

Same-Sex Marriage

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Same-sex marriage is currently legal in 6 countries: Belgium, Canada, the Netherlands, Norway, South Africa and Spain. It is also legal within the states of Massachusetts and Connecticut in the United States. In California same-sex marriage rights were recently reversed by Proposition 8, which, in turn, is now under appeal. Civil unions that grant some of the same rights as marriage to same-sex couples are recognized throughout many European and Latin American countries and Israel, as well as in California, the District of Columbia, Hawaii, Maine, Maryland, New Hampshire, New Jersey, Oregon, Washington and Vermont. This research summary provides an overview of relevant themes regarding same-sex marriage, including: the incidence and longevity of lesbian and gay couples; the fledging research arena that concerns itself with the dynamics of same-sex relationships; the expansion of civil union legislation; and the impact of same-sex marriage in countries where it has been legalized.

Overview of research on same-sex relationships

In the past decade, international movements have occurred aiming for official recognition of long-term, committed same-sex relationships. These relationships – while a longstanding tradition in lesbian and gay cultures – have historically been kept out of the limelight. Same-sex couples have faced job and housing discrimination, as well as threats of violence and any of a number of adverse reactions stemming from anti-gay elements of society. This factor has made it difficult to fully understand the dimensions of long-term same-sex partnerships and subsequently, little research data exists regarding this subject. As times have changed and LGBT visibility and support have increased, same-sex couples are more likely to come forward and identify themselves. The changing social and political climate, combined with the need for extended healthcare coverage, parenthood rights and rights of power of attorney have fueled a legislative process that seeks to officially sanction same-sex relationships.

The willingness of same-sex partners to come forward and identify themselves was noted in the 2000 U.S. Census. The year 2000 was a record year for the Census in terms of the reporting and recording of same-sex households across the country. A total of 594,391 unmarried same-sex partner households were reported (male = 301,026; female = 293,365) [1].

In the state of Arizona 12,332 same-sex partner households were reported (male = 6,278, female = 6,054) [2]. It is likely that both the national and state reportings of same-sex partner households are well below the true number of such households, but the numbers, as well as the fact that there is a category for them to appear under, represent a positive step towards awareness of the widespread existence of such households. It is very likely that the upcoming 2010 U.S. Census will record exponentially higher numbers of same-sex partner households, (at least) as a result of the growing number of same-sex partners becoming advocates for same-sex marriage.

Aside from the simple documentation of their existence, what is known about the nature and longevity of long-term same-sex relationships? Again, due to the past and present stigma of these relationships, little research has been conducted on this matter. In recent years, however, as research on lesbians and gays has continued to shift forward from causal

explanations of homosexuality as pathology, investigations into the nature of long-term same-sex relationships has begun. At the beginning of the decade, a poll was conducted by *The Advocate* magazine to assess key issues related to relationships and sexuality among gay and lesbian couples. In this survey (N = 1,800 gays, lesbians and bisexuals) 46% of gay men reported being in a relationship, with 18% of those being in a relationship lasting 10 years or more. Among lesbians, 63% reported being in a relationship with 13% of those in a relationship lasting 10 years or more [3].

In 2004 these statistics were cited by Lawrence Kurdek [4,5] in a series of research articles examining differences between same sex couples and heterosexual couples. Combining *The Advocate* statistics with other survey data, Kurdek indicates that between 18% and 28% of gay male couples and between 8% and 21% of lesbian couples have lived together for 10 years or more. Kurdek, a psychologist at Wayne State University, figures prominently in the relatively new study of the dynamics of same-sex couples: he has published over 12 articles on the subject in psychological and marriage and family journals. His work represents a tip-of-the-iceberg approach to a wave of scholarship examining the coping strategies and functionalities of long-term same-sex relationships. Specifically, Kurdek has conducted a longitudinal study comparing gay and lesbian couples with heterosexual couples in the context of 5 functional traits that have been the focus of myriad studies of human relationships. The 5 traits are 1) psychological adjustment; 2) personality; 3) relationship styles; 4) conflict resolution; and 5) social support. Data for this study was collected using standardized data collection checklists specific to each of the five domains. Statistical analysis of the data ensued, during which data variables were linked to known relationship health indicators. Seventy-eight percent of the comparisons on which differences were found indicated that gay or lesbian partners functioned better than heterosexual partners did.

While this study (and others like it) is informative, they may seem remote and inapplicable to direct debate on same-sex marriage. If cited carefully, however, such research can provide a sobering antidote to arguments against same-sex marriage that are based on the premise that same-sex relationships are inherently pathological.

Civil Unions

As the debate over same-sex marriage continues, legislation granting civil union status to same sex couples has passed in multiple states in the U.S. Civil unions grant same sex couples many of the rights of married heterosexuals, excluding federal rights. It is a fuzzy area, but depending upon which states are involved, civil unions performed in one state may be recognized in another state that also sanctions civil unions. Connecticut will not recognize same-sex marriages (such as those occurring in Massachusetts) but legally married same-sex couples will be allowed to enter into civil unions in Connecticut [6]. Essentially, what this means is that the New England states of Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire and Vermont Connecticut now form the largest geographic block in the U.S. recognizing and affording privileges to lesbian and gay couples. This region will undoubtedly be the focus of both research and media attention in regards to long-term, same-sex partnerships in the coming years.

Many proponents of same-sex marriage argue that civil unions are unsatisfactory and should be bypassed in favor of actual marriage. It is worth noting, however, that civil unions can be an important step towards changing public opinion. In Holland, for example, civil unions were granted in 1997 and this move turned out to be a significant precursor to legalization of same-sex marriage in 2001. Opinion polls soon reflected that citizens saw no reason not to go ahead and grant full marriage rights to same-sex couples after seeing the results of civil unions [7].

Outside of the U.S., civil unions for same-sex couples are available in Argentina, Buenos Aires, England, France, Germany, and Israel [8].

Same sex marriage

Legislation granting same-sex marriage and civil unions is very recent and, subsequently, little research data from formal scientific studies are available regarding impact and outcomes. Information does exist, however, regarding the social and political ramifications of same-sex marriage in the regions where it has been legalized. For instance, public opinion in regions where same-sex marriage has been legalized has continued to increasingly support same-sex marriage. With the obvious exception of many Californians, opponents of same-sex marriage in these regions frequently support it as they have had a chance to see what it is and what it isn't.

In Massachusetts, Republican State Senate Minority Leader Brian P. Lees and co-sponsor of that state's anti-same-sex-marriage amendment, publicly changed his view on the matter little over a year after same-sex marriage was legalized. "Today gay marriage is the law of the land," he said, and voting for the amendment would mean "taking action against our friends and neighbors who today are currently enjoying the benefits of marriage." He added: "Gay marriage has begun and life has not changed for the citizens of the commonwealth, with the exception of those who can now marry who could not before" [9].

Similarly, public opinion in Spain supports continued legalization of same-sex marriage. Sixty-percent of 1,000 adults surveyed on October 1, 2005 opposed the anti-gay marriage Popular Party's plan to file suit to undo the legalization of gay marriage [10]. In 2005 popular support for gay marriage in Canada mandated the expansion of legislation to the entire country from the original two provinces where it began.

In the United States the struggle for same-sex marriage received a boost in the summer of 2005 when the American Psychiatric Association (APA) adopted a policy statement supporting the legalization of same-sex marriage. This statement, representing an enormous shift from the association's classification of homosexuality as a mental illness over 30 years ago, made the point that the legal recognition of same-sex marriage would be a positive influence on the mental health of same-sex couples [11].

In spite of the anti-same-sex marriage initiatives that have passed in several states, including Arizona's Proposition 102, evidence suggests that a positive change is on the horizon. In a late 2008 poll conducted by Harris Interactive, Americans expressed perhaps the strongest support on record for legal protections for committed same-sex relationships. Seventy-five percent of the adult respondents surveyed said they favor either civil unions/domestic partnerships or marriage for same-sex couples [12].

The case for same-sex marriage: utilizing an informed approach

The research and reporting cited in this summary provide basic information of issues relevant to same-sex marriage. This report will be expanded and updated as more data become available. As is, however, the current information provides a basis from which to strengthen the arguments for same-sex marriage. The following points may be helpful when presenting this case:

- The right-wing argument against same-sex marriage is based on the idea that this expansion of civil rights will “weaken” the institution of marriage. No empirical data exists demonstrating damage to the institution of marriage in the countries and regions of the world that have legalized same-sex marriage. Divorce rates are no higher and there is no sign that heterosexuals are shunning marriage in these areas.
- To date, public support for same-sex marriage has often increased in the regions of the world where it has been legalized. Former opponents of same-sex marriage, including right wing Republicans, now support it in these regions.
- Published research data suggests that, far from being pathological, long-term same sex partnerships demonstrate high levels of functionality when observed under the lens of universally accepted interpersonal relationship domains.
- Right-wing media outlets deliberately try to confuse the issues and it is important to be wise to their strategies. A case in point is when FOX News commentator Bill O’Reilly, in his reaction to the APA policy statement, erroneously (strategically) stated that Sweden had legalized same-sex marriage and that studies have shown that the institution of marriage in Sweden has since collapsed. The truth in this matter is that studies have shown that marriage rates in Sweden are dropping, but this is due to declining religious tradition and changing social norms. Aside from that, same-sex marriage is NOT legal in Sweden, so O’Reilly lied and was counting on the idea that his listeners would confuse Holland with Sweden. Declining marriage rates in Sweden have nothing to do with same-sex marriage because same-sex marriage is not legal in Sweden.
- In the Spring of 2006 an Arizona conservative activist presented her anti-gay marriage views to a local Women’s Club. Among other pieces of misinformation, she stated that the “gay agenda” had succeeded in the Netherlands and that, subsequently, the Netherlands had the highest suicide rate in the world. She then suggested that if gays were to “get their way” in Arizona then suicide rates in Arizona would go up. Linking rising suicide rates to the passage of gay marriage laws represents a new low for opponents of LGBT rights, and there is absolutely no empirical evidence to support this link. Like Bill O’Reilly on the Fox News Network, this politician – and others who follow suit – are confusing the Netherlands (Holland) with Scandinavia (Sweden, Denmark, and Norway). Holland does not have higher suicide rates than other Euro- American countries but Sweden has been noted for its high suicide rate at least since the turn of the century. The Swedish suicide phenomenon occurred long before

anyone discussed gay marriage and, more importantly, has nothing to do with gay marriage because gay marriage is not yet legal in Sweden. Denmark remains the only Scandinavian country that allows gay marriage and this progress is so recent that there is no way to scientifically link suicide rates to gay marriage in that country one way or the other. Anyone who tries to confuse the issue by applying phenomena occurring in Scandinavia to Holland is simply manipulative or simply unable to understand that the two countries are not the same. Additionally, Scandinavian countries no longer top the list for high suicide rates: the countries with the highest suicide rates in the world today are in the Eastern Bloc and other northeastern regions of Europe (Lithuania, Russia, Latvia, Ukraine, as examples) [13].

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