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Before and After ‘I Do’: Marriage Processes For Mid-Life Gay and Lesbian Married Couples

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Abstract

This qualitative study examines how mid-life gay and lesbian married individuals articulate their decision to marry. Using 2013 data from 30 mid-life couples in Massachusetts, this study challenges previous literature that conceptualizes marriage as entirely positive or negative for same-sex individuals. Mid-life individuals’ unique social and historical context influence their experiences of marriage, as mid-life individuals have witnessed the rise and feasibility of marriage equality, formed relationships outside of the bounds of marriage, and been in committed relationships long before they married. Using the framework of ambivalence, our findings provide three main contributions to the literature. First, we show that marital ambivalence is a common experience in our sample. Second, we detail how marital ambivalence is indicative of the age, life course stage, and length of relationship for mid-life lesbian and gay individuals. Third, we explore ambivalence at the level of the relationship, not just as an individual experience. This study provides new insight into how sexuality shapes both intimate relationship dynamics as well as the effect of same-sex marriage on LGBT communities and identities.

Keywords

marriage; gay and lesbian couples; mid-life; Massachusetts; marriage equality; same-sex marriage; United States of America; ambivalence

Introduction

With the legalization of same-sex marriage in 2015 same-sex couples now have the opportunity to address the question, “Should we get married?” The answer to this question is complex—especially for couples who have been in committed unions for years outside of marriage. Massachusetts was the first state to legalize same-sex unions in the United States in 2004, 11 years prior to federal marriage equality, and thus marriages in Massachusetts provides the first insight into the experiences of marriage for same-sex couples. As both an institution and a relationship status, marriage signifies community, loyalty, morality, properties and inheritance, as well as social status (Yamin, 2012). Due to the plurality of

public and private meanings associated with marriage, the ability to marry has immense effects on individuals in same-sex relationships.

This study explores the marital decision-making processes and experiences of lesbian and gay individuals in Massachusetts. Examining decision-making processes provides a new perspective on the changing life experiences of gay and lesbian individuals, as well as insight into the potential “queer” transformations and deinstitutionalization of marriage (Cherlin, 2004; Lauer & Yodanis, 2010). Marital processes differ for the mid-life age group due to the historical denial of access to marriage (Humble, 2013). Mid-life individuals have witnessed the rise and feasibility of marriage equality, formed relationships outside of the bounds of marriage, and been in committed relationships long before they married. Thus, midlife married adults are the focus of the present study.

We examine marriage decisions for mid-life lesbian and gay spouses by asking two primary questions. First, how do mid-life lesbian and gay married individuals talk about their *rationales for marriage*, and what factors contribute to those decisions? Second, how do individuals and couples *frame their subsequent experiences with marriage as positive, negative, or ambivalent?*

Using dyad data from Massachusetts in 2013, we contribute to understanding the implications of marriage equality for mid-life individuals previously excluded from marriage. Interviews were conducted with 30 mid-life married couples and each member of the couple was interviewed separately (N = 60 interviews; 30 gay individuals and 30 lesbian individuals). Dyadic data provides an opportunity to examine similarities and differences in marital experiences within and amongst couples.

Background

While there has been significant debate about the potential effects of marriage equality on marriage and family formation, less work has examined the lived experience of marriage for lesbian and gay individuals (Green, 2013). Previous research focuses primarily on the positive effects of marriage on same-sex couples' intimate relationships (Ocobock, 2013; Lannutti, 2005; Porche & Purvin, 2008; Schecter, Tracy, Page & Luong, 2008; Haas & Whitton, 2015; Humble, 2013). In contrast, feminist and queer theory scholars have critiqued marriage as a patriarchal or heteronormative institution (for a review of these critiques see: Hopkins, Sorenson, & Taylor, 2013; Halberstam, 2011). The presence of positive and critical perspectives of marriage means we can expect complex experiences of marriage for same-sex individuals. Few studies examine this possibility empirically; we seek to fill that gap.

Complexity of marital experiences for same-sex couples likely includes positive and negative (i.e. ambivalent) assessments of marriage simultaneously. Through a juxtaposition of the positive assessments of marriage and queer critiques of marriage, the present study complicates previous conceptions of marriage as merely positive *or* negative for lesbian and gay individuals. Below we outline the basic literature on same-sex marriage as positive or negative, including queer critiques of marriage. We then discuss how the present study

contributes to the growing research on experiences of same-sex marriage through the framework of ambivalence.

The Positive Experiences of Marriage for Lesbian and Gay Individuals and Couples

Scholars have primarily identified marriage as a positive and life-enhancing decision for same-sex couples by citing beneficial components such as an increase in rights and benefits (Badgett, 2009; Haas & Whitton, 2015; Kimport, 2013; Richman, 2013; Riggle et al., 2006), increased security (Lannutti, 2005), improvement in familial relationships (Ramos et al, 2009; Ocobock 2013), decrease in psychological distress (Riggle, Rostosky, & Horne, 2010), expression of activism (Kimport, 2013; Taylor et al, 2009, for additional review, see Rostosky & Riggle, 2017), or expression of love (Kimport, 2013). Bennett and Gates (2004) noted parental benefits, economic benefits, and health insurance as benefits of marriage for same-sex couples. Chambers (2001) found that marriage provides multiple legal functions for lesbian and gay couples. These functions include recognizing emotional and familial attachments between spouses, providing regulations and recognitions related to parenting, and laws regulating economics between the couple and the state (Chambers, 2001).

Further, research emphasizes the centrality of rights and benefits for same-sex couples (Haas & Whitton, 2015; Badgett, 2009; Riggle et al., 2006). For example, Haas and Whitton (2015) show that the most common reason for marriage for lesbian and gay individuals was access to legal rights and benefits. Similarly, Badgett (2009) demonstrates that marriage provides direct benefits such as health insurance benefits (although only if one's spouse has health insurance), federal taxes, social security, other federal benefits, and citizenship access. Badgett (2009) also found symbolic benefits of marriage: the signaling of commitment, the promotion of the specialization of labor within families, marriage acting as a guide for financial transactions, and influence on finances within families. The many positive effects of marriage contribute to the identified importance of marriage for lesbian and gay individuals.

Negative Experiences with Marriage for Lesbian and Gay Individuals

A smaller body of work focuses on negative experiences of marriage, highlighting forms of familial exclusion (Ocobock, 2013) and misgivings about getting married (Lannutti, 2010; Porche & Purvin, 2008; Rolfe & Peel, 2011). In one of few papers that examines complex experiences of same-sex marriage, Ocobock (2013) found almost half of the respondents perceived negative outcomes of new or re-emerging forms of exclusion and rejection with families of origin due to marriage. Porche and Purvin's 2008 study investigated same-sex relationship longevity and couples' misgivings about marriage and found age was a factor in the prevalence of misgivings about marriage due to older participants having increased misgivings about marriage compared to younger participants. Moreover, other work examines misgivings about marriage for those who did and did not decide to marry (Porche & Purvin, 2008; Rolfe & Peel, 2011). However, a full perspective on marriage should include those who have misgivings about marriage and still marry, a perspective we provide in this article.

Queer Critiques of Marriage

While few studies empirically examine the presence of same-sex individuals and couples' negative appraisals of marriage, scholars have amassed a large number of theoretical critiques of marriage as an institution. Critiques of marriage focus on marriage as a patriarchal and heteronormative institution, delegitimizing non-marital relationships, and the linking of marriage with full citizenship (Card, 1996; Warner, 2000; O'Brien, 2007; Auchmuty, 2004). Other critiques of marriage equality include marriage marginalizing poor individuals and LGBT people of color, marriage fully assimilating LGBT individuals into 'mainstream culture,' and that same-sex marriage can be a form of control over non-heterosexual sexuality (Bernstein & Taylor, 2013). This article examines the ways negative perspectives or critiques on marriage coexist with positive perspectives for same-sex married couples through the framework of ambivalence, rather than solely negative or positive perspectives.

Ambivalence: Simultaneously Positive, Negative, and Critical Perspectives

Missing in this literature on positive, negative, and critical perspectives on marriage is research centering the ambivalent experiences of marriage for same-sex couples. Ambivalence is the simultaneous presence of both positive and negative feelings. Utilizing ambivalence in the context of marriage equality, we contribute to growing research on the complex experiences of marriage (Green, 2013; Haas & Whitton, 2015; Humble, 2013; Lannutti, 2005; Ocobock, 2013; Porche & Purvin, 2008; Reczek, 2016; Schecter, Tracy, Page & Luong, 2008). Following Humble (2013) and Rolfe & Peel (2011), we use ambivalence as a theoretical framework due to the focus on the likelihood of contradictory expectations, feelings and desires between and within individuals. Connidis and McMullin (2002) advance a conceptualization of ambivalence that emphasizes the relationship between individual action, agency, and social structures. The framework of ambivalence is useful for examining how changing social structures (i.e. marriage equality) influence ambivalent experiences with marriage.

We investigate lesbian and gay mid-life long-term married couples because they represent a particular transitional historical context to explore ambivalence with marriage due to the combination of mid-life stage, lengthy relationship duration, and recent passing of federal marriage equality (Humble, 2013). Many mid-life individuals did not view same-sex marriage as an achievable goal in their lifetime, so they constructed committed relationships outside of the institution. The present study focuses explicitly on those who chose to marry legally; this allows for the examination of the variation in experiences of marriage for those who navigate a heteronormative institution from a non-heterosexual perspective. In doing so, we provide new perspectives on same-sex married couples' orientation toward marriage, and how their perspectives on marriage are complex and multifaceted.

Data and Methods

The present study examines the rationales for marriage of 60 mid-life married individuals in 30 couples (15 gay and 15 lesbian couples). Researchers collected the data for this study in 2013, 9 years after marriage equality passed in Massachusetts. The time elapsed between

marriage and interviews provides space for participants to consider their rationales for marriage, as well as the effects of marriage retrospectively. Data from both spouses, interviewed separately, provides an opportunity to gather individual perspectives while also exploring coupled experiences (Reimann, 2001). Dyadic data enables comparisons of the decision-making process for marriage across and within couples, which are both key to our studies aims.

Data Collection

All research participants lived in Massachusetts, were legally married and in committed long-term relationships. The research team recruited couples from the Massachusetts Registry of Vital Statistics by gathering the names, birth dates, addresses, occupations, and dates of marriage for all same-sex couples married in Massachusetts from 2004 to 2012 and interviewed a subset of these couples based on who responded to the call for research. The research team recruited remaining couples through friends and family of participants, as well as local community centers and public spaces.

The research team conducted interviews for a larger project on marriage, health, and dyadic health behaviors called the Massachusetts Health and Relationship Project. We focus on the interviews of gay and lesbian participants in this research. The interviews reached saturation on each of the themes in the interview guide (Relationship History, Routine and Serious Illness or Injury, Partner Health Problems, Support and Stress, Mental Health, Relationships and Health Behavior, and Sexuality). This study focuses on the section on relationship history, including questions such as “How long did you date?”, “What led you to marry?” and “How did marrying change your relationship?” as well as clarification questions.

Sample Characteristics

The sample consists of 60 respondents, with an average of 50.4 years of age at the time of data collection, and a range of 41–63 years. This age range is due to the intentional focus on mid-life couples, as age was a main requirement for participation in this study. As for relationship duration, the average number of years cohabiting was 19.9 years, with a range of 8–32 years. The average number of years married within the overall sample was 7.5 with a range of 4–9 years married (see table below for complete sample demographics).

The sample includes fifty-six individuals identified as white, three as African-American/black, and one as Hispanic. It is important to acknowledge the context in which the research team collected these interviews. According to census data, Massachusetts is 82.1% white, 8.4% black, 6.6% Asian, and 2.9% other (United States Census Bureau). While this sample is still disproportionately white, it is less so considering the demographic context of Massachusetts.

The whiteness of the sample has implications for the conclusions drawn from this analysis. The demographics could reflect the fact that non-white individuals get married at relatively lower rates than white individuals (Ocobock, 2013; Carpenter & Gates, 2008). Alternatively, the prevalence of white participants in the sample could be due to the overall difficulty of recruiting non-white LGBTQ participants (Ocobock, 2013; Moore, 2011).

Data Analysis

We used an inductive data analysis approach by looking for themes to emerge, and then coding based on those themes. For coding, the authors follow Charmaz (2014) to develop analytic categories inductively, search for variation, with the goal of contributing to theory construction and increase understanding of the meaning of marriage. In line with typical approaches to qualitative research, we utilized a two-stage coding process. The first stage involved becoming familiar with the data by reading all interview transcripts and developing memos for each demographic category (gay and lesbian) to look for initial themes. Once the list of themes had been constructed, we began the second stage of coding, a more selective phase in which we used the most significant codes to synthesize the data (Charmaz, 2014).

Complexities of Marriage: Benefits, Critiques, and Ambivalence

The present study provides an account of the contemporary experiences of same-sex marriage by empirically examining mid-life gay and lesbian couples' views on their marriages. Findings tread new ground by demonstrating not only the rationale for both pro- and anti-marriage sentiments among married individuals, but also the common occurrence of ambivalent views of marriage for both married individuals and couples. Four main themes emerged from the data: 1) the symbolic and pragmatic benefits of marriage, 2) rejections of the power of marriage, 3) individual ambivalence with marriage, and 4) dyad ambivalence with marriage. The themes are not mutually exclusive; we draw on overlap in positive and negative experiences of marriage to build our account of ambivalence. We apply ambivalence as a lens to understand the simultaneous presence of positive and negative experiences of marriage, detailed below.

Positive Perceptions of Marriage: Symbolic and Pragmatic Benefits of Marriage

Respondents in our sample recounted two main pro-marriage themes: 1) symbolic benefits of marriage and 2) pragmatic benefits of marriage. Sixty-five percent of the respondents (n=39) referenced the symbolic components of marriage when discussing their rationales for marriage while sixty-eight percent of the respondents (n=41) discussed the pragmatic benefits when discussing their rationales for marriage. Forty-two percent (n=25) used both pragmatic and symbolic rationales.

Symbolic Benefits of Marriage.—The symbolic benefits of marriage manifested through four sub-themes: 1) the perception of others (n=30), 2) experiences of legitimacy (n=26), 3) positive views of spousal titles of “husband” or “wife” (n=15), and 4) feelings of community and belonging (n=26).

First, participants (n=30; 17 men and 13 women) discussed marriage in reference to the *perception of others*—including family members, friends, and co-workers. When discussing their perspectives on marriage Ronald (51 years of age, 27 years in relationship) answered:

[Marriage] adds a legitimacy. On a couple of levels, on the legal level...there are certain things we can do now. Also, you know friends and family, we have moved into the category of some of my older brothers who are legitimately married.

In addition to the sense of legal legitimacy marriage gave Ronald, he thought his relationship was viewed as equally legitimate compared to his (heterosexual) siblings after marriage.

Others said they did not feel marriage made a difference amongst their family or friends, but it did to a wider, general audience who did not know them well. For example, Andrew (43 years of age, 16 years in relationship) said that “our family and close friends already sort of knew we were together forever” but that having “a ring on, you are actually with that person forever, and it does not take knowing you well or knowing your relationship really well to get that.”

The ring was a way of communicating their marital status to the world, outside of those that knew the couple closely. Getting married gave these couples access to an institution, title, benefits, and relationship recognition that enabled heterosexual individuals to understand them as a couple better.

Respondents’ *sense of legitimacy* was related to the perception of others (n=26; 14 men and 12 women). For example, Aaron (48 years of age, 8 years in relationship) referenced conversations with his coupled gay friends who described him and his husband James (42 years of age) as “an institution.” One friend told them, “When I met you guys, you were married, so you guys are an institution.” Aaron reflected on that, saying:

It is just interesting that our friends said, you guys are an institution, I met you guys when you were married. So they think of us as a unit, and I do not know if that would be different if we were not married. They would still think of us as a unit? I would think so, because as I said, it does not define my relationship. My relationship is as strong with or without this piece of paper.

Aaron and James’ marriage enabled others to perceive them as a unit. Aaron doubted whether others would still perceive them as “an institution” without marriage. Having that “piece of paper” was legitimating for Aaron and James, and other participants in the study.

The *importance of naming* as a rationale for marriage was central to individual identity, the perception of others, and the recognition of the relationship. Fifteen participants (nine men and six women) emphasized the importance of titles of “wife” or “husband.” David (57 years of age, 25 years in relationship) reflects this, saying, “The only difference was that we started calling each other ‘husbands.’” Other respondents had more of an emotional connection to the ability to say “my husband” or “my wife.” Aaron (48 years old, 8 years in relationship) exemplifies this when he said, “There’s a certain amount of pride when I’m somewhere and I can say...he’s my husband.” Spousal titles were important for the framing of marital experiences and can help others understand their relationship and family structure (for further work on negotiation of family, parenting, and presentation to others see Sullivan, 2001).

Marriage also served as a source of *belonging and community* for respondents (n=26, 15 men and 11 women). Participants discussed belonging in the context of family, religious communities, and social movements. For Sally (54 years of age, 11 years in relationship), marriage was an experience of greater connection with her partner, and her partner’s family. “I felt more deeply connected...with Heidi, and interconnected with her family and kind of

having the force of the law behind us in certain areas of protection.” Sally’s marriage provided a greater sense of belonging within her family. The symbolic power of marriage influenced the perception of others, feelings of legitimacy, positive uses of “husband” or “wife”, meant that individuals felt more legitimate once married or that others perceived them as more legitimate due to marriage. Symbolic benefits of marriage also included positive reflections on using the terms “husband” or “wife” and increased feelings of belonging or community once married.

Pragmatic Benefits of Marriage.—Marriage was also central to participants’ lives and relationships for pragmatic reasons. Participants described the pragmatic power of marriage using four themes: legality (n=33), health-related benefits (n=16), financial benefits (n=13) and parental protections (n=12). Statements coded under “legality” focused on general rights and benefits, whereas health, financial, and parenting protections were subcategories of rights that participants emphasized when discussing their rationales for marriage.

In our first subtheme, respondents centered *legal reasons for marriage* (n=33, 14 men and 19 women). Interviewees emphasized the historical importance of rights and benefits for lesbian and gay relationships. Gerald (47 years of age, 26 years in relationship) illustrates this category when he says, “The institution of marriage itself, we’re indifferent to. It exists. It is something that if we participate in we can get something back from it. So we’ll do it.” Marriage here is important solely because of the provision of legal rights. For Gerald, marriage provided access to rights that are important for the protection of his relationship and family. This framework negates the symbolic importance of marriage, and emphasizes the pragmatic importance of marriage. Other individuals focused specifically on legal, health, financial, or parenting reasons to marry.

In the second subtheme, respondents focused on *financial benefits* (n=13, eight men and five women). When asked how getting married changed their relationship, Troy (47 years of age, 26 years in relationship) said, “It saved us \$400 a month...we own property together...and it avoids any question of state inheritance taxes.” Troy emphasizes the financial benefits the state awards to married couples and references access to those benefits as central reasons to marry. Importantly, pragmatic interests in the legal recognition of relationships resulted in increased perceptions of stability or permanence for some respondents. For example, because individuals now had more rights and legal recognition, they were able to perceive their relationships as more stable. The experiences of stability and permanence emphasize the overlap between pragmatic reasons for marriage and emotional changes within the relationship.

Third, marriage was also important for *health-related benefits*, citing narratives of previous health issues or fear of future health issues as rationales for marriage (n=16, seven men and nine women). When Mel (49 years of age, 15 years in relationship), Kathy’s spouse, shared with her mother their decision to marry, her mother replied that she did not believe in same-sex marriage. Mel responded:

That is because you do not need it...I just had surgery. Kathy had a baby...We have been in and out of hospitals. I cannot go into the hospital room to see Kathy

because we are not married...if something happens we have no rights to see each other.

By providing health-related protections, marriage fostered feelings of security and increased confidence in their ability to handle crises.

The final pragmatic benefit of marriage was *parental protections* (n=12, nine women and three men). Pamela (46 years of age, 14 years in relationship) said, "I think part of it was the kids...[marriage] was just another added protection...if that's some way to protect them or protect us, then 'let's do it' kind of thing." In adoption and birth processes, marriage was an important protection for families by providing legal protections for their family and relationship. Each of the four sub-themes—legality, financial benefits, health-related benefits, and parental protections—center the importance of rights and protections marriage provides couples.

Negative Perceptions of Marriage: The Rejection of the Institution of Marriage

While most respondents referenced pragmatic and symbolic benefits of marriage, 73% of the respondents (n=44) also made concerted efforts to reject the power of marriage within their relationships. This theme manifested in three ways: marriage as minimally important or not changing the relationship (n=34), emphasis on critiques of marriage as heteronormative or "not for me" (n=14), and rejections of titles of "wife" or "husband" (n=7).

The most common form of rejection of marriage was an emphasis on *marriage as minimally important or not changing the relationship* (n=34, 19 men and 15 women). This occurred through statements that marriage would not and did not change their relationships. Importantly, participants often followed these statements with a "but..." that acknowledges a change external to the couple due to marriage. Respondents emphasized that their relationship was just as solid before marriage, but that the only change was in the perception of others, or in the increased access and benefits since marriage. An illustration of this sub-theme was when Gerald (47 years of age, 26 years in relationship) said, "we [now] have some protections...but has it changed our actual relationship between us, no." Negating that marriage changed anything essential to the relationship enabled participants to emphasize that couples were able to create equally solid and fulfilling relationships without marriage. In this context, rationales for marriage were largely pragmatic and marriage did not change anything or changes were not within the couple dynamic but external to it.

Others experienced marriage negatively due to *critiques of the heteronormative and patriarchal history of marriage* (n=14, six men and eight women). Sharon (55 years of age, 23 years in relationship) critiqued marriage when she said "I think marriage is ownership... It's owning of children and names." Sandy (56 years of age), Sharon's partner, reflects further on the problematic history of marriage, saying, "Politically we didn't necessarily think of marriage; we saw it as more of a heterosexual institution that was based on economic reasons historically." While Sandy and Sharon held strong critiques of marriage as heteronormative, they emphasized the overriding pragmatic importance of marriage related to health benefits throughout and those pragmatic benefits were why they decided to marry.

Their critiques, however, reflect disagreements amongst the LGBTQ community regarding whether or not the right to marry is a positive development for same-sex couples.

The last form of rejection of marriage was clear *rejection of marital titles* (n=7, two men and five women). Sharon, who critiqued marriage as about economics and ownership, corrected individuals when they used the term “wife.” Kimberly (47 years of age, 21 years in relationship) is tentative about using the term wife because “wife feels very part of the male female dynamic. Like a wife and a husband go together. Two wives just does not sound right to me...wife sometimes sounds subservient to me.” For Kimberly, wife evoked heteronormativity and gender roles that made her uncomfortable. She was more comfortable with such as “partner.” These themes—*marriage as minimally important*, *critiques of marriage as heteronormative or patriarchal*, and *rejections of titles of “wife” or “husband”*—indicate the ambivalence and complexities of marriage for non-heterosexual individuals.

Ambivalence with Marriage: Individual Level

Three-fourths of respondents (n=41) utilized both positive and negative appraisals of their same-sex marriage experiences —identified as ambivalence. Individual ambivalence was measured by looking for participants that used rejection of marriage in conjunction with the pragmatic benefits of marriage (n=13) or the symbolic benefits of marriage (n=10), or all three (rejection, symbolic, and pragmatic) (n=18). Participants were labelled as “not individually ambivalent” if they only referenced pragmatic or symbolic benefits to marriage, but did not discuss rejection or critiques of marriage (n=16).

An illustration of individual ambivalence about marriage comes from Mark (44 years of age, 16 years in relationship) discussing his wedding:

We had 30 of our closest family and friends here to witness our marriage. But I mean, it felt...a little bit like a rote exercise because we'd already been, in our own eyes, married before...we got married in [country], we got a Civil Union... we just were collecting paper that said we were a couple, so...

For Mark, the legal marriage became just a collection of papers because he felt it was something they had done before due to past ceremonies and legal documents. However, when asked how their marriage felt different from their marriage in another country, Mark said:

It did feel sweeter, in a way, because we had done so much directly to contribute to the success of that happening. I mean, standing day after day, night after night, in the bowels of the Statehouse, having people scream in my face all kinds of horrible, awful things ... I mean, it was just, it was the worst, it was the worst. It was the best and the worst.

Mark framed his marriage in Massachusetts as both “a rote exercise” and “sweeter” due to the work they did to gain marriage rights. Marriage was symbolically important for Mark and Philip, but came with complicated feelings due to repetition of marriage ceremonies and the homophobia he faced in his activism for marriage equality.

Eric (51 years of age, 16 years in relationship) also expressed ambivalence with his marriage, saying:

The marriage law had been passed in '04...but it's funny ...[marriage] never had been available to us before, never something that was on our radar, something we have to do or expected to do or anything like that...I had almost a negative reaction initially to it in that I saw from different cities that we lived in, commitment ceremonies where couples had gone out and done all the traditional invitations and gift registries and all these and the big wedding ceremonies, and then they would break up within a year... We were taking our relationship seriously, and so we didn't feel we needed anything like that. What was interesting, though, is right around the time that we were coming to Massachusetts...Mitt Romney was governor and he began appearing more in the press, trying to potentially either renounce the law or put it up for the vote or...and so all of a sudden it became in our world, that should this be something...this could [be taken away]...And I guess it meant something a little bit more to Andrew, in that he then went and got rings and then did a formal proposal to me, so that we would set a date and you know, and really just make it happen.

Eric initially had a negative reaction to marriage equality because he saw people that “were not taking their relationships seriously” getting married and then divorced. While Eric did not necessarily see marriage as for him, the potential removal of marriage rights combined with his partner's desire to marry contributed to his decision to marry.

Similarly, Sharon (55 years of age, 23 years in relationship) was “officially married but we don't talk about it that way.” Sharon wished the goal of the gay and lesbian movement “really focused on healthcare for all, rights for all, not just for rich or middle class gay and lesbian folks.” However, the health benefits associated with marriage was the reason Sharon decided to marry despite critiques of marriage as patriarchal or privileged. Sandy and Sharon still frame their decision in the context of a desire for the movement to be about healthcare and rights for all, relying on queer critiques of marriage as privileged and exclusive.

Throughout the interviews, individuals expressed positive and negative reasons for and experiences with marriage simultaneously. Their grappling with marriage—particularly due to the sudden availability of marriage after they had already cultivated relationships and lives outside of marriage—is important to understand the lived experience of marriage for lesbian and gay individuals. Individual ambivalence is reflected at the level of the dyad, described below.

Ambivalence with Marriage: Dyadic Level

While individual ambivalence is central, marriage decisions—as well as the perceived effects of marriage—occur on the dyad level. One individual's ambivalence affects and interacts with their partner's ambivalence (or lack of ambivalence) in complex ways that are important to theorize. Ambivalent feelings regarding marriage for individuals created ambivalence *within couples* and influenced the framing of the marital experience for many lesbian and gay couples.

Couple ambivalence manifested in two ways, examined further below: 1) *mutual ambivalence*: both members of the couple were ambivalent about their rationales for marriage or 2) *discordant ambivalence*: one member of the couple was ambivalent and the other only referenced positive components of marriage. Each of these dyad types influenced respondent's experiences with marriage differently.

Mutual ambivalence occurred when both partners individually expressed some level of ambivalence, so each member of the couple discussed positive and negative perceptions of marriage (n=16, eight gay and eight lesbian couples). Richard (58 years of age, 10 years in relationship) reflects this typology when he reflected on his decision-making process with his husband, saying:

Initially when it passed, there was kind of like this, instantaneous, yes, let's do it. And then there was later on, a little bit of a kind of hesitation, like, are we buying into a different paradigm ...but...as they started talking about taking it away, it was kind of like, this is our right, and so we wanted to exercise that...there's something about having that public legitimacy that says we're treating this as seriously as your parents are treating their relationship.

Their initial reaction was to marry but they paused and considered whether that was a "paradigm" that they wanted to engage with. They went through a negotiation between their critiques of marriage, their desire to exercise their rights (pragmatic benefits), and the public legitimacy that comes with marriage (symbolic benefits). Getting married involved taking into account different facets of their identity, previous exclusion from marriage, and an acknowledgment of the tangible and intangible benefits of marriage.

Donna (52 years of age, 14 years in relationship) and Lisa (58 years of age), wanted to "be a part of history" but they were not "diehards [for marriage equality]...it just kind of happened." They discovered their ambivalence about marriage when it took them about "a year to feel comfortable saying 'my wife,' if not longer...I think some of it is internal homophobia." Donna and Lisa's marriage "just happened" but they struggled with the terminology associated with marriage (the word "wife") which caused them some discomfort in their transition to being married.

Discordant ambivalence occurred when one member expressed positive perspectives on marriage and one held ambivalent perspectives on marriage (n=12, six gay and six lesbian couples). A couple's discordant perspectives on marriage shaped how the couple experienced marriage. This couple type was more likely to have some level of disagreement about marriage, whereas mutually ambivalent couples went through a negotiation process more collaboratively. While not true for all couples in these typologies, disagreement was more prevalent in this category due to one member of the couple being strongly for marriage and the other being less sure, as explored in examples below.

Karen and Debbie's marital experience illustrated discordant ambivalence. Karen (50 years of age, 26 years in relationship) had strong positive rationales for marriage while her partner, Debbie (46 years of age), opposed marriage as a heteronormative and patriarchal institution.

When describing why the couple decided to marry after a conflicted decision-making process, Karen said:

It took [Debbie] a while but she does agree that it causes people to view us differently especially straight people when she tells them that we're married they have a like 'okay, I understand that' [reaction]. Which I am not saying is right or wrong but it is helpful.

The ability to portray the seriousness of the relationship to others more easily due to being married was central to couples' rationales for marriage. However, getting married was not an easy decision for Karen and Debbie to make. Their differing perspectives on marriage resulted in ambivalent feelings.

Finally, Sally (54 years of age, 11 years in relationship) and Heidi (52 years of age) discussed their discordant experience of marriage. Sally said:

We thought about it...whether it made sense for us to [marry]. It didn't seem like we should do it just because it was suddenly legal and I think having grown up with it not being available and suddenly being available, it seemed weird to do it just because... There was all the baggage of the husband and wife thing, and you know, what that would, like what, why would we be getting married other than all of the legal benefits. Why would we choose to get married? So we wrestled with it for a while and Heidi wasn't sure she wanted to... but we kept talking about it and we decided that we would for a lot of reasons, for the legal benefits, for the, the 'fuck you' to people who didn't want to see [same-sex couples] getting married.

Marriage was by no means simply positive or negative for Sally and Heidi. They had to negotiate their conceptions of marriage and what the purpose of marriage would be both individually and as a couple. Sally and Heidi's ambivalence shaped their experience of marriage and reflected similar ambivalent processes for other gay and lesbian individuals.

Discussion

The guiding aim of this research was to examine rationales for marriage among midlife gay and lesbian married people. Participants' accounts reflected larger discussions regarding the effects, benefits, and critiques of marriage. Findings revealed the importance of marriage for lesbian and gay couples both symbolically and pragmatically, alongside rejection of the power of marriage through critiques of marriage as heteronormative or patriarchal. Moreover, ambivalence was nearly ubiquitous at both the individual level (measured by the coexistence of symbolic and pragmatic importance of marriage with the rejection of marriage) and the couple level (measured by *mutual ambivalence* and *discordant ambivalence* across couples). Drawing on these findings, we highlight three vital contributions to the current literature on sexuality and the effect of same-sex marriage on LGBT communities and identities.

First, this study moves beyond simply identifying either positive or negative accounts to show that the simultaneity of both positive and negative effects of marriage or ambivalence is the most common. Three-fourths of the sample were ambivalent about their own marriage

—or held views of the benefits of marriage while simultaneously negotiating their critiques or rejections of marriage. Ambivalence manifested to different degrees and involved negotiations between different positive and negative components of marriage. This study is unique in that it included married couples—suggesting that even those selecting into marriage see a downside of being married. In this study, ambivalence at the individual level resulted in a negotiation of individual beliefs, with practical constraints, and acknowledgment of the symbolic importance of marriage. This reflects Connidis and McMullin's (2002) conceptualization of ambivalence that focuses on the relationship between individual agency, and social structures. An individual may hold vehement queer critiques of marriage, but the acknowledgment of pragmatic rights resulted in the decision to marry. Contrastingly, an individual may reject that marriage changed their relationship, but value the belonging and legitimacy that comes with being married. Thus, their perception of marriage is central to how they make meaning of the institution and experience of marriage. This ambivalence can have wide-ranging effects on marital relationships, relationships with families of origin, as well as beliefs and feelings about individuals' identities.

The high rate of ambivalence in this research is remarkable precisely because the sample was comprised solely of individuals who did decide to marry. Ambivalence within the sample may be reflective of the ambivalence within the LGBTQ community regarding marriage, as marriage equality is representative of more general concerns about the future of LGBTQ movements and culture (Bernstein & Taylor, 2013). Some individuals see same-sex marriage as markers of equality and progress, but others view it is an act of assimilation (Bernstein & Taylor, 2013). Our findings emphasize that, for some, it is both. Marriage can mean liberal rights and benefits, as well as assimilation or queer and feminist critiques of marriage simultaneously. The ambivalence framework fits well to emphasize the coexistence of these perspectives within LGBTQ individuals as well as the larger communities.

Second, our account of ambivalence with marriage is influenced by the age, life course stage, and length of relationships of gay and lesbian individuals in this study. The lesbian and gay mid-life couples in this study grew up in a particular period and formed committed relationships without the legal ability to marry through cohabitation, commitment ceremonies, and legal documents (Reczek, Elliott, & Umberson, 2009). We suggest that part of the prevalence of ambivalence among this group is due to historical context. Same-sex marriage first became a possibility in the early 1990s when the *Baehr v. Miike* case in Hawaii signaled a shift toward marriage equality as a possibility (Hull, 2006). This case and the following historical changes for marriage equality occurred during the lives of mid-life gay and lesbian individuals (such as the participants in this study) and contributed to their ambivalent experiences with marriage.

As a function of age, all of the couples in this study had reached adulthood and begun their relationships years prior to marriage equality in Massachusetts, and thus had to cultivate and consider different futures that did not include marriage. The combination of exclusion from marriage, witnessing the achievement of marriage equality within their lifetimes, and feelings of symbolic and pragmatic importance of marriage influence a potential increase in ambivalence with marriage. In line with this argument, Green (2013) discusses whether the potential for queer marital innovation is due to a specific generational factor. Because mid-

life lesbian and gay spouses create and foster relationships within a historical context of exclusion from the institution of marriage, the marital experiences of mid-life gay and lesbian individuals may represent a specific cultural moment, rather than the future of same-sex marriage (Green, 2013).Table 1

As younger lesbian and gay individuals and couples form relationships in a context where marriage equality is potentially more normative, it is possible that their experiences will be less ambivalent than those in this study. Further research could study to what extent ambivalence is prevalent in future generations, as well as how it differs by identity statuses such as other sexualities and racial identities. This article provides a comparison point for future generations of lesbian and gay couples to gauge levels of ambivalence when the historical context is different, as well as to explore further differences across racial, class, gender, and sexuality boundaries. For example, Green (2013) argues that current lesbian and gay spouses were socialized in both a heteronormative context as well as a queer context. This ‘dual socialization’ provides the context for lesbian and gay individuals who now have the right to marry to change and redefine marriage. Using a similar framework, it is possible that our study represents a ‘first generation’ of ambivalent same-sex spouses that may diminish in the future.

Third, we offer another conception of ambivalence—one that considers ambivalence as a component of relationships and existing at the *level* of the relationship—called *discordant* or *mutual ambivalence*. Framing ambivalence as a characteristic of a relationship (rather than an individual state of being) is innovative. Individual rejections or perceived benefits of marriage were reflected within the couple’s decisions to marry. Due to the shared decision-making process prior to marriage, an individual’s ambivalence (or lack of ambivalence) influenced their partner’s experiences with marriage as well as potentially minimized or bolstered their own ambivalence. We contribute to past literature by acknowledging not only that individual ambivalence exists, but also that partner’s perspectives on marriage influence each other and exacerbate or minimize their partner’s ambivalence. These couple dynamics exist within the dual context of a liberal rights discourse for marriage and queer critiques of marriage. This dual context results in couple ambivalence and thus can influence levels of conflict with spouses, and subsequently the quality of the relationship.

Conclusion

Perceptions and experiences of marriage are key to how gay and lesbian individuals navigate the newly available institution of marriage, and these processes are reflective of debates within LGBTQ communities about the desirability of marriage as a social movement goal. In this study, individuals valued marriage for its pragmatic and symbolic benefits and critiqued marriage. The prevalence of ambivalence across our sample provides insight into how marriage maintains institutional power and the many different reasons individuals continue to marry. Ambivalence at both the individual and dyad level is an innovative and central way to structure and theorize individual interactions with the institution of marriage. The framework of ambivalence complicates our conceptions of individuals as either “pro-marriage” or “anti-marriage.” Acknowledging that both perspectives coexist within

individuals and couples forwards understandings of the effects of same-sex marriage on individuals, couples, and communities.

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Table 1:

Demographic Information of Sample

Demographic Information of Sample				
	Overall Sample	Gay Participants	Lesbian Participants	
# of Respondents	60	30	30	
Age				
Average	50.4	49.7	51	
Range	41–63	41–63	41–57	
Race				
White	56	29	27	
Black	3	0	3	
Hispanic	1	1	0	
Years Cohabiting				
Average	19.9	19.4	20.3	
Range	8–32	8–32	11–32	
Years Married				
Average	7.5	7.7	7.3	
Range	4–9	6–9	4–8	