It's complicated: The impact of marriage legalization among sexual minority women and gender diverse individuals in the United States

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Abstract

This mixed-methods study explored perceptions of the impact of marriage legalization in all U.S. states among sexual minority women and gender diverse individuals. Survey data were collected from a nonprobability sample of individuals 18 years or older who identified as lesbian, bisexual, queer, same-sex attracted or something other than exclusively heterosexual—as well as individuals who identified as transgender or gender nonbinary (for example, genderqueer, trans woman, trans man, nonbinary, or gender non-conforming). The analytic sample included 418 participants in an online survey who responded to open-ended questions about the perceived impact of marriage legalization. Qualitative analyses revealed perceptions of marriage legalization that situated individual meanings in the context of broader political and social factors. Four themes represented the complex perceptions of participants about marriage legalization: 1) establishing a victory in

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civil rights, social inclusion, and acceptance; 2) creating a paradox between positives of legalization and limitations of marriage as an institution; 3) amplifying concerns for unaddressed safety and rights issues; and 4) contributing to the erosion of queer identity and community. Quantitative analyses revealed several differences by demographic characteristics, such as greater concern about the erosion of community among unmarried participants compared to participants who were married. Findings underscore the importance of policies that advance equality for sexual and gender minorities (SGMs), as well as the importance of research exploring how policies are perceived by and impact SGM subpopulations.

Abstract 2 – Short statement of Significance:

Legalization of marriage for same-sex couples in the United States was generally perceived by sexual and gender minorities (SGM) as a civil rights victory and marker of increased social inclusion and acceptance. At the same time, findings underscore remaining concerns such as inconsistent policy protections against discrimination, structural stigma and stigma from family and extended networks, and how centralizing marriage may undermine SGM community connectedness and appreciation for diverse relationship structures.

Keywords

sexual minority women; gender nonbinary; transgender; marriage legalization

Introduction

Legalization of same-sex marriage was extended to all United States (U.S.) states in June 2015. As of October, 2019, same-sex marriage is legal in 29 other countries and territories. Extending the right to marry to same-sex couples represents a legal change in structural stigma and affords more access to the psychological, social, and practical benefits associated with marriage (Fingerhut, Riggle, & Rostosky, 2011; Hamilton, 2018; Herek, 2011; Ogolsky, Monk, Rice, & Oswald, 2019b; Verrelli, White, Harvey, & Pulciani, 2019). Structural stigma refers to societal-, institutional-, or cultural-level norms and policies that negatively affect the opportunities, access, and well-being of a particular group (Hatzenbuehler & Link, 2014). Structural stigma reflects and reinforces social stigma that occurs on individual-, interpersonal-, and community-levels regarding non-heterosexual identity, behavior, and relationships (Herek, 2009), and thus contributes to health disparities among sexual and gender minorities (Bockting, 2014; Hatzenbuehler, 2016). Legalization of same-sex marriage in the U.S. affords a unique opportunity to examine the impact of a major policy change on sexual and gender minority (SGM) individual's perceptions of well-being and their experiences of stigma.

Supportive state policies, including marriage legalization, are associated with positive impacts on sexual minority health but little or no impact on heterosexual health (Hatzenbuehler, McLaughlin, Keyes, & Hasin, 2010; Tatum, 2017). For example, living in regions of the U.S. with higher levels of community support for same-sex marriage has been associated with better health outcomes among LGBTQ populations (Hatzenbuehler, Flores, & Gates, 2017). Additionally, a longitudinal study examined changes in multiple measures

of well-being between individuals in same-sex and different-sex relationships beginning three months prior and ending one year after the 2015 U.S. Supreme Court decision that recognized same-sex marriage (Ogolsky, Monk, Rice, & Oswald, 2019a; Ogolsky et al., 2019b). This study found perceptions of increased levels of family support and decreased levels of stigma and support from friends among individuals in same-sex relationships, and no changes among individuals in opposite-sex relationships. Average levels of stress, psychological distress, and life satisfaction did not significantly change for individuals in same-sex relationships after national marriage legalization. Ogolsky and colleagues (2019b) hypothesized that more time may be needed to observe changes in response to marriage legalization as the impact may be indirect. They also speculated that differences between sub-groups may obscure the overall impact of changes observed in aggregated samples.

Consequently, there is a need to better understand the psychosocial factors underlying the impact of same-sex marriage legalization by considering potential differences across SGM subgroups. For example, previous studies of state-level legalization of same-sex marriage suggest positive impacts among same-sex couples including access to practical benefits and protections, interpersonal validation such as being viewed as a "real" couple, and a sense of increased social inclusion (Badgett, 2011; Haas & Whitton, 2015; Lannutti, 2011; Ramos, Goldberg, & Badgett, 2009; Rostosky, Riggle, Rothblum, & Balsam, 2016; Shulman, Gotta, & Green, 2012). Researchers have also documented ambivalence about the impact of same-sex marriage legalization. Specifically, SGM participants in several studies expressed concern about continued marginalization and everyday discrimination based on sexual or gender identity, other unprotected rights, and potential weakening of community connectedness (Lannutti, 2005, 2011; Ocobock, 2018; Shulman, Weck, Schwing, Smith, & Coale, 2009).

Existing literature is limited in several ways. Most studies were conducted before the extension of marriage legalization to all U.S. states. Although many individuals and couples experience benefits associated with same-sex marriage legalization, stigma and minority stress continues to impact SGM populations (Frost, 2015; Frost & Gola, 2015; Lannutti, 2018a, 2018b; Riggle, Drabble, Veldhuis, Wootton, & Hughes, 2018; Wootton et al., 2019). For example, findings from qualitative studies conducted since the right to marry was extended to all same-sex couples in the U.S. point to both positive impacts and, for some SGM individuals, negative experiences of stigma in interactions with family members (Riggle et al., 2018) and extended social networks (Wootton et al., 2019). Similarly, a study of unmarried same-sex male couples in the U.S. found that marriage equality improved perceived social inclusion, but less so among men who experienced more discrimination and lived in conservative states and counties (as defined by results from the 2016 U.S. Presidential election) (Metheny & Stephenson, 2019). Although legalization of same-sex marriage may impact SGM peoples' well-being, research on the ongoing experiences and impact of stigma is important (Frost & Gola, 2015).

Studies to date have rarely examined how perception of same-sex marriage legalization may differ among SGM subgroups. For example, few studies on the impact of same-sex marriage legalization include SGM individuals who are not married or in committed relationships. One notable exception is a study by Lannutti (2005) that included both single and partnered

LGBTQ participants. Lannutti's findings revealed the importance of examining perceived impacts of marriage legalization among SGM varying relationship statuses. Furthermore, although perceptions of marriage legalization may be impacted by intersectional identities such as sexual identity, sex, gender identity, and race/ethnicity (Lee, 2018), few studies examine possible differences. There is also a paucity of research that includes the perspectives of transgender and nonbinary individuals. The need for such research is underscored by findings from a qualitative study of transgender and nonbinary individuals in queer relationships after national legalization of same-sex marriage in the U.S. (Shultz & Shultz, 2016). The study found general support for the tangible benefits of same-sex marriage legalization, but concurrent skepticism about whether marriage equality would generate momentum or advocacy for other policies relevant to transgender and nonbinary communities.

The current study was part of a larger mixed methods research project focused on the perceived impact of same-sex marriage legalization and other political events on the well-being of sexual minority women (SMW). The aims of the current study were to explore 1) how SMW and gender diverse individuals perceived the impact of same-sex marriage legalization; and 2) whether perceived impact differed by sexual identity, gender identity, relationship status, or race/ethnicity.

Methods

Participants and Procedure

The larger mixed-methods study included individuals age 18 and older who identified as lesbian, bisexual, queer, same-sex attracted or something other than exclusively heterosexual, as well as individuals who identified as transgender or nonbinary (e.g., genderqueer, trans woman, trans man, nonbinary, gender non-conforming). The study was advertised as a survey on "Marriage Recognition and Recent Political Events" via online venues (e.g., online publications) and social media (e.g., Facebook, twitter, and listservs). Data were collected between December 13, 2016 and August 31, 2017. A supplemental panel sample of 200 sexual minority women of color was obtained through Qualtrics panel outreach. The full mixed methods study included 969 participants with 21% of the sample from the Qualtrics panel. Participants in the Qualtrics panel were younger ($M = 29.3$ years old, $SD = 10.8$) than the original sample ($M = 35.6$, $SD = 14.3$). Compared to the original sample, the Qualtrics panel participants were significantly less likely to report education beyond high school (97.4% vs. 64.3%), to be married (32.4% vs 17.2%), or to be employed either full- or part-time (74.6% vs 59.7%). Participants in the original sample volunteered to complete the survey without compensation while participants from the supplemental panel sample received a modest monetary incentive from Qualtrics for completing the survey. All study procedures were approved by San José State University Institutional Review Board.

The qualitative sample for the current study included 418 participants who responded to at least one of two open-ended questions in the larger mixed-methods study (see Table 1 for demographics). Participants were asked to choose from a list of response options the label that best described their sexual identity: only lesbian or gay; mostly lesbian or gay; bisexual; mostly heterosexual; only heterosexual; queer, questioning; or other (with the option to write

in a label or descriptor). Participants were grouped into three sexual identity categories for analysis: lesbian/mostly lesbian, bisexual/mostly heterosexual, queer or other. Following recommendations from the William's Institute GENIUSS group (GenIUSS Group, 2013) we asked participants to indicate their current gender identity using multiple response options, which were collapsed into three categories for analysis: female/woman; transgender (trans woman, trans man); and nonbinary (gender non-conforming, genderqueer, nonbinary, or other). The majority of the sample identified as lesbian (60.6%) and female (80.7%). Categories for race/ethnicity (described in Table 1) were collapsed into two categories for analysis: White (69.9%) and people of color (33.1%). Participants were asked to identify which of seven options best described their relationship status: single or dating; in a committed relationship (no legal status); in a domestic partnership, civil union or another legal status other than marriage; married; separated from partner or divorced; widowed; or other (please describe). Participants who selected "other" typically specified polyamorous relationships, such as "plural relationship with one man and one woman," "married and polyamorous," or "in a committed and open relationship." Relationship status was constructed as a four-category variable for analysis. Over one-half of the sample was married (56.9%); other participants were in committed, unmarried relationships (19.1%); single, separated or widowed (22.1%); and polyamorous or other relationships (4.6%). Of participants in married or non-married committed relationships, 74.4% were in relationships with women, 19.8% were in relationships with men, and 5.7% were in relationships with individuals who identified as transgender, nonbinary, or other. The mean length of relationship was 9.72 years ($SD = 10.0$).

Measures

All participants, regardless of relationship status, were invited to share narrative responses to an open-ended question about their perceptions or observations about the impact of same-sex marriage legalization on their lives. Responses to this main question were of primary interest in the current study. Secondarily, the narrative responses to additional questions answered only by participants in relationships were reviewed. Participants who were married were invited to respond to a question asking, "In what ways has your relationship been better or worse after marriage?" An alternative question for participants in other legally recognized relationships was, "In what ways has your relationship been better or worse after formalizing it through domestic partnership, civil union, or other legal status?" Because some participant responses to relationship-focused questions were pertinent the broader research question about the impact of marriage legalization, they were included as data for the study. Length of responses ranged from one word to multiple paragraphs (range = 1 to 709 words). A majority of participants answered the question about the impact of same-sex marriage legalization question ($n = 188$, 45.0%) or both questions ($n = 86$, 20.6%). Approximately one-third answered only questions directed to participants in relationships ($n = 144$, 34.4%).

Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis.—We used inductive thematic analysis of all narrative responses to identify patterned responses or meanings (Braun & Clarke, 2006) related to participants' perceptions about the impact of legalization of marriage for same-sex couples. After immersion in the data by reading and re-reading responses, the first, second, and

fourth authors independently coded a set 41 narratives (every 10th response of 418 narrative responses) to identify provisional codes. Codes were compared across the three independently coded data sets to assess consistency; inter-coder reliability was 90.5%. The coders and the third and fifth authors used an iterative process to further define and refine themes. Several strategies to ensure trustworthiness of data analysis were used: 1) an audit trail to log changes to the coding sheet, definitions of codes, and analytic decisions; 2) regular meetings of the coding team to ensure similar interpretation of the data; and 3) an independent verification of the findings by the sixth and seventh authors who had not previously participated in qualitative data analysis (Cresswell & Poth, 2018).

Quantitative analysis.—In addition to describing each theme and subtheme, we conducted logistic regression analyses to explore similarities and differences among participants based on four key demographic characteristics: relationship status, sexual identity, gender identity, and race/ethnicity. Eight subthemes identified in the qualitative analyses were coded using a binary system (1 = present; 0 = not present). Logistic regression analyses were used to determine whether the odds of describing specific themes differed based on these demographic characteristics. The four demographic variables were entered simultaneously into each of the eight multiple logistic regression models. Reference groups in analyses were married participants (relationship status), lesbian participants (sexual identity), participants who identified as women/female (gender identity), and participants of color (race/ethnicity). We modified the reference group in analyses where the odds ratios were under 1 to generate results that were easier to interpret.

Quantitative follow-up analyses were limited to responses that were coded to one or more theme. Of the 418 participants in the full sample, 127 provided responses that were not classified as related to the research question. Most responses not directly pertinent to the research question (91 out of 127) were from participants who only answered the relationship-specific question and whose responses focused on personal reflections not relevant to the research question.

Restricting the quantitative follow-up analyses to only participants whose narratives pertained to the research question resulted in a sample of 291 participants. Quantitative results are reported in conjunction with the summaries of each of the subthemes.

Results

Four themes emerged, representing a complex mixture of responses ranging from enthusiasm about legalization of same-sex marriage to deep concern about a disproportionate focus on legalization of same-sex marriage in the context of other social and policy issues impacting SGM individuals. Each theme was defined by two inter-related subthemes (summarized in Table 2). Subthemes are described and illustrated with participant quotes. Subthemes were generally similar across participants, but we note when specific subthemes were described more frequently by specific demographic groups. Quoted participants are described using key demographic characteristics for context.

Establishing a Victory for Civil Rights, Social Inclusion, and Acceptance

Many participants viewed legalization of marriage for same-sex couples as an indicator of great societal transformation and as a victory that was impactful in two primary ways. First, legalization of marriage for same-sex couples was perceived as a civil rights victory that afforded greater access to legal rights and benefits. Second, participants described recognition of same-sex marriage as transforming the social climate through increased social inclusion and a heightened expectation of acceptance.

Civil rights victory.—Many participants described celebrating same-sex marriage legalization as a civil rights victory and expressed feeling joy—or relief—regarding the expansion of legal rights and the practical benefits of marriage legalization. Married and partnered participants frequently described marriage equality as providing important civil rights that afforded access to practical, and often profound, benefits in their lives such as health insurance coverage for spouses; social service parity; and protections of rights in relation to parenting, inheritance, hospital visitation, and healthcare-related decisions. One participant noted that most of "…the advantages have been financial… single federal tax return, spousal benefits from social security, renting a car and having my wife automatically covered by law, other financial planning. It surprises me the benefits heterosexuals have been having!" (lesbian White married woman). Another participant elaborated on the impact on interactions with local institutions, observing, "Since we have gotten married it has helped 100% when dealing with our insurance companies and our son's school. No one questions our relationship or that I am my son's mother, even if I am not biologically" (queer Latinx married woman).

The odds of married participants describing this theme were approximately twice that of single participants (AOR = 2.4; 95% CI = 1.18, 4.73; p = .015). No significant differences in responses related to this theme were found by sexual identity, gender identity, or race/ethnicity.

Transformation in social inclusion and acceptance as the new norm.—Marriage recognition was perceived to help legitimize same-sex relationships, normalize sexual minority identity, and provide access to new social status and symbols. Many participants reported a sense of social inclusion and personal validation: "It makes me feel like a more valued citizen of the world…like I could be a valued member of the community, not just someone you put up with" (bisexual/queer White single woman). Descriptions of the positive impact of social inclusion were common among participants of all relationship statuses. This is illustrated by a married lesbian (White, nonbinary) who noted that "Marriage recognition has given legitimacy to monogamous LGBT relationships and given the community a legal status to hold up and declare that our country believes we are worthy of rights," and a single lesbian (White, trans woman) who described "being seen as equal for the first time in my life." Several participants described appreciating access to the social statuses and symbols (e.g., "wife") linked to marriage, typified by one woman who commented, "It makes me happy to see that marriage is now on the table for me and my partner. I can legitimately call her my wife" (lesbian Black/African American woman in a dating relationship).

Participants also described greater expectations of acceptance in community and interpersonal contexts. Many participants described marriage legalization as a repudiation of anti-LGBTQ sentiment and social stigma, which, for example, "made it so that the people in my life who don't approve are in the minority…the extreme conservatives in my family have had to keep quiet about their opinions" (lesbian White married woman). Others emphasized the positive impact of acceptance on the health and well-being of sexual and gender minorities, such as one lesbian (White married woman) participant who observed that marriage legalization "had a great effect on making the general (hetero) population feel more accepting; if that normalization leads to less queer youth committing suicide or being kicked out of their homes, then placing this fight at the forefront was worth it." Some participants described feeling greater freedom after the decision, such as one participant (bisexual Latinx single woman) who described the Supreme Court decision as a "massive relief" that allowed her to come out as bisexual to her mother. She reflected,

> I think that the legitimacy of equal recognition made it finally feel like I really could be with either a man or a woman - it made that choice feel equal and valid, rather than having to be a decision between a conservative heteronormative lifestyle or a counterculture queer lifestyle. Those were the stereotypes I had in my head.

Perceiving legalization of same-sex marriage as a transformation in social inclusion and acceptance as the new norm was common among all participants, but was described more frequently by participants who identified as lesbian compared to those who identified as queer ($AOR = 4.0$; 95% $CI = 1.43, 11.34$; $p = .008$).

Creating a Paradox Between Positives of Legalization and Limitations of Marriage as an Institution

Participants reported mixed perceptions of marriage legalization. First, many participants described benefits and social good associated with marriage legalization for same-sex couples while concurrently identifying concerns about marriage as an institution. Second, some participants acknowledged benefits in general or for others but expressed that the right to marry was not relevant to them.

Legalization as good, but marriage as limited.—Participants describing this subtheme generally perceived marriage equality as positive but concurrently voiced concerns about marriage as an institution. These observations often began with a statement of skepticism about marriage as an institution, followed by an observation about the importance of having equal civil rights. This is typified by a participant who commented, "Just because I'm not yet sold on the usefulness of marriage doesn't mean I don't feel much better and more recognized having marriage be a legal option" (mostly lesbian multiracial woman in a committed unmarried relationship). Another participant stated, "While I do not believe in the 'marriage institution' for anyone--heterosexual or LGBTQ, etc., I do believe everyone must be allowed to enter into this 'financial contract marriage' equally, if they wish" (lesbian Latinx woman in a domestic partnership or civil union). Other participants were stronger in their condemnation of marriage as an institution, such as one participant who commented, "I am strongly against marriage as an institution, but I feel obligated to others in my community to be positive and supportive about marriage equality. …I want the option to be

there for anyone who wants to be married, but I don't share in the excitement about political advances in marriage equality since I do not view marriage as a 'positive' action" (Queer White single woman).

The theme of legalization as good but marriage as limited differed only by sexual identity. Responses that pertained to this theme were more frequent among participants who identified as bisexual or mostly heterosexual compared to those who identified as lesbian (AOR = 3.01; 95% CI = 1.29, 7.02; p = .011)

Legalization relevant for others, but with little or no personal relevance.—Many participants described marriage legalization as having little or no relevance to their current lives, including some who lived in states where same-sex marriage had been legal for a decade. Some distinguished between positive community impacts and the absence of personal relevance for marriage recognition. For example, a bisexual/queer White single/ dating, gender nonbinary participant offered,

> It feels important to distinguish what a person wants personally for themselves and what a queer person may want for the larger LGBT community. I am absolutely in favor of marriage recognition, that empowerment and same rights/benefits as hetero couples. Personally, I do not wish to be married and am upfront early about this when dating.

Many participants in polyamorous relationships described feeling excluded from the narratives and priorities associated with marriage recognition. For example, one participant (bisexual White woman) commented, "I agree that marriage equality has been a step in the right direction. That said, respectability politics has stepped up and as a poly woman, I feel like it delegitimizes my other committed relationships."

There were no significant differences by relationship status, gender identity, or race/ethnicity in describing the theme of legalization being relevant for others but with little or no personal relevance. Responses among participants who identified as bisexual or mostly heterosexual were more likely to be related to this theme than participants who identified as lesbian (AOR = 3.84; 95% CI = 1.78, 8.32; p = .001).

Amplifying Concern for Unaddressed Rights and Safety Issues

A third theme reflected the concerns of participants who emphasized deep concerns about SGM populations whose rights and safety remain at risk. These responses emerged in two main categories: marriage recognition as "only a start" in advocating for SGM rights (and one which may have diverted momentum from addressing other important SGM issues), and fear of social and political backlash, including rollback of marriage legalization.

Failing to remedy, and diverting attention from, other important issues.—Many participants emphasized that legalization of same-sex marriage "must be seen as the beginning, not the end" of social movement efforts, and repeatedly mentioned groups and issues that were perceived as neglected. One participant observed, "It's like we've been discriminated against for so long that we're trying to show the straight people we're 'normal' by making marriage the most important issue and neglecting the real concerns

facing lower income queer populations" (mostly lesbian Latinx single/dating, gender nonbinary). Similarly, a married (queer White) woman noted she felt both "pleased and surprised at how positive it's been for us," and "concerned that the fight for marriage was leaving the most vulnerable among us behind." She elaborated that her concerns left her "more determined than ever to refocus on issues of violence against trans and gender non-conforming folks, violence against queer people of color, homelessness and survival sex work among queer youth." Participants in this subtheme also frequently reflected concern that heterosexual allies would abandon LGBTQ causes. This concern is exemplified by one participant who described marriage legalization as "double-edged sword," noting that "on one hand, marriage kicked down a door to visibility and overall acceptance in most circles - but it also gave a sense of 'everything is solved now' to much of the heterosexual world" (Queer Latinx single/dating woman).

Concerns about same-sex marriage legalization diverting attention from other important issues impacting SGM communities were often emphasized in the narratives of gender nonbinary participants. This theme was illustrated by one nonbinary (Queer White) participant in a committed relationship with a nonbinary partner:

> I think that [marriage legalization] also gives this false impression to the general public and certain portions of the "LGBTQ" community (meaning, the cisgender sexual minorities in the community) that we are much farther along than we really are. This has resulted in a further marginalization of transgender and gender diverse people. I feel like we have been left in the dust now that the cisgender gay men and cisgender lesbians have gotten the rights they were fighting for. It's as if they fought for what they wanted, continually telling transgender and gender diverse people that they'd come back for them, but where are they now?? So - yes, it is positive as equal rights are a good thing and a source of progress. BUT we can't forget the people who get overshadowed and forgotten in such battles.

Concerns about diverting attention from the struggle to remedy other important issues differed significantly by relationship status and race/ethnicity. Compared to married participants, the odds of providing responses that reflected this theme were five times greater among single participants ($AOR = 5.1$; 95% $CI = 2.50, 10.43$; $p < .001$) and nearly four times greater among participants who described their relationship status as polyamorous or other type of relationship ($AOR = 3.9$; 95% $CI = 1.22, 12.25$; $p = .022$). This theme was also more often described by White participants than participants of color ($AOR = 2.05$; 95% $CI = 1.03, 4.07$; $p = .041$). There were no significant differences by sexual identity or gender identity.

Fear of backlash.—Many participants expressed worry about political backlash and increased hostility from opponents of marriage equality. One participant observed that "backlash will always come with progress and I anticipated it after marriage equality was established" (lesbian Asian/Pacific Islander single/dating woman). Another participant explained, "there is still quite a lot of backlash in terms of being openly part of LGBTQ community - I still do not feel safe holding the hand of a partner in fear that I will either be killed or harassed" (lesbian Latinx single/dating woman). Others linked concerns about

backlash to fears about safety and the rights of others, such as one participant who observed, "backlash tends to fall on those in the LGBTQ community who have the least access to protection under the law, as we see with the passing of anti-trans legislation and the murdering of trans women, predominantly trans women of color" (mostly lesbian White single/dating, nonbinary gender).

Others described fears that marriage rights would be rescinded. For example, one participant wrote, "I think it's amazing that LGBT can now marry but am afraid it won't last long" (lesbian Black/African American woman in a committed relationship), and another stated, "I am afraid it won't last long with Trump in office" (lesbian African American single woman). Many described the stress associated with those fears, such as one participant who commented, "the threat of loss of now-existing federal recognition is itself traumatic for many; those of us in both the religious and the LGBTQ+ affirming circles are exhausted from managing the fear and apprehension" (Queer White separated woman).

There were no significant differences by relationship status, sexual identity, gender identity, or race/ethnicity in expressions of fear of backlash.

Contributing to Erosion of Queer Identity and Community

Another significant theme involved concerns about unintended negative consequences of embracing marriage as a heteronormative institution. Participants expressed their concerns that marriage would undermine queer identity and there would be an erosion of heterogeneity in how queer communities construct and honor diverse relationships, including friendship networks.

Undermining queer identity and freedom to "live without a script."—Some participants reflected on how an increased political and social focus on same-sex marriage impacted their sense of individual and community identity. One lesbian Latinx woman in a committed relationship commented, "I feel torn about it because to be gay is to be non-normative. Thus, is getting married creating a homonormativity that emulates heteronormativity? By getting married, am I no longer living a truly queer life?" This concern was echoed in the narrative of a participant who explained that she and her partner are not interested in living together or getting married, and commented that "Marriage politics have served an intensely homogenizing function in the queer community, and have contributed to the loss of what I think of as the absolutely BEST parts of being queer: the ability to live our lives without a script, to invent ways of being and loving that feel organic and specific to the people who are doing the loving" (Queer White unmarried nonbinary woman).

Participants in unmarried relationships were significantly more likely than those in married relationships to express concerns about ways the increased political and social focus on same-sex marriage might undermine queer identity and freedom to "live without a script." Compared to married participants, this theme was more likely to emerge in the responses of participants in committed unmarried relationships ($AOR = 4.45$; 95% $CI = 1.07$, 18.50; $p = .040$), and participants who described their relationships as polyamorous or other type of

relationship (AOR = 9.45; 95% CI= 1.63, 54.85; p = .012). There were no significant differences by sexual identity, gender identity, or race/ethnicity.

Erosion of community and friendship networks.—Some participants commented on ways that heightened focus on marriage and traditional family structures undermined close social networks and community connection. For example, one participant (lesbian White single/dating woman) explained, "I believe marriage, in many ways, erodes community…it focuses only on romantic partners." She elaborated, "Community is something that LGBTQ folks have better developed out of necessity, and the resulting critique of the dominant cultures 'focus on the family' approach has been valuable -- that gets eroded as assimilation progresses."

Some participants expressed concerns about privileging traditional models of "family" over other forms of social and community support. One participant observed that her friends have "become less interested in being the big gay gang of chosen family that we used to be to each other. I don't have much family of origin left, so I'm even more grateful to be partnered" (lesbian White woman in a committed relationship). Some participants in polyamorous relationships described how the focus on marriage undermined alternative family and relationships. For example, one participant (Queer White woman in a committed relationship) described a previous polyamorous relationship that was "extremely negatively impacted by gay marriage in that my partner's other partner received more social status, power in the relationship, and recognition by family because they were married, whereas I was not married to my partner." She reflected, "I feel like the family networks that made queer community function collectively are being severely undermined by gay marriage."

Compared to married individuals, participants in committed unmarried relationships were approximately five times as likely (AOR = 4.59; 95% CI = 1.23, 17.15; p = .023) and participants in polyamorous or other relationships were nearly seven times as likely (AOR = 6.82; 95% CI = 1.24, 37.44; p = .027) to report negative impacts of marriage legalization on community and social networks. There were no differences by sexual identity, gender identity, or race/ethnicity.

Discussion

We explored perceptions of sexual minority women and gender minority individuals regarding the impact of same-sex marriage legalization. Same-sex marriage was generally perceived by participants in this sample as a civil rights victory and a marker of increased social inclusion. At the same time, narratives also described legalization of same-sex marriage as creating a paradox between the positives of legalization and the limitations of marriage as an institution; amplifying concerns for unaddressed safety and rights issues; and contributing to the erosion of queer identity and community. These latter concerns echo and extend findings from studies documenting concurrent appreciation of equal access to marriage rights and ambivalence about marriage as an institution (Bosley-Smith & Reczek, 2018; Lannutti, 2011; Shulman et al., 2009) or concerns about undermining LGBTQ identity and activism through assimilation (Bernstein, Harvey, & Naples, 2018).

Findings from the current study revealed important concerns about changes in community support and ways that centering marriage in social movement advocacy efforts and messaging may have undermined support of diverse relationship structures and community connectedness. Concerns expressed in this study that the "homogenizing" effect of embracing marriage as an institution may erode community connectedness appear to be validated by recent research documenting the association between marriage legalization and increased family support but decreased community support (Ogolsky et al., 2019b). Similarly, another study of LGBQ individuals suggested that the shift from exclusion to inclusion in access to marriage may be a driver of community change by reducing the perceived need to turn to LGBQ community for acceptance, advocacy, and connection (Ocobock, 2018). Given continued changes in social and policy landscapes in the U.S. and elsewhere in the world, there is a need for additional research on community connectedness among SGM individuals.

A number of participants expressed concern about ways that centering of marriage in LGBTQ communities may undermine valuable friendship networks. This was especially pronounced among individuals who were not legally married, including those who were in polyamorous relationships or committed unmarried relationships. However, it is unclear how social support and friendship networks may be impacted by access to legal marriage. For example, Ocobock (2018) found no significant differences between married and unmarried sexual minority people in turning to sexual minority friends for support. Assessing perceived level of support from family and friendship networks following legalization of same-sex marriage in future SGM health research will be important. Research on behavioral and physical health among SGM individuals should include measures that account for potential shifting or eroding sources of social support. Such research is imperative in the context of research findings suggesting that social support is important in moderating the relationship between minority stress and negative health outcomes (Graham & Barnow, 2013; Pflum, Testa, Balsam, Goldblum, & Bongar, 2015; Tabaac, Perrin, & Trujillo, 2015; Verrelli et al., 2019).

Participant responses often situated individual meanings about marriage legalization in the context of broader political and social concerns. Specifically, many participants articulated concerns about unaddressed rights or legal protections, and safety. For example, many participants described deep concerns about lack of consistency in other policy protections (e.g., against discrimination in employment and housing) and about safety issues (e.g., violence and discrimination targeting communities of color and transgender/nonbinary individuals). Some participants noted that the benefits of marriage legalization are limited and may even pose risks associated with visibility, especially in contexts where there are no laws protecting SGM individuals against discrimination, where there is limited access to culturally competent health care, and a heightened risk of experiencing hate crimes. Recent policy trends in the U.S. lend validation to these concerns. Despite marriage legalization, several U.S. states have passed one or more laws allowing discrimination against LGBTQ people, such as denial of services to same-sex couples for reasons associated with religious beliefs, or preempting the option for local counties or cities to pass laws prohibiting discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity (Human Rights Campaign, 2019). Living in states that permit discrimination has been identified as negatively impacting

SGM well-being (Raifman, Moscoe, Austin, Hatzenbuehler, & Galea, 2018) and anti-LGBTQ policies may disproportionately impact racial/ethnic minority SGM communities (Gonzales & McKay, 2017). Findings from the current study and other recent studies underscore the need for national policies that protect LGBTQ rights beyond recognition of same-sex marriage.

Participants in the current study also expressed concern about potential backlash after same-sex marriage legalization. Research on observed levels of backlash is mixed. Recent research in the U.S. (Bishin, Hayes, Incantalupo, & Smith, 2016; Flores & Barclay, 2016; Kazyak & Stange, 2018) and Europe (Abou-Chadi & Finnigan, 2018; Hooghe & Meeusen, 2013) suggest that legalization of same-sex marriage may be associated with more positive attitudes about sexual minorities in public opinion. However, increases in favorable attitudes about homosexuality may be driven by individuals who were already generally supportive; legalization of same-sex marriage does not appear to improve attitudes among individuals who are unsupportive of sexual minorities (Redman, 2018). Similarly, another study found that same-sex marriage legalization changed perception of social norms, but did not change individual attitudes (Tankard & Paluck, 2017). As Redman (2018) notes, individuals who are "most likely to cause hurdles for or perpetuate discrimination against the gay and lesbian community (i.e., those unsupportive of homosexuality)" appear to be unaffected by same-sex marriage legalization (p. 639). Additional research is needed to better understand potential forms of backlash and the political and social factors that may help to increase social acceptance.

Patterns across Relationship Status, Sexual Identity, and Race/Ethnicity

Although there were many similarities in themes and subthemes across the sample, quantitative analyses revealed some differences in the odds of describing different subthemes by demographic group. Specifically, of eight subthemes, four differed by relationship status, three differed by sexual identity, and one differed by race/ethnicity; none differed significantly by gender identity. Research to date has clearly documented ways that legalization of same-sex marriage is viewed as providing both tangible benefits and social inclusion for same-sex married couples (Badgett, 2011; Haas & Whitton, 2015; Lannutti, 2011; Ramos et al., 2009; Rostosky et al., 2016; Shulman et al., 2012). In the current study, perception of marriage equality as a civil rights victory that afforded access to important rights and benefits was described more frequently among married participants than unmarried participants. However, there were no differences by relationship status in comments on ways that legalization of marriage for same-sex couples created more social inclusion and an expectation of acceptance. This finding is provocative given that most studies to date have focused on how legal marriage has improved social inclusion among married same-sex couples and have rarely included or focused on unmarried individuals. Future studies on the impact of same-sex marriage legalization are needed to further explore ways that unmarried individuals may benefit from greater social inclusion, acceptance of same-sex relationships, and shifts in social norms.

Concerns about potential consequences of the social focus on same-sex marriage on identity and community appeared to be particularly salient for participants in unmarried

relationships. Participants in committed unmarried relationships and who identified as being in polyamorous or in other types relationships were significantly more likely than married participants to express concerns about how an emphasis on access to marriage may undermine queer identity and freedom to "live without a script." Participants in unmarried committed relationships and polyamorous/other relationships were also more likely to voice concern about erosion of community support. Codifying marriage as the primary mechanism for legitimizing intimate relationships serves to reinforce monogamous and traditional heterosexual norms and may undermine a broader goal for some LGBTQ people of validating diverse forms of relationships (Daum, 2017). Individuals in polyamorous relationships, in particular, may value versatility and fluidity over legal constructs and social conformity in constructing interpersonal relationships (Aviram, 2008).

In addition to marginalizing non-monogamous or unmarried relationships, single individuals may feel increasingly stigmatized following legalization of same-sex marriage. For example, a recent study (Morris, Slonim, & Osburn, 2016) found that more negative perceptions of single people compared to people in coupled relationships applies to sexual minorities as well as heterosexuals. Furthermore, negative perceptions of single people appear to be strongest when individuals are judging people of the same-sexual identity (e.g. lesbian women and gay men had more negative perceptions of single lesbian and gay individuals, respectively). Future research is needed to better understand the impact of non-monogamous and non-marital relationship statuses on interpersonal and social interactions, particularly studies that challenge normative conceptualizations of intimacy and that are inclusive of diverse relationship forms and identities (Hammack, Frost, & Hughes, 2019).

It was notable that concerns about unaddressed rights or legal protections, and continuing safety concerns appeared to be amplified among unmarried participants. For example, compared to married participants, individuals in any other relationship category (single, unmarried committed, polyamorous/other) were significantly more likely to express concern about ways that the political and social focus on marriage may divert attention from other important issues. The concerns of participants echo observations from other research that access to marriage is not an adequate or equitable vehicle for providing material benefits such as health insurance (Daum, 2017) and does not provide a remedy for other forms of institutionalized discrimination (LeBlanc, Frost, & Bowen, 2018). These findings also underscore the importance of other policy events that increase stigma-related concerns, even in the context of marriage legalization (Drabble, Veldhuis, Wootton, Riggle, & Hughes, 2019; Lannutti, 2018b; Veldhuis, Drabble, Riggle, Wootton, & Hughes, 2018a, 2018b).

Additional research is needed to explore differences and unique perspectives related to same-sex marriage among SGM subgroups. Participants who identified as bisexual or mostly heterosexual were more likely than lesbian participants to perceive marriage equality as not relevant to them or to describe concerns about marriage as an institution. Views about legalized same-sex marriage are not homogenous among individuals who identify as bisexual (Galupo & Pearl, 2008), and warrant further investigation. Although we found no significant differences in subthemes by gender identity, other studies suggest that transgender and nonbinary individuals have unique perspectives about social and political goals that include, but extend beyond, marriage equality (Gandy-Guedes & Paceley, 2019;

Shultz & Shultz, 2016). Furthermore, although White participants in the current study were more likely than participants of color to express concerns about unaddressed rights and safety, other research has documented significant concerns among SGM people of color about issues of social and economic justice that have not been addressed through legalization of same-sex marriage (DeFilippis, 2016; McGuffey, 2018; Moodie-Mills, 2012).

Limitations

The survey used in this study included open-ended questions about general perceptions of legalization of marriage for same-sex couples did not include multiple open-ended follow-up questions to probe for perceived impact in specific areas, such as potential impacts in relation to community, family, or social networks. Meanings derived from narrative responses are limited to those identified by the authors through careful reading and iterative analysis. It is possible that different themes would have emerged with additional open-ended questions. Second, study participants were recruited online for a survey focused on marriage equality and recent political events. Consequently, the sample may over-represent individuals who had strong feelings about marriage legalization or public policies impacting sexual and gender minorities. Third, the participants in the study were recruited using nonprobability methods. As such, results may not represent the full spectrum of LGBTQ reactions to marriage legalization. Furthermore, we included a supplemental sample of SMW of color recruited as part of a Qualtrics panel. Although adding these participants increased diversity of the sample and research suggests that panel samples such as those recruited by Qualtrics are reasonably representative (Heen, Lieberman, & Miethe, 2014), this subsample differed from other participants in relationship status, employment, and level of education. It is also possible that participants in the supplemental sample differed from the online sample (e.g., political affiliation) in ways that were not assessed in the study.

There were also limitations in the relationship status measure used in the study. Relationship categories were constructed as mutually exclusive and, because of small numbers we collapsed into one category participants who identified as polyamorous or who selected "other" relationship status. Polyamorous participants included individuals who were in different combinations of married, unmarried committed, or dating relationships. Although inclusion of polyamorous participants is relatively novel for studies focused on the impact of legalized marriage for same-sex couples, future studies including larger numbers of polyamorous participants are needed to explore more nuanced differences by relationship status and sex or gender of partners.

Quantitative findings in this study should be interpreted with caution. Although exploring potential differences in themes by key demographics may provide some insights, the importance of a given theme is not dependent on quantifiable measures (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A simple count of the occurrence of the mention of subthemes does not adequately capture possible differences in the salience or intensity of meaning associated with that subtheme. Furthermore, failure to mention a specific subtheme in a response to an open-ended question does not mean that the participant was indifferent to the content of that subtheme. Future studies drawing on quantitative measures related to subthemes identified in

this study might allow for a more accurate assessment of potential between-group differences.

Conclusions

This study adds to an emerging literature exploring the perceived impact of national marriage legalization among diverse SGM, including a specific focus on sub-group differences. Although legalization of same-sex marriage was generally perceived as a civil rights victory and a marker of increased social inclusion and acceptance, findings underscore the need to address other important issues, including absence of other protections against discrimination and persistent stigma from family, extended social networks, and in the larger social and political climate. Given research showing that LGBTQ affirming policies are associated with positive health impacts (Du Bois, Yoder, Guy, Manser, & Ramos, 2018; Gonzales & Ehrenfeld, 2018; Hatzenbuehler et al., 2010; Tatum, 2017), additional research is needed to better understand the health effects of national legalization of marriage for same-sex individuals of varying relationship statuses, while accounting for other policy trends. Research is also needed to understand the structural effects of legalization of same-sex marriage independent of the practical effects and potential benefits associated with being married versus other committed relationship statuses. Findings also point the importance of research exploring possible differences in how policies are perceived by, or impact, SGM subpopulations.

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Table 1.

Demographics of sample (N=418).

	n	%
Sexual Identity		
Lesbian	254	61.5
Bisexual	108	26.2
Queer or other	51	12.3
Gender Identity		
Woman/female	324	80.2
Transgender	25	6.2
Nonbinary	55	13.6
Race/ethnicity		
American Indian/Alaska Native	6	1.5
Asian/Pacific Islander	31	7.7
Black/African American	57	14.1
Latinx	28	6.9
White	275	68.2
Other	6	1.5
Relationship Status		
Married	238	56.9
Committed, unmarried	72	17.2
Single/Separated/widowed	89	21.3
Polyamorous/Other	19	4.5

Table 2:

Perceptions of the impact of legalization of marriage for same-sex couples: Themes and subthemes from qualitative analyses of narrative responses

Themes	Subthemes
1. Establishing a victory for civil rights, social inclusion, and acceptance	• Marriage equality as a civil rights victory • Legalization as a transformation social inclusion and acceptance as the new norm
2. Creating a paradox between positives of legalization and limitations of marriage as an institution	• Legalization as good, but marriage as problematic as an institution. • Legalization relevant for others, but with little or no personal relevance
3. Amplifying concern for unaddressed rights and safety issues	• Failing to remedy, and diverting attention from, other important issues impacting SGM communities • Fear of backlash
4. Contributing to erosion of queer identity and community	• Undermining queer identity and "freedom to live without a script" • Erosion of community and friendship networks