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“What Happens Now?: Identity and Commitment Among Lesbian Women With
the Passing of Same-Sex Marriage Laws in Minnesota”

By
Kendra Klump

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
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What Happens Now?: Identity and Commitment Among Lesbian Women with the
Passing of Same-Sex Marriage Laws in Minnesota

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ABSTRACT

What Happens Now?: Identity and Commitment Among Lesbian Women With the Passing of Same-Sex Marriage Laws in Minnesota

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Marriage equality has become a hotly debated topic within public and political discourse within recent years. The personal choices we make based on our sexuality and intimate relationship have been taken out of the private arena and spotlighted as issues of institutional ideology, morality, and equality. Throughout this, the impact felt within LGBTQ communities based on this discourse has been largely overlooked. This study explores the immediate impact newfound marriage equality may have on individuals and couples identifying as members of a diverse sexuality group.

Using semi-structured interviews, sixteen respondents self-identifying as lesbians provided narratives exploring the possible impact legalization of same-sex marriage in the state of Minnesota may have had on their identities and relationships. Feelings of validation, increased discussion about diverse sexualities, and the negotiation of heteronormative gender performances and expectations were overarching themes that emerged from these narratives. Within these themes, experiential differences based on age, location, and intersectionality are further explored.

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“It seems more probable that men really fear, not that they will have women’s sexual appetites forced on them, or that women want to smother and devour them, but that women could be indifferent to them altogether, that men could be allowed sexual and emotional-therefore economic- access to women only on women’s terms, otherwise being left on the periphery of the matrix.”

— Adrienne Rich
Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence

Issues of equality are pervasive in the discursive arenas of the private and political within American society. Often, these two areas overlap to create a combustible environment in which personal matters become a matter of public knowledge and public opinion. Perhaps one of the most prominently featured battles of this sort in recent U.S history has been the political movements for and against the legalization of same-sex marriage. Although issues concerning marriage began to be raised in the 1970’s with the increased salience of various sexuality diverse communities, the fight for equal rights concerning marriage did not become an issue of great publicity or importance until the mid 1990’s. Since then, marriage equality has been at the forefront of the equality battle for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) communities. Due to the beliefs and values associated with the institution of marriage within the United States, much conflict surrounding this issue has arisen within the heterosexual community as well as various sexuality diverse communities. This conflict not only affects the political spectrum of legislature, but has an effect on the identity

of the LGBTQ community as a whole as well as individuals within these communities.

With the increased visibility of minority sexual orientations within the constructs of what is considered an intimate relationship, these issues are brought to the forefront in a vast range of academic and institutional arenas. Research contextualized by psychological, sociological and historical frameworks with the focus on same-sex couples and equality are becoming more pervasive throughout academia. Also, practical applications within the fields of social work, law, and medicine are now being presented. The experiences of this marginalized group are becoming more important as this research reveals that their personal lives, which have been highly publicized and politicized, are being greatly impacted by the social constructs that surround us.

This research serves the purpose of furthering the understanding of the impacts legalization of same-sex marriage has had on certain members of the community directly impacted by it. I collected qualitative data from a diverse group of lesbians who were in committed relationships at the time of the legalization of same-sex marriage in the state of Minnesota. The legal and personal ramifications that come along with the choice of marriage are proving to be of growing importance to marginalized groups of sexual minorities within our country. This study examined these ramifications across a broad span of

issues in order to achieve a greater understanding of this impact. I find that feelings of validation, discussion of alternative sexualities, and increasing levels of acceptance are key in changing perceptions about marriage. The institutional legitimation provided to same-sex couples serves to better represent them as full members of our society deserving of equal rights. Also, the legalization of same-sex marriage has brought discussion of alternative sexualities to the forefront. This serves to raise awareness of and for individuals who identify as belonging to a diverse sexual identity. Lastly, this awareness and discourse has contributed to increased acceptance of the sexuality diverse within our society. As I detail in my findings, amendments made to the legal definition and allowances of marriage have a direct impact on individuals, groups, and greater society. The very definition of what the institution of marriage is and means is being thoughtfully reconsidered. Future considerations for public policy, marriage equality, and other civil rights movements may be impacted by the conclusions of this and similar research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Marriage

Traditionally the definition of marriage in the United States has consisted of the union of one man and one woman, with the importance placed on marriage as the center for procreation and family (D'Emilio and Freedman 2012). Askham (1976) defined marriage as a legal and monogamous union.

These definitions ignore other forms of marriage including polygamy, open relationships, and same-sex couples. Andrew Cherlin (2004) argues that over the past several decades, especially since the 1960's, American marriage has been going through a process of "deinstitutionalization". In defining deinstitutionalization, he does not intend to say that marriage is no longer an institution within the foundations of America, but simply that the social norms that previously defined expected behavior within a marriage are now "weakening" (Cherlin, 2004:848). The expectations associated with marriage are now changing. With childbirth outside of marriage becoming more common and less stigmatized, the importance placed on marriage as the only reputable form of procreation is negated (Cherlin 2004; D'Emilio and Freedman 2012).

Due to the increasing rates of births to cohabitating couples and others outside of traditional marriages, a shift in the central focus of marriage has occurred. Marriage is no longer seen as an institution in which social and familial life must be structured, but is now primarily considered a romantic companionship in which both partners choose to be in a mutually beneficial relationship (Burgess and Locke 1945). Individuals have begun to deem their marriage as satisfactory not based on their roles as wife, husband, and parent as has long been the norm, but instead based on their personal satisfaction and their individual development of self (Cherlin 2004). Symbolic interactionists have long postulated that the self is only acquired through interaction with society (Mead 1934; Stryker 1980). One must act with reflexivity to place their

self as an object within society, and thereby assume the roles and identities and in turn present a self that fits within the structure and situation of the society they are enmeshed in (Mead 1934; Blumer 1969; Stryker 1980). Thus, the self that is presented by a single person is dramatically different than the self they present as part of a married couple. The roles and identities traditionally assumed within marriage are no longer explicitly defined, especially not for same-sex couples in which marriage has only recently become a possibility. Thus, the changing nature of marriage within the United States poses challenges related to understanding expectations to both heterosexual and same-sex couples.

Close Networks

Research suggests that the identities we maintain in the company of those closest to us become central to how we act and present ourselves (Cherlin 2004; Zicklin 1969). Additionally, some argue that those in our extended networks and societal expectations at large have a significant impact on our identities (Lannutti 2011; Quam et. al. 2010; Ghaziani 2011; Askham 1976). Mead (1934) uses the concept of the “generalized other” to conceptualize the ability to see one’s self as others see that self, and in turn perform accordingly to expectations of our society or group. It is through this concept of the generalized other and the expectations that accompany it that the components that make up the self and in turn identities become clear. Identities become

salient on differing levels due to the interactions we have. Within our interactions with others, our identities are revealed. Thus, the formation and fluidity of identity cannot adequately be credited to one dimension of our interactions, but has a multifaceted effect.

Although Cherlin (2004) argues that marriage has very little actual benefit to individuals, he does propose that marriage continues to serve two purposes. One function of marriage is to project a social status congruent with the wealth associated with the performance of a wedding ceremony and the ability to maintain a family. One must possess certain means to afford a wedding, which have become increasingly extravagant and expensive affairs as time has gone by. Deciding to have and raise children also signifies a certain level of wealth in which a couple is secure in their ability to do so. Another function pertains to the wedding. Typically, weddings consist of a binding public ceremony, in which commitment is given to partners in front of their social networks. This is effective in making it harder for either one to simply leave the relationship and provides a sense of stability within the relationship.

Askham (1976) reports that the necessary components for maintaining a personal identity within marriage often conflict with the requirements found in marriage for feelings of stability and commitment. This occurs because the privacy that is required for the reflexive nature of identity creation and maintenance creates a disturbance in the perceived stability of the marriage as

well as the commitment of the individuals involved. It is difficult to be considered and consider oneself both an individual and part of an intertwined couple. This of course can be resolved with a lessening of importance to one or the other of these factors of individuality or coupledness as well as alternate means of being a part of an intimate relationship. Askham's study explored the concepts of identity and stability only within heterosexual relationships, he effectively marginalizes those that do not conform to the heteronormative standards in which intimate relationships are thought to be constructed.

LGBT Relationships

A number of studies have been conducted over the past decade in which identity, stability, and commitment within homosexual couples has been examined (Lannutti 2005, 2008, 2010, 2011; Porche and Purvin 2008; Schecter et. al. 2008; Reczek, Elliot, and Umberson 2009; Quam et. al. 2010; Humble 2013). This recent flux of research is due largely to the intense discourse related to the topics of LGBT rights within the past fifteen to twenty years and the more recent considerations of same-sex partnership as an acceptable form of marriage.

Lannutti (2005, 2008, 2010, 2011) has the largest compilation of works involving the affects of same-sex marriage on LGBT individuals within various aspects of micro, meso, and macro societal levels. Her landmark study examining the meanings LGBT individuals derived from the ability to legally

marry transitioned some focus of marriage within the literature from heterosexuals to those that identified as LGBT. Respondents in this study perceived legalization of same-sex marriage as representing both positive and negative steps for the LGBT community (Lannutti 2005). The LGBT community is defined as a large range of acquaintances from close friends to the “greater imagined group of individuals who have same-sex desire in common” (Woolwine 2006:6). Whereas positive ramifications of legalization included feelings of inclusion and full citizenry as well as a transition to a healing phase of the LGBT community, some respondents worried that additional stigmatization could develop towards those within the community who chose not to marry. Members identifying as bisexuals could also be negatively affected by receiving pressure and stigmatization from both heterosexual and other sexuality diverse communities. Also, a fear of transforming to persistent heteronormativity, especially within the traditionally heterosexual rituals of marriage and commitment expression, renewed anxiety over another means for the heterosexual community to injure or wound members identifying as LGBT were reported as possible negatives. Lastly, based on praxis- the concept that “people are both ‘actors and the objects of their own actions’,” personal identity and the identity of a couple were considered to be affected due to the changing nature of society and their relationship (Baxter and Montgomery 1996:16; Lannutti 2005:10). Just as heterosexuals face pressure and criticism regarding their decisions to marry or not, the seriousness of a relationship could be

measured using marriage as a gauge of commitment based on positive or negative reinforcements from those within the relationship as well as external societal forces.

From here, Lannutti (2007) narrowed her scope to that of same-sex relationships in the context of same-sex marriage. Respondents were asked to explain any changes in the way they viewed their relationships due to the legalization of same-sex marriage in the state of Massachusetts. They expressed a feeling that their relationships would be more “real” to others as well as become more real to themselves and their partners. Shulman, Gotta, and Green (2012) studied the anticipated effects of the legalization of marriage on the relationships of same-sex couples. They found that although respondents claimed that the ability to marry legally would have no effect on their relationships; responses to questions concerning aspects of their relationships contradicted this. Overall, couples reported that they would be happier and healthier in their relationships as an increase in self-esteem as well as reduced stress would come from being legally married. It was also reported that individuals would feel more secure in their identities as members of a same-sex couple as well as in the security of their relationship as a whole. Also, legalization of marriage would afford them civil benefits that would enable them to worry less about the safety of their partner and children.

Civil benefits also contributed to the perception of quality of relationship in Lannutti's study (2007). Respondents reported that the relationship would be more real, and additionally stated that the ability to present a socially acceptable relationship to heterosexuals including family members, employers, and those in the medical field would be an option. Similar findings on the area of legitimization of relationship to others was found in the study done by Shulman, et. al. (2012). The feeling of being able to let go of anger associated with not having equal rights was also seen as a possible positive effect of legalization of same-sex marriage. On the other hand, it was found that certain members of same-sex relationships began to question their own commitment level within their relationships as well as question the characteristics they now considered to be important in potential *marriage* partners as opposed to potential dating partners (Lannutti 2007). Thus, the impact of same-sex marriage can be inferred to resonate not only with same-sex couples, but LGBT identifying individuals considering a relationship at any level and what that means to their personal identity. Lastly, same sex individuals commented that they now had more choices to make regarding their involvement in courting, engagement, and wedding ceremonies: they could engage in "traditional" heteronormative practices or attempt to traverse these steps in symbolically queer ways. These options can be examined further through the discourse of a post-gay era.

Ghaziani (2011) remarks on the issues raised by the post-gay era in which the differences that once profoundly separated those of the “in” group from those of the “out” group disappear. Collective identity, which is vital for social movements of all types, becomes something that can no longer be agreed upon by those within the collective. The blurring of boundaries becomes a means in which desertion of an identity in favor of replacing it with a new one can happen. This can be seen on two levels; the collective identity of a definitive group is no longer salient when compared with that of a previously differing group (sexuality diverse and heterosexual) or identities within the original group could conflict causing a split in the group (gay and lesbian). Ghaziani claims that the era in which we currently reside should be considered “post-gay” due to the fact that the divisiveness that once existed between sexuality diverse and heterosexuals, and which formed the collective identity of the groups along with propelling them forward based on their agenda for social change no longer exists. Therefore, members of the sexuality diverse community not only face the challenge of a shifting identity on the personal front, but on the collective front as well.

Intersectionality

Although Ghaziani (2011) studies the changing language used for inclusion and exclusion of members of these collective groups as well as their intent in the setting of LGBT groups in Ivy League universities, Hull and Ortyl

(2013) research the marginalizing effect the focus on marriage by LGBT political groups has had on the members within those groups. Despite the majority of the focus for LGBT political activists being directed toward marriage and family equality, it has been found that marriage itself has little effect on same sex individuals' collective identities and feelings of being represented as a part of these groups. Many people reported that the movements and organizations failed to represent them due their identities as racial minorities, associations with being bisexual or transgender, or as not being part of the upper middle class. It can be interpreted from these results that the matter of formation and shifting of an identity is reliant on multiple factors, for some of which the intersectionality of race, class, and sexual identification provide difficulty in defining and identifying with others.

Life Course Perspective

Lannutti (2011a) once again narrowed her focus, this time limiting her research to older same-sex couples. This study was done after the legalization of marriage in Massachusetts, thereby shifting the focus of the study from expectations of what could happen with the legalization of marriage to data on what did happen. The life course perspective (Elder 1994), in which actions become relevant based on the stage of life and the historical biographies of the individual deciding on these actions are considered, was used to theoretically frame this study. This proves to be an especially relevant method of framing in

this study as older members identifying as part of the LGBT community have faced significant changes and challenges due to their sexuality throughout their lives. Lannutti distinguishes older members of the community to be aged 50 or older, placing their maturation process across a wide span of views on homosexuality within the social context. The individuals were also required to be part of a couple in order to be participants in this study, which enabled Lannutti to receive the life course perspective from both members in order to compare and contrast significance placed within certain events.

When questioned about marriage, a significant amount of the married couples spoke of an increased sense of security within both the legal system and their personal relationships (Lannutti 2011a). Discussion about security was missing within the interviews of those couples that were not married. This absence of something that is often considered crucial to an intimate relationship does not mean that married or unmarried same-sex relationships are better or worse than the other, but highlights the significant factors that contribute to decisions about marriage. Both married and unmarried couples spoke of personal and political recognition of their relationships as well as misgivings about same-sex marriage.

Those with misgivings were concerned with a heteronormative transition of same-sex marriage and the LGBT community as well as expressing fears of physical safety due to the increased publicity afforded to LGBT couples

due to the legalization of same-sex marriages. Significantly, none of the couples in the study who expressed fears of physical harm decided to get married. This once again details the importance of the life course perspective in understanding motive behind actions, as it can possibly be hypothesized that younger same-sex couples may not internalize this fear to the extent that it prevents them from getting married. Lastly, couples that chose not to get married did so because they had taken previous legal measures in hopes of protecting their partner or had performed a commitment ceremony prior to the legalization of same-sex marriage in Massachusetts. The identities that they formed due to these ceremonies were enough for them to feel committed in their relationships, enough so that they feared that by going through the process of becoming legally married it would invalidate their previous arrangements.

Commitment

Reczek, Elliot, and Umberson (2009) performed research in which they sought to understand how, when, and why same-sex couples felt commitment towards each other and whether or not they performed commitment ceremonies or became married. The life course perspective was also used in this study as the researchers were only interested in couples who were in long-term committed relationships. This method allowed the researchers to gain an understanding of the events that occurred over the course of the relationships

in which commitment was formed and solidified. Reczek et. al. found that many respondents were not entirely certain when they could say they were committed to the relationship. Heterosexual normative practices ascertain that marriage signifies commitment to your partner, but many of these couples were unable to participate in this ritual due to legal discrimination. Because of this, couples had to delineate some other form of expressing commitment, although most of them ascertain that they were fully committed to their relationships before participating in a commitment ceremony of some sort.

Those that chose not to participate in a public commitment ceremony referred to it as an unnecessary step in their relationship, especially because until recently it held no legal ramifications. Also, most of the couples who chose not to hold commitment ceremonies remarked that they were unnecessary seeing as the individuals were openly “out” as being part of a same-sex couple (Reczek et. al. 2009). The implications behind this statement being that the projection of an identity of a sexual minority to society in the assumption that it will be noticed and understood is perhaps an important part of the shift in and construction of identity members of the LGBT community go through as part of a marriage ceremony. The other implications of this study are that meanings behind commitment and marriage vary based on individual situational contexts, and that gay and lesbian relationships vary significantly enough to warrant individual research on these different groups. This also implies that bisexual

and transgender individuals or couples will probably also have different methods of showing and measuring commitment to their partners.

Other studies have been done on the importance of commitment and the ability to discern various timeframes in which commitment happens in same-sex relationships (Porche and Purvin 2008; Schecte et. al 2008; Quam et. al 2010; Humble 2013). Humble (2013) argues that the formative stage of sexual identity one finds themselves in at the time of involvement in a relationship has serious effects on the commitment level and longevity of that relationship. While heterosexual individuals find themselves forming a sexual identity throughout their teen and adolescent years, many LGBTQ individuals do not find themselves in societal positions where they are able to explore their sexual identity as a sexuality diverse individual until later years in young adulthood and adulthood. This could help explain why same-sex couples tend to perform commitment ceremonies including marriage much later in their lives than their heterosexual counterparts.

Other aspects of commitment include labeling oneself as being exclusive or monogamous to one's partner, cohabitating or buying a house together, merging of finances, legalizing rights as partners through wills, powers of attorney, etc in order to protect each other, and presenting a unified self of "us" as a couple to those within societal networks (Humble 2013; Schecter et.al 2008; Quam et.al 2010). Although monogamy was considered to be a marker to

commitment to the respondents in these studies, Green (2013) found that respondent opinion of monogamy and commitment within same-sex couples differed within his study. Although it is the norm for marriage to be defined as a monogamous relationship, two-thirds of same-sex spouses in his study reported believing that marriage did not have to be monogamous to be a committed and successful relationship. In even more of a contrast, nearly half of the male identified respondents reported that their relationships must be nonmonogamous in nature. Only one female respondent in a same-sex relationship reported that they practiced nonmonogamous activity. This once again serves to elucidate the differences between same-sex gay and same-sex lesbian relationships.

Commitment sometimes concerned the inclusion of children into the family as well as wanting to be role models to other same-sex couples (Humble 2013; Schechter, et. al 2008). It was reported that these strengthened the bond between individuals in a couple as well as repairing bonds with family members that had been previously damaged due to the individual's public identification of sexuality diverse (Humble 2013). Although many same-sex couples performed commitment ceremonies or chose to be legally married when the option was presented, some couples decided against it (Humble 2013; Schechter et. al 2008; Quam et.al 2010). Reasoning behind this included statements saying that although a couple was committed to each other, they were not *that* committed, as well as having a distrust towards the institution of marriage as a

system of patriarchal and heteronormative oppression (Humble 2013; Schechter et. al, 2008; Quam et. al 2010). Also, lack of “outness” or wanting to retain one’s privacy, and unsubstantial support from friends and family factored into decisions to marry or not (Humble 2013; Schechter et. al 2008; Quam et.al 2010).

Therefore, although marriage became an option for some same-sex couples, most same-sex couples around the country must find other ways of marking their commitment towards each other. These could include buying a house or raising children together. This is for the sake of both the individuals in the relationships as well as members of their social networks. Often, commitment and marriage ceremonies were held to solidify the identity of a unified pair, but this also acted as a way to present this identity to others as well.

“Coming Out” & Extended Networks

Lannutti (2011b) also considered the impact political discourse about same-sex marriage had within same-sex couples and their extended networks. People within extended social networks can be defined as being a part of the social network of an individual, but tend to be further removed than close family and friends. Although these people are not considered significant in the amount of time or closeness ties they have with an individual or couple, they still play an important role in defining the sexual identity of those who are part of the LGBT community. Through interactions had with these people, societal

values regarding the personal issue of sexual identity are transferred to individuals, in turn either reinforcing or diminishing positive and negative associations with the sexual minority identification of LGBTQ.

Lannutti (2011b) recognized four continually emerging themes when discussing interactions which focused on marriage amendments of members in a same-sex couple with those who were considered to be in their extended network. These themes are coming out, social support, solidarity, and disconfirmation. Coming out is defined as an interaction in which the sexual orientation of an individual is revealed through an explicit statement. This is unique to members of the LGBTQ community as most persons are assumed to follow the normative sexual identification of heterosexual. Therefore, someone who chooses to “come out” as heterosexual, or straight, is not actually revealing anything of significance and therefore does not experience the possible shift in identity and conception of the generalized other as a LGBTQ individual going through the coming out process experiences. As was briefly discussed in regards to the research done by Hull and Ortyl (2013), our identities are intersectional based on race, class, and sexual orientation. Often, by coming out as a sexual minority, members of the LGBTQ community find that the identity in which they are most commonly referred to becomes that of their sexual orientation.

The recent political and personal attention to same-sex equality in the media has pressured members of the LGBTQ communities, and especially those in same-sex intimate relationships, to increasingly come out to members within their extended networks (Lannutti 2011b). This reinforces their identity as a sexual minority as being prominently featured. Also, Humble (2013) found that this level of “outness” to family members, close friends, and members of extended networks impacts the comfort level a same-sex couple feels in performing a marriage or commitment ceremony. The act of marriage can cement one’s sexual identity as they are legally binding themselves to one sex or the other. Intentionally or unintentionally, this often very public agreement forces a coming out process of the couples in present and future interactions regardless of previous experiences of coming out. Understandably, those who have difficulty coming out to those around them due to various reasons would feel uncomfortable taking this next step in possibly coming out to a large number of people through marriage, despite the level of commitment they felt towards their partner.

Porche and Purvin (2008) also considered level of outness when identifying barriers to performing marriage commitments of same-sex couples. Although the couples studied were in what can be defined as long term relationships (twenty years or more together), some of the couples chose not to marry based on their discretion towards their identities as members of a same-sex couple. This study also used the life course perspective in outlining the

historical and social contexts of the couple's and individual's biographies in association with getting married. Many of the individuals in the study were older and had felt the transitioning social perspective on homosexuals throughout their lifetimes. Because of the stigma associated with being a member of the LGBTQ community, some individuals and couples chose not to come out to either close personal members of their social network such as family members or extended members of their social network. We can conclude that coming out and the stigma attached to being that of a minority sexual identity are serious barriers to same-sex marriage, even when it becomes a legal option.

Lannutti (2011b) also found that members of extended networks often produced themes of support including sympathy and listening when discussing marriage amendments with members of same-sex couples. This once again highlights the salience of equality issues within the LGBTQ group. Sympathy for something denied as well as support provided on an emotional level delineates a need for additional help, help that is commonly denied from the majority group and that cannot be fulfilled by only members of the minority group. In some cases this also led to solidarity, both of belief and of action. These expressions of solidarity promoted increased positive feelings surrounding the LGBTQ community and an individual's identity within that community as well as reinforcing feelings of rightness when connected to existing same-sex relationships.

Unfortunately, not all interactions had a positive connotation. Some members of extended networks chose to disconfirm the identity of LGBTQ individuals by using condemnation and avoidance. In these circumstances, the actions associated with being a member of a same-sex couple were either condemned as wrong, or dismissed as something either too uncomfortable or not important enough to discuss. This study reveals information on the formation and acceptance of a minority sexual identity due to larger social interactions.

GAPS & RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Although this influx of research has provided important insights into the identities and actions of individuals and couples in same-sex intimate relationships, much is yet to be done. The life course perspective is useful in determining individual accounts of an individual's experiences and thus their actions in regards to same-sex relationships, but an awareness and understanding of how race and sexual orientation impact identity formation is lacking. With the exception of Hull and Ortyl (2013), marginalized members of the LGBTQ community were excluded from research. Often, researchers were either unable to or did not seek same-sex respondents who did not fit the white, middle to upper middle class descriptives. The indexicality of identities relies on understanding not only one identity, but the intersectional identities present

in one's self that lead to specific actions. Therefore, more research on race, class, and sexual identification must be done.

Also, there is a significant gap in research that focuses on individual sexual identifiers (such as lesbians instead of the entire LGBTQ community). Although Reczek et. al. (2009), Hull and Ortyl (2013), and Green (2013) touch upon the differences between these groups with consideration to their identities and actions within the community and their own relationships, little actual research has been done with the focus strictly on one of these groups. Also, couples and individuals currently within relationships have been the focus of research, but questions of identity on a strictly individual level have little to no mention within current research. Furthermore, I feel as if not enough thought has been given to the impact of children and the importance of a family unit when discussing same-sex relationships. Another missing factor among much of the current research is the level of involvement of LGBTQ members within the equality movement, and the impact the wins and losses of these political battles have on their own identities. Lastly, throughout the discussion of heteronormativity and the institutionalization (or deinstitutionalization, according to Cherlin (2004) of marriage, little mention of the negotiation of traditional dichotomous gender roles and performance (proposals) is discussed. I feel as if this is too influential of a factor to completely disregard.

My research intends to answer the following questions: does the legalization of same-sex marriage have any significant impact on one's identity construction in congruence with being part of a committed relationship? What impacts do the pressures of those within the inner and outer circles of acquaintances have on how one views themselves and their relationship? Is one's level of commitment influenced in any way? What role (if any) do children play in changing the context of a same-sex relationship? How are individuals and couples negotiating the heteronormatively dominated wedding industry and rituals? These questions and others outline that significant gaps in existing research that must be addressed individually before issues facing those members who identify as a sexual minority can be fully understood.

RESEARCH DESIGN

As outlined above, participants in this study are individuals self-identifying as lesbians belonging to a same-sex committed relationship during the time of legalization of same-sex marriage in the state of Minnesota. I chose these variables with a specific intent. First, I chose to focus on lesbians because I believe that it is important to begin recognizing members of sexuality diverse groups as separate entities with unique experiences. Women will have fundamentally different perspectives than men simply because they are women in a male-dominated society.

Also, lesbian experiences differ from bisexual experiences in a couple of ways. First, bisexual women do not always have to attempt to negotiate the heteronormative ideals of our society. Due to their attraction to men as well as women, at times bisexual women may find it easier to blend in with the norm than those who identify as lesbian. Second, there seems to be the understanding between bisexual and lesbian communities that there are fundamental differences in the way one is expected to present themselves within these communities (Huxley, Clark, and Halliwell 2013). Third, much research has been done on the sexuality diverse community as a whole, but research focusing on separate groups within this community is lacking. In much the same way that research has developed our understanding of the differences between heterosexual identities and “gay” or “queer” identities, it seems ignorant to not attempt to further understand the differences that exist between the various sexuality diverse identity groups.

Also, it is important to this particular study that the participants self-identify as having been in a committed relationship at the time of legalization of same-sex marriage in the state of Minnesota. While it is important to recognize the impact this legal action has on all individuals, I am interested in the immediate impact it may have had. Concurrently, by focusing on the immediate impact, the memory of this event is fresh in the minds of the respondents. This allows for a greater level of awareness about changes that may be occurring now. Those that are closest to seriously exploring marriage are typically in what

could be considered a committed relationship. Within the interviews I conducted, respondents explored what it meant to be able to consider legal, government recognized marriage as an option for the first time as social change unfolded around them.

Due to the difficulty in defining the variables of “commitment” and “lesbian”, I did not actively screen respondents for this study. Because of the highly personal nature of romantic and sexual relationships, I did not feel as if I could, or wanted to, adequately define to others what their relationship should look like. The same was true of defining sexuality. One’s sexual self is a fluid being that cannot easily be confined to someone else’s definition. Due to my inability and unwillingness to prohibitively define either of these variables, I allowed the respondents to do so themselves. While this may have potentially created some issues, as the definitions of lesbian and committed were left to the respondents’ interpretation, I believe it provides my research with a richer sample. Recruitment occurred through flyers and posts on social media. In responding to the very specific recruitment criteria, participants de facto self-disclosed their sexual orientation and status of their relationship as significant parts of their identities.

Sample & Recruitment

I recruited individuals for this study with the hope of collecting as diverse a sample as possible. My goal was to compare and contrast the

experiences proffered by participants based on differences in age, race, and socioeconomic status. Only upon a request to interview as a couple did I begin recruiting participants as couples as well. The sample obtained was of fourteen interviews with sixteen women who self-identify as lesbians who were in a committed same-sex relationship in May 2013, the date same-sex marriage became legal in Minnesota. Although a majority of the respondents fall into the categories of Caucasian and between the ages of twenty-six and thirty-five, there is some slight variation between race/ethnicity and age of the respondents and a fairly diverse household income range (for complete descriptive statistics of all respondents, see Appendix E: Demographic Data).

To recruit, I put up flyers in LGBTQ and diversity centers at local college campuses as well as posted advertisements for my intended research and need for participants in lesbian and LGBTQ online forums. Also, a call for participants was posted on social media sights such as Facebook. These social media sites are a way to announce information to a large number of people at once. The intent was to make the call for participants and my information (contact, research statement, etc.) accessible to as many people as possible.

The flyers and posts informed individuals that the intention of the research is to gain a better view from lesbians across the state about marriage and marriage equality and whether the impact of the legalization of marriage in Minnesota could be seen and felt within their own lives. Convenience and

snowball sampling were used to collect data. Initial respondents informed and familiarized friends, significant others, partners, and acquaintances with this study and invited them to also participate if they were interested. For this reason, many of the respondent's social circles overlap with other respondents, allowing me the unique opportunity to view a variety of relationships from multiple perspectives.

Data Collection

As this study is interested in identity in correlation with the legalization of same-sex marriage, semi-structured interviews were conducted with respondents using an open-ended questioning format (see Appendix C: Interview Prompts). This allowed the participants' personal perspectives and individual life histories to be the focus of the research. In fact, much of the significant information gathered during these interviews came not from explicit answers to the prompts, but from personal narratives of lived experiences. The respondents were able to tell me what they found to be important about their experience; the history leading up to that point, emotions felt in the moment, and any resolutions they had come to. Just like the format used to write a good book, respondents used expressive storytelling to relay the whole experience from their perspective. Because these stories were personal and often emotionally charged, much of the significance of these events would have been lost in a different format.

I considered face-to-face interviews as the ideal format for the interviews I conducted, as some of the questions pertain to very personal information; therefore, I attempted to interview all respondents in-person. A sense of trust must be established between researcher and participant in order for the intended questions to be answered fully and honestly and physical proximity and the ability to see an empathetic reaction in the researcher plays a role in developing trust. Using face-to-face interviews allowed for more adaptability with questions based on responses and a greater sense of trust formed by mutual disclosure, which provided richer answers and analysis. Although I view face-to-face interviews as most effective, one participant's geographical location in relation to the interviewer made a face-to-face interview extremely difficult to accomplish, so it was mutually decided that the interview could be conducted using Facetime, a video chat service made available through Apple. All other interviews were conducted face to face in various locations: participants' homes (4), my office (2), their office (2), coffee shops (2), public building (1), and my home (1).

The full reasoning behind the research as well as the intent was explained to the potential participant. Before starting the interview, an informed consent form was discussed completely with the participant in order to clarify my responsibility to maintain an ethical and safe atmosphere for the participant both during and after the interviews. Upon verbal consent via telephone conference or written consent via email, a face-to-face interview was

established for a future time and place. The face-to-face interviews took place at a mutually decided upon location with preference given to those locations suggested by the participant. Upon meeting face-to-face, the study and intended purpose of fulfilling requirements to complete a Master's degree in Sociology was once again discussed and a paper copy of the informed consent form was also discussed and then signed by the participant. The interview process transpired over a period of five months from November 2014 through April 2015. These interviews varied in length ranging from a little over thirty minutes to roughly an hour and a half, depending on the interviewee. A short survey containing questions about the participants' demographics was also administered in order to easily judge the diversity of the sample (see Appendix D: Demographic Survey).

The final sample consisted of sixteen women total. Within this group of sixteen women, I interviewed four couples. Three couples chose to be interviewed with both of the participants together and one couple chose to be interviewed separately. The participants had an age range of 18-55 years old with thirteen identifying as Caucasian, two Latina, and one as African American. Although part of the sample criteria was that the participants must have been in a committed same-sex relationship in May 2013, the specific month of the passing of the same-sex marriage amendment in the state of Minnesota, at the time of their interviews participants had a variety of relationship statuses. Two reported to be single at the time of their interview, two were in the same

committed relationship as in May 2013¹, one was in a different committed relationship than the one they were in in May 2013, four were engaged to be married (same partner as 2013), and seven respondents were married (same partner as 2013). Additional descriptives will be discussed later in this paper in the *Analysis* section (p. 34).

When conducting face-to-face interviews, a tape recorder and limited field notes were used to record the interview and events. The participants were informed of this procedure before consenting to the interviews. All participants were fully informed prior to meeting for the interview that they were able to stop the interview or decline to answer questions at any time during our interaction. Due to the personal and sensitive nature of some of the questions, this point was stressed both before and during the interviews. Also, the identities of the participants and those they mention in their responses were protected at all times by using pseudonyms decided by the participants or assigned by the researcher. All recorded interviews were securely stored at the researcher's place of residence until the transcription and coding processes were complete. Upon this time, the tapes were destroyed completely to leave no possibility of abuse or identity confirmation.

¹ One participant is a special case. She reported that she was not fully committed to her relationship in May 2013 but was shortly after. Although she does not meet the full requirements of the sample, she completes a couple and was thus included to provide a more developed perspective on the relationship.

Interview Guidelines

Although the research will benefit from personal accounts and situations, a draft of interview questions acting as prompts had been prepared (Appendix: C). The questioning and conceptualization process began with questions concerning one's changing perception of their self and their role in their relationship as well as the current outcome of their relationship due to the legalization of same-sex marriage. Respondents got engaged, married, or broke-up with the amendment acting as a stimulus for these changes. Further questions about various influences on them and their relationship helped direct responses in congruence with the areas of interest outlined below, although the open-ended interview format allowed other themes that came up throughout the interview to be discussed. As stated above, these questions were intended to be prompts and the situations and accounts of the individual respondents promoted modification of existing questions and the inclusion of further questions during the interview. These questions and interviews were done with the intent to formulate an in-depth understanding of the relationships and personal identities of each respondent. Another goal was to discern if the legalization of same-sex marriage has had any impact on the relationships, identity of the couple, and/or identity of the individual participating in the interview process.

Demographics

The demographic questionnaire (Appendix: D) contained a variety of questions including age, race, and income. This demographic questionnaire served to collect quantifiable information from the participants in which the diversity of the sample was easily examined. Notably, the last question asked participants about their level of “outness”. Although this question is not one that can be easily quantified, it served the purpose of quickly judging the respondents potential ease or uneasiness in answering personal questions about their relationship before the interview began. As was briefly explained within the *Literature Review* section and will be examined further in the *Findings* section of this paper, one’s comfortability with their self and others’ perception of their sexuality is central to identity formation.

Analysis

Once the interviews were completed, I transcribed each interview fully. I did this using transcription software in which the interview speed could be manipulated, making it easier for me to accurately transcribe them into Microsoft Word documents. Grounded theory was used in the analysis of data (Charmaz 2006). The interviews were first individually coded line by line and these codes were analyzed in an effort to discover repetitive themes within individual interviews and the sample as a whole. I did this first within the Microsoft Word documents and then imported the coded interviews into NVIVO

software. From here the themes were similarly grouped and expanded using a memoing process to further organize and analyze the information. These memos were used in order to develop and theorize patterns within the data.

The interviews were coded as soon after collection and transcription as possible so as to integrate additional questions for future respondents that had not been previously considered. I continued conducting interviews until as representative a sample as possible was achieved. Interviews began reaching saturation (Charmaz 2006) around the eighth respondent, with multiple re-occurring themes emerging from the data. I decided that the sample was complete with the combination of saturation and the increasing difficulty of finding participants had left me with zero responses to my flyers, posts, or previous participant's encouragement for several months.

Ethical Responsibilities

Due to the stigmatized and marginalized nature of members of the LGBT community, utmost care was and will be taken to protect the participants at all times. In reiteration, participants were fully informed of the intended research and purpose of the study as well as immediately and thereafter informed of their ability to terminate the interview or being within their rights to not answer questions that made them feel uncomfortable. A number of participants did exercise this right and chose to withdraw from the study shortly before the

scheduled interview. Time constraints and the very recent disintegration of their relationship were reasons given for not participating in the research.

Those respondents who did participate were immediately assigned a pseudonym as which they would be referenced throughout the remainder of the research project. Due to the extremely personal nature of the questions I asked, several participants found themselves getting emotional during the interviews. I reacted empathetically to these emotions and asked the interviewee if they would like to stop without penalty. In all cases, the participant declined and continued the interview freely.

All collected data including interviews and transcripts were securely stored during the collection and analysis processes and will be destroyed upon completion of this study. This will be done in order to protect the identity of all participants and other individuals mentioned throughout the interview process. If so requested, a final copy of the study will be made available to participants so they may see how the results and their experiences correlate with the sampled population. Any benefits provided to the participants are on a personal and individual basis as no compensation was given for participation.

FINDINGS

Although marriage is criticized to be an outdated institution, to the respondents the value and importance of marriage has not seemed to diminish

in a significant manner. Marriage serves the purpose of expressing commitment by legally binding two people together, effectively making the relationship one that requires public and legal effort to leave. The ability or inability to make this decision to publicly connect yourself to another person affects one's identity in a multitude of ways. According to my respondents, one must deem their relationship to be one that is properly committed before considering marriage. Also, being married opens up the possibility of a new type of discourse in which one's sexuality is placed at the forefront. This can be difficult to negotiate in work and family settings.

For individuals who identify as lesbian or part of another sexuality diverse group, marriage also serves to project one's sexual identity. In performing the rituals associated with marriage and adorning the proper symbols (engagement/wedding rings), individuals open themselves up for the discussion of the topic. In a society where marriage equality is still relatively new, it is not unusual for these individuals to have to make corrections of peoples' assumptions as to the gender of their marriage partner. In deciding to do so, one opens themselves up to a multitude of reactions.

There are other signifiers in which sexual identity is intricately linked. One of these is gender expression. The performance and projection of a gendered identity is often confused with the projection of a sexual identity. Also, through hegemonic ideals, relationships are still thought to be

dichotomous in nature. The participants in this study challenge these ideals and negotiate what it means to be in a committed same-sex relationship on a variety of levels. Further, using life course theory, societal expectations of action are examined and differences in perspective by age/generation become increasingly salient.

Additionally, the dynamic within the state of Minnesota is analyzed. The narrated differences between states as well as within the regions of Minnesota serve to reveal how location has a significant impact on acceptance and identity formation. Lastly, intersectionality—the overlap of multiple identities, offers a revealing glimpse at what it means to have to negotiate one’s identity projection based on context. It also highlights the privilege associated with the majority of the respondents based on their one minority identity as opposed to multiple.

Defining Commitment

This study was designed to better understand the impact the marriage amendment may have had on individuals within committed same-sex lesbian relationships. Although these parameters are central to the thesis of this study, they also prove to be problematic. First being, how do we define commitment? Due to the highly personal nature of our relationships, they differ fundamentally from each other. Because of this, the participants were asked to describe what a committed relationship contained for them. Despite a variety of differences, a few common themes emerged as participants elaborated on

commitment within their narratives. These themes include monogamy, the transition of an “I” identity to that of a “We” identity, and planning for the future, which would include moving in together, marriage, and children.

Most participants began hesitantly when defining what commitment within a relationship meant to them. The couples I interviewed together kept their gaze on each other when answering this question – seemingly looking for affirmation that what they were saying fit with the other individual’s understanding of their relationship. Emily has a hard time finding the right words to explain:

I mean, your...commit...like committed is a good word right? You don’t think about other people, you don’t like...do anything with other people, you think about like that we, instead of me. Or if you are thinking about yourself, it’s in a way that is beneficial for like both people. But then...you do it for yourself, but you do it thinking of the other person.

The multifaceted nature of their commitment made the question hard to sum up in a way that could be packaged and presented neatly to someone outside of the relationship. Lilly does not have this problem, as her blunt answer suggests, “To me it means a relationship where you’re only having sex with one person”.

Much of this answer is based on the reciprocal understanding that “sex with one person”, or monogamy, holds a deeper meaning than just the physical performance of sexual acts.

Monogamy

All of my respondents made some reference to monogamy within their definition of commitment. As seen in the previous examples, some bluntly talked about sex while others made inferences about it (e.g. “loyal to each other”, “being exclusive”, “not doing anything with anybody else”, “faithfulness”, “monogamy”). Anderson (2010) coins the phrase “monogamism” in order to describe a culture where monogamy within relationships is valued and expected and becomes the norm. These values seem to align with my respondents, as it was a central theme in deciding that a relationship was “committed”. This seems to be a noticeable difference between “gay” identity groups. A plethora of research has studied the seeming acceptance and expectation of non-monogamous behavior within gay (male) relationships (Horne and Bricker 2007; Hosking 2014; Klesse 2007; Bonello and Cross 2009; Wilson 2012; Parsons et. al 2012). In this case, all of the women in my study have accepted monogamy and place it in a central role within their commitment. In fact, several participants disclosed the inability to be “faithful” by either partner as a contributing factor in the dissolution of previous relationships.

“I” to “We”

Multiple other themes emerged from responses provided by participants while they were defining commitment. One of these is viewing the world from

the identity of a couple as opposed to that of an individual. As Sophie states, “all our decisions were made together. so...again, it wasn't, we were never planning our lives as individuals but always as a couple”. This level of commitment is important in identity transition and formation, it signifies the shift in one’s identity from that of “I” to “We”.

Not only is this shift internalized, that one’s self is no longer an individual but a part of a whole, but this change is also presented to the social world around them. Emily sums this up when talking about how her friends and family refer to her and her partner Isla, “now that we’ve been together for almost four years people are just kind of like, Emily and Isla, Emily and Isla, Emily and Isla, you know it’s one and the same now”. This combined identity changes how people refer to and act towards individuals.

Olivia talks about how her family has never accepted and approved of her sexuality, but that this changed in the context of her last relationship:

...They just didn’t like in general that I was with women, and that the most [committed] relationship that I had had, the one that I was in for almost two, two and half years, they liked her a lot, they liked the relationship. They were very accepting of her and us as a togetherness. A whole.

As an individual, Olivia’s identity as a lesbian was something that her family had always been uncomfortable and disapproving of. Her shift in identity from an individual to part of a committed couple had a significant impact in the way her family saw and interacted with her. It could be hypothesized that a potential

explanation for this is the stigma towards sexuality diverse populations based on stereotypes of sexual promiscuity, and the reality of a committed relationship in which two individuals were each half of a whole contradicted this misconception. Goffman (1963) defines stigma as an attribute that marginalizes someone due to the cultural norms within their society. He uses discredited and discreditable stigma to differentiate between causes for stigma that can be clearly seen versus hidden. Although an individual with a diverse sexuality is not often an identity that can be known upon seeing that person (discreditable), it is still one that receives considerable stigma within American society (see *Gender Expression and Gender Roles*, p.63 for more on discredited stigma).

Even the mundane becomes a representation of entwined identities.

Olivia's relationship eventually dissolved, but neither her nor her ex-partner's identities as a couple were easy to disentangle from their individual identities.

I think the hardest part, especially when you date someone for long enough and become involved in like their family and you know you live with someone especially your lives completely overlap and so being able to, or learning to separate yourself from them, from the life that you built, from even like when you live with someone they become...like she would call me for a long time and ask 'what kind of detergent did we use?' [laughter] like buy your own! I don't know! Get whichever one you like! To able to separate yourself in that manner is, is very interesting to try and do.

This entwinement of selves into one identity is also highly visible when the individual participants mention misgivings about entering into a committed

relationship. Isabella talks about reasons for her disinterest in a relationship, “I wanted to be single for a year [laughter], I had like committed to only being with myself for a year.” Amber and Erin also talked about how committing to a relationship would disrupt their identities as individuals,

Erin: We didn't like commit to being in a relationship for probably three, four...

Amber: Five months.

Erin: It was in July so yeah five.

Amber: Maybe.

Erin: Because we were both just kind of like we're not doing-we're not doing this thing. Like we're gonna be individuals and kinda doing our own thing and after five months gave into 'oh maybe we should probably just save that work, we're-

Amber: [interrupting] 'We're exclusive'

Erin: [Confirming] 'We're exclusive'. Somebody tried to pick me up at a bar and Amber that night was like 'so....let's talk about this'.

In both these situations the participants mention the importance of their individual identities. Isabella talks about commitment to herself, while Erin and Amber tried to keep themselves separate as individuals “doing our own thing”. In every case except one, the participants admitted that they had ultimately failed in keeping their individual identities distinct from that presented as a committed couple. We invest time and thought into our identities, and the worth we associate with our selves as individuals is not something we easily part with. More often than not, we tend to exchange our individual identities with one that we find to be either more valuable, or one that gets a better response from others. In this case, that identity is one of a committed couple.

Planning for the future

Multiple participants made references to planning for the future, often citing certain events the couples partook in together to prove their commitment. Purchasing a pet is one such event. Olivia recalls, “We talked about forever and we talked about how we were going to be together and the reason we chose his breed of dog was because they are supposed to be really great family dogs”. Olivia is not the only participant who mentions a pet as a prelude to children and forming a family unit.

Isabella jokes about her dog and her view of the future:

Like I spoil the crap out of her [her dog], she [her partner] always gives me crap about how much I spoil her, and she now is babying her more and more and now the dog that is now her best friend, she could care less about me, like what the hell! So, we’ve been looking at dogs and I’m like, ‘I get to pick the dog, because you stole my dog!’ [laughter] But now I don’t want another dog, I’m going to skip to a baby instead.

Although none of the respondents had children at the time of the interview, several were planning on including children in the relationship in the near future. Isabella and her partner Stella had discussed this and considered the steps Isabella would have to take to possess legal rights of their children:

...Stella will be the one carrying them so for me, it was, like that’s probably one of my biggest fears, if anything happened to Stella, how—who gets the kids. So...the second the kids are born, I’m adopting them. You’re writing up a will...everything is going to be very legal and *very* documented.

Isabella is obviously very nervous about her rights as a parent, not because she is uncertain about her relationship with her partner, but because of their relationship with their families and her current lack of legal parental rights.

Their families refuse to validate their identities as a couple in a secure, loving relationship. Both Isabella and Stella are well aware of this and know that they must become agents of their own fate. Although the ability to legally marry each other and have the rights that come along with that should have reduced Isabella's anxiety about her identity as a future parent, her experience with stigma and discrimination due to her identity as a lesbian would not allow her to let down her guard. "...I kind of felt that...it could always be reversed."

Moving to a different location to be with one's partner or moving in together were also signifiers of commitment and planning for the future. "I think having those conversations about forever and planning our life together um, probably since we moved have really increased, which is good, because we're both really invested in being together for forever" (Holly).

Although much of the data discussed in the above section is nothing new to scholarship dedicated to studying commitment and the commitment steps in same-sex relationships, it does provide two points of additional clarity. First, that respondents identified as part of a committed couple is central to the research design. Individuals who are in a committed relationship are more likely to look to the future and consider marriage, thereby making the

amendment a relevant issue. To the best of my ability, I had to be able to understand commitment, despite relationships being personal and unique entities. The second finding is that respondents often disclosed their feelings about and experiences with marriage in conjunction with their commitment narratives. Depending on one's view of marriage, the ability or inability to marry may carry differing levels of importance. If one views marriage as important and something that they envision themselves doing in the future, the recent ability to marry may carry more weight than if they do not "believe in" or want to marry.

Marriage

When one finds themselves in a committed relationship, the norm within American society is to begin considering and taking steps towards marriage, at least for most heterosexual couples. Until recently, members of the sexuality diverse community have not had the ability to make this choice and perform this step within their relationships. Despite this inability to marry, or maybe because of it, my respondents all held similar opinions that marriage should not be viewed lightly and has very real consequences for all involved. Although a few variations on the actual *meaning* of marriage became apparent, especially between generations, individual expectations for marriage, the validation received through marriage, and differing opinions on marriage and commitment ceremonies became relevant themes throughout the participants'

narratives. Lastly, the significance of marriage in projecting one's sexual identity is an issue of importance for participants who wish to make this identity known and those that wish to conceal it alike.

Perceptions of marriage

All of the respondents in this study thought of marriage as a very serious commitment, one that was often described as a "forever commitment". A few respondents had deeply intertwined religious views that affected their conceptualization of marriage, viewing it as sacrament. Others discussed that while they thought of marriage as a permanent thing, it was unrealistic to expect all married couples to stay together forever. Interestingly here, the age of the respondent made a difference in the expectations they had for marriage. Elizabeth (56) talked about how marriage has changed across generations based on medical advances and women's rights:

...[Historically] they were only married like ten, twelve years. That's not the sixty plus now...you, there were just the expectations on what you did as an adult, and especially what you did as a woman, were so different from the opportunities and choices that you have now.

Elizabeth has experienced a variety of social change throughout her lifetime. She has been able to see how social norms and institutional changes have shaped the actions of three generations of women; her mother's, hers, and now that of younger women.

Respondents that fall on the younger side of the spectrum had a completely different experience altogether. Faith's (18) relationship had recently dissolved and she was still trying to come to terms with her new identity as someone outside of that relationship. "We were definitely planning on marriage and a-kids, you know. We knew from the beginning that we were going to be together, so... it just seems weird that aren't-I mean we were going to wait a few more years until we were twenty."

This statement hints at a few things. First, that Faith and her partner had never felt that they *would not be able* to get married when they chose to do so. Considering that Faith is in her late teens, it could be hypothesized that the stigma related to same-sex relationships has diminished significantly over the past decade. Evelyn (46) addresses this generational change in comparing the reaction she gets from members of her family based on her sexual identity. Her sister refuses to acknowledge it as a legitimate identity, but her niece has a differing opinion, "...she's twenty-three...she knew when she was sixteen and she talked to me about it because I took her to the mall or something, and she's like oh, I know. It's fine. Do you know how many gay friends I have in school? [Laughter] And I'm like, ok, good for you." Although Evelyn's sister has raised her niece to view those who identify as sexuality diverse as "sinful", her niece seems to favor the more accepting reaction of her peers. Faith (18) is close in age to this peer group and seems to project this higher level of acceptance within her narrative.

Secondly, that since Faith *is in her late teens*, she may not yet have enough experience with relationships to make a fully informed decision about a potential marriage partner. The Institute for Family Studies claims, “Someone who marries at 25 is over 50 percent less likely to get divorced than is someone who weds at age 20” (Wolfinger 2015:1). At this age, most individuals are just not mature or experienced enough to fully comprehend the significance of marriage within the traditional ideological framework. Our identities are constantly changing to better suit the environment around us, and this age period of eighteen to the early twenties tends to be a transitional period. In Faith’s scenario, it could be hypothesized that the influx of responsibilities and altogether changing outlook on life that comes with adulthood and the college experience may have played a role in the dissolution of what she had considered to be her relationship with “the one”. This also reflects her personal opinions on marriage, in that she has no qualms about marrying and starting a family at a young age.

Olivia (29) has traditional views on the value of marriage, and fears that societal views are starting to move away from this. “It’s intended to be a life long commitment, [but] it’s not [viewed that way], and our generation in general takes it too casually, whether it’s same sex or heterosexual. Uum, just...because divorce is so easy now. “ Younger respondents seemed to have a more romanticized view on marriage, whereas the older respondents tended to

view it in terms of rational decisions. Lily explains her reasoning behind deciding to marry:

...Having both of your names on stuff, if something happened, medically speaking, we were worried that, especially since there's such an age gap and [partner's] family not being supportive, what would happen if I, if she went into the hospital and...I can't make those decisions for her. Legally a lot of that legalities of stuff like we're thinking about buying a house and having us both being on there, and joint taxes, the tax break, whatever else there was. It was mostly about adult reasons versus like romantic reasons. Which sounds bad but, it's-I'm sure-it's the truth for other people too.

Although marriage serves a purpose of further strengthening commitment and security within a relationship, it also has a very real and tangible affect on assets. Couples interested in acquiring wealth by owning a house or receiving a tax break are aware of the benefits of marriage. Aside from monetary value, being able to make financial and medical decisions with and for somebody else also helps to build and strengthen the identity of a married couple.

The type of relationship one has with their partner also helps dictate feelings about marriage. Evelyn explains how she went from opposing same-sex marriage to vocally supporting it:

Interviewer: Do you support same-sex marriage?

Evelyn: I do. I used to not...When I was in college I was like, 'why the hell would we [lesbians] want to get married? It sounds like a horrible idea. Look at all the things you're constraining [the relationship] with.'...I converted [to supporting same-sex marriage]. I was in the non-camp for a really long time. Everyone in my family...they're really surprised because they were like, 'you never used to be this way [a vocal supporter of same-sex marriage].' I said, 'well, *I wasn't married before*'.

It was only upon being in a relationship with someone she could see herself marrying that she decided she would like to have the ability to marry. Her identity as a married woman in a same-sex relationship has changed her attitude and in turn her actions towards something that she now deems to be very important to who she is, causing members of her close network to be taken aback with her behavior. In this way, she is projecting her opinions of her identity as a married woman as one worth fighting for.

Validation through marriage

Regardless of individual feelings about marriage, all respondents recognized the importance of being able to legally marry as a step towards equal rights. Isla states, "It kind of helps validate-it's gay people as humans. I mean quite frankly, it validates gay people as humans with rights". All of the participants were quick to defend their right to marry in comparison to heterosexual relationships. Evelyn sums it up by saying, "I mean what is their divorce rate? Like...50%- higher even? It's not like they're doing such a great job at it, what's the harm in letting us try? It's not like we could do any worse!" Olivia jokingly references pop superstar Britney Spears' short-lived first marriage, "I think we have just as much right to rush as Britney Spears did!"

Monica makes the observation that many of the stereotypes of lesbians moving very quickly within their relationship have to do with their *inability* to marry.

Before there wasn't any further step. Moving in was as committed as you could be, so moving in with someone in six months, a year, *that* was a big deal. But when you look at heterosexual relationships, a lot of them do that too. It just wasn't as big of a deal because they always had that next step of marriage where we didn't. Now that we have that, that step of forever commitment, moving in together will still be a big deal, but it won't be the final step anymore.

Those respondents who did get married or who were engaged to be married also spoke about this new "final step" of marriage. Even for respondents who had been together for a decade or more, the validation that came along with the recognition of the state held importance. Part of this was the legally binding contract of a state recognized marriage. As Lily says, "It did seem far more real at that point. It's like, oh, this would actually take some work to get out of this relationship now." Along with the extra work required to end a relationship, the recognition of their relationship as a married couple by others also became important.

Despite having been committed to each other for over thirty years, Sophie and Elizabeth spoke of people outside of their immediate network questioning their commitment level due to she and her partner not getting married immediately upon legalization.

Sophie: It was like, all of a sudden it became just this thing that it was almost like if you didn't do it, then there was something wrong with you.

Elizabeth: 'Then you must not really be committed if you're not getting married.'

Sophie claims that the influence of others was not the reason they eventually did get married, "it changed nothing, we already knew what we are to each other". Elizabeth recognizes that despite how *they* feel about the matter, their actions still convey meaning about their relationship to others: "It does sort of I guess make... a stronger statement about our relationship and...our commitment to each other".

This is essential to the very basis of forming a self and an identity. We would be unable to become who we are without acknowledging the people around us. This hints at a type of Cooleyan perspective. It is central to the formation of our identity to try to understand ourselves through the perspective of others (Cooley 1902). Although there is variation in the way we see our self and how others see us, it takes the acknowledgment of others to substantiate our identity. Darcy is well aware of this:

I would differentiate between myself and the perception that other people have of me. I don't think a relationship is strengthened or weakened by having the title of marriage. I wouldn't say that now that I'm married I am more likely to stay with her as opposed to not. The perception that people have of us as a couple—um I feel like it strengthens their perception of us as opposed to not having that title. I—we get their approval with that title. You start to fit the white picket fence ideal and you're not so out there and you start to fit in.

By taking the proper steps and performing the proper cultural rituals, others' understanding of the identity of "spouse" begins to change. No longer is this level of commitment reserved for the relationship between a man and a woman, but the sexuality diverse can also begin to "fit in" within the institution of marriage.

Besides confirming the identity of those "in it to win it," as Darcy put it, the reality of marriage also served to be an eye opener to those who were with a partner that they could *not* see themselves spending forever with. Despite talking about marriage quite seriously for some time before the amendment, Olivia's relationship dissolved shortly after the legalization of marriage in Minnesota. Even though they discussed getting engaged, things didn't work out for the couple: "She was doing it [considering engagement] because it seemed like the next step. Which I mean, it very much could have been, but she was not actually ready or in a place where she should have been getting engaged...she was not ready for the commitment that she—we actually had plans for it even. Um, and I think she panicked a little about that." Olivia's partner had thought that she was ready for marriage, until she realized she wasn't. Olivia contributes this confusion in part to indirect pressure her partner had felt from her family to marry and the realization that if they were to get married, it would be "real".

Ceremonies

Our personal lives are not private, and we as a society seem quite uninterested in keeping them to ourselves. Marriage ceremonies are a conduit for transmitting the intimate to large groups of people. Even individuals who have no desire to participate in a ceremony in front of others often submit to normative standards for one reason or another. Sometimes it is due to the desires of a partner: “I would be completely ok with going down to the capital and having a big party, but she really wants a ceremony. If it’s important to her, it’s important to me, so...[Holly].” Others struggle with familial pressure: “My parents really want a party, so we’re having a party-they’re having a party. *They* are having the party. It’s more we’re doing the reception... now they want a big wedding so...so yeah.” Lily and her partner have no desire to include others in their marriage ceremony, but her parents insist on throwing them a wedding party.

The remainder of the individuals and couples decided they *do* want a ceremony in front of a group of people they deem to be important to them. Legislation has created a variety of responses. There is the excitement and solidification of commitment that comes from proclaiming one’s love from the top of the highest mountain (or the end of an aisle if a mountain is not available). Amber and Erin felt that the acknowledgement of those close to them was something that was important to them. “...We wanted to...have some sort of

symbol of we're entering into this committed relationship. We wanted our friends and family to see that and be a part of it and understand that this, you know that we were committing." Although these ceremonies are usually a joyous occasion, this want for a ceremony in front of others also brings up issues that would not otherwise be as problematic.

One issue is not having outsiders support the relationship and ceremony. Evelyn and her partner had a commitment ceremony prior to the legalization of same-sex marriage in which they *did* receive the support of their family members. In contrast, for their legal wedding, what she calls their "second wedding", the support and recognition for their relationship was not there.

We didn't invite anyone to our second wedding because basically I couldn't invite my family. And so, I was like, well if I can't invite my family (Evelyn's partner) was like 'then I won't either, my mom won't care.' so, it was crappy for her family but mine...they just didn't really, they didn't really fully stand behind it, so."

Although Evelyn and her partner would have liked to share their marriage celebration with their families, the realization that one side of the family would not understand and react to it in a positive and meaningful manner made the point moot.

Evelyn broaches a very serious topic of conversation—the difference between a marriage ceremony and a commitment ceremony or other recognition of coupledness. This is where many of my participants are divided in opinion. Isla explains, "It is different, I...I would have done a commitment

ceremony. Would I at my core [have] been ok with it? No.” Evelyn saw no issue with a commitment ceremony and considers it to be her “first wedding”. Isla is not completely satisfied with the idea of performing a commitment ceremony as opposed to a wedding, but recognizes the value associated with the act. In contrast, despite their lengthy relationship (30+ years), Sophie and Elizabeth did not consider a commitment ceremony:

...The commitment was there, the feelings were all there, and it was like what, I don't know. I mean it seems to trivialize it but it was kind of like, what's the point? Uum, because it wouldn't change anything. In many ways it wouldn't change anything for how other people saw us or recognized us.

Sophie is acutely aware of a fundamental reason for getting married—the recognition by others that you and your partner have taken the furthest step of commitment that is possible together. Once again, people outside of the relationship, as audience members and representatives of the community at large, are essential in helping assign meaning to the actions of validating the identities presented.

Although a commitment ceremony and a marriage ceremony appear to be essentially the same thing with the same rituals and meaning, there is no doubt that they are indeed different. They each carry differing connotations of societal beliefs and meanings. The pragmatics of “marriage” have religious, political, and personal meanings that are rooted deeply in institutionalized hegemonic values. Therefore, while people expressing their commitment to

each other is usually deemed to be acceptable by all, marriage is given a lofted position within our society reserved for those who have proven they deserve it. Even with the negatives associated with marriage, it is still considered to be sacred and something that should be protected.

Marriage as representation of sexual identity

In addition to marriage confirming commitment in the eyes of the participants, the members of their networks, and the government, marriage also serves the purpose of projecting a sexual identity. Although marriages do sometimes end in divorce, I think it is safe to say that very few individuals and couples go into marriage expecting to someday divorce that person. This is substantiated by most of my participants claiming that marriage is a “forever commitment”. Therefore, if a woman marries another woman, she is cementing her identity as a lesbian. She will be in love with and committed to a woman—forever.

Even for people who had “come out” previously, this is a big step. “I know that I am bisexual or however you want to put it but...I’ve been in a committed relationship with you for four years [and] we’re about to get married—what do you want to call that? Do you want to call that gay? Do you want to call that I’m in a gay relationship?” Although individuals can recognize the fluidity of their own sexuality in their experiences, it is uncomfortable to think of one’s partner as a sexual being outside of that intimate relationship. In

conjunction with the value of marriage as a forever commitment, this fluidity is stalled into the projected identity of a lesbian. Also, a marriage is not something that you could easily hide from family and close friends—or something that people would normally want to hide. Molly, who is living with her girlfriend and considers herself to be “not out, not at all” recognizes this, stating: “So I don’t know if she’ll tell her family [about being a lesbian]...Obviously if we got married or something then she would have to tell them.”

Oswald (1999:74) claims that the recognition from others of one’s bisexuality or lesbianism through discussion is essential to solidifying their identity. Monica states: “I told my family I have a girlfriend which was, I would say, a big step because now she was seen differently, she was treated differently than if it was, if she was just another friend.” Despite this, her mother has repeatedly questioned her sexual identification as a lesbian. “My mom constantly asks every time I see her, never fails to ask about, ‘are you sure? How’s it going? Are you really living together?’ Like, just kind of that reinforcement of yeah, this is true.” This questioning causes Monica to solidify the way she presents her identity to others. Through this exchange she continues to reinforce her identity as a lesbian to a significant member of her close network.

Lily also finds that members of her networks have questions. “I work with a lot of men so that, I don’t know, as soon as men find out that you’re a

lesbian, then it's like...'ok, come on with the questions, I know the questions are there, let's just go, let's hear it.'" These questions don't pertain to questioning the *validity* of her sexual identity; instead they pertain to what it *means* to be a lesbian. We as humans attempt to understand and make meaning of the social world around us through interaction. By answering questions about her lesbian identity, Lily is not only confirming her sexuality as influential in shaping her identity, but is teaching others around her how to negotiate with and act towards others with similar identities to hers. She is, in part, solidifying a lesbian identity as a legitimate expression of self within the social world.

Holly had come out to her friends and family in the early years of her college education. Even so, most of her family refused to recognize her sexuality. Now that she is engaged to be married, this denial of her sexual identity is something that she will no longer let them do. "...I'm at the point where you either accept me or you don't. So, so I don't need, I don't need their approval [her family] and my...family, for me, are my close friends and my partner". Due to the legitimation of her sexual identity provided by the government, she is now unwilling to negotiate with the discomfort of those who continue to refuse to recognize her relationship. Because of this, she has decided that she would rather cut ties with those that don't recognize her identity as a lesbian than to continue to have her sexuality dismissed as an acceptable identity.

The same thing is true of Isla. Although her aunt has been in a committed lesbian relationship for quite some time, she uses the label of “friend” to introduce her own partner and to categorize Isla and her partner Emily’s relationship. Isla is put off by this and reacts in a way that clearly identifies her sexuality and classifies the commitment level in her relationship, “I was like [name of aunt]! We’re—she’s—Emily is my girlfriend! We’re engaged! She’s my fiancé!” Her aunt’s unwillingness to properly label their relationships could stem from a generational difference, and unease at disclosing one’s sexuality diverse identity. It could also stem from an awareness of the process of coming out, as she could have been erring on the side of caution in case Emily and Isla were not at that point in their identity formation.

Elizabeth falls within the same generation as Isla’s aunt and has a different reaction to others’ response to her sexual identity. When asked about her coming out experience and her family’s reaction, she says:

...you know for the longest time it was never talked about. They just, they, they knew it you know and they just kind of let me live my life they never really said—don't ask, don't tell—
 Sophie: [interrupting] basically! [laughter]
 Elizabeth: And that’s how it was. It just was, it was never really talked about but everybody knew.

When Sophie became a permanent member of Elizabeth’s life, her family reacted in much the same way. In an unspoken understanding, they accepted her as part of their family but never dwelt on what that meant in relation to

their sexuality, although their silent acceptance signals a certain level of recognition of their coupled identity.

For other participants, marriage has acted as an important step in the recognition of family members of their relationship. Amber and Erin discuss:

Amber: He's [Erin's brother] really nice to me, but I wouldn't say that—he certainly wouldn't introduce me to people as his sister in law. Right? I don't kn-

Erin: [interrupting] No, I think he would.

Amber: Would he?

Erin: Yeah, yeah, I think he would. If it needed to be said—if it was part of that conversation.

Amber: Before we got married he introduced me to your cousins as your friend. Like shortly before we got married, so that's why I would think that maybe he wouldn't. But I don't know, maybe he would. Maybe the wedding changed that for him.

For the most part, Erin's family is not accepting of her identity as a lesbian.

Despite this, the legitimization provided to her relationship by her marriage and the legal recognition it now receives has changed how some members of her family view her and her wife's identities. Labeling is an important part of solidifying who we are to others and ourselves. In this case, there is a big difference to Amber in whether Erin's brother calls her Erin's "friend" or her "wife". The recognition afforded by the label "wife" hints at a deeper level of acceptance as opposed to limiting her same-sex relationship to that of "friend".

Compulsory Heterosexuality and Incorrect Assumptions

The underlying expectation that marriage will happen between a man and a woman can make salient a variety of issues for individuals with a diverse sexuality. This expectation, or compulsory heterosexuality (Rich 1980), becomes problematic when individuals interact with members within and outside of their sexual identity group. A re-occurring theme was that of incorrect assumptions. In conjunction with compulsory heterosexuality—in which everyone is assumed to be heterosexual, my participants have had to learn how to negotiate this assumption and make decisions regarding the projection of their lesbian identities.

Even members in or outside our extended networks become attuned to certain cues that allude to marriage. In American culture, we use symbols to express our commitment to others. The symbolic importance of wearing a wedding band is one that is rarely lost on most socially conscious individuals. All of the participants who were married and most of them who were engaged wore rings on their left hand ring finger.

Due to the standing ideology that women marry men, most of the participants have had to deal with incorrect assumptions about their sexuality now and throughout their lives. Rich (1980) coined the phrase “compulsory heterosexuality” to help explain this ideology. She suggests that everyone is expected to be heterosexual, and are rarely given another option. One

participant, Olivia, reflects on the expectations we have about marriage as children and young adults:

Olivia: I think I just thought about that I wanted to be married, that I wanted to have kids and that the other...I guess up until that point I probably did think that it was a man [both laugh].

Interviewer: And now it's clearly...

Olivia: Clearly a woman. Interesting.

Molly also talks about the way she was raised, "I just grew up very—you know, grass is green, the sky is blue, girls marry guys. You know, like very, this is just how things get done." In almost all of the cases participants were never presented with an alternative option to marrying a man. The participants had to eventually find this out on their own (I return to this theme in the *Sequencing* section below, p.70).

Participants were often asked about their husband—what's *his* name, where is *he*, what does *he* do. At this point in time, participants must make a decision to correct this assumption, or let it go. Amber shares her unease with the situation:

I have this anxiety every time I meet people because I have this wedding ring now whereas before I didn't have to talk about it right? So people just naturally assume that I have a husband and so then like it's always this like, I have this anxious feeling when I meet them because I have to like, *come out all over again*.

Although she does correct people that will remain within her extended networks, she states that sometimes it is easier to let the offender remain uncorrected. "If I'm never going to see this person again, I just let it go. It's not

that I'm hiding who I am, it just doesn't seem worth it". Goffman (1959) calls this "secondary adjustments", wherein individuals choose to refrain from revealing their true self to others for a variety of personal reasons.

Lily feels the same way. Because she has been in her lesbian relationship for fifteen years and came out relatively early in her adulthood, most of the members of her close and extended networks know about her marriage to another woman. For those that do not know or belong to a network, she takes a generic approach to questions about her personal life:

...Usually it will come up like 'well what's his name?' Because I can answer a lot of questions without any sort of...pronouns or whatever for a while. If they don't know much about me they can just think whatever they want but...it is funny. It's..I just need to figure out a different method of doing it. Otherwise it's exhausting.

Whereas heterosexual individuals can go about their lives rarely if ever having to correct someone's assumptions about their sexual identity or their partner's gender, it is something that lesbians struggle with.

Gender Expression and Gender Roles

The individuals that face the least amount of confusion about their sexuality often face confusion about their gender. Gender is intricately linked with sexuality and how we make sense of the world. Male-masculinity and female-femininity are constructed in how we dress, move, speak, and have sex (among many other actions). Typically, our gender expression is thought to convey where we fall on the masculine/feminine spectrum, with the

expectation being that our behaviors will align with this expression. This seems to be especially true within same-sex relationships. The ideology within our society is that a relationship is a dyad of opposites. Someone must be more dominant, more aggressive, and more masculine (the “man”) to balance the other half of submission, care, and femininity (the “woman”). Despite some performances that superficially seem to follow these rules, for the most part this imbalance of power does not seem to be the case with my respondents.

All of my respondents spoke of great levels of equality in their relationships. Roles within the relationships were not based on the typical gendered performances that are commonly found in heterosexual relationships. Amber outlines the myriad of tasks her wife Erin performs: “She does the laundry, and cooks, and paints.” In fact, equality seems to be something that most of the participants strive for. As Harper says, “I want someone who will challenge me. I’m a pretty strong personality so I need someone who will stand up and call me on my bullshit”.

It is not *within* the relationship that gender expression poses an issue; it is with others *outside* of the relationship. Emily narrates her experiences and the reaction she gets to her appearance:

I get it when I go to the bathroom and hope that no one is in there, every time. So I don’t have to...like when women walk into the bathroom or open the door and I’m sitting there washing my hands and sometimes they close it and they look at the sign and then they open it again. I’m like, ‘you fucking idiots.’

Using West and Zimmerman's (1987) term "sex category", we can start to analyze and understand this confusion from others. We use gender cues and someone's outward appearance to categorize someone as belonging to a biological sex—we place them within one of two sex categories, that of a man or woman. In this case, the combination of the context, a women's bathroom, and Emily's taller than average height and short hair confuse strangers in their assessment of her sex category. Within her home and the format of the interview, it is apparent to me that she should indeed belong to the sex category of a woman. Her partner thinks that this is absurd as well. "I think you're extremely feminine. Knowing your personality, you're more girly than I am in a lot of ways." This goes back to Goffman's (1963) concept of discredited stigma. Despite her femininity, Emily faces stigma based on her more masculine appearance; which stereotypically hints at a lesbian sexual orientation and a "manly" demeanor.

Isla also receives confusion based on her gender appearance with her sexuality. She does not fit the stereotype of what a lesbian is "supposed" to look like and is questioned by other lesbians and straight men about her sexuality.

...It's a combination of, like, it's a combination of how I look, how I am, *her* [her partner Emily]. It's like, people immediately want to put me somewhere but they can't. Like the gay community, rejects me in a lot of ways. I walk into a gay bar and everyone thinks who is this straight girl that's here? She doesn't belong here.

Schwalbe (1996) discusses “subcultural identity work” in which a group works together to strengthen the identity of a particular subculture. Isla does not fit the image that is represented by the lesbian subculture, so she immediately becomes a person of suspicion. They also police her partner for what they assume to be relationship with a heterosexual woman. “It’s like, ha, Emily picked up the straight girl! [Emily]” Comments such as these serve to attempt to invalidate the legitimacy of the relationship as being one that is equally committed.

Isla also has a narrative on the reaction she gets from men:

... I’ve literally had guys [say]: ‘Yeah, that’s because you haven’t had sex with me. Yeah that’s because you haven’t seen my dick.’ [Emily sadly chuckles]. I’m like; I don’t want to see your dick [Emily laughs]. I don’t care...I don’t-I just don’t care. It’s not because I...have anything [against] men, but because you literally repulse me with your ignorance.

This is yet again where compulsory heterosexuality is a factor in how individuals are approached and treated. The ideology that *everyone* is heterosexual, and that if they claim to be otherwise something must be wrong with them or their previous partners, is oppressing and frightening. The possessiveness shown by the men is also frightening, as if all women who are deemed to be conventionally attractive “belong” to them. Emily’s reaction to this narrative is unsettling in that her response to this tale of harassment is sad acceptance. As if she has seen this happen to her partner too many times.

Proposals

It is often expressed that lesbian women are “butch” because someone has to be the more masculine, i.e. dominant one, or the “man” in a relationship. Although the personal narratives of the respondents usually negated this statement, it was interesting to see traditional dichotomous gender roles being performed when it came to the actual marriage ceremony and acts leading up to it. One of the most common themes that came out of discussing marriage was that of the proposal story.

Perhaps the rituals of marriage are so deeply ingrained in our understanding of commitment that it is hard to envision deciding to marry *without* a proposal. Jewelry stores such as Tiffany and Zales certainly work hard at keeping up the hype about proposals. Videos on Youtube capture “perfect” proposals and proposal “fails”. Magazines dedicate whole sections to doling out advice on the do’s and do not’s of proposals and how to “get him” to pick out the perfect ring. Even “unique” proposal stories that do not include a ring are still a proposal story.

Take Emily and Isla for example:

...We had fake asked each other like a hundred times and we knew we were going to get married, it wasn’t like...you know it wasn’t like this, ‘oh!’ [shocked high pitched sound]...we were pretty clearly heading down that path no matter what and I was like whatever, I’m going to make this actually official and like, you know, I had probably been like “ok, are we getting married yet?” like, like being kind of silly and I had,

I'm such a cornball. I had a, a caramel apple sucker [Emily chuckles], not kidding, and I pulled out the sucker and I just knelt at the side of the bed and just asked for real and you were like 'ok!' and then you ate the sucker!

Emily: I ate the sucker!

Isla: And that was it!

Two things about this particular narrative stuck out as significant to me. First, that Isla is the one that proposed to Emily. As was mentioned earlier in this paper, Isla views Emily as being very feminine, perhaps even more feminine than her despite Emily's more masculine gender expression (short hair, style of dress). This would seem to conform with the hegemonic ideal that it is necessary for someone to take on a more dominant (masculine) role within a relationship, and that person would be the one proposing. Monica seems to agree with this sentiment, saying: "My roommate identifies as the masculine role in her relationship and she wants to be the one to propose, she wants...to watch her partner walk down the aisle." Second, despite an exceptionally equal and communicative relationship in which marriage had been seriously discussed, a proposal was still deemed necessary for the final decision to marry to be made.

Lily and her partner had a similar situation. They had discussed getting married and had actually went and picked out engagement rings together. At this point, it was understood that they were going to get married sometime in the near future. Despite this, Lily also has a proposal narrative:

She surprised me and went and got them, like took care of the rings, brought them home. She was like, 'Oh, your dinner is in the-your dinner is in the microwave' [laughter]. I was like oh, that's so nice! [She was] Like, 'You just have to heat it up...just open it, open it first and see if that's what you want.' ...She had Hostess cupcakes and she made a sign [that said] 'will you marry me?' and then the rings were on there and whatever so, she had that. So it was still really low key and us, but uum, yeah, it was funny.

Amber and her partner Erin were also excited to share their proposal story:

Erin: We went and looked at rings and then we ended up picking out our rings and having them designed together. So then we both knew that we had engagement rings but we hadn't proposed, so but like we still wanted that proposal thing too. So we actually picked up our rings and had them here at the house for like a month before anyone actually proposed, and then—

Amber: [sarcastically] It was very spontaneous.

Erin: Yeah, it was very spontaneous and surprising.

Amber: Whoo!

Erin: But, and then, we, I ended up proposing to Amber, which was kind of the expectation, like she was just waiting for me to get the dang ring off her dresser mysteriously somehow and propose to her after it had been in the house for a month.

Lily describes her proposal as "low key and us", implying that her proposal was different than all of the other proposals. Erin wanted her proposal to be a surprise, despite them having already purchased the engagement rings. In fact, each individual and couple, no matter how grandiose or "low key" the actual proposal, felt that it represented their relationship perfectly.

Therefore, proposals seem to be conflicting yet necessary steps in transforming a coupled identity into one of high commitment and marriage. The ingrained expectations we have for ourselves and others shape our actions, and these proposal experiences illustrate the ongoing structural influences of

marriage and heteronormative relationships on lesbian women. However, by utilizing agency, each couple was able to navigate the engagement process in alternative ways that they found equitable and unique. Hegemonic? No, not quite. More like a rite of passage—queered.

Life Course Theory

We often forget the influence society has on our behavior. By watching others, we are provided with a way of making meaning of expectations for action. Based on our position within society and through comparison with others, we are able to judge if we are “on track” as dictated by societal expectations. Age is one such position in which these hidden expectations apply. As children we are expected to reach certain developmental milestones at specific ages. This does not change as we transition into adulthood. Life course theory (Elder 1994) uses the concepts of sequencing and synchrony (Giele and Elder 1998) to better understand how our perspectives and thus actions are shaped by our current position and the actions of people around us.

Sequencing

Although we as individuals have certain goals for ourselves, often the order in which we accomplish them is dictated by societal norms. Sequencing (Giele and Elder 1998) is the theory that we reach an age/stage in life where the next step of action is expected. Common examples of sequencing are graduating from high school, graduating from college, gaining stable employment,

marriage, and buying a house. In recognizing these patterns of action, we are able to reach these milestones and prepare for the next step. Some groups of people have more difficulty than others in reaching these milestones, as they must perform additional steps throughout the process. One such additional step for the sexuality diverse community is in recognizing their sexual difference.

Recognizing sexuality

As far as relationships are concerned, individuals are expected to become aware of their sexuality and begin forming relationships around adolescence and early adulthood. For sexuality diverse individuals, this experience can be frustrating, complicating an already difficult adolescent process of self-discovery. Harper explains:

...Looking back I was like, ok that's why I did that stuff, I clearly had a huge crush on my best friend all through high school. I do remember, even when I was looking back, one time where I was, in high school, and we were hanging out and laying in bed together with my high school friend and [felt] like this overwhelming emotion-but I didn't know what it was-and I didn't even think, because I had never thought that [romantic attraction] before of what it could have been.

Harper has no words for what she was feeling because she had no knowledge of an alternative sexuality to make meaning out of this experience. She was missing a central piece in recognizing her sexuality—an example in which to compare herself to.

This missing piece of their self— the part that connects intimately with another human being— created what I think of as something similar to a “pseudo-identity” (West 1994). The term, used most often by psychologists in

reference to the persona projected onto others following a stressful event, often consists of a blank, disassociated shell. Individuals who project a pseudo-identity tend to just “go through the motions” without fully accepting and internalizing this identity. Sexuality diverse individuals who project as heterosexuals are aware that something central to their sexual identity is missing, but may be unable to categorize and act upon this awareness.

Although it could be argued that the refusal or inability to acknowledge this part of the self *is* indeed stressful enough to cause the creation of a protective identity, I am more convinced that the creation of a pseudo-identity stemmed from inexperience and lack of education. Emily states, “...It was never like ‘oh my gosh, I’m in love with them!’ or anything like that. It was like, I wanted something, like a different kind of relationship, but I didn’t know what it was.”

In fact, although most of the participants expressed feeling similar confusion, they were not made aware of their sexuality until college or immediately before.

I can’t...in all honesty I can’t think of having feelings for another girl in high school or anything like that. I had a boyfriend in high school. Maybe it was just not something that was-I don’t know. I don’t know, because I know [that she’s a lesbian]. Yeah. But it really came about in college. Uum and it started with a friend who was a really good friend that just evolved into whop! Something happened and...I like it!

Monica was clearly confused about her sexual identity in high school versus her identity in college and beyond. This is another example of how our identities

are dependent on others' interactions and perceptions of us. If we are unable to assign meaning to what we are experiencing, we are unable to react to the stimuli. With exposure to others who hold alternative sexualities, like the lifting of a pseudo-identity after therapy and counseling, the realization of the farce that was their closeted identity is revealed. Many of the participants often laughed in amazement at their disassociation with that part of their self, saying: "oh yeah, that's what that was!" (Harper, Emily, Olivia, and Monica).

Being ready for marriage and family

Once in a relationship, couples often find themselves sequencing their steps in order to show an increased commitment. By properly labeling their same-sex relationship as a romantic relationship, it becomes a first step in showing that they are indeed committed to that person. From here, strengthening commitment (see *Defining Commitment*, p.38) and the sequencing of their lives was something that I found to be important to many of the respondents.

Monica talks about her expectations for her life and relationship in conjunction with her soon approaching graduation from graduate school, "I think I have a lot of personal goals I want to accomplish before I settle down or think about a wedding or anything like that. So I think when some of those are met, I will have another expectation". It is also significant to Monica and her

understanding of how life experiences and events should be ordered that her partner is five years younger than her.

I think I am very conscious about and aware of is our age difference. I'm 26 and she's 22. Like there's not....I'm finishing up, I've been out of college for five years by this time. And she's finishing up in May. There are a lot of things that I've lived that she hasn't, and by no means do I want to keep her from them...hold her back from [life experiences]. So...I have chosen to not put any pressure on our relationship and I am glad that I haven't, but there are conversations that have come up with friends that have said...now what are you guys, what are you doing after this? Are you...are you propo-I just recently got asked 'why aren't you proposing?'

Although Monica seems comfortable in her relaxed stance to considering the next steps towards increased commitment (moving in together, engagement, etc), she is hesitant to consider these steps as a reality in the near future due to her partner's age. The sequencing Monica herself experienced remains important to her and thus mitigates the urge to talk about marriage and engagement with her partner until she has also had a chance to experience those same events.

Molly talks about how her dad's ideas about life sequencing differ drastically from hers, "My dad is very, *very* stinkin' traditional. He's like 'get married at 20, have seven kids by 22.' I'm not kidding you." Her response when asked about marriage with her current partner is a significant contrast to her dad's expectations, "I'm very like, I want to do things too. You know, I want to make a certain amount of money before I like do something, before whatever—I

want grad school, I want da-da-da [hand motion of lining things up on her palm].”

Olivia also alludes to sequencing in talking about being of an age where marriage and children becomes important. “...Because I’m getting older now, and more mature [laughter] and that’s like the next step in my life and something that I’ve always seen myself doing? Is having a family and kind of carrying on that path, same as any heterosexual person.” In her point of view, she has reached an age (30) and maturity level where she is financially and emotionally ready to commit to someone and begin a family together. She talks about a “next step” in that she is ready to move on to something that better fits her, and society’s expectations about what steps she should be accomplishing.

Despite changes in the institution, and albeit an old-fashioned ideal, marriage is still considered to be the foundation of the family unit within the United States. In all of the impassioned debate we forget that it is also the source of familial dissolution. By this I mean that when an individual gets married, they are separating themselves from their nuclear family and choosing to create a new family that will take precedence. Although some individuals choose to be “between” families and distance themselves while still single, this important step is most prominent with the formation of a “new” family. Isla illustrates the time that this was realized with her own mother:

And I think that was also the turning point in our relationship for my mom too, that my mom realized that it was us now. That it wasn't her taking care of me, it was Emily taking care of me. So that was a big transition for my mom to just kind of let...let you, take care of it. And that really in her eyes kind of solidified us. For—forever.

Although this narrative pertains to a medical emergency and precedes Emily and Isla's marriage, the significance of this step is not to be overlooked. This is especially true for respondents in their mid-twenties, the typical age where independence from parents and the pursuit of other significant relationships is expected. It is with this step that one's identity as a coupled identity becomes fully realized by those close to them.

Synchrony

Also important to many of the participants is the synchrony (Giele and Elder 1998) of life events associated with the life course perspective. Like sequencing, activities are expected to be achieved by a certain point in life. The major influence in synchrony is the behavior of those in the networks around that person. We are expected to accomplish steps at the same age as our peers. While marriage and children may be something that one pictures themselves doing at some point in time, other individuals within their peer group help to make these goals and the age in which they are done obvious. Monica is well aware of this, "Uuum, I think more than anything...it could be peer pressure. You know on the outside. Kind of like what I wonder if I would be telling you if I didn't have a million wedding invitations on my fridge."

This puts individuals and couples within same-sex relationships in an interesting situation. Marriage (at least *first* marriages) commonly takes place between the ages of twenty-five and thirty-five.

Molly [speaking about her partner]: She wants to be twenty-six and engaged and at that level. But she's not. I'm not saying she's behind, because there are a lot of twenty-six year olds who aren't engaged- but like, she's like ready for that. She has a lot of friends [getting married]...We've been going to weddings like every other weekend I feel like, of friends that have been getting married. It's just that stage that you're at at twenty-six, twenty-seven."

Molly recognizes that part of the reason her partner feels ready for marriage is because her friends and peers in her same age group are. This does not necessarily mean that her partner *is* or *isn't* ready for marriage at this point in time, but that synchronizing our actions with those in similar situations is an important influence on our expectations for ourselves and the choices we make.

For many respondents that fall within the twenty-five to thirty-five age range, the development of commitment within their relationships has corresponded to the timeline associated with marriage rights of same-sex couples within the state of Minnesota. As Isla states:

I mean now thinking about the timeline about everything and our story is just that like our relationship was progressing in the same way as the amendment, at the same time. You know how it's just something that I never realized until it was like oh shit, we might not be able to do this [get married]. It just never dawned on me.

The increased commitment level within the relationship and growing desire to marry was streamlined with the discussion about same-sex marriage in

Minnesota. At the cusp of the decision to allow same-sex marriages, Isla and Emily had begun seriously talking about marriage. Perhaps for the first time they realized that unlike those wishing to marry members of the opposite sex, this could potentially not be a choice they were allowed to make.

Those that fall outside of this age range on the older side face different challenges in synchronizing with their heterosexual counterparts. Individuals and couples who are older and have long surpassed the typical age of a first marriage couldn't synchronize their expression of commitment. Up until this point marriage had never been a viable option. Sophie sums up her recognition of this:

...Certainly back when I was 15 and first figuring this out and first coming out it was... never going to be an option. And so it was like... *I'll never be a boy. I'll never be married...* It was just one of those things. So yeah, when it happened it wasn't, or even when it became legal-even when it started becoming legal in other states, I don't feel like I was necessarily ever like, oh this is really going to happen.

She had lived for so long with the understanding that because of her sexual identity, marriage was not something that she was allowed to do, that even when laws began to change she had a hard time negotiating what that meant.

Similarly, not only was Elizabeth aware that she was unable to accomplish the same steps in time with her peers, her family members were also aware of this inability to act with synchrony:

When all the rest of my siblings had been married my cousin looked to me and she said, 'Well, I guess that's the last [family name] wedding right?' And I said yep! So it was a done deal after that...Once they found out that we had gotten married...they were just, ecstatic. So it was like, 'about time! [laughter] What took you so long?' Well you know, we kind of had to wait!

Upon her own marriage, the time lapse between family member's marriages and her own is something that is immediately commented on, thereby drawing more attention to the fact that up until this point her identity as a lesbian in a committed relationship had yet to be fully validated by the act of marriage.

The participants are acutely aware of where they are within this sequencing of their actions. Some credit their age for their focus on and expectations for marriage. Others realize the influence their peers have on their level of preparedness for this step. Also, using life course theory to analyze these themes is central in gaining a further understanding of the impact life events have on our perceptions of the world.

Location

Interestingly enough, the geographical location of the participants played a very important role in their ability to properly present their identities. Although most of them had decided to live in a location within the state that they felt comfortable and accepted, there was still the awareness that their identity would not be wholly accepted wherever they went. This varied from distrust of other states within the Midwest to uneasiness in certain areas of the

state of Minnesota. In both cases, the stigma attached to having a diverse sexuality was easily realized. In comparing different states and areas within Minnesota, it was also easy for participants to recognize where and with whom they did feel comfortable and “safe” in projecting their identities.

Evelyn feels an outpouring of support from her partner’s family based on his acceptance of their identity as a couple, despite the overarching negativity in her father-in-law’s home location: “...he's definitely come around. And, he also had a vote no sign, and he lives in Northern Minnesota, where it was very much a bad thing.” In fact, respondents who either have connections in or are from rural areas around the state tended to feel more anxiety about their identity. Molly talks about her hometown, “I come from just a small town... Overall my town is more...conservative you could say. My family is, my grandparents, my...just the community that raised me is that [conservative].” Molly continues to struggle with her sexual identity, and bases much of it on her religious and conservative upbringing.

On the other hand, individuals who lived in larger areas, specifically Minneapolis or St. Paul, tended to feel more accepted in their identities. Emily and Isla talk about why they chose to live in Minneapolis:

Isla: Emily and I really don’t leave Minneapolis. So, except for work, or for my family, or to go to the mall of America. Uuum, because it’s a safe zone. I mean I feel like literally once we cross it, I feel different. I do.

Emily: Well...the likelihood—

Isla: The likelihood—

Emily: Goes up exponentially—

Isla: Yeah. Once we leave Minneapolis—

Emily: [chuckle] Yeah. But it, I mean it happens here too, but it's, it's definitely like a weird culture change between Minneapolis and the suburbs. It's like...it's the lack of...people knowing what to do with—

Isla: Anyone different—

Emily: *Me.*

The combination of Emily's gender expression and her and Isla's projected identity of a committed couple make her feel uneasy outside of their "safe zone".

It is vital to our continued formation of our identities to negotiate others' responses to them. The supportive environment within Emily and Isla's home location continues to reinforce their identity as a committed couple as something worth maintaining. On the other hand, due to repeated negative responses elsewhere, Emily and Isla have made the conscious decision to forgo traveling outside of their community to prevent feelings of anxiety. This decision reinforces how important their identity as a committed same-sex couple is to them. Typically, in response to negative feedback from society, individuals will manipulate their identities to be one that receives a more positive reaction. In this case, Emily and Isla are vehemently against manipulating their melded identity and choose instead to avoid the site of negative response.

Despite narratives about troublesome areas, most of the participants talked about the state of Minnesota in a positive light, especially when compared to other states. Colin Woodward (2011) theorizes that the present

day states of America and the overarching political ideologies found in each state can be traced back to their colonial ancestors. He claims that the people of Minnesota, as part of “Yankeedom”, have a sense of trust and faith that their government is made up of people that represent them and that it is working for them. Monica recognizes this when examining Minnesota, “So, Midwestern... Minnesota nice, liberal state for the most part. Very social justice oriented.”

Although Monica mentions the entire Midwest region in her assessment, neither Woodward (2011) nor multiple other participants would extend their faith in the government past the Minnesota borders, at least not yet. Isabella mentions, “I do feel that I’m in a state as in Minnesota, that you know, I’m safe. If we lived in the Dakotas or somewhere I might be like mmm, I’m not sure. I guess it’s still legal to be fired for being gay [In North and South Dakota].” This hints at a certain amount of trust in the state government to keep her “safe”. Her skepticism and tales of discrimination in bordering states further strengthens the argument that Minnesota is, as Monica mentioned, more “social justice oriented” and deserving of this trust than other states around the country.

Intersectionality

A few participants likened the push for equal rights for sexuality diverse individuals to the civil rights movement. Emily talks about her experience, “you grow up and you’re a white kid and you have all these privileges and you’re-like realize that you’re...like you realize something about yourself and

you're...second class." She recognizes the privileges she has had up to this point were based on her skin color and place within the social stratification system. What about individuals who do not possess this position of privilege?

Holly is very aware of the impact intersectionality has on her life and interactions, "being a black gay woman, there's a lot there that you deal with". The separation of those three identities; black, gay, and a woman, are identities that face individual challenges within society. The combination of them provides a complex perception of the world in which these challenges are layered. Holly talks about her interactions with her partner's (who is Caucasian) stepmom, "...we see things differently. Um, I think she has some...issues to work out in terms of being accepting on the, on the LGBT scale and I think there's a little bit of, some racial things to figure out. To put it nicely." Not only does Holly have to negotiate her relationship with her partner's family based on their dislike of her sexual identity, but her racial identity as well.

Monica finds that her cultural identity plays into the way she interacts with others. Unlike Holly, she does not find those outside of her same ethnic identification to be the issue, but within it. As a Latina, Monica cites the cultural influence of her community and religion to be less welcoming of her sexual identity. "I think that that just plays a big, big part in their view on same-sex marriage, same-sex couples and...I think it's hard to be diverse and

homosexual.” She goes on to talk about the implications this has for her interactions with others:

I know my mom, I don't think she's, I don't think any of her people like, know. You know. I don't think that she is...I don't think she is ok with them knowing, right now.... So I think that...and the worry with that, is that culturally, that...she raised a lesbian. Like *'how come you made your child like girls'*.

Although her mother knows about her sexual identity, she still has made an effort to keep it from others within their community. This poses an interesting predicament for Monica in that she must negotiate her identity as a Latina and what that means culturally with her identity as a lesbian. The acceptance and internalization of traditional cultural ideals by her family members constrains her ability to enact her sexual identity, which is viewed as highly unfavorable.

By continuing to keep her sexual identity a secret in order to protect her mother from community backlash, Monica is projecting her identities so as to minimize the impact felt by being a stigmatized member of society. Although she reports seeing change on the horizon: “our next trip to Mexico [where half of her family lives], the one we [Monica and her partner] are already planning, will be a little bit different. It would allow an opportunity for me, for me to talk to them [her family].” Monica is planning on telling her father and other members of her extended family as well as her Latino/a networks about her same-sex relationship. She credits her upbringing and experiences in the U.S. and college for this:

It's just more widely accepted in the white American culture, part of it could be that we live in Minnesota... my surroundings are very supportive and I certainly believe that that plays a big role in my ability to think that this can happen. And that it can last and that it can, we can be something beyond just a fling. [It's not] just something that I did.

It can also be suggested that the increasing seriousness of her relationship plays an important role in her decision to tell members of her Latino/a networks about her sexual identity and her relationship. If she could see no possibility that she would be with her girlfriend for an extended period of time there would be no reason to tell them. However, Monica and her girlfriend are taking the commitment step of actively planning their future together, "...It's been a conversation, we've had a conversation about it together, and we're going to kind of plan our future [together]". Therefore, once again, the ability to marry and be a significant part of each other's lives—forever—becomes an important part in cementing and projecting one's identity as a sexuality diverse individual to others.

Even for the participants who have not been hit with a trifecta of discrimination like Holly and Monica, being sexuality diverse and a woman can still be a challenge. Being a woman in a still male dominated society brings with it another level of thought and awareness of expectations for appearance and action. Elizabeth felt this acutely when she began her career as a police officer:

I mean first of all, being a female and all in a dominant men position or role, and then coming in and being gay on top of it...I didn't want to you know like, really knock them off this [hand motions above her-

indicating a pedestal]. So I kind of came in, kind of quiet, kind of did my thing you know, and built my rep-you know. My reputation, more than anything, and acceptance and I think people accepted me as a person.

This intention, that people know the person instead of their sexuality, is a re-occurring theme with multiple participants. Although their sexual identity is something that is important to them, most of the participants do not want it to be the one thing that ultimately defines them. This could be because in our society, individuals with diverse sexual identities still receive a fair amount of stigma, or because out of all the things people measure our worth with, in the end, our sexuality *should* be relatively insignificant.

Despite this, sexuality and marriage continue to be controversial topics of discourse, in fact proving the point that sexuality is something that continues to threaten the hegemonic values in place within our society. The legalization of marriage and acceptance of a diverse sexuality as being a legitimate option may not change some of the responses people give to it, but it does change how people can react to these responses. Isla does a great job of explaining what this means to her and her partner:

And just...marriage changes that. It changes it being legal. There is absolutely nothing anyone can do...of course they can say what they want to say, but she's my wife, sorry. *There is nothing you can do.*

Although others have a very real impact on our thoughts and actions, in the end it is through our own agency that we decide to accept these reactions to our identity and alter it accordingly or alter our interactions in a way that no longer

negates the identity at hand. The legalization of same-sex marriage offers a level of validation for sexuality diverse identities that was never previously there.

CONCLUSION

This research intended to answer the following questions: does the legalization of same-sex marriage have any significant impact on one's identity construction in congruence with being part of a committed relationship? What impacts do the pressures of those within the inner and outer circles of acquaintances have on how one views themselves and their relationship? Is one's level of commitment influenced in any way? What role (if any) do children play in changing the context of a same-sex relationship? Additionally, how are individuals and couples negotiating the heteronormatively dominated wedding industry and rituals?

Through respondent narratives, I found that the way participants thought about themselves after marriage did change. Although many of respondents claimed at the beginning of the interview that marriage would "change nothing" about their relationship, most of them brought up things that were important to them that it did, in fact, have a large impact on their views surrounding location, security, and acceptance. Some noted the legality of marriage as being important, including the legitimation they received from the government. The ability to file taxes together, have parental rights to future children, and sign a legal document endorsing one's commitment to another

person became things that the participants reflected on appreciating about marriage.

The validation afforded to the identity of a lesbian by the legalization of same-sex marriage is an overarching theme within the narratives of the respondents. In being able to legally marry, individuals and couples must negotiate what this means for their future. Respondents who are not completely out have begun to examine the possible consequences of projecting their commitment to another woman through marriage or another form of labeling. In legitimating same-sex relationships, marriage equality has now made the relationship and commitment within it more “real”. This has a double-sided affect. In most cases, the respondents are overjoyed to begin planning their future together. In others, the realization that the coupled identity was one that they did not feel comfortable in accepting “forever” resulted in the dissolution of the relationship. Also important is the interaction the respondents had with others.

We use social cues to gauge the response we receive to our identities as favorable or unfavorable. The acceptance of those around us is important in continued identity formation and comfort with one’s self. The want to be socially accepted often modifies our behavior to reflect these interactions, and the withholding of acceptance has serious consequences. Conversely, being given acceptance for something that was previously deemed taboo offers

legitimation to a group or individual that was never there before. This acts to validate the actions and identity as something meaningful and acceptable. It is an institutional way of validating one's self.

This validation is acknowledged outside of the couple as well.

Commonly, the recognition of the couple as a valid one from family members became one of importance. It is important to note that individuals who refused to acknowledge this validity were often excused from the inner circles of the participants. The feeling of being "second class" and without the legal right to defend and be proud of one's identity was replaced with confidence and a sense of belonging within society. The legal backing provided by marriage equality allows the participants to properly label their relationship to themselves and others, and through this label participants were given the ability to make themselves visible to those that would have otherwise ignored or discredited their sexuality and coupled identity.

Some participants noted that being able to marry would have/had a significant impact on how others viewed their relationship. With the legal backing afforded to their marriage, respondents now had a way to compare their relationship to those of their heterosexual counterparts. Their level of commitment to each other would no longer be questioned. Their inclusion in the basic human right of the pursuit of love and happiness validated their identity as one that was worthwhile. Some of the same values that have for so

long held marriage aloof for sexuality diverse individuals now act to reinforce their relationships and identities as legitimate.

The importance of a legal marriage also became salient when participants spoke of other areas around the country. Most of them acknowledged that if they were to move to a different state for one reason or another, they would not choose to move somewhere that would not allow them to marry a partner of the same sex, or that would not recognize their existing marriage to their partner of the same sex (it's important to note that respondents were interviewed before nationwide legalization of same-sex marriage in June, 2015). The worth of a legal marriage was so important to them that they were not willing to negotiate these terms when making other life decisions. It was usually only with this reflexivity on behalf of the participants, that the true value of marriage was realized.

Although none of the participants had children at the time of their interviews, many of them were planning to have them sometime in the near future. This is another area where the value of marriage became increasingly salient. Heterosexual individuals can easily claim their biological rights to children through simple steps such as paternity tests and signing a paper. As of now, there is no way for two same-sex individuals to be direct contributors of biological DNA to one child. Because of this, same-sex couples taking the proper steps to ensure that both parents have the rights to their children is a lengthy

and expensive process. With the legal backing of marriage, these parental rights are now more easily accessed. In this way, marriage not only validates the identity of a committed couple, but also aids in casting them as worthy parents.

Despite the overbearing hegemonic ideals of the society we live in, the participants also negotiated the rituals associated with marriage in a way that they felt comfortable with. Although a proposal story accompanied an engagement narrative the majority of the time, it was traversed in such a way that made the ritual more equal and that of a joint decision as opposed to an expression of dominance of one partner over another. In fact, most aspects of the participants' lives, from the proposal and wedding, to day-to-day behavior, exuded high levels of equality and respect. In every case, the participants reflected on a shared commitment including the recognition and placing of the other person's needs before their own, even if it meant having an elaborate wedding ceremony.

It is not a new finding that married individuals are physically and mentally healthier than their unmarried counterparts (Herdt and Kertzner 2006, Wight and Badgett 2013). In fact, the American Public Health Association (2015) has publicly endorsed marriage equality throughout the country. By keeping the ability to marry from a significant amount of people, the health of the nation as a whole is threatened. How can something that seems to be just a surface level symbol have such deep consequences? As I have reported here,

being part of a committed relationship changes one's thoughts, actions, and future plans. Marriage and identifying as "We" instead of "I" goes much further than just signing a piece of paper. This is especially true in same-sex relationships. These individuals and their relationships have been discredited and discriminated against extensively. To receive the message that how one identifies is "immoral", "unnatural", "perverse"—the list goes on—throughout one's life has an impact on how one views their identity and self. The legitimization offered by legally being able to express this relationship and one's identity helps to relieve the stress associated with being a marginalized member of society.

Kim (2011) has coined the phrase "skeptical marriage equality" in approaching the polarizing nature of marriage in the United States. Kim's (2011) use of this terminology points out that although many view marriage equality as an important step in recognizing the rights of sexuality diverse individuals, it can also be criticized as an effort to streamline gay culture into that of hegemonic America. She argues that although everyone should have the right to marry, if they so choose to, it behooves us to be skeptical of the current institution of marriage.

One of the main arguments against marriage equality is that it will change the foundations in which the institution of marriage is based on. I would agree, but I do not view this as a negative change. The greater level of equality seen in same-sex relationships threatens the hegemonic, i.e. male dominated ideal within the institution of marriage. With the legalization of same-sex marriage throughout the

country, we are on the cusp of a transition in which marriage is no longer about ownership and dominance, but could better reflect a true partnership.

This study served the purpose of further examining the identity formation and shift in sexuality diverse individuals when faced with the possibility of marriage. Although the respondents included in the study offered valuable insights into what it means to be in this position, this study does have some shortcomings. The sample was not as diverse as was intended. Although several participants who would have offered differing perspectives based on their racial/ethnic heritage, socio-economic status, and age originally agreed to participate, they ultimately declined to be part of the research. This is interesting as it could serve to reinforce the idea that talking about and being upfront about one's diverse sexuality is a white, middle class thing to do. Perhaps due to the low levels of discrimination faced in other arenas of their identity presentation, these individuals are more comfortable speaking about and making salient their marginalized sexual identities.

Also, the study did not encompass enough individuals or go on for a lengthy enough period of time. Despite reaching saturation with the amount of participants involved, it is hard to believe that information gleaned from sixteen participants can give a fully developed picture of the experiences had by sexuality diverse individuals. Also, the fluidity of our identities poses an issue for the short time span this study covered. With marriage being a relatively new possibility, the impact on identity could fall one of two ways. First, individuals may not yet fully realize what marriage equality means to them, their relationship, and their identity. Second, the

impact of marriage equality on the participants' identities could be inflated due to this level of newness. They could be hyperaware of what this means to them in terms of changes to their identity. Future research could redesign the study as a longitudinal study to examine the long-term effects marriage equality has on the sexuality diverse population.

Despite these limitations, this study is a good springboard for additional research. Although quite a few studies have been done on older individuals and what the ability to marry means for them, the greatest impact may be found within the younger generations. It would be interesting to study individuals within the typical marriage age (25-35) to see how this affects the way they view their current and future relationships. Also, what does this legitimization of a sexuality diverse identity have on America's youth? Is an acceptable alternative to heterosexuality more readily available? This study and further research into continued acceptance and identity formation of sexuality diverse individuals is important in understanding the impact political decisions have on the quality of our relationships and lives. Additionally, it provides a glimpse of our fluctuating social world, in which the institutions that form the foundation of our society may benefit from a little change.

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Appendix A: informed Consent Form

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

I freely and voluntarily give my consent to be a participant in this research project, "What Happens Now?: Identity and Commitment Among Lesbian Women with the Passing of Same-Sex Marriage Laws in Minnesota". This research (IRB #658843) is being conducted by Kendra Klump, a Graduate Student in the department of Sociology and Corrections at Minnesota State University, Mankato and being overseen by Dr. Emily M. Boyd, a sociologist at Minnesota State University, Mankato. I understand that the purpose of this research is to attempt to understand any changes in identity within an individual and relationships of lesbian women with the passing of same-sex marriage laws in the state of Minnesota. My decision whether or not to participate in this research will not affect my relationship with Minnesota State University, Mankato.

Potential risks are minimal in that they will not exceed what may be experienced in daily life. Risks that could arise include stress and discomfort in relating personal experiences related to my sexual identification that may have had a traumatic impact. Although these experiences are important in understanding the individual, the researcher will guide the interview away from these areas if I am showing verbal or physical signs of distress. Potential benefits could include leaving the interview with the feeling of being heard and understood. Also, upon relaying information regarding my personal life and relationships to an unbiased third party I may gain a greater understanding of my own life and self in the process.

I understand that I will be interviewed about my experiences by Kendra Klump, who will keep my responses confidential. I understand that nothing I say will be associated with my name or used in any way that will identify me. I understand that I will be asked to fill out a short demographic questionnaire taking no longer than five minutes to complete prior to the start of the interview. I understand that I may refuse to answer any or all of the questions on this survey. This survey will be kept locked in Dr. Emily Boyd's faculty office located in 113 Armstrong Hall at Minnesota State University, Mankato until the completion of the research at which time they will be shredded. I understand that I will be asked to participate in a 60 minute one-on-one interview that will

be recorded on a secure audio device. This device will be secure in that it will be kept under lock and key in Dr. Emily Boyd's faculty office located unless the interviews are in the process of transcription. Transcription of interviews will take place in an isolated location within the private residence of Kendra Klump. Upon completion of transcription of recorded interviews, the recordings will be deleted or otherwise wiped from the recording device. I understand that I may refuse to have my interview recorded. I also understand that I may refuse to be interviewed, at which time I will be considered to have withdrawn my intent to participate in this research. I understand that any recordings of my comments will be transcribed for research purposes only and then destroyed; a pseudonym will be used instead of my name in written transcripts. Interview transcripts will be stored on Kendra Klump's password-protected computer until the completion of the research, upon which time they will be deleted or otherwise digitally wiped from her computer. This consent form will be kept in Dr. Boyd's faculty office for 3 years and then destroyed through a shredder. I understand that I have a right to a copy of this consent form and that I will receive a copy of this consent form for my personal use and files before my participation in the survey or interview begins.

At the completion of the interview my commitment to the research will be completed. **I understand that I may elect to not answer particular question(s) if I choose and/or withdraw my participation in the research without penalty at any time.**

If I have questions or concerns I understand that I can contact Kendra Klump by phone (218-341-5946) or by email at kendra.klump@mnsu.edu or Dr. Emily Boyd by phone (507-389-1375) or by email at Emily.boyd@mnsu.edu. If I have any questions or concerns regarding the treatment of human subjects, I should contact: Dr. Barry Ries, Graduate Dean by phone (507-389-2321) or by email at barry.ries@mnsu.edu.

In checking the following categories, I indicate my willingness to participate in Kendra Klump's research project. **If I do not agree to be interviewed, I do not give my consent to participate in this research project.**

_____ I agree to fill out a short demographic questionnaire

_____ I agree to be interviewed one-on-one.

_____ I agree for my interview(s) to be audio-taped.

_____ I have received a copy of this consent form for my records.

Interviewee signature: _____

Date: _____

Researcher signature: _____

Date: _____

Appendix B: Recruitment Flyer

Recruitment Flyer

Title: University Graduate Student Seeks Adult Women Volunteers for Interview Study

Text: My name is Kendra Klump and I am a graduate student in the Department of Sociology and Corrections at Minnesota State University Mankato. I am looking for volunteers for a sociological study on lesbian women who were in a committed relationship at the time of the passing of the same-sex marriage law in Minnesota and their possible change in identity. Volunteers will be asked to complete a short survey and participate in a one-on-one interview. I am seeking volunteers who meet the following criteria:

1. You self identify as a lesbian
2. You are age 18 or older
3. You were in a committed relationship at the time of the passing of the same-sex marriage law in Minnesota (May 2013)

The interview will be a 60-minute interview conducted in an area mutually agreed upon. Your name and identifying information will be kept confidential. The individual interviews collected are a great opportunity to explore the impact marriage may have within the lesbian community. Thank you for considering participation in this study titled "What Happens Now?: Identity and Commitment Among Lesbian Women with the Passing of Same-Sex Marriage Laws in Minnesota".

If you are interested in volunteering, please contact me at kendra.klump@mnsu.edu. All email correspondence including any identifying information will be deleted and wiped from Kendra Klump's computer history upon completion of participation or notification of disinterest in participating in this study. I look forward to hearing from you.

Appendix C: Interview Prompt Guide

Interview Prompt Guide

1. What does being in a committed relationship mean to you?
2. Do you feel you and your partner are/were equally committed to your relationship?
3. What is your family like? (general question in an attempt to outline who they consider family and if children are present).
4. Do you discuss your relationship with members of your close network (family, friends, etc)?
5. Do you discuss your relationship with members of your extended network (work acquaintances, neighbors, friends of friends, etc)?
6. Do you feel pressure from others about your relationship?
 - a. Can you tell me about it?
7. What are your opinions about same-sex marriage? Did you support the movement?
[follow ups: were you involved? Did you feel pressure to be involved? If you are “out” did others discuss it with you? What kinds of things did they ask/say?]
8. It has been over a year since the passing of same-sex marriage in Minnesota, have your opinions changed in that course of time?
How/Why/Why not?
9. Has your relationship changed in that course of time?
How/Why/Why not?
10. Do you know anyone who has gotten married since the law change? What are your opinions about that? What is your perspective on their relationship? Why do you think they got married? Etc.

Appendix D: Demographic Survey

Demographic Questionnaire

Participant

1. How old are you?
 - a. 18-25
 - b. 26-35
 - c. 36-45
 - d. 46-55
 - e. 56-65
 - f. 65 or above

2. What is the highest level of education that you have completed?
 - a. Less than a high school degree or equivalent
 - b. High school or equivalent
 - c. Vocational/technical school (2 year)
 - d. Some college
 - e. Bachelor's degree
 - f. Master's degree
 - g. Doctoral degree
 - h. Professional degree (MD, JD, etc.)
 - i. Other _____

3. What racial group would you classify yourself belonging to?
 - a. Arab
 - b. Asian/Pacific Islander
 - c. Black
 - d. Caucasian/White
 - e. Hispanic
 - f. Indigenous or Aboriginal
 - g. Latino
 - h. Multiracial
 - i. Would rather not say
 - j. Other _____

4. What is your current marital status?
 - a. Divorced
 - b. Living with another
 - c. Married
 - d. Separated
 - e. Single

- f. Widowed
 - g. Would rather not say
5. What is your current household income in US dollars?
- a. Under \$9,000
 - b. \$10,000-19,999
 - c. \$20,000-\$29,999
 - d. \$30,000-\$39,999
 - e. \$40,000-\$49,999
 - f. \$50,000-\$74,999
 - g. \$75,000-\$99,999
 - h. \$100,000-\$150,000
 - i. Over \$150,000
 - j. Would rather not say
6. Which of the following best describes the area you live in?
- a. Urban
 - b. Suburban
 - c. Rural
7. How many children under 18 years of age live in your household?
- a. None
 - b. 1
 - c. 2
 - d. 3
 - e. 4 or more
8. (Skip if the answer to Q.7 was "None") Is/Are the child(ren) in your household your biological child(ren)?
- a. Yes
 - b. No
9. Which of the following categories best describes your primary area of employment? (Regardless of your actual position?)
- a. Homemaker
 - b. Retired
 - c. Student
 - d. Unemployed
 - e. Agriculture, Forestry, Fishing, or Hunting
 - f. Arts, Entertainment, or Recreation
 - g. Broadcasting
 - h. Education – College, University, or Adult

- i. Education – Primary/Secondary (K-12)
- j. Education – Other
- k. Construction
- l. Finance and Insurance
- m. Government and Public Administration
- n. Health Care and Social Assistance
- o. Hotel and Food Services

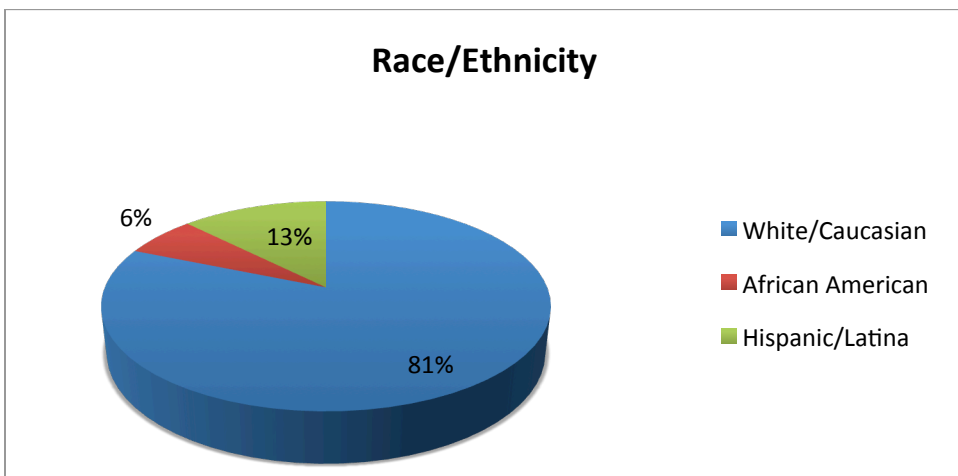
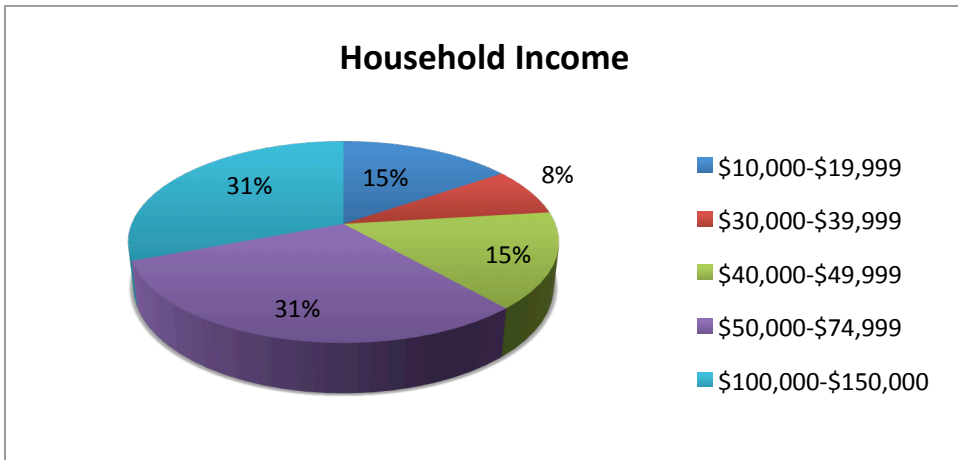
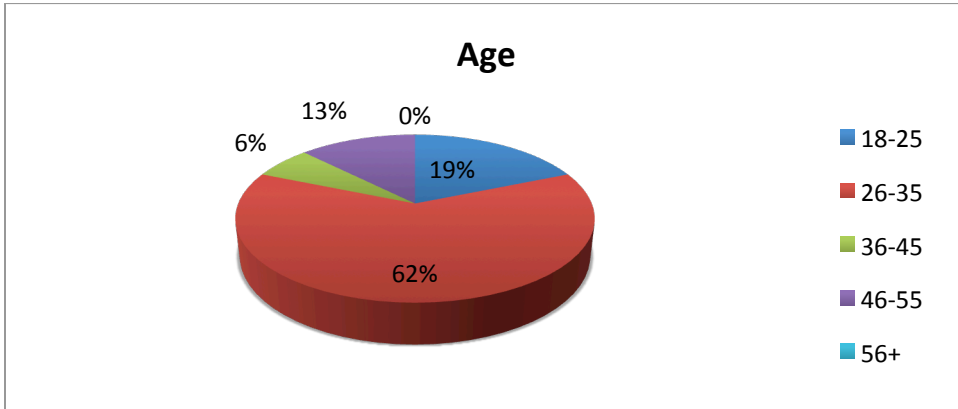
9. Continued:

- p. Information – Services and Data
- q. Information – Other
- r. Processing
- s. Legal Services
- t. Manufacturing – Computer and Electronics
- u. Manufacturing – Other
- v. Military
- w. Mining
- x. Publishing
- y. Real Estate, Rental, or Leasing
- z. Religious
- aa. Retail
- bb. Scientific or Technical Services
- cc. Software
- dd. Telecommunications
- ee. Transportation and Warehousing
- ff. Utilities
- gg. Wholesale
- hh. Other _____

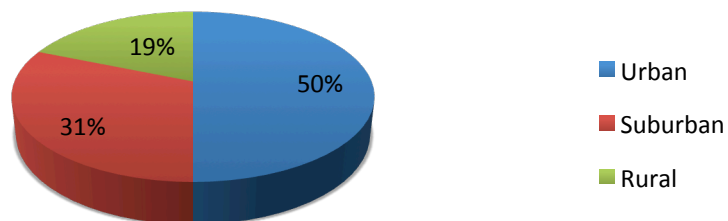
10. How “out” would you classify yourself?

- a. Very “out”
- b. Mostly “out”
- c. Moderately “out”
- d. Selectively “out”
- e. Not “out”

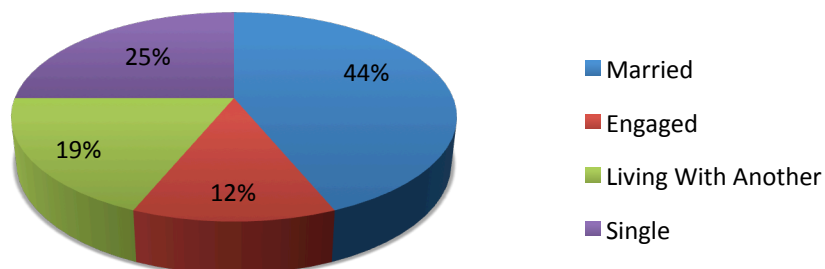
Appendix E: Demographic Data



Location



Relationship Status



Level of "Out"

