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

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Shall We Marry?
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During the Post-Legalization Period

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*A*bstract

When Massachusetts became the first state to legalize same-sex marriage in 2004, it presented an unprecedented opportunity to study the impact of legalization of same-sex marriage on same-sex relationships. This study is a part of an exploratory study of 50 married and unmarried same-sex couples in Massachusetts conducted by the Wellesley Centers for Women. In this paper, we examine 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.

Relationships were found to generally follow a common sequence of commitment development. Roughly one quarter of the couples chose not to mark their commitment with ceremonies of any kind, while nearly three fourths of the couples had either commitment (non-legal) ceremonies, legal weddings, or both. While decisions to legally marry were largely based on gaining legal protections, unforeseen impacts on self and relationships with family, friends, and society at large revealed multiple layers of meaning. Implications of the study for public policy and social change are discussed.

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

of commitment, both to the partners in the couple and to others in their immediate and wider social communities.

Commitment Ceremonies

The focus of this paper is on the intersection of the historically unprecedented availability of legal marriage to same-sex couples in America with prior and ongoing relationship development. Because same-sex couples have been denied legal marriage as a means of formalizing and socially sanctioning their relationships, many have decided to create commitment ceremonies (Eskridge Jr., 2002). Commitment ceremonies are fairly new phenomena in the gay and lesbian community, largely emerging in the late 1970s. As a result, same-sex couples have had few if any templates on which they can base their commitment ceremony scripts. Many ceremonies combine aspects of traditional heterosexual weddings, including the exchange of rings, wedding gowns or tuxedos, etc., which may serve to give others a familiar sense of the ritual, with uniquely personalized features (Butler, 1990; McQueeney, 2003; Tanner, 1978). The personalization of the ceremonies conveys key messages that the couple wants to send to their guests, such as the depth of their love and commitment for one another, the affirmation of their relationship, and about their sexual orientation (McQueeney, 2003).

Although commitment ceremonies lack the legal and civil recognition reserved for married couples, several reasons have been cited by gay and lesbian couples for having a commitment ceremony, including personal, social, and political reasons (Liddle & Liddle, 2004). These range from formalizing or legitimizing the relationship, to publicly declaring feelings and commitment for one's partner, to validating the relationship in the eyes of the couples' social network, including friends, family, and religious groups (Butler, 1990; Liddle & Liddle, 2004; McQueeney, 2003; Tanner, 1978).

It is important for many of these couples to legitimize their relationship not only to their friends and family, but to society as a whole. For many couples, taking part in a commitment ceremony has meant leveling the playing field in the political arena. Commitment ceremonies can be seen as political statements causing their guests to question existing laws, support their cause of equal status, and place their relationship on the same level as heterosexual relationships. Commitment ceremonies may also affect public opinion positively, especially for those who are able to witness the ceremonies (Butler, 1990; Bourassa, 2004; Liddle & Liddle, 2004).

Research on the significance of commitment ceremonies in the gay and lesbian community is limited in scope and nature. Much of the literature is based on personal anecdotes, case studies, or studies of small sample sizes. However, what we do know about commitment ceremonies sheds light on how it has played a role in legitimizing and formalizing same-sex relationships in the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT) community.

For the first time, same-sex couples in Massachusetts have an alternative to extra-legal commitment ceremonies: they can get legally married. This paper explores the meaning of legal marriage for same-sex couples' relationships, their decisions about legal marriage, and the meaning of their ceremonies of commitment (both legal and extra-legal) in the post-legalization era.

Method

Sample

Our sample of 50 couples consisted of 32 lesbian and 18 gay male couples. Fourteen couples were parents (28%: 11 lesbian, 3 gay male). Thirty-six couples were legally married (72%: 22 lesbian, 14 gay male), including all couples parenting dependent children, while 14 couples chose not to legally marry. Length of relationship ranged from 2 to 48 years, with a mean of 12.28 years. No significant differences were

found across any of these groups (gender, parenting status, marital status) in length of relationship.

Within the couples, difference in partners' ages ranged from 0 to 49 (mode = 1 year). Thirty-six couples shared majority or minority status (72%), while 14 of the couples were mixed (i.e., one White and one Non-White member: 28%). Twenty-nine couples shared the same level of education (58%).

Constructs and Their Operationalization

Demographic and descriptive information.

Demographic information was collected for the couple itself and for each partner. This information helped us to place perceptions and experiences in the context of socio-cultural influences.

Information on parenting status was obtained from individual interviews in which the number, ages, and biological, social, and legal relationships of any children to each partner was reported. We used the term "birth mother" to indicate mothers who carried the pregnancy and "co-mother" to indicate those who did not. Gay fathers were designated as "biological father" and "adoptive father" accordingly.

Perceived socioeconomic position data were obtained from the written questionnaire for both the individuals' family of origin and their own current socioeconomic standing. For the former, we asked participants to characterize the socio-economic backgrounds of the family they grew up in as one of the following categories, which were deliberately left undefined: "poor", "working class", "lower middle class", "middle class", "upper middle class", "upper class", and "other". Thirty-four couples came from similar social class backgrounds (0 to 1 difference in category: 68%) and 16 from dissimilar backgrounds (>1 category difference: 32%).

To address current socioeconomic position, we used a subjective social status measure developed by Archana Singh-Manous, Nancy E. Adler, and Michael G. Marmot (2003). Participants were shown

a picture of a ladder and asked to place themselves on it to reflect their current socioeconomic standing relative to others in our society. The top of the ladder signifies those who are "best off, have the most money, most education, and best jobs" and the bottom signifies those who are "worst off, have the least money, least education, and worst jobs or no job at all." Rungs on the ladder were later numbered by researchers from 1-10 (bottom to top) and participants were assigned the number of the ladder rung where they had placed themselves. For example, an SSS (subjective social status) rating of "5" is interpreted as being in the middle of society in terms of perceived social standing.

Markers of commitment. As part of the interview protocol, participants were interviewed using an adaptation of the Life-Story Interview (McAdams, Reynolds, Lewis, Patten, & Bowman, 2001). Our adapted interview included a segment we called "Relationship Story" in which participants were asked to tell the story of their relationship by dividing it into its major chapters, providing a name and brief description of each chapter, and describing what made for a transition between one chapter and the next. Responses to this prompt provided the main source of information for the present analysis, supplemented by other sections of the interviews where relevant data were found.

We defined "commitment" as *devotion to one's partner and to the couple as a unit*, using this definition to identify markers of commitment (i.e., events or practices signaling commitment) that emerged from transcripts of the individual and couple interviews. Examination of the identified commitment events suggested the following coding categories, referred to as "commitment events" or "commitment markers" throughout the paper, as delineated below:

- **"Exclusive"**: Dating each other exclusively / "going steady" / closing the relationship sexually
- **"Tell"**: Saying "I love you", "Would you marry me?" etc.

- **“Feel”**: Feeling that they wanted to, and/or were going to be with each other forever
- **“Cohabit”**: Living together
- **“Money”**: Merging finances
- **“Protect”**: Creating wills, powers of attorney, domestic partnerships, and other legal documents to create legal benefits as much as possible (including legal aspects of marriage)
- **“Venture”**: Buying a house together, creating business together, co-parenting/ dependent care
- **“Ties”**: Integrating friends, kin families and families of choice
- **“Symbol”**: Rings or similar item signifying status as committed couple
- **“Ceremony”**: Commitment ceremony (symbolic and public ritual, includes all forms, including legal marriage)
- **“Naming”**: Name changes, use of terminology (“husband”, “spouse” etc.)
- **“Journey”**: Taking significant trips together
- **“Unity”**: Presenting selves as, and insisting on recognition as, a couple unit (evidenced in cards, invitations, interactions with family and societal institutions)
- **“Support”**: Providing significant support (including doing individual and/or couples therapy, suspending personal goals) during personal/ family crisis, transitions, etc.
- **“Media”**: Giving media interviews, web presence, etc. as a married couple

“Relationship Maps”. We constructed a summary table of demographic information, relationship events, and commitment markers for each couple (see example, **Figure 1**). We refer to these summary tables as “Relationship Maps”. These Relationship Maps were constructed from narrative data where dates and ages weren’t always explicit. All available information was used to reconstruct relationship timelines as accurately as possible. Still, it is important to remember the constructed nature of these maps when interpreting the results of this study. For instance, the absence of a given commitment marker for a couple did not mean the commitment event did not occur, only that it wasn’t specifically mentioned by one or both individuals.

Figure 1. Relationship Map example^a.

Lesbian
 Legally Married
 1 child (conceived in the context of the current relationship)

		Mona White Middle Class Biological Mother Bachelor's Degree SSC- 5 ^b		Dora Latina Middle Class Co-mother Bachelor's Degree SSC- 7 ^b	
Years	Date	Age	Transition Event	Age	Transition Event
0	1996	21		19	Feel
1	1997	22	Crisis (death of grandparent)	20	Crisis (separation)
2	1998	23		21	
3	1999	24	Cohabit Tell Naming ("proposed")	22	Cohabit Venture (pets) Naming ("family")
4	2000	25	Crisis (partner's grandparent's death) Ceremony (commitment) Ties (families)	23	Ceremony (commitment) Naming ("wadding", "wife") Passive (rings)
5	2001	26		24	
6	2002	27	Venture (bought house)	25	Venture (bought house)
7	2003	28		26	
8	2004	29	Ceremony (legal)	27	Ceremony (legal)
9	2005	30	Venture (co-parenting)	28	Venture (co-parenting)

^a Some information in this Relationship Map has been changed for the protection of the identity of the study participants.

^b Subjective social status rating; see description in text.

The Relationship Maps allowed us to see similarities across, as well as differences within the couples' narratives of their relationship and commitment development. The Maps also allowed us to see whether and when in the timeline of the relationship a couple mentioned having a social/spiritual commitment ceremony, legal marriage, or both.

Results²

Quantitative Analysis

Quantitative data analyses drew from a database created from the Relationship Maps, coding the duration of the relationship (in years) when either partner first mentioned each of the commitment markers and the number of discrete mentions of a given marker, whether by one or both partners. If a given marker was not mentioned by either partner, the relationship year was coded as missing and the number of mentions was coded as zero.

Sequence and timing of commitment events. **Table 1** shows the average and variability among our couple participants in the number of mentions and timing for each of the commitment markers. The general sequence of commitment marker events

in our sample seems to reflect an expansion of recognition of the couple as a unit. Early markers of commitment include a sense of belonging and connection experienced within the dyad typically occurring after the first or second year in the relationship (cohabitation, feeling committed, deciding to become exclusive as a couple, telling the partner of feelings of commitment, provision of significant support to partner), followed by joint undertakings which require trust and a sense of stability and longevity and may have implications beyond the couple itself after the third or fourth year in the relationship (combining finances, sharing a significant journey, sharing responsibility in a significant venture such as co-parenting or buying a house together). Last come events related to garnering of public recognition and support for the couple beyond the fourth relationship year (joining the extended family network, publicly celebrating the couple's commitment, using public signals of couplehood such as rings and partnership terminology, and establishing legal protections for the couple and extended family relationships). However, there is a great deal of variability among participant couples in these events, as evidenced by the large range in event timing for each marker.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for the timing and frequency of mention of each coded commitment marker category.

	Number of mentions				Years elapsed in relationship at first mention			
	n	Median	Mean	Range	n	Median	Mean	Range
Cohabit	49	1.00	1.18	0-5	48	1.00	1.75	0-9
Feel	49	1.00	1.04	0-4	30	1.00	2.07	0-24
Exclusive	49	0.00	0.20	0-1	12	1.00	2.75	0-9
Tell	49	0.00	0.37	0-2	17	2.00	2.71	0-12
Support	49	2.00	1.80	0-6	35	2.00	3.17	0-19
Money	49	0.00	0.18	0-1	9	3.00	3.11	1-7
Journey	49	0.00	0.31	0-3	13	3.00	5.15	0-18
Unity	49	0.00	0.53	0-3	19	3.00	5.74	0-24
Venture	49	1.00	1.27	0-5	31	4.00	4.81	0-20
Ties	49	0.00	0.63	0-3	23	4.00	5.39	0-24
Ceremony	49	1.00	1.27	0-3	24	4.00	6.38	0-25
Naming	49	1.00	1.27	0-4	33	4.00	7.94	0-31
Symbol	49	0.00	0.31	0-2	14	6.00	5.79	1-11
Media	49	0.00	0.14	0-2	6	7.00	7.33	2-14
Protect	49	0.00	0.22	0-2	9	7.00	7.67	1-16

Prior to legalization, commitment ceremonies most commonly occurred after a couple had been together two to three years; the second most common time was at ten years. However, legal marriages occurred in a wide range of relationship years, due to the fact that legal marriage only became available at and after a given point in time (May 2004) and due to uncertainty about its future availability. It should be noted that this cohort, being the first to be able to legally marry, may well have unique patterns of timing of legal marriage that may not be duplicated in subsequent cohorts.

Married and unmarried couples. T-tests and chi-square contingency table tests were conducted to see if couples who chose to legally marry differed significantly from those who chose not to marry in terms of the number and timing of each commitment marker. Because we are interested in hypothesis generation in this exploratory study, we report findings that are significant only as “trends” in the data (i.e., $p < 0.10$).

Married couples tended to mention *more instances of efforts to legally protect* the relationship ($\chi^2 = 5.03$, $df = 2$, $p < 0.10$) and more instances of a significant joint venture ($\chi^2 = 12.04$, $df = 5$, $p < 0.05$) than did unmarried couples. No other differences were found in the number of mentions of commitment events.

As a group, married couples reported many of the commitment markers as occurring *later* in the relationship than did unmarried couples: a feeling of commitment ($t = -1.95$, $df = 26.42$, $p < 0.10$), recognition of extended family ties ($t = -2.29$, $df = 6.10$, $p < 0.10$), exchange of rings ($t = -4.07$, $df = 11.58$, $p < 0.01$), use of language to signify commitment ($t = -4.83$, $df = 27.72$, $p < 0.001$), and efforts to present themselves as a unit ($t = -2.50$, $df = 15.26$, $p < 0.05$). On the other hand, married couples tended to enter into a significant joint venture *earlier* than did unmarried couples ($t = 2.02$, $df = 29$, $p < 0.10$). No differences were found in the timing of cohabitation, exclusivity, telling a partner of commitment, support, merging finances, undertaking a significant journey,

appearing in the media as a couple, or seeking legal protection for the couple.

Since all couples in our sample who were parenting dependent children chose to legally marry, we wanted to see if the differences in number and timing of commitment events were due to parenting status, rather than marital status per se. To do this, we looked at the relationship between commitment marker events and parenting status within those couples who had legally married. If differences are largely driven by parenting status, we would find patterns of difference between parenting and non-parenting couples as was found between married and unmarried couples.

Instead, we found very different effects. Parenting couples were likely to exchange rings and make efforts to legally protect the relationship earlier than couples without dependent children ($t = 3.21$, $df = 3.86$, $p < 0.05$; $t = 3.03$, $df = 6.11$, $p < 0.05$; respectively) but timing or number of events did not differ significantly by parenting status along any other commitment markers. This leads us to conclude that couple dynamics other than parenting status underlie the differences in commitment development in couples choosing to legally marry at this time and those choosing not to marry.

Qualitative Analysis

Given that we were interested in the experience of being a committed same-sex couple in a time and place where same-sex legal marriage had just become possible, qualitative analysis focused on couples' narratives of their relationship stories. The stories were coded for commitment markers and themes related to feelings about commitment and marriage, decisions to legally marry, and meanings of commitment and legal marriage ceremonies were identified.

Choosing to Forego Public Marking of Commitment

Slightly more than one quarter of the couples (27%: 3 gay male couples, 10 lesbian couples) chose not to

publicly mark their commitment with a ceremony of any kind. Participants cited three main reasons for this decision: (1) while they felt committed to each other, they felt a public ceremony was premature; (2) one or both were essentially private people who preferred not to publicly “display” themselves; and (3) one or both had beliefs about marriage as an institution of patriarchy that precluded participating in a wedding-like ceremony.

“We talked briefly about what would happen if we got married, but neither of us was really all that enthusiastic about the notion of marriage” (Mikey, Asian-American, age 35, partnered nine years).

His partner added,

“I don’t think we’re helping ourselves or other people by signing up for an institution that in the end is just sort of irreparably patriarchal” (Ben, ethnicity not disclosed, age 36, partnered nine years).

Commitment Ceremonies and Legal Marriage Ceremonies

Nearly three quarters of the couples (74%; 15 gay male couples, 22 lesbian couples) marked their commitment publicly in some way. The majority of these (7 gay male couples, 15 lesbian couples) had a commitment ceremony followed by a legal marriage when this became available. Another common pattern, particularly for men (7 gay male couples, 6 lesbian couples) was to legally marry with no prior commitment ceremony. Only one couple (gay male) had a commitment ceremony but chose not to legally marry.

Couples who chose to mark their commitment publicly cited the significance of visibly affirming their relationship, both for themselves and for important others; gaining community (religious/spiritual and LGBT) recognition and support;

gaining family recognition and support; and serving as role models for other/younger LGBT people.

Couples who had both commitment ceremonies and legal marriages described the commitment ceremony as having the greater impact on their sense of commitment to the relationship and on the degree of social recognition of the relationship in their immediate social circles. Many took place within a religious/spiritual community and setting; were planned and more formal than the legal marriage; and were typically large gatherings of friends, families of origin, and families of choice. Most couples referred to this ceremony as their “real”, “emotional”, or “spiritual” wedding in contrast to their legal marriage.

“We got spiritually married [in a commitment ceremony] seven years ago. We were recognized within our church community as a married couple. All of these kids recognized us as a married couple from the spiritual union. And y’know, everyone was excited that we could legally get married, for us, but we were- we were married” (Lisa, White, age 51, partnered ten years).

Couples who were legally married with no prior commitment ceremony reported their wedding had meanings similar to those cited above. In other words, the *first* time that couples publicly pledged their commitment to one another held deep meaning, regardless of the legality of the ceremony.

Those couples who had both commitment and legal marriage ceremonies initially reported the latter were largely undertaken for the legal benefits, protection, and recognition that legal marriage bestowed upon them and their families. These marriage ceremonies were usually smaller and less formal than the commitment ceremony, ranging from impromptu trips to City Hall to small gatherings of a few intimate friends.

“We had the [commitment] ceremony, that feels so much more momentous to us personally. And then the legal marriage feels more like: the state finally caught up with us. And it means we have a lot of things protected now that we didn’t before, and that makes us feel more secure about what we were already doing” (Mia, Asian, age 35, partnered six years).

Her partner added,

“Because we’d had such a big commitment ceremony, we didn’t do a big wedding. We went just the two of us and signed papers and had a Justice of the Peace go through it. Which was kind of nice, ‘cause it was about what it was about, you know? And we didn’t want a second anniversary. We felt like [the commitment ceremony] was the day in front of our family and friends, we made this official, and it’s always going to be. So let’s make May 17th just about when the state got with the program” (Ada, White, age 30, partnered six years).

While Ada and Mia’s sentiments were typical, a minority of couples who had wanted a quick, less formal legal marriage found themselves planning bigger events due to pressure from family and, less often, friends.

“[We were] just planning to go with the four of us, a couple of friends, in Town Hall. We weren’t going to have family... and... that was going to be it. ... Sally’s parents ended up coming that weekend for a visit, coincidentally, so now it turned into a family event because they were going to be here. So they were here, and I said, ‘Well if they’re going to be here I want my family there.’ So then my family was there. So Town Hall turned into a bigger event than it was going to be... and then the party ... turned into this big deal because people just got excited about

it [and] we ended up with close to 60 people” (Linda, White, age 47, partnered 25 years).

Some couples reported feeling a sense of urgency to marry. The primary reason given for this was concern that the right to legally marry would be revoked, based on knowledge of political efforts underway in Massachusetts to do just that. More than one couple reported that, rather than waiting for a date of personal significance such as the anniversary of their commitment ceremony, they married as quickly as they could before their ability to do so was “taken away.” Secondarily, urgency came from a desire to take part in this particular historical moment and join this first cohort of legally married same-sex couples. Despite the sense of urgency, however, couples also reported that they would not have gotten married just because they were now legally able to. Rather, the right to legally marry either coincided with or trailed the level of commitment that made marriage a “natural next step” in their relationship.

“I wanted her to understand clearly: I wouldn’t do this if I did not love you. This is not like, ‘I’m going to show the world and you’re just coming along for the ride.’ And that was what I said to her. I said, ‘I want you to understand I’m doing this because I love you” (Rebecca, White, age 53, partnered 13 years).

Unexpected Impacts of Legal Marriage

Although the legal marriage was often cited as being about “just a piece of paper,” couples reported additional and often unforeseen impacts of getting married. These ranged across the realms of self, family, and society and revealed the deep emotional scaffolding underlying the social and legal legitimacy, recognition and protection that marriage affords. Participants frequently used words such as “powerful” or “profound” to describe the extent of these changes. For instance, while they had felt deeply committed to their partner previously, upon

legally marrying, many described an unexpected qualitative deepening of commitment. This shift was hard for some to put into words.

“Since we had our legal marriage, I’d say that actually has an impact on things, and since then we’ve went to work on conflicts in a deeper way, in a more meaningful way. We come to deeper understanding, we compromise more, I think we’re more in love even since then. And um I don’t know, it’s the sense of commitment which I assumed was there just feels even deeper. Not that it wasn’t there, but... it really surprised me, it really, really affected us. You know we would talk to gay couples who had gotten married, and we’d say, or they’d say, ‘It really feels different, doesn’t it? It really does. How weird is that?’ The legal marriage was a political act. That said, when we were sort of brought into the public arena of married couples, everything changed. That political act was really quite profound. It affected the way we felt about each other as a couple” (Zelda, White, age 56, partnered three years).

Some mentioned being surprisingly moved to hear traditional words of official state recognition such as “by the power vested in me...,” and reported that feelings of marginalization and internalized homophobia were lifted or eased.

“I was aware that some of that [insecurity about marriage] was my own internalized homophobia and that I was afraid it would be ridiculed. I was afraid that unknown, unnamed people would either make fun of it or say that, ‘How can you be pretending that you’re getting married and it isn’t really marriage? It doesn’t really mean anything.’ Legitimizing

[our relationship] legally also feels profound... my own internalized homophobia has to a great extent been lifted” (Ralph, White, age 61, partnered 17 years).

Many couples reported that their legal marriage changed others’ perceptions of their commitment more than it did their own, citing examples of shifts in family and professional relationships. Participants said their marriage had brought them closer to their families, had created extended families, and that family members “mellowed” and “transformed” in their acceptance of the couple.

“Once I was married, my business [partner] said it the best I could ever say. He said, “Welcome to the club.” And I think for other people, now they realize, yeah, we’re part of the marriage club now. We’re one of you. And I think that’s what it – for me, the difference really lies in that external perception versus how I feel about my commitment.” (Rose, Puerto Rican, age 49, partnered 25 years)

“[Her dad] was really upset that we were getting married. And Adventure was like, ‘You don’t have to come.’ And she was really pissed at him, and I mean he pretty much didn’t talk to me at all from that point on and even at the beginning of our wedding day. And while we were doing our father/daughter dances and while my dad and I were dancing, he said, “So how’s Adventure’s dad with this?’ and I’m like, ‘Well actually he hasn’t been talking to me.’ [My dad] went up to him, he pulled us together, the four of us are hugging. I’m standing right across from Adventure’s dad, looking at him. And my dad’s like, ‘This is a great day. These girls are happy. This is a day of happiness and peace.” I mean this

was a big group hug... I've never seen him this supportive, like this openly supportive. And it was great, and then her dad talked to me after that. Ever since then her family has been great" (Bella, White, age 30, partnered nine years).

Couples also discussed the impact being married had on the way they interacted with the larger society. Some mentioned feeling a sense of entitlement after being legally married, which was explained in two ways: (1) feeling entitled to call their partner "spouse", "wife" or "husband," which they may have done previously but now felt more entitled to do; and (2) feeling entitled to benefits and to force employers, state entities, insurance companies and other societal institutions to recognize the legal status of their relationship.

"When I speak of him, out in the world, I speak of my husband. ... I might have said it previously but it wouldn't have meant what it means now, because we are husband to one another because we're married" (Bear, White, age 58, partnered eight years).

"I called up the insurance agent and said, 'Rod and I got married and we want the family discount'" (Leo, White, age 55, partnered 29 years).

Broader societal implications of being legally married that couples cited included feeling that they were role models for other and younger gay and lesbian couples, and that the legalization acted to counter long-time societal notions that gays and lesbians are incapable of deep and lasting relationships.

"The message always was that gay couples could not have committed, loving relationships. I think once it

gets legitimized, it takes away that argument" (Leo, White, age 55, partnered 29 years).

Concerns About Legalization of Same-Sex Marriage

The legalization of same-sex marriage was experienced in complex ways and couples' reflections on legal marriage as a "mainstream" event were telling. On the one hand, couples expressed a sense of justice and equality in having their same-sex relationships sanctioned socially and legally in ways that are normative for opposite-sex couples in this culture. At the same time, feelings of being seen as "normal" sometimes caused dismay with merging into a patriarchal institution and concern that the gay and lesbian community may be losing its uniqueness as well as the creativity that has characterized gay and lesbian commitment ceremonies.

"I kind of like having an identity separate from the straight community. I mean I think that's probably part of an issue for GLBT people. Many, many years go by and you have this sort of unique identity in this unique community and then there's this sort of merging into the straight environment in terms of marriage. And it can be difficult to give that [uniqueness] up" (Ned, White, age 42, partnered 12 years).

Additionally, married couples tended to struggle with the language available to them to describe their partner and their relationship. Some thought it was important to claim the same terms used by married heterosexuals -- "wife" and "husband" -- as an expression of equality and "normalcy." For others, however, this desire conflicted with repulsion for terms which they felt are laden with patriarchal and sex-stereotyped meanings. The lack of alternative language was also mentioned as problematic.

“He got annoyed with me again last night ‘cause I introduced him to somebody and I didn’t say anything [denoting couple status]. And he said, ‘I don’t get that.’ And I said, ‘Well this is what goes on inside my head, this is all unspoken: Hi, this is Aaron, he’s my dot-dot-dot... Partner, no that’s not right, husband, but I don’t like that word, I know there’s another word, I can’t think of it, oh damn I’m just going to say partner. Partner? No, it’s spouse!’ And then Aaron said, ‘But I don’t like the word spouse,’ and I said, ‘I don’t either but I kinda like it better than husband’” (Stephen, White, age 42, partnered 16 years).

Discussion

Summary of Findings

Lesbian and gay couples in the state of Massachusetts have found themselves in a unique position. An experience not previously available to them, the freedom to marry a same-sex partner, has recently become a real option, and in a very public manner. Controversy about same-sex marriage continues to dominate public discussion, in both straight and gay and lesbian communities. As a research team, we were able to seize this historical moment to investigate the impact of same-sex marriage legalization upon the lives and relationships of same-sex couples.

This study provided us with intriguing new data concerning lesbian and gay relationships. Relationships appeared to follow a general sequence of commitment development, from beginning feelings of belonging and connection, to joint undertakings reflecting belief in the stability and longevity of the couple, to events garnering public recognition and support of the couple. While general patterns emerged, it should also be noted that there were exceptions to these patterns as well, reflecting the uniqueness of each couple and relationship. Of

particular note, couples deciding to legally marry tended to experience many commitment events later in their relationships with the exception of undertaking significant ventures, including co-parenting of dependent children. Perhaps the degree to which the stability and longevity of the partnership is associated with high stakes for the individuals involved heavily influences the decision to legally marry, underscoring the need for social and legal sanction of these unions.

While some chose not to mark their commitment with public ceremonies of any kind, the majority found meaning in doing so. For these couples, committing to one another in front of friends and family was found to be deeply meaningful regardless of whether or not the ceremony was legally sanctioned.

Decisions to get legally married were largely attributed to gaining legal protections provided by civil marriage. Many couples also reported unforeseen impacts of becoming legally married. These included a deeper sense of commitment to one another, greater acknowledgement of the couple by families and professional peers, and reduction in internal, familial, and societal homophobia. Many couples commented on the political efforts to revoke same-sex marriage and the sense of urgency they felt to both be a part of history and to marry before the right to do so was taken away from them.

The complexity of feelings surrounding same-sex marriage was also reflected by participants, both legally married and not. While reporting a sense of justice and equality at having their same-sex relationships sanctioned in the same way as heterosexual ones, some also voiced reluctance to join in a mainstream or patriarchal ritual. Some couples spoke of a hard-won acceptance as “normal,” “ordinary,” and “the same” as heterosexual couples, while others voiced their fear of losing the uniqueness of their gay and lesbian communities. Some married couples emphatically claimed the usually-heterosexual terms of ‘wife’ and ‘husband,’ and others struggled with choosing

language to signal their newly legal marital status. It should be noted that while some couples voiced one or the other of these views, others reported both, living with the dialectic of conflicting feelings.

By far the majority of couples that participated in this study, including those who chose not to legally marry, placed a prominent value upon the concept and the availability of marriage for same-sex couples. Among the various rationales for the significance of marriage for these couples included access to legal protections; validation and recognition by others; integration into families and various types of communities; enhanced family bonds; and countering homophobic messages about gays and lesbians and their relationships.

In short, legal marriage appears to have meaning for same-sex couples not only for its legal protections but as a symbol of recognition of and respect for same-sex relationships. Many couples mentioned a sense of greater "legitimacy" as a couple, and cited shifts in feelings of acceptance by others and sometimes even within themselves. The impact of homophobia and marginalization was clear and profound. Some of these couples had been together over twenty years and still reported deeply layered meanings of becoming legally married. While same-sex couples, like opposite-sex couples, may choose not to legally marry, the fact that they have the opportunity to do so and gain both social and legal benefits can clearly increase their perceived status as equal members of society.

Limitations of Study

A major limitation of our study was the self-selected nature of our sample. Most participants were eager to contribute their stories and perspectives to this study, especially given the current political debate over the legalization of same-sex marriage. At the time of this writing, Massachusetts is the only state in which same-sex marriages can legally occur. Couples who participated in this study were all residents of this state.

We asked couples to reflect on their relationships as they naturally developed and to comment on how they experienced the intersection of their relationship and the historical event of legal same-sex marriage. We did so at a time when same-sex marriage was newly legal, and subsequent cohorts of legally married same-sex couples may well respond quite differently.

Despite purposeful sampling efforts, obtaining a diverse sample of same-sex couples with regard to race, ethnicity, gender and socioeconomic status was challenging, resulting in a largely White, middle-class sample. Possible reasons for this difficulty includes our lack of awareness of alternative avenues through which to access lesbian and gay couples in the state of Massachusetts and low availability of various types of same-sex couples (e.g., legally married, gay male couples with children).

The wording of our recruitment materials may have affected interest or willingness to participate in the study. As this research was conducted by the Wellesley Centers for Women, some male couples may have mistakenly thought that only female couples were being sought as participants. In addition, while recruitment materials titled the study "Same-Sex Relationships in the Post-Legalization Era," and specifically stated researchers' interest in talking with both married and unmarried same-sex couples, the study was sometimes informally called "the same-sex marriage study," which may have inadvertently given a message that only legally married couples were eligible or of interest to researchers.

In addition, our study relied largely on interview narratives of each individual and couple. The interviewers were all women, with the exception of a single male interviewer whose interviews were conducted late in the data-gathering phase. A variety of ages, sexual orientations, social class backgrounds, parenting status, races and ethnicities were present in the research team, but characteristics of interviewer and respondents were

not systematically matched. Therefore, the effort of interviewer characteristics on the tone and content of the interviews is not known. Additionally, within-couple discrepancies in relationship history accounts or failure to mention a commitment marker or event may not mean the event did not occur nor that it was insignificant, but rather may reflect individual differences in how the relationship story is told. For example, stories may be told in socially desirable ways or individual privacy needs may result in events being related superficially or not at all.

For all these reasons (i.e., the regional and historical uniqueness of our study, the self-selected nature of our sample, the potential effect of interviewer characteristics on responses), the preliminary results of this study should not be used to create generalizations about all same-sex relationships. Findings should be interpreted narrowly, with the subjectively-centered methodology in mind.

Implications of Study

Many legally married participants in our study reported enhanced social and legal bonds with family. The creation of larger, more cohesive kin-based social support networks can lead to an increase in more stable, productive, self sufficient, and psychologically, physically, and emotionally healthy members of society. Legal and financial protections for partners and dependents can lead to a decrease in the utilization of government assistance required by same-sex couples with severe financial difficulties previously exacerbated by lack of such protections.

The availability of legal marriage provides sanction for intimate relationships, whether or not a given couple chooses to marry. When legal marriage is available to same-sex couples, the ramifications of marrying stretch far beyond the couples themselves. Families, co-workers, and societal institutions' perceptions of same-sex individuals and couples

can shift towards greater acceptance. As such, homophobia and social alienation in our society may be reduced.

Directions for Future Research

Further analyses of these data are currently being conducted examining variation in our present findings that might be accounted for by participants' various ethnic, gender and cultural dynamics, further exploring normative stages in gay/lesbian relationship development, and studying the bidirectional impacts of homophobia and the decision and outcomes of legal marriage for same-sex couples and their families.

Future data collection should include more participants from diverse racial, ethnic and socioeconomic statuses, as well as other demographic backgrounds. Interviews with family members of these couples would provide a rich view of the social context through which same-sex couples' relationships can be viewed.

Same-sex marriage legalization is a shifting landscape, both internationally and nationally. During the year that this paper was prepared, Canada and Spain legalized same-sex marriage, California's legislature legalized same-sex marriage although the bill was vetoed by that state's Governor, Washington and Oregon await legislative and court action, and Massachusetts' battle over legalization continues. The experiences of same-sex couples in committed relationships residing in states considering similar legislation, as well as states far from such legislation, could provide further understanding of the implications of the availability same-sex marriage on same-sex couples' relationships. We hope to collaborate with others researching this phenomenon both nationally and around the world to better inform public policy and legislation that have profound social repercussions.

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Endnotes

¹ Dorothy Tenov (1979) coined the word “limerance” to describe the state of falling in love or being in love. According to Tenov, limerance is characterized by intrusive thinking about the beloved, acute longing for reciprocated feelings by the beloved, elation when feelings appear to be reciprocated, intense feelings that push other concerns to the background, and focus on positive attributes of the beloved and avoidance of the negative.

² Findings reported are based on data from 49 couples, as interview data for one couple was not recorded due to recording equipment malfunction.