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Exploring Affective Experiences of Queer Individuals Navigating Relationships with Evangelical Parents

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ABSTRACT



An abundance of scholarship explores and discusses the process of queer identity development, including the experience of disclosing one's queer identity, often referred to as coming out. Coming out to one's parent(s) can be a challenging and complex experience for queer individuals, particularly for children from religious families. In this study, I explored the nuanced relationships between queer individuals and their Evangelical parents. I conducted qualitative interviews with nine participants. Using thematic analysis and Ahmed's theory of affect and happy objects, I constructed four themes: (a) learning the affect queer carries, (b) feeling the affects of being queer, (c) how parental appraisals affect parent-child relationships, and (d) being the killjoy. Results suggest the belief alone that "queer is bad" is harmful, regardless of outward acceptance or rejection behaviors from parents. This work compels the field to look beyond and before reactions from parents toward their queer children and to also consider how conceptualizations of queer as bad or good affect queer individuals. While much is known about the challenges faced by queer individuals, this work reveals the importance of examining the systems and structures causing these challenges rather than perpetuating the idea that being queer is inherently painful.

KEYWORDS

Queer; coming out;
family; affect; evangelical

Since 1988, the United States has recognized October 11th as National Coming Out Day. This federally recognized "awareness day" even has its own logo, designed by Keith Haring: an androgynous yellow figure enthusiastically leaping out of a bright orange door (presumably emerging from the closet) into a magenta and lime room. The neon colors exude joy and enthusiasm, suggesting coming out is a celebration of love, happiness, and acceptance, rather than the frightening and intimidating process many queer people anticipate. Coming out can be a celebration of love, of acceptance, and of joy and owning one's truth, but watch any sitcom, or talk to most any queer person, and it becomes evident that coming out is not always a pleasant occasion. Coming out stories also often involve pain and rejection, seemingly inherent to the disclosure.

Scholarship and media commonly depict coming out as ubiquitous to the queer experience. In a cisheteronormative world, many queer individuals find themselves at some point needing to articulate themselves against this backdrop of assumed sexuality and gender identity. Scholars have examined coming out processes for decades, paying particular attention to coming out experiences with parents, acceptance and rejection, and how parental responses affect queer individuals across the lifespan. Scholars have also documented how religion shapes coming out, and how queer individuals in Evangelical contexts experience additional challenges navigating queer identities. In this paper, I explore the experiences of queer individuals and their relationships with their Evangelical parents. Employing affect theory, using Ahmed's (2010) description of happy objects and affective orientations, I answer the questions a) How do queer individuals

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from an Evangelical/Christian background experience their parents' affective appraisals of queer-ness? and b) How may these experiences orient them toward and/or away from their families?

Literature review

Coming out

Scholars have explored the process of queer identity development for decades (Butler, 1996, 1999; de Lauretis, 1991; Sedgwick, 1990), including the disclosure of one's queer identity (Cass, 1984; Coleman, 1982; Floyd & Bakeman, 2006; Grierson & Smith, 2005; Hunter, 2007). Scholars often consider the disclosure of queer identity when studying the disclosure of stigmatized identities broadly (Chaudoir & Fisher, 2010; Chaudoir & Quinn, 2010). How and when individuals realize they are queer, and how and when they choose to share this information has long been of interest to researchers (Floyd & Bakeman, 2006; Haltom & Ratcliff, 2021). In this paper, I use "coming out" to refer specifically to disclosing queer identity, a process that includes both realizing one is queer as well as disclosing to others. Specifically, I consider the experience of coming out to one's parents.

Coming out to one's parent(s) can be a particularly complex event. Scholars have documented a variety of ways parents may respond to their children's disclosure of non-cis/heteronormative identity (Birnkrant & Przeworski, 2017; D'Augelli et al., 1998; Perrin-Wallqvist & Lindblom, 2015; Schmitz & Tyler, 2018). Some found familial response affected the queer individual across the lifespan (Ryan et al., 2010; Schmitz & Tyler, 2018), with acceptance being associated with mental and physical health benefits among adolescents (Ryan et al., 2010). Other scholars have posited relationships between parents and children may change very little following disclosure of sexual identity (Savin-Williams & Ream, 2003), or that coming out can improve relationships between children and parents (Savin-Williams & Ream, 2003; Yarhouse et al., 2016). While these findings are promising and demonstrate that coming out does not always need to be a painful event, scholars have found rejection and other harmful responses from family members remain common experiences among queer individuals (D'Augelli et al., 1998; Schmitz & Tyler, 2018; Van Bergen et al., 2021). In such cases, relationships between the queer individual and their parent or family are often greatly challenged, if not severed completely.

Coming out is also affected by one's relationship with their parents pre-disclosure (Grafsky, 2018; Mehus et al., 2017; Savin-Williams & Ream, 2003). Some found children are less likely to disclose to a parent with whom they do not feel as close (Savin-Williams & Ream, 2003). The experience may also differ based on the gender of the parent to whom one is disclosing (Floyd & Bakeman, 2006; Savin-Williams & Ream, 2003); queer young people may be more likely to come out to mothers than to fathers, which authors attributed to mothers being more likely to inquire about their child's sexuality (Savin-Williams & Ream, 2003).

Coming out can also differ among genders, age groups, and racial groups (Floyd & Bakeman, 2006; Haltom & Ratcliff, 2021; Savin-Williams & Ream, 2003; Van Bergen et al., 2021). Haltom and Ratcliff (2021) found women typically realized and disclosed their queer sexual identities later in life and Black respondents realized their queer sexual identities earlier than other racial groups. Savin-Williams and Ream (2003) found that sons, more than daughters, feared their parents' reactions, delaying or inhibiting disclosure. Parental response can also vary with age of disclosure. Van Bergen et al. (2021) noted validating parental responses were more likely among their youngest age group, aged 18–25 years. Both Floyd and Bakeman (2006) and Van Bergen et al. (2021) suggested youth are increasingly disclosing their queerness earlier in life. Realizing one's sexuality at an earlier age may also influence age of disclosure, with earlier realization being associated with earlier disclosure (Floyd & Bakeman, 2006; Van Bergen et al., 2021).

Scholars have also explored parent perceptions of coming out, such as navigating identity as the parent of a queer/trans child (Grafsky, 2014; Tyler & Abetz, 2020), and what this experience is like particularly for Christian parents (Yarhouse et al., 2016). Tyler and Abetz (2020) posited

three major turning points within the parent-child relationship: a) when the child initially discloses to the parent, b) when the child begins to date and/or the child's first romantic relationship, and c) when the parent begins to identify as the "Parent of an LGBTQ child." They suggested that these are critical points within the parent-child relationship that can prompt either struggle or increased strength and support.

Queerness and religion

Religious contexts may also shape coming out experiences. Scholars have suggested religion is associated with less acceptance from parents (Potoczniak et al., 2009; Roe, 2021; Ryan et al., 2010). Fear of rejection from religious parents can inhibit children from disclosing their sexual or gender identity to their parents, and challenges in relationships following disclosure are frequently documented among religious groups (Potoczniak et al., 2009; Roe, 2021). Scholars have also identified children associate negative beliefs about sexuality with religion, which can inhibit coming out (Reczek, 2016). In another study, scholars found Christian parents responded to queer children in a variety of ways, often through the lens of their religious beliefs (Yarhouse et al., 2016). In interviews with Christian parents of trans youth, Yarhouse et al. (2016) identified parenting a queer/trans child can influence the parent's religious beliefs: liberal Christians remained liberal following their child's disclosure, while conservative Christians remained similarly conservative, or became more liberal.

Queer individuals may also experience challenges navigating identities as queer and Christian (Ganzevoort et al., 2011; Murr, 2013; O'Brien, 2004; Okrey Anderson & McGuire, 2021). Navigating identities as both queer and Christian can result in loss, such as physical and/or psychological loss of relationships with one's faith community, and perceived loss of relationship with God (Okrey Anderson & McGuire, 2021). While scholarship frequently documents challenges experienced by queer individuals within Christian spaces, some queer Christians may find meaning and purpose in this seemingly contradictory identity (Murr, 2013; O'Brien, 2004).

Evangelicalism is a distinct and often more conservative tradition of Protestant Christianity (Pew Research Center, 2015) and Evangelicals remain a group with great socio-political impact in the U.S. (Du Mez, 2020; Schwadel, 2017). Many scholars have thus examined Evangelicalism specifically, particularly exploring Evangelicals' political views (Bean, 2014; Belcher et al., 2004; Brint & Abrutyn, 2010; Du Mez, 2020; Schwadel, 2017) and attitudes on social issues such as abortion (Reimer & Sikkink, 2020; Schwadel, 2017), race (Edgell & Tranby, 2007; Emerson & Smith, 2000; Hawkins & Sinitiere, 2014; Perisho Eccleston, 2020; Perry, 2016; Tranby & Hartman, 2008), social welfare (Elisha, 2008; Laenen et al., 2019; Martin, 2010), and LGBTQ+ issues (Bjork-James, 2018; Chamberlain, 2009; Harrison, 2009; Perry & Whitehead, 2015, 2016; Stell, 2019; Thomas & Olson, 2012; Todd et al., 2017; West, 2014). Generally speaking, Evangelicals in the U.S. tend to be more politically conservative and hold conservative social views, including an emphasis on traditional family and marriage. Evangelical theological views on queerness are diverse, but are generally split into affirming and non-affirming categories (Q Christian, n.d.). Non-affirming theologies are those that maintain marriage is between a man and a woman only and those that view queer identities as a deviation from God's intent and blessing. Within affirming theologies, the terms "Side A" and "Side B" are frequently used. Side A refers to theologies that fully affirm both queer identities and queer relationships, while Side B affirms queer identities, but maintains that queer Christians should remain celibate. Those who maintain that Side B is an affirming theology often clarify that the decision to be celibate must be made by the queer individual, rather than imposed upon them by others.

Religious beliefs can have devastating impacts on queer individuals. While religious beliefs were long believed to be a protective factor for suicidal ideation (Lawrence et al., 2016), scholars have found religiosity to be associated with increased suicidality among queer people (Lytle et al., 2018). Other studies have shown queer young people whose parents hold negative beliefs

about queerness are more likely to consider suicide (Gibbs & Goldbach, 2015; The Trevor Project, 2020). Given the impact of theological beliefs on queer well-being, particularly among Evangelicals in the U.S., I choose to examine how these beliefs can engender affective experiences, how these affective experiences impact queer individuals, and how they impact relationships between queer individuals and their parents.

Theoretical orientation

In this paper, I draw on affect theory to explore the experiences of queer individuals and their relationships with their Evangelical parents. While there is no singular theory of affect, affect theories generally focus on “a body’s *capacity* to affect and to be affected” (Seigworth & Gregg, 2010, p. 2). Affect theories are not only about what is felt and sensed in one’s body, but the effects of these experiences on the body. Affect theories focus on relationships between bodies, and what affects *do* in and among and between bodies. Scholars have employed affect theories to examine queer experiences, such as Malatino’s (2022) exploration of the “bad feelings” of being trans as a way of gaining insight into both transphobia and trans survival.

There is a robust amount of scholarship theorizing affect and a full accounting of it is beyond the scope of this paper. In this paper, I specifically use Sara Ahmed’s (2010) theorizing of happy objects as an analytical lens. Ahmed (2010) describes “happiness as a happening, as involving affect (to be happy is to be affected by something), intentionality (to be happy is to be happy about something), and evaluation or judgment (to be happy about something makes something good)” (p. 29). She draws further connections between happiness and evaluations of objects as good or bad, stating, “We judge something to be good or bad according to how it affects us, whether it gives us pleasure or pain” (Ahmed, 2010, p. 31). The ways we are affected by things, taken as indication of goodness or badness, can become essentialized as an inherent part of the thing itself: “The affect becomes literal: we assume we experience delight because ‘it’ is delightful” (p. 31). Because it appears many, though not all, Evangelical belief systems tend to hold negative views of queerness (i.e., as sin or sinful behavior), I seek to consider how these beliefs may situate queer as a “bad object” and how this may affect queer individuals and their relationships with those who hold this negative view.

I chose to read and analyze my data through Ahmed’s (2010) theorizing of happy objects not only to explore the affective experiences of queer people with Evangelical backgrounds, but more specifically to shift focus from the queer individual themselves onto queerness, the affects that stick to queerness, and how that sticking process affects individuals and relationships. Thus I position ‘queerness’ as the object in question, perceptions of which affect both the queer individual and those in relationship with the queer individual. While Ahmed primarily theorizes happiness, I also consider what we may learn about unhappiness and consider the consequences of queerness as both a happy and unhappy object. Additionally, I seek to explore primarily how things feel, how they are experienced affectively, rather than explain why things happen.

Method

Data collection

I conducted nine virtual, semi-structured individual interviews through Zoom between October and December 2022. Participants were queer, 18 years or older, and identified as coming from an Evangelical background and/or having Evangelical parents. I utilized both convenience and snowball sampling to recruit participants through social media and received ten email responses from prospective participants; nine followed through with scheduling and completing an interview. I also informed participants that they could share the flier and information about the study with others who met criteria and might wish to participate. I provided participants with

a written consent form when scheduling the interview and obtained verbal consent at time of interview, as well as answered any participant questions regarding consent. I obtained approval from Portland State University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) (# 227856-18) and followed all guidelines regarding human subjects during the research process.

During the interviews, I began by briefly collecting demographic information. I then asked participants to broadly describe their upbringing and relationship with their parents, as well as any messages they had received about queerness growing up. I explored with participants the nuances in their relationships with their parents, their parents' beliefs about queerness, how these beliefs were shaped by religion, and the impact these beliefs had on both participants and their parental relationships. I intentionally asked questions to elicit narrative from participants and encouraged participants to share their story rather than worry about "correctly" answering the questions. While the follow-up questions I asked were largely guided by participant responses (Perry et al., 2004), I generally asked all participants questions about coming out to their parents, how their relationship with their parents had changed over time, if there was anything they wished was different or thought could be different about these relationships, the role of community in their life, and what they hoped could be true for the queer community in the future in terms of parental relationships and the coming out process.

During the interviews, many participants inquired about my background and why I chose this topic. I shared with participants that I am also queer and grew up with Evangelical parents, attended church and youth groups most of my life, and was part of my undergraduate university's Christian club. I observed that this shared experience with participants seemed to help them feel at ease. After hearing about my background, many participants made comments such as "you get it," or "you know." While I still asked participants to answer questions as if we had no parallel or similar experiences, it did appear that this shared understanding aided in participants feeling more comfortable sharing their experiences (Osborn, 2022; Perry et al., 2004).

Given these aspects of my positionality, I at times employ the use of "we" when discussing the experiences of queer children of Evangelical parents. This is not only because I fit this demographic; it is also an epistemological claim. The social constructionist approach embraces knowledge as relationally constructed (Gergen, 2009). I believe it is neither possible nor advantageous for me to separate my experience from my analysis of others' experiences (Perry et al., 2004; Robinson, 2022). My lived experience shaped the rapport between myself and my participants as well as my interpretation and analysis of their narratives.

Participants

Participants ranged in age from 28 to 42 years. Seven participants identified as white, one as Hispanic, and one as Asian American/Chinese American. Eight participants were living in what is now the U.S. at the time of the interview. One participant was living in Europe but had grown up in the U.S. Eight participants had disclosed their queerness to their parents at the time of the interview, and one had not yet disclosed. I interpreted queer broadly as encompassing all non-straight and/or non-cis identities. All participants described their sexuality as queer, gay, lesbian, and/or bisexual, and four participants additionally described themselves as trans, non-binary, and/or gender queer. To operationalize "Evangelical," I used Emerson and Smith's definition of Christian: "those who call themselves such" (Emerson & Smith, 2000, p. 3), allowing participants to self-identify as Evangelical. While some participants named that growing up they would have used language such as "Christian" or "Protestant" to describe their religious identity, all participants said they would now characterize their religious upbringing as falling under the Evangelical umbrella, which encompasses multiple denominations (Emerson & Smith, 2000). While not an intentional recruitment strategy, and still ultimately a limitation of the research, the predominantly white sample does reflect the Evangelical population in the U.S., as 90% of U.S. Evangelicals are white (Emerson & Smith, 2000; Stackhouse, 2022).

Data analysis

I audio and video recorded interviews using Zoom. I utilized a transcription service to generate transcripts of the interviews, which I edited for accuracy and anonymized in December 2022. I replaced participant names with self-selected pseudonyms and removed all other identifying information. Interviews typically lasted about 45 minutes and transcripts ranged in length from 13–18 pages. I approached data analysis from a social constructionist perspective (Gergen, 2009). I did not approach theme construction as discovering the real, objective experience of my participants, but rather a joint and reciprocal practice of meaning-making constrained to these individuals in this time and place. The analysis and themes detailed in this section reflect only my own sense-making of what participants shared through Ahmed's (2010) writing on happy objects. I did not intend to establish a true and universal account of Evangelical coming out, but rather describe and interpret participant experiences through this particular lens.

My analysis drew on Braun and Clarke's description of thematic analysis (2006; see also Clarke & Braun, 2017; Clarke et al., 2015). I completed all coding independently. After reading the transcripts multiple times to familiarize myself with the data, I engaged in inductive open coding using MAXQDA (2022), which resulted in an extensive code list. Codes included items such as "parental appraisal of queerness," "parent views affecting child," "wishing you could come out," and "tensions between acceptance and affirmation." I then deductively grouped codes using MAXQDA's creative coding feature and began looking for broad themes. I then constructed four final themes drawing on Ahmed's (2010) theory of affect and happy objects: (a) learning the affect queer carries, (b) feeling the affects of being queer, (c) how parental appraisals affect parent-child relationships, and (d) being the killjoy.

Results

Learning the affect queer carries

Ahmed (2010) writes, "To be made happy by this or that is to recognize that happiness starts from somewhere other than the subject who may use the word to describe a situation" (p. 29). She posits that being happy about something makes something good. The queer child is often attuned to others' reactions: We see those who respond to queerness with an unhappy affect and thus discover that queer is something other than good, and perhaps so are we.

Many participants spoke of noticing their parents' reactions to queerness. Many participants did not yet know themselves to be queer at the time but remembered these moments later in the context of considering their own queerness. For example, Eli remembered their parents' response to seeing drag queens:

I was probably like ten and...there were drag queens in the parade and I was like, 'Oh my gosh, they're so cool.' And so I was taking pictures with my disposable camera and my mom's like, 'Don't do that. Don't look at those.' And I was like, 'Why? They're beautiful.'

In Eli's statement, I see how queer's affect is *learned*. Eli's initial appraisal of drag queens is "cool" and "beautiful," but Eli is corrected by their mother. Eli learns the assessment of queer comes from something external, rather than how queer makes Eli feel. Similarly, Johnny shared their parents' response after witnessing a pride parade at Disneyland: "[M]y parents just wiggled out, like, 'We're never coming back to Disney again, we knew Disney was terrible.'" In both instances, parents made evident the negative affect queer carries without explicitly saying queer is something bad. Ahmed (2010) describes affects as "sticky," in that values and meaning are fused with objects through affect. For these participants, disgust "stuck" onto queerness. Though Eli and Johnny did not know they were queer at this time, they internalized queer as something one does not want to be.

Some participants could not recall explicit messages or moments, but understood the beliefs about queerness that seemed to be ubiquitous within religious communities. Millicent spoke of this:

I always knew that the idea of being gay...was a big no-no. It was...an abomination. It was sacrilegious on so many levels. And I think...as I grew, I associated it almost to the level of...even on that level of, like, murder... it just was one of the most abominable things that could be.

Millicent did not recall where, how, or from whom she heard this message and could not recall a time when she had her own understanding of queerness. She came to learn about queerness as she learned how her parents' religion viewed queerness.

Others spoke of queerness as invisible, something not to be talked about at all. For example, Edie shared: "[G]rowing up...messages about queerness were just invisible. There were no messages. It was just heterosexual messages or nothing messages." This absence of message implied queer was not something one could be. Many participants spoke of how highly regarded and oft-discussed heterosexual marriage was; yet, religion defined desirable relationships in a way that excluded queerness. Rather than a neutral omission, participants seemed to experience this as an intentional erasure; queer as something so bad one cannot talk about it.

When I asked participants to describe the relationship between their parents' views of queerness and their parents' *religion's* views of queerness, many described these as indistinguishable. Speaking of their mother's beliefs about queerness, Eli shared:

I believe that they are related to her religious belief entirely, because I know ...when the whole coming out thing, being outed thing happened, I locked myself in the bathroom one night and she was screaming bible verses through the door about anti-gay-ness. So, at least to me, it feels very much like it's just the religion piece. If we took that out, she would be more open to accepting more parts of me.

Eli's mother's appraisal of queerness is inextricable from her religious beliefs. While it is impossible to know, Eli speculates that Evangelicalism taught their mother to condemn queerness and that, without the stickiness of this affect, she may have formed her own appraisal.

Given this, even if they did not know their parents' beliefs about queerness, most participants assumed they aligned with dominant Evangelical views. For example, Nicole shared queerness was not openly discussed at home growing up. Though her parents later became affirming, they had never discussed their views. Nicole spoke of her mother's response to her coming out: "[S]he said... 'I don't know, I can't explain it, but I'm just so happy for you.' I wasn't expecting that response from her." Nicole's surprise speaks to the negative affect queerness carries in religious spaces, a perception Nicole assumed her parents held as well. Nicole's mother seemed surprised by her own response as well, stating she "can't explain it," but feels happy for her daughter, as if she is not sure where this happiness comes from. Nicole's parents did not adhere to the belief that queer is bad, but never spoke of a different belief, and were perhaps never forced to reckon with what they believed until Nicole's coming out.

Feeling the affects of being queer

Participants also spoke of how it felt to *be* queer knowing others' appraisals. Often, participants spoke to how queer's negative affects impacted them even *before* coming out to others. When participants realized their own queerness, many described anxiously feeling that they were something they had been told for years was bad. For many, this fear was separate from, though often in addition to, fears of outright rejection. Millicent spoke of this:

[T]he anxiety-inducing aspect was far worse for me, simply because that's when... I started to realize that things didn't exactly align for me in the same way they should have been according to what I've just been raised with. So that made it all the more anxiety producing.

As Millicent realizes she is queer, she begins to see herself as embodying queer's as negative affect: "And so if they [parents, church community] thought those things, what would that mean about me?" Millicent knew being queer was not a good thing, an "abomination" as described earlier, and feared becoming an abomination herself.

Fear of being something bad can inhibit disclosure, as disclosure means others will start to see you as this bad thing. Lydia had not come out to her parents, explaining:

I'd rather just sit with this and let them think that they know all of me, as the means to protect them, I guess. Which also causes me pain, but...I can shoulder that pain if it means that they will continue to look at me the same way.

Lydia feared disclosing her sexuality would fundamentally change her parents' perception of her, that their affectual response to queerness would stick to *her*, and this kept her from disclosing her sexuality. While this caused her pain, Lydia chose the pain of not being wholly known by her parents over the pain of knowing her parents now view her as something less than wholly good.

Even participants whose parents outwardly accepted them shared the pain of knowing others still viewed queer as a bad thing. Participants spoke of differences between acceptance and affirmation, such as Lydia, who explained some Evangelicals "delude themselves into thinking like, 'Well, I am accepting you,' even though they're completely rejecting who you are." While some Evangelicals believe they can accept the queer individual while rejecting their queerness, Lydia experienced this as a rejection of who she is.

The previous section noted messages of queer as invisible. These invisibilizing images also had a tremendous impact on participants. Johnny stated:

I had come to realize they weren't, they were never going to see me. They didn't want to. And because of this, just like I didn't exist. And that was, that was going to kill me. And I knew that was going to kill me. That irreality. That place of non-being. And I lived my whole life there.

Here, Johnny expressed the pain of being something those around them believed did not exist, and the experience of internalizing nonexistence. For some of the queer participants I spoke to, the attempted invisibilization of queer by those around them felt like an attempted invisibilization and disregard of the queer individual.

How parental appraisals affect parent/child relationships

Returning to Ahmed (2010), she writes, "We move toward and away from objects through how we are affected by them" (p. 32) and, "To be affected by something is to evaluate that thing. Evaluations are expressed in how bodies turn toward things" (p. 31). I categorize parental responses to coming out as turning toward or away, and consider tensions between these impulses. When the queer child is both queer, a "bad" object, and child, a "good" object, what happens?

Turning away

I use turning away to describe when a parent's impulse to *turn away from queer* led them to turn away from the child. The parent must turn away from the child if the child is queer, because they must turn away from queer, as experienced by River: "My parents said, 'Well, you can be a lesbian or you can be our daughter, but you can't be both.'" River's parents could accept their child, but not queerness; the queer child is an impossibility, making relationship with the queer child an impossibility. Johnny expressed how their parents turned away by denying queerness existing:

[T]he problem was this queerness...that just didn't exist. And that's what led ultimately, slowly to the end of the relationship. Because that whole side of me, which was who I really am...it's not that they would get

angry or threatened to, you know, write me out of the will. Like I wish they would have done that. I so wish they would've done that. Instead, they just pretended, and still do, that it isn't happening. They just pretend that it's not real. Which means they pretend that I'm not real. And how do you fight – you can't fight that.

For Johnny, their parents' inability to acknowledge queerness, to acknowledge Johnny, represented a process of turning away ultimately leading to a breakdown in their relationship. Johnny expressed how they would prefer outright rejection to this invisibilization. Invisibilizing queerness made Johnny feel as though there was nothing tangible to point to, no explicit behavior that could change; denial of their reality left an impenetrable void.

Turning away can also be mutual. Some participants described turning away from parents and their harmful religious beliefs, like Eli: "I think with my mom, the religion piece is a really big stumbling block for me. I can't get past that she holds these beliefs about me." For Eli, it was harmful that their mother chose continued adherence to Evangelicalism's appraisal of queer as bad, and this necessitated at least partial turning away.

Turning toward

When queerness carried no negative affect, parents could *turn toward* this newfound identity. Nicole was the only participant who experienced this turning toward and was the only participant who described their parents as affirming when coming out. Explaining how coming out had changed her relationship with her parents, she said: "It's just gotten a lot closer... there's a closeness about my personal life that wasn't there before.... there's more trust between us all... I thought it would create distance and it has done the opposite." Nicole also described how her parents left an unaffirming church to find a church that aligned with their beliefs about queerness, which Nicole expressed also helped ease her anxiety and enabled her to turn toward her parents.

Tensions between toward and away

In some cases, participants described tensions engaging with family members following coming out. Many believed their parents experienced similar tensions relating to their queer child and a stuckness between turning toward and turning away. Eli, for example, described turning toward their family, despite wanting to turn away from their family's queerphobia: "I feel like I have familial love toward them. I grew up with them. They raised me, you know. I have known them for 31 years, you know. They're part of my life, so I love them as people." Eli also recognized their mother's process of learning to turn toward them despite their mother's feelings toward queerness: "I think she might have gone through a similar kind of working through of, like, you know, [Eli] is still a good person and still worth loving." Eli's mother seeing her queer child as "still a good person," an experience echoed by other participants, reflects how parents turned toward aspects of their child they still believed were good, even when they viewed queer as bad.

For some, there was no clear path through these tensions. Chad spoke of his relationship with his father: "[A]t what point does someone's beliefs about sexuality...become bad enough or, you know...offensive enough that I can't be in relationship with this person?" Chad, like several others, was stuck between a desire to turn toward the parent, but away from the parent's homophobic beliefs. While the parent may still represent a happy object, homophobia is a source of pain one needs to avoid.

Being the "killjoy"

Finally, parents often saw the queer individual as disrupting the happiness or potential for happiness of the parent and family. I see this as a representation of affect becoming literalized. Similarly, this reflects what Ahmed (2010) describes as the "killjoy," the one who kills joy when

“she refuses to share an orientation toward certain things as being good because she does not find objects that promise happiness to be quite so promising” (p. 39). Ahmed explains how “some bodies are presumed to be the origin of bad feeling insofar as they disturb the promise of happiness, which I would re-describe as the social pressure to maintain the signs of ‘getting along’” (p. 39). The parent experiences an unhappiness related to their queer child, or their child’s queerness, and they attribute this unhappiness as being caused by the child.

Several participants described this sense that they were the one causing problems simply by being queer, such as Edie:

[I]t makes you feel like you’re harming people by just trying to be who you are. It makes you feel like they want you to be something else, that they wished that you would have been something else, and yeah that’s just, it makes you feel...like you should have been something else to make them happy.

Feeling that one “should have been something else” represents an internalization of being the problem, when the actual point of struggle is others’ beliefs about queerness; when queerness is a bad thing, a thing that kills joy, the queer individual kills joy simply by being queer.

Some participants described how their queerness represented a problem their parents had to navigate. In particular, participants observed their parents struggled with how their child’s queerness would impact them socially: “She said, ‘I just don’t know what to tell my friends. I don’t know what I’m supposed to tell the church’” (River) and “[S]he didn’t want, like, people to know that she had a gay kid” (Chad). We again see affect’s stickiness here; it was not only parents who held these negative appraisals of queerness, but whole communities reinforced these appraisals.

The killjoy is not merely the one who disturbs the status quo by refusing to be happy, but the one who uses their unhappiness as a way to draw attention to forms of oppression by refusing to participate in joyful affects that work to invisibilize harm. For example, Ahmed (2010) describes how the feminist killjoy, by refusing to perform happiness in moments of sexism, exposes “the bad feelings that get hidden, displaced, or negated under public signs of joy” (pp. 38–39). I see this when queer children refuse to act like everything is fine, refuse to perform “happy family,” in the face of rejection by their parents. For example, Edie explained how their mother wished to proceed as usual following Edie’s coming out, but Edie did not feel this was possible, and thus limited contact with their family: “[R]ejection is maybe the wrong word here in terms of comparison to a lot of other people. Like we have contact. I’m the one who limits contact. They’d want me to visit.” In limiting contact, Edie refuses to act as though everything is fine and mask the harm they experienced when coming out.

Edie’s experience also troubles the typical rejection/acceptance narrative found in the literature. The parent has not outwardly rejected the queer child; they want the child to visit, to maintain the image of the whole and happy family. However, the parent’s beliefs harm the queer child, and the queer child thus limits contact. In this example, parents see the queer child as the one disrupting the family by not coming home, and this obscures the homophobic belief system that makes the family inhospitable and at times unsurvivable for the queer individual, while the queer child refuses to participate in this obfuscation.

Discussion

Using Ahmed’s (2010) theorizing of happy objects, I draw attention to how queerness is not an inherently happy or unhappy object; rather, we *learn* queer is good or bad, we see what *sticks*, and the people and belief systems around us shape these understandings. This is the crux of the stories told by participants: many Evangelical belief systems hold that queer is a bad thing, an unhappy object, and this belief impacts queer individuals in numerous ways.

Participants repeatedly expressed an understanding that queer is not something one ought to be, which led to tensions in their relationships to their own queerness. When parents shared these appraisals of queerness, this then led to tensions between parents and children: the tension

of embodying both happy and unhappy object. Expanding prior research, this analysis reveals how negative views of queerness can impact well-being *prior* to one's coming out. Simply knowing those around them held negative views of queerness negatively impacted participants, even before anyone else knew they were queer. The beliefs others hold about queerness, not only their behaviors, matter immensely.

While conducting this research, I was wary of the dangers of damage-centered research (Tuck, 2009; Tuck & Yang, 2014). Eve Tuck (2009) describes damage-centered research as that which documents the pain and struggles of certain communities, as if these are their only stories. Such research implies a faulty theory of change: when others hear stories of pain, they will work to address this harm. This is exceptionally true for marginalized and over-researched groups, including queer and trans communities. Our pain stories have been essentialized in media representations of tragic comings out and in academic research documenting the slew of possible negative reactions and subsequent impacts on queer individuals. While I suspected participants would tell these stories, because far too often these are our stories, I aimed my analysis beyond the pain, and toward who or what was causing the pain.

Implications

The number of children and adolescents coming out as queer is generally understood to be increasing (Jones, 2021), and some scholars suggest queer people are coming out at younger ages (Floyd & Bakeman, 2006). While I consider the implications of my study's results cautiously, knowing they represent only the experiences of nine, mostly white individuals, their stories offer insights for those working with queer young people and may aid in understanding the nuances of coming out to and navigating relationships with Evangelical parents.

While previous studies have focused on parental reactions to young people's coming out (Birnkrant & Przeworski, 2017; D'Augelli et al., 1998; Perrin-Wallqvist & Lindblom, 2015; Schmitz & Tyler, 2018), this research compels those who work with queer young people to look beyond and before reactions from parents toward their queer children and to also consider how conceptualizations of queer as bad or good affect queer individuals. Gottman (2001) similarly focuses on turning toward, away, or against during conflict. However, many of my participants experienced their queer identity as causing a sort of internal conflict between them and their parents; this occurred before the child's identity, the source of the conflict, was known to the parents. When parents made statements indicating they viewed queerness as something bad or negative, the child often experienced this as an act of turning away. In this way, this paper adds to the literature exploring queer coming out experiences, particularly the literature on Relational Dialectics Theory (see Tyler & Abetz, 2020). These stories suggest queer children may be impacted by imagined parental reactions to their identities, affecting both the coming out process and the parent-child relationship. The environments in which young people grow up—especially traditional Evangelical environments—may shape how they and their parents view queerness, and these effects can be powerful. Further, even when parents may be outwardly accepting, knowing the parent does not view queer as good may still be something the queer young person must grapple with.

For those working with the families of queer young people, participants offered insight into the experiences of their parents as well. It may be helpful to support parents in differentiating their feelings about queerness from their feelings about their queer child as a step toward acceptance. Further, many participants shared that their parents' religious beliefs had a profound impact on their parents' beliefs about queerness, and thus the reactions to their coming out. For those whose parents became more accepting, it appears that finding an Evangelical community that was accepting of queer identities was beneficial. Previous research documents that queer Evangelical individuals often find a way to make peace with both of these aspects of their identity (Murr, 2013; O'Brien, 2004). A similar process might occur for parents of queer children, who may find that affirming Evangelical communities allow them to maintain their identity as an Evangelical person while also fully accepting their child's identity.

Finally, the experiences of participants reify that while coming out is often painful, it does not need to be. Affect is learned; we learn that queer is a bad thing, and spaces like religious institutions help reinforce and reproduce this belief. While it may be natural, and still necessary, to focus attention on helping queer young people cope with the challenges of unaffirming parents, this research reveals a need to also continue to examine and dismantle the systems and structures that shape and reinforce damaging beliefs about queerness.

Limitations & recommendations for future research

This research reflects the experiences of the nine individuals I interviewed. It is possible other individuals have had contradictory experiences. While participants discussed their experiences as both children and adults, all participants were over the age of 18 at the time of the interview; further research may explore the themes found in this study with younger people. Similarly, while my participants and I can speculate as to how their parents were thinking and feeling, I did not interview parents during this study. Further, my participants were predominantly white, and I did not explore intersectional aspects of queer identity.

Conclusion

This research expands and nuances understandings of the challenges facing queer individuals when coming out, while countering notions that queerness itself is an inevitable source of pain and struggle. Queerness itself is not painful; rather it is how those around the queer individual appraise and respond to queerness that causes pain. These appraisals and responses are shaped by belief systems, by worlds we construct, and thus by worlds we can reconstruct.

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