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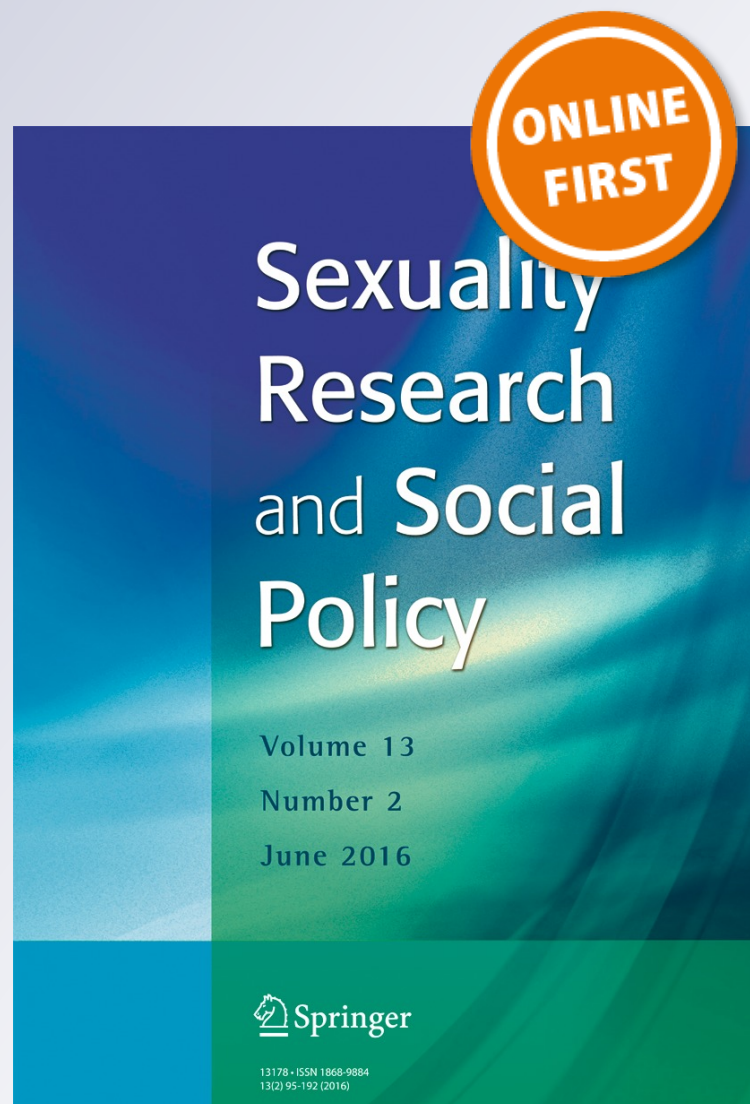
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# Impact of Civil Marriage Recognition for Long-Term Same-Sex Couples

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**Abstract** Many same-sex couples had already established long-term relationships prior to the availability of civil marriage rights in the USA. The impact and possible benefits of marriage and marriage recognition for long-term couples was tested using data from a sample of couple members: 307 in a civil marriage and 50 with no legal relationship status. The reported study was conducted prior to marriage recognition in all US states and tests the associations of marital status and living in a state that recognized civil marriages of same-sex couples with self-reports of positive and negative LGB (lesbian, gay, and bisexual) identity, social support, and daily discrimination. Dyadic regression analyses revealed that participants in a civil marriage reported higher levels of LGB identity centrality and support from partner. Residing in a state that recognized civil marriage was associated with lower levels of LGB identity concealment, a less difficult process accepting one's LGB identity, and less vigilance and isolation. Results are discussed in terms of the benefits of long-term relationships and the impact of socio-historical context and marriage policy on same-sex relationships.

**Keywords** Lesbian · Gay · Bisexual · Long-term relationships · Marriage · Same-sex marriage · Minority stress · Same-sex relationships

The availability of civil marriage for same-sex couples and its recognition by the federal and state governments in the USA have changed dramatically since 2003 when Massachusetts became the first state to legalize civil marriage for same-sex couples. Since then the institution of civil marriage has become an increasingly available option for same-sex couples. However, same-sex couples who formed and maintained their relationship prior to 2003 did so with no or limited options for state recognized legal status (e.g., civil unions in Vermont).

For individual members of same-sex couples, the status of civil marriage as a signifier of social integration and full sexual citizenship may be associated with higher levels of positive well-being (Herdt and Kertzner 2006; Herek 2006). The recognition of civil marriage for same-sex couples at the state level may be associated with alleviating minority stress and increasing well-being of members of same-sex couples through the socio-political environment in which a couple resides (e.g., Lannutti 2014; Riggle et al. 2010a; 2010b; Wight et al. 2013). It is also possible that civil marriage and marriage recognition may have limited or no impact on well-being for long-term couples who have already established their relationship commitment without civil marriage (Lannutti 2014). This would be consistent with research on different-sex couples that has suggested that being in a long-term relationship has benefits for the well-being of couple members similar to the benefit of being in a marriage (Reczek et al. 2009).

The purpose of the current study was to explore the impact of being in a civil marriage (marital status) and state recognition of marriages of same-sex couples on the well-being of

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individuals in long-term same-sex relationships (formed prior to the first recognition of same-sex marriage in the USA). The data were collected during 2013 when only 17 states and the District of Columbia in the USA provided civil marriages to same-sex couples. This allowed examination of differences in marital status as well as state-level recognition on participants' reports of well-being as indicated by positive and negative feelings about their LGB identity, perceptions of social support, and daily experiences with heterosexism.

## Marriage and Long-Term Relationships

Research on different-sex couples suggests that being in a civil marriage is generally associated with better mental health outcomes and fewer health problems than being single or cohabiting (e.g., Holt-Lunstad et al. 2008; Kiecolt-Glaser and Newton 2001; Waite and Gallagher 2000). Because civil marriage has not been an option for same-sex couples until relatively recently, there are few studies of the differences between cohabiting and married same-sex couples. When past research has included same-sex couples, it has typically studied differences between cohabiting same-sex couples and married or cohabiting different-sex couples. For example, Liu et al. (2013) found that members of same-sex cohabiting couples reported higher levels of health than different-sex cohabiting couples but lower levels than different-sex married couples. These findings suggest that same-sex couples may benefit from their partnership but were disadvantaged by the lack of civil marriage recognition.

Studies comparing same-sex couples with and without a legal relationship status have found significant differences in well-being suggesting a benefit from legal recognition. Fingerhut and Maisel (2010) found that same-sex couples with a domestic partnership (in California) reported higher levels of investment in their relationship than couples who did not have a domestic partnership. Riggle et al. (2010b) reported that individuals in a same-sex relationship with legal status (i.e., civil union, domestic partnership, or civil marriage) reported lower levels of psychological distress and higher levels of well-being than individuals in a committed relationship without a legal status. Wight et al. (2013) found that LGB individuals in a civil marriage reported less psychological distress than LGB individuals not in a legally recognized relationship.

Other studies have failed to find a significant marriage benefit for well-being. A study comparing LGB-identified individuals who were married in Massachusetts, had a domestic partnership in California, or a civil union in Vermont found few significant differences between well-being based on the type of legal recognition (Rothblum et al. 2008). Wienke and Hill (2009) found that partnered gay men and lesbians reported similar levels of psychological health compared to

married heterosexuals, suggesting that being in a committed relationship might confer benefits similar to marriage for gay men and lesbians. Denney et al. (2013) compared same-sex cohabiting and different-sex cohabiting couples to different-sex married couples and found differences on health outcomes; however, they argued that the differences were accounted for by socio-economic status, not marital status.

Same-sex couples have historically been denied access to civil marriage, leading couples to create their own meanings to support their relationship commitment (Hull 2006; Lannutti 2014; Rostosky et al. 2006). These self-created commitments have formed the foundations supporting well-being for couple members even in the absence of legal and cultural support. Thus, for same-sex couples, being in a long-term committed relationship may confer significant benefits regardless of legal marital status (e.g., Porche and Purvin 2008; Reczek et al. 2009; Lannutti 2011).

As the option of civil marriage has become more widely available, same-sex couples in long-term relationships have started to have the choice to marry. Survey findings suggest that many of the couples who marry immediately after a state changes its law are on average older and have been in their relationship for many years, compared to different-sex couples who marry. For example, the average age of same-sex couple members who married shortly after marriage became legal in France, Massachusetts, Illinois, and several provinces in Canada was approximately 10 years older than different-sex couple members marrying in the same period of time (Employment and Social Development Canada 2015; Gates 2015; Progress Illinois 2015; Radio France International 2014). A study by Rothblum et al. (2008) found that same-sex couples had been living together an average of 11 years prior to their marriage during the first year that same-sex marriages were available in Massachusetts (the first state to recognize same-sex marriages in 2003).

Having already established a committed relationship without the choice of civil marriage, some couples may see little reason to enter into a civil marriage, especially if they live in a state where their marriage would not be recognized and might result in more immediate costs than benefits (Porche and Purvin 2008; Lannutti 2014). For individuals in same-sex couples, living in an environment that includes legal discrimination against their relationship (e.g., state laws or constitutional amendments prohibiting recognition of their relationship) has been found to be associated with higher levels of minority stress and lower perceived levels of social support (Liu et al. 2013; Riggle et al. 2010a). This association may remain when a couple gets legally married in one state but resides in a state that does not recognize that marriage. On the other hand, when same-sex marriage is legally recognized in a state, all same-sex couples in that state may benefit because of the symbol of legitimacy conferred on same-sex relationships as having the potential of entering into a marriage.



## Identity, Support, and Heterosexism

How LGB individuals experience their identity is impacted by the cultural stigmatization of those identities (Meyer 2003). LGB identities are multidimensional, reflecting different feelings and experiences, both positive and negative, related to forming and claiming an LGB identity, and living as a lesbian, gay or bisexual identified person (Mohr and Kendra 2011; Riggle et al. 2014). Positive LGB identity may act as a resource for positive well-being and alleviating distress; negative feelings about having an LGB identity may exacerbate distress and create barriers to experiencing well-being (e.g., Mohr and Fassinger 2000; Riggle et al. 2014). Feelings about identity and the experience of stigmatization take place within a context that both shapes and is shaped by public policy and laws (e.g., Riggle et al. 2010b). Marriage and marriage recognition as symbols of sexual citizenship, therefore, potentially impact feelings about identity (Herek 2006).

Social support is important to well-being, especially for LGB individuals within a stigmatizing cultural context. Social support, or the sense of having ties to other people, may include emotional and instrumental supports for an individual's psychological and physical well-being. Social support may come from a variety of sources, with those closest to an individual being the interpersonal interactions and support of a partner, friends, and family (Zimet et al. 1988). For LGB individuals, social support may buffer the negative impacts of minority stress (Liu et al. 2013; Riggle et al. 2010a). Marriage and marriage recognition may increase the support that couple members perceive from people around them, thus enhancing well-being (Frost and LeBlanc 2014).

Heterosexism underlies and perpetuates the stigmatization of LGB identities and same-sex relationships. Heterosexism is the assumption that heterosexual identity is the norm and is superior to non-heterosexual identities and relationships; heterosexism discriminates in favor of and privileges heterosexual identities and relationships. LGB individuals experience heterosexism in a variety of ways, ranging from violence and overt discrimination to vicarious experiences of prejudice through hearing about the experiences of others; these experiences have a negative impact on well-being (Balsam et al. 2013). Legal restrictions on marriage recognition for same-sex couples are an institutionalized form of heterosexism (Meyer 2003), forming a privileged status with accompanying rights available only to heterosexual (one man and one woman) couples. Marriage restrictions may also serve as a rationale for heterosexist acts, such as discrimination against same-sex partnered individuals in the workplace, impacting same-sex couples and their well-being.

## Hypotheses

Relatively recent changes in availability of civil marriage for same-sex couples made investigation of the impact of marital status and state recognition of the civil marriages of same-sex couples possible. Based on findings from prior research that suggest support for a marriage benefit, we examined the following hypotheses:

H1: Individuals in long-term same-sex couples who are in a civil marriage will report higher levels of positive LGB identity and social support, less negative LGB identity, and fewer experiences of daily heterosexism than individuals who are not in a civil marriage.

H2: Individuals in long-term same-sex couple relationships who live in states that recognize marriages of same-sex couples will report higher levels of positive LGB identity and social support, less negative LGB identity, and fewer experiences of daily heterosexism than individuals who live in states that do not recognize marriages of same-sex couples.

Past findings also indicate a long-term relationship benefit that would be supported by null findings:

H1(Null): For individuals in long-term same-sex relationships, marital status will not be significantly associated with LGB identity, social support, or experiences of daily heterosexism.

H2(Null): For individuals in long-term same-sex relationships, state recognition of marriages of same-sex couples will not be significantly associated with LGB identity, social support, or experiences of daily heterosexism.

## Method

### Participants

Data from 357 participants were used for this analysis, including 227 women who identified as members of female same-sex couples (including 100 couples with both members participating and 27 individuals whose partner did not participate) and 130 men who identified as members of male same-sex couples (including 55 couples with both members participating and 20 individuals whose partner did not participate). The average age of participants was 55.6 years ( $SD = 8.50$ ). Self-reported average length of relationship was 22.78 years ( $SD = 7.91$ ). Participants self-reported their racial/ethnic identity as (participants could choose more than one identity option): 96.1 % White, 3.9 % "Other," 2.0 % American Indian/Alaskan Native, 1.2 % Latino/a/Hispanic,

0.6 % African-American/Black, and 0.3 % Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander. The sample reported their education level as 1.4 % High School diploma, 14.3 % some college or associate's degree, 27 % bachelor's degree, 56 % masters, professional or doctoral degree. Participants resided in 12 US states and the District of Columbia that recognized marriages of same-sex couples and 17 states that did not recognize marriages of same-sex couples at the time of the study. The most common states of residence were Massachusetts ( $n = 59$ ), California ( $n = 48$ ), Vermont ( $n = 39$ ), and New York ( $n = 36$ ).

In this sample, 34 individuals were not married and lived in a state that did not recognize marriages of same-sex couples, 20 were not married and lived in a state that recognized marriages of same-sex couples, 83 were married and lived in a state that did not recognize their marriage, and 220 were married and lived in a state that recognized their marriage.

### Procedure

Participants were recruited from a sample that participated in a 2002–2003 study of the impact of civil unions on same-sex couple members. Participants in the original study were first recruited from the population of same-sex couples who registered a civil union in Vermont between July 2000 and June 2001 (the initial period after the civil union law took effect). The couples who agreed to participate were asked to provide the names of another same-sex couple in their friendship network who had not registered a civil union in Vermont. Members of these couples were then also recruited to be part of the original sample. The sample included couples who resided in Vermont as well as couples from other states who came to Vermont to obtain a civil union, and friendship network couples from any state were eligible. (For further information about the original study and sample, see Solomon et al. 2004; 2005.)

Individuals from same-sex couples in the original sample who could be located were re-contacted in 2013 and asked to participate in a survey about their relationship ( $n = 920$ ). Individuals were provided a link to an online survey that included an informed consent form and earned \$50 for completing the survey. A total of 612 individuals responded; 97 respondents were excluded from the final sample for analysis in this study because they were not currently in a relationship, were no longer with their original partner, or did not provide a completed survey.

The purpose of the present study was to examine the impact of civil marriage, which has a relatively consistent legal and cultural meaning throughout the USA. The legal meanings of civil unions and domestic partnerships varied from state to state, were not recognized by the federal government, were not recognized consistently by other states, and had no shared cultural meaning. Consequently individuals who reported being in a civil union or domestic partnership ( $N = 47$ ) or who

resided in states that recognized civil unions or domestic partnerships but not civil marriages of same-sex couples ( $N = 111$ ) were not included in the present analyses. The final sample size was  $N = 357$ .

### Measures

The Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual Identity Scale (LGBIS; Mohr and Kendra 2011) is a 27-item scale measuring the identity experiences of LGB-identified individuals; the LGBIS includes seven subscales used in this study. Two subscales measure aspects of positive identity, identity affirmation (e.g., "I am glad to be an LGB person") and identity centrality (e.g., "My sexual orientation is a central part of my identity"). Five subscales measure aspects of internalized negativity leading to negative identity: concealment motivation (e.g., "My sexual orientation is a very personal and private matter"), internalized homonegativity (e.g., "I wish I were heterosexual"), identity uncertainty (e.g., "I am not totally sure what my sexual orientation is"), acceptance concerns (e.g., "I often wonder whether others judge me for my sexual orientation"), and difficult process (e.g., "Admitting to myself that I'm an LGB person has been a very painful process"). Statements were rated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from disagree strongly (1) to agree strongly (7). Items were coded to the valence of the scale and scored so that higher scores on the positive subscales indicated more positive feelings about LGB identity and higher scores on the negative subscales indicated more negative feelings about LGB identity. Scores on subscale items were averaged. Coefficient alpha for the subscales in the analyzed sample ranged from 0.73 to 0.81.

The Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS; Zimet et al. 1988; Zimet et al. 1990) consists of 12-items measuring perceptions of social support forming three subscales: family, friends, and partner. Individuals indicated their feelings about item statements on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from very strongly disagree (1) to very strongly agree (7). Items include, "There is a special person in my life who cares about my feelings" (partner), "My family is willing to help me make decisions" (family), and "I can talk about my problems with my friends" (friends). Scores on subscale items were averaged. Coefficient alphas in the analyzed sample for the three subscales ranged from 0.93 to 0.96.

The Daily Heterosexist Experiences Questionnaire (DHEQ; Balsam et al. 2013) 40-item version was used to measure how often individuals had experienced events of stigma, discrimination, and victimization related to their LGB identity in their day-to-day life. The items were rated on a scale ranging from 0 (never) to 4 (very often). The subscales measured experiences with vigilance (e.g., "Hiding your relationship from other people"), harassment and discrimination (e.g., "Being verbally harassed by people you know because you are LGB"), gender expression (e.g., "Being misunderstood by people because of

your gender expression”), victimization (e.g., “Being punched, hit, kicked, or beaten because you are LGB”), family of origin (e.g., “Being rejected by your mother because you are LGB”), vicarious trauma (e.g., “Hearing about LGB people you know being treated unfairly”), and isolation (e.g., “Difficulty finding LGB friends”). Scores on subscale items were averaged. Coefficient alpha on the subscales in the analyzed sample ranged from 0.69 to 0.85.

**Analysis Strategy**

Collecting data from both individuals in a relationship introduces non-independence among responses, which is known to bias standard error estimates (Kenny and Judd 1986; Kenny 1996). Moreover, the sampling strategy utilized in the present study introduced an additional level of non-independence because the originally recruited couples with a civil union (CU) referred non-CU couples from their friendship network. The resulting three-level random intercept model was specified to account for the interdependence and the distinct sources of variance.

An individual participant’s response to each dependent variable can be expressed by the following level 1 equation:

$$Y_{ijk} = \pi_{0jk} + \pi_1 * \text{Age}_{ijk} + \pi_2 * \text{Education}_{ijk} + r_{ijk}$$

Where  $Y_{ijk}$  represents the outcome variable for person  $i$  in dyad  $j$  that is a member of friendship network  $k$ .  $\pi_{0jk}$  is the regression intercept that varies randomly across both dyads ( $j$ ) and friendship networks ( $k$ ), whereas  $\pi_1$  and  $\pi_2$  are fixed regression coefficients linking the person-level covariates age and education (respectively) to the outcome. Finally, the  $r_{ijk}$  term reflects the person-specific residuals (errors in prediction) that are assumed to be normally distributed with a mean of 0 and variance  $\sigma^2$  [i.e.,  $\sim N(0, \sigma^2)$ ].

Following the slopes-as-outcomes formulation (Raudenbush and Bryk 2002), each of the terms in the level 1 equation can be expressed as an outcome in a level 2 equation, which describes the dyad-level predictors and variance components:

$$\pi_{0jk} = \beta_{00k} + \beta_{01} * \text{Gender}_{jk} + \beta_{02} * \text{Marital Status}_{jk} + \beta_{03} * \text{State Recognition}_{jk} + u_{0j}$$

$$\pi_1 = \beta_{04}$$

$$\pi_2 = \beta_{05}$$

Effect-coded vectors were created for the binary predictors Gender<sub>jk</sub> (−1 = female; +1 = male), Marital Status (−1 = no status, +1 = married), and State Recognition (−1 = no recognition, +1 = recognition). Finally, the  $u_{0j}$  term represents dyad (couple) level residuals, assumed to be  $\sim N(0, \tau^2_{00})$ .

Each of the terms in the level 2 equations can also be expressed as outcomes in a series of level 3 equations describing friendship network-level variance components:

$$\beta_{00k} = \gamma_{000} + u_{0k}$$

$$\beta_{01} - \beta_{05} = \gamma_{001} - \gamma_{005}$$

$\gamma_{000}$  is the fixed component of the intercept, representing the conditional grand mean of the outcome across all persons, dyads, and friendship networks, and  $\gamma_{001} - \gamma_{005}$  are the fixed regression coefficients describing the effect of the corresponding lower-level predictor variables. Finally,  $u_{0k}$  reflects the friendship network-level residual term, assumed to be  $\sim N(0, \omega^2_{00})$ . For some outcome variables, the amount of residual variance at the friendship level was very small, in which case the residual term for this level was omitted.

Analyses were conducted using SAS PROC MIXED (Version 9.4) with restricted maximum likelihood estimation to test the hypotheses. An interaction between the two levels (marital status and state recognition) was tested for each model. The proportional reduction in error (PRE) statistic was calculated for each outcome variable using the formulae described by Snijders and Bosker (2012). This statistic provides an estimate of the change in variance at the dyad- ( $\tau^2_{00}$ ) and person-levels ( $\sigma^s$ ), going from a null model with no predictors to the conditional model containing all predictors.

**Results**

Table 1 presents the means and standard deviations for the variables of interest by marital status and by state recognition. One-way ANOVA analyses indicated significant gender differences in friend support (female  $M = 5.96$ ; male  $M = 5.71$ ;  $F(1, 355) = 5.54, p = 0.02$ ), identity uncertainty (female  $M = 1.17$ ; male  $M = 1.38$ ;  $F(1, 355) = 11.29, p < 0.001$ ), and gender expression (female  $M = 0.11$ ; male  $M = 0.26$ ;  $F(1, 355) = 10.22, p < 0.002$ ). Bivariate correlations between age, education level, and the outcome variables indicated significant correlations ( $p < 0.05$ ) between age and identity affirmation ( $r = 0.11$ ), identity centrality ( $r = 0.13$ ), identity uncertainty ( $r = -0.12$ ), internalized homonegativity ( $r = -0.14$ ), isolation ( $r = -0.16$ ), and vicarious trauma ( $r = 0.11$ ), and between education level and partner support ( $r = 0.11$ ), identity centrality ( $r = 0.20$ ), concealment motivation ( $r = -0.12$ ), and isolation ( $r = -0.12$ ). Based on these results, age, education, and gender were entered into the corresponding level of the regression models as presented in the analysis plan above.

Tables 2, 3, and 4 provide the coefficients of the dyadic regression analysis. There were no significant interactions between state recognition and marital status for any of the

**Table 1** Outcome variable means by marital status and state recognition ( $N = 357$ )

Variable (range)	Not married $M$ (SD)	Married $M$ (SD)	No state recognition $M$ (SD)	State recognition $M$ (SD)
Identity affirmation (1–7)	4.90 (1.02)	5.19 (0.83)	5.00 (1.01)	5.22 (0.77)
Identity centrality (1–7)	4.37 (1.04)	4.82 (0.98)	4.72 (1.05)	4.76 (0.97)
Social support: friend (1–7)	5.87 (.98)	5.87 (0.98)	5.80 (0.96)	5.90 (0.99)
Social support: family (1–7)	4.76 (1.72)	4.74 (1.64)	4.81 (1.59)	4.71 (1.68)
Social support: partner (1–7)	6.25 (1.10)	6.52 (0.73)	6.55 (0.60)	6.45 (0.88)
Concealment motivation (1–7)	3.04 (1.27)	2.62 (1.20)	3.00 (1.33)	2.53 (1.13)
Internalized homonegativity (1–7)	1.47 (0.68)	1.43 (0.72)	1.53 (0.78)	1.39 (0.67)
Identity uncertainty (1–7)	1.40 (0.65)	1.28 (0.55)	1.24 (0.52)	1.33 (0.60)
Acceptance concerns (1–7)	2.57 (1.11)	2.53 (1.06)	2.67 (1.07)	2.48 (1.06)
Difficult process (1–7)	2.23 (1.01)	2.42 (1.15)	2.63 (1.29)	2.27 (1.03)
Vigilance (0–4)	0.79 (0.60)	0.64 (0.59)	0.82 (0.66)	0.58 (0.54)
Discrimination/harassment (0–4)	0.38 (0.39)	0.20 (0.47)	0.43 (0.40)	0.41 (0.49)
Gender expression (0–4)	0.25 (0.42)	0.20 (0.36)	0.23 (0.39)	0.20 (0.36)
Family of origin (0–4)	0.59 (0.76)	0.54 (0.66)	0.57 (0.69)	0.54 (0.67)
Victimization (0–4)	1.98 (0.52)	2.06 (0.72)	2.12 (0.66)	2.06 (0.71)
Isolation (0–4)	0.75 (0.74)	0.59 (0.61)	0.80 (0.68)	0.52 (0.59)

variables of interest; therefore, these coefficients are not reported. Tables 2, 3, and 4 contain PRE estimates for the dyad ( $PRE_{Dyad}$ ) and person ( $PRE_{Person}$ ) levels. The PRE statistics describe the proportion of variance explained by all model predictors at the person and dyad levels.

The outcome variables in Table 2 describe factors associated with positive LGB identity and social support. The positive coefficients for marital status (H1) indicate that individuals who are in a civil marriage report significantly higher levels of LGB identity centrality ( $\gamma_{020} = 0.20$ , 95 % CI = [0.04, 0.36]), and perceive their partner as more supportive ( $\gamma_{020} = 0.17$ , 95 % CI = [0.04, 0.30]). In contrast,

none of the coefficients linking state-level recognition status (H2) were significantly associated with any of the positive outcome variables (all  $p > 0.05$ ).

Table 3 presents the results for the five negative identity LGBIS subscales and Table 4 presents the results of the six DHEQ subscales. None of the coefficients for marital status (H1) reached the a priori level of significance ( $p < 0.05$ ). Living in a state that recognizes same-sex marriages (H2) was significantly associated with lower motivation to conceal one's LGB identity ( $\gamma_{030} = -0.20$ , 95 % CI = [-0.35, -0.04]), and experiencing less difficulty in the process of accepting one's LGB identity ( $\gamma_{030} = -0.22$ , 95 %

**Table 2** Positive LGBIS identity and social support outcomes by marital status and state recognition

	Identity affirmation	Identity centrality	Social support: friend	Social support: family	Social support: partner
$\gamma_{000}$ —intercept	4.19**	2.84**	5.96**	5.70**	5.77**
$\gamma_{100}$ —age	0.01†	0.01†	-0.00	-0.02	0.00
$\gamma_{200}$ —education	0.03	0.11** <sup>a</sup>	-0.01	-0.01	0.05†
$\gamma_{010}$ —gender	0.05	0.08	-0.13* <sup>b</sup>	0.08	-0.03
$\gamma_{020}$ —married	0.09	0.20*	0.02	0.00	0.17**
$\gamma_{030}$ —state rec.	0.08	-0.05	0.05	-0.05	-0.09†
$\omega^2_{00}$ —friendship var.	—	0.00	—	—	—
$r^2_{000}$ —dyad var.	0.14*	0.16	0.20*	0.17	0.11†
$\sigma^2$ —person var.	0.59**	0.76**	0.76**	2.58**	0.61**
$PRE_{Dyad}$	0.05	0.17	0.02	0.00	0.03
$PRE_{Person}$	0.02	0.10	0.01	0.00	0.02

\*\* $p < 0.01$ , \* $p < 0.05$ , † $p < 0.10$

<sup>a</sup> 95 % CI = 0.04, 0.17

<sup>b</sup> 95 % CI = -0.24, -0.01



**Table 3** Negative LGBIS identity outcomes by marital status and state recognition

	Concealment motivation	Internalized homonegativity	Identity uncertainty	Acceptance concerns	Difficult process
$\gamma_{000}$ —intercept	3.34**	2.21**	1.70**	2.69**	1.93**
$\gamma_{100}$ —age	0.00	-0.01** <sup>a</sup>	-0.01* <sup>a</sup>	-0.00	-0.01
$\gamma_{200}$ —education	-0.06	-0.02	0.01	0.00	0.08* <sup>c</sup>
$\gamma_{010}$ —gender	-0.05	-0.06	-0.10** <sup>b</sup>	0.03	0.01
$\gamma_{020}$ —married	-0.12	0.03	-0.05	0.01	0.17†
$\gamma_{030}$ —state rec.	-0.20*	-0.07	0.06†	-0.11	-0.22**
$\omega^2_{00}$ —friendship var.	—	—	—	—	0.11
$\tau^2_{000}$ —dyad var.	0.44**	0.01	—	0.31**	0.35†
$\sigma^2$ —person var.	0.98**	0.49**	0.33**	0.84**	0.79**
PRE <sub>Dyad</sub>	0.06	0.04	—	0.00	0.04
PRE <sub>Person</sub>	0.04	0.02	0.00	0.00	0.03

\*\* $p < 0.01$ , \* $p < 0.05$ , † $p < 0.10$

<sup>a</sup> 95 % CI = -0.02, -0.00

<sup>b</sup> 95 % CI = -0.16, -0.04

<sup>c</sup> 95 % CI = 0.00, 0.15

CI = [-0.37, -0.08]) (Table 3). State recognition was also significantly associated with feeling less vigilant in daily interactions with others ( $\gamma_{030} = -0.10$ , 95 % CI = [-0.18, -0.03]), and feeling less isolated ( $\gamma_{030} = -0.11$ , 95 % CI = [-0.19, -0.03]) (Table 4).

### Discussion

The recent changes in marriage law extending civil marriage recognition to same-sex couples in all US states may have an impact on same-sex couples at two levels: as a function of

individual marital status and as a function of the state recognition of marriage. In the present study, identity centrality and partner support were significantly associated with the status of being married. Recent changes in marriage laws and the continuing debate over the recognition of marriage (at the time of the survey reported herein) may have made LGB identities more salient for people in this study who were married (Rostosky et al. 2016). Marriage may also reinforce a commitment within a relationship, leading couple members to feel more positive about their relationship with their partner.

State recognition of the marriages of same-sex couples was significantly associated with experiencing less

**Table 4** Discrimination and harassment experiences (DHEQ) by marital status and state recognition

	Vigilance	Discrimination/harassment	Gender expression	Family of origin	Vicarious trauma	Isolation
$\gamma_{000}$ —intercept	1.06**	0.59**	0.36†	0.00	1.23**	1.60**
$\gamma_{100}$ —age	-0.00	-0.00	-0.00	0.00	0.01†	-0.01* <sup>b</sup>
$\gamma_{200}$ —education	-0.02	-0.00	-0.01	0.03	0.03	-0.03
$\gamma_{010}$ —gender	0.00	-0.00	-0.07** <sup>a</sup>	0.01	0.07†	0.05
$\gamma_{020}$ —married	-0.03	0.04	-0.01	-0.03	0.01	-0.02
$\gamma_{030}$ —state rec.	-0.10**	-0.01	-0.01	-0.02	0.01	-0.11**
$\omega^2_{00}$ —friendship var.	—	—	—	—	—	0.07
$\tau^2_{000}$ —dyad var.	0.11**	0.07**	0.03**	0.08*	0.03	0.08
$\sigma^2$ —person var.	0.23**	0.14**	0.10**	0.38**	0.45**	0.24**
PRE <sub>Dyad</sub>	0.04	0.00	0.03	0.00	0.02	0.10
PRE <sub>Person</sub>	0.02	0.00	0.02	0.00	0.01	0.07

\*\* $p < 0.01$ , \* $p < 0.05$ , † $p < 0.10$

<sup>a</sup> 95% CI = -0.12, -0.02

<sup>b</sup> 95 % CI = -0.02, -0.00

motivation to conceal an LGB identity, less vigilance, and fewer feelings of isolation. It was also associated with having a less difficult process claiming an LGB identity. These outcomes may be a consequence of living in a socio-political environment that is more supportive of one's identity and one's relationship (Herek 2015; Herek et al. 2009). Isolation, concealment, and vigilance are all reactions to an external environment where a person might feel risk from disclosure of their identity and might be more exposed to negative messages about LGB identities. These findings are consistent with previous findings of lower levels of distress and minority stressors in states that have legal protections against discrimination (Riggle et al. 2010a) and in states that legally recognize same-sex relationships (Hatzenbuehler et al. 2010; Hatzenbuehler et al. 2012).

The current findings suggest that when exploring the impacts of individual level factors, such as marriage, researchers may want to include positive outcomes; when exploring the impacts of social level factors, such as state recognition, researchers may want to include negative outcomes. The finding that marital status was only significantly associated with positive outcomes may partly reflect self-selection effects into marriage (e.g., individuals who have higher levels of minority stress or a less positive identity may be less likely to be in a long-term relationship, married or not). Also, the privileged status of marriage as a marker of social integration may enhance positive feelings about identity while not also being able to buffer negative feelings rooted in internalized homonegativity or act as protection against discrimination. It is also possible that marriage may create a visibility that increases risk for discrimination while simultaneously providing support that buffers the negative impacts of discrimination. These are questions for future research.

That state recognition was not significantly associated with any of the positive identity or social support outcomes may reflect the position of state laws as external (cultural) factors in the socio-ecological context. These external factors may have greater impact on interactions within the environment (e.g., experiences of heterosexism) and negative cultural messages that may be internalized than on positive identity and interactions with significant others in a person's life. Individuals in non-supportive environments may have already created strong support systems and a positive sense of identity as a way of coping with the stigmatizing cultural messages.

Consistent with prior findings that being in a long-term relationship has benefits for well-being similar to marriage, most of the indicators used in this study were not significantly different based on marital status or state recognition. This suggests that the measurable impacts of civil marriage on individuals in long-term relationships may be minimal, at least during the initial period of legal expansion of marriage

rights. In this sample, couples had established their relationships prior to marriage availability. These couples may have created supports that continued to benefit the relationship even after legal changes to marriage law (Lannutti 2014; Rostosky et al. 2016).

Even when and where marriage was an option, not all long-term same-sex couples desired or chose to be married. Some same-sex couples, for example, may feel a distrust of government involvement in their relationship (based on prior persecution of lesbians and gay men), or may have financial reasons to not marry. Same-sex couples in long-term relationships may not feel an emotional need for marriage, or may feel that getting married would betray their relationship history and prior expressions of commitment (see Lannutti 2014; Reczek et al. 2009; Rostosky et al. 2016). These choices do not necessarily negate the benefits of being in a long-term committed relationship.

### Limitations

The sample in this study predominately self-identified as "white," was older, and on average had high levels of income and education relative to the general population. Therefore, generalizations from the findings based on these data should be made with caution. For example, younger individuals may have different experiences given changes in the cultural and political environment that may contribute to differences in their socialization and different beliefs about sexuality and sexual citizenship. The impact of marriage and marriage recognition in their lives may be different than the impact on older cohorts.

This sample was limited to individuals in long-term relationships. The impact of civil marriage on those just beginning to form relationships may be different, regardless of their age. This sample was also limited to those who choose to marry and those who were not married. In the present study where the status of interest is civil marriage, the impact of other forms of legal recognition was not considered. Also, this study did not control for how long participants had lived in a state that recognized marriage or how long an individual had been married.

This sample was originally recruited as part of a study of couples who had obtained civil unions in Vermont and couples recruited from their friendship network. Therefore, all couples in this sample had prior experience, either personally or through a friend, with legal recognition of same-sex relationships. A sample that did not have this prior experience may be impacted differently by civil marriage laws and recognition. Also, there are nations where marriage is still not available to same-sex couples; couples in those nations may have a different experience as marriage becomes available to them.

## Policy and Future Research

In the USA, same-sex couples did not have the choice of civil marriage prior to 2003 and had limited opportunities to marry between 2003 and 2013. In the majority of US states at the time of the survey reported in this article, marriage was still not available or recognized. While marriage for same-sex couples was legally available and recognized in all US states after the US Supreme Court decision in *Obergefell v Hodges* [576 U.S. (2015)], there is still legal and social debate about the rights of same-sex couples. This legal and social environment shapes same-sex couples' lived experiences and impacts their relationship decisions (Frost and LeBlanc 2014).

Stigmatization, including legal discrimination, still presents challenges to same-sex couples (and LGB individuals) in the USA (see Hatzenbuehler 2014, for a review). For example, sexual orientation (and gender identity) is not protected (in 2016) under non-discrimination laws in all US states, nor under federal law. Without this protection, in many states an individual may be married (or simply engaged) to a same-sex partner one day and fired from their job the next, with no legal recourse. Even in states with legal protections, these protections may be limited to certain domains of actions (e.g., public accommodations) and may excuse some entities from adhering to the law or the consequences of the law (e.g., the "sincerely held religious beliefs" exceptions). Another example of continued discrimination is the parental rights of same-sex couples. Not all states recognize the parental rights of both members of a same-sex couple in the same way that they would a heterosexual couple. This puts same-sex couples and their children at risk. This lack of complete structural and legal equality continues to create a sociocultural context of stigma that is relevant for the well-being of LGBT individuals and same-sex couples and their families.

Future research needs to take into account the ongoing issues facing same-sex couples and focus on couples forming relationships in the era of marriage equality. Future research should also explore the impact of marriage equality on youth and their experiences, especially as they think about relationships and their future. For long-term couples, future research can follow their relationships in a changing legal and social culture, and the impact that these changes have on their well-being.

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**Conflict of Interest** The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

**Ethical Approval** All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

**Informed Consent** Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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