

Shall We Marry? Legal Marriage as a Commitment Event in Same-Sex Relationships During the Post-Legalization Period

In our culture, getting married is a legally, socially, and often spiritually sanctioned joining of two people in an intimate relationship, and has heretofore been the exclusive right of heterosexual people. The recent ruling to legalize same-sex marriage in Massachusetts offers a unique opportunity to examine the meanings and impacts of social and legal sanction through legal marriage for committed same-sex relationships for the first time in this country.

This paper is part of a larger study, "An Exploratory Study of Same-Sex Marriage," conducted by the Wellesley Centers for Women. Our particular study group was interested in whether and how legalization of same-sex marriage impacted same-sex partners' commitment to one another, presentation to others as a couple, and treatment as a couple by others. In this paper, we explore couples' decisions about legal marriage, their expressions of commitment prior to and subsequent to the legalization of same-sex marriage, and their views of others' perceptions regarding their commitment, whether or not they chose to marry.

This paper presents preliminary findings concerning couples' expressions of commitment and decisions about legal marriage, and focuses on one specific expression of commitment: ceremonies. Throughout the paper, we will use the term "commitment ceremony" to refer to a social/spiritual but extra-legal ceremony, while "civil ceremony" or "legal marriage" will refer to a legal marriage ceremony, which may or may not incorporate social/spiritual elements.

Literature Review

Because we are interested in the ways that legal marriage intersects with the ongoing development of lesbian and gay relationships, we briefly

review the literatures concerning lesbian and gay relationship dynamics, theories of relationship development, and the role of ceremony as a public signal of commitment in these relationships.

Lesbian and Gay Relationships

Lesbian and gay relationships had been largely ignored in the psychological literature until the late 1970s, when the gay and lesbian civil rights movement became well-established in American culture. Since then, literature on gay and lesbian relationships has slowly developed and has focused on five areas: (1) the unique issues faced by these couples (coming out, being closeted with families of origin and children, lack of social support, lack of legal support); (2) relationship dynamics (power, sexuality, division of labor, conflict, influence strategies, fusion/distance); (3) relationship satisfaction; (4) same-sex parenting; and (5) comparisons of same-sex and heterosexual couples (see Peplau, 1993, and Kurdek, 1995, for reviews of the literature on gay and lesbian relationships; see Hall, 2005 for a review of lesbian and gay parenting literature).

This literature informs the present study by providing general, contextual data concerning gay and lesbian relationships. Given this paper's focus on commitment and marriage, the following literature on gay and lesbian relationship development is of particular interest.

Theories of Lesbian and Gay Relationship Development

A few attempts have been made to create models of gay and lesbian relationship development, based on clinical observation or, less frequently, research programs. Four models have been advanced, two for gay male relationships (Harry & Lovely, 1979; McWhirter & Mattison, 1984) and two for lesbian relationships (Clunis & Green, 1988; Slater, 1995).

Joseph Harry and Robert Lovely (1979), writing well before the AIDS epidemic, proposed a model based

on their observation of the uncommonness of sexual exclusivity in gay male relationships. Their model consists of an initial, brief “honeymoon” stage of sexual monogamy, followed by the opening of the relationship to non-monogamy over time. This model was tested by David Blasband and Letitia Peplau (1985), who found little support for it in their sample of 40 gay male couples. Rather, a wide variety of patterns relating to monogamy was found to exist.

David McWhirter and Andrew Mattison (1984) proposed a six-stage model based on their study of 156 gay male couples: *Blending* (Year 1), characterized by merging, limerance¹, shared activity, high sexual activity; *Nesting* (Years 2-3), marked by homemaking, finding compatibility, decline of limerance, ambivalence about the relationship; *Maintaining* (Years 4-5), characterized by the re-appearance of the individual, expressing and resolving conflict, establishing traditions; *Building* (Years 6-10), in which the couple experiences collaboration, increasing individual productivity, establishing independence and dependability; *Releasing* (Years 11-20), characterized by trusting, blending finances and possessions, taking each other for granted, midlife priority review; and *Renewing* (Years 20+), marked by achieving financial and emotional security, shifting perspectives regarding health, time, loss, restoring romance, and remembering relationship history.

Lawrence Kurdek and J. Patrick Schmitt (1986) looked at relationship quality in the first three stages of this model in gay, lesbian, heterosexual cohabitating, and heterosexual married couples and found substantiation for increased stress and disillusionment in Stage 2 compared to Stages 1 and 3. This stage difference was shared by all four couple types, leading Kurdek (1995) to conclude that early stages of relationship development are similar for homosexual and heterosexual couples.

Using McWhirter and Mattison’s (1984) model of gay male relationships and Susan M. Campbell’s (1980) model of heterosexual relationships as

starting points, D. Merilee Clunis and G. Dorsey Green (1988) proposed a six-stage model of lesbian relationships: *Pre-relationship*, a typically short stage lasting days or weeks (getting to know the other person, dating, and choosing to invest time and energy into the relationship); the typically very intense *Romance* stage (merging, fusion, limerance); *Conflict*, which appears due to rapid entry into relationship and produces ground rules and norms for communication, problem-solving, and decision-making; *Acceptance* (accepting reality of other person, realistic expectations); *Commitment* (expectation of being together; may mark with commitment ceremony); and *Collaboration* (focus on something bigger than the couple, such as starting a business, community involvement, or having a child).

Finally, Suzanne Slater (1995) created a five-stage model of lesbian relationships, based on her own clinical experience and the psychotherapy literature: *Formation* (becoming a couple); *Couplehood* (solidifying the partnership through ongoing relational work and delineating roles/responsibilities); *Middle Years* (trials and deepening intimacy); *Generativity* (establishing links to the future through parenting, social activism or other pursuits); and *Life Over 65* (dealing with challenges such as retirement, increased togetherness, lack of income, health emergencies and widowhood).

To our knowledge, all of the work to date on relationship development focuses on dynamics between partners without acknowledgment of the dependency of these dynamics on the social context in which they are embedded. Given the potency of homophobia as a social force, a strong theory of same-sex relationship development must include the impacts of local and cultural homophobia on the sequence, timing, and expression of relationship development.

While we do not attempt such a theory in this paper, we provide an empirically-based examination of these person-context interactions as they are expressed through events that serve as markers