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Dawn N. Geller
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Experience of Social Supports
for Same-Sex Individuals Who Were
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ABSTRACT

This study explored the experiences of the new population of individuals who married a same-sex partner since it was legal in Massachusetts. The study focused on the effect legal marriage had on their experiences of social supports. Seventy-three individuals responded to the on-line survey, 54 of which answered the essay question that contributed to the findings of this study.

The findings of this study reflect that the experiences of individuals who have married a same-sex partner vary in part due to the social supports and levels of acceptance of their marriage from family, friends, coworkers, neighbors and other institutions. The visibility that legal marriage brought to these individuals' same-sex relationships brought both a sense of legitimacy and an experience of backlash as this new civil right was accessed by this previously marginalized population.

HOW HAS LEGAL MARRIAGE AFFECTED THE EXPERIENCE OF SOCIAL
SUPPORTS FOR SAME-SEX INDIVIDUALS WHO WERE MARRIED IN
MASSACHUSETTS?

A project based upon an independent investigation,
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of Master of Social Work.

Dawn N. Geller

Smith College School for Social Work
Northampton, Massachusetts 01063

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Marriage is known to provide many legal benefits. These benefits include access to health insurance, the legal system and hospital visitation rights. A benefit of marriage that exists outside of these legal benefits is the social supports a couple experiences when legally married. The benefits of social supports are also commonly understood, but more subjective in their experience. These are the supports a couple or family counts on to help hold it together through all the challenges that face a long term marriage and raising children. Social supports include a person's family (parents, siblings, and relatives), friends, neighbors and co-workers. Social supports are experienced through a variety of service providers such as therapist, financial assistance programs (fuel assistance, WIC, sliding scales), memberships (YMCA, support groups, 12 step programs), and other institutions such as schools, banks and employers. Some examples of how extended families support the couple's healthy marital longevity are by accepting the relationship and by helping in times of sickness or circumstances that geographically separate the couple. When there is trouble in paradise, family and friends encourage the couple to work things out. There is joy when children arrive. There is recognition of the family as a unit, a visible, loving family unit. Children benefit from the support and recognition of their family. Children benefit when there is acceptance from the extended families of both of their parents.

This exploratory study examined how legal marriage has influenced the experience of social supports for individual's who married a same-sex partner in Massachusetts since it was legally accessible on May 17, 2004. As of May 21, 2007 the Massachusetts Office of Vital Records reported a total of 9695 same sex couples have been married in Massachusetts (Health and Human Services Vital Records, Statistical Data, personal communication, 2007). These couples do not currently receive the federal benefits of marriage, but they do receive all Massachusetts state marriage benefits. Since this is a new phenomenon in our society, the individual experiences of couples that chose to become legally married are yet to be examined. The findings from this research provide information to contribute to the understanding of this population's unique experience and therefore assist in providing better services for this population. In particular, the exploration of experiences of social supports will be helpful to the field of social workers as we aspire to better understand the internal experiences of our clients. .

This study will utilize the lens of an individual, couple or families eco-map (Hartman & Laird, 1983) as it describes the client in relationship to the surrounding community and social climate. Social workers' understandings of both clients' resources and the quality of their relationships to resources provide vital information to fully assess clients' situations. These resources of social supports and the quality of clients' experiences with these resources can be clearly illustrated with the use of Hartman and Laird's eco-map as it draws out the client's story of their community similar to how a genealogy illustrates a client's story of family history and relationships.

The first definition of social supports this study will examine will be based on stories that motivated this research. Many heterosexual couples have told stories of the

difference in the recognition of their partner when they were “just” cohabitating opposed to when they got married. This is a dynamic we have seen on television, in movies and in books. The pressure for a couple to be legally married is not universal, but is commonly known. The acceptance of one’s partner into the extended family often becomes more legitimate when the couple is legally married opposed to just living together. Friends and family are more likely to assist a couple through hard times when they are legally married. Avoiding divorce through the hard times is a joint effort of a couple and their community of support. Same-sex couples, like heterosexual couples, similarly benefit from community support. This research will explore same-sex couple’s experience of community support.

There is extensive research mapping out the evolution of the institution of marriage from its beginning to how it is interpreted today in the United States. This study examines the evolution of marriage in its different states of interpretation from an economic agreement (Anton, 2004; Hartog, 2004) to romantic relationship, to a religious institution, to today’s debate of *who* has the right to access marriage. Same-sex marriage is currently only legal in the state of Massachusetts and not recognized on a federal level. Little research exists on the experience of this new group of people and how they are contributing to the history of marriage. This study attempts to fill a piece of that gap in this research.

This study was conducted through an on-line survey with demographic information questions and one opened ended essay question. The essay question sought to gather the stories and comments of legally married same-sex individuals in Massachusetts in regards to their experience of social supports since becoming legally

married. This information should additionally be important to the current debate surrounding same-sex marriage. How providing legal marriage has affected the experiences of same-sex couples should prove to be an important piece as the debate about same-sex marriage continues in Massachusetts (Mass Equality, 2007), other states (Human Rights Campaign, 2007), and on a federal level (Bush, 2004). Many opponents, such as Rep. Philip Travis (2004) challenge that extending legal marriage to same-sex couples threatens the institution of marriage and will cause a breakdown of families. The survey will provide the voice of couples and same-sex headed families to be included in this debate.

This study is connected to the field of social work in that it promotes social justice, focuses on policy and explores social supports for a population of our cliental. The marriage debate in Massachusetts is a small part of a larger debate nationwide. In 2006 the United States Senate was debating whether or not to amend the United States Constitution in a way that would define marriage as between one man and one woman. This is an attempt of those opposed to same-sex marriage to take the matter out of the individual states' hands, as well as to reverse the decision of the courts of Massachusetts, the first state to grant equal marriage rights to same-sex couples. If an amendment like this was passed, it would be the first time the United States Constitution was amended to limit a group's rights rather than expand their rights. Many individual states are also considering similar bans on same-sex marriage, or have already passed such bans. As of May, 2007, The Human Rights Campaign reported 26 States currently have state constitutional amendments restricting marriage to one man and one woman. Nineteen states have laws that restrict marriage to one man and one woman. Massachusetts is

currently the only state that grants marriage to same-sex couples. Four states have no legal provisions prohibiting or granting same-sex marriage. In the field of social work, knowing the systems of social supports available to our clients is essential. It is also essential to understand the social supports and resources that are inaccessible to our clients. Our clients' experiences as a marginalized group, whether due to race, economic status or sexual orientation will be important for us to understand. This study hopes to contribute to the research in order to add to the understanding of the gay and lesbian population's experiences of social supports.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

The following sections will discuss the history of marriage, the history of the legal debate for same-sex marriage, the current state of the same-sex marriage debate, possible legal complications of same-sex marriage defining social supports, and the ecological theories that frame a foundation for this research.

Brief History of Marriage

Marriage is a socially constructed concept that has continuously changed in social, religious, political and cultural contexts. In the current debate on same-sex marriage opponents of same-sex marriage often use the term *traditional marriage* (Allard, 2006) when describing the institution of marriage that they are protecting by requesting marriage to be legally defined as between one man and one woman. This brief history of marriage will explore how the definition of marriage has evolved over history. Today's westernized understanding of marriage would not be considered *traditional* in the historical sense. Marriage was originally an economic arrangement and the concept of *love* was not a part of the understanding (Hartog, 2004). Women and children were considered property of a man in and of his interest in the labor they could provide (Anton, 2004). Marriage was defined differently depending on your class status (Anton 2004). Polygamy has been the norm through out history although the norm being argued today is one of monogamy (Schwimmer, 1995).

Discrimination in who can access marriage is noted in our own history in America. The laws and norms for marriage have been continually changing in history. African Americans were not allowed access to legal marriage until after the Civil War. In the North American British colonies interracial marriage was allowed. In 1662 Virginia doubled fines for interracial “fornication” and Maryland followed with a ban on interracial marriage in 1664. Over the years more colonies adopted anti-interracial marriage laws. It was not until 1967 that the United States Supreme Court ruled in *Loving v. Virginia* (1967) that prohibiting interracial marriage was unconstitutional. Section II of this United States Supreme Court June, 12 1967 decision stated:

These statutes also deprive the Lovings of liberty without due process of law in violation of the Due Process Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. The freedom to marry has long been recognized as one of the vital personal rights essential to the orderly pursuit of happiness by free men.

Marriage is one of the "basic civil rights of man," fundamental to our very existence and survival. *Skinner v. Oklahoma*, [316 U.S. 535, 541](#) (1942). See also *Maynard v. Hill*, [125 U.S. 190](#) (1888). To deny this fundamental freedom on so unsupportable a basis as the racial classifications embodied in these statutes, classifications so directly subversive of the principle of equality at the heart of the Fourteenth Amendment, is surely to deprive all the State's citizens of liberty without due process of law. The Fourteenth Amendment requires that the freedom of choice to marry not be restricted by invidious racial discriminations. Under our Constitution, the freedom to marry, or not marry, a person of another race resides with the individual and cannot be infringed by the State.

The states that had maintained laws prohibiting interracial marriage had to repeal them.

When considering the importance of who can access marriage today, considering the history of how these decisions were made in the past may be helpful.

Another example about how norms and laws have changed in defining marriage can be seen in how rape was viewed in marriage. Rape was not illegal in marriage until New York State became the first state to make it a crime in 1978. By 1990 ten states had

made rape in marriage a crime, thirty-six states had limited circumstances of when rape would be considered a crime in a marriage, and four states did not recognize rape in marriage as a crime (Peterson, 1997). Today it is illegal in all states but not without some difficulties in legal interpretations.

Brief History of the Legal Debate of Same-Sex Marriage

The gay/lesbian rights movement began with the Stonewall riots of 1969 (Eskridge, 1996). Since 1971 lawsuits have been filtering through the court systems to gain equal access to marriage for same-sex couples (Eskridge, 2002). Little attention had been given to these requests for civil marriage rights until the Hawaii Supreme Court in 1993 ruled in *Baehr v. Miike* that same-sex couples had the same right to marry as heterosexual couples. In the end, the original 1993 court ruling was overturned by a 1998 state constitutional amendment banning same sex-marriage (Eskridge, 2002). The 1993 ruling had never been implemented and no same-sex marriages took place before the constitutional ban. On a federal level, Congress passed the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) on September 21, 1996 which denied federal recognition of same-sex marriage and gave states the right to refuse to recognize a same-sex marriage that had been allowed in another state (Strasser, 1999). Currently, all but five states have a law or a constitutional amendment stating that they will not recognize same sex marriages. Of these five states, two, Massachusetts and Rhode Island, have pending constitutional amendments that will define marriage as between one man and one woman. Massachusetts is the only state that has passed equal access to civil marriage for same sex Massachusetts residents. If the amendment opposing same sex marriage in Massachusetts passes, it will reverse the court's decision in *Goodridge v. the Department of Public*

Health (Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court, 2003). Ten other states have some means of formal recognition of same sex relationships such as a civil union or domestic partnership status. Six of these states offer spousal rights equivalent to marriage to same-sex couples recognized within that state. Four of these nine states offer limited spousal rights as recognized within that state (Human Rights Campaign, 2007)

Current State of Same-Sex Marriage

As of May, 2007 Massachusetts is the only state that allows equal marriage status for same-sex couples. There are currently 26 states that have a state constitutional amendment restricting marriage between a man and one woman. There are currently 19 states that have a law restricting marriage between one man and one woman (Human Rights Campaign, 2006). Updates for each state can be found on the Human Rights Campaign web site at www.hrc.org.

Many respected organizations have issued statements that recognize same-sex couples and families as existing, active, healthy, and valued members of our society. The voices of these organizations are important in the current legal fight to gain legal same-sex marriage in this country. The American Medical Association (2004), the American Academy of Family Physicians (2002), the American Academy of Pediatrics (2002), and the American Psychological Association (2004), are examples of groups that have endorsed the recognition of same sex couples and families. These statements contribute to the historical context and climate in which the debate of same-sex marriage is being argued. It is relevant to the field of social work practice as social workers are providers of social supports for the gay and lesbian population.

Possible Legal Complications with Same-Sex Marriage

Same-sex couples considering legal marriage should also be aware of potential problems that legal experts are warning couples to consider (GLAD, 2007). The organization GLAD (Gay and Lesbian Advocates and Defenders) has warned bi-national same-sex couples of the risks of deportation if applying for legal marriage (GLAD, 2007). Immigration laws are federal and do not currently recognize legal same-sex marriage. An American citizen cannot sponsor their same-sex partner for a United States green card as a heterosexual American citizen can for their opposite sex partner (Same Sex Marriage..., 2007). In fact, applying for legal residence based on a same-sex marriage in Massachusetts could lead to deportation. Legal marriage could reveal that a non-resident is out-of-status. Additionally, non-immigration visas, such as Student, Worker or Visitor Visas, are expected to show that there is no intent to stay in the United States. Marrying a citizen shows intent to stay and could block a visa from being granted (GLAD, 2007).

Same-sex couples considering foreign adoptions need to be aware that many countries such as China, Estonia and Vietnam specifically state that homosexuals are prohibited from adopting from their countries (U.S. Department of State, 2006). Marriage could affect adoptions from some states as a single parent in states that do not permit gays and lesbians to adopt. GLAD reported that no foreign countries appear to permit same-sex couples or openly gay/lesbian people to adopt internationally (GLAD, 2007).

Finally, there are two more examples of possible legal complications when considering same-sex marriage. Prior to legal marriage Massachusetts allowed second parent adoptions. This meant that if a lesbian couple had a baby through a sperm donor

the non-biological partner could easily adopt the child in Massachusetts. Under current Massachusetts law same-sex couples are treated equal to heterosexual couples in paternal rights when using a sperm donor to have children. The spouse who is not carrying the child is considered to be a legal second parent without the need for the adoption process. However, given that same-sex marriages are not recognized in most other states or federally, it is recommended that the non-biological mother still proceed with the adoption process as a safeguard (GLAD, 2007). Secondly, gays or lesbians enlisted in the military risk military discharge if they become legally married for breaking the “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy. Due to the lack of clarity on how laws will be interpreted state by state and on a federal level, the benefits of legal marriage are accompanied by many possible risks.

Defining Social Supports

How people are socialized is an important piece to this conversation as it affects how individuals perceive social supports. For example the expected level of an individual’s connection to their family of origin can vary greatly in different family cultures. How each person internalizes stereotypes, biases, habits and traditions are a part of the cycle of socialization (Harro, 2000). The model of the cycle of socialization is an important foundation in understanding the development of our dominant (privileged) and target (oppressed) identities. To summarize the cycle of socialization: Individuals are born into the world with no blame, shame or choice. Individuals take in a combination of information-“limited information, no information” and “misinformation” (p.16). Individuals begin to form and internalize “biases, stereotypes, prejudices history, habit and tradition” (p.16). Individuals develop these around both their target and their

dominant social identities. Socialization is established. Individuals develop a personal self as those we love and respect (parents, teachers, mentors) shape our “norms, values, roles” and dreams. Their options become based on their social identities. These messages become reinforced on an institutional and cultural level through a variety of influences that range from churches, schools and the legal system to song lyrics, media visibility and language. These messages are further reinforced through systems of rewards and punishments, access and lack of access to resources, discrimination and empowerment. This process of internalized and institutionalized socialization results in a mix of silence, anger, collusion, outrage, stress, and self-hatred. Individuals then have the choice in their development to do nothing and “behave,” or to make waves and become an agent of change. Harro’s model discussed how messages in society on the various levels-- individual, familial, cultural, and institutional--build the frame work from which social supports are either provided or denied to a certain group.

Bobbie Harro (2000) used the cycle of socialization as a learning tool for an individual to trace an aspect of their social identity through the “systematic training” (p.15) of the socialization process. How these identities, and the contexts of how they are perceived and valued, can be better understood with the use of Harro’s model. A strength of the cycle of socialization model (Harro, 2000) is how the model clearly maps ways to change, or interrupt, the cycle such as through an increase of awareness, questioning the status quo, education and activism.

Several sources discuss definitions of social supports and research that backs up the importance of social supports for one’s physical and mental well-being (Dritt, 1986; Griffith, 1985; Kim & McKenry, 2002; Sarason, Levine, Basham & Sarason, 1983;

Schabot, 2005). In *Assessing Social Support: The Social Support Questionnaire* (Saroson et al.) social supports are discussed as "...social supports would seem to have two basic elements (a) the perception that there is a sufficient number of available others to whom one can turn in times of need and (b) a degree of satisfaction with the available support"(p. 128-129). Dritz (1986) defined social supports "as help in the form of services, material aid, information or emotional support" (p. 3). Griffith's (1985) study discussed the "buffering effect" and the "direct contribution" of social supports in his description of social supports (p. 42). "Buffering effects" suggest that social supports are more beneficial for individuals experiencing high stress compared to those in lower stress experiences. The "direct contribution" describes that social supports, regardless of ones stress level, make a direct, beneficial contribution to an individual's mental well-being (Griffith, 1985).

Griffith's (1985) study utilized surveys and interviews with 361 randomly selected adults across three southern California suburban communities. The research focused on questions such as "Who are the natural providers of support and comfort?", "Where are these providers first met?", "What is the relationship of network characteristics to the psychological well-being of the helped person?". Examples of pertinent results were that two-thirds of support providers were related to the respondent, the most sought after support provider was a friend, seventy-seven percent of these friends were of the same gender, and the next most sought after support was from the respondent's immediate family.

Kim and McKenry (2002) examined how one's marital status affects one's psychological, emotional and physical well-being. Kim and McKenry's study examined

heterosexual participants; however the findings help establish a base-line for this study on gay and lesbian participants. Kim and McKenry's study showed that marriage was more beneficial to one's psychological, emotional and physical well-being than cohabitation with one's partner. To examine the relationship between marriage and psychological well-being, the study looked at two research perspectives (a) *protection perspective* which looks at how marriage status and quality affects one's well-being, and (b) *selection perspective* which focuses on how a person's physical and psychological well-being influences marriage. This was a longitudinal study and the data were collected twice, 1987-1988 and 1992-1993, from the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH). The study was a fixed, quantitative design. The conclusion of this study that is relevant to this current study on gay and lesbian's experience of social supports after marriage is that as Kim and McKenry looked separately at couples that cohabit and those who marry, they found that the cohabiting couples did not experience the benefits of the protective effects that accompany marriage. Gay and lesbian couples who do not live in Massachusetts do not have the opportunity to marry, leaving co-habitation as their only option. Since the protective effects of marriage relates to how marital status influences one's well-being, it can be assumed that marriage status will benefit gay and lesbian couple's sense of well-being in a similar way that it benefited heterosexual couples.. When this current study looks at social supports, an individual's sense of well being connected to their marital status will be a key perspective on the definition of social supports.

The research on social supports focused on same-sex couples is limited; however there is adequate research that examines social supports. The *Social Support*

Questionnaire developed by Sarason et al. (1983) is a respected measurement tool used in research directly or to guide further research. The Social Support Questionnaire (SSQ) was created to test the observation that social attachments play a role in psychological adjustment and health. In order to evaluate the accuracy of the SSQ (Sarason et al., 1983) it was used in four separate studies in conjunction with other tests. The four studies were diverse in the scope of aspects of social supports they measured. The first study was used to create the 27 questions that then made up the SSQ. This study focused on assessing both what individuals viewed as important social supports, and if they were satisfied with those supports in their current experience (Sarason et al., 1983). The second study focused on the relationship of the SSQ with how a person's personality, such as an extrovert versus an introvert, may be connected with their experience of social supports (Sarason et al., 1983).

Study three (Sarason et al., 1983) built upon these two tests by adding a component that considered the relationship between social support, the preceding year's positive and negative life events, internal-external locus of control, and self esteem. One important finding in this research was summarized in the study's discussion "People high in number of social supports may experience more rewarding interpersonal relationships than do those who are low in social supports" (p.135). Finally, study four focused on the idea that social supports function as a buffer to stress. This study was experimental as the participants needed to solve difficult mazes (some unsolvable) as well as take the SSQ to look at the connection between social supports and the role it plays when people must perform in stressful situations. Study four discussed "People high in social support seem to have positive self-concepts, be low in anxiety as by cognitive interference, and have a

belief in their own ability to control aspects of their environment” (pp. 136). Both studies three and four included other tests besides the SSQ to look at the specific correlations the studies focused on.

*Brief Overview of Research on Same-Sex Couples
and Their Experience of Social Supports*

There is little research on gay and lesbian couples and their experience of social supports. There are two pieces of research that provide a foundation as we explore how same-sex marriage has affected the experience of social supports for these individuals. One is a thesis by Dritt (1986) entitled *Lesbian Social Support Networks: Affiliative Patterns and the Effects of Stigma*. Another thesis is entitled *The Social Support Structure and Identity Development of Married Gay and Lesbian Couples* (Schabot, 2005). Where individuals and couples receive social support from was examined in these theses. Schabot examined supports received from family, friends and co-workers, while Dritt almost twenty years earlier had included the category of neighbors in her research.

Dritt’s (1986) research showed that lesbians rely more heavily on friends for their support network than they do on family, neighbors or co-workers (Dritt, 1986). The amount of support from family for lesbians was found to be lower than the family support received by other groups. Out of the 24 lesbian women that participated in Dritt’s study, friends represented 64.7% of the support network while family represented 25.8%. Friends were found to provide more total emotional support while relatives provided “more personal /emotional support, particularly in the area of emergency help than did friends, workmates or neighbors” (p.36). Neighbors and workmates were listed as 2.7% and 6.8% respectively. Dritt’s research examined a small sample, 24 lesbian women, in

one geographical area, Denver, Colorado. Gay male experiences were not examined in Dritt's study.

Schabot's (2005) research, which was conducted in Massachusetts after marriage became legal for same sex couples, found that married gay and lesbian couples had support systems that closely resembled the research on heterosexual couples (Griffith, 1985) where friends and family were noted to account for an equal amount of support. Schabot's study examined both the social support structure and the identity development of married same-sex couples. For the purpose of this research, the portion of Schabot's study that focused on social supports will be reviewed. Schabot sent out two questionnaires to 284 gay and lesbian identified persons in Western Massachusetts' Hampden County. She obtained information from local town halls in Hampden County of same-sex couples who were married between May 17, 2004 and November 17, 2004, the first six months that marriage was legally accessible. Seventy-four participants responded to Schabot's mailings making up the number of participants examined in the study.

An important aspect of Schabot's (2005) study was that her research "showed that gay and lesbian individuals are more likely to depend on family of origin when in need of financial support, while they are also more likely to rely on friends for advice and guidance" (p. 47). This distinction possibly ties together the differences in prior mentioned research on where gay and lesbian couples find supports as it further explored the different types of supports one might access. The research in this area is limited so it is difficult to draw definitive conclusions, but the before-mentioned studies may also point to a shift in one's experience of social supports since same-sex marriage has been legalized. One notable caution in making conclusions however is that Schabot's study

was limited to one county, Hampden County, and may or may not be representative of the experiences of married gay and lesbian couples across Massachusetts. An additional caution is to remember that same-sex marriage is only legal in Massachusetts so any results of this study, or Schabot's study, is not necessarily representative of gay and lesbian couples in the other 49 states in the U.S.A.

*An Ecological Assessment of Same-Sex Couple's Experiences of Social Supports
Through the Lens of an Eco-Map*

The field of social work strives to assess an individual's experiences through a full biopsychosocial assessment. To focus on the biological, psychological, and societal characteristics and environment allows for a fuller picture of an individual's unique experience. In 1975 Ann Hartman and Joan Laird developed an assessment tool called the eco-map that clearly demonstrated how an individual or family interacts with the environment around them (Hartman & Laird, 1983). Access to resources and the lack of access to resources are key principles in assessing the social support experience of a family or individual. In a similar fashion as social workers often create a genogram, an eco map is also drawn by the social worker and client as they map out resources the individual or family counts on for survival. A large circle is drawn in the center representing the core family, couple or household. Hartman then suggested drawing smaller circles varying distances away around the central circle, but still surrounding it. These smaller circles begin to represent the environmental systems that affect a family's experience. These smaller circles are the resources a core family unit counts on for supports as well as the systems that drain a families resources and everything in-between. The eco-map and accompanying discussion begins to include supports that have been lost

or that are inaccessible. Example categories of systems Hartman and Laird suggested are extended family, work, friends, school, recreation, culture, religion, health care, and social welfare . Other possible systems may be the legal system, support groups, the military, or advocacy groups. Similar to other oppressed groups, gays and lesbians access to support resources may be affected by their social status and identity. Social workers and other providers will benefit from clients perceptions or experiences of which social systems discriminate against them.

Hartman and Laird (1983) next examined the quality of the connection between the core family and the outlying systems. They provided symbols to represent the characterizations of these relationships. A solid line represents a strong connection, a broken line a tenuous connection, a line with slashes a stressful connection, and a line with arrows showing which way the energy of the connection flows. This eco-map theory is vital in understanding that the quality of one's connection to a social support is necessary to fully understand ones experience. Social support systems may not be accessible or perceived as supportive depending on the relationship with these systems. For some visibility and access to more resources may be a comfort while for some these same things may be a source of complications and even risks. Hartman and Laird's recognition of the importance of each unique experience in relation to one's complete eco systems is an important assessment lens for a social worker. As social workers we are apt to make errors in our assessments when we make assumptions about a clients experience and relationship with outside systems.

This present study explored how legal same-sex marriage has affected the experience of this new population of same-sex married since they have chosen to marry a

same- sex partner since it became legal May, 17 2004. The following chapter will discuss the methods by which this study was conducted.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study is to explore how legal same-sex marriage has influenced individuals' experiences of social supports since they married same sex partners in Massachusetts. The research examined the experience of participants using a broad definition of social supports in order to best view what the various participants self identified as social supports. The research question that participants answered was "How has legal marriage affected your experience of social supports? Please share stories, brief examples, or comments to answer this question in any way that feels important to you as a part of your experience of marrying a same-sex partner." Demographic information was collected to identify the age, gender, marital status (married, separated, or divorced), date of marriage, length of time together before marriage, race, race of partner, and number of children.

The research design for this study was a fixed method collecting information about demographics and one written narrative question for data. This fixed narrative approach allowed for the experiences of a sample group of same-sex married individuals to be explored in order to generate more information on an unstudied topic. The narrative survey question focused on their unique experiences of social supports since same sex couples were legally married. Variables were collected through demographic information to provide data toward possible future research.

Sample

This research surveyed same-sex individuals who had been legally married in the state of Massachusetts. The survey sought to be as diverse as the population of same-sex couples in Massachusetts is in terms of race, age, socioeconomic level, gender, and couples with and without children. In order to reach a diverse population, flyers with information about participating in this survey were distributed to a wide variety of urban and rural communities in Massachusetts with particular efforts made to recruit participants from Massachusetts cities, towns, groups, and organizations that represent diverse populations. Through email, phone contact, and face to face contact I contacted gay and lesbian resource centers, newspapers, websites, social establishments and organizations to publicize the survey. Participants were encouraged to contribute to this research on line through Survey Monkey.

Distribution occurred primarily via email to individuals, groups and organizations across Massachusetts. Other methods of distribution included face to face contacts, a Western Massachusetts Gay and Lesbian newspaper ad, and a presentation at a town meeting organized to discuss the current *Status of Marriage in Massachusetts* in Northampton, Massachusetts. The town meeting presentation was approximately 5 minutes and printed information was made available to those in attendance regarding survey access. The town meeting took place Feb. 11, 2007 with an estimated 40 people (Status of Marriage rights...., 2007).

A sample of convenience was used as participants were recruited through distributing information about the survey in a variety of ways. Participants responded to the survey on line, limiting participants to only those who have some form of internet

access. Eligibility of participation was limited to individuals who legally married a same-sex partner in Massachusetts. Since legal marriage, participants could have become separated or divorced. Residency in Massachusetts was not a requirement as long as at the time of their marriage they were able to access legal marriage in Massachusetts.

The survey was designed on Survey Monkey to include informed consent information, demographic questions, a definition of social supports, one essay question, and finally a list of support resources that a participant could access. Participants signed onto the URL address assigned by Survey Monkey when the survey was created. As participants responded to the survey I was able to access and read the responses. The narrative data did not require transcription as the responses were typed in by participants who answered the essay question. I closed the survey on the date advertised in the recruiting materials making the survey inaccessible beyond that date. The responses remained accessible to this researcher after the survey closed for further analysis of the findings.

Prior to beginning the survey, participants were informed that individuals who had commitment ceremonies but did not enter into a legal same-sex marriage would not be eligible to participate. However, one individual noted he/she was not married, and presumably his/her essay was the one stating only that they were not yet married as they had just moved to Massachusetts. Data on other demographic information on this participant could not be traced so it is included in the percentages. Two other participants put down responses to the *date of legal marriage* demographic question as dates that were prior to the May, 17 2004 date of legal access to marriage in Massachusetts. It is unclear if these two individuals were legally married at the time of participation, however

chose to respond with the date of a prior commitment ceremony instead of the date of legal marriage. There is a strong assumption that at least one of these respondents was also legally married as one essay question gave the same date of a commitment ceremony as it discussed the difference in their commitment ceremony and their legal wedding.

Legal marriages obtained in another country, such as Canada, were not included in this study. Additionally I did not require that participants needed to be same-gendered at the time of participating in the survey, only that they were considered same-sex at the time of legal marriage. The possibility therefore is that, after legal marriage, participants may have had changed their gender identity. One participant was filtered out of the demographic gender question by Survey Monkey, probably because that person checked off both male and female genders. The survey technology through survey monkey did not allow for currently transgender participants to participate unless they only checked one gender in the demographics.

Ethics and Safeguards

The details of the study were presented to the Smith College Human Subjects Review Board (HSRB) before advertising or posting the on-line survey. The proposal approval letter from the HSRB (Appendix A) documents that this study is in compliance with Federal regulations. Elements presented in the proposal included the informed consent letter (Appendix B), example advertisements used for recruitment (Appendix C), and the demographic and essay survey questions (Appendix D).

Survey Monkey provides built in safeguards of confidentiality and anonymity that were incorporated into the study. Participants had access to information describing the purpose of the study, an informed consent letter, and how confidentiality and anonymity

would be provided before they began the survey. Some of these protections included full knowledge of the purpose of the study, the anonymity and confidentiality protections and limitations, any risks involved, and encouragement to save a copy of the informed consent letter. This information was provided when a participant logged onto Survey Monkey before they began the questionnaire. All participants had the opportunity to discontinue the survey at any time before submission. Participation was anonymous and only I received answers to the survey questions. Demographic information will only be used as a whole and individual potentially identifiable information will not be reported in my thesis. Participant's email addresses are kept confidential and anonymous through Survey Monkey. Following the completion of the questionnaire, or if they opted not to participate after signing onto the survey site, participants were automatically transferred to a page thanking them for their participation and they were provided with GLBT resources for counseling and support that they could access if participation in the survey caused them any discomfort.

Data Collection

The data were collected through the on-line survey vehicle Survey Monkey. The survey questionnaire (Appendix D) gathered demographic information and include an open ended essay question in order to gather personal stories. The survey was open on-line from 2/9/07 through 3/16/07. Each participant was shown an Informed Consent Letter (appendix B) prior to beginning the survey.

The survey was estimated to take a participant 10-15 minutes to complete. I received back 73 responses, with only 54 that answered the essay question. Demographic data was broken into 8 tables: gender in table one, race in table two, year of marriage in

table three, number of children in table four, age in table five, race of partner in table six, years together before legal marriage in table seven and current status of relationship in table eight. Demographic categories broke down as follows:

Table 1

| <i>Gender of Participants</i> | |
|-------------------------------|--------------|
| <u>Gender</u> | <u>n (%)</u> |
| Male | 12 (16.4) |
| Female | 60 (88.2) |

Note. There were a total of 73 participants with one filtered out.

Table 2

| <i>Race of Participants</i> | |
|-----------------------------|--------------|
| <u>Race</u> | <u>n (%)</u> |
| White | 62 (86.1) |
| White/Jewish | 2 (2.8) |
| Black | 2 (2.8) |
| American Indian/White | 2 (2.8) |
| Self Identified as “Mutt” | 1 (1.4) |
| Hispanic | 1 (1.4) |
| Black/White | 1 (1.4) |
| Asian | 1 (1.4) |

Note. One participant did not respond.

Table 3

| <i>Year of Participant's Legal Marriage</i> | |
|---|--------------|
| <u>Year of Marriage</u> | <u>n (%)</u> |
| 2004 | 37 |
| 2005 | 15 |
| 2006 | 15 |
| 2007 | 2 |

Table 4

| <i>Number of Children</i> | |
|---------------------------|--------------|
| <u>Number of Children</u> | <u>n (%)</u> |
| 0 | 33 |
| 1 | 17 |
| 2 | 10 |
| 3 | 6 |
| Pregnant | 2 |
| Foster Child | 1 |

Note. Two participants did not respond and one noted three children that did not live in the home.

Table 5

Age of Participants

| <u>Age</u> | <u>n (%)</u> |
|-------------|--------------|
| 20-29 years | 9 (12.5) |
| 30-39 years | 28 (38.9) |
| 40-49 years | 23 (31.9) |
| 50-59 years | 12 (16.7) |

Note. One participant did not respond.

Table 6

Race of Participant's Partners

| <u>Race of Partner</u> | <u>n (%)</u> |
|------------------------|--------------|
| White | 64 (90.1) |
| White/Jewish | 2 (2.8) |
| Puerto Rican | 1 (1.4) |
| Native American /White | 1 (1.4) |
| Native American | 1 (1.4) |
| Multi-Racial | 1 (1.4) |
| African American/White | 1 (1.4) |

Note. Two participants did not respond.

Table 7

Years Together Before Legal Marriage

| <u>Years Together Before Legal</u> | <u>n (%)</u> |
|------------------------------------|--------------|
| Marriage | |
| < 1 year | 1 (1.4) |
| 1-5 years | 25 (35.2) |
| 6-10 years | 25 (35.2) |
| 11-15 years | 12 (16.) |
| 16-20 years | 4 (5.6) |
| 21-25 years | 3 (4.2) |
| 26-30 years | 1 (1.4) |

Note. Two participants did not respond.

Table 8

Current Status of Participants Relationships

| <u>Current Status of Relationship</u> | <u>n (%)</u> |
|---------------------------------------|--------------|
| Married | 69 (98.6) |
| Separated | 0 (0) |
| Divorced | 1 (1.4) |

Note. Three participants did not respond.

This study used descriptive statistics to analyze the demographic data. The number of participants that skipped a question was noted but not included in the percentage for that question. Two of the demographic questions (gender and current status of relationship) gave specific assigned answers to choose from while the others (age, race, race of partner, date of legal marriage, length of time together before legal marriage, and number of children) allowed for open ended responses. The demographic questions with specific assigned answers were calculated by the Survey Monkey analysis tool while the demographic questions that were open ended were manually calculated.

Narrative data were collected through one open ended essay question on the survey. The narrative data was coded based on themes that were identified as common themes and idiosyncratic themes pertinent to the research topic. Themes were chosen for either their commonality or for their uniqueness. Essay questions that discussed more than one theme were included in each theme category that was raised. Theme categories were chosen when a theme arose no fewer than seven times with the exception of Idiosyncratic Responses of Interest that was a grouping for unusual themes that were deemed pertinent to the findings. Both negative and positive experiences within a theme category were included in that category to clearly represent the full spectrum of participant's experiences.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

The goal of this study was to examine how legal marriage has affected the social supports of same-sex individuals who were married in Massachusetts. The major findings were that of the 53 eligible participants that answered the essay question, 30 indicated positive effects on their experience of social supports, 13 described no effect to minimal effect on their experience of social supports, six indicated both areas of positive and negative effects on their experience of social supports, one indicated an accentuation of a lack of supports, and three responses were unclear in how legal marriage has affected their sense of supports.

There were eight major findings identified for discussion in this research. One finding was noted by participants who discussed a strengthening of their internal sense of security and legitimacy in society since legal marriage. Another theme addressed how some people who participants had perceived as supportive prior to legal marriage were revealed to be less accepting than anticipated in response to the marriage, while for others genuine support became more evident. Participants that discussed how legal marriage effected their access to benefits revealed that legal marriage for same sex couples positively increased their access to practical and institutional social support resources. The actual wedding ceremony was found to be a significant event in participant's experiences of support from family, friends and co-workers, with the emphasis on families in the majority of responses from participants. The sense of support individuals

felt from those who attended was often expressed as being more meaningful than participants had anticipated. Likewise it was found that the lack of supports that was experienced when key people in participant's lives choose not to attend their wedding ceremony was significantly painful. The visibility that legal marriage brought to participants experience of feeling that their spousal relationship was more recognized, acknowledged, and respected at work, from family, and in their general was another significant finding. Another common topic in participant's responses was about how legal marriage allowed them to access language that is more universally understood when describing their primary relationship. This language, such as spouse, had prior to legal same sex marriage been reserved for heterosexual couples.

One interesting finding was how some participant's experiences differed from many others in how they experienced their increase of recognition and of social supports prior to legal marriage when they had a commitment ceremony or had children together. These respondents had already had a notable public display of their relationship commitment. Additionally there was a smorgasbord of topics participant's responses that did not qualify in a category of their own due to occurring fewer than the required seven times in the overall narrative data, but is included in the major findings. These responses were deemed of interest and importance to this research and were considered relevant to inform further research on same sex couples and families.

Sense of Security and Legitimacy

Participants reported that they felt an increased sense of security and legitimacy after the wedding. This theme was very common throughout the narrative data from the survey's essay question. Comments included words and phrases such as "entitled,"

“empowering sense of legitimacy,” “recognition,” “true to myself, less hidden and feel basically terribly normal!,” “legitimized our relationship in subtle but powerful ways,” “makes our commitment and intentions with regard to everything from love to money crystal clear,” “we feel on more equal footing,” “reassuring experience,” “sense of confidence,” “being legally married adds legitimacy,” “makes it feel more real, more equal,” “accepted as equals,” “not just tolerated but celebrated, recognized, cherished, applauded,” and “it has profoundly changed our world view about what we are entitled to and how much support we have in this world.”

One participant described that her family, friends and co-workers were supportive before she and her partner were legally married, but that she experienced an increased sense of that support from legal marriage. She also put her experience in a historical context.

I discovered myself as a lesbian back in the days when gay bars had to hide behind locked doors and went thru police raids. So this is a precious time for me, and I find that since married I am more true to myself, less hidden, and feel, basically, terribly normal!

Excerpts from the following participants’ responses well reflect this common theme of security and legitimacy when they describe their experience since becoming legally married.

Because the marriage was legal, we had a big wedding inviting all of my family, and because of that I learned how supportive my extended family also is. I feel as though my marriage is valid whereas if it were just a spiritual commitment ceremony it wouldn't have the same weight. Coming out is easier whether it's to a stranger on the phone regarding a utility bill or a co-worker that I see everyday. I just feel like I have a right to be in the world--to be seen and be heard. I don't have to hide anymore. I feel legitimate.

I now feel I have a right to supports, services, whatever other people are entitled to. I can say I'm married to a woman, and even if somebody thinks hateful

thoughts, I still have a right to exist - legally and otherwise. There is definitely an empowering sense of legitimacy that goes along with legal marriage.

The way relationships gained recognition through legal marriage was best described in this quote that included how her sister's heterosexual relationship was viewed differently by the family once the participant's sister married her boyfriend. Here we see that some heterosexual couples also experience recognition from legal marriage. Similarly, the participant experienced an increase of recognition of her relationship to her same-sex partner after legal marriage from her family.

I personally feel that being legally married adds legitimacy to my relationship, and being recognized as a couple by the state makes it feel more real, more equal. My sister is straight and married and I have seen how my parents viewed her differently once she was married. Previous to my current relationship with my wife, I had been in a long term relationship and had a commitment ceremony, which my family all participated in, but it did not feel like it was equal to that of a "real" wedding, as if it weren't as valid since there was no legally binding contract that accepted us as a couple. Now, I feel like my partner and I are accepted as equals to my sister and her husband and it is reflected by my family each time we gather for an occasion and everyone understands that she and I are [sic] together for the long haul, married and committed to each other [sic] as the straight married couples in my family.

Seeing the True Colors of Existing Supports

Many participants discussed the ambiguity of knowing who was truly embracing of their same-sex relationships and who was just cordially tolerant. Responses to announcements of legal marriage, or from those receiving wedding invitations, illustrated this common theme exposing the true feelings of neutral or ambiguous connections. Some responses noted positive changes that included a more genuine acceptance and embracing of the relationship. Others chose to become more outspoken about their discomfort with opposition to legal same-sex marriage.

The Brighter Colors

One major finding was the common experience participants expressed in how people were more supportive than the participants had previously realized. Participants may have *assumed* these family, friends, co-workers, or fellow church members were supportive; however, the level of support was unclear or under-expressed. Some people may have had conflicted feelings about gay and lesbian relationships and the marriage forced them to come to terms with a choice to support and embrace their gay or lesbian friend, family, co-worker or church member.

Participants expressed this phenomenon throughout the narrative data in comments represented by the following examples:

who supported us all along.And it brought support out of the wood work from colleagues who previously appeared neutral.

I feel getting marriage and making it such a wonderful and public event has really helped. It seems to have legitimized our relationship in subtle but powerful ways to even those increase support from our families.

I think the most surprising thing was realizing how many supports I had among family and straight friends, but wasn't aware of. Maybe "sure of" is really what I mean.

I have been an accepted part of my partner's large, extended Irish-catholic family for many years (after a challenging start). Despite knowing that I was part of the family, I was incredibly moved when my brother-in-law, a retired [city] police detective and patriarch of the family, got up at our wedding and said to the 150 people (mostly straight) gathered there, that I am "family"...tears of joy!

The Dimmer Colors

Another common experience that participants expressed was how the announcement of a couple's wedding highlighted the lack of support and acceptance from friends, and family. Here is where we see the visibility and legal acknowledgement of a

relationship accentuate the *lack* of acceptance. Similar to a “backlash” phenomenon, here is where the legal proclamation of the legitimacy of a same-sex relationship brought forth the voices of opposition by those who those who had previously held their tongues. Three participants represented this experience in examples describing responses from significant family members.

Legal marriage clarified initially who truly [sic] supported me and my partner in our relationship. I knew my parents struggled with me being a lesbian however the fact that my mother wouldn't attend our ceremony except for the reception let me know how she truly [sic] felt. My only sister's true colors also showed through. I thought I had her support until I told her we were getting married. Somehow she could not handle the legality of it and although she remained civil at family gatherings, our relationship was fractured for about 2 years. (She came to the wedding but pictures show her crying, not happy tears).

My parents, who have never been supportive of my coming out, not only did not attend our wedding, but did not acknowledge the engagement party, wedding shower, or wedding invitations that were sent to them. They also did not acknowledge the letter my in-laws sent inviting them to meet prior to our wedding. Now, 1 1/2 yrs after our wedding, my parents have yet to acknowledge my marriage but have stated their sadness around not having me in their lives

My partner's parents refused to come to the wedding. They hadn't spoken to us for the first 8 years, and they denied their grandchildren for the first few years of their lives, but in more recent years there had been a significant thawing. By the time of the wedding, we were seeing them regularly and sharing holidays with them, and our children (then 8 and 6) considered them their grandparents. We invited them to the wedding. They refused, and that was incredibly painful, a real setback, and in a way it was a reality check: we could have a relationship with them, but clearly that relationship had conditions and limits. Oddly, they have carried on since then just as they were before, continuing to see us and call and so forth. But in terms of support, the wedding made it clear that her parents would be willing to withhold their support, and we have continued to be wary in dealing with them.

Access to Benefits

One way individuals, couples and families experience social supports is through access to practical and institutional resources. Many participants discussed how marriage

affected their interactions with the legal system, health care institutions, and other institutions that influenced their day by day quality of life. Examples ranged throughout the responses from access to legal and social benefits when having children, increased security to health insurance and medical decisions regarding their spouse, entitlement to take advantage of partner benefits with airline tickets, to the simple phone contacts with utility companies. Many participants expressed that prior to marriage they had already received health benefits through domestic partnership recognition at their places of employment, while others were able to access health benefits for a spouse for the first time after marriage.

This area of legal and institutional benefits raised the interesting question many participants had as to what happens to their marital status when they cross state borders. If they are in a state that does not recognize same-sex marriage, will they be given hospital access to their spouse if something happened while visiting that state? Will their child's birth certificate with both parent's names on it still be recognized? The essays revealed not only the sense of security that comes with access to benefits, but the lack of clarity that still surrounds this new phenomenon of same-sex marriage.

Participants described this both the remaining ambiguity of same-sex marriage recognition as well as the added clarity of the legal status.

The other interesting aspect of being legally married in Massachusetts is the fact that if we travel, we wonder if our marriage dissolves as we cross borders into other states. When visiting my wife's brother in a different state, can I still call her my wife - I do anyway, but does it become a lie to everyone else simply because we drove 2 hours?

...with regards to the birth of our child, there are still a lot of untested areas, but the laws seem to make more space for a non-traditional family. God forbid

Getting legally married has made a larger difference for us in terms of things like auto insurance and health insurance. The ability to have both of our names on our child's birth certificate will be big. But our social supports have been in place long before we ever got legally married.

...knowing my will now says spouse, knowing that my health care proxy says spouse and getting those "normal" things for others as part of my existence [sic] has bene [sic] like a bit of a weight lifted.

The Wedding Ceremony

Many couples found the actual wedding ceremony extremely significant. Some were surprised at how significant the show of support from their wedding would be. It is known that same sex couples often have non-binding commitment ceremonies as a way to celebrate their relationship. Until marriage became legal, commitment ceremonies were the only options same-sex couples had. Many couples had never dreamt it would be with in there legal rights in this lifetime to be legally married, and as significant as their commitment ceremony may have been for them, they were surprised by how powerful the right to a "true" wedding was to them.

The process of preparing for and having a true wedding allowed us to fully experience the love and support of our families and friends. It was a big acknowledgment and helped us feel validated as a couple in a way we had never experienced before.

... the wedding itself was incredibly affirming. We had more than 100 friends and family there, including a lot of my conservative aunts and uncles; all of my mother's close-knit social group of seven friends; my three siblings and their families; and my partner's two siblings and their families. The nieces and nephews were all in the wedding. I felt especially gratified by my parents' pride and their eagerness to share this occasion with their friends.

Some of our friends and relatives (even the ones on my side who had not met my then lover/partner) took proactive initiatives in wanting to celebrate our marriage, and it never occurred to us that they would be so proactive about it. We were heartened and overjoyed to have both of our relatives travel from afar to celebrate

our marriage. In general, each of us feels loved and unquestionably included by the other's extended family. And the rare or few issues that arose pertained less to any leaking homophobia and more to your typical garden variety couple-in-law snags, glitches, itches, and hiccups. Etcetera, and so on and so on.

I feel mixed about this. The most powerful outcome was at the wedding itself - a public acknowledgment of our relationship in our church with our families, friends and co-workers. Everyone loved how personal it was and I think they "got it" and were able to go tell others about it. However, since then, not much has changed in the greater straight-dominated world. We are lucky to live in a very progressive area where acceptance is usually more prominent than oppression anyway and we continue to enjoy and appreciate those privileges.

The wedding itself was the most affecting and important aspect of the whole thing: everyone seemed very moved, and inspired, by the event, especially the straight people. That helped me feel like our relationship had broad "community" support.

On my part, I think having them at the wedding, along with my partner's parents, to show us support, love, and an official welcoming into the family has been more meaningful than I can describe.

Recognition

One important result of legalizing same-sex marriage was the visibility of same-sex couples and families. The survey responses showed the benefits of visibility and the backlash that accompanied visibility. Despite how visibility can highlight the lack of acceptance through negative responses, for most the recognition from marriage has been supportive. Recognition was broken into three categories: work, family, and general examples.

Recognition at Work

The ability to obtain and maintain employment is a core piece of individuals, couples, or family's basic survival. Therefore, in discussing social supports, security in one's employment becomes a crucial part of the sense of safety and security. The acceptance and sense of belonging at ones work is also an aspect of quality of life and

happiness for most individuals. Participants who discussed their work environment on the survey highlighted the effect legal marriage has had at work.

the example that comes to mind is that i started a new job and within about 3 months got married. i shared this information with my new coworkers and they had a little get together during lunch one day, acknowledging the wedding and giving us a very nice gift. that kind of recognition of our relationship would not have happened if we had continued to remain unable to marry and the whole experience brought us closer.

I was open and out everywhere before, but feel that my work colleagues now better understand and accept the nature and the importance of our relationship.

I have had several situations that have emerged since being married: * on a number of occasions at my place of employment i have had to consult with and seek direction from human resources staff to help me understand how various benefits, regulations, etc. apply to me as someone who is married in the state but considered single by federal standards. in working with HR staff i have sometimes been met with a "oh, you're one of those" type of response, while on other occasions i have gotten what i think is a more standard or typical response (that is, the type of response i would think a straight person would get). no matter the type of response i've gotten, i have been helped sufficiently to get the information i needed * in general i have found that more people in a variety of settings--personal and professional--are asking if i am married, mostly as a means of determining how they should refer to my spouse. * on occasion someone will refer to my spouse as my "wife" while others typically still use the term "partner." i often refer to or introduce her as my "spouse." [Typing given as in original response.]

Recognition from Family

Stories of participants showed an increase in their sense how their relationship was recognized and acknowledged since legal marriage. The stories varied from an increase of support from families that were already supportive, to a more tangible support increase from families who had not been supportive prior to marriage. Additionally, participants discussed that marriage gave their families the access to the language of marriage as they present their gay son or lesbian daughter to the world.

Social supports have been strengthened - I think not only from my perspective, but from the supports' perspective as well. My parents have always been supportive of me, but in the past they have grappled with how to acknowledge my partner to their friends and colleagues [sic]. Now, because we are legally married, they can say just that - and they can defend it because even while the marriage is no [sic] legal across the U.S., it is legal in Massachusetts and they can point that out if needed, although they have not shared any need for pointing it out.

Since we live in a very liberal and accepting area, daily life has not changed. However, there is an increased feeling of solidarity and celebration of a legal victory. I believe that my parents, who have a history of being negative, have become more accepting. In particular, my father always asks about my partner and treats her as part of the family in a way that didn't exist before.

Positively. One of my siblings would always just do a curt "hello" ask for me whenever he called, even after a decade of being together. After our marriage, he would talk to my partner; one evening I came home to find that they had talked for half an hour!

My family is far more inclusive of my partner and our child than they were before marriage.

I have experienced a surge in support for being in a committed relationship from acquaintances [sic] and strangers to family, friends and colleagues. The friend/family/colleague group had always been supportive, but the marriage gave them another handle - another way of expressing their support. Strangers and peripheral people were surprisingly supportive and excited about this new social phenomenon. Re: family - my mother, who had grown quite comfortable with her lesbian daughter was brought to even higher levels of understanding the personal as well as the social/political meaning of same-sex marriage.

My mother, always supportive, has been even more so. Marriage means a lot to her and she was excited to participate in our ceremony. She talks with me more as another married woman now. My 6 siblings have also been very supportive and 3 were able to travel to the wedding. We have received recognition and support from heterosexual friends and acquaintances as well as acknowledgement in work

General Recognition

The survey responses showed that people tend to show an increased respect for relationships when the commitment is clear. This surveyed showed that legal marriage

was one way that the commitment became more visible and respected. For many, as will be discussed in another section, having children together emphasized the commitment before legal marriage. One participant felt that marriage brought even more respect than the commitment of having children together. Another participant expressed how simple, yet powerful the effect legal marriage had on others recognizing the legitimacy of his relationship. Marriage brought a heightened sense of legitimacy and equality from people who knew the participants pre-marriage.

seems to force folks to recognize me as "married", i.e. not available for casual flirtation (even though we have children, etc) and co-workers to actually ask about my family.

think marriage gave legitimacy and validation from and within our social supports, including family and friends. It was something that they could identify with directly, as many are straight and married. It afforded an element of familiarity and dameness[sic] with which they could identify.

Access to Language

In conversation with gay and lesbian friends the topic of language often comes up. What do we call each other? Common terms such as partner, lover, girlfriend/boyfriend, or life partner all have their problems. Partner could be a business partner. Lover narrows the relationship down to its sexuality. Girlfriend or boyfriend doesn't express the commitment of a long term relationship. Life partner is ok, but a bit dramatic and certainly not mainstream. Legal marriage gives same-sex couples, their friends and their families, the option to access mainstream language. Access to language that is understood was a common theme through out the survey as a way participants experienced support.

Effects have been minimal and rather subtle. I feel a bit different in how I represent our relationship – benefiting [sic] from the powerful simplicity of the word "husband" to describe him to colleagues, new neighbors, service providers and customer service agents. Our previously supportive relationships with

extended family have not changed much...though perhaps some of my husband's siblings have taken to introducing me as their "brother-in-law". Again, the marriage has conferred access to traditional language, where previously none technically applied. [Punctuation given as in original response.]

Extremely positively. While we have been "out" individually and in our relationship for many years, and have had the support of our families and straight friends, I cannot underestimate the incredible power of the word "marriage". The understanding by straight people (and gay and lesbian folks as well) of an intrinsic meaning to this word, and how it reflects our relationship, is palatable [sic], in the subtle, every day interactions. People understand what marriage is in a much clearer way than they do "civil unions". To us, we are "partners". To them, I am her "wife". [Punctuation given as in original response.]

Though sometimes taken aback by referring to my husband as just that, a husband, people take notice in substantively [sic] different ways when striking up casual conversation.

As for social supports in a larger context (people you encounter as part of routine daily activities but not friends/family), it has been easier to establish ourselves as a committed couple when we can simply say we are married.

i feel my marriage has a status that my relationship would not otherwise have had. as an individual, i can claim a "married" status with strangers, nad [sic] this carries a weight with it. my family and friends have always been supportive, but again, i think because [sic] many of thme [sic] have had the experience of marriage, they can now relate to my remationship [sic] in terms that they understand better.

Recognition after Commitment Ceremonies or Having Children Prior to Legal Marriage

The findings previously noted that many couples experienced greater visibility from legal marriage than from their prior non-binding commitment ceremonies. Some participants however experienced recognition and support from their commitment ceremonies and their legal marriage was just icing on the cake.

Not much effect probably because we were already together for 21 years and had a child together (he was 14 when we got married). However, we may have a stronger sense of legitimacy [sic] with a bit of humor about the whole thing.

We got married in a religious ceremony about a year before we got legally married, and I think that shaped our experience of social supports more than getting legally married.

Our family, on both sides, has always been supportive. We've been together for years and have been out to our family and friends the entire time. Both my husband and I are originally from [mid western state], but we moved to [city] in 2000. Most of our family still lives in [mid western state]. Prior to moving to [city], we had a commitment [sic] ceremony in [mid western state]. More than 150 family and friends attended. My husband's aunt officiated. It was a big wedding, and kind of a going away party too since we moved a few days later. When same-sex marriage was legalized in Massachusetts, we had a small civil ceremony at [city] City Hall on 21 May 2004. Family that could make it from [mid western state] came to the ceremony, as did many friends we had made in Massachusetts. Since our families have always been loving and supportive of us, I didn't feel anything change with our social supports from them, but I can tell you they are delighted that we could get legally married.

Because we had a large commitment ceremony in 2002 it has made little difference to our friends and family-- there was a major shift after that. Mostly, it is with the outside world, telephone agents, etc that want to know our relationships. i can say she is my wife at hospital etc. I also feel more entitled to ask for health insurance for her.

By comparison, I believe becoming parents 13 years ago had a much more dramatic affect on how we were treated by extended family. From the time our daughter was born, my parents dramatically improved their treatment of my partner. Having parenting in common with my in-laws also has brought us closer.

No Change...

Some participants voiced that they had not experienced any changes in their experience of social supports since becoming legally married. Some explained why, some just stated no change.

I would say that it hasn't changed much.

It has not made a great deal of difference. We were very much regarded as a family before legal marriage. Since we didn't regard it as a huge change in our relationship, others have not either.

no change whatsoever. we felt fully recognized as a 'married' couple before the law changes [sic], by community and family. we chose to get married as a political act more than any other factor. we had had a ceremony and drawn up numerous legal documents long before 2004. so the marriage itself was only a semantic issue about stepping up to show a constituency and participate in a legal-social sea change around gay rights.

Since we live in a very liberal and accepting area daily life has not changed. However, there is an increased feeling of solidarity and celebration of a legal victory.

I don't perceive any impact. We always enjoyed the kind of domestic partner protection of health insurance benefits etc so the material benefits feel the same. Our family relationships went unchanged.

Nothing has changed for me in the long run. Coming out was the process and I did that in 1999. That is where the social support of some friends weened [sic] off. They were overly religious and though they new [sic] I was a good person didn't believe in "my choice". Other than that I had one sister who mentioned she was sure about gay marriage because of (you guessed it) her religious upbringing. Funny I lived in the same house as her and went to the same church and I don't ever remember hearing anything about homosexuality at all. She was totally fine with supporting me finding a boyfriend and all so it took me back to ear her say this. I talked to her at lendgth [sic] about who I am. A hard worker, a dedicated volunteer at numerous organizations icluding [sic] working at charity events, I brother/son/friend who would do anything for those around him before thinking of himself... I asked how someone like me could be told "no. you can't arry [sic] and love like other eople[sic]". She could answer it. She agreed I was right but... Everyone else has always been there for me and they continue to do so

Idiosyncratic Responses of Interest

This last section of the findings explores some of the less common responses, however responses of interest. These responses are broken into sub-categories that best describe their contribution to this research.

The Children of Same-Sex Parents

The experience of the children, from the young to the now grown children, was a voice heard within participant's responses. In some form or another, these responses show the importance of a family being recognized as a legitimate, valued, equal family to bring our children an experience of supports in their world.

It also had a profound effect on our now grown children and their reflections on the support they lacked as kids and how they believe this would have made a difference then were very poignant and bittersweet. It connected our family of origins more--they felt connected as family in a way they hadn't. I don't think it

changed much for the homophobic... Practically, it was great to finally get health insurance together. Long overdue. Still frustrating how many things are also federal which it does not effect. Still, it makes our commitment and intentions with regard to everything from love to money crystal clear.

Even though our relationship has been long term and committed, getting married gave a feeling of stability to us and especially our daughter. We included her in our marriage ceremony, exchanging vows with her and giving her a circle necklace signifying the unending love and commitment [sic] of our family. We moved to [town], MA from [state] so we could get legally married. Also, living in [state] for our daughter was not a good support system for her. She was teased and left out in school and parents didn't want their kids going to a house with two mommies. Our daughter had become antisocial and would cry and fight us every day before school. Moving to [town], where there are many same sex couples, has helped our daughter tremendously [sic]. The turning point for me was when our daughter had a project in school when she had to share/bring in something that was different about her family. I asked her if she was going to bring in something about her having two mommies. She said, "Of course not, everyone here has two mommies." She ended up bringing in something about her Mami being from Puerto Rico. Overall, we feel validated as a couple since we are legally married. I also think that being in the town of [town] helps us feel that we are able to be more open. We can actually walk down the street here holding hands with no odd looks our way.

My oldest son was the most affected by our marriage. He became very angry when he discovered that our marriage prior to his birth was not legally recognized and that we had to do it again to make it legal. As a result we had a very simple, backyard celebration. Our son however continues to be shocked and angered as he realizes that not only is Mass. the only state we are leagally [sic] married in, but also that that right may be revoked. This is crazy to him, as if we were telling him that women might loose the right to vote or blacks might have to sit in the back of the bus again. His world is moving forward and in that world gay marriage is not only legal but celebrated.

Our daughter has two daddies but two legally married daddies.

Politics of Marriage

The act of getting married for some, as mentioned in prior responses showed the political emphasis on the choice to marry. The following response discusses an important point on the politics of visibility and supports as it discusses that same sex relationships were just as legitimate before the state sanctioned access to legal marriage.

A lot of our friends and family members act as if through the marriage, our relationship has reached a new level of legitimacy. A few even act as if the marriage signifies a new level of commitment. While I appreciate the recognition, I'm uncomfortable with this characterization of us. It's an accident of history and geography that we were able to get married, and our relationship is no more committed, solid, or legitimate now than it was for the first 17.5 years. I think it's because straight people view marriage as the ultimate form for a relationship to take, but as lesbians we realize that legal marriage is a legal construct. Our getting married signified not the full realization of our love, but the full realization of our citizenship. So this aspect of social "support" -- people recognizing our relationship in a new way -- is something that has made me really uneasy.

Internalized Homophobia

The intent of this research to explore individual experiences of social supports was exemplified clearly in one participant's response about her legal marriage causing her to grapple with her own internalized homophobia. One's experience of social supports is strongly linked to their perception of the quality of the relationship to those social supports.

Both of our families have recognized our significance in each other's lives since early in our relationship. However, the process of planning the wedding made us face our own internalized homophobia and the ways in which we didn't feel **TOTALLY** supported and recognized by our families. Their amazing response to our marriage made us have to face the fact that we are *TRULY* loved and that our relationship is not just tolerated but celebrated, recognized, cherished, applauded etc. Hearing our parents refer to each other as my daughter's wife brings familial acceptance to a *WHOLE NEW LEVEL*. Before getting married we knew we were accepted, but having my father get up at our wedding (a man who struggled the most with our relationship and had reached "tolerance") and give the most amazing, emotional welcome speech [sic] to my wife was a defining moment in my life. While we go into every experience (impending motherhood, housebuying [sic], taxes, jobs etc) together expecting to have to fight a little more than some of our neighbors - we have been forced to question our assumptions based on the overwhelming outpouring of love around our wedding. If we could have doubted their love of us - then we could be wrong about anything. The public, legal pronouncement of our love and marriage has had the greatest impact on that mindset. It hasn't changed our love, roles, relationship structure, taxes etc, it has profoundly changed our world view about what we are entitled to and how much support we have in this world.

Taxes

Last but not least, these findings will conclude with a section on love and taxes.

The complex theme of how same-sex couples need to register as married on Massachusetts state taxes, yet single on federal taxes was a topic several participants pointed out. These type of legal complexities can cause a sense of insecurity for many, as lying on your taxes can result in serious consequences. The question remains unclearly answered, is a couple who is legally married in Massachusetts lying when they file as single on federal taxes, even though they have no choice but to file as single federally?

The biggest issue is that it has complicated our tax filings. We file as married/separate [sic] in Mass and as single to the feds. I pay extra taxes on the value of his healthcare and my company pays payroll taxes on that value as well. This is unfair.

Now that it is tax season, it is increasingly different being recognized as married in Massachusetts, but fundamentally ignored federally. In order to file taxes and be consistent, we felt that we had to file separately instead of as a married couple. I haven't really had any negative experiences, except that filing income tax returns is harder, since we can't file as married for the federal return.

Summary

One participant summed up the general spirit of the responses of this survey with the following brief statement:

the ability to use terminology that is equal to hetero marriages and families makes me feel more equal. the legal part makes me feel protected by the law and held by the culture. it is easier to be out and comfortable when able to say we are married. people understand that language. [Typing given as in original response.]

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to explore the effect legalizing same-sex marriage has had on the experience of social supports of same-sex couples who were legally married in Massachusetts since May 17, 2004. Legal same-sex marriage, legal currently only in the state of Massachusetts, represents a step toward equal rights of a group of people who have been discriminated against in the United States. These findings represent how the visibility of this population of same-sex couples in the early stages of obtaining access to the right to marry has affected their experience, both from the backlash and the validation that accompanies visibility. This chapter examines the data in light of prior research, discusses limitations of the study and suggestions for further research, and suggests implications for social workers.

How Has Same-Sex Marriage Accentuated the Experience of Social Supports for Individuals Who Married a Same-Sex Partner?

Participants who felt a heightened sense of acceptance and legitimacy also experienced a heightened sense of support since legally marrying their same-sex partner. Some experienced an increase of tangible support while others experienced an increase of their perception of existing supports. Either way, the legal validation and visibility of their relationship after marriage positively affected their experience of support albeit differently amongst the various groups previously researched, such as friends, family, co-

workers, and neighbors (Dritt, 1986; Schabot, 2005). Given that same-sex marriage has only been legal since May, 17 2004, and that this legality is only recognized in one state, studies on this population's experience is limited in its perspective of long term effects. However, prior research on the importance of both marital status (Kim & McKerny) and access to social supports (Griffin, 1985; Sarason et al. 1983) provide a baseline applicable to the importance of marriage and social supports for the physical and mental well being for gay and lesbian individuals, couples and families.

Positive experiences of social supports varied in the participant's responses from the subtle to the dramatic. One participant wrote "I just feel like I have a right to be in the world—to be seen and heard. I do not have to hide anymore. I feel legitimate." This type of internal sense of legitimacy can be viewed as a powerful occurrence in light of a study such as Kim and McKerny's (2002) that examined the *protection perspective* and *selection perspective* effects of marriage on one's psychological, emotional and physical well-being. The protection perspective looks at how marriage status and the quality of the marriage, opposed to co-habitation, related to the benefits for one's overall well-being. The selection perspective looked at how one's overall well-being affected the quality of the marital relationship. The assumption can begin to be made that gay and lesbian individuals well-being, and the quality of their relationships, would likewise benefit from access to legal marital status, social recognition, and acceptance of the relationship.

The findings were consistent with the four part study by Sarason et al.(1983) when their Social Support Questionnaire survey responses discussed stronger social supports contributing to "more rewarding relationships" (p.135) and positive affects on one's self-concepts and "ability to control aspects of their environment" (p.136).

Participants of this current study on same sex married couples discussed the wedding ceremony and the access to the understood language of marriage to strengthen the support and bond with immediate family, relatives, in-laws, coworkers, neighbors and friends. The stronger the quality of one's support system, or eco-system, then the more apt the individual, couple or family is to experience a benefit to one's psychological, emotional, and physical well-being (Hartman & Laird, 1983, Kim & McKerny, 2002). This appeared to be true for the gay and lesbian participants in this study as it had been for prior studies on heterosexual's experiences of the effect social supports. (Dritt, 1986; Griffith, 1985; Kim & Mckerny, 2002; Sarason et al., 1983; Schabot, 2005).

Understanding the bridge between why some participants had a positive experience in relation to their connection to social supports, and others felt their legal marriage accentuate the lack of support or discrimination that they experienced, may best be discussed through the lens of Harro's (2000) Cycle of Socialization. Harro (2000) pointed out that the way to bring change, to interrupt the status quo of the cycle of socialization is to question and challenge the cycle. In this current debate on same-sex marriage, similar to the debate over interracial marriage as previously discussed in the 1967 case *Loving v. Virginia*, questioning the current understanding of who has access to the right to marry is a step toward ending the socialized discriminatory definition of marriage today. When the United States Supreme Court in *Loving v. Virginia* ruled that the "freedom to marry has long been recognized as one of the vital personal rights essential to the orderly pursuit of happiness by free men" (par. 25) it was at that time referring to expanding this right to interracial marriages, specifically in a case involving the marriage of "Mildred Jeter, a Negro woman, and Richard Loving, a white man," (par

10). The Loving v. Virginia case described that Richard Loving and Mildred Jeter had been married in the District of Columbia in 1958 and returned to their state of residence Virginia, where interracial marriage was banned. The Lovings were sentenced to one year in jail, which would be suspended if the Lovings left Virginia for 25 years. The Lovings moved to the District of Columbia and continued with their court battle until finally, 9 years later; in 1967 the United States Supreme Court ruled in their favor stating that banning interracial marriage was in violation of the Due Process Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment of the Constitution. We can easily imagine that the acquaintances, friends, loved ones and institutions that showed support to the Lovings over their nine year fight for equality provided a validating experience for the Lovings. Similarly, those that expressed a lack of support toward the Lovings plight would have provided an accentuated sense of discrimination and isolation for the Lovings.

How Has Same-Sex Marriage Accentuated the Lack of Supports for Individuals Whom Married a Same-Sex Partner?

Participants also spoke about how becoming married to a same-sex partner painfully revealed the lack of support and acceptance that their families, or other usual sources of supports, withheld from them. Survey responses described family that refused to attend the wedding ceremony, or worse refused to acknowledge that a wedding even occurred in some cases. Some participants did not seem surprised as their family had never accepted their relationship, while others described this refusal to attend the wedding as a setback in their experience of perceived support such as in story of the participant who's parents had finally joined in building a grandparent relationship with the grandchildren (children of their gay child) but refused to attend the wedding.

The phenomenon of “backlash” has been a common response when there is advancement in a marginalized group’s civil rights. In this debate on same sex marriage backlash can be illustrated by the United States Congress passing the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) in 1996 in reaction to the 1993 Hawaii Supreme Court ruling in 1993 that same-sex couples had the right to marry, a decision that was never implemented due to a 1998 Hawaiian State Constitutional amendment banning same-sex marriage which overturning the 1993 state courts decision (Eskridge, 2002). The United States Congress Summary and Analysis of DOMA stated in its introduction on May 7, 1996:

The first substantive section of the bill is an exercise of Congress' power under the "Effect" clause of Article IV, section 1 of the Constitution (the Full Faith and Credit Clause) to allow each State (or other political jurisdiction) to decide for itself whether it wants to grant legal status to same-sex "marriage." This provision is necessary in light of the possibility of Hawaii giving sanction to same-sex "marriage" under its state law, as interpreted by its state courts, and other states being placed in the position of having to give "full faith and credit" to Hawaii's interpretation of what constitutes "marriage." Although so-called "conflicts of law" principles do not necessarily compel such a result, approximately 30 states of the union are sufficiently alarmed by such a prospect to have initiated legislative efforts to defend themselves against any compulsion to acknowledge same-sex "marriage."

This clearly shows that this federal regulation to sanction states from not acting in the tradition of the Constitution’s Full Faith and Credit Clause, which provided states to recognize marriages from other states despite slight differences in state marriage laws, was a “backlash” response to Hawaii’s Supreme Court decision. Certainly the scale of the act of congress differs from the act of a parent not acknowledging one’s wedding, but in

relation to one's sense of their social identity (Harro, 2000), both are significant. One comes from an institutional discrimination while the other stems from a personal level.

Harro (2000) discussed how our social identities and personal sense of self shape our norms, values and our sense of our options in life. If our perceptions of our options are limited then we can assume our positive sense of self is harmed, decreasing our sense of safety in our environment and increasing our anxiety (Sarason et al., 1983). The cycle of socialization (Harro, 2000) shows how the rejection experienced by some participants when they announced their wedding reinforced the negative association to their social identity-as gay or lesbian. The cycle then continues as this negative self concept is reinforced on an institutional and cultural level, then through a sense of lacking access to supports, which all leads to an increase of silence, rage and isolation. In the context of this study it can be assumed that this process then causes a decrease in one's sense of psychological, emotional and physical well-being (Dritt, 1986; Griffith, 1985; Kim & Mckerney, 2002; Sarason et al., 1983; Schabot, 2005). Furthermore, when a marginalized person attempts to speak up for themselves to create change, or soften their rage, they take risks of being labeled a troublemaker and experiencing further marginalization.

The politics and the vulnerabilities that accompanied visibility were expressed in the response of one participant when she stated:

It's an accident of history and geography that we were able to get married, and our relationship is no more committed, solid, or legitimate now than it was for the first 17.5 years. I think it's because straight people view marriage as the ultimate form for a relationship to take, but as lesbians we realize that legal marriage is a legal construct. Our getting married signified not the full realization of our love, but the full realization of our citizenship. So this aspect of social "support" --

people recognizing our relationship in a new way -- is something that has made me really uneasy.

This statement points to the fact that despite one's experience of social supports or acceptance, one's legitimacy remains equal, recognized or not. Many other participants echoed similar responses as they described that their relationship continued on as strongly as it had been prior to marriage and they continued to enjoy supports that had been there for a long time. For some it seemed getting married was a political act rather than a step toward greater legitimacy. The legal victory of the civil right to choose and access marriage seemed to be a link between these groups.

Limitations of this Research and Questions for Future Study

One limitation of this study that became evident as the findings of this study was reviewed, was that the geographical area of participants was not noted in the demographic questions, and perhaps more importantly whether or not the participant experienced their community as an environment where it was easy or hard to be out as a gay or lesbian person. As of May 2007, the third anniversary of legal same-sex marriage, 9695 couples have been married in Massachusetts (Health and Human Services Vital Records, Statistical Data, personal communication, 2007). The survey was sent to organizations across Massachusetts but because the demographic section of the survey did not include location the geographical diversity of participants is unclear. The survey was also limited in its racial diversity as only 9 participants out of the 73 respondents identified as something other than white.

One aspect of the survey's limitation through the use of Survey Monkey was that it can not be determined which of the 73 participants who responded were among the 53

who answered the one essay question. Therefore the demographic data, such as race, is not distinguishable within the narrative data. Additionally, since the survey was only accessible through the internet, the responses were limited to a population who had internet access.

The potential bias inherent in how this study's findings were viewed may stem from the fact that this researcher identifies as a lesbian and has been legally married in Massachusetts to her same-sex partner. The strength of this study is that it contributes to the small body of literature on the experience of gay and lesbian identified people, particularly this new population of legally married gay and lesbian individuals.

This study begins to outline many possible topics for future study that would further be a benefit for clinical social workers and to add to the literature of the gay and lesbian population's experience. First is the obvious need for on going research on the effect of same-sex marriage in order to understand the long term impact. Along with this long term impact, another need is to collect data on the effects of the backlash of the political and legal debate on same-sex marriage. Presumably this research correlates with research that has already been documented and contributes to the historical understanding of other marginalized groups experience gaining civil rights and recognition. How this impact differs along the socio-economical and racial lines within the gay and lesbian population would also be important for a fuller understanding of the gay and lesbian community.

One phenomenon not addressed in this study is that some of the individuals legally marrying a same-sex partner identify as bisexual rather than as gay or lesbian. This choice of marrying someone of the same-sex for someone who is out as a person attracted to both opposite sex and same-sex possible partners may provide a unique

perspective that should not be overlooked. Similarly, the experience of couples with children, both those who had children together with a same-sex partner and those who left a heterosexual relationship and entered into a same-sex relationship, bringing their children with them, would provide several aspects for future study.

Other populations would be of interest in future study as well. Transgender individuals that married someone of the same-sex after they transitioned, or marrying someone of the now opposite sex after their transition, would add yet a further perspective. Family members, parents and extended relatives, experience of how same-sex marriage affected their acceptance of their same-sex loved one would be another population not directly addressed in this current study, but a study of this population would be beneficial.

Implications of This Study's Findings for Clinical Social Workers

Clinical social workers can better serve gay and lesbian individuals, couples, and families as they increase their understanding of these populations' experiences. Social workers undoubtedly will either work directly with the gay or lesbian population or with the family and friends of gays and lesbians at some point in their career. Given the political climate of the times, a thorough knowledge of same-sex marriage, the personal effect as well as the political debate will assist a clinical social worker in their assessment of a client's experience. The social climate and how it affects the quality of a client's access to resources cannot be ignored if a social worker desires to assist a client with full regards to their cultural experience.

This study's literature review and survey findings provide social workers with the complexities of same sex marriage legally and in individual's experiences. The overview

of the ambiguity of how marriage is interpreted as legal in one state, but not on a federal level is vital as we assess our client's eligibility for federal benefits. Additionally understanding the risks of legal marriage for some, such as marriage to a non U.S. citizen, will better equip social workers as they navigate through this legal ambiguity in individual cases. Clinically this study provides a range of experiences to inform social workers in matters such as how the legalizing of marriage contributes to both a sense of legitimacy as well as the possibility of backlash. Individuals who marry a same sex partner may uncover deeper levels of internalized homophobia and a clinician may miss this if assuming the marriage only represents celebration. Social workers will also work with clients who, similar to heterosexual couples, choose not to get legally married for a variety of political and personal reasons.

Understanding the perceptions and individual experiences of a client in their environment is valuable for a social workers assessment and engagement with the client. An example of this can be illustrated with the use of a lens such as Hartman and Laird's (1983) eco-map tool as we apply the eco-map to one participant's story as told in the Findings section of this study. A mother describes living in another state before moving to a gay/ lesbian friendly area in Massachusetts and legally marrying her same-sex partner in Massachusetts. Her daughter had been teased in their home state and other parents would not let their children come play at a house with "two mommies". Using this example to imagine ways a social worker may incorporate an eco systems lens, we would first consider that this mother may be hesitant to seek help as in many states it is unclear how the "two mommies" factor may be seen as a part of the child's problem instead of the social discrimination the child is experiencing. If the mother seeks supports

for the child, a worker connecting this family with resources should know what the individual provider's attitudes are about lesbian headed families before making these referrals. An intervention that exposes this family to an intervention that focuses on the mother's sexual orientation as the problem is at the least not going to receive the intended support, and at the worst may even experience further discrimination and destructive interventions. Whether or not this fear is real or perceived in the laws of her state, the social workers understanding of the relationship to support resources is crucial.

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Appendix A

Human Subjects Review Committee Approval Letter

January 27, 2007

Dawn Geller
14 Hamden Street
Northampton, MA 01060

Dear Dawn,

Your amended materials have been reviewed and all is now in order. We are, therefore, happy to give final approval to this most interesting study. I hope that you get lots of responses, but I am glad you put on an ending date.

Please note the following requirements:

Consent Forms: All subjects should be given a copy of the consent form.

Maintaining Data: You must retain signed consent documents for at least three (3) years past completion of the research activity.

In addition, these requirements may also be applicable:

Amendments: If you wish to change any aspect of the study (such as design, procedures, consent forms or subject population), please submit these changes to the Committee.

Renewal: You are required to apply for renewal of approval every year for as long as the study is active.

Completion: You are required to notify the Chair of the Human Subjects Review Committee when your study is completed (data collection finished). This requirement is met by completion of the thesis project during the Third Summer.

Good luck with your project.

Sincerely,

Ann Hartman, D.S.W.
Chair, Human Subjects Review Committee
CC: Mary Beth Averill, Research Advisor

Appendix B

Informed Consent Form

Dear Participant:

My name is Dawn Geller and I am conducting a brief, anonymous and confidential survey to assist with research for my Masters Thesis at Smith College School for Social Work. My research will explore how granting equal marriage rights to same-sex couples in Massachusetts has affected the experience of social supports for individual's who have been legally married to a same-sex partner since it became legally accessible May 17, 2004. Each participant's experience of social supports will be unique. Your participation in this study will contribute to the research and knowledge about the social supports that are experienced from legal marriage. Besides being a part of my Masters thesis the research will be used in other presentations and publications. The data from this study will contribute to the valuable research on the experience of gay, lesbian and bisexual people.

The survey will be accessed through the internet survey vehicle called Survey Monkey. Your confidentiality and anonymity will be protected. Information that you provide will not be used in any way that can identify you. To be eligible for participation you need to have been legally married to your same-sex partner in Massachusetts. All ages, races, socioeconomic classes and genders are encouraged to apply. The survey is estimated to take 15-30 minutes of your time. The survey will ask the demographic information of age, race, race of partner, gender, date of your legal marriage, length of time together before legal marriage, current relationship status (married, separated or divorced), and if you have children. There will be one essay question regarding your experiences of social supports since you have been married. All questions are optional.

You may discontinue the survey at any point once you have begun for any reason, or refuse to answer any part of the survey. Participation in this survey could potentially bring up uncomfortable feelings as you reflect upon your experience as a same-sex married person. A list of referral resources will be provided for counseling and support.

There will be no financial compensation of participating in this study. There will be a benefit for many participants in being able to share their experience with others and to have their experience be a part of research that will increase the understanding and quality of services utilized by GLBT individuals and couples. Additionally some individuals may benefit by reflecting on the social supports that they experience.

The internet survey vehicle of Survey Monkey guarantees to provide confidentiality and anonymity regarding any identifying information of your participation. I will receive survey answers only. I will not receive your name or email addresses. All materials will be kept in a secure place and destroyed after three years.

Participation in this study is voluntary. Once you have signed onto the survey through the Survey Monkey web site, you will be able to withdraw participation at any

point before you have submitted your survey. Regardless of if you choose to discontinue before submitting your survey or you choose to complete the survey you will be directed to a page thanking you for your time and have a list of support resources provided. I recommend that you keep a copy of this consent form and the resources provided for your records. Once you have submitted your survey there will not be any means of discontinuing participation as your submission will be confidential and unidentifiable.

If you have any questions you may contact me at:

By Email: dgeller@email.smith.edu

By phone: 413-584-2838

YOUR COMPLETION AND SUBMISSION OF THE SURVEY INDICATES THAT YOU HAVE READ AND UNDERSTAND THE ABOVE INFORMATION AND THAT YOU HAVE HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY, YOUR PARTICIPATION, YOUR RIGHTS AND THAT YOU AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY.

If you choose to participate in this study I would like to extend my thanks and appreciation of your time and contribution.

Thank You,

Dawn Geller

Smith College School for Social Work

Let Your Story Count

**Same-Sex Marriage research is needed
now!!!!**

**If you were legally married to a same-sex partner in
Massachusetts and you have 15 minutes to participate in a
confidential on line survey, please keep reading!**

I am a Masters in Social Work student working on my graduate thesis exploring how legalizing same-sex marriage has impacted individual's experiences of social supports. We are making history and our unique stories must be heard.

My hope is that as more information is known the visibility of our experiences will increase the quality of services provided to same-sex individuals, couples and families.

To participate go to:

www.surveymonkey.com/s.asp?u=353313286943

More information will be provided as well as my contact information at these sites.

Survey Closes March 16, 2007

THANK YOU

Dawn Geller, MSW Student

dgeller@email.smith.edu

Appendix D

Survey

1. Gender

Female

Male

2. Age

3. Race

4. Race of Partner

5. Number of Children

6. Date of Legal Marriage

7. Length of Time Together Before Legal Marriage

8. Current Status of Relationship

Married

Separated

Divorced

Definition of Social Supports

Social supports will be defined for the purpose of this study as the supports one experiences for their emotional, mental and practical well-being. How individuals interpret this will vary as this study is exploring personal experiences of social supports. The individual's perspective will be valuable.

Participant's responses will include how the visibility and recognition of their relationship through marriage has affected their experience of social supports in both positive and negative ways. For some it may be about parents who had to go beyond a cordial acknowledgement of a partner to grappling with genuine joyful acceptance of a partner into the family. For another participant this same cordial acceptance may turn into a family drawing a line and becoming outspoken against same-sex marriage as a back lash of the visibility marriage brought to their child's relationship.

Others may report a simple yet powerful sense of entitlement as an equal as they walk with their children through the neighborhood due to the legitimate status of marriage.

Short Essay

How has legal marriage affected your experience of social supports? Please share stories, brief examples or comments to answer this question in any way that feels important to you as a part of your experience of marrying a same-sex partner.

Thank You for your time and contribution to this important research.

THIS SURVEY WILL CLOSE MARCH 16, 2007.

Below are resources where supports can be located for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender participants if needed.

RESOURCES

Gay and Lesbian Helpline
Sponsored by Fenway Community Health
617-267-9001
888-340-4528
6pm.-11pm.

Gay and Lesbian National Hotline
888-843-4564
M-F 4pm.-12am.
Sat. 12pm.-5pm.
info@glbtnationalhelpcenter.org

Pink Pages
1-617-423-1515
www.linkpink.com

BGL Advertising Companies Community Pages
Community Groups for the G/L/B Community
www.bgladco.com/community/comgrp2.htm