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commitment without marriage : a project based upon an
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Amanda Sommers
Not Playing House the Way
Mom and Dad Do: Same-Sex
Commitment Without
Marriage

ABSTRACT

This exploratory study reveals the narratives of long-term, committed same-sex couples living in the Bay area of California, who decided not to marry in 2008 when it was temporarily legal. Thirteen participants were interviewed and their responses were transcribed and analyzed. They were asked to explain personal, social, and political influences on their perspectives on marriage. They were also asked to define commitment and the commitment markers used in their relationships. Lastly, they were questioned about their relationship with the current marriage equality movement.

Findings revealed that participants refrained from marrying due to negative associations they have developed toward the institution of marriage throughout their lives in addition to ways they define themselves as “outsiders.” They highlighted the history of the marriage institution as one that established patriarchy and ownership. Many participants reflected that the marriages of their parents illustrated models of commitment they did not want to replicate. Lack of connection with the gendered roles associated with marriage was also discussed as a deterrent.

Participants recognized the movements of the 1960s and 1970s as significant influences on their freedom to establish norms and roles in their relationships. The ways their relationships and styles of commitment differ from and resemble marriages are discussed. Given their perspective, participants describe the impact legalized same-sex marriage may have on the LGBT community.

This study provides insight from a perspective that is often overlooked as the country is increasingly polarized around the issue of marriage equality.

NOT PLAYING HOUSE THE WAY MOM AND DAD DO: SAME-SEX
COMMITMENT WITHOUT MARRIAGE

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

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2010

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The position of marriage in our society has undergone radical change, from the late eighteenth century shift away from marrying for economic and political gain toward marrying for love and personal satisfaction. Marriage continued to change, from the 1950s breadwinner/house-wife model, through the ‘free love’ era and equal rights revolution of the late 1960s and early 1970s, and into the mid 1970s and 1980s when divorce accelerated. It became more common for couples to cohabit unmarred in the 1980s and pregnancy out of wedlock was less of a stigma in the 1990s (Coontz, 2005). Marriage continues to transform, as the twenty-first century has ushered in controversial debates about same-sex marriage. The borders of the marriage institution are widening in some states and narrowing in others, as law-makers and the American people are swayed on this issue.

As California’s Proposition 8, prohibiting same-sex marriage, is currently being evaluated for constitutionality in the U.S. District Court, a battle which may continue on to the U.S. Supreme Court (Brown, 2009), arguments for and against marriage have become polarized around this controversial legal issue. Debates rampant and opinions strong, assumptions are made on both sides of the marriage equality argument about what same-sex marriage would mean for the LGBT community and the larger society. Therefore, this timely study strives to portray a more nuanced perspective from the experience of same-sex couples in committed, long-term relationships who decided not to

marry in 2008, when they had the opportunity in the state of California. Their narratives and insights offer another lens from which to view this issue and present an angle that is often overlooked in the current political climate.

Deciding not to marry despite deep commitment runs counter to what many in our society assume to be the culminating point in a relationship. However, given the social, personal, and political forces influencing same-sex couples, this study intends on examining the position marriage holds in our society and the way the dominant cultural concept of marriage intersects with those who have been excluded from the institution. Therefore, this study explores the perspective of committed, same-sex couples in relationships of five years or longer who decided not to marry. Their responses reveal factors that were influential in shaping their attitudes toward marriage. Couples also highlight their personal definitions of commitment and markers of commitment outside the institution of marriage, in addition to their relationship with the marriage equality movement.

Before their perspectives are conveyed, chapter two will review the history of same-sex marriage in the United States and the battles fought in some key states over the past forty years. This chapter will also provide an overview of the conservative, liberal, and radical perspectives on same-sex marriage, illustrating the great divergence of thought and arguments that seem to reflect a complexity of values and beliefs. Chapter three will explain the methodology used in conducting this research, including the rationale for this choice, the details of the sample, and the ethical considerations exercised. The Findings chapter will illustrate the perspectives of the thirteen participants interviewed, highlighting the themes that were discussed, while the final chapter will

discuss the relevance of these findings within the context of prior research. The final chapter will also address the implications this study has for the field of Social Work and suggestions for future research that could advance our understanding of same-sex commitment and attitudes about marriage.

CHAPTER II
LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This study attempts to explore the perspectives of same-sex couples who are in committed, long-term relationships yet chose not to marry in California in 2008, when it was legal. The research questions posed are: What influences same-sex couples not to marry when given the opportunity? How do these couples define and symbolize their commitments to each other outside of marriage? How do these couples relate to the marriage equality movement? In gaining insight around this area of research, the historical context of same-sex marriage and the controversy that surrounds it must be explored. Therefore, the literature reviewed is chosen to reflect an accurate representation of the various associations, values, and meanings woven into the institution of marriage. While there seems to be agreement on the historical narrative of same-sex marriage, the perspectives surrounding the challenges to the definition of marriage and its inclusion are greatly divergent, even among supporters of the LGBT movement. In an effort to provide a foundation for this study and aid in deconstructing the ideas gathered, a history of same-sex marriage is reviewed, followed by a more specific chronicle of the marriage equality movement in California. Conservative and liberal arguments opposed to marriage equality are outlined in addition to conservative and liberal arguments in favor of marriage equality.

History of the Marriage Equality Movement

While the marriage equality movement has been gathering speed within the past ten years, the legal battle around same-sex marriage arguably began in 1971. However, it was in the 1942 *Skinner v. Oklahoma* case that the United States Supreme Court ruled that we have the fundamental right to marry. With that precedent set, a same-sex couple applied for a marriage license in Minnesota in 1971 and were “refused on the sole ground that both members of the couple were of the same sex” (Hawkins, 2009, p. 754). In the case that ensued, *Baker v. Nelson*, the court ruled that the common usage of “marriage” within the law referred to a union between man and woman. When appealed with the argument that the definition of “marriage” violated the Equal Protection Clause of the 14th Amendment, the Minnesota Supreme Court found that that the Fourteenth Amendment does not require 'abstract symmetry,' in that the “Constitution does not require things which are different in fact or in opinion to be treated in law as though they were the same” (p. 754).

For twenty years, there were no significant challenges to laws that excluded same-sex couples from marriage. Then in 1991, the case of *Baehr v. Miike* challenged the state of Hawaii to prove that the statute banning same-sex marriage “furthered a compelling state interest” insofar as it was not a violation of equal protection.

The state argued that it had a compelling interest in...”protecting the health and welfare of children and other persons” and in “fostering procreation within a marital setting” and that this interest justified the statute banning same-sex marriage. However, the state failed to present sufficient evidence establishing or proving "any adverse impacts" to the public "resulting from same-sex marriage." (Hawkins, p. 755)

Therefore, it was ruled “that the Hawaiian statute prohibiting same-sex marriage violated the equal protection clause of the Hawaiian Constitution” (p. 755). That decision was

finalized in 1997. In 1998, a constitutional amendment was passed by Hawaii voters, reserving the right of marriage to opposite-sex couples. This amendment did not explicitly ban same-sex marriage, but stood alongside the Court's decision in *Baehr v. Miike*, thus negating it, making same-sex marriage was once again prohibited in Hawaii (p. 755-756).

The 1998 Hawaii amendment had a ripple affect across the country, as sixteen other states in the next seven years created similar amendments, specifying that marriage take place between a man and a woman (p. 756).

However, this remained a state issue until 1996 when the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) was signed into law by President Clinton. DOMA specified that, under federal law, marriage would be officially defined as a legal union between a man and a woman. DOMA also served to protect states from being required to recognize same-sex marriages performed in other states. This protection negates the Full Faith and Credit Clause of the U.S. Constitution, which "requires every state to recognize the 'public acts, records, and judicial proceedings of every other state'" (Hawkins, p. 756). In effect, given the discrepancy between states that were passing statutes to outlaw same-sex marriage and states that weren't, DOMA limited the rights of same-sex couples to the legislation within their state and took a stand on this debate at the federal level.

In 1999, it was Vermont's turn to face a similar constitutional challenge. However, this time, in *Baker v. State*, it was argued that same-sex couples were being denied the legal benefits and protections granted through marriage. While the Supreme Court of Vermont found "legislative intent" to mean marriage between a man and a woman, civil unions were created on July 1, 2000 to grant same-sex couples the 300+

state rights that opposite-sex married couples receive. However, due to DOMA, none of the 1,138 federal rights, such as social security benefits or immigrant privileges, could be included (Hawkins, p. 757-758).

Finally, in 2003 Massachusetts took a stand on same-sex marriage and the decision managed to stick. In the case *Goodridge v. Department of Public Safety*, it was argued that denying marriage licenses to same-sex couples was ‘incompatible with the constitutional principles of respect for individual autonomy and equality.’ The court disagreed with the state’s three defensive arguments. The first was that the purpose of marriage is for procreation. The court countered that the purpose of marriage is for long-term commitment, and that marriage is afforded to the “infertile and the terminally ill” (Hawkins, p. 761). The second argument asserted that opposite-sex marriage serves as the optimal setting for childrearing. The court rebutted that same-sex couples are granted rights that allow them to have children (through adoption, etc) and that nontraditional families have successfully raised children (p. 761). The last argument posited that extending marriage to same-sex couples would be a drain on the state’s limited resources. The court rejected this as an over-generalization of the needs and financial capacities of same-sex couples versus opposite-sex couples. Thus, on May 17, 2004 marriage licenses were issued and more than 1,000 same-sex couples were married on that first day (p. 762).

While Massachusetts provided an example for the nation of how the constitutionality of marriage equality can be argued, the fight for marriage equality did not ease up after 2004. “In the past year alone, marriage equality has been realized in Connecticut, Iowa, Maine, Vermont, and New Hampshire. At the same time, the number

of states explicitly defining marriage as a union between a man and a woman has increased to 30. This is a war with many fronts, and it has never been fought more furiously than now” (Gumbel, 2009, p. 55).

In the state of California, debate over same-sex marriage became heated in 2002, when voters passed Proposition 22, which restricted marriage to a union between a man and a woman. This Proposition was challenged by San Francisco Mayor Gavin Newsom, who “directed the city clerk to issue marriage licenses to same-sex couples” (Hawkins, 2009, p. 780). However, since the Mayor acted outside his jurisdiction, the California Supreme Court voided those licenses. While this was an ineffective way to overturn the Proposition, the Mayor’s actions called attention to this controversy.

In 2005, the California Registered Domestic Partner Rights and Responsibilities Act went into effect, allowing state rights for registered domestic partners. Then, on May 15, 2008, the “Supreme Court of California issued its opinion in *In re Marriage Cases* in which the Court held that the state law restricting marriage to a man and a woman was a violation of the Equal Protection Clause of the California Constitution” (Katz, 2008). More than eighteen thousand same-sex couples were married in the state in the six months that same-sex marriage was legal. However, Proposition 8, passed by voters on November 4, 2008, overturned the Court’s ruling when it amended the state constitution to prohibit same-sex marriage (Hawkins, 2009). In an effort to fight Proposition 8, the ACLU, Lambda Legal, and the National Center for Lesbian Rights argued in the case of *Strauss v. Horton* that the amendment was not valid under the state constitution (Hawkins, 2009). However, in May 2009 the California Supreme Court held that Proposition 8 was a legal enactment, but declared that marriages licensed before its

passage are valid. Thus, those who were married in the six-month window when same-sex marriage was legal in California have the right to remain married, creating a unique population of same-sex couples who have different rights than long-term, committed couples who did not marry during that time (Egelko, 2009).

Interestingly, it has always been propositions that have limited the rights of California's citizens around the issue of marriage. When the court was faced with the question of constitutionality, it ruled that restricting this right was a violation; however, the initiative process that exists in California enables a popular vote to overrule the state's highest governing body. "Voters [can] bypass the Legislature and have an issue of concern put directly on the ballot for voter approval or rejection" (California Secretary of State, 2007). In 2008, this enabled the Constitution to be changed to restrict the rights of a population of citizens to marry.

Since the passage of Proposition 8, opponents have argued that "the state Constitution contains a 'core guarantee' of equality that limits voters' amendment powers. A minority group's fundamental rights, they argued, should not be subject to repeal by majority vote" (Egelko, 2009). Attorney General Jerry Brown does not dispute the unconstitutionality of Proposition 8 (Robb, 6/2009) and Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger refuses to comment. However the initiative process limits the power of these elected officials.

Therefore, attorneys Ted Olson and David Boies are teaming up across party lines to fight this issue on a federal level. The case of *Perry v. Schwarzenegger* is currently on trial in the U.S. District Court and Olson and Boies predict that it will reach the U.S. Supreme Court within the next two years (Brown, 2009). They hope to prove that

Proposition 8 is a violation of the 14th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. Supported by the American Foundation for Equal Rights, Olson and Boies argue that Proposition 8 creates a population of second-class citizens and denies basic liberties and equal protection granted under the 14th Amendment. They hope to use the precedent-setting case of *Loving v. Virginia* (1967), which struck down the ban on interracial marriage, to defend marriage as a basic human right (Robb, 5/2009).

Egan and Sherrill (2005) argue that the marriage equality movement has been initiated by court cases, fueled by a handful of gay and lesbian plaintiffs instead of grassroots efforts. They highlight the backlash that has taken place in states across the country and attribute it to the lack of public support garnered around this struggle. Rauch (2009) agrees that “legislative victories afford the movement more momentum and popular legitimacy than judicial ones ever could.” According to Egan and Sherrill (2005), the LGBT movement is struggling to decide whether their goal is to achieve liberty or equality. Jagose (1996) agrees that LGBT ideology has shifted from a “liberationist model,” which sought freedom from the “constraints of a sex/gender system that locked them into mutually exclusive homo/hetero and feminine/masculine roles” (p. 59), to an ethnic model, which “demand(s) recognition and equal rights within the existing social system” (p. 61). Post-Stonewall, liberty was the focus, as the LGBT community fought to end laws that criminalized homosexual behavior and lifestyles. Signs of success were seen in the 2003 *Lawrence v. Texas* decision to decriminalize consensual sodomy. It is argued that the pursuit of same-sex marriage symbolizes a fight for equality, as partners desire to be treated the same as heterosexual married couples. “Whereas once LGBT people sought primarily the right to be left alone, they now increasingly demand the right

to be recognized as equals” (Egan & Sherrill, 2005, p. 230). This seems to be a generational shift in the priorities of the LGBT movement.

Resistance to the Marriage Equality Movement

In response to the battle to achieve marriage equality, arguments about the values of the LGBT community, the unique definition of marriage, and the protection of future generations have managed to capture the hearts of many Americans in opposing same-sex marriage.

Many of the arguments opposing same-sex marriage refer to the “social goods” that traditional marriage upholds. Santorum (2003) points out that the founding fathers drafted the constitution to “promote the general welfare” of society. He argues that the right to privacy prioritizes the individual instead of the common good. Traditional marriage, on the other hand, is about “building families and raising children,” which is healthy for men, women, and children because it leads to greater success and increased happiness and health. Because these are values that conform to the intentions of our forefathers, they must be protected.

Stewart (2008) elaborates on Santorum’s argument, stating that “genderless marriage” (as same-sex marriage is referred to in this source) suggests that “marriage and children are not really connected” and that marriage can be an “adult-centered [act]...entered into for its own sake, which lasts only as long as both partners are satisfied with the rewards” (p. 338). Hence, Stewart and Santorum fear that same-sex marriage prioritizes the couple and consequentially transforms marriage from a commitment made in order to preserve social good to an act done for the happiness and security of the individuals in the relationship itself. The same argument, made from one Christian

perspective comes from the Amicus Curiae brief of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention (Llewellyn, 2010). This brief states:

A desire to protect the sacred institution of marriage and the social goods it promotes is the source of religious opposition to redefining marriage as the union of any two people. ...Such a redefinition would send the message that marriage is about nothing more than adult desires. (p. 3)

Stewart (2008) does acknowledge the arguments that support same-sex marriage, namely, that same-sex relationships and identities are devalued if “personal commitment and public celebration” (p. 330) are not officially permitted; that state and federal benefits are harder and sometimes impossible to get; that adoption is legal but same-sex couples are not afforded the security of marriage, which benefits children; that gay men may benefit from the “civilizing” influence of marriage just as straight men do. However, Stewart asserts, as previously described, that these arguments stem from adult-centered priorities instead of a dedication to furthering society’s greater welfare by making such a commitment.

Another argument in opposition to marriage equality is that including same-sex couples into traditional marriage changes the inherent definition of marriage and requires opposite-sex couples to measure their unions as equal to those of same-sex couples. Stewart (2008) states, if marriage is adopted as “the union of any two persons,” this “becomes the sole definitional basis for the only law-sanctioned marriage that any couple can enter.” It follows that “legally sanctioned genderless marriage, rather than peacefully coexisting with the contemporary man-woman marriage institution, actually displaces and replaces it” (p. 319). This argument speaks to the difference in how these two unions are valued and the resistance to accepting an official equality between them. Stewart expresses discomfort with the idea that traditional marriage would be associated with “the

genderless marriage institution [which] is radically different in its aims and teachings” (p. 324). Stewart furthers his argument with a fear that “marriage will change” since “all marriage becomes genderless marriage; they’re not just joining the existing man-woman marriage institution” (p. 329). Herein, Stewart attempts to rebuke the argument that there is no downside to marriage equality, that opposite-sex couples will still marry and have their benefits.

One of the “aims and teachings” that Stewart finds missing from “genderless marriage” is the social obligation to focus on the next generation by “maximiz(ing) the private welfare provided to children conceived by passionate, heterosexual coupling” (p. 321). Included in this welfare is the “right of a child to know and be raised by her biological parents” (p. 321) and “physical, mental, emotional health and development” (p. 352) that is optimally gained by being raised by a “married mother and father in low-conflict marriage” (p. 352). Stewart argues that studies of same-sex couple child-rearing have been argued to fail the “good-science requirements” even though arguments are made that there are no differences in these ways of child rearing (p. 354). The Baptist brief (Llewellyn, 2010) contends that “redefining marriage sends a message that men and women are fungible and that children do not need both a mother and a father. Christians deplore this and other threats to the meaning and significance of marriage such as divorce, cohabitation and unwed childbearing” (p. 3).

Another “social good” that is disregarded through the acceptance of same-sex marriage, it is argued, is the calming affect that marriage has on men. Stewart (2008) states that marriage has the function of “bridging the male-female divide” as it is “society’s only means of transforming a male into husband-father, and female into wife-

mother, statuses and identities particularly beneficial to society” (p. 322). If men marry men, Stewart argues that men would not be formally connected and obligated to women and children and they would live “chaotic” lifestyles. This argument seems to suggest that all men should simply marry women, regardless of sexual orientation.

Similarly, Stewart (2008) also posits that marriage provides a container for intimacy that would otherwise result in “immense personal and social damage” (p. 325) since the sexual attraction between man and woman would be unguided. Stewart explains that “man-woman marriage” is “inherently normative” as a way of “channeling the erotic and interpersonal impulses between men and women... to each other and to the children that their sexual unions commonly produce” (p. 325). The Baptist brief agrees with Stewart and argues that “any sexual conduct outside the bond of marriage, the union of one man and one woman, is contrary to the will of God because God has designed marriage as the only appropriate context in which sexual relations should occur” (Llewellyn, 2010, p. 4). Stewart asserts that “genderless marriage” would be like “Monopoly money: it resembles true currency, but lacks the essential shared meaning that provides its value” (p. 328).

Lastly, the Baptist brief (Llewellyn, 2010) defends its Christian perspective against the accusation that opposition to same-sex marriage stems from social animus. The brief argues that the first amendment freedom of religion must be upheld and that Christian opposition is in line with Biblical prescription, which must be protected.

Critiques of the Marriage Equality Movement

While there are many who are actively fighting to oppose same-sex marriage, there are also conservative thinkers who are working to deconstruct the marriage equality movement in order to assess the challenges of this battle.

One assessment of the marriage equality movement is that it is inappropriate given that the nature of the union is insulting to many people's beliefs. While Paglia (1995) seems to feel that same-sex couples should be able to unite and commit to one another, she asserts that another type of ceremony should exist for people who want to marry outside of religion instead of "profan(ing) other people's sacred traditions" (p. 140). This creative solution seeks to separate civil unions from religious, but does not offer an answer to same-sex couples who value religion. However, perhaps this is not the role of a civil, legal ceremony.

Another critique of the movement is Arkes (1993) who states that "it is not marriage that domesticates men; it is women" (p. 155). Arkes believes the gay rights movement has never been driven by "a yearning for monogamy" (p. 156) and questions the consequences of marriage equality. He shows skepticism about the desire for committed, officially recognized unions that conform to the expectations of marriage and worries that expanding the definition of marriage will lead to an acceptance of sex with animals, sadomasochism, polygamy, and pedophilia (p. 156).

Furthering Arkes' skepticism, another perspective about the movement is that it is misleading to society. Posner (1992) argues that the movement communicates that same-sex marriage is a:

desirable, even noble, condition in which to live. This is not what most people in this society believe.... It would be misleading to suggest that homosexual

marriages are likely to be as stable or rewarding as heterosexual marriages.... Permitting homosexual marriage would place government in the dishonest position of propagating a false picture of the reality of homosexuals' lives. (p. 186)

This argument suggests that formal commitment is not the true picture of a homosexual lifestyle and that marriage would be used as a farce that is disingenuous. Paglia (1995) offers that gay men are not genuinely interested in monogamy or commitment. According to these perspectives, most same-sex relations are unstable, fluid, and uncommitted.

Sullivan, a religious and conservative thinker, has another perspective on this debate. Sullivan (1995) is more direct in articulating the conservative fear underlying the previous argument:

They mean by 'a homosexual life' one in which emotional commitments are fleeting, promiscuous sex is common, disease is rampant, social ostracism is common, and standards of public decency, propriety, and self-restraint are flaunted. They mean a way of life that deliberately subverts gender norms in order to unsettle the virtues that makes family life possible, ridicules heterosexual life, and commits itself to an ethic of hedonism, loneliness, and deceit.... So it is clear that whatever good might be served by preventing gay people from becoming parents or healing internal wounds within existing families, it is greatly outweighed by the dangers of unleashing this kind of ethic upon the society as a whole. (p. 148)

Sullivan argues that this is not necessarily the life of a homosexual since homosexuals are "as varied as the rest of humanity" and many may in fact be very "virtuous" (p. 149).

However, he continues, it is curious to ask, if homosexuals are defined as "depraved" in this way, what social incentives are offered as a deterrent for this stigmatized type of lifestyle. Sullivan points out that "there's little social or familial support, no institution to encourage fidelity or monogamy, precious little religious or moral outreach to guide homosexuals into more virtuous living" (p. 149). With this in mind, Sullivan wonders why conservatives wouldn't encourage better behavior and asserts that even the most virtuous homosexual is seen as less than a virtuous heterosexual, so this necessitates

“social discouragement to deter the waverers” (p. 149)- people who are questioning their sexuality.

To the argument that men need women to be sane, healthy, and civilized, Sullivan (1995) responds that this assumes women are always nurturing and follows that lesbian relationships must be better than heterosexual ones since two women would be more civilized than one. Sullivan also posits that a shared love and responsibility with anyone is better than bachelorhood, which is the natural alternative for most homosexuals who are shamed out of participating in same-sex relationships (p. 151).

In response to the critique that heterosexual pride and stability “would be undermined if society saw them as equivalent to homosexuals,” Sullivan (1995) responds that this view actually asserts that “the stigmatization of homosexuals is the necessary corollary to the celebration of traditional family life” (p. 152). He argues, “Why would accepting that such people exist, encouraging them to live virtuous lives, incorporating their differences into society as a whole, necessarily devalue the traditional family? It’s not a zero-sum game” (p. 152-3).

Commitment

Many of the arguments supporting or opposing marriage equality address a concern over the types of commitments same-sex couples make and the type of commitment that is expected within marriage. The topic of commitment has been explored in the literature, both in married relationships and in same-sex relationships outside of marriage.

According to Stewart (2008), marriage is seen as the “exclusive and permanent commitment of the marriage partners to one another,” (p. 329) which signifies a promise

of love and support. It is also a public celebration, a “central rite of passage in American family life” (p. 330). Stewart asserts:

Through the institution of marriage, individuals can publicly express their love and commitment to each other. Through this institution, society publicly recognizes expressions of love and commitment between individuals, granting them respect and legitimacy as a couple. This public recognition and sanction of marital relationships reflect society’s approbation of the personal hopes, desires and aspirations that underlie loving, committed conjugal relationships. (2008, p. 330)

Reczek et al. (2009) agrees that marriage is a significant symbol of commitment to the public, which validates and legitimizes the relationship. Further, Slater’s work (as cited in Reczek, 2009) asserts that legal marriage can “provide individuals with a template of what to expect as they pass through various life stages” (p. 739). Some studies say that there exists less commitment in cohabiting relationships when compared to married relationships (Stanley, Whitton, & Markman, 2004). According to studies by Brines & Joyner and Bumpass & Lu (as cited in Reczek, 2009), in cohabiting relationships, couples are more likely to break up and less likely to pool their resources. However, Reczek et al. (2009) found that cohabiting couples cannot simply be grouped together. Stanely at al. (2004) found that there are “nonmarital cohabiters,” who cohabit as an alternative to marriage, and there are “premarital cohabiters,” who cohabit as a precursor to marriage (p. 497). Reczek et al. postulates that gay and lesbian cohabiters are another type, who express commitment differently because they do not have the right to marry (2009).

Due to the resistance many same-sex couples have to marriage, commitment has been defined in a variety of ways. Schecter (2008) defined commitment as “devotion to one’s partner and to the couple as a unit” (p. 406), and came to realize that couples relied on various markers to define commitment within their relationships. These markers

ranged from being sexually exclusive and expressing a desire to be together forever to merging finances and signing protective documents to cohabitating to going on a long trip together. This piece of literature illustrates how subjective and fluid the idea of commitment can be, and how creative and self-narrating couples can be in creating their own meaning within their relationships.

Many couples have commitment ceremonies instead of weddings to celebrate their relationships and gain recognition and support. Commitment ceremonies began to emerge in the late 1970s as a reaction to the exclusiveness of marriage (Schechter, 2008). Ceremonies are performed in a variety of ways. Some resemble a traditional wedding, with an exchange of rings and familiar wedding attire, which serves as a reminder of the ritual that is taking place. However, most have personalized elements embedded, which “convey key messages that the couple wants to send to their guests, such as the depth of their love and commitment for one another, the affirmation of their relationship, and about their sexual orientation” (Schechter, 2008, p. 402). Because of how deeply personalized commitment ceremonies are often celebrated, even couples who marry after having had a commitment ceremony often report that the commitment ceremony had a “greater impact on their sense of commitment” (p. 411).

Similar to the reasons couples choose to marry, commitment ceremonies serve the function of “formalizing or legitimizing the relationship; publicly declaring feelings and commitment for one’s partner; validating the relationship in the eyes of the couples’ social network, including friends, family, and religious groups” (Schechter, 2008, p. 402). Guests are invited into the intimacy of the couple’s relationship to witness their declaration of love and commitment, which can result in increased acceptance of the

couple and of same-sex marriage on a political level. Friends and family may begin to question existing laws that limit the rights of the couple (Schechter, 2008).

A study by Reczek et al. found that many couples who have commitment ceremonies “change their behaviors. They may work harder at the relationship and approach life decisions as a couple” (2009, p. 741). However, many participants of the study said ceremonies were not such transitional events, but rather offered “a way of celebrating an already committed relationship” (p. 751). Other couples decide not to have commitment ceremonies, positing that they already know they are committed and there is no point if it is not a legally recognized union (p. 748). For these couples, commitment is not defined by one single act; thus the transition from dating to commitment is often more ambiguous unless they consciously create alternative personal markers (p. 751).

Whether couples choose to have commitment ceremonies or not, Patterson, Ciabattari, & Schwartz (1999) confirm that many same-sex couples maintain “married life” without actually marrying. While there are many more barriers to the success of their commitments, as opposed to opposite-sex commitments, many same-sex couples are adapting to the political and social climate, and embracing their “non-normative” perspectives, to create long-lasting relationships. Patterson et al. (1999) points to social and familial disapproval and the closetedness that this can cause as some of the larger obstacles to same-sex commitment. Sprecher & Felmlee (as cited in Patterson et al., 1999) explain the benefits that social acceptance affords, which is often missing for same-sex couples. They highlight the cognitive balance for the couple; reinforcement of

the couple's identity; and increased frequency of mutual friend interaction as some of the missing benefits when social acceptance is lacking.

Even without the benefits of external approval, same-sex commitments tend to look somewhat similar to heterosexual commitments (Lannutti, 2008, p. 246). The differences that do exist, however, are worth noting. Often, same-sex relationships are less dictated by gender norms, so outside employment, reliance on income, and household responsibilities are more equitable (Lannutti, 2008; Patterson et al., 1999). Also, because there is a lack of societal constraints, there are more instances of same-sex commitment without sexual exclusivity (Lannutti, 2008; Patterson et al., 1999). Patterson et al. point out that commitment is actually easier for some to sustain when it includes sexual freedom. This is an attractive option for gay men who can sometimes compartmentalize their relationships instead of relying on all relationships to fulfill the same needs. For lesbians, sexual freedom can be desirable because of the association between monogamy and patriarchal ownership of women that has existed (Patterson et al., 1999). It can be argued that these differences result from the lack of societal structure surrounding same-sex relationships, but it can also be argued that the LGBT community values their unique expressions of love and commitment.

LGBT Critiques about Marriage

Within the literature about the LGBT community's perspectives on marriage, alongside the arguments about the ways marriage would benefit same-sex couples and the LGBT community, there are also many discussions about a resistance or opposition to marriage that exists. One such opposition stems from the idea that "marriage is an inherently flawed, oppressive institution" (Yep, Lovaas, & Elia, 2003, p. 53), which "has

its roots not in love, but in property and power” (Callahan, 2009, p. 74). It is argued that marriage was created within the context of patriarchy and sexism is still embedded in its ideals. According to this viewpoint, LGBT couples who choose to marry are seen as “selling out” because marriage runs counter to the ideals of equality and feminism that are at the roots of the gay rights movement. In a study exploring the meaning LGBT individuals assign to marriage, Lannutti (2005) found that couples articulated a resistance to joining an institution that is described as patriarchal. Couples spoke about marriage as an institution that values the owning of others and expressed sadness that the LGBT community bought into that. Schechter (2008) also illustrates same-sex couples’ hesitance to use language “laden with patriarchal and sex-stereotyped meanings” (p. 416).

The institution of marriage is also considered unappealing because it is state sanctioned, which leads to a loss of autonomy over what are permissible expressions of love and commitment. Callahan argues that “marriage is legitimated and regulated by an authority external to the relationship” (2009, p. 74) and Yep et al. (2003) discuss the false belief that marriage provides safety and security when in reality the state determines what agreements are made within this official union. For example, Callahan explains that “monogamy required by marriage is problematic,” especially for “sexual and gender minorities” whose intimate relationships are different from straight people (p. 75). According to Ettelbrick (1989), the queer movement fights not for state approval, but for the elimination of gender roles that oppress.

Another argument expressed against marriage is that it has been historically used as a means of discrimination. Before 1967, people of Color and White people were not permitted to marry one another. Today, the LGBT community is experiencing increasing

discrimination as states are preemptively creating laws to prevent their right to marry. Some couples simply do not want to be part of an institution with discrimination at its roots. Other more radical thinkers argue that this discrimination will be present even if same-sex marriage were legalized because our society's fixation on marriage negates other forms of commitment. According to LaSala (2007), "Sexuality and relationships can be expressed in many forms, and it is unjust to privilege only a portion of them" (p. 182). With this in mind, arguments are made to shed light on the discrimination that underlies the protections that marriage affords. According to LaSala, "rather than preserving families or benefiting children, as conservatives claim, marriage privileges are meant to reward and legitimize certain relationships and sexual behaviors and in so doing stigmatize and marginalize others" (p. 182). Similarly, Yep et al. (2003) argue that if same-sex marriage were legalized, acceptance would be garnered for those who marry and assimilate, leaving those with alternative relationships to stay marginalized. Trying to negotiate this radical viewpoint with the reality of the times, Callahan (2009) states:

The best thing would be ... to be done with the institution of marriage as we know it. But that is not within reach in the foreseeable future. Marriage will not give way easily. We are, however, in a position to make inroads now against the wrongs of exclusion from this very deeply entrenched institution. (p. 78)

This ideology posits that the LGBT community has always valued and celebrated a unique variety of families and relationship structures; new lines would be drawn if same-sex marriage became the norm, causing marginalization of couples who choose to commit outside of marriage.

Impact of Marriage Equality Movement for LGBT Community

What would inevitably follow legalized same-sex marriage, it is feared by many radical thinkers, are drastic changes to the LGBT community. The right to marry would

divide the community into those who do and those who don't marry, causing a fragmented and un-unified voice on the political stage. This fragmentation would decrease the unified protection and recognition that individuals within the community fight for on behalf of one another. While this argument assumes that there is currently a unified voice in the LGBT community, which may not be the case, Yep et al. (2003) articulate that more assimilation via marriage is "less likely to advance queer interests than it is to reinforce dominant social norms, defang queer movements, and increase queer invisibility" (p. 54). Ettelbrick (1989) agrees: "Marriage will not liberate us as lesbians and gay men. In fact, it will constrain us, make us more invisible, force our assimilation into the mainstream, and undermine the goals of gay liberation" (p. 119).

Drawing from her interviews of LGBT individuals, Lannutti (2005) reveals:

Participants foresaw same-sex marriage as setting up a stigmatizing system within the LGBT community as getting married becomes the norm and remaining unmarried becomes a stigma. One participant explains:

Same-sex marriage will set up marriage as the ultimate relational goal and make other ways of relating and loving invalid in the community. People will start to wonder what is wrong with you if you are in a good relationship and you don't get married, and will be disappointed in you if you say you just don't see marriage as something you want for your life. (p. 12)

This complex perspective speaks to the fears some same-sex couples feel about losing autonomy over their expressions of love and relationship. This is a fear of assimilation and reflects the value that same-sex couples place on the uniqueness of the LGBT community, as they know it, without legalized marriage (Schecter, 2008). The community has "been special in that we could have more fluid and more realistic relationships, but now that will change" (Lannutti, 2005, p. 13).

There also exists a sentiment among radical thinkers that some in the LGBT community long for acceptance and assimilation, and will be fooled into thinking that marriage will provide this, thus being distracted from the battle to gain recognition for their unique relationships on their own terms. Ettelbrick (1989) articulates:

We must not fool ourselves into believing that marriage will make it acceptable to be gay or lesbian. We will be liberated only when we are respected and accepted for our differences and the diversity we provide to this society. Marriage is not a path to that liberation. (p. 124)

Thus same-sex marriage, it is argued, would detract from the uniqueness of the LGBT community; relationships that were once celebrated for their uniqueness will need to be molded to fit the norms of acceptable married relationships. Self-defined markers of commitment such as commitment ceremonies, civil unions, and intimate couple milestones will no longer be regarded as valid and significant when marriage is the more acceptable choice.

Yep et al. (2003) point out that marriage would officially limit couples' lifestyle choices and would limit the definition of what is sexually appropriate. For example, Browning (1996) talks about the idea that "gay men tend to develop something more like extended family instead of nuclear one, with ex-lovers, friends, etc. all caring for one another instead of adopting the isolation that exists in modern nuclear hetero marriage" (p. 133). Browning also discusses childrearing in the LGBT community and points out that the couple and the other biological parent often share child-rearing responsibilities. Therefore, marriage can make the third parent feel like "second-class status" to the family (p. 134). It is feared that these unique cultural characteristics within the LGBT community would be lost and devalued if marriage became the norm.

Lastly, many feel distrustful about the status of same-sex marriage and resentful toward state courts that continually change laws (Reid, 2005). While this is obviously a dynamic time for same-sex marriage, the tumultuous nature of the laws in the past few years have impacted people's lives and the way society views their relationships. Lannutti (2005) illustrates participants' fears about their relationships being documented and official, which holds them up to public scrutiny. They spoke about reports of the same-sex divorce rate and their fears about these numbers being used against them, as if this might add fuel to the fire of those who oppose same-sex marriage or homosexuality in general. Reid (2005) speaks, in her personal account, about her resistance to marry because of the way a sense of "belonging" may negate discrimination and oppression that still exists out of sight.

On the other hand, Sullivan and Rauch highlight the positive effects that same-sex marriage would have on the LGBT community. Aside from the obvious financial benefits and public recognition, Sullivan (1989) discusses the inter-psyche impact marriage equality would cause. He predicts that having the opportunity to marry will allow young people to come out as gay and envision relationships with long-term commitment as the goal. He asserts that one reason same-sex relationships are less stable is because there is no promise of inclusion in a publicly recognized institution of commitment. Currently, Sullivan feels young people "easily lapse into short-term relationships and insecurity with no tangible goal in sight."

Sullivan (1989) also discusses familial changes that may take place. He believes same-sex marriage could "bridge the gap often found between gays and their parents"

and introduce the gay couple to “the traditional straight family in a way the family can most understand and the gay offspring can most easily acknowledge.”

Societal changes are also part of Sullivan’s vision if marriage equality were to become a reality. He questions the conservative impulse “to make taking responsibility something that the government should make harder rather than easier” and asserts that marriage for all would “uphold a common ideal of mutual support and caring; it not only enables such acts of responsibility but rewards and celebrates them” (2003). In Sullivan’s vision, there would not exist a limitation on a couple’s right to commit to one another and be scapegoated for their untraditional lifestyle. Instead, couples could care for each other the way they wish and society will celebrate their mutual dedication and support.

Rauch (2008) talks practically about the happiness, health, and wealth that would increase for same-sex couples and their children if marriage equality became the norm. He asserts, “Marriage is our first and best line of defense against financial, medical and emotional meltdown. It provides domesticity and a safe harbor for sex. It stabilizes communities by formalizing responsibilities and creating kin networks.”

LGBT Arguments for Marriage

Generally, ideology around same-sex marriage reflects an individual’s perspective about whether change can take place within or from outside an institution. The radical position seeks to dismantle the marriage institution by refusing to take part and asserting that other relationships are just as valid and require protection. The assimilationist position seeks to gain the rights of the marriage institution and thus widen the scope and meaning of that institution.

Contrasting many of the radical viewpoints is Sullivan's assimilationist stance, which addresses similar ideas through a conservative lens. Sullivan (1989) argues, "gay marriage is not a radical step ... it is conservative, in the best sense of the word." Sullivan asserts that it is in society's best interest to extend the right to marry to same-sex couples because "they make a deeper commitment to one another and to society." He explains:

Marriage provides an anchor, if an arbitrary and weak one, in the chaos of sex and relationships to which we are all prone. It provides a mechanism for emotional stability, economic security, and the healthy rearing of the next generation. We rig the law in its favor not because we disparage all forms of relationship other than the nuclear family, but because we recognize that not to promote marriage would be to ask too much of human virtue. (1989)

Interestingly, Sullivan's argument speaks to those who want to retain the traditional definition of marriage and those in the LGBT community who resist marriage. He admits that marriage should be preserved, not as a form of discrimination against other types of relationships, but to "civilize" us and for the betterment of social goods. If this is a good reason for traditional marriage, why wouldn't this be appropriate in providing structure for same-sex attraction, relationships, and family life? Sullivan (1989) asks, "Given the fact that we already allow legal gay relationships, what possible social goal is advanced by framing the law to encourage those relationships to be unfaithful, undeveloped, and insecure?"

Similarly, Rauch (2008) writes about the social goods that would be preserved with marriage equality. He asks the reader to imagine life without the possibility of marriage and asserts there would be "more sex and less commitment than a world with marriage." He eloquently points out that the LGBT community lives in an "upside-down world, where love separates you from marriage instead of connecting you with it." Rauch echoes Sullivan's message, that marriage equality produces a mutually beneficial

relationship between the couple and society - “The partners agree to take care of each other so the community doesn't have to. In exchange, the community deems them a family, binding them to each other and to society with a host of legal and social ties.” Both Rauch and Sullivan question why this reciprocity would only extend to opposite-sex couples if society’s social goods are to be protected.

Sullivan (1989) directly addresses LGBT opposition to marriage when he acknowledges that there is a segment of the community (mostly in the “Stonewall generation”) that “clings to notions of gay life as essentially outsider, ant-bourgeois, radical,” but that there is another segment of the community who recognize “a new opportunity. A need to rebel has quietly ceded to a desire to belong.”

Sullivan (1989) also argues that alternatives to marriage are unjust. Domestic partnerships, he asserts, involve a demanding qualification process and a statement of intent. He asks, “Why, after all, should gays be required to prove commitment before they get married [become domestic partners] in a way we would never dream of asking of straights?” However, Sullivan points out that the instituting of domestic partnering and civil unions have resulted in huge numbers of same-sex couples publicly and officially “committing themselves to one another for life in full view of their families and their friends.” This is a “healthy social trend” that would be reinforced by the right to marry. He asserts, “It would also, in the wake of AIDS, qualify as a genuine public health measure.” Rauch (2008) agrees that the separate but unequal structure for commitment that exists today is unjust. He states, “Conservatives who object to redefining marriage risk redefining it themselves, as a civil-rights violation.”

A study by Reczek, Elliott, & Umberson (2009) echoed many of these arguments as participants asked why marriage matters to them responded that it's more economical and makes adoption and legal rights easier. Rauch (1996) supports this concern. He highlights that those opposed to marriage equality argue that the goal of marriage is to support childrearing, but same-sex couples have children too. He follows that there are many heterosexual couples that cannot have children, but they are still afforded a right to marry. We do not turn away sterile couples or assert that allowing them to marry will lead an acceptance of polygamy since the point of marriage is a union of two people who can procreate (p. 175).

Conclusion

Given the rapidly changing history of the marriage equality movement and the timeliness of this debate, every perspective is fighting to be heard. Often times, when a political fight takes place, the most polarized perspectives are heard and those in the middle feel the need to keep quiet so as to not detract from the efforts of others in their community. Because of this tendency, it is valuable to encourage thought and engage in nuanced dialogue that is capable of holding many truths. As one means of achieving this goal, this study will explore the thoughts of same-sex couples who have had the opportunity to wed but have chosen to refrain. Perhaps this population can offer another look at the influences that mold one's decision around marriage and how that aligns with the struggle waged for marriage equality. Maintaining long-term relationships without marriage, participants' experiences may also shed light on unique ways commitment is conceptualized and enacted.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study is to gather the perspectives of same-sex couples living in the Bay area of California, who consider themselves in long-term, committed relationships yet decided not to marry when same-sex marriage was legalized in the state. This study focuses on their ideas about what has influenced their decision not to marry; how they define commitment and ways they feel they have marked their commitment to one another; and how they relate to the marriage equality movement.

The research design is exploratory and qualitative, using semi-structured interviews for data collection. Since I am not expert on this research topic, I used the exploratory style to gain familiarity with the prevalent themes. I did not attempt to uncover conclusive findings about the participants; instead, I chose to investigate this issue to increase the curiosity and critical thinking surrounding the position of this population. Therefore, an exploratory research design seemed most appropriate (Rubin & Babbie, 2010).

The analysis of the data was guided by the common themes found in interviewing same-sex couples who decided not to marry in 2008. I used an inductive method of data analysis, as the study was used to explore patterns that may be associated with committed, unmarried same-sex couples. The discussions generated in chapter five are based on these patterns. The inductive method enables insights to be generated without the need to reach conclusions or determinations, which are more often sought in a

deductive method of data analysis. Given that the small and limited sample is not representative of the size and diversity of the population studied, the inductive method highlights themes and patterns without striving for a definitive conclusion (Rubin & Babbie, 2010).

During the interviews, I asked demographic questions, in order to develop a context for the unique experiences and perspectives shared. Demographic questions included: race, socioeconomic status, gender, sexual orientation, marital status, living situation, length of relationship, age, education level, employment status, and religious or spiritual practice. I then used guiding questions to facilitate an open dialogue with the couples, allowing them to contribute any personal information that was relevant to the research questions. Some examples of the qualitative questions that guided the discussion were: What kinds of discussions have you had about marriage during the course of this relationship or past relationships? Was there agreement in these discussions? What past or present factors may have influenced your decision not to marry? What explicit or implicit messages did you receive about marriage during your upbringing? Are there any circumstances under which you can envision yourself marrying? What is your personal definition of commitment? What are some markers of commitment that you have used in your relationship? How do you relate to the marriage equality movement? How do you think marriage equality would impact the LGBT community? How has the movement influenced your relationships with family or friends?

Obtaining the Sample

I used a snowball sampling strategy to recruit 13 participants. This sampling method seemed appropriate because of the difficulty in locating this population. The

word-of-mouth referral inherent in snowball sampling afforded me greater access to couples who fit the criteria for the study (Rubin & Babbie, 2010). Participants passed on information about the study to friends, family, or coworkers who seemed appropriate. I also submitted information about the study to various LGBTQ organizations in the Bay area, who spread the word through newsletters or websites. I posted flyers in specific neighborhoods and at the LGBT Community Center in San Francisco. In addition, I posted information about the study on Craigslist.com and sent information to my own colleagues, friends, and family. Sampling techniques may be biased because people who participated recommended the study to those they know. Their association makes it more likely that they have similar perspectives than if the sample consisted of random participants with very divergent lifestyles and backgrounds.

In order to participate, couples had to be living in the Bay area of California and had to consider themselves in a committed relationship for five or more years. They were required to be unmarried, not intending on marrying in another state, and not intending on marrying in California if it becomes legal in the state once again. One participant joined the study without her partner because her views made her eligible, but her partner's views did not fit the requirements. The fact that they do not agree may contribute to the nature of her answers. Another couple specified that they do not intend on marrying if it becomes legal in California, but do intend on marrying if it becomes legal federally. Therefore, I widened the last eligibility requirement for them, curious about their views on state versus federal legality.

Description of Sample

This study explores the perspectives of three male couples, three female couples, and one individual female who reflected on her relationship without her partner present. There were a total of 13 participants. Three of the men identified as gay, one male participant identified as homosexual, two male participants identified as bisexual, and all seven female participants identified as lesbian. All participants have been in their relationships for at least five years, but they ranged from five and a half years to thirty-three years, with a median relationship length of 15 years, and a mean of 19.2 years. All couples except one live together. Three of the couples live in San Francisco, one couple lives in Berkeley, and three couples live in Oakland. Racially, twelve of the participants identified as Caucasian or Anglo and one participant identified as African American. The ages of the participants ranged from 44 to 71, with a median age of 55 and a mean age of 55.46. In terms of the educational level of the sample, one of the participants reported completion of some college, three participants had received Bachelors degrees, and nine participants had received some type of post-graduate degree. One participant was unemployed, eight reported current employment, one reported underemployed retirement, and three reported being retired. When asked how they identify in terms of socioeconomic status, seven participants reported that they identify as middle class whereas six participants reported upper-middle class. In terms of religious or spiritual practice, five reported that they had none (although they all mentioned being raised with some form of Christianity), one reported being atheist, two reported secular Judaism, three reported Judaism, and two reported have an unaffiliated spiritual practice.

When discussing the participants' marital statuses and their perspectives about whether they will marry in the future, all participants reported they would not marry in another state that recognizes same-sex marriage. Three couples stated that they would not marry in California if same-sex marriage were to become legal again. Four couples said they would consider marrying in California if the legal implications are favorable or if marriages in California are recognized federally. Currently, four of the couples are domestically partnered through the state of California, two of the couples have a marital status of single, and one of the couples is domestically partnered through city registration.

Only one of the participants in the sample has a child. This undoubtedly impacts the findings of this study. The underrepresentation of couples with children may be indicative of the choices couples make around marriage when having a child. For example, marriage may become a more compelling step to take or the external pressure to marry may be increased. Alternatively, underrepresentation in this study of couples with children may reflect a lack of time for participation, given the demands of parenting.

Because of the small sample size, findings are not meant to represent all committed same-sex couples who choose not to marry; however, this study offers a window into the perspectives of this segment of the population at this critical time.

Ethics and Safeguards

In order to ensure that the interviewees understood the terms of their participation, I alerted them to the voluntary nature of the study before beginning the initial telephone screening process and the subsequent in-person interview. I used the telephone screening to ensure that participants were suitable for the study. Once accepted into the study, I sent each participant an informed consent (see Appendix #) to review before our interview

date and collected the signed consents from them at the interview, offering to answer questions at that time. The informed consent explains the structure of the interview process, the risks and benefits of participation, the process of withdrawing from the study, and the actions taken to ensure confidentiality. As I ended each interview, I provided participants with a “Referral Resource List” (Appendix #) and suggested they seek assistance if they needed support with any of the material we discussed. The preparation I exercised, in structuring the study to suit its purpose, recruiting for appropriate participants, organizing the interview materials, and safeguarding any possible risks enabled me to conduct research that aligned with my research questions while offering respect and sensitivity to my participants.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

Thirteen participants were interviewed in an attempt to reveal a perspective that often gets lost in the rampant debates about the legalization of same-sex marriage. Responses reported in this chapter highlight participants' attitudes about marriage as an institution and same-sex marriage as a legal option for themselves and the larger LGBT population. Of the thirteen perspectives reflected, seven are female and six are male. There is one participant who identifies as African American and the rest of the participants identify as White. The age range of the participants is 44-71.

Given that marriage is considered the penultimate marker of relationship commitment in our society, this study attempts to uncover the experiences of a population who celebrate their long-term, committed relationships outside this institution. Thus, drawing from their personal experiences, participants shared the ways their perspectives about marriage were influenced. They described the way they define their commitments to one another, ranging in length from five and a half to thirty-three years, and spoke about the markers of commitment that took place throughout their relationships. Finally, participants explained their individual relationships with the marriage equality movement and the impact they predict marriage equality may have on the LGBT community and the larger society.

Perspectives on Marriage

Arguments against marriage

In interviews with participants about their perspectives on marriage, many of them cited reactions to the institution of marriage that contribute to their personal decision to refrain from marriage. Within this discussion, couples articulated how the meaning and structure of the institution and the power it has over the legitimacy of the relationship deter them from participating in the act of marriage. Many of them also explained the benefits of not marrying and the way the structure of their unmarried partnerships more accurately reflects their values and intentions in their relationships. Finally, couples discussed the circumstances under which marriage may be a consideration or a necessity.

One argument mentioned by the majority of couples in opposition to marriage is its history as a patriarchal institution. One or both participants in six of the seven couples referenced patriarchy as a foundational element in their opposition to marriage. One participant understood marriage historically as a way for society to ensure child and woman belong to the man in the family. Another participant emphasized her concern that marriage has been used to persecute women who had children out of wedlock, separating them from their children. Others stated that marriage was developed for property rights and inheritance, not as a means of cementing one's loving commitment to a partner. Three of the couples connected marriage's history of patriarchy with the present day vows and ties that accompany marriage, asserting that the control and ownership inherent in marriage is a present deterrent. They expressed a value for autonomy in their relationships and a resistance to entering an institution that would make them feel

“trapped,” “stuck,” or “boxed in.” This association with the historical roots of marriage and the symbols that some feel still accompany the institution contribute to the resistance to marry for most participants.

Another argument against marriage was the notion that marriage is a “phony” institution that lacks “integrity.” Sophia (all names have been changed to protect the anonymity of participants) discussed her perception that marriage, as it stands as a heterosexual enterprise, does not reflect the sanctity of family and community that is so valuable in our society:

This is very sacred. It’s a very sacred, somber thing. Don’t just do it because everyone else does it. Don’t just do it because you’re supposed to do it. Really think about it and really be willing to make this very serious commitment and have the community support you. It’s for real for real.

Wanda, Sophia’s partner, agreed, “This thing called creation of family is so important that I don’t buy the heterosexual notion of it. I really don’t. That anyone can get married just because they feel inclined toward it.” They argued that heterosexual couples often lack regard for their privilege to marry and do so without recognizing how sacred a decision it is to connect themselves to one another.

Partners Jacob and Pinky expressed confusion about people’s motivations for marrying. Jacob spoke about how nonchalantly people get married and then divorced and stated, “the institution of marriage is a charade, it’s a sham. So you can have a big wedding, you can elope... Why bother? Who’s this for?” Pinky added, “Yeah, I do feel a lot of it is having to prove you’re as good as everybody else. And I don’t think we need that.” Axel, another participant elaborated on this idea:

It was clear to everybody in the last 50 years what the divorce rate was doing. So it was clear to me growing up in the 60s and 70s, everybody was aware that people were divorcing all over the place. So I did think about the typical pledge

that the marriage- sickness and in health, forever... but look, seems like, yeah you can promise anything but what makes it more meaningful than if you don't?

This idea about marriage as an empty institution seems reflective of the limited rights afforded same-sex couples who wed. Dereese articulated that same-sex marriage as a state right seemed like a “bone-throw” or a “farce” given that federal rights are withheld and recognition is limited across the country. Louise stated frankly that she and Dereese are practically-minded and do not see a point to marrying, given that there is no benefit to them beyond what they are afforded through their California state domestic partnership. Charlie spoke about his preference for “the legalistic, nonpublic, non-ritualist aspect of domestic partnership” rather “than the formality of marriage.” He and Richard have their own contractual financial arrangements that conflict with state registration, so they are only registered through the city at this point, to protect the joint ownership of their home. These ideas illustrate the division participants make between the legal rights and protections gained from marriage and the personal and intimate connection made in their relationships.

Another argument participants widely expressed was that couples did not want or need legitimacy for their relationship granted from the outside. Charlie articulated:

I find the notion that there's the invalid people and the valid people, the illegal sex and the legal sex, the socially acceptable and socially unacceptable... and that if you then get married then you are righteous and acceptable and proper and a good member of society- I find that totally offensive.

Erin remembers the influential Joni Mitchell saying, “We don't need a piece of paper to validate our relationship.” She also explained that marriage has been “used by religious forces and the right wing as sort of this stamp of legitimacy.”

Some participants concluded that this external legitimacy causes couples to feel the need to prove themselves. Two couples in particular highlighted their disinterest in

seeking approval externally via marriage. One participant opined that the intimate connection within a relationship is often made public and “showy” through marriage; some suspected same-sex couples who were rejected or disowned by loved ones may feel the need to prove themselves even more. They stated that same-sex weddings feel “fake” and seem like the couple is pretending to be like everyone else.

Finally, a theme represented by couples in opposition to marriage is the idea that reserving benefits for people just because they are partnered is discriminatory and unjust. Axel spoke about his commitment to individual rights and his partner Martin explained:

I think that there’s a confusion that civil rights come with marriage. So in my thinking marriage is not a civil rights issue. Civil rights issues are about people having the same rights as everyone else in society and I think married people have certain privileged rights that single people don’t.

Wanda described a friend who is “deeply committed to her community” and argued “you and I can walk down that aisle and get a lot of goodies that she couldn’t have, even though she’s as deeply committed to her community as we might be to one another.”

Wanda articulated that marriage should be an extension of the value to protect one another, not to limit whom we are allied with and protective of. She emphasized the injustice in the fact that married people “get a bunch of goodies that [her friend] who chooses to not partner with anybody has no access to.”

Reasons for personal refrain from marriage

In addition to these theoretical arguments against marriage, couples had personal reasons for not marrying. One that was articulated by at least five of the seven couples was an interest or pride in identifying as an outsider. Many participants stated they do not like to “conform” and prefer to “disrupt the narrative.” Repeatedly, participants expressed

resistance to being “like everyone else.” Erin elucidated the genesis of this association for her:

I just think my own sense of my sexuality is inextricably intertwined with being, in some way, an outsider or a rebel. I came out when I was 16, and I didn’t tell my parents until I was like 25 because I was afraid, literally, that they would commit me somewhere.

Therefore, for Erin, being a lesbian meant she was not necessarily accepted or conforming. She contended, “I still see it as sort of an outsider experience. And maybe there’s a part of it I like. I think especially as a young person there’s a part of it that made it almost sexually arousing. Where it’s exciting to be different.” Her partner, Nora, takes pride in living an openly lesbian lifestyle outside the heterosexual institution and sees this as a political act. Another participant, Martin, always felt like an outsider as a political activist, which seemed to give him the foundation for questioning society’s norms. He asserted that he was never interested in marriage. Charlie spoke about his preference “for the independence and marginality of being outside of conventional culture,” illustrating that he and Richard have a consciousness around their commitment instead of conforming to the expectation that relationships are solidified through the decision to marry. He maintained that his “preference is to do it as conscious, voluntary, repeated actions.” Charlie referenced the politics of the gay rights movement of his time as he asserted that “we’re not going to do everything that’s socially acceptable, and we’re proud of it.”

In line with nonconformity, couples expressed attraction to developing their own roles and rules for their relationships. At least three of the seven couples discussed the freedom to be different than their parents and the relief that brings. Nora laughed as she candidly expressed:

I'm imagining if I got legally married, some part of that imprinting from my parents' marriage would start being in the room with me in a way that I have successfully kept it outside. Not that it doesn't affect how I feel about being in a relationship or how I feel about myself, but there's a way that not getting married is an emotional protection. It's like, ok, I'm not playing house the way mom and dad do. I'm making up the rules myself and I have pretty real concerns that if I participated in that institution, it would just rise up for me... and I don't need more of that.

Her partner, Erin, mirrored the emotional protection Nora addressed, stating, "being able to not struggle with the baggage of your family's expectations of gender roles is actually very freeing." Erin recognizes this as a privilege of being in a same-sex partnership – the potential freedom to live outside the roles that are often passed down within families.

Nora and Erin seem to agree that marriage would invite these roles into their relationship.

Charlie addressed another role he and Richard avoid by not being marital spouses. Wittily referring to it as one of the "privileges of oppression," Charlie pointed out that his family has less expectation around whether Richard joins Charlie at family events or gatherings. He maintained that they feel freer to do things more independently than most married, heterosexual couples, who he believes internalize an expectation that they must present themselves together as a unit. Nora expressed the same sentiment regarding her family's expectations for her relationship with Erin.

Jacob recalled the relief he felt when he realized he was gay and therefore free to establish a lifestyle that was unencumbered by the roles and expectations of his parents. He reported that one of his first thoughts was, "Now I don't have to get married and live in the suburbs and have a kid and a car." He was relieved to realize that "same-sex relationships can be/have to be completely negotiated. There's no: 'Well you take out the trash and I cook.' There's none of these expectations, so everything is up for grabs. I thought, well that's nice."

Couples also expressed a sense of freedom around the financial arrangements in their relationships. One of the couples revealed that they have no financial entanglements and another reported that they do not share a bank account. Some of the other couples spoke about the emotions that accompany the normative expectation to financially support one another. In articulating the ways she does not see herself fitting into the framework of marriage, Sophia recalled the gender roles that she associates with marriage and the way she does not see herself embodying either gender role. She highlighted that to be “the male one... you have to go out into the world and be responsible for everything,” which seemed unappealing to her. Erin and Nora elaborated that they are able to be financial equals in a way that was not modeled to them through heterosexual partnerships. Nora stated:

One of the things I like about being in a same-sex relationship is that there aren't any really strong undercurrents of socialization that would lead one of us to feel like the other person should financially support her. And neither one of us is feeling guilty that we're not making tons of money and being a provider.

In addition to the autonomy couples expressed in creating their relationships on their own terms, one participant spoke about the freedom to dissolve the relationship on her own terms. Interviewed without her partner, her responses to the interview questions were influenced by the fact that she has been struggling to maintain her relationship. She is also the only participant who has a child and he has autism. Kali explained that given her uncertainty about her relationship and the high divorce rate for parents of children with autism, the contentiousness and hardship involved in the dissolution of marriage was a large factor in her decision not to marry. Charlie, who is a lawyer and works with couples on their financial arrangements when entering or exiting domestic partnerships or marriages, agreed, stating, “the notion of having a relationship that is under government

regulation, that requires court process to exit and has your life regulated by the government was something that neither of us were actually interested in.” Overall, couples agreed that the ability to personalize their relationships based on choice rather than unconsciously following internalized social expectations felt more possible due to their decision to remain outside the institution of marriage.

Consideration of marriage

However, given the reality of the protections and benefits that come with marriage, there were certain circumstances under which participants reported they would marry. One such circumstance was to protect themselves as a couple or to protect family. While only one participant is a parent, many of the other participants acknowledged how differently they presume their perspectives would be if they had children to protect. Three couples said they might marry if they had children. Kali, the only mother in the sample, stated that she would marry if she felt it would support her son’s identity or if he expressed an interest in his mothers’ marrying. However, Kali believes it is “irrelevant to him at this point.”

Five of the seven couples reported they would marry if it becomes federally recognized. They explained that with federal support, they would have access to more benefits that would be of interest to them and more of their rights would be protected. Some of them articulated that marriage granted at that level would feel they “could really get married” as opposed to the “farce” that is believed to be state-backed marriage. One couple said they might marry when they reach their seventies or eighties in order to ensure they could care for one another in their old age. Another couple admitted they would marry if their domestic partnership rights were taken away and they were forced to

marry in order to get those rights. One participant said she would consider marrying if it felt important in protecting the right to marry for those who wish to in the LGBT community. She explained that if a critical mass of people marrying would influence the law, she would participate.

Wanda and Sophia imagined what marriage would need to look like for them to be enthusiastic to join. Wanda stressed the importance for marriage to reflect her value of caring for one another. She articulated:

If we were to define marriage as a union of interested people gathered to assure the common well-being, I could totally get behind marriage... The stability of family is really important to me. But this idea of pair bonding, you and me and we'll look just like the people next door- holds no interest for me... I believe in the importance of family and connection and agreements around that, I'm just politically uncomfortable with marriage as it's defined between a man and a woman or two people.

Sophia explained that she would need to internalize a new picture of a married couple.

She stated:

I think it would be helpful to me if we saw more same-sex people, all kinds of people getting married and I didn't just have this archetype in mind. That really was two people, that it wasn't like wasn't a gay marriage, that it was just a marriage. That it really was.

Their visions speak to the ways marriage would need to expand in representing various types of relationships in order to be a trusted institution that more same-sex couples would be comfortable adopting.

Influences

Family

In order to gain a clearer understanding of participants' perspectives on marriage, it is enlightening to consider the various contexts for their beliefs. Family experiences

and social influences seem to contribute greatly to the relationship this sample has with the idea of marriage.

While only one participant reported that his parents eventually divorced, more than half of the participants reported that their parents' marriages were somewhat conflictual. Most of these narratives included the opinion that their parents wanted to leave their relationships or have more freedom but could not.

Wanda spoke about her mother's previous marriage, which Wanda found out about by chance. She realized how shameful it was to her mother that she did not "make it work" in her first marriage, which Wanda believes contributed to her mother's perseverance in her relationship with Wanda's abusive father. Wanda admitted that she associates marriage with a lot of painful sacrifice:

I grew up in a family that should have dissolved before I was born. So my mother stayed in a situation that she would have been much better off had she avoided... My mother was so ashamed of having her first marriage wrecked that she married a man who was completely inappropriate for her and with whom she raised kids, who he abused, but was so embarrassed about having failed twice, she stayed in a marriage that should never have happened.

Jacob and Nora also reflected on the unhappiness in their parents' marriages and acknowledged that external pressures caused them to remain intact. Interestingly, both Jacob and Nora had grandparents who divorced. Nora explained:

It was very clear my mother was very unhappy in her marriage and she would periodically talk about getting ready to leave and then wouldn't do it. The fact that I was privy to that information was also a problem. But anyway, it didn't look like a really fun enterprise. It looked like something where people were trapped. And my mother herself had been the child of divorced parents and it seemed like the divorce of my grandparents had a huge negative impact on her and she pretty much, it seems, made a pact with herself - before meeting my father, before having kids - her promise was: I'm never going to get divorced. I would never do that to my kids. Which then seemed to me to result in her being trapped in a really unhappy, unsatisfying marriage. So there was not a whole lot about marriage that I witnessed first hand that looked very attractive. It didn't look like it provided emotional sustenance. It sure as hell didn't look like it provided financial support.

It didn't provide any glue for the family, despite my mother's fantasy about that. It really didn't result in a nice living environment. I mean, there really wasn't anything.

Jacob discussed the discrepancy between what might have been best for his parents and how they decided to live their lives. He highlighted the power of this social norm:

My grandparents were divorced in the late 40's, so for that generation, that was very shocking. And my parents were married the whole time I was growing up. They were divorced much later. But I thought it was a really terrible marriage and I couldn't understand why they were together. And they were really bad parents too and I didn't understand why they had had children. It just seemed like so much could go on behind this lovely little white picket fence called marriage and I thought, I don't really want to participate. But at the same time, there didn't seem to be other options - everybody got married, everybody got their picture in the paper, the bride wore white, the groom wore a tux...

At least two other participants emphasized the unhappiness of their parents' marriages and the impression that made on them. Louise recalled messages her mother sent about not trusting men and spoke about her suspicion that her mother may have had earlier experiences with women. Pinky asserted that his parents were "boring" and isolated, which was uninspiring to him.

Some participants referenced the difference between the appearance of their parents' marriage and the reality. One participant revealed that it was only after her father died that she found out he had multiple affairs and a long-standing affair:

My parents were married for 34 years and then my father died. And what I believe is that they really loved each other and that they were totally faithful. After my father died, I found out that my father had affairs, plural, which my mother suspected but didn't know about. I certainly never suspected it growing up. What I saw was two parents who really respected and loved each other... I know he loved her. And I know that they had, in some ways, a good relationship, and I know that something was not there for him or that he needed to have affairs outside.

Charlie, another participant, spoke about the obsession his parents had with marriage, despite the fact that he reports, "I saw from my parents that their marital vows kept them

together for far longer than, at least when I was growing up, than they should have.” He spoke about the “hypocrisy between their marriage focus in their own life and their high-conflict relationship and their almost breaking up many times.” The difference between his reality of their relationship and their external honoring of the marriage institution repelled Charlie. He reports:

My parents had a notion that was very marriage-focused. We were just at my parents’ 66th wedding anniversary dinner. They have an anniversary party every single year. Their house is filled with memorabilia of their wedding. There’s gifts, there’s events. They have a strong sense of superiority for being married. They’re there at the apex of the pyramid... There’s endless stories about their wedding, endless stories about how they met, and it’s a huge thing that I found very off-putting and claustrophobic and restrictive growing up.

For both of these participants, the disconnect between appearance and reality meant marriage was something binding regardless of changing needs, and therefore something to be hesitant about. The participant in the first example conveyed, “the model is that you’re really careful who you choose. You do it really, really carefully b/c it’s for real and you’re going to stay with that person and you’re not going to split.” Charlie also shows some caution:

I jokingly say I’m a child of a couple who should have gotten divorced, so when I was growing up, I kind of made a vow that said I’m never going to ask somebody to marry me because I saw from my parents that their marital vows kept them together for far longer than, at least when I was growing up, than they should have.

The varied experiences participants had seemed to send them messages about marriage during a very impressionable time.

Another theme participants recalled in their developmental years was a lack of discussion about their own marital futures. Most of the sample maintained that they did not engage in “wedding talk” with their parents and some claimed that their parents did not ask about sexuality, dating, or future parenting. Some of the female participants

suspected that their “tomboy” presentation deterred such discussion. This seems to represent another way the norms of who is included in marriage are implicitly conveyed. However, at least four participants contended that marriage was the implicit or explicit expectation for their future and that this assumption was something they noticed. Participants felt this predicted future came with an assumption of heterosexuality.

A positive influence from family that some participants considered a contributing factor to their nonconformity was the freedom their families permitted. Kali described the “limited amount of structure and expectation” her parents had, which was difficult at times, but afforded her a sense of autonomy in her life. She recalled that the message she received from her parents was “make yourself happy” instead of “this is who you need to be.” As opposed to Pinky’s description of his “boring,” isolated parents, Charlie inherited the value his parents have for community and he emphasized his internalization of their “notion of what it is to be fully alive.” Other participants highlighted the critical thinking that was permitted in the home and the opportunity their parents afforded them of going to college, where they learned ideas that questioned the status quo.

Participants also addressed current family influences, now that they are in long-term committed relationships and considering ways of representing their commitments. When considering marriage or other commitment ceremonies, some spoke about an aversion to placing their relationship in the center of a big family event. Charlie mentioned his parents’ conflicting views of his homosexuality, an issue he would rather not incite between them. Nora referenced the party her friend organized when she and Erin became domestic partners and the sadness she felt about her family’s homophobia, that such an event highlights. Conversely, Wanda and Sophia upheld that their families

would be relieved if they married, since it provides state sanctioning, protection, and the status with which they are familiar. It is not as clear how recognized they are as a couple without entering the marriage institution.

Society

The struggle around recognition and acceptance was a central focus in interviews. While families exerted a strong influence on participants' perspectives about marriage, they also acknowledged how tied family messages were to societal norms. Gender and sexual orientation were two themes stressed by participants as many of them alluded to the "archetypal image" of marriage. Sophia expressed it directly when she revealed that to her, marriage is represented as "a man and his wife. It's the man who goes out in the world and makes a living and it's his wife who is dutiful and tends the hearth." She articulated that she cannot see herself in either of those roles and does not like the expected gender path. Sophia made clear that homosexual relationships are not part of that societal picture of marriage and admitted that "it would be helpful to me if we saw more same-sex people, all kinds of people, get married and I didn't just have this archetype in mind. That it...wasn't a gay marriage, that it was just a marriage." Others expressed similar feelings- that marriage was never a consideration because of their sexual orientation or the strict gender construct that they associate with marriage.

Axel spoke about the way marriage assumes certain behaviors and labels individuals negatively if they do not comply. For example, he pointed out that monogamy is expected in marriage and if a couple is non-monogamous, their behavior is assumed to be secretive or deceptive and labeled "cheating," even if they have an open and honest arrangement within their relationship. He sees marriage as an "institution

that's part religious and part trying to enforce certain ethical rules... I don't have to go along with that shit."

The experiences of Sophia and Axel highlight the rigidity of thought that surrounded them. Many other participants elaborated on the "oppressive" nature of their influential communities, to which they did not choose to conform. Martin spoke of his Catholic upbringing and the criticisms he developed as he began to branch out. Pinky and Jacob recalled their "dull suburbs," where they felt there was no place to be gay and little example of anything outside the norm. As an adult, Pinky was reminded of his constrictive suburban community when he witnessed married men coming to the Bay area on business trips, who visited gay clubs and had unprotected sex. Pinky recalled:

I thought about all of these gay men who married a woman because they had to and it was easier to hide... and many of them had children. And I just thought, what a horrible thing that people feel they have to conform so much and then they come to San Francisco and have unsafe sex with a stripper at the theater and then they're going to go back to Omaha and sleep with their wife. And I just thought, what a horrible, horrible thing. I'm glad I never felt that pressure to conform.

Unlike these men, Pinky and the other participants found a way to avoid conforming to these social pressures.

Considering the intensity of the influence of social norms, it was interesting to uncover some of the ways participants felt they escaped the obligation to tailor their lives to these external expectations. Many of them cited the privileges that come with a middle-upper class lifestyle as a way to avoid social pressures. Axel shared about his ability to go to college: "I went to a university and I learned a lot about radical, non-traditional stuff, so my privilege allowed me entrée into that world, which is one of the things that informed my opinions." Kali admitted that her women's studies classes were influential and Jacob recalled his feminism and sociology classes at college, where he

learned about gender roles and began to think that “same-sex relationships can be/have to be completely negotiated,” a very freeing idea for him at the time.

In addition, many participants mentioned peers who provided models of lifestyles that were alternative to the norm. Martin emphasized the influence of his friends and those in his community who had rejected conformity, political activists who modeled successful unmarried relationships. He reported that this was part of his exposure growing up. Kali asserted that she never thought she would get married when she was young and was always open to friends’ relationships that deviated from the norm. Similarly, to Axel it seemed natural to have multiple sexual partners, so he was relieved to find that his partners embodied acceptance of this relational model. It seems these experiences helped to offset the larger social expectations and provide exceptions as new models.

Given that the sample ranged in age from 44-71, the influence of the 1960s and 1970s loomed large. Most participants mentioned the women’s liberation movement, the gay rights movement, and opposition to Vietnam War as fuel for their compulsion to oppose marriage. There were messages of the time reflected in participants’ responses. Sophia highlighted the conscious autonomy of the time, stating that she is opposed to “jumping on the bandwagon just because everyone else is doing it.” Wanda pointed to the freedom and liberation inherent in disco as signs that anything was possible. She spoke about the new concepts of family, love, and community that she was engaged with. Kali spoke about her travels to lesbian land around the country and her visit to the Peace Encampment in Seneca Falls, where she was exposed to lifestyles that gave her a chance to think about what she wants. While larger societal messages communicated rigid

lifestyle expectations, inspiration from the civil rights movement, combined with progressive education and the influence of peers, loosened participants' sense of obligation to conform and made space for those norms to be challenged.

Commitment

Definitions

In challenging those norms within their relationships, participants offered their personal definitions of commitment. As opposed to the stereotypically traditional vows of marital commitment, these couples have had to develop their own personalized symbols and meanings for their long-standing relationships. Many couples articulated that their commitment entails an awareness of the “arc of the relationship,” “the big picture,” or “seeing the long vision,” a dedication or intention to remain supportive and engaged through difficult times. Some of them spoke about the importance of acceptance, focusing on “supporting someone when they’re not necessarily being or acting or doing the things that you want to have around all the time” and “wanting to help them grow, wanting to be part of that growth.” This theme speaks to the awareness couples have of each other’s imperfections and their desire to invest in one another despite challenges.

Interestingly, another theme represented by some of the same participants was the openness to breaking their commitment and awareness of the potential for incompatibility. Couples conveyed the idea that there’s no shame in saying “this isn’t gonna work.” Participants understood this concept as a true part of their existing commitments. Jacob felt he learned this idea from his partner Pinky when, earlier in their relationship, conflicts arose, Jacob considered ending their relationship, and Pinky reacted with, “I want the best for you and if this is what’s best I’ll help you make it

happen.” Similarly, Charlie explained that honoring his relationship includes an honest acknowledgment if the relationship needs to end. He explained:

In my mind, ending a relationship because you no longer want to be in it but doing it in a loving caring way is a higher form of commitment than staying with a person you don't want to be with. So, I am more upset with the way people treat each other in divorce than I am about them breaking up. So I'd say commitment to honoring the other person, valuing the other person, treating the other person in a loving way. That to me is what commitment is. It is not staying together even if you are not happy.

This seems aligned with the idea of not marrying, since marriage entails a promise to remain coupled, regardless of changed feeling or hardship.

This definition extends to another commonly held idea in the sample- a value for making a conscious choice to remain coupled. Many expressed that their relationships are not decided upon, but are free to continue to develop based on the attention each partner gives to the choice to continue. Jacob stressed this point:

I would only want to be with someone if I wanted to be with them and they wanted to be with me. And supposedly marriage impedes the process of separation to ensure that couples stay together. Well, but I've seen so many couples that stay together that definitely should not have. So it seems like we have glue but it's rubber cement so that we can pull apart, we can come together, we can do this, we can do that.

Similarly, Charlie explained the way he maintains his choice to be in his relationship:

My preference is to do it as conscious, voluntary, repeated actions. I would say my bias is that the notion that if you get married all these things just come to you, it's kind of the notion that if you buy the marriage package, you suddenly get loyalty, fidelity, health, welfare. And having to create those arrangements incrementally and voluntarily I think can actually make for a better result than people who think all you have to do is get married and it all comes.

In this way, participants differentiate themselves from married couples, who made definitive promises that they expect to follow. For most, the idea that each partner maintains his or her freedom to consciously choose the relationship adds value to the intentionality of the commitment and ensures that neither is “stuck” or “trapped.”

What follows, for most participants, is that their commitments are defined by action more than words or vows. Many couples asserted that their commitments are personally made and “organic,” developing in a natural way that is not influenced by external expectation, but are represented by the actions and behaviors they conduct. Axel spoke of his faith in his commitment to Martin based on the action they have each taken to prove they stand by their stated intentions. In this way, Axel values trust in his relationship, which is established through intended action instead of promises. Martin agreed with Axel, stating, “I think commitment is something that one makes.” Similarly, Richard asserted, “It just sort of grows that way. It isn’t something that we sat down and thought, these are the rules.” Jacob articulated that Pinky presented a refreshing alternative to his own need to talk and process and gain reassurance. For Jacob, Pinky modeled the ability to embody commitment instead of promising it. He explained, “He doesn’t talk about it, he just sort of does it. And I tend to want to blather on. So it’s refreshing.” Pinky explained that instead of doing things because they are what’s expected, “Why not do things because it’s the right time or the right way.” Embodying the commitment, the trust, and the intentions instead of vowing to uphold them aligns with the value many of these couples have for being in the relationship because they want to be. While they also commit to seeing the larger picture when conflict arises, they seem to avoid binding themselves to one another if they can no longer honestly embody their intentions.

Couples also articulated that an awareness of sacrifice defines their commitments. In speaking about the compromises that come with relationships, Nora asserted that she can

comfortably and happily relinquish some of my own self-interest because the relationship is something... I feel like I integrated myself into something bigger than myself. And that something is not just Erin. It's something that's outside of the two of us.

Dereese expressed a similar sentiment:

It seems to me that when you are with someone and it means a lot, you're more than happy to give up a good portion of your independence to make a third entity, which is the partnership... When we met, I was more than happy to give up my independence because I felt the resulting relationship was so much more. More valuable than my independence. And that's I guess, commitment.

Richard specified how he compromises for the sake of the relationship when emphasizing the importance of "thinking in a loving way about how you conduct your own life so you aren't harmful to each other."

This sacrifice and compromise illustrate another theme that was discussed when defining commitment. Many couples simply articulated that their commitments are defined by the connection and care they feel toward one another. Some participants identified that their partner is the person to whom they are emotionally closest. Others spoke about the dedication they have to seeing their partner grow. Martin, Charlie, and Richard emphasized their commitment to honesty, concern, kindness, and their commitment to meeting each other's needs.

Commitment Markers

In addition to defining commitment, couples described some of the momentous markers throughout their relationship that signified their commitment. While there is one couple in the sample that does not cohabit, the other six couples emphasized that joining their lives together physically was an indicator that they were committed. For most that meant moving in together or purchasing a home together and for some that meant sharing resources, assets, and plans. Nora and Erin laughed about not feeling

completely committed until Nora agreed to let go of her land line number and share one phone number. Kali reported that she and her partner took a significant step when they had a child together. She recalled the adoption process she underwent to have completely shared custody.

Nora and Erin, who chose not to have children, explained that their commitment deepened whenever they would make life plans together. They shared that they would periodically see a financial planner or a therapist to help them negotiate their individual and joint aspirations. They discussed their decision not to have children and the support they sought in exploring that possibility. They emphasized that there were certain “junctures” in their relationship when their divergent goals would cause them to negotiate new plans. For instance, Nora’s decision to attend graduate school meant she would be away for three summers, causing them to develop a supportive long-distance relationship for a period of time. Martin and Axel also spoke about making life plans together. For instance, they decided to move across the country together, but had to restructure their relationship as well when they had different plans and had to adapt to a long-distance relationship. These reflections from participants speak to the powerful connections that developed when collaborating on joint plans as well as divergent ones.

Life plans also entailed a merging of financial resources for some couples. While the male couples reported less economic unity in their relationships, two of the three male couples purchased a home together, entangling them in that way. All of the female couples spoke about the economic unit they became in differing ways. Some felt their joint home purchase united them. Others asserted that the establishment of wills and trust documents further cemented their commitment. A few couples emphasized that the

financial support they began to provide for one another, despite of the difference in earning power contributed to their commitment. Others, who resisted full financial unity, recognized the ways they stopped keeping track of individual financial contributions and trusted that they would nevertheless be responsible for their share. The couples that domestically partnered highlighted the financial merging that came from shared benefits and protections.

In addition to the benefits granted through domestic partnership, couples identified that commitment celebrations signified the strength of their commitment. However, most couples asserted that these celebrations or ceremonies recognized, as Nora articulated, “something that was already true about our relationship” and did not feel like the beginning of the commitment. Kali spoke about the excitement of jumping over a broom with her partner when they first moved in together. Interestingly, Martin asserted that his decision with Axel not to get married signified their level of commitment for him. Most couples also said that they mark their commitment either each year or on milestone years with an anniversary celebration of some sort, even if they simply go out to a special dinner together. Couples mark their anniversary dates differently- from their first sexual encounter, from the time they moved in together, or from their first date.

While none of the couples reported an exchange of rings during whatever ceremonies they may have had, many of them have exchanged rings since then and recognize that exchange as a commitment marker. In fact, three of the four female couples and none of the male couples exchanged rings at some point in their relationship. Most of these exchanges were done informally. Nora and Erin bought their rings together, celebrated over some champagne, and went home. Erin recounted that once

home, “We burned some sage and put some salt in the corners and the cats looked at us. And we said a couple nice things to each other. And we exchanged rings and then we fed the cats.” Nora explained the importance of the rings when stating that it was “a nice feeling for me to know that in my life I was visible as somebody who had a partner. And it didn’t matter if people knew my partner was a woman or not...I felt grown up I guess.” Kali admitted that her partner gave her a diamond nipple piercing when they moved to the Bay area and smiled as she said, “we joke around that that’s my engagement ring, but it’s not like you show that to everybody.” Louise and Dereese discussed the importance of their recently exchanged rings, about 30 years into their relationship. Similar to Nora, Louise explained, “I want to be known as someone who has a commitment to someone. That’s important.” Her partner Dereese expressed, “I like it because it’s a subtle sign in our society.” They emphasized that it’s a “confirmation” of what is already there in the relationship.

Jacob and Pinky spoke about other exchanges that confirmed their commitment. Jacob felt his decision to offer Pinky a set of his keys to his apartment was a significant moment and he explained that he did so without expectation that Pinky would offer his keys in return. When Pinky did, it solidified that connection even more. Jacob and Pinky also spoke about photographs they had taken of themselves as a couple. Jacob recalled that the impetus for them was Pinky’s desire for “something that signifies our couple-ness.” During the interview, Pinky asserted, “I guess this is what we did instead of getting married. That was our commitment ceremony.”

Aligned with definitions entailing a vision of the “arc of the relationship” and the need to sacrifice, couples felt their commitments were marked by difficult times in their

relationships as well. The various long-distance arrangements exemplify this form of dedication. Additionally, participants reported about the support they offered one another when life circumstances aggravated their stability. Richard and Charlie recalled their first home together burning down and the strength their relationship had to gather in order to survive this tumultuous event. Also, the illness or death of loved ones was a time when couples felt they exemplified a reinforced commitment toward one another. Erin remembered the support Nora offered during the time of her mother's illness and death. Pinky spoke about the reassurance brought to him and his dying mother when he assured her in her coma that Jacob would take care of him. Jacob recollected the peace he was able to make with Pinky's previous partner at his mother's memorial service, in an effort to provide Pinky with the support he needed.

These examples of taking care of one another exemplify another theme that was expressed regarding commitment markers. Many participants held that their commitments were simply marked by the heightened feelings they had for their partners. Most related to Louise's explanation that, "Over time- that's where you develop the depth and breadth of the commitment. So history's a big part of it." Others highlighted the compatibility and bond that strengthens throughout the relationship.

Axel and Sophia each discussed the daily fulfillment that exists. Axel stated, "we just take care of each other in little everyday ways." Sophia elaborated on this idea and described how she felt when she and Wanda had finished the work on the home they purchased:

It really wasn't until after all the work was completed, that we stopped working on a project and we lived day to day. And it was just the day-to-day that I settled into... it was a very significant...I mean, I always felt it was forever and so forth,

but the feeling caught up in a different way, like wow. It's just, this is what it is. This is what it is. Like we're not distracted by something else. This is it.

Wanda had a more specific time in mind when she realized she was interested in committing to Sophia. "I knew I was committed by the way she made love... The quality of her presence and what she could bring to a relationship was very clear." Overall, participants seemed to illustrate that, without a wedding date finalizing their commitments, their markers are gradual, fluid, and diverse.

Uniqueness of relationships

Participants highlighted other ways their relationships differ from married couples. Some of them admitted, as Charlie said, that they "value all the ingredients and yet reject the formal structure." However, many of them, including Charlie, illustrated many aspects of their relationships that look quite different from most married couples. A repeated example of this mentioned by all the male participants was the concept of non-monogamy. Jacob described his realization, through psychotherapy, that people could have more than one intimate relationship. In his relationship with Pinky, while they do not practice explicit non-monogamy, he does not concern himself with how Pinky spends his time when they are not together. Richard and Charlie have a more explicit understanding of non-monogamy. Charlie symbolically stated about Richard, "the best way to keep you in a room is to leave the door open. He gets claustrophobic when the door's closed... [that when there's] a feeling of claustrophobia or overly coupled-ness, that it felt constraining." Richard agreed that their relationship would not have lasted if Charlie did not give him the freedom to have sexual experiences outside the relationship.

For some this concept came very naturally, while for others like Jacob and Charlie, they worked to redefine what they understood loyalty to mean. Charlie explained

he realized “that loyalty and caring is not synonymous with absolute monogamy. Because to me it felt disloyal and a lacking of caring, so I had real troubles in the beginning.”

However, Axel and Martin reported, “Our relationship has never been monogamous.” They agreed that non-monogamy is natural, which influences how they feel about marriage. Axel explained:

My thoughts about the naturalness of non-monogamy made me think about marriage as an artificial construct. Because it seems to me that there are people who are 100% monogamous and 100% fulfilled and happy, but it seems to me just from what you hear about people ‘cheating’ ... it’s only cheating if you promise not to do it. And then yeah, cheating is wrong, lying is wrong. So, that was another strike against marriage- it just seemed artificially monogamous to me. It seemed like something that people in a certain sense of desperation could cling to – well if we get married, I’ll be more secure, I won’t be cheated on or if I do everyone will know that it’s wrong, wrong, wrong.

Contrary to the heterosexual notion that non-monogamy will destroy a relationship, Axel and Martin argued that it actually benefits theirs. Axel stated that they value “the idea of not tying another person down, not saying because I think this, you have to do this or the other thing.” They agree that:

More love is better... I think we both had the experience that having an intimate relationship with someone else doesn’t take away as much as it brings to the relationship. And to me, it’s just as simple as variety gives you some perspective. Like going on vacation, you come back and appreciate your home a lot. And it doesn’t make sense to me that more love, like in a physics equation, that more love means danger or trouble. It seems like a good thing.

Axel admitted that, while there are benefits to non-monogamy, it is not a seamless arrangement. He explained, “That doesn’t mean there wasn’t jealousy, but it too was openly discussed. Reassurances, comparisons made. And comfort regained.”

Another difference participants highlighted, between their relationships and those of married couples, is the practice of maintaining relationship with previous partners.

Pinky and Jacob shared that they are both very close friends with Pinky’s previous

partner of 25 years. Erin and Nora spoke about the “village” mentality within the LGBT community and the typical expectation that community remains inclusive, even when break-ups occur. It is unclear if this is unique to all same-sex couples or only same-sex couples who do not marry.

Many couples also asserted that not marrying is one way they represent their independence as individuals. One couple does not live together because their lifestyle choices are very different and they decided that, rather than compromise all the time, they are happy to maintain their independent homes and come together when they choose. A few couples keep their money separate, preferring to remain autonomous in their spending decisions. While Charlie and Richard live together and merge finances, they spoke about the ways they support each other’s independence on an emotional level. Charlie pointed out that Richard “really prefer(s) a degree of emotional autonomy, that actually I do as well.” He explained, “we’re supportive of each other’s having independent friendships, independent travel. He still travels two-three months a year. I was totally supportive of you living in Washington for ten years” (for 2/3 of the year).

Richard commented on the balance they achieve:

We’ve been, I think, good as a couple in that neither of us are on each other’s case because there’s some really disturbing personality trait that we just can’t deal with and you just constantly ride on the other person... We function as independent people and we also help each other in those regards. In other words, it’s not totally independent and we like that.

While this balance is something that many married couples strive for, participants held that their decisions not to marry contributed to their ability to maintain this supportive independence.

Marriage Equality Movement

Should it be legal?

Considering the commitments that participants have formed outside of marriage, given their perspectives on the institution, they are a unique population during the recent struggle for marriage equality. While their views on marriage may lead to the assumption that they are opposed to marriage in the LGBT community, the entire sample agreed that marriage should be a legal option for same-sex couples. Most of them argued that it is obvious that it should and eventually will be a right granted to anyone. Many highlighted the importance of choice in this “significant rite of passage,” despite their personal choices. Charlie noticed that even though the “movement used to be about gaining the right to be sexually transgressive (and) now it’s about the right to form long-term, loving relationships (he) believe(s) in those relationships, so (he) believe(s) in that path being open.”

Dynamic with other couples in light of the movement

Logically, this consensus in the sample translates to the opinions participants have of same-sex couples who marry. The majority of the sample felt excited for friends who married, moved at their weddings, and nonjudgmental about others’ decisions. One participant even recognized her own bias toward straight couples who marry, admitting that, despite her value for not marrying, she views those who marry as more legitimate and serious about their relationship.

This bias of legitimacy extended, for some couples, into how they viewed their own relationships. When same-sex marriage became legal, Nora came to some realizations:

I think watching peers of mine embrace it and set the whole thing in motion and invite their friends and family made me realize that even if I wanted to, I had never felt at liberty to do so... it made me mad that it was out of my control, that other people could decide that for me and particularly that the sort of social and cultural impact of that my relationship might never be regarded as being as valid or legitimate.

Sophia had similar feelings and stated, "It's never occurred to me how much we've been deprived, like how fundamental this is." She explained that, in addition to the happiness she felt for friends, attending same-sex weddings "made me a little angry, like you don't count if you don't get married." Erin and Jacob expressed a similar sentiment. As Erin articulated, "finally you offer me this opportunity and you expect me to come running down to city hall. Like, oh finally they'll let me in!" While she acknowledged that this would not be the most effective strategy, she admits this was her initial reaction to legalization.

A few participants reported some level of disappointment when they saw same-sex couples marry. Pinky called himself "heterophobic" and asserted, "I don't like the aping of (heterosexuals). I don't like trying to be just as good." His partner Jacob agreed that it seems "showy," as if people feel they have something to prove. Nora also expressed disappointment, but for different reasons: "It seems like a shame... it feels like as a group of people we could have a more powerful impact on the world by standing outside of it and asking the system to change." From all three of these participants, there was a sense that same-sex couples should stand firm in their unique relationships instead of conforming to the status quo.

Participants also pointed out that it was just as difficult for others to accept their decision not to marry. Once same-sex marriage became legal, there was a lot of external pressure, from the LGBT community and from family, to participate. Jacob recalled that

his family automatically assumed he and Pinky would marry when it was legal, as if this was what they were waiting for. Axel and Martin were surprised when their gay friends failed to understand their decision to refrain. To some friends their decision not to marry meant they were opposed to same-sex marriage. Others could not understand why they wouldn't marry if "everyone else is doing it."

Therefore, it's been difficult for this population to express to others in the LGBT community that they would prefer for the movement to be focused on other issues. Most participants highlighted universal health care as an issue that is particularly important to their community and society at large, which seems more relevant and vital than marriage. Participants listed a series of current issues that they would be more eager to support than marriage. Many reported that their lack of enthusiasm for the issue of marriage has alienated them from organizations they support, as they feel like dissenters at meetings or events, in which marriage is the only issue being addressed. However, many participants acknowledged that this is the issue of the current generation and feel supportive of them in their efforts.

Positive impact on LGBT community

In addition to their personal experiences, couples predicted the positive and negative impact same-sex marriage would have on the LGBT community. One positive influence participants emphasized was the feeling that they would be welcomed as full citizens. Sophia recalled that she "stood taller" when same-sex marriage was legal in California. She stated, "I felt like a full citizen in a way that I never realized I could feel before. It pointed out that I hadn't felt it and suddenly I did." Erin pointed out that legal rights, like inheritance and property rights, would automatically be granted. Wanda

asserted that the ability for she and Sophia to care for each other in their old age would be guaranteed and same-sex families would have an opportunity for greater stability. Louise predicted that same-sex marriage would offer a “big morale boost” and a recognition that the LGBT community wants the same things as the heterosexual community.

From this position of equality, some participants felt couples would personally benefit from the strengthening of ritual and community support. Sophia and Wanda emphasized how “transformative” ritual can be. They highlighted the backing a couple may feel when they are witnessed as they publicly proclaim their commitment to one another and are held accountable to their community. In turn, participants discussed the strength the community gains in being witness to same-sex, long-term commitments. Axel stated that more people would come out if they saw “successful models of same-sex couples.” Nora agreed, “I think people will be much more out if they feel like they have laws protecting them. We have a sense of how many gay people there are and I think we’d be surprised about how many there really are.”

With the legalization of same-sex marriage, many participants felt that acceptance would increase- that same-sex couples would be less judged by their families and they would gain the respect they desire and therefore be happier. Several participants drew a connection between legitimacy and happiness, explaining that people who seek that inclusion will benefit when it is granted. Charlie clearly articulated his more recent understanding that:

The marriage movement is about allowing gay and lesbian people who are unhappily on the margins and who haven’t felt able to form relationships because of the social exclusion, that the marriage movement is a way of saying, you can have this too. And the way that we’ve created a household, outside of marriage, works for us. But for a lot of people marriage is the way that they do that. And it’s a way they get social acceptance and it’s a way they get family acceptance. And

it's a way they get a sense of self worth in valuing their relationships. And that opening those marriage doors, I think is very good for gay and lesbian people to feel that that's ok and it is very good for straight people or larger society to say it's ok to be gay.

Once established, participants like Nora forecasted that “being gay (will become) less and less of an issue in mainstream culture.” Richard similarly expressed that it may lead to “taking the toxicity out of whether you're a homosexual or not.” Pinky and Martin pointed out that those who want to marry will, the rush will subside, and it will become a quieter, more personal decision.

With this inclusion and acceptance, some participants believed a new definition of marriage and sexuality would result. Wanda pointed out that it would broaden the concept of marriage, allowing families to look any way they want. Erin trusted that there would be an increased “acceptance of the fluidity of sexuality.” She recognized that this fluidity is already taking place, as she compared the relative progressiveness of today with the binary perspective she remembers as a youth coming out. Pinky disagreed with this sentiment, asserting that same-sex couples have no power to change what marriage looks like. He explained, “those straight people who started it would have to do it for it to stick. Otherwise we're just the interlopers, saying we want what you have but we want to do it the way we want to do it.” Still, others like Nora and Erin discussed the changes that would be possible if same-sex marriage existed. Erin claimed that it could impact religious institutions, “creep(ing) into religious discourse.” Nora stated, “I think we'd have more economic power, which would lead to more political power.” These perspectives suggest that there may be more possibility for social change from inside the marriage institution.

Negative impact on LGBT community

Conversely, many participants expressed concern that same-sex marriage would influence the LGBT community in a negative way. As opposed to the viewpoint that being inside the marriage institution would increase the power of social change, many felt that joining the institution would lead to a loss of the community's role as an outsider group that questions the mainstream. Nora argued that influencing others to question their assumptions is potentially more effective when one is living a different lifestyle but does not fit into all the biased assumptions others may have. Others feared that marriage equality would result in increased pressure to marry and decreased alternatives to the traditional lifestyle. Charlie identified that he finds it "really sad that that political wing of the gay community- (and) of the straight community- has just completely dried up. And I feel like I'm one of the last hold-outs for a statement against the institution of marriage." Jacob reflected on the movement's values as well, recalling "when I was active in gay liberation, I thought we were working to dismantle the institution of marriage." Martin has a less sentimental (or more stoic?) reaction to this change, pointing out that it's the natural course of outsider groups in America to become part of the mainstream as they evolve.

You can look at lots of groups who were once outsider groups who have also moved in varying ways into more mainstream, conventional, assimilated positions. I think that's kind of how it works. And especially in America, where everything is about absorption. It's really not about really recognizing difference and seeing things as different as being good. It's always about, no everyone should be like middle class and somewhat suburban, that's really what life is about in America. That's really what people want and I think they become less concerned about who that is that's in the club as long as they can be in that club. That's kind of the goal, in this assimilationist culture we live in...Everyone wants to assimilate into this manufactured life.

These attitudes reflect the loss, that participants feel, of the unique character that they valued fighting for in developing their identity; for it seems their generation yearned for liberation from society's norms as opposed to equality within the system.

Others expressed concern that, with the legalization of same-sex marriage, community will become less important as people become focused on pairing. Kali stated, "I definitely worry that we're going to dismantle our protective base and get into these little houses and we'll be more caring about our family than each other." Nora argued that the "village" quality of the LGBT community would change and that couples would resemble heterosexual couples, where previous partners are left behind. She gave an example of the strength and cohesion she values in the LGBT community:

The epitome of that is what happened with AIDS activism, which is the opposite of saying- everybody gets one other person matched to them. You know, it was about a whole community taking care of anybody in need. That's something I would fight for.

Attentive to the value of community, some pointed out that complying with the structure of increased privilege for the married "leaves a lot of segments of the gay community off the bus." Single people or those whose relationships do not fit into the structure of marriage, argued Martin and Charlie, will become alienated from this "protected status." This argument for inclusion reiterates an initial theme participants highlighted in their arguments against marriage. There was a resistance in the sample to joining an institution that uses relationship status to discriminate between those who receive benefits and those who do not. The benefits granted married couples, it was argued, should actually be individual rights to which all are entitled. In consideration of the entire community, and society at large, participants agreed that marriage limits rights to an elite group and

participation would lead to individual privilege while negating the discrimination that results.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

The intent of this study was to explore the themes addressed by committed, same-sex couples who chose not to marry in order to understand how they were influenced in their perspectives about marriage, how they define and practice commitment, and how they relate to the current marriage equality movement. The thirteen participants had varied experiences and diverse ways of being in relationship, but focused on similar ideas in describing their views on marriage. It is revealing to compare their responses with prior research in order to better understand the particularities of this study, the significance of the themes in a broader context, and the study's relevance to the field of Social Work.

Relating the findings to the literature

The findings of this study seem to reflect prior research done on the issue of same-sex marriage as it relates to the perspectives of those who chose not to marry. Based on the literature, I expected to find that subjects would be deterred from marriage because of the historical framework of the institution as a means of control, patriarchy, and discrimination between relationships that are seen as legitimate and illegitimate. In fact, the findings of this study supported these themes, as participants spoke about the autonomy and freedom from prescribed roles they felt were inherent in their relationships. Participants also stressed the delineation marriage makes between acceptable and unacceptable commitments, asserting that their resistance to marrying

includes a recognition of this privileged status and an awareness of the inequality that results for those who remain outside the institution of marriage. As the literature addresses, participants discussed the desire to boycott the benefits granted through marriage out of a wish to abstain until marriage rights are universally available.

Despite this relatively liberal perspective, the sentiment shared by most participants regarding the value to preserve the greater good of society and community was shared by the conservative views of Stewart (2008), Santorum (2003), and the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention (2010). While conservatives argued that “social goods” are protected by the traditional heterosexual marriage institution and the partnership between man and woman in raising children, participants asserted that society is best served by the individual freedom to engage in relationships that are less constrained and isolated. While conservatives posit that same-sex couples engage in self-serving relationships that last only as long as they are satisfied (Stewart, 2008), suggesting that these partnerships are not conducive to broader “social goods,” the couples in this study emphasized that the freedom within their relationships actually increased their personal happiness and ability to commit. Additionally, many couples felt that this freedom and independence enabled them to view themselves as part of a larger community, freer to support those outside their personal relationships and better the common good.

Participants’ lifestyles and relationship structures also aligned with previous literature. Many couples admitted that they appear to be mostly indistinguishable from married couples, despite the values that distance them from the institution of marriage. However, to some extent, this may be due to the age of the participants, as many of them

asserted that their lifestyles and relationship dynamics were less “normative” in their earlier years. But even currently, participants’ openness to non-monogamy, increased freedom to negotiate the roles and rules of their relationships, and decreased gender role constriction echoed the literature’s findings. The fluid, personalized, and unique ways couples defined and marked their commitments also proved to support the literature, as many of them asserted that their commitments were realized gradually and continue to develop, often without fixation on a promise or guarantee to be together forever.

Interestingly, the men interviewed in this study all referenced some aspect of non-monogamy in their relationships. Conservative literature argues that this confirms that men need to partner with women in order to be calmed and civilized. The often religious and moral prescription for monogamy that conservatives promote distances them from understanding the ways men in this study explained the benefits of non-monogamy. Many of them asserted that they are actually more able to commit because of this agreed upon freedom. Also, some described the deepened level of love and attentiveness that non-monogamy brings, knowing that they have an arrangement where no one is getting hurt and they are promoting trust, desire, and communication in their own relationship.

In accordance with the literature, participants predicted both positive and negative impacts marriage equality could have on the LGBT community. They addressed the benefit public recognition would have for couples and for the transformation of the marriage institution. Many reasoned that if same-sex marriage could be normalized as simply marriage, more people would come out, families would begin to be more supportive, and increased happiness and financial stability would result. These responses illustrate the ideas represented by Sullivan (1989, 2003) and Rauch (2008) in particular.

However, participants also reflected the works of Yep et al. (2003), Ettelbrick (1989), and Lannutti (2005) when they explained that same-sex marriage will draw new lines for discrimination, negating forms of commitment outside the institution and leading to a fragmented political voice in the LGBT community. This study and prior research uncovered the concern that this assimilation will detract from the effort for acceptance to be gained for same-sex relationships on their own terms.

Implications for the field of Social Work

This fear is somewhat reflective of the particular generation of participants interviewed in this study and offers the historical context necessary for this research to be applied by professionals in the field of Clinical Social Work. As noted by Egan and Sherrill (2005) and Jagose (1996), the perspective of the LGBT community is changing from a need to rebel and be accepted as different (the liberationist model) to a desire to belong and be equal (the ethnic model). Since the participants in this study range in age from 44-71, their views represent their contextual experience of coming out within the political climate of the early gay liberation movement and the second wave of the feminist movement. The powerful social change of the time situated them between the traditional values of marriage and heterosexuality that their parents often conveyed and the radical resistance to these values and realization of alternative lifestyles that began to emerge around them. Many participants spoke about the discrimination and lack of acceptance they experienced from family and community as they came out, positioned as outsiders to a very “normative” society. In addition, many highlighted the rigidity and façade of happiness present in their parents’ marriages, propelling them farther from the

models of commitment they witnessed. Thus, it is not surprising that this generation desires recognition of relationship structures outside the institution of marriage.

It is also not surprising that participants represent marriage as they do. While the image of married life has changed over time, with less traditional interpretations of roles and norms being accepted, this is not reflected in most of the participants' descriptions. Instead, marriage is described in traditional terms that harken back to the 1950s and is opposed on that basis. Given the marital relationship models of their parents, that at least eight out of the thirteen participants referenced – the urge to leave the relationship but a moral obligation to stay, secret affairs, personal identity loss and polarized marital roles, painful sacrifice, reverence for marriage despite extreme conflict, and shame and embarrassment when marriage does end – it is quite understandable that participants feel safer when viewing traditional marriage as the norm and defining their own relationships as the opposite of that image. Additionally, this provides some insight about the gradual shift in the priorities of the LGBT community and the emergence of the marriage equality movement. Perhaps the social change promoted by the generation of the participants led to increased fluidity in the way marriage is defined and practiced, thus propelling the transformation of the institution into one that is more welcoming and attractive to a younger generation of same-sex couples.

In working with same-sex couples, a more nuanced understanding of the varied relationship structures within the LGBT community affords the clinician an open stance with less assumption about the goals or views of their clients. The study also provides examples of long-term couples who commit in non-traditional ways, which can serve to dismantle stereotypes and challenge any judgments that may be provoked. With the

information presented in this study, social workers can better understand that there are varied viewpoints in relation to the marriage equality movement and the personal decision to marry. Recognizing the diversity within the LGBT community can potentially enable a social worker to be a more effective ally. This perspective can also lead to a critical analysis of the ways assumptions are made about all couples, regardless of sexual orientation, and the limitations those assumptions can place on one's ability to engage fully in their relationships and in a therapeutic alliance.

In addition to being an analysis of marriage, this study addresses the gender norms manufactured by our society. Participants' responses reflect their narratives about not fitting into these prescribed norms, which may be informative for clinicians in the field of Social Work. The examples given of how couples established their own roles, rules, and norms may be inspiring to some couples who struggle with the influence more traditional societal norms have had on them and their relationship. The study also creates awareness of the pressures couples face to comply with gender norms and relationship norms and the benefits society grants for such adherence. It is significant that this incentive and the values of these couples are at odds, leaving couples in a compromised position.

Depicting a population that remains outside the construct of marriage after a lifetime of discrimination by the cultural and political forces that define the institution, this study is also a meaningful portrayal of the consequences of oppression. At a time when marriage was sacred and alternative lifestyles were shunned, the population in this study was seen as threatening outsiders and their love labeled unacceptable. Needless to say, when the doors of marriage have been closed to a whole community for generations,

rejection of the institution is inevitable when those doors finally begin to crack open. In fact, it makes even more sense when considering how the LGBT community experienced the strong conditioning that their love did not and could not equate to any legitimate form of accepted recognition. However, it is remarkable to appreciate the strength and healing that has been gained as this study exemplifies the successful relationships developed outside the painful norms that excluded them.

Caveats

While the experiences and viewpoints expressed by the thirteen participants of this study offer a greater understanding of this segment of the population, the findings cannot be generalized in an attempt to understand all same-sex couples who choose not to marry. Not only is this small sample limited to couples in the Bay area, known to be one of the most liberal areas in the state of California, but the sample also lacks diversity in terms of age, race, socioeconomic status, and family make-up. The sample does not consider the views of younger couples who may be influenced by a completely different social and historical context. In addition to these contextual differences, the age range of this study's sample may also reflect responses unique to participants' particular life stage. Additionally, the fact that twelve out of thirteen respondents are White and only one out of thirteen is African American results in findings that lack the diversity needed to analyze any racial differences and implications within the sample. Generalizing these findings would lead to the false assumption that the White experience is normative and would negate the diversity of response that varied races may produce. The socioeconomic status of participants is similarly narrow, leaving out the experiences of couples who have less assets, access, and privilege than this middle-upper class sample.

The fact that only one participant has a child also skews the study's results. It can be assumed that the addition of children into a family changes one's perspectives and priorities. Couples without children may feel less threatened by the idea of forming a partnership with less protections and have more freedom to act according to their personal values, without having to consider the possible impact on offspring.

Another factor that limits the ability to generalize the results of this study is the snowball recruiting method. Those who participated encouraged friends, acquaintances, and colleagues to join the study, possibly creating a sample of relatively like-minded people. Also, while recruitment efforts were made at various organizations, there are a disproportionately high number of Jewish participants in this study. Five of the thirteen subjects identify as Jewish, which may reflect the networks with which I am associated and the fact that a queer-friendly Jewish synagogue was very receptive to recruitment efforts. Therefore, the limited scope of this study and its results must be considered when reflecting on the perspectives of same-sex couples who do not marry.

My personal lens, through which interviews were conducted and responses shared, also biases the results of the study. During the interview process, I may have unwittingly encouraged responses with my posture, facial expression, tone of voice, and follow-up questions. As a researcher, I attempted to present myself as an unbiased listener; however, my interest in the topic and my own views about marriage could have come across inadvertently with participants. Due to my own membership in an unmarried, long-term, committed relationship, I may have revealed enthusiasm in reaction to the ideas being discussed and I may have oriented my listening toward aspects of responses that resonated with my own experience. Similarly, in analyzing the data of

participants, I may have unintentionally placed more emphasis on certain themes or downplayed the importance on experiences that were not in keeping with the common sentiment.

I also embody a particular perspective as a White, Jewish, female heterosexual of middle to upper socioeconomic status. My conceptualization of their experiences may have been biased by the various ways my identity positioned me as similar to or different from each participant. There are many ways this could have played out unconsciously. For example, shared axes of identity could have caused me to generalize their experiences with my own or it could have increased my awareness of the ways we were different. Differing axes of identity could have caused me to attribute unfamiliar aspects of their stories with the ways we are not alike. Honoring the experiences of my participants accurately was always at the forefront of my research process; however, I am aware of the inevitable partiality that a researcher brings to any study so it is important to acknowledge the risk of misrepresentation.

Future research

While the research presented in this study may be helpful in the field of Social Work, this is by no means an exhaustive study. In fact, the structure and findings presented open the door for future related research. Given the social influences that impacted participants' perspectives on marriage, it would be worthwhile to study the views of a younger generation of same-sex couples who refrain from marriage. The struggle for marriage equality prevalent in the community at this time creates a completely different context for young couples who are evaluating how they wish to represent their commitments. Similarly relevant would be a theoretical analysis of the

changing dominant perspective within the LGBT community regarding marriage – how it has changed, for whom, and why. In addition, it may be informative to conduct research about different-sex couples of varying ages who decide not to marry. Having the privilege and right to marry but not exercising it may look very different. Another valuable study would address the differences between the perspectives of participants from different races and ethnicities who are in long-term, committed relationships (same-sex or different-sex) and choose not to marry. Lastly, studying same-sex couples who have children but decide not to marry may provide more insight into the values and priorities of this segment of the LGBT population.

This study suggests that marriage is not an institutional frame that all couples strive to join. While the participants of this study value access to marriage for the LGBT community, they highlight the fact that this is only one form of commitment and that alternatives to marriage can also be appreciated and celebrated. The political and generational considerations of this study are significant to the findings. They provide a distinct lens through which participants' experiences were filtered – a lens that reveals how discrimination, rigid norms prescribed by family and society, embodied social change, and community support can lead to both rejection of a significant social expectation and the establishment of a meaningfully self-defined alternative. This suggests that perhaps it is important for all couples to know and define their own relationships. For, it was not the idea of commitment that was challenged by the participants, but the prescribed image of commitment's form. In the experiences described, this freedom to self-define enabled them to form satisfying commitments to

their partners, meaningful commitments to the values of their community, and empowering commitments to their personal autonomy.

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APPENDIX A

Recruitment Flyer

**SAME-SEX COMMITMENT WITHOUT MARRIAGE
SHARE YOUR PERSONAL STORY!**

Have you been in your current relationship for at least 5 years?
Did you decide not to marry in 2008?
Are you considering never marrying, even if legalized?

Grab your partner and join me in a private interview to discuss your feelings about marriage, your definition of commitment, and your perspectives on the marriage equality movement!

Give back to your community and contribute to a Master's level thesis with your own personal story!



APPENDIX B

Recruitment Email for Organizations

Dear (name of organization or name of appropriate employee if I have it),

My name is Amanda Sommers, and I am a graduate student at Smith College School for Social Work. I am conducting a research project designed to explore the influences on same-sex couples' decisions not to marry when they are in committed, long-term relationships. This exploratory study will investigate couples' perspectives about marriage as a personal decision as well as perspectives about the marriage equality movement. It will also investigate other ways same-sex couples have ritualized their commitments to one another.

I am conducting this research for my MSW thesis and I am interested in recruiting for potential participants at (name of organization). Recruitment would entail hanging flyers in public spaces at your organization and possibly speaking with your front desk employee about the study so that he or she has my information if questions arise. I would be interested in visiting (name of organization) as soon as possible and I would request that flyers stay posted until mid-March.

This confidential, graduate-level research will enable participants to share their stories and have their perspectives heard. Their contributions will provide important information that may be helpful in educating others about the varied experiences surrounding marriage and different forms of commitment. This information may be beneficial within the field of social work and in the realm of politics.

Please review the attached flyer and if you have any questions, do not hesitate to get in touch via email or phone (###.###.####, ext. ##).

Thank you for your consideration and I look forward to hearing from you soon.
Amanda Sommers

APPENDIX C

Recruitment Email for Community/Friends/Colleagues

Hello,

My name is Amanda Sommers, and I am a graduate student at Smith College School for Social Work. I am conducting a research project designed to *explore the influences on same-sex couples' decisions not to marry when they are in committed, long-term relationships*. This exploratory study will investigate couples' perspectives about marriage as a personal decision as well as perspectives about the marriage equality movement. It will also investigate other ways same-sex couples have ritualized their commitments to one another.

I am conducting this research for my MSW thesis and I am looking for potential participants. This confidential, graduate-level research will enable participants to share their stories and have their perspectives heard. Contributions will provide important information that may be helpful in educating others about the varied experiences surrounding marriage and different forms of commitment. Participation includes a 1-2 hour voluntary interview between the couple and myself.

You or someone you know may offer wonderful contributions to this study if:

- * You are in a committed relationship of 5 years or more
- * You live in the Bay area
- * You did not decide to marry in 2008 and you consider never marrying, even if legalized

Please review the attached flyer and get in touch if you would like to participate. Also, please pass this along to anyone you know who may be interested *and* to any list-serves or organizations to which you subscribe. Help spread the word!

Please get in touch via email or phone (###.###.####, ext. ##).

Thank you!
Amanda Sommers

APPENDIX D

Informed Consent Form

Dear Research Participant,

My name is Amanda Sommers, and I am a graduate student at Smith College School for Social Work. I am conducting a research project designed to explore the influences on same-sex couples' decisions not to marry when they are in committed, long-term relationships. This exploratory study will investigate couples' perspectives about marriage as a personal decision as well as perspectives about the marriage equality movement. It will also investigate other ways same-sex couples have ritualized their commitments to one another. I am conducting this research for my MSW thesis, for professional presentation, and for possible future professional publication.

You have been asked to participate in this study because (a) you are in a committed relationship with someone of the same-sex and (b) you are not married nor do you intend on becoming married and (c) you have been in your current relationship for five or more years and (d) you live with your partner in the San Francisco Bay Area. As a participant in this study, you will be interviewed with a series of semi-structured questions for approximately 60-120 minutes. I will conduct the interview. I may take a few notes during the interview process. I will audio record the interview and then selectively transcribe your responses later in order to ensure the accuracy of your statements. If a transcriber is used, s/he will sign a confidentiality pledge before having access to the recording. In order to conduct the interview, we will agree on a location that is somewhat private and convenient.

Participation in this study may trigger strong feelings as you reveal your experience surrounding the decision not to marry. You may feel strong or uncomfortable emotions during or after the interview process. I will provide you with a list of referral resources in case you would like support around any of these possible reactions. While there will be no financial compensation for taking part in this study, participation will allow you to share your experience regarding the decision not to marry and to have your perspective heard. Your contributions will provide important information that may be helpful in educating others about the varied experiences surrounding marriage and different forms of commitment. This information may be beneficial within the field of social work and in the realm of politics.

Your identity will be protected in a number of ways. The audio recording of the interview and the transcription will be assigned a number for identification. You will not be asked your name or any other identifying information during the recording. You will be asked to provide a pseudonym for yourself, which will be used to discuss your responses and to protect your identity. I will be the primary handler of all data collected. After identifying information has been removed, my research advisor will have access to the data collected during the interview including any transcripts or summaries created and will assist in the analysis of the data. Any person assisting in transcription will be

required to sign a confidentiality agreement. I will keep the audio record, the transcripts, and other data in a locked and secure environment for three years following the completion of the research, consistent with Federal regulations. After that time, all material will remain locked and secured if still being used or destroyed if no longer needed. Should this study be presented or published at any time, the data will be presented as a whole and when brief illustrative quotes or vignettes are used, they will be disguised with your pseudonym.

This study is completely voluntary. You are free to refuse to answer specific questions and/or to withdraw from this study. If you decide to withdraw, all recordings and data describing you will immediately be destroyed. You have until May 15, 2010 to withdraw from this study. After that time, the interview will be integrated into the study.

YOUR SIGNATURE 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, AND YOUR RIGHTS AND THAT YOU AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY.

_____ Signature of Participant #1	_____ Date
_____ Signature of Participant #2	_____ Date
_____ Signature of Researcher	_____ Date

Thank you for participating in this study.

If you have any questions or would like to withdraw from the study, please contact researcher at: **(email address) or ###.###.#### ext. ##**

Please keep a copy of this consent form for your records.

APPENDIX E

Referral Resource List

LGBTQ-friendly Options: (retrieved from 2008 “Best of the Gay Bay” publication)

Gaylesta, LGBT Psychotherapists Association of the Greater San Francisco Bay Area

5245 College Avenue, Suite #713

Oakland, CA 94618

Therapist Referral: (888) 869-4993

www.gaylesta.org

Raising awareness of mental health issues as they concern the LGBT community through seminars, consultations and speakers, resource and referral services.

New Leaf

103 Hayes Street

San Francisco, CA 94102

(415) 626-7000

www.newleafservices.org

Professional mental health, substance abuse, social support, HIV/AIDS, resource and referral services, and outreach to elders. Accepts Medi-Cal.

Marcy Adelman

San Francisco, CA 94102

(415) 285-4307

Karen Barnes

San Francisco, CA 94101

(415) 642-9580

Pamela Braswell

2481 Clay Street, Suite #202

San Francisco, CA 94115

(415) 440-6240

www.bayareatherapy.net

Cheryl Deaner

San Francisco, CA

(415) 282-2200

www.cheryldeaner.com

Ann Diedrich

2772 Bush Street

San Francisco, CA 94115

(415) 673-7597

www.childandadulttherapy.com

Christa Donaldson
3890 24th Street
San Francisco, CA 94114
(510) 528-9867

Tasha Jackson
999 Sutter Street
San Francisco, CA 94109
(415) 248-1362

Meridian Psychotherapy- Hillary Koster
2120 Market Street
San Francisco, CA 94114
(415) 810-5572
www.meridianpsychotherapycenter.com

Laurel Center
3323 Sacramento Street
San Francisco, CA 94118
(415) 673-2370
www.thelaurelcenter.net

Greg and Shasta Nelson
Fort Mason Center Building C, Room C-362
99 Marina Boulevard
San Francisco, CA 94123
(415) 748-0015
(415) 418-4100
www.secondwindsf.org

Stacey Shuster
5 Franklin Street, Suite #320
San Francisco, CA 94102
(415) 285-8755
www.staceyshusterphd.com

Jana Silverman
134 Clement Street, Suite B
San Francisco, CA 94118
(415) 752-5826
www.arttherapysf.com

Cathy Wickham
3890 24th Street
San Francisco, CA 94114

(415) 821-7248

Sliding Scale Options:

San Francisco Psychotherapy Research Group

9 Funston Ave, The Presidio

San Francisco, CA 94129

(415) 677-7946

http://sfprg.org/low_fee_clinic.html

San Francisco DBT Center

1735-A Union St.

San Francisco, CA 94123

(415) 345-1396

www.sfdbt.com

Oak Creek Counseling Center (East Bay & SF)

1-888-637-7404

www.oakcreekcenter.org

A Center for Psychotherapy

(415) 931-4888 (SF)

(510) 849-2878 (Berkeley)

www.psychotherapycenter.net

California Institute of Integral Studies

http://www.ciis.edu/About_CIIS/Counseling_Centers.html

Jewish Family Services

<http://www.jfcs.org/Services>

Marina Counseling Center

2137 Lombard St

San Francisco, CA 94123-2712

(415) 563-2137

www.marinacounseling.com

ACCESS Institute

110 Gough St

San Francisco, CA 94102-5971

(415) 861-5449

www.accessinst.org

Psychoanalytic Institute of Northern California

2252 Fillmore St.

San Francisco, CA

(415) 922-4050

APPENDIX F

Screening Guide

I need to ask a few questions to see if you are appropriate for this study. Some of the questions are somewhat personal, but you can refrain from answering any that are uncomfortable to you. Participation in this study is voluntary. Each of you needs to answer each question.

QUESTIONS:

- 1) Committed Relationship?
- 2) Same-sex relationship?
- 3) How long have you been in this relationship?
- 4) What is your marital status?
- 5) What is your living situation?
- 6) Where do you live?
- 7) Do you intend on marrying if same-sex marriage is legalized in California?
- 8) Do you intend on marrying in another state?
- 9) How do you each identify in terms of race/ethnicity?
- 10) How do you each identify in terms of SES? (lower, l-m, middle, m-u, upper)

APPENDIX G

Interview Guide

Demographic Questions:

1. Age
2. Gender
3. Sexual orientation
4. Education level
5. Employment status
6. Religion/spiritual practice.

Open-ended questions:

The following questions will be asked in order to explore the three numbered research questions.

1. What factors influence members of same-sex couples not to marry when given the opportunity (i.e., legalization)?
 - a. Did you consider marrying in 2008, when it became legal in California? Were you in agreement about this decision? Can you tell me about your conversations around the topic of marriage before 2008 or during the time marriage for same-sex couples became legal? If you did not consider marrying in 2008, was there another point in your relationship when you had discussions about marriage? What was discussed at that time?
 - b. What past or present factors in your lives (political, social, personal) influenced you not to marry?
 - i. Were you aware of or involved in political activity, activist groups, or organizations at any point in your past that directly or indirectly influenced your feelings about marriage?
 - ii. Were there political events that you remember (nationally or locally) that influenced your feelings about marriage?
 - iii. What were the messages you received about marriage (explicitly or implicitly) when you were growing up (in the home, from friends,

school, your community, religious organizations)? How did you come to follow or divert from these messages?

- iv. Have you had past relationships that have influenced your ideas and decisions about marriage?
 - c. Are there any circumstances under which you can see yourselves marrying? Do you feel you are in agreement about this as a couple?
2. How is commitment defined and represented by same-sex couples who chose not to marry in California in 2008?
 - a. What is the strongest indicator of your commitment and how does it affect your relationship?
 - b. Can you recall some commitment markers you have used throughout your relationship? Let's explore what those were, how they came to be, and what they meant to you?
 - c. What is/are your personal definition(s) of commitment?
 3. How does this population relate to the marriage equality movement?
 - a. How do each of you relate to the marriage equality movement?
 - b. How do you each think marriage equality would influence the LGBT community and the larger society?
 - c. What kinds of relationships do you have with same-sex couples who decided to marry in 2008 or in other states?

APPENDIX H

Human Subjects Review Board Approval Letter

December 4, 2009

Amanda Sommers

Dear Amanda,

Your second set of revisions have been reviewed and approved. You have done an excellent job both in fashioning the study and in preparing your HSR materials and we are now happy to give final approval to your project

Please note the following requirements:

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

Maintaining Data: You must retain all data and other 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 study.

Sincerely,

Ann Hartman, D.S.W.
Chair, Human Subjects Review Committee

CC: Fred Newdom, Research Advisor