

Narratives of Same-Sex Couples Who Had Civil Unions in Vermont: The Impact of Legalizing Relationships on Couples and on Social Policy

Esther D. Rothblum · Kimberly F. Balsam ·
Sondra E. Solomon

© Springer Science+Business Media, LLC 2011

Abstract Quantitative surveys often end with an item asking respondents to write in “additional comments,” and this study analyzed these narrative comments of 659 women and men in same-sex couples who had civil unions in Vermont during the first year of that legislation. Our research question was to examine which novel themes not covered by the questionnaire subscales respondents would bring up in their narratives. For many couples, the civil union was a powerful event, resulting in psychological and tangible benefits, as well as improved relationships with family of origin. Respondents described their efforts to publicize the civil union or display the certificate in their homes. Other couples wrote about why the civil union was less important than their commitment ceremony, did not reflect the longevity of their relationship, or were not recognized by family members. Finally, many respondents wrote about political activism to change policies for same-sex couples. Many researchers use a similar type of requests for additional comments at the end of quantitative questionnaires without ever analyzing such comments, yet narrative analysis of these comments is extremely valuable for understanding how participants view their own experiences, for making policy decisions, and as a topic for further study.

E. D. Rothblum (✉)
San Diego State University,
San Diego, CA, USA
e-mail: erothblu@mail.sdsu.edu

K. F. Balsam
University of Washington,
Seattle, WA, USA

S. E. Solomon
University of Vermont,
Burlington, VT, USA

Keywords Civil unions · Same-sex couples · Lesbian couples · Gay male couples · Narrative methods

Introduction: The Civil Union Study

In July 2000, Vermont was the first US state to legalize same-sex relationships in the form of civil unions. This was before any US state or Canadian province had legalized same-sex relationships and before any nation had legalized same-sex marriage. Over 2,000 same-sex couples took advantage of that new legislation during the first year of its enactment. The majority of couples came to Vermont from other US states, despite the fact that civil unions were not recognized by their home state.

At the time, Vermont lawmakers were inundated with queries from legislators, politicians, and activists from other states, who wanted to know which same-sex couples were choosing to have civil unions. The media were comparing civil unions to marriage (at the time, available only to heterosexuals everywhere in the world). In the absence of any data about civil union couples, we wanted to conduct a study about these couples. What was unique about civil union couples was that civil union certificates were public information, so we had access to a population, not just a convenience sample. Of the 2,475 same-sex couples who had civil unions that first year, only 21% resided in Vermont, so this was a national sample. And when we contacted all couples by mail, 42% wanted to participate in the study, a very high response rate for this kind of study.

At this point, readers may want to consider which methods and topics they might have included in a research project on same-sex couples in civil unions. On the one hand, this was the first study of its kind, and qualitative methods are frequently used for social science research

when there is little prior information on a topic area or population (Mason, 2005). The goal of qualitative research is understanding and, frequently, hypothesis generation for future research (e.g., Benbasat 1987; Johnson and Onwuegbuzie 2004). On the other hand, we had access to hundreds of couples, so quantitative methods seemed more appropriate given that we were interested in demographic and descriptive information about this population. Also, a considerable research literature already existed on same-sex couples, although none of these earlier studies had access to couples in legalized relationships and none had used population-based samples. We decided to compare same-sex couples who had civil unions with same-sex couples in their friendship circle who had not had civil unions. Given that all other same-sex couples research up to that time had focused on couples who had not had civil unions, this comparison group represented the status quo of same-sex couples research. Secondly, because the media often compared and contrasted civil unions to heterosexual marriage, we wanted to include a comparison group of heterosexual married couples and chose to compare civil union couples with heterosexual married siblings and their spouses.

We decided to focus the study on demographic and relationship variables, closely modeled on the American Couples Study (Blumstein and Schwartz 1983), the largest couples study that also included lesbian and gay male couples. Thus, we included sections about demographics, relationship, children, contact with family of origin, perceived social support from friends and family, leisure activities, level of outness, sexual behavior, division of finances, division of household tasks, and conflict.

We then sent questionnaires to the first 400 same-sex couples in civil unions who replied to our request, as well as to their same-sex coupled friends not in civil unions and their heterosexual married siblings and spouses. Of the 800 questionnaires sent to both members of 400 civil union couples, we received back 659 (82%), and these 659 respondents are the focus of the present paper. We also received back 466 (58%) from members of same-sex couples not in civil unions and 413 (52%) from members of married heterosexual couples (these numbers represent total respondents; we did not always receive back two questionnaires from each couple).

Two-thirds of our sample was female, and 90% was white, which corresponded exactly to the gender and racial/ethnic composition of the civil union population as a whole (for more detailed demographic data and results of the quantitative portion of the study, see Henehan et al. 2007; Solomon et al. 2004; Solomon et al. 2005; Todosijevic et al. 2005). Quantitative results indicated very few differences between same-sex couples in civil unions and those not in civil unions, particularly for women. Women in civil unions were more “out” about their sexual orientation and more

likely to consider themselves married than were women not in civil unions. Men in civil unions were more likely to have children, joint bank accounts with their partner, mutual friends with their partner, more connection with their family of origin, and to consider themselves married. They were less likely to have seriously discussed ending their relationship than men not in civil unions (Solomon et al. 2004). In contrast, both types of same-sex couples differed from heterosexual married couples in numerous ways. Same-sex couples were in their current relationship for a shorter duration, less religious, less likely to have children, more likely to share housework and finances, and less close to their family of origin than heterosexual couples. Women in same-sex relationships were more highly educated and perceived less social support from their family of origin than heterosexual married women. Men in same-sex relationships lived in larger cities, were less monogamous and more likely to agree that non-monogamy was acceptable, and perceived more social support from their friends than heterosexual married men.

The Present Analysis: Narrative Inquiry

Our lengthy, 16-page questionnaire ended with the heading “We value your comments” and the text “Your comments and feedback are greatly appreciated. Please write any additional comments, suggestions, etc. here. Thank you for your help with this project,” followed by nearly a whole blank page for these comments. These written narratives are the focus of the present article.

Our quantitative study used a between-subjects design, comparing three types of couples. Consequently, we did not focus specifically on the civil union itself, since this would not have been relevant for the two types of comparison couples. However, descriptions of and comments about their civil union were the major focus of written narratives. So, we decided to further examine the narrative comments by civil union respondents.

Questionnaires did not include names or addresses but had an identifying number that was identical for the two members of the civil union couple (e.g., 166 A and B), their same-sex friends (e.g., 166 C and D), and their heterosexual married sibling and spouse (e.g., 166 E and F). The first author received a small grant to have all handwritten comments typed into one file. Each comment indicated the participant’s identifying number and letter (i.e., the letter indicated whether a participant had a civil union, did not have a civil union, or was heterosexually married). In order to provide some further information about participants, for each sample quote we selected to use below, we also looked up the participant’s gender, age, and geographic location from the quantitative data file.

The results were interpreted using thematic analysis and aimed to provide a descriptive account of participants' experiences around community. As Braun and Clarke (2006) have indicated, thematic analysis is used to search for themes or patterns within an entire data set and can be used within most theoretical frameworks. The first author read through all comments by respondents in civil unions (those comments with identifying letters A or B). Of the 649 civil union respondents, 473 wrote a comment (66%). She made notes of possible themes, then highlighted all comments referring to those themes and made a list of possible subthemes. She then emailed the file with all highlighted comments and her list of themes to the second and third authors for verification. We did not develop a codebook, count the number of comments related to each theme, or train raters for consensus.

Consequently, this method of examining open-ended "comments" at the end of a lengthy, quantitative questionnaire is a very atypical method for narrative analysis. However, we use it to illustrate the amount of information that narrative comments can add to standardized, quantitative surveys, and, consequently, highlight the limitations of quantitative research.

Results

We found responses to the open-ended question to yield two types of information, which we termed "reactive" and "novel." Reactive comments are an opportunity for respondents to mention any particular reactions to or problems with specific items of the quantitative portion of the questionnaire and, not surprisingly, a lot of comments focused on this kind of information. Many respondents felt the questionnaire was too long or pointed out items that were poorly worded. They explained why some items or sections did not apply to them. For example, some respondents wrote that items about work were irrelevant because they were unemployed, or retired, or students. They stated that items about social activities did not apply because they lived in rural areas, or had health problems. They clarified that their parents were deceased, or their children were grown, or they were out to some family members but not others. They wished the questionnaire had included items about what it was like being deaf, or transgendered, or adopted, or in a long-distance relationship.

The second type of information contained in these narratives is for respondents to bring up novel topics not included in the questionnaire, and this was the main focus of the present analysis. What did civil union couples reveal in their narratives that was noteworthy and valuable to them as "pioneers in partnership" and that was not included in our questionnaire?

There were five themes resulting from this analysis, two of which had subthemes. A major theme was the very

positive impact of the civil union. Subthemes of the positive impact included (a) increased psychological benefits, (b) increased acceptance by family and society, (c) increased tangible benefits, and (d) mementos of the civil union ceremony (e.g., framing the certificate). A second theme related to children; many respondents explained that they wanted to legalize their relationship before getting pregnant, giving birth, or adopting children. A third theme was gratitude for Vermont, at a time when Vermont was unique in providing legalized relationships for same-sex couples. A fourth theme was that the civil union was not important or did not result in benefits. Subthemes of the lack of importance of the civil union included (a) couples had already been together for a long time, so they considered the length of their relationship or their commitment ceremony more important than the civil union, (b) family or society didn't recognize the civil union, and (c) there were no tangible benefits from the civil union. The fifth theme was the connection between social policy and sexuality, in order to change policies for same-sex couples in their own state. These themes will be described below.

The Civil Union Had a Positive Impact

Respondents often described the importance of the civil union and positive consequences. It is also interesting that quite a few respondents used the terms "husband," "wife," or "spouse" at a time when civil unions were the closest legislation to marriage for same-sex couples.

Increased psychological benefits - Many couples wrote about the emotional significance of the civil union, with an increased sense of love, closeness, and commitment. For example, a 42-year-old man from Washington wrote "Prior to our civil union I did not think that I could be any closer to my spouse, but I am, and I know the civil union has helped that closeness grow." A 46-year-old woman from Vermont stated "The civil union gave us commitment, it bound us together in a way I cannot explain."

Couples described increased stability and legitimacy as the result of the civil union.

"Due to my partner's employment situation, we have had to live apart for much of the past several years...I feel that the Civil Union has provided a sense of permanence to our relationship and removed some of the doubt that can be characteristic of 'Gay relationships,'" wrote a 42-year-old man from Pennsylvania. A 35-year-old woman from Massachusetts described the sense of legitimacy as follows: "During my maternity leave, we decided to drop the kids off and drive to Vermont so we could be legally wed, while it was still legal there. We were both very surprised at how emotional it was for us. The clerk's office and the justice of

the peace were wonderful, and our ceremony felt legitimate and real.”

Increased Acceptance by Family and Society - A major theme in couples’ narratives was increased support by other people. In fact, this was described more often than personal benefits. Many couples had been together a long time and felt married, yet the civil union legitimized their relationship for others. Some people wrote specifically about increased acceptance by family members; others described acceptance by society more generally. A 46-year-old woman from Florida told us “My wife and I are extremely happy people, individually and as a couple. Having our relationship validated by family, friends, and the community has only enhanced our couplehood. Although my wife’s family had difficulty accepting her sexual orientation in the beginning, they have become very supportive.” A 27-year-old man from Illinois stated “I feel the commitment we have made in Vermont has given some sort of basis for outsiders to take it more seriously and see us as a couple. I feel that a lot of outsiders don’t look at gay relationships as seriously as they do ‘straight’ relationships.” And a 45-year-old woman from Florida wrote “Our wedding (‘commitment ceremony’) changed our relationship, not so much internally, as how we were viewed externally. In other words, those people who had previously not taken our relationship very seriously began to do so.”

Increased Tangible Benefits - Couples wrote about real benefits that they gained as the result of legalizing their relationship. In several cases, this occurred even though they lived in US states that did not legally recognize civil unions. A 39-year-old man from Maryland found that “...so far with the exception of TAXES Maryland has accepted my Civil Union on my Drivers License. We get the marriage benefit with our Car Insurance Company—so far so good.” A 37-year-old man from Florida wrote “Our civil union has been instrumental, as it has enabled me to put my partner on my benefits plan as a domestic partner with my employer for both travel and health. Also with my health club’s ‘Add a family member’ program. We found that we were *warmly* welcomed by vendors when planning our *HUGE, EXPENSIVE* commitment ceremony on the yacht. (The vendors were pleased to take gay *or* straight money!) Being married as a straight person still unfairly has more benefits (especially tax benefits, as my partner’s health and travel benefits is considered ‘imputed income.’)”

Mementos of the Civil Union Ceremony - Respondents wrote about framing their civil union certificate: “The Civil Union which my partner and I had has been very meaningful to us. The Certificate is displayed in our home open to those who visit. We have a lot of people, family and

friends who come through our home” (60-year-old woman from Indiana). Others described ways in which they displayed photographs from the civil union ceremony. A 40-year-old woman from Indiana stated “We saw the CU as a political gesture first and an anniversary celebration second. But when [my partner] went to write the check for the CU license at the Brattleboro town hall, I snapped a photo. It was genuinely moving to me to think that the *state* was taking our relationship seriously, that it *counted* in a legal fashion. That photo is now framed on our piano! I love to look at it. It makes me hopeful for a future where our relationship—all lgb relationships—will have value to the state.”

Several contacted the “weddings” section of their local newspaper to publicize the civil union. We also received a number of photographs and newspaper clippings from respondents who wanted us to see more detail about their civil union. A 35-year-old man from Washington, D.C., sent us this comment with a photo attached: “Psst—we met Vermont Governor Dean while he was on a speaking/fundraising campaign in our retirement city (Las Vegas) this past year and got him to autograph our civil union certificate.”

Legalized the Relationship before Having Children

Some couples decided to have the civil union before getting pregnant, giving birth, or adopting children, as a way to legitimize their relationship as parents. A 37-year-old woman from New York wrote: “We just want the same rights to make a commitment to each other and have the same rights, such as insurance, tax and parental rights as heterosexual married couples. We are expecting our first child and wanted him/her to know that marriage is a serious and important commitment between two people who love each other. This is one of the reasons we had our civil union before getting pregnant.”

Gratitude for the State of Vermont

Now that a few nations and US states have same-sex marriage, and other nations and US states have domestic partnership or civil union legislation, it is easy to forget what landmark legislation the Vermont civil union act was. Not surprisingly, many respondents thanked the State of Vermont for this law; others thanked God for Vermont in their prayers at the civil union ceremony. “We’d never been to Vermont before our Civil Union, and haven’t been back since—but it seems like “home” to us. Thank God for the people of Vermont!” (43-year-old woman from Nebraska). “I always will be thankful to the people of Vermont. Our civil Union was very significant in our relationship, not

only for us but for our families, friends and our community in Utah” (30-year-old man).

Some even debated moving to Vermont. “I pray for the day when our nation will recognize our loving and committed relationships. Thank you for offering a civil union to this Floridian lesbian couple. We have talked about becoming snowbirds. Colorado was our original choice for the summer months and we are now seriously considering Vermont...since our civil union” (43-year-old woman). “I love my partner, my family, her extended family, our life together. We are planning to move to Vermont and start a business. We love Vermont especially the Middlebury area (our Civil Union was performed there)” (33-year-old woman from Virginia). And several respondents mentioned that they would move if only Vermont weren’t so cold or rural: “I would move to Vermont if it weren’t so cold...and if it had a big city” (41-year-old man from Maryland).

Civil Union Was Not Important or Did Not Result in Benefits

Other couples wrote about ways in which the civil union was not significant.

Couples Had Already Been Together for a Long Time - Many couples had been together for years or decades: “When we had our civil union ceremony, my partner and I felt that we didn’t want to have a big reception or ceremony because we had already been together for 17 years—we already felt married—I just wanted a religious ceremony” (43-year-old man from New York).

Furthermore, many couples had had commitment ceremonies in the presence of family members, friends, and their religious community. Others indicated that the civil union was only symbolic because their own state did not recognize this legal status. A 40-year-old woman from Vermont wrote: “When the Civil Union bill passed, we decided to get ‘civilly united’ in order to get what legal rights we could. The ceremony, however, was not at all as serious or meaningful as was our wedding ceremony—we didn’t want to diminish the importance of the wedding just because the state was going to recognize the relationship.” A 47-year-old man from New York told us: “I sense that the raw data from this questionnaire might make it seem that our civil union was not a big deal—and that is partially correct. The significance for the union was, in fact, diminished by the fact we’d had a wedding ceremony—with a priest and rabbi—several years earlier.”

Family or Society Didn’t Recognize the Civil Union - Some respondents were disappointed to discover that their families, friends, or acquaintances did not react positively

to the civil union or did not recognize it as equivalent to marriage. A 47-year-old woman from Oregon stated that “The family section (social support form) is hard. Actually, the experience of their behavior around our civil union shook me up quite a bit and lessened my confidence in them. While on the surface they were all for it and very supportive, in fact they turned on me emotionally, and I have been adjusting to the realization that they are not ‘who I thought they were’—partly their unconscious, undealt-with homophobia, I think, and partly other old issues surfacing (as they will at weddings!). It’s a quite dysfunctional family, and I think they were uncomfortable with my happy union.” And this 50-year-old male respondent from New Jersey actually found his family decreased support as the result of the civil union: “My spouse and I are very much committed to each other. Have always had a “public” relationship. However, the Civil Union has made *my* family less supportive and created tension that never previously existed. In the meantime my spouse’s family has, while always OK in the past, moved much more strongly to the positive realization of our devotion...My family’s lack of deep support to my spouse during my recovery is a matter that has strained the blood ties on my side to a great degree.”

No Tangible Benefits as the Result of the Civil Union - Respondents from outside Vermont commented on not getting real benefits from the civil union. For example, a 37-year-old woman from Massachusetts wrote: “My partner and I cherish our Civil Union for numerous reasons, including achieving some degree of societal validation of our commitment and love for one another. However, since we do not live in Vermont, we unfortunately do not get the full benefits of our Union. Instead we often deal with the continued discrimination, regardless if we function and live essentially ‘the same’ as a heterosexual couple.”

It was rare to read about actual negative consequences of the civil union, such as this comment by a 54-year-old woman from Vermont: “I’m a high school administrator whose job has just been eliminated...Therefore, I wonder if my having had a Civil Union is an underlying reason for my job being cut. I also wonder if being in this committed relationship, in the same small VT town, for 10 years, is the reason I have not been given other teaching jobs closer to home. It is an underlying fear. It keeps me from telling students and parents, although I have been open with colleagues and administrators.”

Sexual Policy and Sexuality

A large number of respondents described their political activities related to getting same-sex partner legislation passed, including same-sex marriage. These narratives

convey a sense of possibility and excitement and also a sophisticated knowledge of efforts required to change social policy.

Some respondents were directly involved in the movement to get civil unions passed in Vermont, as this 46-year-old man reported: “My parents were comfortable with my sexuality when I was single and dating. The civil union war (moral, political, ethical) split my family. My partner and I went *very* public and helped pass the law. My brothers and father were *totally* embarrassed and my sisters *totally* supportive. My oldest sister, a Baptist, was asked to *renounce* me as a brother. She has stayed loyal to me and left the church. Currently my brothers and parents have very little to do with us. I do not regret my role in the civil union law. Rarely does anyone have an opportunity to use their personal power to make the world a better place. I thought I could have it all, but members of my family *really* surprised me. Bittersweet!”

Other respondents were aware that their civil union supported political efforts in Vermont and was a model for other states: “Although our C.U. in Vermont changes (legally) nothing for us we thought it important to send a message to our nation” (58-year-old woman from California). “Regarding our civil union: We live outside of Vermont, and our union is not legally recognized in our state. We hope that someday it will be. We wanted to take all opportunities to make our commitment ‘official,’ binding and apparent to others” (41-year-old woman from New York). “In addition, we felt that you might want to know that getting a civil union was never a priority for us. We are totally committed to each other in every aspect of our lives and have never felt the need to acknowledge it with a ceremony or piece of paper. We have always viewed marriage/weddings as kind of a silly heterosexual ritual. It’s just not our bag. We had a trip planned to New England in the fall and thought as long as we were in Vermont, we would get “hitched”. We wanted to support the efforts of the folks who worked so hard to get this legislation passed. We felt that it would help to further the gay rights movement and set an example for other states to follow. We know that for many lesbian and gay couples this is a very important issue” (41-year-old woman from Colorado).

And respondents continued to fight for tangible benefits and recognition: A 37-year-old woman from Washington, D.C. wrote “I believe in being realistic about our position in society. I work for a *very* tolerant company (provides health benefits, etc., for my partner). However I occasionally have to really fight for equal rights that are just overlooked. Example: my partner was not considered my legal ‘spouse’ until I complained to Human Resources about the company vehicle policy. Now the wording has been changed to include ‘domestic partner’ and she may drive my car. When you see something wrong you must try to take action.

Maybe it won’t change—but maybe it will! We *must* lead by example—be ourselves, be truthful, be thoughtful with others. I am also advocating for gay/lesbian announcements to be printed in our newspaper. These small dignities are *sooo* important in the long run. My partner is my life for all our ups and downs and we want to be recognized legally by our state! Seeing our names in print is a small but important validation that we really do have a place in society—we don’t want to be hidden away!”

Discussion

Methodological Issues and Advantages of Narrative Analysis

This study highlights a number of differences between quantitative and qualitative methods described previously and also shows some advantages of narrative analysis when studying marginalized populations. Survey items (e.g., Likert scales, multiple choice items, or yes/no questions) take less time than open-ended items for respondents to complete and also lend themselves to computerized scoring and statistical analysis. Standardized subscales allow for comparison with other studies (c.f., Gotta et al. 2011, comparing our data to the American Couples Study conducted three decades earlier by Blumstein and Schwartz 1983).

On the other hand, the researchers’ choice of quantitative measures may not reflect respondents’ experiences very well, or may reflect those of some respondents better than others. Most people can remember receiving surveys about interesting topics, only to discover that completing the questionnaire items did not provide a full account of their personal experiences. This is often the case when lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender respondents complete “mainstream” questionnaires about sex, relationships, or community, indicating that choice of research method is particularly important for research about sexuality.

The disconnection between researchers’ aims and respondents’ experiences is also more likely in between-subjects comparisons. For example, Rothblum and Factor (2001) compared lesbians and their heterosexual sisters on demographic and mental health factors. In order to include lesbians who were not “out” to heterosexual sisters, the survey did not state anywhere that it was focused on sexual orientation; instead, the purpose of the survey was described as “to learn how the lives of adult sisters are similar or different. There is little information about sisters and how their lives change in adulthood.” Consequently, many sisters—lesbian and heterosexual—commented that they had expected more items about their relationship with

their sister. Thus, including open-ended items allows participants to resolve these discrepancies by tailoring their response to issues that are of interest to them. The quantitative portion of the civil union study used a between-subjects methodology to compare same-sex couples in civil unions, same-sex couples who had not had civil unions, and heterosexual married siblings. The results indicate differences between types of couples (particularly between same-sex and heterosexual couples) on a number of demographic and relationship variables (for more detailed demographic data and results of the quantitative portion of the study, see Henehan et al. 2007; Solomon et al. 2004, 2005; Todosijevic et al. 2005).

We were intrigued that the narrative methods allowed for a qualitatively different kind of perspective to emerge from participants' comments that had not been accounted for by our quantitative measures. The results of the current narrative analysis indicate that civil union respondents were excited about the new legislation and wanted to describe the civil union ceremony and its consequences. Their narratives provide first-person accounts of the many personal, familial, and tangible results of the civil union, as well as some limitations. They also showcased how their cohort of same-sex couples was aware of their role in changing social policy, both with regards to having the civil union and in working on legalizing same-sex marriage in the future. This cohort represents the first same-sex couples who were legally united anywhere in the US or Canada, and consequently their narratives have historical significance.

Furthermore, the narrative analysis allowed for a more nuanced understanding of how the (very partial) legal recognition afforded by civil unions can have a positive impact for some couples and a negative one under different conditions for other couples. Traditional quantitative approaches, due to their focus on the "average" experience, would miss these important nuances.

The current qualitative methodology had some limitations. Our questionnaires were intended to focus on quantitative measures; it was only after reading the narratives responding to the "comments" section that we realized the contributions of this part of our data. Thus, we could not use such elements of grounded theory such as theoretical sampling (Glaser 1998), among others. We, the researchers, were more distant and anonymous, and less interactional, than is usually the case in qualitative methods that use interviews or personal contacts. On the one hand, the prompt was so general that respondents could (and did) write about anything. Because the questionnaires were all sent out during the same time period, we could not construct knowledge by locating subsequent respondents who might build on (or negate) some of the themes in the present study.

Based on the information learned from civil union couples' written comments, we formalized this component of the survey in our 3-year follow-up of the study (Balsam et al. 2008). Consequently, the 3-year follow-up questionnaire began by asking respondents to reflect on their relationship over the past 3 years in their own words. The instructions for civil union couple members were:

"Before we ask you to rate specific items, we would be most interested to find out how you have seen your relationship develop in the past 3 years. Please focus on your civil union partner of 2001; if you are no longer in that relationship, let us know about the break-up. We would be interested in your own experiences about the relationship. If you have children, how has the relationship affected them? How do people perceive you now as a couple? These are just suggestions—we are looking forward to reading about your relationship in your own words!"

The follow-up narratives are described in more detail in Rothblum et al. (2011).

Many, if not most, researchers use a similar type of requests for additional comment at the end of quantitative questionnaires. As our themes illustrate, narrative analysis of these comments is extremely valuable for understanding how participants view their own experiences, for making policy decisions, and for providing directions for future research. We would urge researchers to examine these comments carefully in order to increase understanding of people's lived experience, especially in the area of sexuality research and social policy.

Comparison of Narratives to Existing Literature on Same-Sex Couples

There are now over 60 books about same-sex marriage and legal relationships, most of them focusing on the legal and political implications of marriage for lesbians and gay men. Nearly all of them begin with poignant stories of the journeys that led same-sex couples to become plaintiffs for marriage. Thus, Eskridge and Spedale (2006) describe the first couples that had registered partnerships in Denmark (the first nation to have legalized relationships for same-sex couples), Eskridge (1996) describes the plaintiffs for same-sex marriage in Hawaii (the first US state to try—unsuccessfully—to legalize same-sex marriage), and Moats (2004) describes the plaintiffs for same-sex marriage in Vermont (the first state to grant legalized relationships, though it drew the line at marriage). However, plaintiffs are not typical same-sex couples. They need to be out to their families, employers, and communities and willing to expose themselves to extensive scrutiny by the media. They are often selected by attorneys because of their

“poster couple” status and so, are likely to be economically privileged, occupationally successful, in long-term relationships, and monogamous, for example.

In that regard, our sample represents the narratives of a larger and more heterogeneous cohort of same-sex couples. Respondents described a number of benefits, some of them surprising given that civil unions were not legal in their home state. A smaller number of respondents were disappointed that the civil union did not result in benefits, or felt that it paled in comparison to the longevity of their relationship.

In particular, the narratives describe the connection between social policy and sexuality. Couples came to Vermont to have the civil union as a way of supporting the legislation, even though it was not legal in their home state. They were aware that the possibility of legalizing their relationship would serve as a model for advocacy in other US states. Some couples used the legislation to fight for benefits in their workplace. Couples publicized the civil union by contacting the “weddings” section of their local newspaper; others made sure that the civil union certificate or photographs about the civil union ceremony were displayed in their home for visitors to see.

The civil union had a ripple effect that extended beyond the couples’ efforts at advocacy. Many described how their families, friends, religious organizations, co-workers, and society in general became more accepting. People began to treat these same-sex couples with more respect and took their relationship more seriously.

Since Vermont legalized civil unions, same-sex marriage is now legal in five US states (Massachusetts, Connecticut, Iowa, New Hampshire, and Vermont) as well as Washington, D.C. (and, as of this writing, same-sex couples who got married in California before the passage of Proposition 8 also remain legally married). Recent research has thus been able to use narrative methods to explore how same-sex couples experience marriage. Porche et al. (2005) interviewed 50 same-sex couples who were married in Massachusetts (at that time, restricted to residents of Massachusetts) or chose not to marry. As in our research, married couples described the legitimacy and benefits of marriage, while also feeling a sense of vulnerability due to the fact that their marriage was now a matter of public record. Schecter et al. (2005) used the same data set to examine how marriage affected partners’ commitment to the relationship and treatment by society. Most couples married in order to gain legal protection, yet found positive as well as negative consequences from family and society.

Riggle et al. (2010) used quantitative measures to examine the relationship between well-being, psychological distress, and legal status of same-sex relationships. In an online survey sample of 2,677 LGB respondents, they

compared those who were single, dating, in a committed relationship, or in a legally recognized relationship. Respondents in legalized relationships reported less internalized homophobia, depression, or stress, and greater meaning of life. During the 2006 elections in the US, nine states had amendments banning same-sex marriage. Rostosky et al. (2009) found that LGB participants (regardless of their own relationship status) who lived in those states reported more minority stress and psychological stress than those living in states that did not have such amendments on their ballots.

At a time when 26 US states have passed amendments limiting marriage to one man and one woman and 45 US states (as well as the federal government) do not legalize marriage between same-sex couples, same-sex couples will continue to be second-class citizens. The couples who had civil unions in Vermont during the first year of that legislation will always remain the longest cohort of same-sex couples in legalized relationships. In that regard, their narratives are an important document and also a testimony to social policy concerning sexuality.

References

- Balsam, K. F., Rothblum, E. D., Beauchaine, T. P., & Solomon, S. E. (2008). Three-year follow-up of same-sex couples who had civil unions in Vermont, same-sex couples not in civil unions, and heterosexual married siblings. *Developmental Psychology*, *44*(1), 102–116.
- Benbasat, I. (1987). The case research strategy in studies of information systems. *MIS Quarterly*, *11*(3), 369–386.
- Blumstein, P., & Schwartz, P. (1983). *American couples: Money, work, sex*. New York: William Morrow.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *3*(2), 77–101.
- Eskridge, W. (1996). *The case for same-sex marriage: From sexual liberty to civilized commitment*. NY: Free Press.
- Eskridge, W., & Spedale, D. (2006). *Gay marriage: For better or for worse? What we’ve learned from the evidence*: Oxford University Press.
- Glaser, B. G. (1998). *Doing grounded theory: Issues and discussions*. Mill Valley, CA: Sociology Press.
- Gotta, G., Green, R. J., Rothblum, E. D., Solomon, S. E., Balsam, K., & Schwartz, P. (2011). Heterosexual, lesbian, and gay male relationships: A comparison of couples in 1975 and 2000. *Family Process* (in press)
- Henehan, D., Rothblum, E. D., Solomon, S. E., & Balsam, K. F. (2007). Social and demographic characteristics of lesbian, gay, and heterosexual adults with and without children. *Journal of GLBT Family Studies*, *3*(2/3), 35–80.
- Johnson, R. B., & Onwuegbuzie, A. J. (2004). Mixed methods research: A research paradigm whose time has come. *Educational Researcher*, *33*(7), 14–26.
- Mason, J. (2005). *Qualitative Researching*. London: Sage Publications.
- Moats, D. (2004). *Civil Wars: A Battle for Gay Marriage*. NY: Harcourt, Inc.
- Porche, M., Purvin, D.M., & Waddell, J.M. (2005). Tying the knot: The context of social change in Massachusetts. *Working Papers of the Wellesley Centers for Research on Women*.

- Riggle, E. D. B., Rostosky, S. S., & Horne, S. G. (2010). Psychological distress, well-being, and legal recognition in same-sex couple relationships. *Journal of Family Psychology, 24*(1), 82–86.
- Rostosky, S. S., Riggle, E. D. B., & Horne, S. G. (2009). Marriage amendments and psychological distress in lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) adults. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 56*(1), 56–66.
- Rothblum, E.D., Balsam, K.F., & Solomon, S.E. (2011). The longest “legal” U.S. same-sex couples reflect on their relationships. *Journal of Social Issues* (in press)
- Rothblum, E. D., & Factor, R. (2001). Lesbians and their sisters as a control group: Demographic and mental health factors. *Psychological Science, 12*, 63–69.
- Schecter, E., Tracy, A.J., Page, K.V., & Luong, G. (2005). Shall we marry? Legal marriage as a commitment event in same-sex relationships during the post-legalization period. *Working Papers of the Wellesley Centers for Research on Women*.
- Solomon, S. E., Rothblum, E. D., & Balsam, K. F. (2004). Pioneers in partnership: Lesbian and gay male couples in civil unions compared with those not in civil unions, and heterosexual married siblings. *Journal of Family Psychology, 18*, 275–286.
- Solomon, S. E., Rothblum, E. D., & Balsam, K. F. (2005). Money, housework, sex, and conflict: Same-sex couples in civil unions, those not in civil unions, and heterosexual married siblings. *Sex Roles, 52*, 561–575.
- Todosijevic, J., Rothblum, E. D., & Solomon, S. E. (2005). Relationship satisfaction, affectivity, and gay-specific stressors in same-sex couples joined in civil unions. *Psychology of Women Quarterly, 29*, 158–166.

Author Note

This study was funded by grants from the Gill Foundation, the University of Vermont, and San Diego State University. The authors gratefully acknowledge the support of Vermont State Representative Bill Lippert for supporting the study and the Vermont Office of Vital Records of the Vermont Department of Health for providing the civil union certificates. Address correspondence concerning this article to Esther D. Rothblum, Women’s Studies Department, San Diego State University, 5500 Campanile Drive, San Diego, CA 92182, email: erothblu@mail.sdsu.edu; Kimberly F. Balsam, Department of Social Work, University of Washington, Seattle, WA 98195, email: kbalsam@u.washington.edu; Sondra E. Solomon, Department of Psychology, John Dewey Hall, University of Vermont, Burlington, VT 05405, email: Sondra.solomon@uvm.edu.