

Debates over legalizing same-sex marriage have continued to rage within U.S. culture at large, as well as within the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) communities. In this chapter, we present research from a variety of academic traditions related to same-sex marriage. We begin by providing a historical and contemporary overview of the battle over legalizing same-sex marriage, outlining the important legal and demographic contexts that frame debates on same-sex marriage. Following this overview, we examine the implications for promoting, or denying, same-sex marriage at the individual and societal levels. To do so, we demarcate two opposing positions on legal same-sex marriage—the perspective that advocates for same-sex marriage, and the contrasting one that critiques the fight for same-sex marriage. In the final sections of this chapter, we outline empirical research on same-sex couples' perceptions of the same-sex marriage movement and provide a case vignette for therapists of same-sex couples.

A Brief History of the Marriage Movement and a Review of Same-Sex Union Demographics

The political and popular movement aimed at ending discrimination of LGBTQ-identified individuals gained momentum and visibility throughout the 1980s (Hull, 2006). By the last decade of the 20th century, the fight to extend civil rights protections to LGBTQ individuals, most notably including the legalization of same-sex marriage rights, became a national and international conversation. At the broadest level, advocates of same-sex marriage utilized civil rights discourses to argue that like other disadvantaged groups, LGBTQ individuals were being discriminated against on the basis of their sexual orientation. In contrast, those who opposed same-sex marriage argued for viewing marriage as a sacred institution between one man and one woman. The same-sex marriage debates in the United States have continued to carry political and social relevance in political and legal arenas into the 21st century.

The history of same-sex marriage legislation in the United States is a relatively short one. At the time of this writing, no federal legislation exists to legally recognize same-sex marriages. Internationally, Denmark was the first nation to legalize same-sex unions in 1989 (Soland, 1998), and same-sex marriage is now legal in Argentina, Belgium, Canada, Iceland, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, South Africa, Spain, and Sweden. In addition, more than 20 other countries recognized registered nonmarital same-sex unions at the national level (Eskridge, 2002; Eskridge & Spedale, 2006; Hull, 2006). Because no federal legislation recognizes same-sex marriages in the United States today, states have independently enacted legal marriage rights for same-sex couples through a variety of avenues. The first state to attempt to legalize same-sex marriage—Hawaii—did so in 1993 through a State Supreme Court decision that ruled the state's refusal to allow same-sex marriage unconstitutional. In response, in 1998 a ballot measure was passed creating a constitutional amendment banning same-sex marriage (Hull, 2006). This early loss for same-sex marriage rights launched the current marriage equality movement, setting the tone for the next 15 years of legal battles over same-sex marriage

(Wolfson, 2001). Shortly after the Hawaii marriage initiatives, Congress passed the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) in 1996 under the Clinton administration. The DOMA was initiated in response to apprehension that if same-sex marriage were to become legal in Hawaii, other states would be legally bound to recognize same-sex marriages conducted in Hawaii (Hull, 2006). With the passing of DOMA, marriage became legally defined as a union between one man and one woman, and no state is legally bound to recognize a same-sex marriage from another state (Cahill, 2004; Hull, 2006).

After Hawaii and DOMA, Massachusetts legalized same-sex marriage in 2003, followed by Connecticut, Iowa, New Hampshire, Vermont, and New York. The District of Columbia also now grants full marriage rights. Twelve states—California, Delaware, Hawaii, Illinois, Maine, Maryland, Nevada, New Jersey, Oregon, Rhode Island, Washington, and Wisconsin—grant iterations of legal marriage to same-sex couples, including civil unions and domestic partnerships. The rights granted to same-sex couples through civil unions or domestic partnerships vary; in some states civil partners have nearly identical rights to married partners, whereas in other states partners have “near spousal” legal rights (Chambers, 2000). Maryland and Rhode Island legally recognize same-sex marriages from other states, but they do not grant same-sex marriage licenses. To complicate matters, the 13,000 same-sex couples who married in California during the short period in 2008 when it was legal to do so are still legally married, but no other same-sex couples can marry in California at this time.

In contrast to advances toward marriage equality from 1998 to 2008, residents of 30 states voted on initiatives to ban same-sex marriage (McVeigh & Diaz, 2009). To date, 37 states prohibit same-sex marriages through either legal statute or constitutional amendments, and several of these states further prohibit the recognition of same-sex marriages from other states. Many of these ballot initiatives took place during the 2004 and 2008 presidential and local political campaigns. In fact, some scholars argue that the “culture wars” over same-sex marriage were a significant force in President George W. Bush’s 2004 reelection victory (Hull, 2006). These culture wars played a less significant role in the 2008 campaigns of Barack Obama and John McCain, yet the ballot initiative to ban same-sex marriage in California—known as Proposition 8—received significant media attention. Proposition 8 was a response to the California State Supreme Court’s decision that the ban against same-sex marriage was unconstitutional. This decision was overturned by the passing of Proposition 8—which enacted a constitutional amendment defining marriage as a union between one man and one woman. Proposition 8 most clearly epitomizes continued same-sex marriage debates. In the media coverage of Proposition 8, the pro-same-sex marriage camp was framed with a discourse of equality and human rights, whereas anti-same-sex marriage position rested upon notions of traditionalism and conservative religious and family values.

These political and legal battles fought throughout the past 2 decades have cultivated unprecedented attention on the lives LGBTQ-identified people. As unparalleled changes continue to affect the legal status of members of the LGBTQ community, demographers and other social scientist have attempted to take count of same-sex couples in legal and non-legal unions. Because the legal status of same-sex partners varies by state and union type (i.e., marriage, civil union, or domestic partnership), and because national data on nonmarried couples are virtually nonexistent, defining the number—as well as sociodemographic characteristics—of individuals in same-sex unions is complex. Recent data suggest that approximately 32,000 same-sex couples are legally partnered in some way in the United States, although nearly 150,000 same-sex couples identify themselves as married in a recent American Community Survey (ACS), the yearly supplement to the U.S. Census (Gates, 2009). Estimates of nonmarried same-sex couples are far more difficult to ascertain. Data from the

2010 U.S. Census suggest that there are approximately 646,000 cohabiting same-sex partners (U.S. Census, 2011).

Estimates suggest important demographic differences among same-sex couples who marry. In the United States, women are more likely to enter into same-sex marriages than men. For example, in Vermont, nearly twice as many female as male same-sex couples entered into civil unions (Solomon, Rothblum, & Balsam, 2004); and in Massachusetts in the first year same-sex marriages were made legal, 65% of unions were of lesbian couples (Belge, 2005). In a study of same-sex partners in California, Carpenter and Gates (2008) found that whereas nearly half of lesbian partners were legally registered in California, less than a quarter of gay partners were registered. However, the opposite is found internationally; in fact, two men are almost three times more likely to marry than two women (Waldijk, 2001). In a study comparing married same-sex couples in Massachusetts, legally domestic partners in California, and partners in civil unions in Vermont, Rothblum, Balsam, and Solomon (2008) found that men, as compared to women, were more likely to be older, were less likely to have children, and had been in their relationships for longer periods of time before becoming legally partnered. The vast majority of same-sex couples in U.S. legalized relationships are White, and this demographic has been explained by the fact that couples of color are faced with homophobia as well as racism and so may not choose the very public step of a marriage or civil union (Rothblum et al., 2008). Other differences between same-sex married couples have been uncovered. For example, according to 2000 U.S. Census data, about 10% of gay male couples lived with children, whereas 22% of lesbian couples lived with children. Using the same data, we see that nearly 90% of gay partners and 85% of lesbian couples lived in an urban area, and gay- and lesbian-partnered individuals are better educated than their heterosexual counterparts (Black, Sanders, & Taylor, 2007).

In sum, a burgeoning literature draws attention to important changes in the legal status of same-sex couples over past 2 decades. Because of the political contention over same-sex marriage, this topic has received substantial attention from news and popular media. In media portrayals of these debates—most recently seen in relation to the 2008 California Proposition 8 ballot initiative—dichotomous boundaries are drawn. On one side is a monolithic LGBTQ community fighting for the right to marry; on the other side are traditional straight conservatives with the aim to preserve a view of marriage as a union between one man and one woman. This simplified, bifurcated version of the same-sex marriage debate obscures the complexity of nuanced positions on the topic. Most notably, scholars argue that the LGBTQ community is not a monolithic force that unilaterally agrees with the pursuit of same-sex marriage. Instead, a close examination of the same-sex marriage movement suggests that within the LGBTQ community, a variety of voices not only argue in favor of the legalization of same-sex marriage but also express positions against attempts to legalize same-sex marriage.

In an attempt to outline the multifaceted viewpoints on same-sex marriage within the LGBTQ community, Yep, Lovaas, and Elia (2003) describe what they call two competing “sexual ideologies.” They argue that individuals within the LGBTQ, or what they refer to as “queer,” community who view same-sex marriage as an important civil right critical for the stabilization of same-sex relationships are *assimilationists*. In contrast, individuals who view same-sex marriage as an oppressive institution that the queer community should work to dismantle, not partake in, adhere to a *radical* view. These opposing views are themselves not monoliths, as a variety of positions are expressed within each. However, we believe that these contested ideologies have real implications for individuals’ everyday relationships in that “conceptions of how to seek, pursue, develop, define, maintain, and represent loving sexual relationships invariably occur in an ideological context” (Yep et al., 2003, p. 48). In the remainder of the chapter, we aim to underscore how these ideological standpoints shape the costs and benefits of same-sex marriage on individual, relational, and community levels.

The Case for (Same-Sex) Marriage

Marriage is a fundamental institution in American culture that rewards participants with social advantages in multiple forms. Unlike mixed-sex couples in the United States, same-sex couples are denied the tangible and intangible benefits of marriage, a deprivation that restricts their citizenship and hinders their mental health and well-being. (Herdt & Kertzner, 2006, p. 1)

In one of the prevailing views on same-sex marriage, an assimilationist or “normalizing” approach frames same-sex marriage as an equal rights issue, wherein the legal right to marry marks the final step toward full and legal citizenship (Wintemute & Andenaes, 2001). Scholars and activists who adhere to this approach suggest that being LGBTQ identified is a discriminated status because these individuals do not have access to the same rights other citizens have (Bell & Binnie, 2000; Calhoun, 2000; Cott, 2000). As outlined by Yep and colleagues (2003), assimilationists argue that legalizing same-sex marriage not only would provide equal citizenship rights for same-sex couples but also would be beneficial to society generally and to same-sex intimate couples specifically. In the remainder of this section, we outline an assimilationist view of the benefits of same-sex marriage in these two arenas.

On the societal level, assimilationists argue that allowing same-sex couples to marry will normalize same-sex relationships as similar to heterosexual married ties. This normalization would, in turn, reduce the stigma and minority stress of LGBTQ individuals in society at large (Meyer, 2003). In this view, visibility and legal equality are the keys to undermining pervasive homophobic, heteronormative culture in the United States. Research shows that LGBTQ individuals may have higher rates of psychological distress and face stigma on account of their nonnormative sexual orientation (King & Bartlett, 2006). Thus, if same-sex marriage is legal, there will be less social stigma associated with being LGBTQ identified, in turn reducing the incidence of mental health problems of LGBTQ people. Moreover, according to this frame, access to marriage would moderate sexually promiscuous behavior and promote monogamy. Some scholars suggest that lower levels of sexually promiscuous or nonmonogamous behavior will lead to greater respectability and lower levels of stigma against LGBTQ individuals (Rotello, 1997).

Assimilationists propose that legalizing same-sex marriage will foster greater benefits to society at large. Because one of the main critiques of same-sex marriage is that it will destroy the meaning of traditional, opposite-sex marriage (Badgett, 2009), some individuals supporting the assimilationist approach emphasize that same-sex marriages will not denigrate but will actually work to bolster different-sex marriages. In a study on the impact of legalizing same-sex marriage on different-sex marriage in Europe, Badgett (2004, 2009) finds that extending marriage rights to same-sex couples in Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Iceland, and the Netherlands had no impact on trends in different-sex marriages or nonmarital birth rates. Badgett argues,

The legal and cultural context in the United States gives many more incentives for heterosexual couples to marry than in Europe, and those incentives will still exist even if same-sex couples can marry. Giving same-sex couples marriage or marriage-like rights has not undermined heterosexual marriage in Europe, and it is not likely to do so in the United States. (2004, p. 8)

Here, Badgett emphasizes that same-sex marriages in the United States pose no threat to the institution of marriage. Badgett further suggests that same-sex marriage may make the institution of marriage better by challenging patriarchal gendered norms and family roles of husband and wife in marriage (Badgett, 2009).

Aside from the proposed benefits of same-sex marriage on society in general, assimilationist scholars suggest that gay marriage will benefit LGBTQ individuals, as well as same-sex partnerships, in numerous ways. First, scholars who argue from an assimilationist framework point to potential benefits that partners and couples would accrue if able to legally marry. Marriage and family scholars have long suggested that transitioning from cohabiting or dating relationships to marriage makes unions stronger and more stable (Waite & Gallagher, 2000). Assimilationists believe that, as is theorized for different-sex couples, participating in the institution of marriage would bolster relationship quality, make same-sex relationships more stable, and induce stronger feelings of long-term commitment (Hull, 2006; King & Bartlett, 2006; Sullivan, 1995). Moreover, assimilationists believe that being legally bound may deter same-sex couples from obtaining a divorce due to the legal, social, and emotional complications (Badgett, 2009; Kurdek, 2004).

There is some empirical evidence supporting the importance of legal marriage on these dimensions, at least for different-sex couples. Married couples are qualitatively different than other intimate couples, such as cohabiting couples, in a variety of ways (for a review, see Smock, 2000). For example, research shows that there is less commitment in cohabiting relationships (Stanley, Whitton, & Markman, 2004), and cohabiters are more likely to break up and are less likely to pool financial resources than are married partners (Brines & Joyner, 1999; Bumpass & Lu, 2000). Thus, same-sex couples who participate in marriage may accrue these same benefits. Green (2004) argues that there is “commitment ambiguity” experienced by nonmarried same-sex couples, wherein same-sex partners do not have a shared understanding of what to expect from each other in their relationships, causing distress (p. 291). Green suggests that the commitment of marriage may foster more concrete, long-term plans together (e.g., having children or buying a home). Access to marriage, then, may promote greater financial security, provide partners with a sense of pride for their sanctioned commitment, and provide individuals with a template of what to expect as they pass through various life stages (Green, 2004; Slater, 1995).

Recent research suggests that these dimensions of same-sex relationships may indeed benefit from marriage. A recent study compared same-sex unmarried partners, legally married different-sex partners, unmarried different-sex partners, and single gay, lesbian, and heterosexual individuals and suggests that same-sex partners reported less happiness than did married different-sex partners, but no other differences on health outcomes were found between these two groups (Wienke & Hill, 2009). Research on same-sex civil unions in Vermont suggests that there was not a significant difference in break-up rates between same-sex couples in civil unions and heterosexual married couples but that both same-sex couples in civil unions and heterosexual married couples had lower break-up rates than did same-sex couples who were not in civil unions (Balsam, Beauchaine, Rothblum, & Solomon, 2008). In Sweden, however, same-sex couples were more likely to end their registered partnerships than were married different-sex couples likely to divorce (Andersson, Noack, Seierstad, & Weedon-Fekjaer, 2006). This research suggests that access to same-sex marriage may shape the relationship of same-sex couples in important ways.

In addition to pointing out the proposed benefits of legal marriage on relationship stability and quality, scholars argue that married people gain physical and mental health benefits from entering into marriage (Waite & Gallagher, 2000). Marital partners regulate and manage each other's health habits and overall health (Umberson, 1992), have increased social and emotional support, and receive an income boost with marriage (Heck, Randell, Sell, & Gorin, 2006; King & Bartlett, 2006; Waite & Gallagher, 2000). Assimilationists believe that much like different-sex couples, same-sex couples who marry would also accrue these benefits. For example, King and Bartlett (2006) write, “The social respectability conferred by state sanction of same sex relationships combined with the financial benefits of such unions and the necessary commitment to share a future may have positive health effects” (p. 189). King and Bartlett go on to suggest that access to same-sex marriage will “reduce the tendency” (p. 189) to have

sex with multiple partners as part of the cultural transmission of monogamy related to marriage, and subsequently gay communities will witness lower rates of sexually infectious diseases. Moreover, recent research suggests that men and women in same-sex relationships have lower rates of health insurance than do men and women in different-sex relationships (respectively) and are also more likely to have more unmet medical needs (Buchmueller & Carpenter, 2010; Heck et al., 2006). The inability to gain insurance benefits from one's partner is viewed as one reason for this gap. For example, because 40% of women in the United States obtain their health care from their husbands, women who do not have husbands or access to their partner's health care are less likely to have coverage (Heck et al., 2006). Recent research suggests that people with same-sex partners are nearly twice as likely than married spouses to be uninsured (Badgett, 2009). King and Bartlett (2006) argue that legal marriage will increase access to health care. Access to same-sex marriage may alleviate some of this disparity.

In sum, an assimilationist perspective suggests that marriage is a social institution that has not only legal but also symbolic benefits, and that the extension of legal marriage will influence society in general and same-sex relationships specifically in positive ways. However, questions remain as to the extent to which same-sex couples will accrue the benefits of marriage seen by straight couples and how influential same-sex marriage will be on a homophobic U.S. culture. In this vein, several scholars suggest that the fight for same-sex marriage has important detriments to same-sex relationships and to society in general. We explore this position next.

Queer Critiques of the Movement for Same-Sex Marriage

But marriage—forget the “gay” for a moment—is intrinsically conservative. It does not just normalize, it requires normality as the ticket in. Assimilating another “virtually normal” constituency, namely monogamous, long-term, homosexual couples, marriage pushes the queerer queers of all sexual persuasions—drag queens, club-crawlers, polyamorists, even ordinary single mothers or teenage lovers—further to the margins. “Marriage sanctifies some couples at the expense of others,” wrote cultural critic Michael Warner. “It is selective legitimacy.” (Levine, 2003)

Perhaps it is surprising, given the media's bifurcated portrayal of the same-sex marriage debates, that opposition to same-sex marriage has arisen not only among conservative marriage traditionalists but also among queer scholars and activists who aim to highlight inherent differences between LGBTQ and heterosexual people (Lewin, 2009). This view, understood in opposition to an assimilationist approach, is what Yep and colleagues call a “radical” approach and what Badgett (2009) terms a “dissenter” approach. Radicals or dissenters argue that the movement for same-sex marriage is harmful to the larger queer community, to queer relationships, and to all families in the United States, straight or queer. We outline each of these areas here.

First, radical scholars argue that the quest for same-sex marriage is harmful to the larger queer community. For some individuals, focusing the time, money, and energy of the LGBTQ rights movement distracts from other issues in the queer community, depoliticizing a larger, more diverse movement for a variety of interests of all queer people regardless of marital status (Ettelbrick, 1992; Weston, 2005). Since the beginning of the movement for same-sex marriage rights in the United States, the push for such rights has been at the forefront of legal and political action. While other legal battles have raged, including the repealing of sodomy laws and “Don't Ask, Don't Tell” in the military, and battles to obtain legal protection against discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, these legal efforts have been dwarfed by efforts to legalize same-sex marriage (Hull, 2006).

Moreover, queer scholars believe that LGBTQ culture is intrinsically unique, and thus view the fight for same-sex marriage as an attempt to assimilate “to mainstream, middle-class values,

[that are] intrinsically distinctive from what it means to be lesbian or gay” (Lewin, 2009, p. 6). At the core of this approach, scholars argue that queer culture is oppositional to normative heterosexual culture, and that this distinct culture is at risk of dissolution when queer individuals gain the right to marriage. This critique of same-sex marriage has been defined by the term *homonormativity*, wherein the efforts to gain access to same-sex marriage fail to “contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions” but instead work to sustain them while demobilizing queer culture “anchored in domesticity and consumption” (Duggan, 2003, p. 50). For these scholars, same-sex marriage is part of the mainstreaming of queer culture, stripping the progressive potential of queer politics. Any attempt made to attain access to the quintessential feature of heterosexual life—marriage—is a disloyalty to the larger queer movement’s emphasis on difference and opposition (Bronski, 1984; Warner, 1999). Most notably, radical scholars view the fight to challenge homophobia and resistance to heteronormativity through subversive queer culture as an imperative aspect of queerness (Halberstam, 2005; Polikoff, 2008).

In similar way, queer scholars further argue that the quest for same-sex marriage works to marginalize individuals in the queer community who do not choose normative relationship configurations that would be sanctioned by marriage. The quest for same-sex marriage, then, depoliticizes queerness, shifting it from a community with the aim to radically resist and critique the institution of marriage to one that values marriage above all other forms of intimate ties (Polikoff, 2008; Robson, 1994; Vaid, 1995). These scholars warn of a new hierarchy of queer relationships, wherein the presence of respectable married queer individuals further marginalizes those queer individuals who chose alternative relationships (Butler, 2001; Walters, 2001). Michael Warner (1999) argues that efforts for gay marriage work to promote “normal” and “respectable” same-sex couples who want marriage and nuclear families much as do different-sex couples, consequently framing “abnormal” queer families as disrespectful, “bad” gays (Walters, 2001). Similarly, some lesbian scholars argue that the quest for same-sex marriage disregards long-standing feminist and lesbian critiques “of the oppressive and political nature of the family in favor of advocating recognition for ‘our’ families” (Robson, 1994, p. 977). In this approach, same-sex marriage acts to make queer individuals who are not in two-person intimate relationships and works to demonize nonmonogamous, polyamorous relationships (Saalfeld, 1993; Warner, 1999). Moreover, an emphasis on the tie between two intimate partners through legal marriage works to obscure other nonsexual family relationships that are theorized to be unique to LGBTQ communities. For example, Weston’s (1991) families of choice, along with other alternative, nonbiological family relationships, will be obscured (Bronski, 1998). Such books as *That’s Revolting! Queer Strategies for Resisting Assimilation* (Mattilda, 2004), *I Do, I Don’t: Queers on Marriage* (Wharton & Philips, 2004), and *Same-Sex Marriage Pro and Con: A Reader* (Sullivan, 2004) portray these radical approaches through personal narratives and queer theory.

Scholars from a radical perspective argue that participating in marriage will not only harm the queer community but also have specific negative implications for same-sex intimate relationships (Warner, 1999). This approach draws from feminist critiques of marriage that argue the institution is inherently flawed because of its foundation on women’s subordination to men (Bernard, 1972). In this view, this flawed institution will also detrimentally influence the intimate relationships of same-sex partners by perpetrating inequality (Walters, 2001). Whereas some scholars suggest that same-sex couples are revolutionaries, promoting a new vision of marriage that dismantles norms of inequality that govern intimate relationships (Cherlin, 2004; Stacey, 2000), others are less optimistic. In a radical view, same-sex couples who marry must interface and construct gendered selves within the context of long-standing inequality of marriage. Thus, because marriage is linked to patriarchy (Ettelbrick, 1992), even queer marriages will reinforce hegemonic, unequal models of intimate relationships. In a similar vein,

some argue that marriage invites the state's intrusion on the intimate relationships of queer people, fostering a loss of individuality and independence (Clarkberg, Stolzenberg, & Waite, 1995). These scholars suggest that legal same-sex marriage sanctions state interference in the intimate lives of those people who participate (Warner, 1999), rather than attempting to subvert the state's hold on personal relations.

In the article "Is Gay Marriage Racist?" (Bailey, Kandaswamy, & Richardson, 2004), the authors argue that marriage—for both same-sex and different-sex couples—benefits couples with privilege. Black families have been marginalized regardless of legal marital status, and Black parents have children removed by child protection authorities more than any other demographic group. Marriage can provide both spouses with health benefits, but only if one spouse has access to a stable job with health insurance (Bailey et al., 2004).

Finally, scholars of a radical approach extend their critiques of same-sex marriage beyond its effect on the queer community or on same-sex relationships to argue that same-sex marriage will actually do harm on a broader societal level. Although same-sex couples may benefit by gaining access to other legal aspects of marriage, queer radicals believe, health care, tax credits, and other benefits of marriage should be delinked from the institution of marriage. Radical queer scholars argue that legalizing same-sex marriages works to reinforce inequality in all relationships because the fight to legalize same-sex marriage obscures efforts to dismantle the institution of marriage. In this view, queer efforts against same-sex marriage and marriage in general may decouple the long-synonymous relationship between any intimate relationship and state- or religion-sanctioned legal marriage. Further, the effort toward moving away from recognizing just one form of relationships in favor of emphasizing a choice of partners and commitments may create "more opportunities for discovering new social arrangements that work in ways we have yet to conceive" (Yep et al., 2003, p. 58).

In sum, scholars who adhere to a radical approach argue that the fight for same-sex rights works to the detriment of queer culture, queer intimate relationships, and society at large. In the next section, we move beyond accounts of assimilationist and radical approaches in order to gain a view of the opinions and beliefs that same-sex couples themselves have on the fight for same-sex marriage and on getting married.

Do Same-Sex Couples Want to Get Married?

In the previous sections, we worked to explore the opposing discourses on same-sex marriage within the queer community, highlighting the potential consequences of same-sex marriage on U.S. culture, the queer community, and same-sex relationships. Now, we turn to a brief discussion of empirical studies that focus on queer individuals' and same-sex couples' beliefs about same-sex marriage. Relatively few studies attempt to systematically ascertain the beliefs about same-sex marriage from the perspective of same-sex couples and queer individuals. Here, we outline recent research on this topic, highlighting how demographic differences may shape perceptions of same-sex marriage.

Overall, U.S. attitudes toward LGBTQ individual rights have become increasingly liberal over time (Loftus, 2001). Opinion polls indicate that despite increasing numbers of people who believe same-sex couples should be able to marry, most remain against same-sex marriage (Hull, 2006; Loftus, 2001). Although most large-scale survey research focuses on U.S. perceptions in general, some studies—mostly smaller scale qualitative studies—ascertain what same-sex couples themselves think about same-sex marriage. At the broadest level, this research area reveals that same-sex couples believe that they should, as a matter of equality, have the option to legally marry (Badgett, 2009; Lannutti, 2005; Porshe & Purvin, 2008; Reczek, Elliott, & Umberson, 2009). Yet a closer reading of same-sex couples' perceptions of same-sex marriage reveals more ambivalent understandings of this issue.

Although studies show that most same-sex couples believe they should be able to legally marry, the symbolic meaning of marriage is articulated as a point of contention. Taking an assimilationist approach, some couples see marriage as the epitome of the symbolic commitment two individuals can make to each other; those individuals who adhere to this view express their desire to access to this symbol. The importance of symbolic marriage for some couples is seen in the popularity of commitment ceremonies (Hull, 2006; Lewin, 1998). In an attempt to understand the relationship between commitment ceremonies and marriage, Hull (2006) interviewed same-sex couples who had been together for more than 2 years or who had undergone a commitment ceremony. Her findings suggest that ceremonies are embraced by some same-sex couples as symbolic of legal marriage in that they are a way to bind the couple together in a profound marriage-like union. Hull further argues, as do scholars who study the effects of marriage on relationships (Waite & Gallagher, 2000), that those who have taken part in commitment ceremonies change their behaviors in relationship-enhancing ways. Similarly, in a study of married Dutch couples, Badgett found that “even those who believed they were already committed before marriage expressed that sharing their commitment in front of others in the form of a marriage ceremony changed their relationship in important ways” (Badgett, 2009, p. 124). These findings point to the continued symbolic importance of marriage and commitment ceremonies for some same-sex couples.

In contrast, aligned with the radical approach, some same-sex couples express hesitancy and concern with the symbolic meaning same-sex marriage holds for their relationships. These couples vocalize underlying tensions regarding the potential negative consequences same-sex unions may have on their intimate relationships, as well as on the queer community in general. Several qualitative studies highlight this nuanced approach to same-sex marriage, finding that though most couples desire the right to be able to legally marry, they view the institution of marriage as problematic (Lannutti, 2005; Reczek et al., 2009). For example, Badgett (2009) and Lannutti (2005) both call attention to same-sex couples’—especially lesbian couples’—hesitation about the institution of marriage as a patriarchal, outdated institution ripe for inequality.

There is reason to suspect that the age and relationship length of a couple shape beliefs about marriage. Same-sex couples have interfaced with tremendous historical changes in the legal and social status of their intimate ties over the past half-century (Cook-Daniels, 2008; Marcus, 2002). As a result of these rapid changes, younger cohorts of queer individual may have more positive beliefs and perceptions of same-sex marriages than do older cohorts. In a study of same-sex couples together 8 years or longer, Reczek et al. (2009) found that for couples who established their relationships before the gay marriage debates of the 1990s, marriage was not viewed as symbolically important to their relationships, even though nearly all couples believed that same-sex couples should have the right to marry (also see Porsche & Purvin, 2008). Survey research suggests that younger and less educated lesbian, gay, and bisexual people are more likely than their older counterparts to say they would marry if they could. For example, an 18-year-old person identified as nonstraight is 31% more likely to want to legally marry than is a 65-year-old lesbian, gay, or bisexual person, and 61% of young gay men and 78% of young lesbian women want to legally marry at some point (D’Augelli, Rendina, Sinclair, & Grossman, 2008).

Gender may also influence couples’ decisions to marry. As discussed earlier, in the United States lesbian couples are more likely to participate in state-sanctioned unions than are gay couples (Belge, 2005; Carpenter & Gates, 2008; Solomon et al., 2004); whereas internationally, gay couples are more likely to marry than are lesbian couples (Waalwijk, 2001). In addition, studies suggest that lesbian cohabiting relationships break up at a higher rate than do gay cohabiting relationships and that the average relationship duration of gay partnerships is significantly longer than that of lesbian partnerships (Kurdek, 1998, 2004). Research from Scandinavia suggests that the risk of divorce is more than two times higher in lesbian registered partnerships than in

gay registered partnerships in Norway and Sweden (Andersson et al., 2006; Noack, Seierstad, & Weedon-Fekjaer, 2005), as well as Denmark (Wockner, 1997).

Research and theory explaining these gender differences in legal partnership and dissolution rates are far from conclusive. Scholars suggest that gay men are much more likely than lesbians to marry in countries other than the United States because there are more gay male couples in the population (Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, & Michaels, 1994) or because of men's greater financial benefit from marriage, given men's higher incomes. In contrast, within the United States, scholars argue that because partnership rights do not include any of the federal benefits of different-sex marriage (e.g., Social Security, inheritance, and retirement), there may be less legal incentive to marry (for a review of these theories, see Rothblum, 2005). Those couples who do marry view their marriage primarily as a symbolic event, and "it is possible that women are socialized to value the symbolism of marriage more so than men" (Rothblum, 2005, p. 27). In terms of divorce rates, marriage scholars suggest, the higher relationship dissolution rates of lesbian compared to gay unions may reflect an underlying gender dynamic in which women have higher expectations for relationships and are more likely to exit unsatisfying relationships (Sweeney, 2002). Research suggests that women are more likely than men to perceive a heterosexual marriage as strained, to express dissatisfaction with their marriage (Umberson, Williams, Powers, Chen, & Campbell, 2005), and to file for divorce (Sweeney, 2002). It may be that like straight women, lesbians are more likely to have higher expectations for their marriages and, when expectations are not met, be more likely to dissolve these unions.

Taken together, studies of same-sex couples' views on getting married themselves mirrors—and, in some ways, complicates—the broader assimilationist and radical debates outlined earlier in this chapter. The ambivalence about same-sex marriage among same-sex couples points to the tensions between assimilationist and radical arguments. Future research should continue to explore the perceptions of same-sex marriage of LGBTQ populations with a focus on how the fight for marriage may shape the everyday lives of these individuals.

Case Vignette

Roger Kirkpatrick, age 49, and Carlos Garcia, age 41, met 15 years ago when Roger was coaching his son's high school baseball team at a local park in Los Angeles and Carlos was playing on a gay and bisexual men's softball team. At the time, Roger was heterosexually married, had three young children, and self-identified as bisexual. He worked as a civilian contractor in the navy, and knew he would lose his job if he came out as gay or bisexual. Consequently, he was extremely closeted and had told no one about his attractions to men. He admitted later that he agreed to coach high school baseball because he knew about the gay softball team playing at the same time.

Carlos had been attracted to boys as long as he could remember. A very athletic child, he participated in several sports leagues and had sex with other boys in middle school and high school while sharing motel rooms at regional sports tournaments. He joined a theater club at his high school; as a star athlete he could get away with membership in a club that had the reputation of being a "gay club." Many students in the theater club were planning to attend small, liberal arts colleges, and Carlos applied to and received a scholarship from a college known for its nontraditional curriculum, its progressive policies on the environment, and, not surprisingly, its large LGBT student population. Carlos's parents, first-generation immigrants from the Dominican Republic, would have preferred him to attend the local state college near home. Since graduation, Carlos has stayed in the college town, working part time as a waiter in a gay bar, volunteering at an advocacy group for immigrant rights, and participating in a number of amateur sports teams. He has a lot of gay and bisexual friends but is not out to his family of origin, which lives 500 miles away.

Roger and Carlos were immediately attracted to each other and began to meet frequently. It was a time when Roger's children were about to leave for college, and so Roger came out to his family, divorced his wife, and found a job with a progressive firm. This is the first long-term relationship for Carlos (who has had many gay sexual partners) and the first same-sex relationship for Roger. Yet despite their differences in age, relationship history, and degree of outness, they have had a very positive relationship with few conflicts.

When their state legalized same-sex marriage, Roger wanted them to get married, but Carlos did not. This difference has led to a number of arguments, and both men have been urged by friends—both Carlos's and Roger's—to seek counseling.

Roger and Carlos face a dilemma shared by many same-sex couples: One partner wants marriage and the other does not. Among heterosexual couples, who have always had the option of marriage, a partner who is opposed to marriage (or children) would bring up this topic early on. For same-sex couples who met prior to the present century, legal marriage was not an option, and so even long-term couples did not discuss this issue until marriage became a possibility in their state, in the case of Roger and Carlos, 15 years into their relationship.

Of the couples who had civil unions when Vermont became the first U.S. state to grant any type of legalized relationships, 40% had previously been heterosexually married (Solomon et al., 2004). Thus Roger, previously married, may gravitate to the institution of marriage in order to solidify his relationship with Carlos. However, the majority of same-sex couples getting married in the United States are female, so Roger may not receive support from the gay male community for his choice. As a Latino, Carlos may avoid the public process of marriage to a man, given that he is already a member of an ethnic minority group and may not want the added stress of having the state government know about his sexual orientation. Furthermore, marriages are public information, and Carlos is worried that his family may obtain access to his marriage certificate.

Case Discussion

It is important that therapists stay informed about the ever-changing laws about same-sex marriage and such other legal statuses as civil unions and domestic partnerships. Some states are establishing such laws, whereas others are trying to take them away. Furthermore, many same-sex couples go out of state or to Canada to get married, so same-sex marriage is not just an issue for therapists in progressive states.

It also important that therapists are aware of the various viewpoints held about marriage in LGBTQ communities. Just as some people are fighting for same-sex marriage and would get married as soon as they could, others are opposed to marriage on principal. Furthermore, some individuals get married on a whim and are then surprised how meaningful and symbolic the marriage is; others are disappointed that their family, coworkers, or religious leaders do not recognize the institution (see Rothblum, Balsam, & Solomon, 2011a, 2011b).

Conclusion: Implications for Therapists

Although it is not possible to be a little bit pregnant, it is certainly possible for LGBTQ individuals to be a little bit married. A married gay male couple living in Massachusetts has the same legal benefits as their heterosexual married neighbors but none of the federal benefits. Furthermore, they will not be legally recognized as a couple when they travel to most other U.S. states. Even in Massachusetts, their family, religious institution, and workplace may not give them the same psychological validation that heterosexual married couples receive. It is thus important that couple and family therapists understand the precarious emotional and legal status of same-sex relationships today.

We also urge couple and family therapists not to assume that marriage is the desire of all LGBTQ couples. As this chapter has shown, there are various radical voices in the LGBTQ

communities who feel marginalized by the media focus on marriage. It is ironic that same-sex couples who are politically against marriage may now feel pressure to marry by their family and friends (e.g., Badgett, 2009). Therapists will see same-sex couples where one partner wants to get married but the other does not.

Scholarly, political, and social debates over the legalization of same-sex marriage continue into the 21st century. With a focus on the perspectives of queer activists and scholars, this chapter draws attention to the competing notions of the importance of same-sex marriage within the queer community itself. Instead of painting a monolith of a unified queer community whose joint aim is to legalize same-sex marriage, we have emphasized how same-sex couples interface with multiple ideas about their relationships and lives and show the consequences of these discourses on same-sex intimate relationships and the queer community.

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