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Impacts of Marriage Legalization on the Experiences of Sexual Minority Women in Work and Community Contexts

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Abstract

The extension of marriage rights to same-sex couples in the United States provides an opportunity to examine how legalization of same-sex marriage has impacted the experiences of sexual minority women (SMW) in interactions within their extended social networks and local communities.

Interviews were conducted with 20 SMW ranging in age from 23 to 75, with varying relationship statuses, and in different regions of the U.S. Inductive thematic analysis of responses revealed both positive and negative/neutral impacts in three broad thematic areas: workplace dynamics and interpersonal interactions in the workplace, social interactions in extended social networks and local communities, and impacts on community climate and queer communities. Findings of the study underscore the importance of evaluating the impact of same-sex marriage legalization in the context of local social and political climates.

Keywords

lesbian; bisexual women; same-sex relationships; same-sex marriage; marriage equality; marriage legalization

Introduction

Same-sex marriage in the United States was legalized on a state-by-state basis until the Supreme Court decision in June 2015 [*Obergefell v Hodges* [576 U.S. ____], which extended marriage equality to all 50 states (Landers, 2015). These changes in law have led to heightened interest in the impact of marriage legalization on individual, couple, and family well-being and on changes in sexual minority experiences of stigma. Stigma is generally defined as “co-occurrence of labeling, stereotyping, separation, status loss, and discrimination in a context in which power is exercised” (Hatzenbuehler, Phelan, & Link, 2013), p. e1). Stigma directed toward sexual minorities involves social stigma regarding non-heterosexual identity, behavior, relationships or community (Herek, 2009).

Stigma occurs at multiple levels: individual (e.g., self-stigma, concealment), interpersonal (e.g., hate crimes; rejection by family member; and less overt, even unintentional, expressions of hostility or stereotyping), and structural (Hatzenbuehler & Pachankis, 2016; Hatzenbuehler et al., 2013). Structural stigma refers to societal-, institutional-, or cultural-level norms and policies that negatively affect opportunities, access, and well-being (Hatzenbuehler & Link, 2014). Supportive or stigmatizing political and social climates manifest on a continuum, from distal manifestations (such as state and national policy, regional social norms, economic and social service infrastructure) to more proximal manifestations including workplaces, schools, healthcare, schools, religious congregations, and local residential communities (Oswald, Cuthbertson, Lazarevic, & Goldberg, 2010; Oswald & Holman, 2013). Cultural-level norms often manifest in stigmatizing interpersonal interactions or microaggressions, which are “behaviors and statements, often unconscious or unintentional, that communicate hostile or derogatory messages, particularly to members of targeted social groups” (Nadal, Whitman, Davis, Erazo, & Davidoff, 2016) p. 488).

Structural stigma has been identified as an under-researched cause of health inequities, including higher risk for negative health outcomes among sexual minorities compared to heterosexuals (Hatzenbuehler et al., 2013). An example of structural sexual stigma is the denial of the right to marry, and the psychological, social, and practical benefits associated with marriage (Fingerhut, Riggle, & Rostosky, 2011; Herek, 2011). Structural stigma in the form of state-level bans against same-sex marriage, and negative messages during public debates about same-sex marriage legalization, have been associated with significantly increased psychological distress (Frost & Fingerhut, 2016; Hatzenbuehler, McLaughlin, Keyes, & Hasin, 2010; Maisel & Fingerhut, 2011; Riggle, Rostosky, & Horne, 2009; Rostosky, Riggle, Horne, Denton, & Huellemeier, 2010; Rostosky, Riggle, Horne, & Miller, 2009; Tatum, 2016) and other negative health outcomes, such as alcohol use disorders and lower self-reported well-being (Hatzenbuehler et al., 2010; Tatum, 2016) among sexual minorities. Conversely, state-level legalization and social approval of same-sex marriage are associated with positive impacts on sexual minority psychological health, including lower depression symptoms (Everett, Hatzenbuehler, & Hughes, 2016; Hatzenbuehler et al., 2010; Lannutti, 2014; Wight, LeBlanc, & Badgett, 2013), less identity concealment (Charlton, Corliss, Spiegelman, Williams, & Austin, 2016), improved physical health (Hatzenbuehler, Flores, & Gates, 2017; Hatzenbuehler et al., 2012; Kail, Acosta, & Wright, 2015), and

reduced suicide attempts among sexual minority high school students (Raifman, Moscoe, Austin, & McConnell, 2017).

Same-sex married couples residing in states in which marriage is legal have reported lower levels of identity concealment, greater acceptance of LGBTQ identity, and less vigilance and isolation (Riggle, Wickham, Rostosky, Rothblum, & Balsam, 2016). For same-sex couples, marriage legalization is often associated with a sense of relationship recognition and social inclusion, high levels of partner support, and perceptions of romantic, financial and legal security (Badgett, 2011; Fingerhut et al., 2011; Lannutti, 2011b; Manning, Brown, & Stykes, 2016; Riggle et al., 2016; Rostosky, Riggle, Rothblum, & Balsam, 2016; Shulman, Gotta, & Green, 2012). Legalization of same-sex marriage may be associated with improvements in family members' and friends' perceptions and treatment of same-sex romantic relationships (Lannutti, 2007; Riggle, Drabble, Veldhuis, Wootton, & Hughes, 2017; Rothblum, Balsam, & Solomon, 2011; Shulman et al., 2012). However, negative family messages, ambivalent responses, or "don't ask, don't tell" family norms may be amplified in the context of marriage legalization (Kennedy, Dalla, & Dreesman, 2017; Riggle et al., 2017) or a couple's decision to marry (Smart, 2007), and at least one study did not find support for the hypothesis that residing in a state with marriage legalization increased family and sexual-identity specific support (Kennedy et al., 2017).

Reductions in structural stigma, such as legalization of same-sex marriage, may influence sexual minorities' experiences of stigma and stress on multiple levels: individual, dyadic (couple-level), interpersonal (e.g., family, co-workers), and institutional (e.g., workplace, churches, schools) (Rostosky & Riggle, 2016). At the political/cultural level, changes in law recognizing the civil rights of sexual minorities appear to influence perceptions of social norms, which, in turn, may help reduce heterosexist attitudes and increase support for same-sex relationships (Flores & Barclay, 2016; Hooghe & Meeusen, 2013; Kreitzer, Hamilton, & Tolbert, 2014; Tankard & Paluck, 2017). For example, protections against discrimination in employment based on sexual or gender identity vary across states and local jurisdictions in the U.S. (ACLU, 2018; Movement Advancement Project, 2015), and are associated with reports of less discrimination, less concealment of LGBTQ identities, and better health and well-being outcomes among LGBTQ individuals (Badgett, Durso, Kastanis, & Mallory, 2013; Rostosky & Riggle, 2002).

A majority of studies on marriage legalization focus on the impact on individuals, couples and family relationships; however, few studies address the perceived impact of same-sex marriage legalization on interpersonal relationships within broader community contexts. Notable exceptions include research by Lannutti (Lannutti, 2011a, 2014, 2018a). Lannutti (2011a) conducted a qualitative study with 57 same-sex couples in which she assessed the impact of amendments prohibiting same-sex marriage on interactions with extended social network members, including work colleagues and casual friends. In that study, participants described coming out to people in their social network, receiving social support (through both sympathy and listening), experiencing solidarity (in belief or action related to valuing equal rights), and, in some cases, encountering disconfirmation (through condemnation or avoidance) (Lannutti, 2011a, 2014). In a more recent study, Lannutti (2018) examined how same-sex marriage legalization impacted relationships with social network members

(defined as family and friends) among 27 committed same-sex couples who did not marry. The unmarried couples, interviewed after same-sex marriage was legalized in all U.S. states, described two challenges in their relationships with social network members: reduced support of their relationships, and perception that they were less committed to their partners because they chose not to marry.

Most studies focusing on perceptions of same-sex marriage legalization were conducted prior to the Supreme Court decision legalizing marriage equality nationwide. Although sexual minority women (SMW) and men may differ in their perceptions of social acceptance and support (Lyons, 2015), few studies focus specifically on SMW. In those that do, even fewer include racially/ethnically diverse samples (Coulter, Kenst, & Bowen, 2014; Institute of Medicine, 2011; Trinh, Agénor, Austin, & Jackson, 2017). Furthermore, a majority of studies about the impact of same-sex marriage legalization focus on married couples, and few studies include SMW who not married. Lannutti (2014, 2018a) notes that legalization of same-sex marriage has profoundly impacted the social, cultural, and legal experiences and opportunities of sexual minorities—whether married or unmarried. Consequently, further investigation of the perceptions and experiences of SMW of different relationship statuses in the context of national legalization of same-sex marriage is warranted.

Extended social networks and local community contexts play an important role for SMW in providing social support, creating a sense of normalization and belonging, as well as buffering (or contributing to) stigma and minority stress. Although same-sex marriage is now legal in the U.S., ongoing political debates and social disagreements continue to impact the relational lives of same-sex couples and sexual minorities, including interpersonal extended social networks and in local community contexts (Lannutti, 2014, 2018a). Extended social networks include casual friends, neighbors, work colleagues, and others who are not close friends or family members (Lannutti, 2011a). Local community contexts include, for example, workplaces, schools, healthcare settings, religious congregations, and local residential communities (Oswald et al., 2010; Oswald & Holman, 2013).

The current study is part of a larger mixed methods research project designed to describe the perceived impact of same-sex marriage legalization and other political events on the health and well-being of SMW. The primary aim of the larger study was to explore the impact of marriage legalization on sexual minority women at individual, interpersonal, community, and institutional levels. Results from the larger study, including the impact of same-sex marriage legalization on interpersonal relationships with family members, are reported elsewhere {Riggle, 2017 #1646}. The current study draws on data from qualitative interviews with 20 SMW from 15 different states in the U.S. who were single, dating, in committed relationships, or married, to explore the following research question: How do sexual minority women describe the impact of same-sex marriage legalization on their experiences and interactions with their extended social networks and local communities?

Methods

Participants

Participants completed an online screening survey and interviewees were chosen purposively based on demographics to include a diverse range of experiences (e.g. age, race/ethnicity, educational level, relationship status, and geographic region). Interviews were conducted with 8 participants in June to July 2016, and 12 participants in December 2016 to April 2017.

Table 1 summarizes demographic characteristics of the sample. Participants ranged in age from 23 to 75 (eight were 23–35; four were 35–44; four were 45–54; and four were age 55 or older). They resided in 15 states and included women who were single or dating ($n = 7$); in committed relationships without legal recognition ($n = 5$); or married ($n = 8$). Thirteen participants identified as lesbian and seven identified as bisexual and/or queer. The racial and ethnic identity of participants included Asian-American/Native Hawaiian ($n = 3$), African-American ($n = 5$), Latina/x ($n = 3$), and White ($n = 8$), and one participant identified as White and African-American. Participants' educational backgrounds were as follows: seven post-graduate; eight with a 4-year college degree; one with an Associate of Arts degree; and three had completed high school or attended some college.

Procedures

Participants were recruited through an announcement on LGBTQ listservs, Facebook groups (unpaid listings), and other social media. The announcement provided a link to online screening questions for lesbian, bisexual, and queer-identified women, ages 18 and older, who were interested in sharing their thoughts and life experiences regarding recent changes in marriage laws and other policies. For the first round of interviews, nine volunteers were selected from 67 respondents who completed the screening questions; these volunteers disproportionately self-identified as White, married, and with postgraduate degrees. We obtained the remainder of the sample from a separate study that recruited participants to participate in an on-line survey. These participants were recruited by announcing a link to a survey on LGBTQ websites (such as AfterEllen and Autostraddle). At the end of the survey we invited participants to indicate whether they would be interested in volunteering for other studies (see Veldhuis et al. 2018 for more details on the survey methodology). We used purposive sampling to select 11 participants from the 481 individuals who indicated interest in being contacted for other studies. Women were selected participants to ensure inclusion of those under-represented in the initial set of interviews, including women of color, women with lower educational attainment, and unmarried women.

Four of the research team members (Wootton, Riggle, Drabble and Bitcon) conducted the interviews. Participants were emailed a consent form and the interviewer read the consent to participants before proceeding with interview. Participants were given a \$30 Amazon e-gift card to thank them for their time. All study procedures were approved by the San José State University (SJSU) Institutional Review Board.

Telephone interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview guide. The interview covered a range of topics, including the perceived impact of marriage legalization

on dating/romantic relationships, coming out, relationships with family, interactions and experiences in work and community contexts, as well as perceptions about the impact of other policies and political events. For example, participants were invited to describe their interactions and experiences within work contexts (e.g., whether people at work knew about the participant's identity [or relationships if partnered] and general reactions) and their perceptions of how marriage legalization impacted interactions at work (e.g., whether and how people at work talked about changes in the law, impact on feeling more or less "safe" or supported at work, and impact of interactions at work). Parallel questions were asked about participants' social circles and community groups, with prompts regarding interactions with neighbors, church, schools, community groups, and friends. Responses to other interview questions were included in the current analysis only if they pertained directly to experiences with extended social networks or experiences in institutional (e.g., work, religion) and community contexts.

Analysis

Interviews were transcribed verbatim by a paid, off-site transcription service. An inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was conducted using the narrative responses to identify patterned responses or meanings associated with the research question. Four of the research team members who conducted the interviews conducted the primary analysis. First, two coders (author 1 and 5) divided and independently coded the first nine interviews by reading each participant's responses and summarizing meaning in segments of data and writing memos about potential patterns and themes. More than 57 codes were collated and sorted into 10 potential thematic categories. Provisional codes and emerging categories were reviewed between the primary coding team (authors 1, 2, 3, and 5), revised for consistency, and condensed further to create reach consensus on a provisional list of candidate themes and subthemes. Differences in categories and provisional themes were discussed between coders, with review by the fourth author, until agreement was achieved. The coders then re-read and re-coded the responses to ensure consistency in emerging categories and to verify whether meanings were adequately represented by the themes. The initial coding scheme, including initial themes and subthemes, were applied to the next 12 interviews, and coders continued to review and refine themes and sub-themes in relation to the full data set. As described by Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 91), this iterative process allowed the researchers to 1) identify whether the themes "work" in relation to the full data set, and 2) refine or add themes/sub-themes themes that may have been missed in earlier stages of coding in order to ensure all data relevant to the research questions could be organized in a final set of themes and sub-themes. Themes were finalized and consensus was reached on their definitions and description for presentation in the results.

Researchers used three strategies to ensure trustworthiness of data analysis in qualitative research (Cresswell & Poth, 2018). First, authors (1–5) met regularly throughout the analysis to review similarities and differences in interpretation and reflect on ways as individual biases, values, and experiences that may have influenced analysis. Second, the authors employed use of an audit trail to log changes to the coding scheme, definitions of codes, and to review analytic decisions. To conduct a final check on the stability and trustworthiness of

the data, the findings were examined and verified by the last author who had not previously participated in data analytic activities.

Results

Sexual minority women described the impact of same-sex marriage legalization across three broad thematic areas: impact on interpersonal interactions in the workplace; impacts on social interactions in extended social networks; and impacts on community contexts and queer communities. In each of the categories, sub-themes emerged that reflected perceptions of marriage legalization as as positive or as negative/neutral. Primary themes and sub-themes in each category are summarized in Table 2.

Perceived Impact on Interactions in the Workplace

Participants described two areas of positive impact of national marriage legalization on their work lives: feeling safer to come out at work and experiencing more tolerance and more frequent, positive conversations with co-workers about dating and romantic relationships. Participants also identified workplace concerns that were either unchanged or amplified by marriage legalization: experiencing continued or increased LGBTQ-related challenges at work and lack of workplace protections for LGBTQ people.

Feeling safer to be visible and “out” at work.—Several participants reported feeling safer and more confident about disclosing their sexual orientation at work following national same-sex marriage legalization. Married participants, in particular, noted feeling more comfortable coming out since marriage equality. For example, a recently married woman explained how marriage legalization changed her assessment of safety noting, “It depends on the calculation for risks in a situation, but yeah, I mean in terms of a work environment, I think I’ve become a lot more comfortable, or mentioning my wife’s name, or using pronouns, whereas prior to the decision I didn’t.” (Participant 8). Another participant who noted, “I was always very closeted at work; I just never felt comfortable” went on to explain how marriage legalization impacted her willingness to be visible about her same-sex marriage:

And then it [marriage legalization] was just there... [Same-sex marriage] was just very normal, this is what people do. So I appreciated [marriage legalization] on that level. I find in my day-to-day interaction, when people ask if I’m married, I say, “Yes.” Like at work -- I find that people talk very openly about their spouses and I find, for me, I was always little closeted, or very closeted, whereas now it’s just like I feel emboldened to just be out.

(Participant 15).

Some unmarried participants also reported being less afraid to talk about their identity with co-workers and those encountered at their place of employment. One participant who is employed by a school stated, “It’s more of that same feeling of it feels a little bit safer to come out. Just the idea that it’s a little bit less out there in terms of being deviant or weird or crazy” (Participant 5). Describing the way that same-sex marriage legalization influenced her expectations for acceptance, another participant offered,

I feel like talking about my sexuality and my gender expression is something that should generally be accepted by people. That I should not feel afraid to be able to talk about it at work and stuff because I mean, we have marriage equality and that's something that naturally needs to be accepted.

(Participant 1)

Experiencing more tolerance and positive conversations at work.—Some participants described their co-workers as being more likely to express their support of LGBTQ people. For example, one participant reported changes in workplace communication norms, “I think there has also been a shift towards, at least, tolerance being the norm in a workplace.... I think now that [same-sex marriage] is legally recognized, there's some understanding that you can't be a jerk” (Participant 8). One woman in a committed relationship stated of her co-workers,

I do have people ask me a little more about [my partner]... I've actually had the head of the practice address as her as my wife, once or twice. I'm like, “Thank you for mentioning it like that. We're not actually married, but we would be if we could financially do it right now, but we're not.” That was nice to have been addressed in that way, even though we can't yet.

(Participant 4)

Participants frequently described positive interactions that were directly related to the 2015 Supreme court decision, which affirmed or amplified their perception of support in their work environments. Several participants were particularly moved by interactions with supportive co-workers during or immediately after the decision. For example, Participant 12 described finding out about the Supreme Court decision at work, where a co-worker hugged her and said, “Dude, you're going to be able to get married now!” and her manager called from out of the country to congratulate her. She contrasted the enthusiastic response of co-workers to the absence of response from her family, noting, “I didn't hear any, ‘Hey, congratulations, Hey, when's the wedding?’” from family.

Facing continued LGBTQ-related challenges at work.—While many participants reported positive impacts of same-sex marriage legalization on interpersonal interactions in the workplace, several described no impact, or continuing concerns about, and experiences of, stigma in the workplace. Continued LGBTQ-related challenges at work included maintaining or increasing vigilance regarding potential stigmatizing reactions from co-workers, or continuing to feel unsafe about visibility despite marriage equality.

Several individuals expressed that they continue to be strategic about assessing potential heterosexism or concealing their identity at work in relation to co-workers who they perceived as opposing same-sex marriage implicitly or explicitly. For example, one participant (8) explained that marriage legalization made her feel both more and less secure at work, primarily in relation to her ability to assess co-worker hostility. “I think that it's easier to read people, to know whether they'll be respecting or not, because people are homophobic then. They either come out and say it if they're really homophobic, or they are silent and tolerate.” She goes on to explain that the “marriage decision really has polarized

from opinion to give people some really ‘charming’, crystallized talking points for practice,” such as co-workers at her last place of work who changed and became “more reactive about it....I would not say they were ever pro same-sex marriage, but they were not quite a vocally opposed and nasty as I see them get on Facebook now.” Similarly, another participant explained,

It’s like if I’m disclosing to someone who I predict will be neutral to positive towards coming out, I’m more likely to tell them and less likely to feel anxious or have any concern about it. For people I suspect would be opposed to [marriage legalization], I’m probably less likely to tell them because I know people who are opposed to it are upset about the ruling and a lot of those people feel kind of under siege and like they’re losing their America and that all these ideas are being forced on them.

(Participant 3)

Other participants noted that marriage legalization did not impact the overall climate in their work contexts and reported concealing their identities and moderating discussions because of persistent fears of homophobia from co-workers and clients/customers. For example, one woman commented, “Corporate America is still not a place where I feel safe discussing gender, gender equality, gender politics, marriage equality - anything queer.” (Participant 9). Participant 3, who works in a state psychiatric hospital described being comfortable in being open with other clinicians but reported seeing and hearing homophobic behaviors and remarks from other staff and stated that “With the broader work population, I am more reserved about it [sexual identity]; there’s kind of a selection process there...I’m deliberate in who I disclose that to.” A government employee who works directly with the public described, “I don’t think it [my sexual identity] would be an issue with my boss, but I would be worried about the people that we help..... I would be concerned that the more conservative [people] of my town doing something about it, especially working for the government” (Participant 1). She concluded, “I think that my identity and my gender identity just has to be something that I keep to myself within that sector.”

Having concerns about lack of legal protections against workplace

discrimination.—Many participants commented that the absence of consistent laws or policies that protect sexual and gender minorities against employment discrimination was made more obvious by national marriage equality. Some pointed out lack of employment protections were particularly ominous in the context of marriage legalization, as they could negatively impact LGBTQ people entering same-sex marriages. For example, one participant, from a state with discrimination protections in place noted, “The people in—I don’t know how many states it is, but there are a number of states—can still be fired based on, like, their sexual orientation. That I think is ridiculous” (Participant 18). Another participant described the employment risks faced by many same-sex couples who were married: “We saw that in couples who got married and came home and put their spouses picture on their desk and they were fired, because that was still legal—there is no job protection” (Participant 20).

Perceived Impact on Interactions in Extended Social Networks and Local Community

Many participants perceived a shift in norms in the local social climate since marriage equality and participants often noted they began having more frequent and positive conversations with their extended social networks about LGBTQ issues. At the same time, many reported that marriage opponents became more outspoken about LGBTQ issues within their social circles or that they experienced experiencing continued discrimination and stigma despite policy shifts.

Perceiving a positive shift in norms for social interactions.—Participants frequently reflected on the associations between marriage legalization and the social norms that guide interpersonal interactions. For example, Participant 1 explained that marriage legalization influences daily interactions, “because whether or not any particular person is against something like that [same-sex marriage], it doesn’t matter, this is the law, you have to become tolerant, you have to become accepting.” She concludes, “I think having something as powerful as our federal government recognizing it [marriage legalization] as, ‘this is our law - this is what our nation stands for and what we are going to expect to see,’ is progress” (Participant 1). Other participants echoed the observation that heterosexist views were no longer aligned with current laws. This resulted in a sense that the onus for dealing with stigma was shifting away from sexual minorities to those who hold heterosexist views and empowered participants to be more vocal in defending their identities and relationships in everyday interactions. For example, one participant noted, “Because I had that backup [of same-sex marriage legalization], I could say, ‘Well, I’m legally married, you know, if you don’t approve, that’s basically your problem’” (Participant 11). Similarly, another respondent reported that the same-sex marriage decision allowed her to be authentic and demand respect in her interactions with others, describing her stance as follows: ‘You know what? No, I’m not continuing to lie, or to prevaricate, or to hide the truth, because this is who I am. This is my marriage. This is my relationship. It is legally sanctioned. You can learn.’” (Participant 8).

Noticing an increase in positive conversations about LGBTQ issues.—A few participants described positive conversations and interactions related to marriage legalization as helping to transform acquaintances into friendships, such as one participant who observed: “I think it [marriage legalization] has made it easier to open up to certain individuals and make way for ongoing relationships that become friendships, I’m thinking of neighbors in particular” (Participant 3). In addition, some participants pointed out that same-sex marriage legalization heightened awareness and support among people in their communities and social networks. For example, one participant explained there was “jubilation” among people “who support us, and our co-workers and everything.” The same participant pointed out that discussions about same-sex marriage increased awareness among people who were generally supportive, but who had not yet fully grasped the significance of the Supreme Court decision. She observed,

It was interesting because we got reactions from some people who were like, “Oh, this is a big deal for you, didn’t you have marriage already?” There is such a misunderstanding among many people in the community that-- I mean we got it

quite frequently, the comment of, “Oh, I thought you had it [marriage legalization] already, you didn’t have it all over the place?”

(Participant 13)

Noticing an increase in expressions of “hateful thoughts and opinions.”—

Many participants reported noticing marriage opponents in their lives became more outspoken about LGBTQ issues. For one participant observed, “even though at a federal level it [marriage legalization] might be OK, there’s always challenges that you can encounter in your own neighborhood,” adding “it’s given people a license to be more vocal with their hateful thoughts and their opinions about what LGBTQ people are like” (Participant 2). Some participants were specific in describing increased hostile comments in interactions with people in local communities, partly attributed to backlash against marriage legalization, such as Participant 13 who perceived an increase in negative interactions at a local Catholic primary school where her daughter was enrolled after “three decent years there.” She reflected, “I think what we’ve learned is the school is more predominantly conservative, so it [marriage legalization] was more a rallying for those folks to be more upset about the way the country was moving.”

Some participants noted that although legalization of same-sex marriage made them feel safer and more open, they still lived in fear due to reactions from people in their local communities. This was typified by one woman, who stated, “I’d say that the marriage laws definitely allowed me to be a little bit more open a little bit this year, but I think there is still that fear in there, that hesitation” (Participant 8). Other participants shared they did not feel safe in their local neighborhoods: “I don’t feel safe out there. I really don’t. Even in my own, my own area, you know, where I should feel comfortable, I still kind of don’t” (Participant 12). A few participants in relationships noted that marriage legalization increased the likelihood that disapproving people in the local community will recognize them as a couple. For example, Participant 11, illustrated this dynamic in the following story:

So I think when they see us together, they sort of put two and two together. And we were out shopping recently and I got what I am almost positive was a disapproving look from this one guy that sort of looked at us long enough to make me a little bit uncomfortable. So I do think that one of the downsides, probably, to be more visible just in general cultural now is that people that might not have suspected we were a couple before now do and it’s-- not that that’s necessarily a bad thing in most cases, but for those people that are disapproving, that do have a problem with it, or, you know, worst case scenario, might want to do harm, we’re a little more obvious now in that sense.

Experiencing continued discrimination and stigma despite marriage

legalization.—Some participants reported experiences of discrimination and unequal treatment after the legal change took effect. For example, one woman discussed her experience of discrimination while seeking changes in her and her partner’s legal documents after getting married. She stated, “We had this whole conversation about whether they would accept my same-sex marriage license. I’m like, ‘The federal government has recognized that my name has changed. Really you’re going to disagree with the IRS?’” (Participant 8). An

African-American participant reflected on continued discrimination more broadly, pointing out that changes in law do not necessarily impact the attitudes and behaviors of people in local communities: “As with the Civil Rights, changing the law doesn’t necessarily truly shift the cultural landscape and there are still local policies and fights to be had in terms of really moving forward.” She pointed out that despite Civil Rights Acts that mandated “the end of the segregated waiting rooms and buses, [these laws] did not make it end in the old Confederacy in the South.” She described marriage legalization “a good place to start” adding, “you’ve changed the law [marriage legalization] but you haven’t changed hearts and minds, or made people see your humanity based on that law” (Participant 20).

Other participants emphasized how the change in laws did not lead to changes in her interactions with people in local communities that were meaningful to them, such as religious communities. This dynamic was illustrated by one participant who described attempting to use the change in marriage legalization as an opportunity to promote greater acceptance among leaders in her conservative Christian religious community:

I’d been in it [the religious community] long enough to know what they accept and what they don’t accept. And so, now I’m just trying to let them know how I feel about it [lesbian identity] and trying to see if there’s some kind of way we can make it so it works for me and works for them as well. But, so far, I’m losing

(Participant 19).

Similarly, another participant described rejection from her Muslim community during a state-level marriage legalization campaign and after her subsequent choice to marry her same-sex partner in 2014 (just prior to national legalization). She explains, “I was in a pretty conservative Muslim community at the time, definitely not pro-marriage equality -- actually anti -- like they were collecting signatures...to defeat the proposal.” After marriage legalization passed in her state she described feeling “completely joyful” and “vindicated.” Legal marriage made her sexual identity visible in her community and “all hell broke loose.” “I don’t think I quite anticipated the level of rejection from the [religious] community or people, like, close acquaintances. She ultimately distanced herself from the religious community, noting “I no longer felt safe --not, like, physically safe, but I no longer felt emotionally or, you know, psychologically, spiritually safe in that community” (Participant 15).

Perceived Impact on Community Climate and Queer Communities

Participants described positive impacts of marriage legalization on the local community climate and on LGBTQ communities in two ways: 1) feeling greater social acceptance and feeling “normalized,” and 2) having a sense of equality and expectation of equal treatment. Although these themes emerged for participants across relationship status and age, differences in the narratives of participants emerged in each of these themes. Older participants (in their 40’s and older) often provided long and detailed life-course narratives to explain the impact of marriage legalization as a symbol of greater acceptance and normalization. Detailed descriptions of being treated as “equal” to heterosexual couples emerged as particularly salient to married participants. At the same time, many participants expressed concern that marriage legalization may have limited, or even negative, impacts on

LGBTQ communities in two areas: 1) concerns about marriage as an institution and assimilation into heteronormative society, and 2) concerns about the mainstream LGBTQ movement's focus on marriage over other issues impacting the community.

Experiencing social acceptance and feeling “normalized.”—Many participants reported feeling more normalized in their identity as sexual minority individuals after marriage was legalized nationally, linking this change to their increased feelings of social acceptance. For example, one participant described the psychological effects of this change: “It just, for me it’s just very refreshing. Like it’s almost like this, marriage equality, helped normalize my own queerness” (Participant 15). Another stated that the change in marriage law and perceived increase in LGBTQ normalization has “given me better self-esteem” (Participant 11). Another participant conveyed her sense of feeling more “legitimate” in her public presentation in broader community contexts and social media:

I think it’s that idea that, maybe it’s just about me, maybe it’s about my confidence, having the legal backing to support the validity of my sexual orientation. I’m a lot more outspoken about it [sexual orientation] on social media and within my life. It feels more legitimized, so I don’t have to play the game of staying in the closet or hiding, or having this don’t ask, don’t tell because it makes other people uncomfortable.

(Participant 5)

Several participants, particularly those in their 40’s or older, described the impact of marriage legalization from a life-course perspective. For example, these participants commented that they never thought marriage legalization would occur in their lifetime, that marriage legalization was “a long time coming” (Participant 16) and that marriage would never be a choice for them. Participant 14 (age 59) explained:

Well... I mean it [marriage legalization] was life-altering for me. I grew up that being gay was something that you just didn’t tell anybody. In fact for most of my life I just thought I was an anomaly. So marriage was never something that was on my radar, it was just never something I thought was for me... And so to have the Supreme Court of the United States come out and say, “These people can get married. There is nothing wrong, they should not be-- they should not have rights withheld from them.” It just-- the validation was, and through the whole community, there was just such happiness and freedom. And you feel like you can live your life without having this constant thing that distracts you. And not just marriage, but being gay.

Having a sense of equality and expectation of equal treatment.—Participants who were dating or in romantic relationships with other women often reported feeling their relationships were perceived as more valid or more “equivalent” to heterosexual romantic relationships by extended social networks and in local community contexts. For example, one woman described the way shifts in others’ views of her relationship affected her: “I do think there’s just something very empowering or validating in that my relationship is not seen as other” (Participant 15). Another single participant elaborated on how marriage

legalization helped frame her dating experiences as equivalent to heterosexual acquaintances and co-workers:

Now I feel much more confident and much more able to say, “yeah, I’m dating and I’m looking to [a] long-term goal [to] get married.” They know what that means. I don’t feel the anxiety that causes me to then go on this big tangent about what that means and why that’s okay and why it’s not that different from how they’re dating. It just feels a lot more concise, and I feel a lot more confident in being able to just say that and own that.

(Participant 5)

Although both single and married participants described feeling a greater sense of equality, married participants often elaborated on specific ways same-sex marriage legalization impacted their expectation of equal treatment and their sense of safety. One participant tied marriage legalization to equalizing her social status: “It makes me feel like I’m finally on an equal footing with other people in society. Because really and truly, you know, we weren’t before. We were essentially treated as second class citizens” (Participant 11). Some participants stressed a sense of relief related to safety. For example, one participant (13), who was married in her state prior to the 2015 decision and who traveled frequently for work, was previously concerned about “piecemeal state policies... if something were to happen... or if someone was injured.” She discussed the impact of having consistency in national policy on her and her wife’s sense of safety:

I think that it enabled us to really feel like we’re legally married no matter where we’re traveling to. We’re everywhere, we’re wives, we’re legally protected... We may have to carry the marriage certificate, we may have to push people who don’t really accept it or know about it but we’ve got the law on our side, so we’re safer.

Feeling concerned about assimilation and reinforcing heterosexual norms.—

Some participants reported concerns about whether the focus on gaining national marriage legalization would further assimilation of LGBTQ communities into mainstream heteronormative society and undermine political critiques of marriage as an institution. For example, one woman stated,

“I think that marriage is an antiquated, possession-based sort of thing, where women were not treated as humans. So historically, I don’t think marriage is an awesome thing in itself... I wonder sometimes if we’re being homogenized into, if it’s a bad thing that we’re being kind of homogenized into the larger, or majority, community.”

(Participant 7)

Although the majority of participants described positive impacts of same-sex marriage legalization on their personal lives, many participants concurrently reported experiencing personal and political ambivalence or disapproval of the institution of marriage, which is typified by the following quote:

“I’m appreciative and I’m happy that we have this legal recognition across the country, but at the same time, kind of politically and in many other ways, I wish

that we didn't have to be a part of something that was meant for so long to keep us out.”

(Participant 6)

Additionally, a few of the participants who were married reported feeling conflicted about the act of getting married and what it meant about them as LGBTQ people: “I feel like now I've joined something that I for so long have had a problem with or this institution that I have spoken so much in opposition to” (Participant 6).

Expressing concerns about social movement priorities.—Participants also discussed concerns about the LGBTQ movement's strategic decision to focus on legalizing marriage as a movement priority. For example, a few participants pointed out ways the focus and framing of marriage equality advocacy rendered people of color invisible or minimized the contributions of queer people of color in social change. For example, Participant 20 talked about how the framing of marriage equality emphasized images of young, white gay and lesbian couples as the “poster child” of the movement, comparing this to both the “invisibility of queer folks in civil rights organizing” and invisibility of people of color in earlier battles around “Don't Ask, Don't Tell.” For example, she commented on a similar dynamic where “a black gay drag queen had been locked in a battle with the military because they wanted to discharge him when they found out he was gay.” She noted, “there was no place for him in that push around gays in the military because he was not a poster child.” She called for “an integrated approach of seeking justice...because there has to be room for all of us on the bus,” and also stated, “we as human beings don't tend to subdivide; I refuse to make a choice between my skin, my ovaries, my wallet or the love of my wife.”

Many participants commented that marriage legalization was “a good start,” but that it was not enough. Some participants elaborated on the need for other protections against discrimination and other areas of concern, including concerns that intersect with race, gender presentation, and other identities. For example, Participant 2 (29-year-old, African American queer-identified), commented “I feel like if there were laws that were anti-discriminatory and anti-harassment...it would help change the climate of things, but that's not what we have. Participant 2 went on to say “also the trans women of color that are being murdered, that makes me feel more scared for myself, even though I'm not trans, it's sort of in my pool, so I have to be careful.”

It was notable that many participants, particularly participants who were interviewed after the 2016 presidential election expressed concern about community climate and emerging policies designed to impede sexual or gender minority rights. A few participants expressed the concern that “we won't be able to get married; that he [the president] will block that and because of his orders and that's it for us” (Participant 12). One participant even moved up her wedding date because “they can't take it away once we've done it” (Participant 16). Similarly, Participant 9 commented on the negative impact of the election on the local social climate by explaining “we've seen it on the national news and here a little bit on the local level as well” that the election outcome has empowered hostile people “to be louder.” She elaborated, with examples:

We had a couple incidents here locally of yahoos in pickup trucks, driving through what had been historically gay neighborhoods, you know, yelling “Trump won” or “fuck you, Trump won” or whatever. Once or twice, and they were reported. Duly reported, but those were the ones that we know about. I don’t know how many things have happened that we don’t know about.

Discussion

The current study, conducted after the 2015 Supreme Court decision extended marriage legalization to all states, examined the perceived impact of legalization of same-sex marriage on SMW’s interactions within their extended social networks and local communities. Inductive analysis of responses revealed impacts in three broad thematic areas: workplace dynamics and interpersonal interactions in the workplace, social interactions in extended social networks and local communities, and perceived impact on local community climates and LGBTQ communities. In each of the categories, sub-themes emerged that reflected positive or negative/neutral perspectives about the impact of same-sex marriage legalization on stigma-related concerns and experiences.

Although some findings were consistent with prior research focused on state-level same-sex marriage legalization, our study revealed new themes describing the impact on SMW. For example, one prominent theme involved descriptions of changes in social norms shifting the discomfort in stigmatizing social interactions from those who identify as sexual minorities to those who hold negative views of sexual minorities and same-sex relationships. Since the current study was conducted after the 2015 Supreme Court decision extended legalization of same-sex marriage across all states, it is possible that these emerging themes reflect shifts in social norms about sexual minorities and same-sex relationships.

It was notable that participants across discrete relationship statuses generally described similar feelings of improved social acceptance and an increased sense of being treated as equal to heterosexuals. These findings are consistent with Riggle and colleagues recent study (2017), in which participants described improved social support and acceptance (of minority sexual identity in general, and of relationships among respondents who were married or part of a couple) as a result of same-sex marriage legalization. The theme of being treated equally was particularly salient to married participants in the current study who expressed appreciation, relief, and an increased sense of safety in having the ability to assert and defend their rights both in local communities and when traveling across state lines. It was also notable in the current study that some participants, particularly participants over 40, described marriage legalization as a significant milestone in feeling “normal” and accepted as part of their overall life narrative. Future research is needed to explore the importance of marriage legalization as a phenomena that may be experienced differently by age-cohorts and that should be viewed from a life-course perspective.

One of the overarching themes was conflicting perceptions about whether same-sex marriage legalization would or would not improve stigmatizing interactions and experiences in workplace and community contexts. Many participants described feeling hopeful that marriage legalization was a sign of increased LGBTQ acceptance and would continue to

advance acceptance. At the same time, many noted that marriage legalization did not necessarily improve daily interactions or decrease experiences of microaggressions, such as participants who described hearing negative comments at work or feeling rejection from members of their local neighborhood, religious, or school communities. Sexual minorities are often exposed to microaggressions in interpersonal interactions, including microassaults (verbal or nonverbal abuse or behavior), microinsults (demeaning statements), and microinvalidations (messages that negate perceptions and experiences) (Nadal et al., 2016). Microaggressions that have been identified as particularly salient to LGBTQ couples and families involve others questioning the legitimacy of their family relationships (e.g., referring to partners as “friends,” denying that same-sex marriages are “real,” and minimizing the importance of chosen family), framing LGBT families as conflicting with family values, and pathologizing families in relation to lack of traditional gender roles (Haines, Boyer, Giovanazzi, & Galupo, 2017). Previous research has found that experiencing microaggressions in the social environment appears to have a negative impact on sexual minorities, even when controlling for supportive policies such as marriage legalization (Woodford, Pacey, Kulick, & Hong, 2015). Results of the current study similarly indicate that many participants continued to experience microaggressions post-marriage legalization. This is concerning, particularly given research documenting the negative impact of sexual stigma on health (Hatzenbuehler, Duncan, & Johnson, 2015; Hatzenbuehler, Keyes, & McLaughlin, 2011; Holman & Oswald, 2016).

Data for the current study were collected prior to (8 participants) and after (12 participants) the 2016 presidential election. The changing political and social climate appeared to impact respondent descriptions of comfort and safety in their extended social networks and communities, as well as conversations and other interactions perceived to be explicitly anti-LGBTQ. Many participants pointed to national political events and policy debates as factors that fostered continuing or increasing levels of stigma in their interactions at work or in their community, and these concerns were amplified in the narratives of post-election interviewees. Increased concerns about stigmatizing discourse and emboldening of hostility related to sexual minority status, race, and immigration status in the aftermath of the 2016 presidential election have been documented in other studies including SMW and gender non-confirming individuals (Gonzalez, Ramirez, & Galupo, 2018; Gonzalez, Pulice-Farrow, & Galupo, 2018; Veldhuis, Drabble, Riggle, Wootton, & Hughes, 2017).

A few participants in the post-election sample described concerns that marriage legalization might be rescinded and some specifically stated that they (or friends) moved up their wedding dates as a result of these concerns. This finding has been echoed in other research, which revealed that fear of losing rights and benefits of legalized same-sex marriage was one of four key motivations for same-sex couples who married shortly after the 2016 presidential election (Lannutti, 2018b). Lannutti also found that participants perceived their marriages in the context of their immediate and extended social networks as both a perceived threat among heterosexuals and as a rallying point for resistance in response to the 2016 election (Lannutti, 2018b). Future research is needed to document the impact, over time, of same-sex marriage legalization and other policies on sexual and gender minority health and well-being.

Evidence from other countries suggests that sexual stigma and negative health impacts may persist even in the context of same-sex marriage legalization. For example, a recent study conducted in the Netherlands found that despite 20 years of marriage rights, sexual minority adolescents were still at greater risk for substance use and lower levels of well-being, which was attributed in part to continued stigma on individual, interpersonal and societal levels (Kuyper, de Roos, Iedema, & Stevens, 2016). The persistence of stigma in everyday interactions and in the larger social climate remain important areas for future research and intervention.

It was notable that participants in the current study frequently pointed to the lack of consistency in other legal protections against discrimination as undermining the positive impact of same-sex marriage legalization. Specifically, participants routinely described their work environments in relation to how accepting, “safe,” or rejecting the climate or co-workers appeared to be. Many explicitly voiced concerns about how the visibility inherent in being legally married might increase risk for discrimination at work, for themselves or for others, in the absence of broader protections against discrimination. This finding is consistent with research documenting continued barriers to equality, including the lack of protection against employment discrimination in state non-discrimination laws for sexual minorities (29 states) or transgender persons (32 states), as well as the surge in “religious freedom” laws allowing refusal of health or other public services to LGBTQ people (Landers, 2015; Movement Advancement Project (MAP), 2015).

More broadly, participants noted that same-sex marriage legalization alone did not ensure full inclusivity or safety in their communities. For example, some described their inability to protect themselves from exposure to negative comments and conversations in contexts where policies and social norms appeared to sanction discrimination. Consistent with this finding, Riggle, Rostosky and Horne (2010) found that lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals living in states and cities with nondiscrimination policies inclusive of sexual orientation perceived their environments to be more positive, experienced less minority stress, and described fewer instances of engaging in, or overhearing, negative conversations than those in regions without protections. Future research on the impact of marriage legalization should integrate consideration of the impact of local policy climate, including the presence or absence of inclusive anti-discrimination laws.

Limitations and Conclusions

This study was novel in its identification of both improvements and unexpected challenges for SMW following national same-sex marriage legalization. Nevertheless, readers should also consider the limitations of the study. First, the sample included only 20 participants. Additionally, the sample over-represented participants with college and post-graduate education levels. The sample included only SMW; interpersonal interactions and experiences in local and LGBTQ communities may differ for sexual minority women and men. Additional research is needed to investigate the impact of changes in the social and policy climate and possible differences by sex.

This study contributes to an emerging literature on the broader impacts of same-sex marriage legalization, particularly because we included single and unmarried women. Additional

research is needed to determine the full, long-term impacts of marriage equality on SMW, especially within sub-groups that are more marginalized and understudied. Although the impacts of same-sex marriage legalization were generally described as directly or indirectly improving the lives of women in work and community contexts, many participants also reported stressors that had not changed or had worsened, or reported concerns that other issues facing the LGBTQ community, such as people of color, were not given sufficient attention. These findings underscore the importance of interventions to reduce stigma, and that community and contexts may be particularly apt settings for interventions. Further, our findings highlight the importance of workplace non-discrimination policies, as well as local and national non-discrimination laws, that include sexual and gender minorities. However, even when there are protective policies and laws in place, such as marriage equality, SMW may still be negatively impacted by complex and persistent stigmatizing interactions.

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Table 1:

Participant demographics

ID	Age	Race/Ethnicity	Highest Degree	Sexual Identity	Relationship Status	State
1	25	Latina	BA	Bisexual	Dating	CA
2	29	African-American	Graduate	Queer	Committed relationship	NC
3	43	White	Graduate	Lesbian	Committed relationship	ID
4	42	White	Graduate	Lesbian	Committed relationship	TX
5	31	White	Graduate	Lesbian	Single/dating	WA
6	30	African American	Graduate	Lesbian	Married ¹	MD
7	46	White	Graduate	Lesbian	Single/dating	PA
8	26	White	Graduate	Lesbian	Married ^{2*}	OH
9	47	African- American, White	BA	Bisexual/ Queer	Single/dating	WA
10	23	Asian-American	Some college	Bisexual	Committed relationship	CO
11	47	White	BA	Lesbian	Married ¹	IN
12	47	Latina	High School	Lesbian	Committed relationship	TX
13	56	Native Hawaiian	BA	Lesbian	Married ^{2*}	HI
14	59	White	Some college	Lesbian	Married ¹	VA
15	33	African-American	BA	Lesbian, Queer	Married ²	MD
16	43	White	Some college	Bisexual/ Queer	Previously widowed, Married ¹	SC
17	40	Latina	BA	Bisexual/ Queer	Separated/divorced	CA
18	30	API	BA	Bisexual/Queer	Dating/Casual Relationship	ME
19	75	African-American	Graduate	Lesbian	Single/dating	OH
20	67	African-American	BA	Dyke	Married ²	GA

¹ - Married after 2016 Supreme Court decision extending same-sex marriage rights to all states.

² - Married in state that legalized same sex marriage before 2016 Supreme Court decision.

* Lived in a state that did not recognize same-sex marriage from a different state in which they married.

Table 2:

Summary of Themes and Subthemes related to the Impact of Same-Sex Marriage Legalization on Work and Community Contexts

Theme	Positive Impacts	Negative and Neutral Impacts
Perceived impact on interpersonal interactions in the workplace	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feeling safer to be visible and “out” at work • Experiencing more tolerance and more positive conversations at work 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facing continued LGBTQ -related challenges at work • Having concerns about lack of legal protections against workplace discrimination
Perceived impact on interactions in extended social networks and local communities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Perceiving a positive shift in norms for social interactions • Noticing an increase in positive conversations about LGBTQ issues 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Noticing an increase in expressions of “hateful thoughts and opinions” • Experiencing continued discrimination and stigma despite marriage legalization
Perceived impact on community climate and queer communities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Experiencing social acceptance and feeling “normalized” • Having a sense of equality and expectation of equal treatment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feeling concerned assimilation into mainstream heteronormative society • Expressing concern about social movement priorities