insight into specific aging processes and life course events that structure and shift articulations of solidarity, conflict, and ambivalence in midlife to later life gay men and lesbians' intergenerational ties (Elder, Johnson, & Crosnoe, 2003; Umberson, Pudrovska, & Reczek, 2010). For example, as with previous research on heterosexuals, aging and life course transitions were revealed as moments that both highlight and alter the nature of the parent–child relationship (Elder et al., 2003; Ocobock, 2013). For some, major life course events such as a death were understood as important moments that highlighted a shift from a conflictual parent–child relationship to a supportive one (Umberson, 2003). For others, however, aging events such as an adult child's illness revealed strain with parents. In this view, life course events that occur as parents and children age provide the contextual backdrop for understanding relationships as not statically positive, negative, and ambivalent, but also as transitional (Sullivan, 2004). Additionally, a life course perspective emphasizes the importance of historical time in analyzing life experiences (Elder et al., 2003). Respondents and respondents' parents came of age prior to the widespread gay activism, during a time when a majority of the country disapproved of gay and lesbian identities and when many adults remained in the closet for fear of discrimination (Fredriksen-Goldsen & Muraco, 2010). There has been remarkable legal and social

change over the course of respondents' lives, including the federal and state-level legalization of same-sex marriage and decreased public and institutional stigma against gay and lesbian identities (Powell et al., 2010). Thus, interviews conducted with midlife to later life gay men and lesbians in the years after these social and legal changes may reveal new patterns. Moreover, these findings may uniquely represent a specific cohort of parent–child ties (Powell et al., 2010; Savin-Williams & Cohen, 1996). Future research should examine younger cohorts to more fully understand the nature of this tie given shifting social, political, and legal landscape. Limitations should be considered. Analyses rely on the perspectives of adult children; a more comprehensive study would include accounts from both parents and adult children as adult children's descriptions may be reflective of, or perhaps diverge from, the perceptions of parents (Birditt et al., 2012; Gilligan, Suitor, Kim, & Pillemer, 2013; Reczek, 2014; Sechrist et al., 2011). Multiple accounts may be particularly important when attempting to understand the consequences of these intergenerational exchanges on both generations. Additionally, the analyses presented here did not reveal categorical differences between accounts of parents versus parents-in-law. This is in line with previous research suggesting that these two types of intergenerational ties are relatively similar in dimensions of solidarity, conflict, and ambivalence (e.g., Willson et al., 2003). However, this also may be a function of the dyadic data that included each partners' account of both their own parent and their partner's parents in overlapping ways. Future research should attempt to tease out how in-law and parent–child relationships are distinct in the gay and lesbian context. Further, respondents likely experience gradients in the salience of support, strain, and ambivalence—wherein an adult child may experience high levels support, strain, or ambivalence each time they interact with a parent, whereas others experience low levels of support, strain, and ambivalence or experience these dynamics sporadically. Delineating this range of experiences is beyond the scope of the present study but is an important area for future research. Furthermore, auxiliary analyses were performed to examine how the frequency of contact with a parent or in-law (e.g., how often a parent–child dyad visit, speak over the phone) related to the above themes. Analysis showed that those who have infrequent contact (i.e., less than once every 6 months) with a parent were more likely to typify that relationship as negative or ambivalent. However, no meaningful patterns on how respondents characterized their family ties were found when examining individuals with high (e.g., everyday) and moderate (e.g., once a week to once a month) degrees of contact. Additionally, previous research suggests that the level of outness and gender may matter for the parent–child tie (Gilligan et al., 2013; LaSala, 2001), and additional analysis were performed to understand these dynamics. Results revealed that those who were not officially "out" were more likely to experience ambivalence and strain with parents or

in-laws; surprisingly, no systematic gender findings were revealed, but gender dynamics are an avenue for future research. Finally, the study sample is largely white with high levels of education and stable professional careers. Moreover, individuals in this sample are all in long-term intimate ties. These findings are distinct to individuals of comparable status, as they are highly contextualized and are not intended to be generalized to other subpopulations. For example, it may be that less privileged individuals face increased stress and disadvantage, increasing strain and ambivalence in parent–child ties. Alternatively, individuals of disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds may experience increased solidarity due to the opportunity for exchange of financial and instrumental support. Future work should explore the parent–adult child dynamic in other socioeconomic, relationship status, and racial groups. Despite limitations, this study provides one of the first empirical accounts of how midlife to later life gay men and lesbian women in intimate ties experience relationships with their own—and their partner's—parents. Findings provide clear evidence of the ways support, strain, and ambivalence are interpreted by gay men and lesbian women, facilitating a new lens to view adult intergenerational relationships within both solidarity–conflict and ambivalence paradigms (Averett & Jenkins, 2012; Grossman et al., 2000; Solomon et al., 2004). Dimensions of strain, support, and ambivalence may have important consequences for the well-being of both gay and lesbian adult children and their aging parents (Birditt et al., 2010; Fingerman, Cheng, Birditt, & Zarit, 2012; Ward, 2008), and this study lays critical groundwork for future research to address these possibilities.

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