“This is Not a Lesbian Wedding”: Examining Same-Sex Marriage and Bisexual-Lesbian Couples

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SUMMARY. This study examines the ways in which legally recognized same-sex marriage (SSM) has impacted the lives of cross-sexual orientation same-sex couples. Twenty-six, female-female couples, consisting of one bisexual and one lesbian partner, who were married or engaged to be married in Massachusetts participated in instant messenger interviews about their experiences with SSM. Results indicated that SSM impacted participants’ views of themselves, their relationship, their relationships within their social network, and their interaction with the gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer (GLBTQ) community. The study highlights how SSM, as a civil institution and specific expression of commitment, both affirmed and challenged bisexual identities and the unique SSM experiences of cross-sexual orientation couples.

KEYWORDS. Bisexual, cross-sexual orientation couples, lesbian, same-sex couples, same-sex marriage

During the past decade, various forms of legal recognition of same-sex partnerships have developed in some parts of the United States (see Purcell, 1998 and Human Rights Campaign, n.d., for overviews) and in other countries (see Gay-Civil-Unions, n.d. and Goransson, 1998 for overview). Although these marriage-like unions were available in selected locations, the civil benefits of these forms of legal recognition remained unequal to those granted to different-sex couples. A change occurred when Massachusetts became the first of the United States to recognize same-sex marriages (SSM) in May 2004. Since then, over 7,800 same-sex couples have been married in Massachusetts (Massachusetts Department of Public Health [MDPH], personal communication, August 24, 2006). Although these marriage rights are not federally recognized or reciprocated in other U.S. states, legal recognition of SSM in Massachusetts has afforded same-sex couples an opportunity to gain the same public recognition and protection for their relationships as their different-sex counterparts.

Although the civil benefits of SSM are straightforward and the battle for and against SSM continues to challenge same-sex couples in the political and legal arenas, it is less clear how SSM is benefiting and challenging same-sex couples on the individual and interpersonal levels. Although previous research has begun to examine how legally recognized SSM as a civic institution (Lannutti, 2005; Lannutti, 2007) and as a specific form of expressed commitment (Lannutti, 2006) has impacted
the lives of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer (GLBTQ) people, the majority of this research has focused on individuals who identify as gay or lesbian and are members of couples in which both partners share the same sexual orientation. Thus, little is known about the influence of SSM on the relational experiences of members of the GLBTQ community who identify as something other than gay or lesbian or may be members of cross-sexual orientation couples. The current study attempts to address this gap in the previous research by examining the ways that SSM, as a civic institution and a specific form of expressed commitment, affects the relational experiences bisexual-lesbian couples.

**PREVIOUS RESEARCH ON SAME-SEX MARRIAGE**

Previous research examining same-sex relationships suggests many similarities between committed same-sex relationships and their heterosexual counterparts. For example, research has shown little difference in the experience of jealousy (Bevan & Lannutti, 2002), attractions and constraints to commitment (Kurdek, 2000), and relational maintenance behaviors (Haas & Stafford, 1998) for same-sex and different-sex couples. Yet, one consistent difference found between the relational experiences of different-sex and same-sex couples has been the stigmatized and non-institutionalized status of same-sex couples (see Patterson, Ciabattari, & Schwartz, 1999). Although same-sex couples often compensated for the lack of institutional recognition for their relationships through commitment ceremonies and other rituals (Stiers, 1999; Suter, Bergen, Daas, & Durham, 2006), these forms of expressed commitment could do little to give couples the wide-spread societal recognition and legal protection afforded to different-sex couples through civil marriage.

The legal recognition of SSM in Massachusetts marks a possible shift in the status for same-sex relationships within the state from non-institutionalized to institutionally recognized. Because people’s understandings of themselves (Massey, 1986) and their relationships (Parks & Eggert, 1991) are influenced by the social context, same-sex relationships need to be re-examined in the changing social context marked by the introduction of legally recognized SSM. To that end, I have conducted several studies using web-based open-ended surveys to examine the ways in which SSM has impacted experiences of the GLBTQ people.
Lannutti (2005) examined the ways in which GLBTQ people were assigning meaning to legally recognized SSM as a new civil institution. Participants from across the United States indicated that legally recognized SSM in Massachusetts was an important indicator of increased civic equality for GLBTQ people, but there were also dialectical tensions (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996), or simultaneous contradictory forces, within participants’ understanding of SSM. Participants saw the institution of SSM as a means for same-sex couples to become more serious and more fanciful, for the GLBTQ community to become both stronger and weaker, and for the relationship between the GLBTQ community and heterosexual others to become more healing and injurious. This study revealed the complex and contradictory nature of GLBTQ peoples’ understanding of SSM, and highlighted the interconnections between same-sex relationships and the GLBTQ community and heteronormative social structure.

A further study (Lannutti, 2007) more closely examined the ways in which the institution of legally recognized SSM influenced GLBTQ people’s view of their romantic relationship or romantic relationships in general. Results indicated that SSM impacted participants’ understanding of romantic relationships by making existing relationships seem more real and by serving as a tool through which participants realized their desires for ideal potential partner and relationship characteristics. This study demonstrated that the institution of SSM changed the way that GLBTQ people saw themselves and their relationships, but also suggested that further research to more fully describe the experience of couples in the context of SSM was needed.

A further study focused more specifically on the experiences of same-sex couples as they considered SSM as a new vehicle for expressing their commitment. Lannutti (2006) asked GLBTQ people who were married or engaged to be married to a same-sex partner to report their attractions to marriage and the obstacles they faced when considering marriage. Gaining civil and social network recognition for their relationship were among the attractions to marriage, while civil limitations of marriage, social network disapproval, and practical and symbolic issues with weddings and the institution of marriage were among the obstacles. This study again showed that SSM had positive and negative aspects for GLBTQ people. It also highlighted the interdependence between the couple and their social network (Parks & Eggert, 1991) and the particularly powerful challenge that an unsupportive social network can present to same-sex couples (Caron & Ulin, 1997; Rostosky et al., 2004).
Taken together, this research shows that the SSM, both as an institution and as a specific form of expressing commitment, has complex and contradictory implications for the relational experiences of GLBTQ people and same-sex couples. The studies show that SSM influenced participants’ perspectives on their society, GLBTQ community, and personal relationships. Yet, these studies are limited in three ways. First, the studies used survey methods, therefore forcing participants’ responses to pre-determined questions and limiting the descriptive richness of the data. Second, although Lannutti (2006) focused on the experiences of couples, only one member of the couple participated in the study. Finally, GLBTQ community members who identify as something other than gay or lesbian are under-represented in the samples. The current study is part of an ongoing research project that attempts to further the understanding of SSM through interviews with married or engaged same-sex couples. To better understand the experiences of GLBTQ members who identify as something other than gay or lesbian, the current study focuses on bisexual-lesbian couples.

**BISEXUAL-LESBIAN COUPLES**

Although approximately 63% of the SSMs that have occurred in Massachusetts are between women (MDPH, personal communication, August 24, 2006), there is no data available regarding the sexual orientations of the partners in these marriages. Yet, to assume that all of these marriages are between women who identify as lesbian would continue the trend of ignoring the uniqueness of bisexual identity when discussing same-sex relationships (Burleson, 2005; Hutchins, 1996). Those who identify as bisexual are often challenged by both heterosexual and homosexual people, (Mulick & Wright, 2002; Ochs, 1996). Negative attitudes towards bisexuals often suggest that bisexuality is a phase, bisexuals are actually gay or lesbian, or bisexuals can not commit to a relationship (Hutchins, 1996; Israel & Mohr, 2004). Rust (1995, 2000) suggests that lesbians’ negative attitudes towards bisexual women are particularly complex due to women’s political struggles. According to Rust (2000), the biphobia displayed by some lesbians towards bisexual women includes two types of beliefs: “explanatory” beliefs that challenge the existence of bisexuality as a true sexual orientation, and “depoliticizing” beliefs that bisexual women are politically dangerous to lesbians because they lack loyalty to the lesbian community.
Given the larger social context of identity politics, bisexual-lesbian couples may have relational experiences that are unique to cross-sexual orientation same-sex relationships between women. Yet, relationships between bisexual-lesbian couples are understudied. To better understand legally recognized SSM, this study examines the experiences of bisexual-lesbian couples. To understand the experience of SSM as both a civil institution and a specific way of expressing relational commitment, the study examines the experiences of married or engaged couples. Specifically, the study examines the ways in which married or engaged bisexual-lesbian couples experience the impact of their marriage or decision to marry on their relational lives.

**METHOD**

Semistandardized interviews were conducted with couples using the three-way chat function of a popular instant messaging (IM) program. Participant recruitment, theoretical sampling, and data analysis occurred simultaneously until saturation was reached (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

**Participant Recruitment and Sampling**

Participant recruitment took place in two phases. As part of a larger study, participation was first sought from couples who met the following criteria: both partners were female, the couple was legally married or engaged to be married, and both members of the couple were 18 or over. Announcements about the study were distributed through the newsletters and listservs of several Massachusetts GLBTQ social organizations. Interested participants were asked to contact the researcher by email for more information about the study and to pass the study information on to other couples who met the study criteria and may be interested in participating. From this initial sample, twelve bisexual-lesbian couples were interviewed.

The second phase of participant recruitment, theoretical sampling, took place after the 12 initial interviews were analyzed. Theoretical sampling (Charmaz, 2000; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) is used to refine the data analysis process by comparing new data to the analysis of previously collected data. The recruitment criteria and procedures for the theoretical sample remained the same as that for the initial sample except
that participation was sought from bisexual-lesbian couples only. Satura-
tion was reached after 14 additional interviews.

Participants

Twenty-six bisexual-lesbian couples were interviewed (N = 52). All
participants were residents of Massachusetts and lived in 15 towns
within the state. Most participants were Caucasian (n = 37) while 6 were
Asian, 5 were African American, and 4 were Hispanic. Participant ages
ranged from 24 to 57 years (M = 35.71, Mdn = 34, SD = 8.54).

All participants lived full-time with their partner and had an exclu-
sive relationship. The average age difference between partners was 2.73
years (Mdn = 1.5, SD = 3.44). The majority of the couples (85%, n = 22)
had married since Massachusetts started legally recognizing SSMs in
May 2004. The remaining four couples were engaged to be married and
were planning weddings during the 8 months following the interviews.
The length of time that participants had been in their relationships
ranged from 2.5 to 15 years (M = 6.42, Mdn = 5.75, SD = 3.21). Six of
the couples had a commitment ceremony prior to the legal recognition
of SSM in Massachusetts. None of the participants had a marriage or
commitment ceremony with a previous same-sex partner, but three of
the bisexual participants had been previously married to a man. Five of
the couples were interracial couples. Four of the couples were currently
raising children together.

Interview Procedure

The recruitment announcement instructed those who were interested
in the study to contact the researcher by email. When emails from po-
tential participants were received, the researcher responded by sending
a consent form with details about the study to the potential participant
and indicated that to participate in the study, each member of the couple
would need to send informed consent back to the researcher in separate
emails. Participants were also asked to indicate whether they would pre-
fer a face-to-face interview at the location of their choice, or an inter-
view using the chat function of a popular IM program that was available
for free to all participants. All of the participants who consented to par-
ticipate in the study indicated that they would prefer an IM format inter-
view. After informed consent was received from both members of the
couple, an interview time was scheduled. Participants were also sent a
link and instructions for downloading the IM program (most partici-
pants indicated that they already had the program on their computers. To protect the participants’ confidentiality, they were asked to create a new IM screen name to be used exclusively for the purposes of the interview.

The IM chat room function allowed for three people to send and receive instant messages from each other in an exclusive environment. The entire chat is visible to all people participating in it. IM interviews offer several advantages over face-to-face interview methods such as the ability to save the interview without transcribing and less scheduling and resource strain. Disadvantages of IM interviewing compared to face-to-face interviewing include some brief time-lagging associated with typing and posting a response during an ongoing conversation and the inability to include nonverbal communication beyond simple emoticons in the conversation.

The researcher and participants logged on to the IM program at the agreed upon interview time and the researcher established a three-way chat environment for the interview. Interviews were semistandardized such that an interview guide with some predetermined questions and topics was used for all interviews, but each interview ultimately developed in reaction to participants’ responses (Berg, 1995). All interviews began with questions about participant demographic information and background information about their relationship which were answered by all participants. During the remaining interview, participants were asked about their decision to marry and the impact of their marriage or decision to marry on their romantic relationship and their relationship with others. Interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes.

**Analysis**

The data from the initial set of interviews was analyzed using an inductive method informed by grounded theory. When using this type of data-driven approach, themes emerge from the participants’ responses rather than a priori conceptual categories (Boyatzis, 1998). Using procedures recommended by Strauss and Corbin (1998), the first step in analyzing the initial interviews was open coding. Open coding was performed for each of the participants’ responses to questions or each other’s statements during the interview to identify key concepts and organize them into categories. Axial coding was then performed to identify links among categories and identify themes.

The goals of the second set of interviews using theoretical sampling (Charmaz, 2000; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) were to refine the data analy-
sis process such that categories and themes were well explicated and that saturation, meaning that no new categories or themes emerged, was reached. Participants’ responses to the interviewer’s questions and to each other’s comments were analyzed using a constant comparative method (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to understand the relationship between these responses and the categories and themes identified in the initial interviews.

Steps were taken to verify the credibility of the data analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Miles & Huberman, 1994). To ensure the validity of the coding procedure, a colleague with expertise in qualitative methods reviewed the transcripts and analysis of 6 randomly selected interviews and agreed with the fittingness of the data to the categories and themes. To check the external credibility of the coding, two of the couples were asked to review the categories and themes that emerged from data analysis, and they confirmed that the descriptions fit with their lived experiences regarding SSM.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Participants discussed the impact of SSM on their lives along four distinct, but interconnected themes: their self-images, their romantic relationships, their relationships with social network members, and their relationship with GLBTQ community. Each theme was comprised of two conceptual categories. The results presentation relies upon directly quoted excerpts from the interviews to give priority to the participants’ voices. The quotes presented were edited to replace any IM slang, such as “u” for “you,” with the standard English translation and punctuation. Although participants’ were identified by their screen names during the interviews, pseudonyms are used here to further protect participant identities.

Same-Sex Marriage and Self-Image

The first theme that emerged from the interviews describes the participants’ perspectives on the impact of SSM on views of themselves. Two conceptual categories pertain to SSM and self-image: SSM as an affirmation of bisexual identity and thoughts about being and having a “wife” in a SSM.

Affirming bisexual identity. Many of the bisexual participants discussed how their decision to marry a female partner caused them to re-
reflect on their own bisexual identity in the context of SSM. These participants saw SSM as an affirmation of their bisexual identity. First, participants saw the legal recognition of SSM as a sign of recognition and acceptance for those who are not heterosexual, resulting in a sense of support for their bisexual identity. For example, “I wanted to get married because the legal recognition of SSM isn’t just for gay and lesbian people, it’s for all of us who love a same-sex partner. It made me feel proud to be bi and with Jess.”

Other participants explained that being able to have the same legal recognition of their relationship with a woman as they could for a relationship with a man removed a barrier to their relational freedom. For example, “Now that I could marry a woman, I didn’t feel like in being with a woman I had to give anything up anymore. I could be married and have everything I would want in a committed relationship.” The idea of SSM allowing for true freedom of choice was expressed by many participants. For example:

I was so excited that marriage was being recognized for everybody. I mean, for me, being bi has always been about making my own choices and not having society or whatever make them for me. I could choose who to love. Now, I could choose who to marry.

Thus, legally recognized SSM was seen as a means of affirmation for bisexual identities and the relational freedom of choice participants associated with bisexuality.

Being a (and having) a “wife.” The second way in which participants discussed the relationship between SSM and their self-images was by reflecting on what it meant to be (and have) a wife within the context of SSM. While some participants expressed excitement and comfort with the institution of marriage (e.g. “I always wanted to get married.” and “We were already acting like we were married before it was legal.”), others discussed the ways in which they sought to find a fit between their self-image and their understanding of marriage. Many participants commented on their initial reluctance to getting married due to political and philosophical issues with the institution of marriage. For example:

Jasmine: “We were both nervous about getting married. We didn’t want to seem like we were acting straight. And we didn’t want to be our parents.”
Laura: “Yeah, marriage is so main-stream. I never wanted to get
married even when I thought I was straight. It just wasn’t me.”
Jasmine: “And we both hated the history of marriage. Women being property and all that. We couldn’t see ourselves as wives.”
Laura: “We had to think about it in a different way.”

Many participants explained that they dealt with misgivings about heteronormative marriage by defining or redefining marriage-related terms in a way that fit better with their self-concepts. For example, participants avoided the term “wife” and instead used terms such as “spouse” and “partner” to refer to each other. Other participants resisted negative images of wives in marriages by co-opting traditional language through tongue-in-cheek references to each other as “my bitch” or “my old lady.” Participants also spoke of their definition of marriage verses what they perceived as a heteronormative definition of marriage. For example,

Candace: “I’d been married to a man before. He was really controlling, and I guess I thought that was what marriage was like. I couldn’t be that person again, so we talked about it.”
Stephanie: “We talked about it a lot.”
Candace: “Yeah, and I realized that it wasn’t that I wasn’t the marriage-type, I just wasn’t the controlling marriage-type.”
Stephanie: “Right. We had to be sure to have a marriage that fit who we were. For me, too.”

Participants’ concerns with marriage as a mainstreaming and heteronormative institution echoed the concerns of GLBTQ participants in previous research examining SSM (Lannutti, 2005, 2006). Although previous research (Lannutti, 2006) indicated that same-sex couples, especially female-female couples, had reservations about legally recognized marriage based in feminist critiques of marriage (e.g., Steil, 2000), the current research offers additional insight into this aspect of SSM by describing in more detail how couples dealt with their concerns. Through targeted conversations about the meaning of marriage and redefinition of terms associated with marriage, participants sought to align their self-image and beliefs with the institution of marriage.

Same-Sex Marriage and the Primary Relationship

The second theme that emerged from the interviews was the effect of SSM on the couples’ relationship with each other. Two categories comprised this theme. The first category includes descriptions of how marriage strengthened the couples’ relationships, while the second category
describes the ways in which marriage challenged the couples’ relationships.

*Strengthening relationships.* All of the couples expressed some way in which SSM improved or strengthened their romantic relationship. Many couples discussed feeling that their relationship was stronger because it now had legal protections. For example, “Getting married helped us because we didn’t have to worry anymore about what would happen if something horrible happened to one of us. I know she will be taken care of now because of the legal protections.” Another participant stated, “I think because we are more legally secure now, we feel more secure in our relationship.”

Other couples expressed the ways in which SSM contributed to a closer emotional bond between them. Many couples expressed greater feelings of love as a result of getting married. For example, “Obviously, we loved each other or we wouldn’t have gotten married. But actually being married has made our love deeper I think.” Another participant stated, “Having made those vows in front of our family and friends made me realize how much I really cared for her and how much I really did want to spend my life with her.”

Couples also discussed how SSM strengthened their relationship by creating the opportunity to reflect on their relational goals and values with one another. For example:

Carly: “We didn’t just get married right away because we could. We really thought and talked about it.”
Melissa: “It was a serious decision for us. We talked about what we thought was important in a relationship. What our strengths and weaknesses were. We hadn’t done that much before.
Carly: “Well, we didn’t have intense conversations like that before thinking about getting married.”
Melissa: “That’s true. It really helped make us closer. And feel more confident about marriage.”

The discussion of relational values and goals was sometimes explicitly related to one partner’s bisexual identity. For example, “When we talked about getting married, I made it really clear to Emily that even though I would always think of myself as bi, I was making a lifelong monogamous commitment to her and I expected the same from her.” Another bisexual participant expressed how marriage strengthened their relationship by showing her partner the depth of her commitment: “Right after we got married, Jen told me that she felt a lot happier in our
relationship. She confessed that she worried deep down that I wouldn’t be able to ever fully commit to her because I was bi. Getting married made her forget that stupid idea.” Although all of the couples discussed how SSM made their relationship stronger, many also discussed how SSM challenged their relationship.

Challenging relationships. Couples’ discussed the stress that was introduced into their relationship through either their marriage decision process or planning their weddings. While the discussions during their decision to get married were a means to a stronger emotional bond for some couples, others expressed hurt feelings and relational distancing during their marriage decision-making process. For example:

Coryne: “It was kind of a struggle for us to decide to get married. I wanted to right away, but she was unsure.”
Gram: “Well, I was sure I loved her, but I wasn’t sure if we were ready for marriage. I didn’t want to do it just cause it was legal.”
Coryne: “Neither did I. But, I really wanted to marry her cause I loved her and I thought the protections would help us.”
Gram: “We fought about it. I actually moved out for a short time.”
Coryne: “It was horrible. But, we worked it out. We both needed to grow-up I think.”

Other couples discussed challenges in deciding the terms of their marriage. For example, “I wanted us to be married, but have an open marriage. She wanted no parts of that.” Another participant explained, “We were all excited about getting married, but when it came down to pooling our financial resources, I became less sure. We almost broke-up over money before I realized how untrusting and unfair I was being.”

In addition to challenges to the relationship presented as part of the marriage decision making process, couples also discussed how planning their wedding ceremonies introduced stress into their relationships. For example:

Diane: “I had been married to a man before. I didn’t want anything that was like that wedding.”
Marie: “But, I wanted some of the traditional things. Like a formal reception and stuff like that. I didn’t see why her straight wedding before should mean we couldn’t have some of those nice things, too.”

Many couples expressed problems with planning their wedding ceremonies because they lacked support from their families-of-origin. For
example, “I really didn’t want to have a big wedding at first because I knew my parents wouldn’t come. In the end, we had the wedding, but it was bittersweet for me.”

The idea that SSM helps strengthen same-sex relationships, especially through legal protection, is consistent with previous research on SSM (Lannutti, 2005). However, the present data is also consistent with previous research (Lannutti, 2005) in that SSM is also seen as challenging to couples. Like the couples interviewed for this study, same-sex couple often report struggling with the symbolism involved in commitment rituals and ceremonies (Stiers, 1999). Suter et al. (2006) discuss how lesbian couples may struggle with the public-private dialectic in their commitment ceremonies because members of the couple’s families-of-origin are unsupportive of the relationship. Thus, the couples’ experience of SSM as both a relationship bolstering and stressing phenomena is consistent with previous research. The relationship between SSM, the couples, and their families and friends is explored further as part of the third theme.

Same-Sex Marriage and Social Networks

The third theme that emerged from the interviews describes the influence of SSM on couples’ relationships with their social network members. Couples’ discussions of their social networks comprised two categories. First, couples discussed the support and resistance to their marriage from their families-of-origin. The second category describes the pressure some couples felt from their lesbian friends regarding marriage.

Support and resistance from families-of-origin. All of the couples discussed how the legal recognition of SSM or their specific decision to marry affected their relationships with their families-of-origin. The most frequently discussed family-of-origin members were the participants’ parents. Some couples discussed the support they felt from their families for SSM in general. For example:

Jody: “The whole marriage debate really helped my relationship with my parents. They were so upset at how the anti-marriage people acted.”
Cynthia: “Her parents never were really supportive of us before.”
Jody: “They weren’t unsupportive. It’s more like they didn’t take our relationship very seriously before I guess.”
Cynthia: “But they got really involved in the fight against the anti-marriage amendments.”

Other couples also explained the support they felt from family members for their marriage. For example, “My parents were happy we could get married because it made us so happy.” Some participants explained how their parents were surprised by their decision to marry because of their bisexual identity, but were supportive of the decision nonetheless. For example:

When I told my mom that Diane and I were getting married, I wasn’t sure how she was going to react. But, she just started laughing and saying she was glad I was going to finally going to marry somebody. I asked her why she said that, and it turns out she was worried that because I was bi I was never going to have a secure lifelong relationship with someone. I have no idea why she thought that. It’s not like I even dated around that much!

Although some couples described how one partner’s bisexual identity was associated with surprised, yet supportive reactions to their marriage plans from family members, others described family members who were both surprised and unsupportive. Participants explained how their family members, particularly parents, seemed to view their bisexuality as reason to hope that they would someday choose to marry a man. For example:

Kali: “My parents, especially my mom, lost it when I told them we were engaged.”
Carmen: “It was a nightmare. They were never really happy about us, but they were coping. But, this did it for them.”
Kali: “I was surprised. When they finally spoke to me, they told me that they thought that being with Carmen was a phase . . . that I would find a man someday.”
Carmen: “Imagine, I’m a 4 year phase!”
Kali: “I asked them why after all this time they would think that, and they said ‘you call yourself bi, not a lesbian.’ Anyway, they are still upset. They say they won’t come to the wedding.”

Another participant explained, “My sister was totally against us getting married. She could accept me dating a woman, but not marrying one.
We had this fight and she said that I’ve dated men before and that I should wait to marry a man.”

For other couples, families were simply unsupportive of their marriage because it was a SSM, regardless of the participants’ individual sexual orientations. For example, “My parents were so embarrassed that I was marrying a woman. They had told people we were roommates all this time.” Participants also mentioned that their families were unsupportive of their marriage for religious reasons.

In previous research examining same-sex couples considering marriage, lack of family approval for the union was the most frequently identified obstacle to marriage (Lannutti, 2006). Although the struggle for same-sex couples to gain acceptance and support from families-of-origin is a commonly reported stressor (e.g. Kurdek & Schmitt, 1987; Rostosky et al., 2004; Smith & Brown, 1997), the current data highlight the role that misperceptions about bisexuality play in increasing this stress. Family members’ attitudes reflect belief that bisexual women can not fully commit to another woman. Ironically, the families hold on to this stereotypical belief as a “ray of hope” that their bisexual family member may reconnect to the heterosexual world, while ignoring the fact that believing in this myth creates greater stress and distance in their relationship with her.

Marriage pressure from lesbian friends. The second category describing how SSM impacted couples’ relationships with their social networks demonstrates a tension between some couples and their lesbian friends. Some couples described the ways in which their lesbian friends pressured them to consider marriage. For example, “As soon as it became clear we could get married legally, it seemed like all of our lesbian friends started asking us when we were getting married. And they persisted. It became annoying after a while because we wanted to really think about it seriously.” Another couple describes how a lesbian friend seemed to challenge one partner’s bisexuality while pressuring them to marry:

Susan: “This one friend, Patty, she was kind of over supportive.”
Teressa: “I wouldn’t describe it as supportive. She was almost like a bully about it. She kept saying ‘you should get married.’ Then, when we would say we were thinking about it, she would say ‘Well, why not, Teressa? If you can be bi and live with a woman, you can be bi and marry a woman, can’t you?’”
Susan: “It bothered Teressa . . .throwing the bi thing at her like it was something wrong. I think she was just being protective of me, though. She wanted Teressa to make a commitment to me.”
Teressa: “Fine. But I never said I wouldn’t marry you and it had nothing to do with being bi. Patty was really pushy and rude. I mean, I did marry you. I wanted to.”

Other couples described how some lesbian friends attempted to assert their influence on the ways in which the couples defined their marriages and themselves. Some couples described how a lesbian friend asked specific questions about the terms of their marriage. For example, “My friend Allie, she kept asking, ‘Is it a monogamous marriage? She won’t be able to date men will she?’” Many lesbian friends seemed to take the marriage as a sign that the bisexual partner no longer identified as bisexual. For example, “Deciding to get married actually started some fights with our friends, our lesbian friends. They would make a joke like, ‘Well, I guess Quinn grew out of that bi thing, huh?’ and eventually we had to come back at them.” Another couple explained:

Lisa: “Sometimes when we told people we were getting married, they would say, ‘So, you’re giving up on guys for good?’ or something like that. I got really mad, especially when lesbian friends would say it. It was like they had won a game or something.”

Liz: “It was annoying because she had never been with a guy while with me. We were exclusive. She was making a commitment to me, not ‘women.’”

Lisa: “It was really because they resented me being bi I think. It made me sorry I ever labeled myself as anything.”

The pressure felt by bisexual-lesbian couples to marry and to define the terms of their marriage in ways that their lesbian friends approved of reflects the tension between lesbian and bisexual women described by Rust (1995; 2000). Couples’ descriptions of how lesbian friends sought for signs of loyalty to the lesbian partner, a proxy for the lesbian community, through a monogamous marriage is reflective of Rust’s (2000) “depoliticizing” aspect of biphobia. “Explanatory” biphobia (Rust, 2000) is evident in lesbian friends’ direct challenges to their friends’ bisexual identity now that she had decided to marry a same-sex partner. The intersection between bisexual-lesbian SSM and the GLBTQ community is explored further in the next theme.

**Same-Sex Marriage and the GLBTQ Community**

The fourth theme that emerged during the interviews explained how SSM influenced couples’ relationship with the larger GLBTQ commu-
nity. Two conceptual categories comprised this theme. The first category relates how couples felt a stronger sense of belonging to the GLBTQ community as a result of the political fights over legally recognized SSM and their own marriage. The second category describes how many, particularly bisexual participants, expressed a sense of increased invisibility for their relationship as a result of SSM.

**Belonging to the GLBTQ community.** The first way in which SSM was relevant to the couples’ relationship to the larger GLBTQ community was by encouraging the couples to feel more a part of the community. Couples described feeling more united with the GLBTQ community in two ways. First, many couples described feeling more a part of the community as the community struggled to maintain their marriage rights. Although Massachusetts began recognizing SSM in May 2004, there have been several attempts at overturning these rights through amendments to the state constitution. At the same time, there has been the continuous threat of federal legislation that would eliminate SSM in the United States. Some participants described a renewed sense of belonging with the community as it continued its political struggle over SSM. For example, “We got really involved in all the political stuff to protect marriage. Going to the state house, stuff like that. It reminded me how great the queer community can be, and how much I had drifted away from queer events.” Other participants described feeling a part of the GLBTQ community for the first time as a result of the struggle over SSM. For example, “I’d never been into any type of community action stuff. I mean, I’m not the kind of person who wears t-shirts about being bi or anything. Everyone got together to fight to protect it . . . . it didn’t matter to me whether I belonged before.”

In addition to feeling an increased sense of belonging to the GLBTQ community because of the political struggle over SSM, couples discussed feeling more united with the community because of their marriage itself. Several couples described a sense of “being counted” as part of the community through their marriage. For example, “Because we are married we are officially registered as a same-sex couple. It made us realize that our marriage isn’t just about us, it’s a part of something bigger that couldn’t happen before the law changed.” Other couples felt that in getting married, they were more accepted as a couple by the larger GLBTQ community. For example, “There is kind of a pride in the married couples, I think. Like, our gay friends, they are always introducing us as their ‘married’ friends and people are instantly excited about that.” While many couples ex-
pressed feeling a stronger sense of belonging to the GLBTQ community, others expressed a sense that SSM made them more invisible within the GLBTQ community.

Increased invisibility. Some couples explained how the political struggle over SSM made them feel that their relationship was invisible in the GLBTQ community. Couples discussed how getting married made them little more than a statistic to the GLBTQ community. For example, “I think that to some people, all that matters is that as many people as possible get married and stay married. Who cares who you are . . . we need numbers!” Other couples discussed how their relationship became defined by the community as a “lesbian marriage” and erased the uniqueness of their relationship, especially one partner’s bisexuality. One couple’s discussion shows how frustrated this sense invisibility may become:

Carla: “All you ever hear about is ‘lesbian and gay marriages.’ It makes me mad that we don’t use the term ‘same-sex marriage.’ I mean, it’s like we don’t want to complicate things or something.”

Paula: “It shouldn’t really matter I guess. But it seems like how we see ourselves doesn’t matter right now or something.”

Carla: “I just didn’t want to hear about our ‘lesbian wedding’ anymore. Everybody, even our very gay florist who we’ve known for years kept calling it a ‘lesbian wedding.’ Sometimes I wanted to yell, ‘This is not a lesbian wedding!’ but then again, do labels really matter? It only matters that we are married and can stay married. So, we put up with it.”

Thus, SSM affected the intersection between the couples and the larger GLBTQ community in two ways. As in previous research (Lannutti, 2005), couples described feeling a part of a united GLBTQ community struggling to protect the civil institution of SSM. Couples also felt that by specifically expressing their commitment through SSM, they had an opportunity to be affirmed by the GLBTQ community. In contrast, other couples explained how expressing their commitment through SSM increased their sense of being ignored by the GLBTQ community because SSM cloaked the uniqueness of their relationship and self-images. This function of SSM serves as another example of the way that bisexual experiences and concerns become invisible as they are subsumed under the GLBTQ banner (e.g., Hutchins, 1996).
CONCLUSION

This study examined the ways in which bisexual-lesbian couples experience legally recognized SSM. Examining the SSM experiences of bisexual-lesbian couples contributes to the emerging SSM literature by focusing on the unique experiences of cross-sexual orientation couples. The study also widens the scope of the bisexuality in marriage literature, which has mostly focused on the experiences of bisexual individuals in different-sex marriages (e.g., Buxton, 2005; Coleman, 1985).

This study showed that SSM impacted the lives of bisexual-lesbian couples as both a civil institution and a specific way of expressing relational commitment. Couples discussed how the political battle over the institution of same-sex marriage, both inside and outside of the GLBTQ community, made them experience their own identities and relationship in new ways. They also discussed the challenges of integrating the institution of marriage, which many viewed as philosophical and political problematic, with their own identities and relationship. Couples also discussed how choosing to express their commitment through marriage impacted their lives. Participants expressed the ways that becoming a married couple influenced how they and others viewed their relationship and their individual identities. Thus, legally recognized SSM is taking on two roles in impacting the lives of same-sex couples.

While previous research has examined the way that GLBTQ people and couples understand and experience SSM (Lannutti, 2005, 2006, & 2007), this study is different in that it specifically examines the experiences of bisexual-lesbian couples. This study showed that bisexual-lesbian couples experienced SSM in ways similar to other same-sex couples. As in previous research on same-sex couples and SSM (Lannutti, 2006), the couples interviewed for this study also experienced SSM as a complex, and often contradictory, phenomena that both benefited and challenged their primary relationship and their relationships with their social networks and the larger GLBTQ community. However, this study also described the unique experience of bisexual-lesbian couples regarding SSM. For example, participants explained how lesbian friends displayed biphobia in discussing the couples’ marriage and marriage-decision process and the way in which getting married seemed to cloak the couples’ identity as a bisexual-lesbian couple within the GLBTQ community. Thus, this study highlights the need to consider the experiences of GLBTQ people who identify as something other than gay or lesbian, and the need to further examine the experiences of cross-sexual orientation same-sex couples.
While this study describes the SSM experiences of bisexual-lesbian couples, several limitations of this study should be noted. The couples interviewed for the study were all married or engaged to be married in Massachusetts, and their experiences may differ from bisexual-lesbian couples in other geographical regions and from bisexual-lesbian couples who have not chosen to marry. The experiences of these couples may also differ from the experiences of male-male cross-sexual orientation couples. Future research should examine the ways in which legally recognized SSM influences the relational experiences of bisexual-gay male couples and non-married bisexual-lesbian couples.

REFERENCES


