

Examining Cynicism in Regards to Reasons for Gay Marriage

Jessica Madrid¹ & Stephen Rice¹

¹ New Mexico State University, Las Cruces, New Mexico, USA

Correspondence: Stephen Rice, New Mexico State University, Las Cruces, New Mexico, USA. Tel: 1-575-571-7750. E-mail: scrice02@gmail.com

Received: January 5, 2013 Accepted: January 19, 2013 Online Published: February 18, 2013

doi:10.5539/res.v5n1p45

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5539/res.v5n1p45>

Abstract

Much research has been conducted with regards to general and specific attitudes towards gay marriage; however, to our knowledge, very little, if any, research has evaluated the reasons that others give for *why* gay couples want to get married. The purpose of the current study is to examine various common and uncommon reasons why couples get married, and to determine if there is a general cynicism towards gay marriage that does not exist towards heterosexual marriage. Participants were given a variety of reasons why a male gay or heterosexual person might get married, and they were asked to rate how strongly they agreed with the reasons why the target person might want to get married. The results were surprising in that there was very little cynicism towards the gay target person's reasons; in fact, there was more cynicism towards the heterosexual target person's reasons. We discuss the implications of this research.

Keywords: gay, homosexual, marriage, cynicism

1. Introduction

A Gallup poll conducted in May 2011 suggests that Americans consistently overestimate the percentage of homosexual individuals living in the United States. On average, participants estimated that 25% of the country's population is gay or lesbian (Morales, 2011). In reality, there are around 8 million individuals who identify as gay, lesbian, or bisexual, representing 3.4% of the total population (Gates & Newport, 2012). The National Health Statistic Report of 2011 stated that of their 55,556 male participants, 1.7% identified themselves as gay.

Trends towards acceptance of homosexuality are apparent in a survey conducted by the NORC at the University of Chicago (n.d.). Support in favor of civil liberties for gay individuals, such as the right to speak in front of a public audience has risen from 62% in 1972 to 86% in 2010. In addition, the findings of this recent General Social Survey report that support for same-sex marriage has risen from 11% approval in 1988 to 46% in 2010 (NORC, n.d.). Approval continues to rise according to a 2012 Gallup poll, with 50% of respondents agreeing that marriage between same-sex couples should be legally recognized at the same level as traditional marriages (Newport, 2012).

As of November 6, 2012 there are eight states as well as the District of Colombia that allow same-sex marriage (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2012). High courts in Connecticut, Iowa, and Massachusetts ruled that their constitutions required that same-sex couples be given the same rights as opposite sex couples, while in New York, New Hampshire, Vermont, and the District of Colombia, legislatures passed statutory changes allowing same-sex marriage. Voters in Washington and Maryland upheld legislative decisions to legalize same-sex marriage on the November ballot (NCSL, 2012). Maine voters also approved same-sex marriage through a ballot decision, overturning a decision in 2009, which rejected its legalization (O'Toole, 2012). Results from Washington, Maryland, and Maine denote the first time that voters have openly backed same-sex marriage.

In September 2011, the United States Census Bureau reported a revised estimate from the 2010 census, reporting 131,729 same-sex married couple households and 514,735 same-sex unmarried partner households. The 2010 American Community Survey reported similar numbers, with 152,335 same-sex married households, and 440,989 same-sex unmarried partner households.

1.1 Attitudes towards Homosexuality

There are a number of variables that influence attitudes towards homosexuality. Age (Andersen & Fetner, 2008), gender (Glick, Gangl, Gibb, Klumpner, & Weinberg, 2007; Herek, 2002), ethnicity (Brumbaugh, Sanchez, Nock,

& Wright, 2008), religiosity, political affiliation (Todd & Ong, 2012), and exposure (Dasgupta & Rivera, 2008) have all been shown to correlate with various positions toward homosexuality. While the United States remains divided regarding acceptance of homosexuality (NORC, n.d.), these factors provide useful information about the demographics that are slowly moving towards accession.

In a study of cohort differences in Canada and the United States, Andersen and Fetner (2008) illustrated a greater tolerance for homosexuality in younger generations. Through the use of data from the World Values Survey, Andersen and Fetner (2008) investigated the evolution of American and Canadian attitudes from 1981 to 2000, and across three birth cohorts. The study found that cohort attitudes became more tolerant over the 20-year span, and that there was a negative correlation between age and level of acceptance. The authors suggest that the growing tolerance of homosexuality within age groups over time provides a noteworthy exception to the hypothesis that social attitudes are typically inflexible, reflecting a widespread change in societal acceptance of homosexuality.

Besides age, gender has been studied extensively as a predictor of attitudes on homosexuality (Pearl & Galupo, 2007). Herek (2002) found that heterosexual men tend to have much more negative views regarding homosexuality than their female counterparts, particularly towards gay men. In comparison to heterosexual women, heterosexual men are less likely to support work place equality and adoption rights. They tend to have stronger negative affective responses to homosexuality and are more likely to categorize gay individuals as mentally ill and/or child molesters. However, these differences are less pronounced in attitudes pertaining to lesbians. Herek (2002) concludes that the gender gap in views about gay men and lesbians may be the result of dissimilar cognitive processing of gender in the context of homosexuality.

While research on the relationship between ethnicity and tolerance of homosexuality has been less definitive than that of gender, Brambaugh et al., (2008) found that African Americans are significantly more opposed to homosexuality than Caucasians, while Ahrold and Meston, (2008) found that Asian Americans were more conservative than Hispanics and European Americans in regards to homosexuality.

1.2 Attitudes towards Same-Sex Marriage

Religiosity and political affiliation are often closely linked and represent another factor that can successfully predict social positions on homosexuality. Todd and Ong (2012) used data gathered by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life to investigate the relationship between theological and political orientation and how this may affect support for same-sex marriage. The study found that religious and political conservatism tended to be a predictor for opposition to gay marriage. In addition, they found that the association between religious attendance and support for gay marriage was dependent on an individual's degree of theological conservatism. This is significant because it indicates that although the link between religiosity and disapproval of same-sex marriage does exist, it varies a great deal among individuals.

Contact with and exposure to gay and lesbian individuals through various social relationships is also thought to have an effect on attitudinal perceptions of homosexuality. Dasgupta and Rivera (2008) designed an experiment to test the influence of short-term exposure to venerable outgroup members on implicit anti-gay sentiments. Those participants who were exposed to a biography about an estimable homosexual individual showed less anti-gay attitudes on an Implicit Association Test and tended to vote more in favor of civil rights for gay men and lesbians. Individuals who had long-term contact with gay men and/or lesbians tended to display less anti-gay attitudes in comparison to those who did not have previous long-term contact. Interestingly, exposure to a biography about an admired homosexual individual caused a decrease in this effect. A key factor in interpersonal exposure to gay men and lesbians is overall social attitudes regarding support of civil rights.

With attitudes about homosexuality turning progressively more liberal (Pew Research Center, 2012), support of same-sex marriage is also on the rise (Newport, 2012). While factors such as age, gender, and political affiliation influence perceptions of the morality of homosexuality, there are additional variables that impact whether an individual supports the legalization of same-sex marriage.

Haider-Markel and Joslyn (2008) tested Weiner's 1988 theory of attribution, which states that a stigmatized group will face more opposition when the source of their stigma is perceived to be as a result of choice rather than innately characteristic. Haider-Markel and Joslyn (2008) hypothesized that those respondents who believed homosexuality to be genetic would report significantly more support for same-sex marriage in comparison to those who believed homosexuality to be a choice. This is indeed what they found. Women, those with higher levels of education, those with more contact with gay men and lesbians, Caucasians, and those without children reported a belief that homosexuality is biological and tended to support same-sex marriage and other civil rights for gay men and lesbians.

Perception of marriage itself is also an important variable in determining how an individual feels about same-sex marriage. Duncan and Kimmelmeier (2012) argued that divergence in attitudes arise from different beliefs about marriage as an institution. They proposed that some tend to think of marriage as unalterable in its nature and something that has a more divine origin than any other social construction. Duncan and Kimmelmeier (2012) were able to show that this mind-set often implies greater religiosity and opposition to same-sex marriage. Conversely, those who consider the act of marriage to be a result of evolving, historical circumstances tend to report greater support for the legalization of same-sex marriage.

In a review of the literature, Herek (2006) commented on the legal status of same-sex marriage and how it may affect the relationships of gay men and lesbians. This analysis points out the many benefits of legal marriage, which include greater relationship satisfaction, positive health benefits, financial advantages, greater societal support, the right to certain medical and legal allowances, and the “deterrent of relationship dissolution” (Herek, 2006, p. 615). Just as there are benefits to marriage, so are there many negative outcomes that arise as a result of denying same-sex couples legal marriage. Financial instability, job inequality, and lack of legal rights as the spouse of a deceased individual are just a few of the challenges that lead to high stress levels in the lives of same-sex couples (Herek, 2006). While analyses of attitudes towards homosexuality and same-sex marriage are frequent, there exists a lack of research pertaining to the perception of why gay men choose to get married. The above-mentioned reasons undoubtedly play a large role in the decision for any couple, gay or straight, to get married. However, a review of public opinion on this issue is essential in that it allows a fuller understanding of current attitudes.

1.3 Current Study

Previous studies have found that Americans are slowly becoming more accepting towards homosexuality and supportive of gay rights including same-sex marriage. While certain demographics remain opposed to homosexuality and gay marriage, in general, there have been many recent movements in support of equal rights for homosexual individuals. There have been numerous studies that analyzed the amount of support for gay marriage (NORC, n.d; Pew Research Center, 2012; Newport, 2012); however, there exists a lack of research regarding perceptions about the reasons why gay men choose to marry. The current study aims to extend current knowledge about attitudes towards gay marriage by asking about the reasons behind the marriage decision. The institution of marriage contains complex motivations for both gay and straight couples. The current study seeks to explore perceptions of what these motivations are and compare the potential differences between traditional and same-sex marriages. We hypothesize that participants will be more cynical about the reasons why gay men get married in comparison to the perceived reasons for heterosexual marriage.

2. Experiment

2.1 Participants

Two hundred and fifty-three participants from [blinded for review] took part in the experiment. The mean age was 31.07 ($SD = 10.20$).

2.2. Materials and Procedure

Participants first signed a consent form. They were then given the following instructions, “*Imagine that you met a person named Joe recently. Joe is homosexual. He tells you that he wants to get married. Please state below how strongly you agree or disagree with each statement about why Joe might want to get married.*” In a separate condition, participants were given the same instructions except that Joe was described as being heterosexual. Following this, participants were given 11 different scenarios about Joe’s reasons for getting married. The scenarios can be found in Appendix A. For example, in one scenario, participants were told that, “*Joe believes having a legally recognized marriage will force his friends to accept his relationship.*” These scenarios were generated by both gay and heterosexual couples in a pilot study. Other than Question 1, all the questions were meant to portray cynical reasons for getting married (other than for love).

Participants were then asked to rate how strongly they agreed or disagreed with each of the reasons why Joe might want to get married on a 7-point Likert scale from Extremely Agree to Extremely Disagree. A neutral response was allowed.

Once participants completed the scenarios, they provided demographics, were debriefed and dismissed. The design was between-participants, in which separate participants were presented with the homosexual-heterosexual experimental manipulation.

3. Results

Table 1 provides the data from the experiment. A two-way mixed design ANOVA was employed using Sexual Orientation as the between-participants factor and Scenarios as the within-participants factor. There was a main effect of Sexual Orientation, $F(1, 251) = 7.93, p = .005$, and a main effect of Scenario, $F(12, 3012) = 16.53, p < .001$. The interaction between the conditions was not significant, $F(12, 3012) = 1.12, p = .34$.

As hypothesized, participants were less inclined to agree that homosexual Joe wanted to get married because he was in love, $t(251) = 2.32, p = .02$; two-tailed. However, none of the other scenarios went in the direction of the hypothesis. A binomial analysis showed this to be statistically significant ($p < .001$). In fact, four of the 10 other scenarios were statistically different in the opposite direction of the hypothesis (all $ps < .05$; two-tailed).

4. Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions that people have regarding the reasons why gay men get married. While it is generally accepted that there are many complex reasons why a straight couple may choose to engage in traditional marriage (Adams & Jones, 1997), the issue of whether the same opinions hold true for gay couples had previously gone unaddressed. As changes in equal rights laws are at the forefront of current legislation, it is pertinent to examine public attitudes regarding not only support or disapproval of same-sex marriage, but also the beliefs that people hold about the intentions, motivations, and purposes of gay marriage. While previous studies have examined attitudes towards gay marriage on a surface level (Andersen & Fetner, 2008; Glick et al., 2007; Brumbaugh et al., 2008), the present study sought to delve into the insights that people hold concerning the subjective reasoning of gay men who choose to get married.

We hypothesized that people would not have the same perceptions of the reasons why same-sex couples get married in comparison to heterosexual couples. Specifically, we suspected that when asked about the various reasons for marriage, participants would be more likely to indicate that same-sex couples get married for superficial or selfish reasons. Cynical attitudes were considered to be those that leaned towards reasons involving monetary advantages, spousal benefits, increased ease of business transactions, and so forth. The current study conjectured that a higher degree of cynicism exists towards the reasons that gay men get married as compared to the reasons why opposite sex couples get married. An analysis of the participant's responses deemed this hypothesis unfounded. The data showed that people were less likely to perceive a gay man as getting married for superficial reasons. In contrast to our hypothesis, cynicism about motives for marriage were generally higher when people were asked about a straight man than when they were asked about a gay man. Of particular interest was that when presented with the reason, "*Joe wants to get married because he is looking for attention*" participants were more likely to attribute this to the heterosexual target individual.

However, when asked about a non-cynical scenario, specifically if a gay man marries for love versus if a straight man marries for love, the hypothesis was supported. Participants were less likely to report a strong belief that gay men marry for love. Previous research on attitudes towards gay marriage has shown that there exist negative prejudicial stereotypes regarding the level of satisfaction and healthy functioning in same-sex relationships (Crawford & Solliday, 1996; Testa, Kinder, Ironson, 1987). For instance, heterosexual participants reported the perception that same-sex couples were less satisfied with their relationships and less in love than opposite sex couples (Testa et al., 1987). Similarly, when asked how well a child would fare with homosexual parents, college students reported that the child would experience more instability and emotional upheaval as a result of relationship difficulties than if the child were reared by a heterosexual couple. Although this stereotype has been shown to be inaccurate by several studies (Peplau & Cochran, 1980; Kurdek, 1998), erroneous assessments of the loving relationships of same-sex couples clearly still exist.

While prejudice and misperceptions remain, the present study provides some evidence that attitudes toward gay marriage are changing. As support for the legalization of same-sex marriage rises (Newport, 2012), Cherlin (2004) discussed the possibility that changes in the structure of marriage as an institution may be responsible for transforming standards for both gay and straight unions. Traditional marriages typically come with expectations of child rearing, joint ownership of property, and the merger of finances. However, as divorce, remarriage, and single parenthood become more prevalent, there is more diversity in what marriage represents to those who choose to partake in it. Cherlin (2004) goes on to discuss the heightened view of marriage as representative of emotional closeness, loyalty, and intimacy. With viewpoints about the institution of marriage shifting, cynicism about the reasons why gay men get married may be decreasing. The gradual movement towards acceptance of homosexuality as well as recent movements towards equal rights for gay men and lesbians is indicative of the progress being made for human rights.

In 1988 the National Opinions Research Center cited as little as 11% of the general population as supportive of gay marriage. In just over twenty years, attitudes have changed drastically, with over 50% of the population now supporting equal marriage rights for gay men and lesbians (Gallup Poll, 2012). The transformation of attitudes towards homosexuality may be influenced by sociocultural factors, greater education regarding homosexuality, and exposure to gay and lesbian individuals (Avery et al., 2007). However, it is crucial that perceptions of homosexuality and same-sex unions be examined at a deeper level. Many studies have shown that a thorough understanding of a given outgroup leads to higher levels of acceptance (Hogan & Mallot, 2005; Pettijon & Walzer, 2008; Nesdale & Todd, 2000). The present study seeks to add to what is known about public perceptions of gay marriage so that we may gain a better understanding of what drives social change. Less cynicism about the reasons why gay men marry may be reflective of higher levels of awareness, insight, and tolerance of homosexuality.

4.1 Conclusion

While previous research has focused on support for the legalization of same-sex marriage, or general attitudes towards gay marriage, the current study intended to provide a deeper understanding of the perceptions that drive opinions and attitudes. The finding that people may be less cynical regarding the factors of homosexual marriage compared with heterosexual marriage may signify a gradual shift in outlooks on same-sex unions. With comprehension of public attitudes comes the ability to develop and test theories of social change.

Table 1. Data from the experiment. Mean values on a scale from -3 to +3. Actual questions can be found in Appendix A

	Homosexual	Heterosexual
Question 1	0.64	1.14
Question 2	0.40	0.75
Question 3	0.61	1.11
Question 4	0.42	0.75
Question 5	0.25	0.56
Question 6	0.30	0.67
Question 7	0.43	0.99
Question 8	0.66	1.38
Question 9	0.55	0.79
Question 10	-0.14	-0.12
Question 11	-0.30	0.17

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Appendix

- Question 1. Joe wants to get married because he is in love.
- Question 2. Joe believes having a legally recognized marriage will force his friends to accept his relationship.
- Question 3. Joe wants his relationship legally recognized as a marriage because he believes it will increase his respectability in society.
- Question 4. Joe believes if he is legally married it will be easier for him to conduct business (e.g., buy a house, get a loan, lower their insurance premiums, qualify for special public services, etc.)
- Question 5. Joe believes will be easier for him to make friends and build a social network across gender preference lines.
- Question 6. Joe wants to get married in order to get his partner's spousal benefits.
- Question 7. Joe believes that his marriage status will prevent prejudicial social constructs in some instances (e.g. hospital situations, personal information privacy, right of survivorship in legal terms).
- Question 8. Joe believes being legally married will provide a more stable social environment for raising children.
- Question 9. Joe believes being in a legally recognized relationship will reduce the amount of harassing his future children will receive from teachers and classmates in school.
- Question 10. Joe is getting married because he feels pressured by his friends to do so in order to make some type of political statement.
- Question 11. Joe wants to get married because he is looking for attention.