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For better or worse: Exploring the meanings of same-sex marriage within the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered community

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──────────────── ABSTRACT ────────────────

This study examines how gay, lesbian, bisexual and trans-gendered (LGBT) men and women assign meaning to legally recognized same-sex marriage and its impact on their under-standing of the LGBT community. Open-ended web-based survey questions asked participants (N = 288) to consider the ways in which legally recognizing same-sex marriage may positively and negatively affect the LGBT community. The understanding of legally recognized same-sex marriage that emerges is multilayered, with an overarching theme of equality forming a surface over deeper dialectical themes describing tensions in the perceived influence of same-sex marriage on same-sex romantic relationships, the LGBT community, and the relationship between the LGBT community and heterosexual others. The findings of the study suggest that same-sex marriage should be considered as a context for all future discussions of married and un-married same-sex partnerships.

KEY WORDS: dialectics • gay and lesbian relationships • same-sex marriage

On November 18, 2003 the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court (SJC) declared that it could find no 'constitutionally adequate reason for denying civil marriage to same-sex couples,' and ordered the state to begin issuing marriage licenses to same-sex couples after a 180-day stay period (Goodridge v. Dept. of Public Health, 2003). The SJC decision marked a turning point in the fight for and against same-sex marriage that had been occurring across the US for nearly a decade (Alderson & Lahey, 2004;

Purcell, 1998). Although other states and municipalities had been legally issuing same-sex couples protective civil rights for several years (see Human Rights Campaign, n.d. and Purcell, 1998, for reviews), the SJC decision marked the first time that same-sex partners would be legally granted the same civil marriage protections as heterosexual couples.

Immediately following this historic decision, the popular media erupted with discussion and debate on the legal and moral implications of this shift in the definition of marriage, but the relational, identity, and cultural implications of the decision for the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered (LGBT) community received little attention. Although previous studies have examined how LGBT people make sense of heterosexual weddings and marriage (Oswald, 2000, 2002) and nonmarital forms of same-sex committed relationships (e.g. Haley-Banez & Garrett, 2002; Slater, 1995; Stiers, 1999), never before have researchers been able to examine how LGBT people assign meaning to legally recognized same-sex marriage while experiencing this large-scale social change.

This study examines how gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered men and women view the impact of legally recognized same-sex marriage on their understanding and experience of the LGBT community. Participants were asked to reflect upon the impact of legally recognized same-sex marriage on the LGBT community, rather than on the individuals or couples, because of the unique relationships among LGBT individuals, same-sex couples and the LGBT community. The 'community' has been described as existing on many planes ranging from a close group of friends to inhabitants of a shared gay ghetto to a largely imagined group of individuals who have same-sex desire in common (Woolwine, 2000). Although heterosexual couples also experience relational processes within a broader social context (Parks & Eggert, 1991), Stearns and Sabini (1997) point out that same-sex couples experience a unique type of community influence on their relational processes because same-sex couples are part of a minority group defined by relational and sexual preference. Same-sex couples often find acceptance only within the LGBT community, rely on community organizations for specialized resources, and/or negotiate their separateness from the community due to the pressures of heterosexism (sometimes internalized) or to protect their relationship (Meyer, 1990; Peplau & Cochran, 1981; Stearns & Sabini, 1997). As such, the links between same-sex couples and the LGBT community have been shown to be complex and participation in the community from couples and individuals varied. Yet, the potential implications of legally recognized same-sex marriage may be so widespread that this institution holds the possibility to reshape the dynamics of the LGBT community system. Therefore, the meaning of this new phenomenon should be considered in relation to participants' experiences of the LGBT community, while meanings assigned to same-sex marriage should reveal insights into participants' understanding of the LGBT community itself (Adelman & Frey, 1997).

By examining themes that emerged when LGBT community members were asked to consider the ways in which legally recognized same-sex

marriage may positively and negatively affect the LGBT community, this study offers a 'real-time' picture of social change in the definition, recognition, and understanding of same-sex romantic relationships. The understanding of legally recognized same-sex marriage that emerges is multilayered, with an overarching theme of equality forming a surface over deeper dialectical themes describing tensions in the perceived influence of same-sex marriage on same-sex romantic relationships, the LGBT community, and the relationship between the LGBT community and heterosexual others. The findings of the study suggest that same-sex marriage should be considered as a context for all future discussions of married and unmarried same-sex partnerships.

Method

Participants

Two hundred and eighty-eight people participated in the study; 169 participants were female, 113 were male, and 6 identified as neither male nor female. Participant ages ranged from 19 to 66 years ($M = 31.6$, $Mdn = 30$, $SD = 9.6$) Most participants were White ($N = 262$), 15 participants were African American, 3 were Asian, and 8 did not identify a racial or ethnic heritage. Participants identified themselves as gay or lesbian ($N = 235$), bisexual ($N = 44$) and queer/transgendered ($N = 9$), and had identified themselves as such for an average of 11.4 years ($Mdn = 10$, $SD = 7.89$). Most participants described themselves as 'totally' ($N = 161$) or 'mostly' ($N = 114$) out about their sexual orientation, whereas the rest ($N = 13$) indicated that they were out to only a few people. One hundred and ninety-three participants were currently involved in a primary romantic relationship, and the length of those relationships ranged from 1 to 36 years ($M = 5.50$, $Mdn = 4$, $SD = 4.80$).

Procedure

Data collection took place over 6 weeks. Collection started 2 months after the SJC ruling was announced and ended 6 weeks before marriage licenses were issued to same-sex couples in Massachusetts. Participants were recruited through a snowball sampling method. First, the author made announcements inviting participants on several Massachusetts LGBT listservs and through the membership lists of several Boston LGBT recreational and social organizations. After completing a web-based survey, participants were asked to pass the URL along to other LGBT community members who might be interested in participating. This method generated 166 participants who resided in Massachusetts, and 122 who resided in one of the other states. At the time of data collection, it was expected that residents of other US states would be able to obtain legally recognized same-sex marriages in Massachusetts, therefore the information from non-Massachusetts participants was retained for analysis.

The recruitment announcement informed potential participants that the study was being conducted to better understand what members of the LGBT community thought about the legal recognition of same-sex marriages and that participation would require them to complete an anonymous web-based survey. Interested participants were provided with a URL for the web-based survey. The welcome page for the survey reiterated the goal of the project, that

participation was anonymous, and gave instructions. Participants were asked to respond to several open-ended questions, followed by demographic items and close-ended items. This study examines the meaning of same-sex marriage in relation to participants' experiences of the LGBT community, thus two of the open-ended items ('In your opinion, how may legalizing same-sex marriage change the LGBT community for the better?'; 'In your opinion, how may legalizing same-sex marriage change the LGBT community for the worse?') are of interest for this study. These questions attempt to elicit a wide range of participants' understanding of same-sex marriage and the community using a technique similar to that in Paul and Hayes' (2002) exploration of college students' hookups. After completing the survey, the participants viewed an end screen that thanked them for their participation and asked them to please pass the study URL on to other members of the LGBT community who may be interested in participating.

Analysis

Participants' responses to the two questions of interest were analyzed using an inductive method informed by grounded theory. When using this type of data-driven approach, themes emerge from the participants' responses rather than a priori conceptual categories (Boyatzis, 1998). Following coding procedures suggested by Auerbach and Silverstein (2003), responses to each item were examined and sub-themes were noted. A constant comparative process (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) was employed to compare emerging sub-themes until saturation was reached. At that point, no new sub-themes were identified and almost all responses fit within a sub-theme. Conceptual linkages among the sub-themes were noted throughout the analysis and informed the creation of themes. In addition to the constant comparative process, other steps were taken to ensure the validity and credibility of the data analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Miles & Huberman, 1994). To further ensure the validity of the coding procedure, a colleague with expertise in qualitative methods reviewed the data and coding results and agreed with the fittingness of the data to the sub-themes and themes. To check the credibility of the coding, five members of the LGBT community were asked to review the sub-themes and themes, and they confirmed that the descriptions fitted with their lived experiences regarding same-sex marriage. Finally, the author examined the themes and constructed a theoretical narrative to best explain the results.

Results and discussion

Analysis of the data revealed that participants assigned meaning to legally recognized same-sex marriage in relation to the LGBT community along four clear and strong themes. The first of these themes, legal equality, was mentioned by nearly every participant and served as a surface theme over deeper understandings of same-sex marriage. The other three themes were revealed as dialectical tensions existing under the initial surface of legal equality and signified contradictory expectations about how same-sex marriage will influence same-sex relationships, the LGBT community, and the relationship between the LGBT community and heterosexual others. The presentation of the results relies upon directly quoted excerpts from the participants'

responses to give priority to their voices. The examples chosen are representative of the responses of many.

Surface theme: Legal equality

Nearly every participant mentioned that the legal recognition of same-sex marriage represented an aspect of legal equality for LGBT people, and this was seen as affecting the LGBT community for the better. The theme of legal equality should not be surprising given that same-sex marriage has been promoted by LGBT advocacy groups, such as MassEquality (see MassEquality, n.d.) and the Human Rights Campaign (see Human Rights Campaign, n.d.), as a necessary means to ending the discrimination experienced by LGBT people in the US. The theme of legal equality comprised three sub-themes: first-class citizenship, financial benefits, and family security.

The first sub-theme of legal equality, first-class citizenship, reflected the participants' beliefs that the legal recognition of same-sex marriage marks the end of differing legal protections and treatment for LGBT and heterosexual American citizens. One participant expressed the end of 'second-class citizenship,' 'We now have the same rights as everybody else. They can't say we are second class or not as worthy of legal rights as straights anymore.' Another stated, 'This finally makes us real American citizens. It shows that we are Americans and being married is part of our fundamental American rights.' So strong was some participants' view of same-sex marriage as a vehicle for first-class citizenship that they rejected the relational aspects of marriage and instead defined marriage in legal terms only. For example, one stated:

> Having same-sex marriage, and calling it marriage especially, makes the discussion about gay relationships a legal one, not a religious or moral issue. This shows everyone that we are citizens, we pay taxes, and we have to be treated the same as everybody else. So, this isn't about marriage, it's about equal rights.

The theme of legal equality was also expressed through two sub-themes related to other expected benefits of legally recognized same-sex marriage: financial benefits and family security. First, participants welcomed the financial benefits of same-sex marriage. One expressed, 'Having the right to get married means that same-sex couples can now get the tax breaks and other financial perks, such as getting to share property, of being married.' Many participants expressed the financial benefits of legal equality in terms of health and insurance benefits. For example, 'Now couples will be able to share health insurance, and that's really important, especially to older couples or when one partner can't work.' Participants also understood legal equality as a means for increased security for LGBT families. One participant's statement reflected many participants' concerns for same-sex couples with children, 'Being able to get married will help couples who have children or want to have children. It should help in adoptions a lot if the couple can say they are married. It will make sure all LGBT families are legally protected.' Others thought ahead to protection of families in times of crisis. For example, one participant stated, 'Being able to get married means that I will be able to take care of my partner, like making medical or other types of decisions for him, if something horrible happens or when we are older because everyone will have to recognize me as his partner.'

Although nearly all of the participants agreed that same-sex marriage should be understood, at least in part, as a way of gaining legal equality for LGBT

people in the US, legal equality was not the only way in which participants understood same-sex marriage. Same-sex marriage as legal equality was recognized as important and positive for the LGBT community and the expressions of legal equality were similar to those put forth in the public domain by advocates of same-sex marriage. Yet, the participants' understandings of same-sex marriage and its expected effects on the LGBT community went beyond legal equality and were revealed in contradictory expectations about the new phenomenon and couples, the LGBT community, and the relationship between the LGBT community and heterosexual others. The descriptions of these additional themes were more varied and detailed than those of legal equality, suggesting that legal equality is an overarching surface theme and these dialectical themes are situated in deeper, richer and more controversial layers beneath legal equality's external veneer.

Deeper dialectical tensions

Baxter and Montgomery (1996) have described relational dynamics and communication as dialectical processes in which people experience simultaneously contradictory forces. These forces drive changes in relationships and are both affected by and affect communication between relational partners. Baxter and Montgomery emphasize the need to understand the totality of dialectics by recognizing them as interdependent with each other and contextualized within a culture. They see dyads as both defining and being defined by a larger social order or culture, suggesting that to better understand relationships, dialectics should be examined not only at the dyadic level, but also at the larger societal level. Participants' responses reflected dialectical themes in the understanding of same-sex marriage at three interconnected levels: dyadic partnerships, the LGBT community, and between the LGBT community and heterosexual others. It is interesting to note that because participants were asked about both positive and negative ways in which legally recognized same-sex marriage may impact the LGBT community, they were encouraged to think about two sides of legally recognized same-sex marriage. Yet, the questions did not encourage participants to describe positives and negatives along simultaneously conflicting themes. Therefore, the nature of the questions may have contributed to the emergence of dialectical themes, but did not necessitate dialectical responses.

Same-sex partnerships: Serious/fanciful. The first dialectical theme that emerges from the participants' reflections upon legally recognized same-sex marriage and the LGBT community begins at the dyadic level and reflects out upon the community. Participants had contradictory, yet simultaneous views of same-sex marriage as a means for same-sex partnerships to become more serious and more fanciful.

Participants expressed their belief that same-sex marriage will make same-sex couples take their relationships more seriously and strengthen same-sex partnerships in a variety of ways. For example, one participant saw same-sex marriage as adding seriousness for those who marry as well as those who do not. 'Getting married will help couples feel closer to each other and will make their relationship stronger. Couples who don't get married right away will realize that they can work toward a serious relationship in the future because they have the option of getting married someday.' Others felt that same-sex marriage would make stronger relationships because the institutionalization of

same-sex relationships will create a type of structural barrier to relational dissolution (Attridge, 1994; Johnson, 1982). For example, 'Marriage makes people take a relationship more seriously and realize that they need to work on it instead of just leaving when things get tough. Gay people will now have to look at their relationships as more stable and permanent because there are marriages.' Other responses linked stronger relationships to a stronger LGBT community as a result of same-sex marriage: 'Same-sex marriage means that our relationships will be more stable which will make our community much stronger.' Another stated:

> Being able to get married will make the whole community stronger and happier because people will be more supported in their relationships, but will also be held more accountable for them in the eyes of others. After all, we all want lesbian and gay marriages to work out.

Although participants saw same-sex marriage as resulting in more serious same-sex partnerships, they also expressed the opposite idea by suggesting that same-sex marriage might encourage more fanciful relationships as well. Many expressed concern that the excitement of having legally recognized marriage for the first time may lead same-sex couples to marry for the 'wrong reasons.' For example, 'Same-sex marriage could be a problem for couples and the whole community if people get married for the wrong reasons. Like, if people marry just because they can now, or because it seems like the cool thing to do if you are gay or lesbian now.' Another participant offered, 'Having the ability to get married is great, but not if people get married without thinking long and hard about the lifetime commitment they are making. I think getting married is going to be a fad for a while.' Others were concerned that same-sex couples might marry for political reasons. For example, 'One problem with gay marriage is that people might marry out of duty to the community for having won the right or in some sort of protest to those who think that we shouldn't marry because we are gay. Those won't be good marriages.' Thus, participants believed that same-sex marriage would have opposing results on same-sex partnerships: to make them more serious and more fanciful. Participants also indicated that these effects on partnerships would also reflect out to affect the LGBT community. The second dialectical theme that emerged from the participants' thoughts on same-sex marriage sharpened the focus on the LGBT community.

The LGBT community: Stronger/weaker. The second dialectical theme that emerged from the participants' thoughts about legally recognized same-sex marriage and the LGBT community reflects participants' simultaneous and contradictory beliefs that same-sex marriage will make the community stronger and weaker. Participants' understanding of same-sex marriage as something that will make the LGBT community stronger was expressed in two subthemes: validation and unification.

Participants saw the legal recognition of same-sex marriage as extending beyond legal equality to creating a sense of validation for the community and its members. As one participant stated, 'Same-sex marriage is a wonderful thing for the LGBT community because it shows us that we matter and we are to be respected in our ways of loving and living our lives.' Another wrote, 'There is such joy in the community right now because of this. It's like the whole state is celebrating lesbian and gay relationships.' Others expressed

validation through their belief that same-sex marriage will serve to diminish internalized homophobia within the community. For example:

> Even though being gay is a lot better than it was 20 years ago, lots of members of our community still feel oppressed and have come to believe that they are worth-less because they are queer. This marriage thing says it's really OK to be gay in a huge way and that should help to lessen the internalized homophobia going around. If we stop hating ourselves, we will be so much stronger as a group.

Participants also saw legally recognized same-sex marriage as strengthening the LGBT community through unification. One participant stated:

> What's important here isn't just that we finally have the legal right to marry, but that we as a community fought long and hard for this and have a real victory to hold on to. Even though we won in Massachusetts, the fight for equality is not over here or anywhere yet, but the community has really come together and is being strong together.

Another echoed the political unification of the community around same-sex marriage issues, 'The fight for same-sex marriage has shown the community that we can do good when we have a unified political voice.' Other participants saw unification not in political terms, but in terms of the dynamics of relation-ships within the community. For example:

> Gay marriage will help to tie partnered gay people to the community as a whole. Before, if you were in a long-term relationship, you sort of lost touch with the community because the community seemed to be for single people who were inter-ested in hooking-up. This whole gay marriage thing shows that partnered people are welcome and needed in the community because the community wanted marriage as an option.

Although same-sex marriage was understood as making the LGBT community stronger through the sub-themes of validation and unification, participants also espoused an opposing view that saw same-sex marriage weakening the community. The meanings of same-sex marriage as something that weakens the LGBT community were expressed in two sub-themes: stigma-tization and assimilation. The stigmatization associated with same-sex marriage in the present responses differs from that usually presented in studies of the LGBT community (e.g., DiPlacido, 1998) which describe the experience of homo-sexual, bisexual and/or transgendered as setting one apart from the norms of mainstream/heterosexual society. Instead, the participants foresaw same-sex marriage as setting up a stigmatizing system *within* the LGBT community as getting married becomes the norm and remaining unmarried becomes a stigma. One participant explains:

> Same-sex marriage will set up marriage as the ultimate relational goal and make other ways of relating and loving invalid in the community. People will start to wonder what is wrong with you if you are in a good relationship and you don't get married, and will be disappointed in you if you say you just don't see marriage as something you want for your life.

Participants suggested that the stigma of not getting married would lead to nonmarried couples losing the LGBT community's support. For example, 'I think that the same-sex marriage is a good thing, but that it will cause some trouble. I mean, the community isn't going to take a couple seriously unless they get married now.' Another predicted that the stigma of nonmarriage would divide the LGBT community into two distinct groups:

I guess there will now be the 'haves' and the 'have-nots' when it comes to marriage. This will cause a split in the community because the married gays will look down on the nonmarried gays and the nonmarried gays will probably be seen as rebels or trouble-makers. At the very least, there will be a split because the married and nonmarried gays will want different things for the community and won't work together anymore.

Other participants expressed the idea of stigma and same-sex marriage as causing divides between gay men and lesbians and other members of the community. For example:

Same-sex marriage is great if you are gay or lesbian, but if you are bisexual this will just force you out of the 'LGBT' community more. I mean, gay and lesbian people will want a same-sex marriage now and if you are bi you might not want to do that, so you will be an outcast in a way because you won't be seen as worth having a relationship with anymore.

Another expressed concern about the transgendered segment of the LGBT community:

I'm not sure where same-sex marriage leaves you if you are trans or genderqueer. There are issues of identity (psychologically and legally) that the trans community is facing that are glossed over when you think about same-sex marriage because it is so dependent on 'same-sex' which may or may not apply in relationships with a genderqueer or trans partner. It seems to me that married gay and lesbian couples are being seen as the 'right' kind of relationship, and that just makes the MTFs, FTMs, butches, bois, queers and everyone else who doesn't fall in a neat little box fit less and less into the so-called LGBT community.

In addition to stigmatization, participants also expected same-sex marriage to weaken the LGBT community through a process of assimilation. Participants' sensed that same-sex marriage may lead to the LGBT community losing its unique culture and instead move closer to what they saw as a straight status quo. Many mentioned the loss of difference when same-sex marriage is legally recognized. For example, 'Having the same marriage rights as everybody else also means that we will become everybody else. We just won't be unique anymore.' Others expressed the theme of assimilation by talking about how same-sex marriage will affect relational dynamics:

Same-sex marriage might impose a cookie-cutter set of rules on our relationships. Gay and lesbian couples have been special in that we could have more fluid, and more realistic, relationships, but now that will change. The unique way we defined our relationships was one of the things that made the community so special, and I'm sad to see that part of us go.

Another participant agreed that a change in the way LGBT relationships are defined takes something away from the community:

Legalization of same-sex marriages might lead us to take our relationships for granted. I mean, it's not a big deal anymore to stand-up for your relationship if you can get married. Before, it was a big deal to make a commitment and say you were 'married' to your partner because it meant you were brave and standing up for your relationship in the face of all that said you couldn't. Some of the bravery of being gay and out and together is gone now.

Finally, others saw the assimilation potential of same-sex marriage as weakening the LGBT community because same-sex marriage could be seen as a way of incorporating the norms of heterosexual relational culture. As one

participant explained, 'Marriage itself is a fundamentally flawed institution. It's patriarchal and makes people think they own other people. Now, the LGBT community has bought into that.' Another stated, 'I just think that same-sex marriage makes it look like all along we've wanted to be straight and that all the horrible things that happen in straight marriages, like abuse and divorce, are fine with us. We aren't as strong as a community because we aren't fighting against the mainstream now, we are wanting to be a part of it.'

The dialectical theme that same-sex marriage will make the LGBT community stronger and weaker through the contradictory sub-themes of validation and unification vs. stigmatization and assimilation that emerged in this study echo the tensions in the sexual ideologies described by Yep, Lovaas, and Elia (2003). Yep et al. (2003) compare the ideologies reflected in recent LGBT popular literature in which assimilationist writers claim same-sex marriage will improve the LGBT community, whereas radical writers see same-sex marriage as the community's downfall. The participants in this study reflected both positions, but did so not by choosing one side or the other, but rather by acknowledging both positions as part of their overall understanding of same-sex marriage. An additional dialectical meaning of same-sex marriage emerged from participants' responses as they discussed their views on same-sex marriage and the relationship between the LGBT community and heterosexual others.

Between the LGBT community and heterosexual others: Healing/injury. The final dialectical theme that emerges from the LGBT participants' understandings of legally recognized same-sex marriage concerns the relationship between the LGBT community and heterosexual others, or mainstream American society. Participants recognized a tension between opposing results of same-sex marriage. They saw same-sex marriage as a tool for healing the relationship between the community and heterosexual others while simultaneously understanding that same-sex marriage may be used by heterosexual others as a weapon to injure the LGBT community.

Participants expressed their belief that legally recognized same-sex marriage would help to improve the relationship between the LGBT community and heterosexual others in several ways. Many looked at same-sex marriage as a beneficial public relations tool for the LGBT community that would lead to greater acceptance of the community by the heterosexual mainstream. An example of this idea is in the following participant statement, 'Same-sex marriage won't just change the community, but the way the community is viewed by those outside of it. If straight people see that we want to get married, they will have to realize that the stereotypes of gays as promiscuous are wrong. Basically, same-sex marriage will help to reduce homophobia in the straight community.' Another expressed a similar sentiment, 'Same-sex marriage will help to reduce the stress felt by sexual minorities because it will help reduce the misunderstanding and rejection that they feel from heterosexual people. Marriage makes relationships and families more visible and will make those outside the community question their ignorance.' In addition to helping to change heterosexual others' perceptions of the LGBT community, same-sex marriage was seen as a tool for improving LGBT/straight relations by encouraging acceptance of LGBT relationships. For example, 'Same-sex marriage makes our relationships really count. Straights can't ignore us anymore, and I think most of them will come to accept us better if they see that we are married just like they are.' Another put the idea of acceptance in more personal terms:

> It would be nice if marriage made straight people, in general, like gay people more, but I think it will really matter when you look at it in the smaller scale, like looking at families. If you get married, your straight family will be able to better accept and integrate your partner in the family because being married is something that is easier for them to understand and accept.

Thus, same-sex marriage was seen as a tool to heal perceived rifts between the LGBT community and heterosexual others by reducing homophobia and ignorance and increasing acceptance and integration of LGBT community members.

Although participants saw the potential for same-sex marriage to improve the relationship between the LGBT community and heterosexual others, they also pointed out the potential for legally recognized same-sex marriage to be used as a weapon by a segment of mainstream society to hurt the LGBT community. Participants were wary of scrutiny of the community that would accompany same-sex marriage:

> Same-sex marriage opens up our community to public scrutiny, especially from conservatives and the media. I mean, there has never been a gay divorce rate before and now it will be public knowledge when we break up and it will be reported the same way stats on straight divorce are, but in our case, these stats will be used as 'proof' that we shouldn't have been allowed to marry in the first place. It puts a lot of pressure on those getting married to stay together, and pressure on the whole community to make sure we don't add fuel to the fire.

Others expressed concern that same-sex marriage would force increases in LGBT visibility and therefore increase vulnerability for physical and verbal attack. For example, 'Same-sex marriage is probably really upsetting a lot of ignorant straight people out there. If you get married, everyone in your town will know you are a lesbian or gay couple, and in some places that could be like painting a target on your head.'

Another participant's statement represents the hurt felt from anti-same-sex marriage campaigns:

> Same-sex marriage is opposed by a lot of the straight community and it has been really painful to hear everyone from politicians to church leaders to just plain people on the subway talk about how disgusting it is for LGBT people to get married or worse, how disgusting we are period. It's like the issue of same-sex marriage has given people free range to make homophobic and offensive state-ments anywhere and to anyone they please.

As with the other dialectical themes, participants understood the meaning of same-sex marriage and the relationship between the LGBT community and heterosexual others as incorporating two opposing poles. On the one hand, they saw same-sex marriage as a tool to heal the schism between the LGBT and straight community, and on the other hand, pointed to the ways in which same-sex marriage could be used as a tool by segments of heterosexual society to injure the LGBT community. Taken together, the four themes show that participants understand legally recognized same-sex marriage as a complex social change that brings with it an overarching move towards legal equality for LGBT American citizens as well as simultaneously contradicting forces of influence on three interdependent levels: same-sex partnerships, the LGBT community, and the relationship between the LGBT community and hetero-sexual others. As such, the participants' responses reflect not only their evolving understanding of same-sex marriage, but of the LGBT community.

Conclusion

Same-sex marriage: A new context for relationships

In the introduction to a recent special issue of *Personal Relationships* dedicated to the importance of understanding the influence of context in studies of personal relationships, Surra and Perlman (2003) point out that context has been conceptualized in two ways: first, as a set of structural and cultural forces external to a couple that combine to influence relationship processes, and second, as something resulting from the relationship itself. Both views of context apply to same-sex marriage as a context for the understanding of same-sex relationships. Although various forms of domestic partnerships and civil unions have been available to same-sex couples in some US locations in recent years (see Human Rights Campaign, n.d. and Purcell, 1998, for reviews), on May 17, 2004 Massachusetts became the first location in which same-sex couples could receive the same civil benefits as married heterosexual couples. Thus, same-sex marriage creates a new legal, societal and symbolic entity that same-sex relational partners may use to institutionalize their married relationships or as a counterpoint for the definition of their unmarried relationships.

Same-sex marriage is also a context in the sense that it is created by the relationship between partners. Partners in all types of relationships can be understood to create a unique context for their relationship through establishing a system of rules, expectations, and behavior within the relationship (Argyle & Henderson, 1984; Baxter, Dun, & Sahlstein, 2001). This idea of creating context is particularly salient when considering same-sex newlyweds as they have the added advantage/burden of creating context in a type of relationship that did not previously exist. As these relational systems are created in the early same-sex marriage dyads, they can be expected to create a benchmark from which to view the new phenomenon of same-sex marriage. Also, same-sex couples who do not marry will also influence the context of same-sex marriage by helping to establish what this new phenomenon of same-sex marriage is not.

Thus, same-sex marriage as a context is best understood as neither an external force nor product of the relationship, but as both simultaneously. In this way, same-sex marriage exemplifies a core concept of dialectics: praxis. Baxter and Montgomery (1996) define praxis as the idea that people are both 'actors and objects of their own actions' (p. 13). The idea of praxis applies to same-sex marriage and the LGBT community as they are understood by the participants of this study. In the dialectical themes, participants expressed not only the contradictory and interdependent meanings of same-sex marriage, but also that same-sex marriage is being defined by the LGBT community while simultaneously redefining the meaning of the LGBT community. This interplay is seen in the participants' understanding of same-sex marriage at the three interdependent levels of same-sex partnerships, the LGBT community, and the relationship between the LGBT community and heterosexual others. It is important to note that at the time of this data collection, the future of same-sex marriage in

Massachusetts began to face legal challenges that will surely continue, and that the issue of same-sex marriage was gaining national attention as more states, such as Oregon and Minnesota, moved for and against same-sex marriage (see Human Rights Campaign, n.d.). As the institution of same-sex marriage spreads, changes, and matures so will the evolving understanding of this phenomenon, but one conclusion of this study will remain constant: same-sex marriage should be understood as a complex cultural and personal phenomenon to be considered as a context for understanding same-sex relationships in the future.

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