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Same-Sex Couples’ Decisions and Experiences of Marriage in the Context of Minority Stress: Interviews From a Population-Based Longitudinal Study

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ABSTRACT
In the emerging context of marriage equality, it is important to explore the reasons for and experience of marriage for long-term same-sex couples, including the role of minority stress. In Wave 3 of the population-based, longitudinal CUPPLES Study we interviewed 21 long-term same-sex couples (14 female, 7 male) who resided in 12 different states and who were legally married. Couple members ranged in age from 37 to 84 and reported being together as a couple from 15 to 41 years. Seven couples lived in states that did not recognize their marriage at the time of the interview. Legal protection and social validation emerged as the two primary domains that captured couples’ lived experiences of marriage. Minority stress experiences emerged in the narratives in the context of couples’ long-term commitment, the availability of civil marriage, and couples’ participation in activist efforts on behalf of marriage equality for themselves and others.

KEYWORDS
Gay male couples; legal protection; lesbian couples; marriage; minority stress; same-sex couple relationships; same-sex couples; same-sex marriage

Same-sex couples in the United States live in a culture that stigmatizes their relationship. This stigmatization has historically been institutionalized through legal discrimination, including restrictions on marriage recognition for same-sex couples (Herdt & Kertzner, 2006; Herek, 2006). The institutionalized stigma enacted through discriminatory laws changed dramatically between 2004, when same-sex couples were granted marriage equality in Massachusetts, and 2015 when the U.S. Supreme Court found restrictions on the rights of same-sex couples to marry unconstitutional (Obergefell v Hodges, 2015). During that 11-year period, civil marriage became an option for same-sex couples either in their own state of residence or by traveling to other states (even if their own state did not recognize the marriage at the time).
Same-sex couples, many of whom formed their relationships and celebrated them in private commitment ceremonies during a time when civil marriage was not an option, now have to make a decision about getting married legally. Despite changing laws, these decisions are made in a social context that continues to be characterized by minority stress, which is the chronic stress that accompanies a stigmatized identity (Meyer, 2003). Previous research has demonstrated that same-sex couples experience minority stress factors (discrimination, anticipation of rejection, concerns about disclosing their identities, and internalized stigma) that negatively affect their interactions at work (e.g., Rostosky & Riggle, 2002), in their extended families (e.g., Reczek, 2015; Rostosky et al., 2004), in their religious/spiritual communities (e.g., Rostosky, Riggle, Brodnicki, & Olson, 2008), and with each other (e.g., Otis, Rostosky, Riggle, & Hamrin, 2006). Research has also documented associations between discriminatory marriage laws and policies and minority stress (Riggle, Rostosky, & Horne, 2010; Rostosky, Riggle, Horne, & Miller, 2009).

Despite the challenges of minority stress, however, comparison studies either find no significant differences in relationship quality between same-sex couples and heterosexual couples (e.g., Frost & Gola, 2015; Kurdek, 2006), or find differences that favor same-sex couples (e.g., Balsam, Beauchaine, Rothblum, & Solomon, 2008). Qualitative findings suggest that same-sex couples find ways to successfully cope with the minority stress they experience in ways that preserve and benefit the quality of their relationships (Rostosky et al., 2004; Rostosky, Riggle, Dudley & Comer Wright, 2006; Rostosky, Riggle, Gray, & Hatton, 2007).

With the advent of marriage equality, the ongoing context of social stigma and minority stress forces couples to consider the effects of marrying, a public act, in the face of possible rejection or other negative experiences and interactions. In addition to issues related to public disclosure, couples must contend with possible prejudice and discrimination in their families, workplaces, and communities, fear of rejection, and internalized stigma. They must anticipate the need to use coping strategies to manage these minority stressors.

Marriage is a powerful institution that grants significant legal rights and social privileges and responsibilities to participating couples (Hull, 2006). DePaulo and Morris (2005) argued that U.S. society has constructed a “cult of the couple.” That is, the social context values and reinforces people who are married and uses marriage as a way to privilege those who participate. Weighing the social benefits and costs of marrying (or not marrying) is a relatively new phenomenon for same-sex couples that warrants empirical investigation.

Previous qualitative interview studies of same-sex couples in the United States have focused on samples of Massachusetts couples, the first to be able
to legally marry in the United States (Badgett, 2011; Lannutti, 2011; Porche & Purvin, 2008; Ramos, Goldberg, & Badgett, 2009; Schecter, Tracy, Page, & Luong, 2008; also see Richman, 2013, who interviewed Massachusetts and California couples between 2004 and 2007). These studies found that same-sex couples marry to gain legal protections, social validation, and support for their relationship. Haas and Whitton (2015) found that 91% of a large sample of same-sex partnered individuals indicated that legal marriage was important because of the legal benefits and financial protections. Slightly more than one third of this sample indicated that legal marriage gave (or would give) legitimacy to their relationship in the eyes of others and demonstrate the equal rights and dignity of same-sex and different-sex committed relationships.

Interestingly, two of the studies cited above also suggested that couples were at times fearful that the right to marry would be rescinded (Schecter et al., 2008) or expressed some ambivalence or misgivings about getting married (Lannutti, 2011). This fear and ambivalence may be related to minority stress. The first aim of the present study was to extend previous studies by specifically investigating the role of minority stress (Meyer, 2003) as a conceptual framework for understanding long-term same-sex couples’ decision to marry. In a narrative analysis of same-sex couples’ “triumph” and “atrocity” stories of their marriages in the United Kingdom, Canada, and the United States, Thomas (2014) argued that positive changes in legal policies (e.g., marriage equality, civil partnership) does not end stigma and discrimination against same-sex relationships even as they open up new possibilities for social inclusion. Similarly, open-ended responses to a survey item soliciting reactions to the U.S. Supreme Court decisions in U.S. v. Windsor (2013) and Hollingsworth v. Perry (2013), which supported marriage equality at the federal level and in California, evoked minority stress reactions (in addition to positive emotions) from the same-sex partnered subsample \((N = 273)\), including fears of backlash discrimination. Responses from the heterosexual sibling comparison subsample \((N = 98)\) included expressions of indifference and disapproval (as well as support), substantiating the concerns of the same-sex partnered individuals and demonstrating that marriage equality does not end prejudice, discrimination, and rejection of same-sex couples, even within their own families (Clark, Riggle, Rostosky, Rothblum, & Balsam, 2015).

Our second aim in the present study was to understand the experiences of long-term, same-sex couples who began their relationship at a time when marriage was not an option and then had to decide whether or not to marry when that became possible. We interviewed same-sex couples from the CUPPLES study, a longitudinal, population-based study of same-sex couples who came from all over the United States to obtain civil unions in Vermont between July 2000 and June 2001, the first year that such legislation was available anywhere in the United States (and before any nation in the world...
had same-sex marriage). Civil union couples were compared with same-sex couples in their friendship network who had not obtained civil unions at the time (Solomon, Rothblum, & Balsam, 2004, 2005); these couples were resurveyed 3 years later (Balsam et al., 2008). Couple members from the original study were recontacted in 2013 for the Wave 3 data collection. Wave 3 was the first time that same-sex couples, who were surveyed via questionnaires at Waves 1 and 2, were given the option of also being interviewed about their relationship.

All these same-sex couples had formed their committed relationships prior to 2002, when there was no availability of civil marriage. By Wave 3, some of the couples had decided to marry even though the state they resided in would not recognize that marriage. Other couples married with the expectation of full legal recognition in their state of residence and by the federal government (although not by all other U.S. states). To address the two aims of the study, interviews with these long-term couples focused on gathering in-depth narratives on their decision to marry and their experience of being married.

Method

Participant recruitment and demographics

Same-sex couple members from the original CUPPLES study were recontacted in 2013 for the Wave 3 data collection. Of the 88% of respondents in the Wave 3 online survey that indicated that they were still with their 2001 partner, 141 same-sex couples volunteered to be interviewed together about their relationship. Of these, 21 married couples (14 female, 7 male) were selected to be interviewed with attention to including male and female couples and some geographic diversity. Eleven of these couples had obtained a civil union in Vermont prior to Wave 1 of the study; the other 10 couples had not. The couples in the present sample had been legally married for an average of 5.2 years (SD = 3.6) with a range of less than 1 year since marriage to 10 years. At the time of the interviews, couples lived in 12 different states. Seven of the couples resided in states that did not recognize their marriage. Couple members ranged in age from 37 to 84 (M = 56; SD = 9.3) and reported being together as a couple from 15 to 41 years (M = 24.0; SD = 7.4). Four couples included one member who identified as African American, Chicano/a, Latino/a, or Pacific Islander; all the other couple members self-identified as White. In six cases one or both couple members had children (from the current or a prior relationship); four of these couples had at least one child under the age of 18. The participants were highly educated compared to general population samples, with 70% having a college degree or an advanced graduate degree. Employment status was reported as full-time (61%), part-time (15%), and retired (24%).
**Interview protocol**

A semistructured interview protocol was developed by the research team and piloted with three volunteer couples from the researchers’ social networks. Open-ended questions focused on couples’ relationship history, including details about their experiences with legal relationship recognition (civil union, domestic partnership, marriage). Semistructured interview prompts included “Tell me how you came to decide to get married” and “How did getting married change your relationship with each other and with others (friends, co-workers, children, local community)?” We also asked couples if anything surprised them about how they felt or how they were treated once they were married and what it meant to them to be legally married.

**Procedures**

**Interviews**

Since the relationship was the unit of analysis, couples were interviewed together rather than individually. This dyadic interview was conducted by phone or over the Internet (Skype) between June and December 2014 and was digitally recorded. Each interview began with approved informed consent procedures and then proceeded with open-ended questions and prompts that were designed to generate rich and detailed narratives about couples’ perceptions, feelings, and experiences. Interviews lasted approximately 1 hour, and each couple member received a $50 gift card for participating in the interview. A professional transcriptionist transcribed the interviews, which averaged 18 pages of text (range 12–24 pages).

**Research team**

Interviews and data analyses were conducted by a research team composed of four PhD senior researchers, each with extensive experience in qualitative methods and LGBTQ psychosocial research; all senior researchers identified as female, LGBTQ, and as being in a committed same-sex relationship. The senior researchers were approximately the same age as the couples they interviewed (ages 47–60). The full-time project director, MA, female, in her 30s, partnered and heterosexual-identified, participated in the coding and discussions of coding to provide an additional perspective on the data and to give feedback on the coding process. None of the researchers were in a civil marriage at the time of the study.

Team members reviewed the audio tapes as data were being collected to immerse themselves in the data, to monitor their quality, and to determine if any adjustments were needed to clarify the wording of interview questions. Team members regularly listened to each other’s completed interviews and discussed their initial impressions of overall themes and patterns that were
emerging from the couples’ shared narratives of their lived experience. As data collection progressed, the interviewers noted that some redundancy or consistency across the data corpus seemed to be emerging, signifying that data saturation was likely (Morrow, 2005).

During the interviewing period and prior to commencing coding the transcripts, team members debriefed with each other about their personal reactions to the couples they had interviewed and their personal perspectives on marriage as a legal and social institution. With these perspectives “on the table,” the coding team proceeded with the coding tasks described below with attention to staying grounded in the actual narratives of the couples (subjectivity) rather than layering these words with abstract interpretations and meanings supplied by the coders (reflexivity). The coding team also challenged each other during team discussions to actively examine the data for couples’ experiences and perspectives that differed from those of the coding team members. These reflexive processes helped to minimize research bias (Morrow, 2005) in the coding and interpretation of the couples’ lived experiences.

**Analyses**

Data were coded and analyzed inductively with the goal of accurately describing the lived experiences of the couples. The team took a two-step approach to understanding the lived experiences of same-sex couples who marry. The first step was a content analysis of the responses to the questions according to the steps outlined in Hill (2012) and described below. Second, the minority stress framework was used as a theoretical perspective on couples’ narratives about their decisions and experiences of marriage.

The first step in the coding process was to extract the data from each transcript that was relevant to the research question. Each member of the research team individually read eight transcripts and marked the relevant passages in each, noting common domains that were present across the transcripts. Then the team met to discuss the domains that they had observed in the transcripts they were assigned. They agreed on a set of working domains (six related to reasons couples married and five for effects of marriage). They used these domains to code each couple’s transcript; each transcript was coded independently by two coders. Data that did not fit any of the domains were collected into an “other” domain and examined carefully for possible inclusion in a new domain or as evidence that contradicted one of the existing domains (Morrow, 2005). No data in the “other” category coalesced into an additional domain.

Once all the data were coded, the first author created the cross-analysis document, which is a consensus version of the coded data for each pair of coders and for each domain across the full set of transcripts. Pseudonyms were assigned to each couple member in the cross-analysis document to
protect confidentiality. The first author then drafted a summary of this cross-analysis for review and discussion by the team. During this coding process, refinements were made to the original domains such that domains and the data within domains were compared, collapsed, and reorganized to present the most parsimonious narrative that integrated all the data provided by the couples. Finally, the first two authors conducted a careful reading, analysis, and discussion of the data in the domains using minority stress as a theoretical lens to further contextualize couples’ responses. The second two authors served as auditors for this level of theoretical coding. Illustrative quotes from each domain are presented below and then discussed in relation to what the findings reveal about couples’ decisions and experiences.

The standards for credibility of qualitative studies were ensured by a number of analytic procedures (Hill, 2012; Morrow, 2005). First, the coding team rigorously prioritized the lived experiences of the couples as narrated in the interviews. Multiple coders were used to code each transcript, and ongoing team discussions helped coders to bracket their own meanings and privilege the experiences and perceptions that the couples disclosed. Data were constantly compared within and across domains, and final coding decisions were discussed and verified through the consensus process enacted by the coding team.

Results

Results focus on two main areas: domains related to the decision to get married and domains related to the effects of being married. The long-term committed couples in the present sample reported getting married for (1) the legal protection and security that come with civil marriage, (2) the social validation that civil marriage provides, and (3) as an extension and expression of their political activism on behalf of marriage equality for themselves and others. Regarding the effects of getting married, there were three domains: (1) emotional effects, (2) legal protection and security, and (3) social validation. Within each of these domains, narratives of minority stress emerged. These are described in detail below and illustrated with quotes from the couples.

Decision to get married

A few couples (n = 3) reported that they got married because “it felt right” and marked the growing trust and commitment that they felt toward each other. Other couples elaborated with more specific reasons for their decision to marry.
**Legal protection and security**

A majority of this sample of long-term couples focused on the desire for legal protection and security for their relationship \((n = 15)\). Tangible benefits that provided a sense of security included health insurance benefits, Social Security benefits, and tax benefits. Some couples were anxious to get married as soon as it became legal because they did not trust that their access to marriage would be permanent. These couples got married within days of it becoming legal in their state, afraid that if they did not act quickly their window of opportunity might close, similar to what happened in California.

Linda, 54, and Denise, 57, for instance, had gone to California in 2013 to get married with the thought, “You know because of last time we better do it right away in case they pull the plug again!” Likewise, Jackie, 51, married Harriet, 55, as soon as it became legal in their state and after being a couple for 15 years. She explained her sense of urgency, “You know you can’t take these things (getting married) for granted because you never know when they’re gonna disappear.”

These couples’ decisions to get married were made in a context of minority stress. They feared that their rights would be taken away if they did not act quickly. These couples had witnessed the passage of Proposition 8 revoking the marriage rights of same-sex couples in California, and this event affected their own minority stress regardless of their state of residence.

Family formation was another motivator for some couples in the sample. Three couples who had minor children or who were thinking about having children were particularly motivated by the protection that marriage provided their family. For example, James, age 37, and his husband John, 50, were married a year prior to the interview as they were in the process of adopting their son.

James: I’ve come to understand for myself what same-sex marriage means. It really means security. And it’s really not as much about the life you’re living as what happens when one of you passes away. We would have a lot of obstacles if one of us passed away. So that piece we were well aware of early on in the civil union that it still didn’t answer that concern that we always had. But moving forward with an adoption, I just knew that we would be viewed as a more secure household (if we got married). And I felt some security in (getting married) as well.

John: We want to provide for each other. We want to provide for our child and we don’t want any contingencies that we could prevent.

This couple and others wanted to do everything possible to protect their families from discrimination in the event of a crisis. In the context of discrimination, they could not and did not assume that their relationships to their children would be honored or acknowledged. This minority stressor motivated them to seek out legal methods of protecting their family relationships, including advance planning documents. Even though couples had
taken prior legal steps, civil marriage offered them added legal protection and security that helped to allay their fears.

**Social validation**

Several couples cited the desire for social validation as a primary reason for getting married ($n = 6$). The relationship histories of couples in this sample included painful experiences of prejudice and rejection within their family of origin. For instance, Jerome, 49, described how his immediate family members treated him and Roger, 42, for the 11 years they were together prior to their marriage 6 years ago. “Even my parents and my brothers and sisters, like, well, they would minimize our relationship because we couldn’t legally get married and therefore we were second class citizens. That’s how they treated me, emotionally.” He went on to explain how momentous it felt to tell his family that he was married. “So for me, getting that marriage license and holding it up and saying, ‘Look, I’m married! Yes, the ‘M’ word is very important to me. We’re married now. Now what are you gonna say? Am I still a second class citizen in your eyes?’”

Unsupportive interactions with their family members were a continuing source of minority stress for some of the couples in the study. Some couples had a long history of distancing themselves from unsupportive family members. Other couples narrated complex mixtures of support and rejection from their family members. For example, while a sibling might still be disapproving of the couple’s decades-long relationship, the couple might enjoy a close and mutually supportive relationship with the nieces and nephews.

Since Roger and Jerome lived in a state that did not recognize their marriage, they had taken several opportunities to obtain different types of relationship recognition. They had a formal commitment ceremony in 1998 that they still consider to be their “real” anniversary. Then they went to Vermont in 2000 to get a civil union because they wanted what they perceived as a “smidgeon of legality.” Then they traveled to California in 2008 to get legally married during the window of time prior to Proposition 8. Other couples joked that their history of seeking legal recognition represented their determination to keep “pursuing it until it sticks.”

Emily and Joyce, both 58, have been together for 33 years. They described a general sense of social exclusion before marriage equality. They went to California 6 years ago to get married, even though their marriage would not be recognized in their state of residence. Emily explained:

> It wasn’t about the legality. It was more about a broader common mankind acceptance. It was more that all these people in the state of California would recognize that we were not any different from any married couple. For me that’s what it was all about. It was to normalize our committed relationship over so many years.”
These couples’ experiences of minority stress formed the backdrop for their decisions about getting married and their hopes for social acceptance and inclusion. They pursued every newly available form of legal recognition to end the ambiguity, uncertainty, and vulnerability that they felt. Even after years of stigma and rejection from family, community, and country, they were optimistic and hopeful that civil marriage would finally provide the social inclusion and validation that their relationship deserved.

**A political act**

Several couples (n = 6) had participated in social and political activism for many years, and getting married was the culmination of their hard work on behalf of marriage equality. Liz, 55, and Brenda, 53, have been together for 33 years and were married when Massachusetts became the first state to legalize same-sex marriage.

Liz: The decision to get married was something that we had always been working towards, so it was always something we’d been fighting for.

Brenda: We were part of the whole process of fighting for marriage rights. We weren’t expecting it to happen, really. But when it did happen we knew all along that’s what we were going towards. So we were part of the process, testifying at the state house and doing all the things that we could to make that come true.

Likewise, Mark, 72, and Dan, 64, felt that getting married was an important political statement to make as a couple, as they were about to move from a state that recognized their marriage to a state that did not.

Dan: We wanted to come down to Florida as a married couple because we wanted to stir the soup if there was a problem. It was a political statement, you know, just because we could. I had a feeling that we would possibly get involved in some of the lawsuits here, being a same-sex couple from New York...we met some of the leaders and told them we’d be available if they needed another couple (to join a lawsuit).

Mark: It was a political statement instead of a love statement because we were already in love. We didn’t need to prove our love to each other.

Activism was an important positive coping strategy that many of these couples used to deal with the minority stress that they felt as a result of social and institutionalized stigma. Couples frequently described long histories of working together as activists to combat discrimination against their relationship and their identities. They were motivated to get married, in part, to celebrate the strides made toward legal recognition and equality, not only for themselves but for the larger LGB community. Couples noted that achieving marriage equality filled them with a sense of satisfaction and joy, and they wanted to participate in this historic triumph.
The effects of getting married

Three domains captured the effects of marriage for these couples. It is important to note that even though the question focused on their experience after marriage, all participants contextualized their emotional responses to marriage within the long-term commitment that they had to one another prior to their civil marriage. Typically, the emotional effects of their legal marriage were compared to a previous, deeply meaningful commitment ceremony and the long history of their emotional commitment to each other. Increased protection and security and a greater sense of social validation were also primary effects of marriage.

Emotional

When asked whether changes had occurred in their relationship since getting married, it was common for couples to initially respond by saying that “nothing” had changed in terms of the quality of their relationship with each other \( (n = 11) \). All 21 of the couples had been together for a minimum of 15 years, all had at least one previous meaningful private or public ceremony, and all had at least one special anniversary date prior to their marriage that they celebrated. Many of these couples remarked that they never considered that they would have access to marriage in their lifetime and so marriage was never really a life goal as it was for their heterosexual family members and friends. Some of these couples still considered their original commitment ceremony or civil union to be the most meaningful marker of their commitment. For Barb (84) and Helen (66), together for 36 years, it was their civil union in Vermont that “for us was a huge deal.” They converted their civil union to civil marriage 6 years ago:

You know somebody who hasn’t had a civil union first, whose state has just passed gay marriage without having to go through civil union or domestic partnerships or anything, these people are getting married for the first time, getting legally recognized for the first time. You know it’s a huge, huge deal. But for us that huge deal was with civil unions. And it was a huge deal because we were the first state and there weren’t very many people in civil unions at the time that we did ours even though we did ours 2 years after the law took effect. We were certainly within the first, oh, probably 500 or so couples….it wasn’t in any other states. So it was a real big deal and it had been such a hard won fight that it was a really big deal, but then, you know, marriage after that was no big deal.”

Many couples affirmed that they had long loved each other and were deeply committed to their relationship, so getting legally married did not change that. Dave, 56, and Francis, 51, had been together for 29 years and married for the last 10. Dave said, “I often tell people that being married meant everything and nothing. Nothing changed, like we’re still the same couple we were before and after…but then it changed everything because
we’re married.” Likewise, Joan, 65, married to Gail, 56, for five of their 19 years together said, “Just to say we got married…just feels good. But I mean as far as the emotional part, not that much changed in our relationship to each other.”

Some couples were surprised by the intense emotion that they felt during their wedding ceremony, even after so many years together. For Laura and Connie, now in their early 40s and together for 21 years, unexpected emotions surfaced. When she saw her parents walking down the aisle at the wedding rehearsal, Laura reported that she “got really choked up. And I was like, ‘oh my gosh! It’s my turn’ [to get married]. It even makes me a little bit emotional thinking about it now.”

Other couples felt that getting married gave them a sense of satisfaction and achievement that things were finally “the way they should be.” Some felt that for the first time they were “seen” or acknowledged as a couple, even though they had considered themselves a couple for many years. Getting married also elicited complex emotions for some couples and revealed the long-time and lingering effects of stigma and minority stress. Couples recounted that unlike their straight siblings, they had grown up thinking they would never be able to marry the person they loved. They did not fully trust that their right to marry would not be revoked, as it had been in California. This context of minority stress provided a poignant background to their joy at finally being able to marry each other.

**Legal protection and security**

Getting married did achieve the goal of providing legal and tangible benefits and an increased sense of psychological security. Twenty couples noted some sense of security that marriage gave them in terms of legal protection and practical benefits. Six couples specifically talked about having the security of being able to make financial and medical decisions in the event of an emergency. “Once you’re married you can prove beyond a doubt that you have a legal right to make medical decisions or financial decisions [for your spouse],” noted Stuart, age 65.

Fifteen couples named specific practical benefits they received after they married, including being able to file taxes together, obtain car insurance and health insurance together, and go through customs together. Francis, age 51, stated,

Not that either one of us is contemplating retirement, but the fact that we’re now eligible for spousal social security benefits and survivor pension rights is incredibly significant. And not even just counting the dollars, but you know sort of the stability. That matters. It matters a tremendous amount.
Many couples, like Francis and Dave, noted that these legal and practical benefits gave them an increased sense of psychological security that they did not previously enjoy. They seemed to “breathe easier” knowing that their relationship and families had a legal status that everyone understood and that would be honored in the event of a crisis or emergency. Eleven couples used words such as empowered, liberating, more relaxed, and a sense of permanency to describe specific psychological effects of having the legal protection of marriage. As Stuart noted, “There was so much more solid reassurance that nobody could take my rights away.”

In the narratives of these couples, vestiges of minority stress emerged. Unlike different-sex couples, same-sex couples do not assume that their relationship will be honored or even recognized. These couples, in many cases, had spent decades together as “single” persons in the eyes of the law and in the eyes of society. Having legal benefits was a new and positive experience that contrasted with their experience of being denied legal recognition.

Social validation
A few couples gave examples of prejudice and rejection from family members that they experienced even after they were married. Lynn, 60, and Cynthia, 58, married 6 years ago after being together for 27 years. Cynthia reported that her mother expressed her rejection of the couple’s marriage by sulking through the entire wedding, refusing to let the photographer take her picture, and continuing to introduce Lynn as her daughter’s “friend.” Charles, 41, and Jeffry, 53, together 20 years, were hurt when family members came to their wedding 6 years ago and then promptly and publicly donated to an organization that was working to prevent marriage equality.

On the other hand, many couples reported feeling an increase in social validation of their relationship from others (n = 14). In addition to the six couples who said they married for this reason, another eight couples specifically noted that this was one of the effects of getting married. Even after a 19-year relationship, Francis was surprised about the change in his and Dave’s families:

All of a sudden it seemed that we got to another level that we never expected. And I think it was most noticeable with our families. It was just a level of recognition that hadn’t happened before. An example is when my grandfather died they put Dave’s name in the obituary. And I don’t know that would have happened before we were married. People know what being married means. (Francis, 51, married to Dave, 56, for 10 of their 29 years together)

In some cases couples were shocked by how much positive attention they received when they announced that they were marrying or had already
married. Linda, 54, and Denise, 57, married after 16 years together. They remembered their friends’ reactions to their announcement:

Linda: I will say I found it shocking how much it meant to them [friends]. You know because when we told them we were just going down to the courthouse to get married…and they made such a big to-do about it. They called us fiancées, they gave us cards…the wedding party she’s telling you about was really a wedding shower that they did. They insisted. They wanted it. They gave us gifts.

Denise: They fed us cakes. They got a little cake like would be on the top of the wedding cake. It’s in the freezer right now.

Linda: So that was very surprising to me that it made a big deal to them because they’ve always treated us as a couple, so I was surprised by that.

Other couples perceived that people saw them as a “legitimate” couple or a “real” couple now that they were married. Mark, 72, married to Dan, 64, after 25 years together, shared the joy that he felt when he filled out forms and checked the “married” box, even though their state did not recognize their marriage.

A number of people said that their marriage signified to others that they were a “normal” couple. After many years together in a stigmatized relationship that had no legal status, “You can be like everybody else and say, ‘I got married’ and everybody knows what you mean,” said Shirley, 64. She recounted a recent incident in which she had some minor surgery and asked if her wife could come in to be with her. “I didn’t have to say partner; I didn’t have to say friend; it was just, you know, what everybody else says and that’s what I got to say. And that word has all the meaning. It has lots of meaning attached to it.” This couple and others expressed a sense of relief from the minority stress that, prior to their marriage, kept them constantly uncertain about how they and their relationship would be treated. Couples did not fully trust that they would always be treated well despite their marital status, but they were pleased and delighted when their relationship was acknowledged and respected in even the most mundane interactions.

Some couples (n = 8) enjoyed referring to each other as “wife” or “husband” because those were labels that everyone understood. Stuart, 65, and Ray, 66, have been married for six of their 21 years together. “There was a sense of proudness around being able to say, you know, that this is my husband,” said Stuart, although he and Ray both admitted that it took some time and practice to get comfortable using that label publicly. Likewise, Liz talked about how much easier things were now that she can simply refer to Brenda as her wife and people immediately understand the relationship, although when they first got married 10 years ago, “The wife thing, at first I didn’t really like it and I was hoping they’d come up with something else.” Now, however, Liz has concluded, “I think it just levels the playing field a little bit and, you know, we all have the same thing….that word ‘wife’ means something very specific.” Brenda, who Liz says “jumped into the wife thing
immediately,” concurred: “I say ‘wife’ and I think that’s the best thing about the marriage thing.”

On the other hand, several couples \( n = 6 \) struggled, at least at first, with using these labels. Gene, 62, and Steve, 59, married for 3 years after being together for 38 years, shared his struggle with referring to Steve as his husband:

Gene: I’ve had some difficulty adjusting to the “h” word as I call it. I’ve never liked all the other words over the years (lover, boyfriend). We settled on partner ultimately but being a lawyer I decided it was too much like someone in a law firm. But husband, to me, is just getting past that sense of putting on the strictures of a different institution that may or may not be what same-sex marriage will ultimately be, or is, or will turn into. And also, I go back to the time when, you know, when I was a kid and coming out, you know the view of the straight world was that if it is a gay relationship, two men and two women, one is a husband and one is a wife playing those roles. That’s my 50-year-old emotional baggage that says, “Oh gee, if I say husband someone will say, which one of you is the wife?” And I know that it sounds totally ridiculous and absurd, but old habits die hard. But I’m getting better with “husband.”

Gene’s narrative illustrates the impact of internalized stigma, a minority stress factor that results from having been socialized in a culture that stigmatizes identities and relationships by creating and reinforcing negative messages and stereotypes to rationalize prejudice and discrimination.

Marriage, and its associated traditional gender role scripts, triggers Gene’s internalized stigma and coping with it takes time and energy.

Jackie and Harriet also struggled at first with adopting the word “wife,” for different reasons:

Jackie: I think in the beginning I had a slightly difficult time using the word ‘wife’ when we were married 3 years ago and suddenly we were wife and wife. I just had a difficult time using the words. I think part of my mental block was that in the world at large, husband equals master of the house and wife equals the person who picks up the dirty socks. And that didn’t reflect our relationship, so I think that was part of why I struggled.

Harriet: That’s not true in my case. We fought for so long to be wife and wife that we’re gonna use it, by the way!

Jackie and Harriet represent couples whose opinions and perspectives on marriage differ. Jackie, like other couples, rejected the sexism and rigid gender scripts underlying traditional conceptualizations of marriage. She found these gender scripts to be oppressive and limiting to women and was, as a result, ambivalent about the institution of marriage. Harriet, on the other hand, heartily embraced the full social inclusion that marriage equality and its accompanying language and symbols represented.

Disclosure issues, another minority stress factor, also came up in couples’ narratives about the effects of marriage. When Vicki, 62, and Ruth, 64,
married in Canada 14 years ago after 11 years together, they hesitated to share their wonderful news when they made dinner reservations because they feared they would be mistreated.

Vicki: [The dinner] needed to be special. And I wanted to say the reason, but I couldn’t. It’s not my personality to say those kinds of things to regular people, I guess.

Ruth: And I was the same way because I think of all the past prejudices that we have been through prior to this. I mean we’re both in our sixties so we’ve had prejudice and the name-calling and all of that. And it was still new to us...and we just wanted to keep it special and we didn’t want to have any negative consequences to that memory.

As a legal and social institution, civil marriage is a matter of public record. Couples recounted a history of maneuvering through their workplaces and communities with a sense of caution about how safe it was to be out or whether they should conceal their relationship in some settings. Being hypervigilant about others’ reactions and anticipating problems is part of the minority stress that couples face, even after marriage. Joyce, 58, explained,

There are times when I would not say ‘wife.’ There are people that I deal with at the company I would not feel comfortable saying ‘wife’ to that I would say ‘partner’ because I think that would be more palatable for them. If I think they can go there I’ll go there immediately. And if I’m dealing with them on the phone, like a clerk or somebody, or just somebody that I don’t happen to know or have to work with, then I go there immediately. It’s just people that I think I may have to have more interaction with. Then it just takes me a little while to move them along.

Two couples talked very specifically about their wedding rings, which held great meaning for them as symbols of their marriage. Dave and Francis had never worn rings and were expecting that they would take their rings off after the ceremony. To their surprise, they found it very satisfying to wear their matching wedding rings on the “traditional ring finger,” and they have continued to wear them for the 10 years they have been married. Dave perceives that he is treated differently because he wears a wedding ring. “Just having a wedding band on, you know, it signals to the world that you’re married,” he concluded. This couple and others embraced the traditional symbols of marriage and experienced social recognition and acceptance as a result.

As couples married, they experienced the social inclusion that comes with marital status in our society. However, they also experienced fears of rejection and discomfort with disclosing in some situations. Specifically, some couple members struggled with adopting the labels of husband and wife out of fear that they would encounter negative reactions from others, or in reaction to the negative stereotypes that they had internalized about gender
roles and sexual identity. These minority stress experiences coexisted with the joy and relief of being acknowledged as a couple, legally and socially.

Discussion

For these mid-life, long-term couples, the lived experience of deciding to marry and the effects of marriage are situated within the larger sociopolitical context of marriage equality for which several of them had fought, and within the emotional/intimate bonds of their long-term commitment to each other. Their reasons for getting married and the experiences of marriage are consistent with findings from previous qualitative studies of couples who were among the first to be married in Massachusetts (e.g., Badgett, 2011; Lannutti, 2011; Porche & Purvin, 2008; Schecter et al., 2008) and California (Richman, 2013). Like earlier studies (e.g., Haas & Whitton, 2015), couples married because they wanted the legal protections that are provided to spouses. They also wanted the social validation that society bequeaths to married couples (DePaulo & Morris, 2005). They perceived that getting married would help them to achieve both goals.

Similar to previous studies, the couples in this study did not perceive that marriage impacted their emotional commitment to each other. Many of these couples had already marked their commitment to each other with public or private ceremonies that they considered to be their “wedding” or their “real marriage.” Indeed, one half of the couples in this study were among the “pioneers in partnership” (Solomon et al., 2004) who were the first in the nation to obtain legal status when it first became available in the form of civil union in Vermont. Civil marriage, however, more than other forms of legal recognition, represents the most socially integrated relationship status available to adults in our society (see Natale & Miller-Cribbs, 2012). Many of the couples in the current study represent those who have repeatedly sought this social integration as various types of relationship recognition became available to same-sex couples. The young adults who will form and maintain their relationships in the context of marriage equality will likely have different relational experiences and challenges than this cohort of couples (Frost, Meyer, & Hammack, 2015).

We found that minority stress was an important context to interpreting these data. The couples in this sample had formed their relationships prior to marriage being an option and thus had experienced many forms of legal and social discrimination throughout their relationships (in many cases, for over two decades). Minority stress in its many forms served as backdrop for the couples’ experience, even when not explicitly stated. Their narratives provide evidence that their decisions and experiences have been shaped by a social context that stigmatizes the relationships of same-sex couples. Some couples experienced prejudicial interactions with family members that discounted...
their relationship, anticipated that strangers would reject them or otherwise discriminate against them if it were known they were a couple, and sometimes struggled with their own internalized negative feelings. Couples displayed a range of coping strategies, including many years of political activism, their private and prized commitment ceremonies that they still celebrate even after their civil marriages, and their repeated efforts to protect their relationship through all available means (e.g., advance legal planning, civil unions, domestic partnerships, and civil marriages in multiple states). The research team also noted the humor, optimism, and resilience that couples displayed as they shared their experiences of stigma and minority stress. This finding is worthy of direct investigation.

It is notable that religion did not appear as a reason for getting married. Lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) individuals, compared to their heterosexual siblings, were more likely to indicate that they have no religion or that their spiritual beliefs do not fit a formal religion (Rothblum, Balsam, & Mickey, 2004). In Wave 1 of the CUPPLES study, women in same-sex relationships reported attending religious services less often than heterosexual married couples, and men in same-sex couples rated religion as less important than did heterosexual married men (Solomon et al., 2004). In the current study, the spiritual or religious meanings of marriage were more likely to emerge in couples’ descriptions of their earlier commitment ceremonies rather than in their accounts of their legal marriage. Marriage equality now opens up the possibility that spiritual or religious meanings and legal or contractual meanings of marriage can be temporally aligned, as they often are in the wedding scripts of different-sex couples.

Due to the age of the participants in the current study and the fact that civil marriage was possible only years after they entered into their relationship, children and parenting were not prominent themes in participants’ reflections about marriage. However, for three couples who still had minor children at home, parental rights served as primary motivation for their marriages. Qualitative analysis of written comments by CUPPLES Study participants at Wave 1 (Rothblum, Balsam, & Solomon, 2011a) and Wave 2 (Rothblum, Balsam, & Solomon, 2011b) indicated that having a civil union to provide legal protection for children was an important motivation. Similarly, Haas and Whitton (2015) found that 91% of individuals ($N = 526$) in committed same-sex relationships (with an average age approximately 15 years younger than the CUPPLES Wave 3 sample) noted that access to legal benefits and financial protections for themselves and their children were the most important reasons for desiring marriage equality. Future research will be needed to assess whether the presence of children or couples’ desires to become parents will be a central motivating factor for couples to marry.

In sum, future research on young adult cohorts will help us understand how marriage equality affects same-sex couples’ motivations and decisions to
marry and how these young couples choose to express, ritualize, and commemorate their relationships and marriages. Marriage equality necessitates new research on the minority stress experiences of same-sex couples in their families, workplaces, and religious communities. Other types of discrimination, both social and structural, continue to affect the health and wellbeing of same-sex partners (Hatzenbuehler, 2014) and deserve continued study. For example, laws that exempt some people from following nondiscrimination laws that include sexual orientation create an environment where couples may expect and experience discrimination. As argued by Thomas (2014), “triumph” stories continue to coexist with “atrocity” stories and form a complicated social context for same-sex couples to navigate.

One of the limitations of this study is that the majority of the couples in the sample are relatively privileged in terms of income, education, and race/ethnicity. As a result, these couples may cope with minority stress by enacting choices that couples with few privileged statuses cannot. Several couples in this study acknowledged that they choose to live in less conservative and more “friendly” communities, which has been shown to have effects on wellbeing (Riggle et al., 2010). Many couples had the economic means to travel to get married and to hire attorneys to help them with advance planning. Now that all 50 U.S. states have legal marriage for same-sex couples, couples do not need to travel long distances to get married. Therefore, same-sex marriage will be available across a greater range of income. While this study contributes to the small but growing literature on a population-based cohort of older same-sex couples, it is important that future studies recruit younger couples and couples who are more diverse in terms of socioeconomic status and race/ethnicity to more fully understand the impact of marriage.

Despite their relative privilege, however, the couples in this study were not fully protected from experiences of minority stress. Minority stress is associated with lower relationship functioning, especially in younger couples (Doyle & Molix, 2015). Minority stress is also associated with poorer mental (Meyer, 2003) and physical health (Denton, Rostosky, & Danner, 2014). Understanding how minority stress interacts with the current legal environment and impacts couples’ lives is essential to competent health service delivery, psychoeducational and advocacy efforts, and ally building (Rostosky & Riggle, 2011).

Social integration theory (Durkheim, 1951) suggests that civil marriage is associated with psychological and physical health in older same-sex couples, and this hypothesis should be tested in future studies. The findings from the current study might also be used to create and validate measures of security and social inclusion for same-sex couples, two prominent themes that emerged in this and other qualitative studies. While some evidence has shown that partnered older LGB people enjoy greater health than single older LGB people (Williams & Fredriksen-Goldsen, 2014), as more midlife
and older same-sex couples access civil marriage, these two potential explanatory mechanisms and their contributions to wellbeing should be tested in large, diverse samples of same-sex couples.

**Conclusion**

The couples in this study married for legal protection and benefits and for social validation. Once married, couples realized the social symbolism of marriage; the terms *husband, wife,* and *marriage* carry important meaning, significance, and status. These benefits of marriage were experienced despite the fact that couples in our study had been in their relationship for many years before civil marriage was available, and even though many had already had a commitment ceremony in the past. Nevertheless, minority stress forms a backdrop to the social inclusion that marriage promises. Much research, education, and social advocacy work remains to be done to end stigma and prejudice that affect LGBTQ-identified people and their relationships.

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