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Marriage (In)equality: The Perspectives of Adolescents and Emerging Adults With Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Parents

The debate over whether same-sex couples should be allowed to enter into civil marriages continues in the United States. Forty-nine adolescents and emerging adults (ages 14–29) with lesbian, gay, and bisexual parents were interviewed for the current exploratory study, which examined how individuals perceived themselves and their families as being affected by marriage (in)equality, as well as the factors that shaped their perspectives. More than two thirds of participants voiced unequivocal support for marriage equality, citing numerous legal and symbolic benefits that their families were denied. One quarter of participants articulated critical perspectives of marriage or the fight for marriage equality, while also acknowledging the benefits associated with marriage. As the first study to examine the perspectives of individuals with lesbian, gay, and bisexual parents with regard to marriage (in)equality, this research has important implications for the marriage equality debate and provides a springboard for future studies on this topic.

Whether same-sex couples should be allowed to marry is a topic of considerable debate within the United States (Woodford, 2010). After the 1996 passage of the federal Defense of Marriage Act (Pub. L. No. 104-199), which defined marriage as exclusively heterosexual for federal purposes, several states passed laws or constitutional amendments defining marriage as between one man and one woman (Oswald & Kovalanka, 2008). Only six states (Connecticut, Iowa, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New York, and Vermont) and the District of Columbia currently allow same-sex couples to enter into civil marriages, and California remains in limbo while a federal district court judge's decision to overturn the state's recent constitutional amendment restricting marriage to heterosexual couples is appealed (Associated Press, 2010).

Individuals who oppose extending marriage to same-sex couples have expressed concern that legalizing civil marriages between same-sex partners will hasten the decline of marriage as an institution. Wardle (2006) argued that recognizing marriages of same-sex couples would change the meaning of marriage, such that "conjugal marriage" (marriage between a man and a woman) would be replaced with "committed intimate relationships." In his opinion, the heterosexual dimensions of the relationship are central to the definition of marriage and why it is of such fundamental value to society. Some opponents have further claimed that

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allowing same-sex couples to marry is harmful to children, arguing that children fare best with both their biological, heterosexual mothers and fathers (Carroll & Dollahite, 2008). In Iowa, the case made by the state against legal recognition of marriages by same-sex partners involved the argument that allowing same-sex couples to marry would disadvantage any future children these couples might have. The state's attorney argued that heterosexual couples provide the best home for children and that thus the state should limit legal recognition of marriage to different-sex couples (see Patterson, 2009).

Advocates of extending marriage to same-sex couples have situated the pursuit of marriage equality within a civil rights framework, arguing that access to marriage is important in that it grants same-sex couples access to many important legal rights. These advocates have highlighted the reality that, within the United States, marriage privileges individuals in numerous ways, including allowing married people to be covered under their spouses' health insurance and to inherit their spouses' personal assets without being taxed excessively (Patterson, 2009; Pawelski et al., 2006). Advocates have also emphasized the symbolic benefits of marriage, arguing that marriage equality may help to legitimate same-sex relationships and to combat the discrimination that lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) people and their families face (Meezan & Rauch, 2005).

Both the practical and symbolic benefits of marriage have been emphasized when discussing the welfare of children, in particular. Advocates of marriage equality have asserted that marriage may benefit children by increasing their material security and well-being by means of benefits such as spousal health insurance eligibility (i.e., children with legal ties to both parents can receive health insurance from either parent; Pawelski et al., 2006). Marriage may also benefit children by increasing the stability of their parents' unions; that is, couples may be less likely to break up in the presence of legal and symbolic safeguards. Finally, advocates of marriage equality have contended that marriage may indirectly benefit children by enhancing the social acceptance of their parents' unions, thereby reducing the stigma to which children are exposed (Patterson, 2009).

The voices of children with LGB parents have been absent from debates about marriage equality. Although national poll data have indicated

that a growing number of young people believe that marriage as an institution is becoming obsolete (Pew Research Center, 2010), some scholars have suggested that youth with LGB parents may tend to hold a somewhat different view of marriage, given their awareness of and experience with existing marriage laws that have explicitly discriminated against same-sex couples (Gabb, 2004). Yet no research has explored how children with LGB parents perceive marriage and marriage (in)equality. The current qualitative study of 49 adolescents and emerging adults (ages 14–29) with LGB parents aims to fill this gap.

LGB Adults' Perspectives on Marriage and Marriage (In)equality

Although no research has described how young adults with LGB parents think about marriage and marriage equality, a growing body of empirical and theoretical scholarship has explored the perspectives of LGB people. This work has revealed a diverse range of views among both LGB laypeople and scholars regarding the meaning and implications of marriage for same-sex couples. Some are critical of marriage and have asserted that, rather than seeking access to the rights that married couples enjoy, LGB people and allies should be critical about whether it is fair that marriage bestows such privileges in the first place (Card, 2007; Lannutti, 2008). Critics have questioned, for example, whether providing income tax benefits to married couples is appropriate, because this practice disadvantages single people and those who do not wish to marry (LaSala, 2007). Other scholars and laypeople have conceded that critiques of the institution of marriage are viable but assert that one can hold critical views of the institution and still seek marriage equality in order to benefit one's own and one's children's well-being (Lannutti, 2008; Peel & Harding, 2004).

Empirical research has increasingly examined the variability of beliefs regarding marriage equality among LGB adults. Lannutti (2007) surveyed LGB Massachusetts residents about their views on marriage equality after the 2003 Massachusetts court ruling in favor of same-sex marriage. Perceived benefits of marriage equality included having their relationships be seen as "real" by others and having their relationships become validated for themselves. Perceived drawbacks included the possibility

that by marrying they might somehow become, or be seen as becoming, like heterosexual people. In their study of same-sex couples in Massachusetts, Schecter, Tracy, Page, and Luong (2008) found that although married couples often emphasized that civil marriage (i.e., a state-sanctioned institution with legal rights and responsibilities) was not as important as the emotional commitment that couples made to each other, they also acknowledged that marrying had deepened their commitment to their partners. Furthermore, at the same time that married couples often voiced a sense of justice in having their relationships sanctioned, some were uncomfortable with the idea that being seen as “normal” also meant being seen as merging into a patriarchal institution. It is notable that, although recent studies of same-sex couples have often focused on those with access to marriage, many couples have formed long-lasting unions in the absence of marriage; thus, geographic, generational, and historical contexts should be considered when studying LGB people’s perspectives on marriage (Reczek, Elliott, & Umberson, 2009).

What About the Children?

The emerging literature suggests that youth with LGB parents show similar outcomes compared with youth with heterosexual parents, with respect to psychological and social adjustment, thereby challenging the notion that children are disadvantaged by growing up with LGB parents (see Biblarz & Savci, 2010, for a review). At the same time, the literature indicates that youth with LGB parents may encounter unique challenges related to the stigmatized nature of their family structure. For example, they are vulnerable to teasing about their parents’ sexual orientation (Fairtlough, 2008; Tasker & Golombok, 1997), and experiences with stigma have been linked to poorer mental health (Bos & van Balen, 2008). It is notable that there is mounting research showing that the sociolegal context in which LGB-parent families live has implications for the degree of stigma they encounter related to their family structure and, in turn, their mental health (Goldberg & Smith, 2011). For example, Bos, Gartrell, van Balen, Peyser, and Sandfort (2008) compared children (ages 8–12 years) with lesbian parents in The Netherlands (where marriage has been an option for same-sex couples since 2001) and the United States and found that Dutch children reported greater openness about their

family structure, less frequent encounters with homophobia, and fewer adjustment problems than American children.

Thus, research with LGB family members has begun to document a relationship among the sociolegal context, exposure to stigma, and well-being. LGB parents and prospective parents may in turn be aware of how marriage may benefit their children by minimizing or buffering the effects of societal stigma. Porche and Purvin (2008) studied a small sample of same-sex couples in Massachusetts and found that parents and prospective parents often felt that marriage provided children with an almost intangible yet critical sense of security. Likewise, Lannutti (2008) interviewed members of same-sex couples in Massachusetts who were married or engaged and found that some participants’ motivation to marry rested in part on their belief that getting married would help to protect their relationships with existing or future children.

Indeed, in the absence of marriage (and thus the *parentage presumption*, a doctrine that presumes that a child born to a married woman is the child of both the biological mother and her spouse), children of LGB parents are often legally vulnerable (Rosato, 2006). Their parents may try to access the legal protections that are available (e.g., second-parent adoptions, which allow the partner of a legal biological or adoptive parent to also adopt the child), thereby weaving together a “patchwork quilt” of legal security for their children. Yet this quilt is not without holes, and in some cases these holes are quite large. Few states guarantee same-sex couples access to second-parent adoptions, thus preventing both parents from being able to make emergency medical decisions for their children, from sharing the responsibility of financially supporting their children, and so on (Pawelski et al., 2006). Furthermore, LGB coparents without second-parent adoptions could end up legal strangers to their children, should the partners separate: When same-sex couples have dissolved their unions, courts have clearly favored a biological/legal parent over a nonlegal coparent in custody and visitation disputes (Richman, 2009). Thus, the unevenness of laws and judicial decisions from state to state can create vulnerabilities for LGB parents and their children.

As discussed earlier in this article, there is a literature on LGB adults’ perceptions of

marriage equality. Although LGB adults' views are important, it is essential to gain insight into the perspectives of individuals with LGB parents for several reasons. First, their voices should not a priori be assumed to be tautological; adolescents and emerging adults with LGB parents may have a unique vantage point for considering the meaning and consequences of same-sex marriage. Their perspectives may be shaped by their particularly vulnerable status as the children of LGB parents, whereby their parents' ability to access marriage and other legal protections has implications for their daily exposure to minority stress and, thus, their well-being. Indeed, amidst a cultural context that defines family relationship in terms of biological and legal ties, children with LGB parents often must construct their families in the absence of such ties. Defining and asserting their family relationships in the absence of societal or legal recognition (e.g., marriage) may require a certain amount of work that, over time, can be stressful (Breshears, 2010).

Second, the views of individuals with LGB parents may be uniquely shaped by their age and generational factors. The participants in our sample were born in the mid-1980s and early 1990s, before the issue of marriage equality had gained national attention, and many had LGB parents who were together long before marriage was considered a possibility for same-sex couples. The fact that the marriage equality debate grew in intensity during their formative years—in particular, their adolescence, a time marked by identity formation and exploration with respect to relationships and worldviews (Arnett, 2000)—potentially makes them a unique cohort. Furthermore, there was great diversity within this cohort, enabling us to examine how their particular circumstances (e.g., whether they grew up with LGB parents or experienced their LGB parent[s] coming out later) might influence their views of marriage equality. Finally, on a theoretical level, gaining their perspectives on marriage (in)equality can broaden our knowledge of how marriage (in)equality affects families and may lend insight into the changing role of marriage in society.

Thus, we were interested in gaining an understanding of how individuals with LGB parents perceive themselves, and the broader community of children with LGB parents, as being affected by marriage (in)equality. Through our analysis of interviews with 49 adolescents and emerging adults (ages 14–29) with one or more

LGB parents, we aimed to answer the following two questions:

1. How do adolescents and emerging adults with LGB parents view marriage and marriage (in)equality? How do their perspectives vary, and what factors seem to influence these various perspectives?
2. How do adolescents and emerging adults with LGB parents believe that the lives of families like their own might be affected by marriage equality? In other words, what kinds of practical and/or symbolic consequences do they associate with marriage equality?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

We approached these questions guided by an integrative theoretical framework, which combines minority stress, legal consciousness, and social constructionist frameworks. A minority stress framework suggests that LGB people comprise a disadvantaged social group that is subject to stigma, which predisposes them to excess stress that may lead to adverse mental health effects (Meyer, 2003). Minority stress theory points to the pathogenic social conditions that stigmatize LGB people and treat them as inferior to heterosexuals as the source of the psychosocial stress that LGB people experience (Meyer, 2003). Although the experience of minority stress has long been recognized in the LGB population, minority stress has less frequently been examined in the context of youth with LGB parents (Bos & van Balen, 2008; Goldberg, 2007). This perspective is important in that this group is vulnerable to unique stressors related to having an LGB parent and may thus view marriage equality as a vehicle for minimizing the stressors that their families face in the broader heterosexist society. Indeed, marriage amendments and other anti-LGB policies are often perceived as “acute prejudicial events by LGB citizens and thus by definition are minority stress factors” (Rostosky, Riggle, Horne, & Miller, 2009, p. 57). In turn, marriage equality may be valued at both the broader, symbolic level (i.e., in terms of what it means for society) as well as on the personal, practical level (i.e., in terms of what it means for individual families).

We also draw from the notion of *legal consciousness* (Ewick & Silbey, 1998), which encompasses the bidirectional and historically changing tensions between individual

engagement with the legal system and the structural and practical constraints that govern such engagement. Ewick and Silbey (1998) differentiated among three types of legal consciousness—(a) before the law, (b) with the law, and (c) against the law—that attend to “both the constraints and opportunities of law and the ways in which people negotiate their lives within these parameters” (Oswald & Kivalanka, 2008, p. 1053). When individuals perceive themselves as positioned *before the law*, they view the legal system as a powerful external authority to which they submit. A child with LGB parents who accepts her or his family’s lack of legal rights as unchangeable and not worth challenging is standing before the law (Oswald & Kivalanka, 2008). When individuals position themselves *with the law*, they strategically engage with the law for their own benefit. A child living in a state where civil marriage for same-sex couples is legally accessible, and who wants her or his LGB parents to enter into a civil marriage to access rights and privileges, is positioned with the law. Likewise, children with LGB parents who are satisfied with civil unions might also be positioned with the law. When individuals struggle *against the law*, they intentionally resist legal authority. A child with LGB parents who voices opposition to the federal Defense of Marriage Act is positioned against the law. Finally, legal consciousness can vary across time and circumstance, reflecting changes in and differences between individuals’ learning, experiences, and resources. Thus, children with LGB parents may have varying positions with regard to marriage (in)equality as a function of the dynamic nature of state and federal laws defining marriage and their own personal circumstances.

Finally, a social constructionist framework emphasizes the construction of meaning and knowledge, placing emphasis on individuals’ constructions of their experiences. Individuals’ meaning-making processes are necessarily shaped by their everyday interactions and immediate social context, as well as broader historical, cultural, and ideological contexts (Schwandt, 2000). Because the dominant cultural narrative is that marriage is a fundamental institution in society, affording unparalleled symbolic and practical benefits to relationships (Dodge, 2006), individuals with LGB parents may internalize this narrative, inasmuch as the absence of civil marriage may have profound effects on their lives. Or, they may construct resistant narratives

about marriage and the need for marriage, given that their families are often living their lives without access to it. Furthermore, because individuals with LGB parents must often construct their family identity (including ideas about commitment and family connectedness) in the absence of marriage (Breshears, 2010), of interest is the degree to which they view marriage as capable of transforming LGB family members’ constructions of family relations, as well as shaping outsiders’ views of LGB families.

METHOD

Sample

A total of 49 individuals, ages 14 to 29 ($M = 22.15$ years, $SD = 3.58$), participated in the study. Thirty-eight participants self-identified as female, 10 as male, and one as gender-queer. In response to an open-ended question about sexual orientation, 39 individuals self-identified as heterosexual, five as queer, two as gay, two as bisexual, and one as lesbian. Most participants ($n = 43$) were White, four were Hispanic, one was African American, and one was Asian. Seven participants had less than a high school education (they were currently in high school); one had a high school diploma, 17 had some college (in most cases because they were in college), one had an associate’s degree, 21 had a bachelor’s degree, one had a master’s degree, and one had a J.D.

Participants grew up in a variety of family situations. In 20 cases, participants had been born to two mothers via donor insemination and had a biological mother and a nonbiological mother. In 22 cases, participants had been born to heterosexual parents, one or both of whom later came out as LGB (in 13 cases, their mother; in eight cases, their father; in one case, both parents). Two participants were born to a single lesbian mother, one was born to a lesbian couple and a gay male couple who coparented, one was born to a bisexual mother and a gay father, one was adopted by two gay fathers at birth, one was adopted by two lesbian mothers at birth, and one was born to heterosexual parents but later adopted by a lesbian couple via the child welfare system.

Eighteen participants grew up in California; five in Ohio; four in Pennsylvania; four in Massachusetts; three in Minnesota; two in Georgia; two in Texas; two in Virginia; and one each

in Arkansas, Delaware, Florida, Idaho, Maine, Maryland, Michigan, New York, and Oregon. In terms of their current state of residence, 16 participants were living in California; five in Ohio; four in Massachusetts; three in New York; three in Washington State; two in Florida; two in Georgia; two in Illinois; two in Texas; two in Virginia; and one each in Arizona, Colorado, Maine, Minnesota, Ontario Canada, Oregon, Pennsylvania, and the District of Columbia.

Ten participants reported that their LGB parent(s) had obtained civil marriages; in seven of these cases, the marriages involved an LGB parent and stepparent. Also in seven of these cases, participants' parents were married in California before the passage of Proposition 8, a voter measure that banned additional same-sex couples from entering into legally recognized civil marriages in that state (and the constitutionality of which is currently under legal debate; Associated Press, 2010). In all but 2 of these 10 cases, the marriages were granted in their own states and recognized. Three participants reported that their LGB parent(s) had obtained a domestic partnership. In 13 cases, participants said that their LGB parent(s) had had a commitment ceremony.

Participant Recruitment

Participants were recruited and interviewed over the course of 8 months, namely, between March 2010 through October 2010. Recruitment began shortly before Judge Vaughn Walker's ruling that Proposition 8 was unconstitutional. Thus, participants were recruited during a time when the issue of marriage equality was being hotly debated across the country and, in some cases, within their own state. In turn, they sometimes cited Proposition 8 (and other constitutional amendments banning same-sex marriage) in their interviews, typically as a means of grounding their own personal response to marriage inequality in a particular example.

Participants were recruited in a variety of ways. Adolescents (ages 14–17 years, $n = 7$) and emerging adults (ages 18–29 years, $n = 42$) with LGB parents were invited via listserv announcements to participate in a study focused on understanding their perspectives on and experiences with marriage (in)equality. For example, calls for participants were placed on listservs maintained by the Safe Schools Coalition, a partnership of organizations that seek to promote tolerance in schools by providing resources

for students, parents, and schools; and COLAGE (Children of Lesbians and Gays Everywhere), an organization run by and for individuals with one or more lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer (LGBTQ) parents. LGBTQ centers on several university campuses throughout the United States also disseminated information about the study to their students. Finally, several chapters of PFLAG (Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) provided information to their members.

Procedure

Abbie E. Goldberg's contact information was included with the study description, and potential participants contacted her for study details. Interested participants were mailed a consent form ensuring confidentiality and detailing the conditions of participation, as well as a small packet of questionnaires to complete. Participants then completed an in-depth, semistructured telephone interview (about 1 hour) with Abbie E. Goldberg or a trained graduate research assistant. Interviews were transcribed verbatim. Pseudonyms were assigned to participants.

Our analysis primarily focused on the following interview questions:

- What are your feelings and opinions concerning marriage equality for same-sex couples? What has informed your opinions?
- (How) do you think marriage equality would affect LGB-parent families?
- If your parents were married, how did this change your/their life, if at all? If your parents were married but that right has since been taken away, what was this like?
- If your parents were not married, would you like your parents to be able to get married? Why/why not?
- If your parents obtained a civil union or domestic partnership, what are your feelings about this? Does it feel like "enough"? Why/why not?
- If your parents separated and their relationship was not legally recognized, how did things work after your parents separated in regard to custody, visitation, etc.?

We conducted a thematic analysis of the data (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003) that involved a thorough exploration of recurrent patterns in the data to create a coding system to organize the data. Both the literature on LGB people's perspectives on marriage equality and our integrative

theoretical framework informed our analysis. One focus of our analysis was the degree to which exposure to minority stress seemed to heighten participants' awareness of or desire for marriage equality. For example, we were interested in whether individuals who grew up with LGB parents (and thus had less discretion over disclosing their family structure than individuals whose parents came out when they were older) had more passionate stances regarding marriage equality. We also were interested in how participants positioned themselves in relation to marriage; that is, using the concepts of legal consciousness, to what extent, and how, were participants standing before, acting with, or struggling against the law? Because our analysis was also grounded in a social constructionist perspective, we also were generally attentive to the ways in which individuals were constructing and explaining their views of marriage and marriage equality and the degree to which these ideas reflected dominant narratives about marriage. We also attended to whether and how marriage equality was imbued with the power to shape individual and dominant constructions of family; that is, was marriage perceived as having the capacity to transform LGB families' relationships, or to shape others' views of LGB families?

We both coded the data, engaging in a process of analytic triangulation. This involves having multiple individuals independently analyze the same data and compare findings, thereby ensuring that multiple interpretations are considered and thus lending itself to verification of the soundness of the emerging descriptive scheme (Patton, 2002). First, we engaged in line-by-line analysis to generate initial theoretical categories (Charmaz, 2006). For example, we generated the initial codes "advocate of marriage equality" and "not an advocate of marriage equality" to describe individuals' general stance on marriage equality. As we moved to focused coding, we refined these codes. For example, the code "not an advocate of marriage equality" was replaced with three separate codes: (a) "critical of marriage as an institution," (b) "critical of the fight for marriage equality," and (c) "mitigated support due to ambivalence about LGB parent's sexuality." We further specified our codes by developing subcodes that denoted information about participants' interpretations of how or why they feel a particular way (e.g., some participants attributed their critical stance toward marriage to their geographic context and privilege). We

also attended to relationships among categories (Charmaz, 2006); for example, we attended to how participants' gender, sexual orientation, and family structure (living in an LGB-parent family from birth vs. having a parent come out post-divorce) might be relevant to their views about marriage and marriage equality.

We discussed the emerging codes and our differences in interpretation throughout the coding process. The final coding scheme was established once we had reached agreement among all the independently coded data. We continued to reapply the coding scheme to the data and made subsequent revisions until all data were accounted for with the codes. The coding scheme was revised seven times. The findings are organized around the final coding scheme.

RESULTS

In the sections that follow, we first describe participants' varying orientations toward and beliefs about marriage equality. We then describe the perceived benefits that they associated with marriage equality, discussing how they made sense of the presence or absence of these benefits in their everyday lives. Finally, we highlight several perceived disadvantages of marriage equality.

Beliefs About Marriage Equality

Some participants described themselves as *strong advocates* of marriage equality, others articulated *critical perspectives* of marriage and/or the fight for marriage equality, and still others described *mitigated support* for marriage equality.

"I am all for marriage equality": Unequivocal support for marriage equality. Almost 70% of participants ($n = 34$; 28 women, 6 men) described themselves as strong advocates of marriage equality. Most of them framed this belief, at least in part, in terms of civil rights discourses (Meezan & Rauch, 2005). Participants focused on the injustice of LGB people being denied the hundreds of legal rights that are conferred by marriage. They emphasized that, as tax-paying citizens, LGB people should have the right to enter into civil marriage. Some participants specifically invoked the Constitution and argued that their parents' right to marry was being violated. Most of these participants also

asserted their belief that domestic partnerships and civil unions were not sufficient replacements for marriage. They knew that “marriage carries an unmatched historical and legal recognition” (Dodge, 2006, p. 91) and thus were struggling against the law, as they believed that LGB people deserved the right to marriage specifically (Ewick & Silbey, 1998).

Participants who did not grow up with LGB parents from birth or early childhood, and who therefore had been less personally affected by marriage inequality, tended to ground their assertions about the importance of marriage equality exclusively in the “rights” discourse. Their narratives thus focused more on the assorted benefits associated with marriage rather than on their personal experiences of living without those benefits. For example, Lauren, a 24-year-old White heterosexual woman whose father came out as gay when she was 12, made the following assertion:

All those things: taxation, inheritance rights . . . or protection in case the relationship ends. I mean, all that kind of stuff gets denied to same-sex couples. So I think that’s one of the things that really bothers me, that there’s a lot of talk around, “Well, aren’t civil unions the same? Aren’t domestic partnerships the same?” And they’re not the same. There are over a thousand rights that are denied same-sex couples because marriage is not equal.

Participants who had been raised by LGB parents from birth or early childhood, and who had therefore been personally affected by marriage inequality throughout their lives, also tended to emphasize people’s basic right to marriage—but also spoke to how their personal experiences influenced their beliefs. In this way, they tended to describe more emotionally charged views, punctuated with references to how they had been personally affected by marriage inequality. Their stories highlighted the myriad ways in which legal inequalities powerfully shaped their daily lives. Callie, a 25-year-old White heterosexual woman with two mothers, observed that her belief in marriage equality had been informed by her awareness that

we don’t have the same rights as other people. [Paying] thousands of dollars just so I could go in and sign this paper [so that] in the event that my mom gets hurt, I could visit her in the hospital. . . . It’s those really basic things that people get from their legally married parents . . . that we weren’t able to get.

Having grown up with LGB parents their entire lives, participants like Callie may have been exposed to more minority stress, on average, than participants whose parents came out later (Meyer, 2003), raising their awareness of the law’s power to enhance or undermine family stability. Thus, their familial circumstances contributed to how they came to their position of legal consciousness (Ewick & Silbey, 1998).

Of note is that 11 of the participants—all women—who described themselves as strong advocates of marriage equality qualified this by emphasizing that they believed that couples, such as their LGB parents, did not need marriage to show their commitment or to be in loving relationships. They described their parents’ commitment ceremonies as meaningful, independent of their access to marriage, thus resisting the notion that marriage had the power to symbolically define their parents’ relationship. Thus, at the same time that they implicitly acknowledged the authority of the law by recognizing its capacity to enhance or undermine family stability, they also stood against the law by refusing to accept the law’s power to define their parents’ relationships (Ewick & Silbey, 1998). Tasha, a 22-year-old White heterosexual college student who grew up with two adoptive lesbian mothers, described how her mothers had gotten married in California prior to the passage of Proposition 8:

It’s still under such a debate that it’s kind of—I don’t think they want to be too attached to it. It might get taken away. But, the whole marriage situation has kind of been, it’s like, “You know what? You love who you love. . . .The rest is just documentation.”

Of note is that 10 of these 11 participants had grown up with LGB parents from birth; thus, they had grown up surrounded by relationships that thrived in the absence of marriage. As Allison, a 20-year-old White heterosexual college student who was raised by two mothers, remarked,

I don’t think marriage is necessarily the best way to show that there’s love for one another, probably just because nobody in my family has really ever had a marriage ceremony or anything, and yet I feel like everyone’s very connected and loves each other.

Indeed, having grown up with parents who maintained long-term, committed relationships in the absence of civil marriage may have encouraged participants’ resistance to the dominant social narrative about the importance of the

marital union when constructing their own ideas about enduring familial relationships (Reczek et al., 2009).

"I believe in marriage equality, with reservations . . .": Critics of the institution and/or fight for marriage. Twenty-four percent of participants ($n = 12$; eight women, three men, one gender-queer person) articulated critical perspectives of marriage, such that they believed in marriage equality but vocalized resistance to the institution of marriage and/or the fight for marriage equality. They described marriage as an "oppressive" institution, particularly to women, and did not know whether they themselves would ultimately choose to marry. They were critical of "state interference in relationships" and felt that tying benefits to marriage "reinforces the idea that being coupled is a superior thing." At the same time, they believed that everyone should have the choice to marry. In this way, they gave voice to the problems with marriage while also claiming LGB people's right to access it (Peel & Harding, 2004). As Leah, a 25-year-old White heterosexual woman who was raised by a bisexual mother and a gay father, explained,

I think everyone should be able to get married if they want to, but I also think the institution of marriage has been generally kind of oppressive for a lot of people. I don't really personally believe in the institution, but I think that people who want to get married definitely should be able to do that. . . . In my ideal world, everyone would just get domestic partnerships, and then marriage wouldn't be that big an issue [*laughs*]. But I think that because marriage is so important to so many people, everyone should be able to have it.

Leah's preference for domestic partnerships was echoed by several others ($n = 4$), who believed that the legal and romantic aspects of marriage would ideally be disentangled, such that civil marriage was separate from religious/commitment ceremonies. They therefore positioned themselves against the law by resisting the institution of marriage in its current form (Ewick & Silbey, 1998), but they also stood with the law by noting that, in the absence of overhauling the institution of marriage, LGB people should be able to access it in order to obtain certain benefits.

Seven of the above 12 participants also voiced their criticism of the level of energy and resources devoted to the fight for marriage

equality. In some cases, they asserted that fighting for marriage equality was elitist, noting that "poor LGB people are not the ones fighting for marriage equality." They were critical that marriage equality was the "lead issue" taken on by LGB organizations when, from their perspective, many LGB people did not have anything to gain from marriage equality. Several participants also emphasized that there were many other important, sometimes non-LGBTQ-specific, issues to worry about, including health care, immigration, and homelessness, all of which seemed more worthy of political activism than marriage equality. Jessie, a 22-year-old White female heterosexual college student, asserted the following:

Gay marriage is the issue that people without any problems go to as their problem. I realize I am coming at this from a place of a lot of privilege, because I have a lot of privilege. . . . But the people who are fighting this . . . are upper middle-class, White, [and] gay. . . . People who are struggling to feed their kids and are gay are not on the front lines of this. It's like, do they really need that kind of support from the government that marriage gives you?

Jessie later acknowledged, however, that "there are definitely financial benefits to being married." Thus, she indirectly suggested that although poor LGB people may not be on the "front lines," they may actually benefit from marriage, if they choose to marry (i.e., to act with the law).

These participants' more critical views may in part be accounted for by their social locations. Several of them observed how their parents' access to high levels of educational and financial resources enabled them to protect their families against hardship (e.g., through second-parent adoptions). They recognized that their social and economic privilege offset the hardships that might be incurred by less affluent families who lacked marriage rights and noted that they might not be so critical of marriage if they were personally affected by marriage inequality: "The privilege of my family made it such that it wasn't something we needed." Indeed, in 4 of the 12 cases, participants' LGB parents had recently entered into civil marriages—yet they noted that their parents' marriage did not have much of an impact on them, specifically because their families had already procured second-parent adoptions. Likewise, several participants invoked their own geographic

privilege, noting that they might be less critical of marriage if they had grown up in less progressive, more stigmatizing communities. Thus, protective factors in the form of social, material, and community resources may have protected them from minority stress (Meyer, 2003), facilitating their willingness to vocally criticize the fight for marriage equality.

Also of note is that all but one of the participants who espoused more critical perspectives had grown up with lesbian parents since birth or early childhood. Perhaps not experiencing any legal vulnerability—as well as living their entire lives in “nontraditional” households—gave them the freedom to be more critical of marriage and the fight for marriage equality. Furthermore, four of these participants self-identified as queer, which may have facilitated their sense of freedom to advance more critical (e.g., radical feminist) perspectives on marriage (LaSala, 2007).

‘I believe in marriage equality, but . . .’: Mitigated support. Six percent of participants (two women, one man), whose parents came out when they were teenagers, expressed that they were struggling with complex feelings surrounding their parents’ divorce and their LGB parents’ subsequent relationships. Although they claimed to believe in the right to marry for all, their ambivalence surrounding the nature of their LGB parent’s current relationship(s) prevented them from assuming a more passionate stance. Ian, a 24-year-old White heterosexual man whose father came out when he was 14, claimed to support marriage equality yet acknowledged struggling with his father’s same-sex relationships, feeling that his father “always put his relationships ahead of me and my sisters.” Miranda, a 20-year-old heterosexual college student whose mother came out when she was 17 after having an affair with a woman, also expressed conflicted feelings, noting that she was “pretty liberal in [her] views” but disagreed strongly with the affair. These findings complement prior work that suggests that youth whose LGB parents come out after a divorce may experience an array of stressors that involve both the divorce and their parents’ sexuality (Fairlough, 2008), yet they go beyond prior work to suggest how experiencing these events, side by side, may create internal conflict for youth with LGB parents as they struggle to articulate their views on political—and now personal—topics such as same-sex marriage.

Perceived Benefits or Advantages of Marriage Equality

Many participants in the study identified *legal benefits* of marriage, noting its power to enhance security in LGB-parent families. They also described *symbolic advantages* of marriage, such as sending the message that LGB-parent families were legitimate. Finally, some participants believed that marriage might exert a *stabilizing influence* on LGB-parent families.

Legal benefits. Legal benefits of marriage were identified by participants who were unconditionally supportive of marriage equality efforts as well as those with more critical stances. Thus, even individuals who expressed apprehension about the institution of marriage recognized that, because marriage was associated with a host of legal privileges, access to those privileges via marriage had the capacity to enhance families’ material well-being (Meezan & Rauch, 2005). Fourteen participants (12 women and 2 men) described *financial continuity* (i.e., wills, inheritance) as a concern, given that their parents were not legally married. They worried that their parents would be unable to pass on property or assets to each other or that their nonlegal parents would be unable to pass on property or assets to them. Tammy, a 26-year-old White heterosexual woman who had grown up with a mother and father until her mother came out when she was a teen, shared the following:

It’s a pretty big fear of [my mother’s] that if something happened to her, all the power of attorney and all that would probably go to her mother, whereas she barely knows her mother and has established this 15-year relationship with her wife, but it [isn’t] recognized . . . so my stepmom would literally be left with nothing, even though their lives are so intertwined. So my mom is always preaching to me, “Please don’t let this happen, please don’t let this happen. This is what I want, these are my wishes,” so that I can kind of override that in case anything ever happens. I kind of have to be the voice for her wife.

Twelve participants (all women) specifically identified *the right to visit a loved one* (i.e., in the hospital) as a fundamental right conferred by marriage. They noted that they knew “multiple families and people who couldn’t go and see another loved one while they were in the hospital because they weren’t considered family,” a problem that they recognized would “go away”

if LGB people were allowed to marry. Marlo, a 21-year-old White lesbian college student whose mother had been with her partner, Carol, since she was 7, shared,

I talk about this with Mom and Carol all the time: What if Mom is dying one day and you can't go see her in the hospital because you're not married to her, or something like that? I think [marriage equality] is really, really, really important.

Twelve participants (11 women and 1 man) observed that issues surrounding *health insurance* would be resolved if LGB people could marry. Most of them described how, growing up, their parents were not able to cover each other under their health insurance and/or their nonlegal parent (usually their nonbiological mother) was not able to cover the participant under his or her health insurance. Lexy, a 24-year-old White heterosexual woman who had been raised primarily by her lesbian biological mother and her mother's partner, Karen, her "stepmother," explained,

[Marriage equality] would have affected my life with my mom and Karen very tangibly and specifically. I couldn't drive Karen's car, because I couldn't be on her car insurance. Karen had dental insurance . . . and my mom and I couldn't be on her dental insurance.

Similarly, Dean, a 22-year-old White heterosexual college student whose mother had repartnered with a woman after his parents divorced when he was 12, described how he and his sister had fallen through the "patchwork quilt" when his mother was fired for being gay, leaving them both without health insurance. Dean noted that "at the time, my mother's partner was employed and would have been able to keep us on her insurance if civil unions or gay marriage were valid." This situation represents just one concrete example of how legal insecurities can create the potential for, or may exacerbate, LGB family members' exposure to minority stress (Rostosky et al., 2009).

Indeed, many of the benefits that participants named were benefits that would have been conferred via the "parentage presumption" (Rosato, 2006), that is, by virtue of getting married, both of their LGB parents would have been legally connected to and responsible for them. In addition to describing more general advantages of marriage, such as rights

concerning hospital visitation and health insurance, many participants described advantages that specifically related to their relationships with parental figures. Fifteen participants (13 women and 2 men) described how marriage would reduce the need for *second-parent adoptions* by a nonlegal parent, a right to which some of their parents had not had access while they were growing up. Six of these individuals specifically described how their nonbiological, nonlegal parent had attempted to adopt them, without success. Rachel, a 22-year-old White heterosexual female college student who grew up with two mothers, described her relationship with her nonbiological mother, Nora, as follows:

There is no legal relationship. I think that when . . . I was first born or when I was a little baby, Nora tried to adopt me and they tried to go through those offices and nothing happened, and it wasn't able to happen. . . . We have gone to lawyers the last few years just in case something should happen to my mom, so that . . . they can be each other's next of kin and I can also be their next of kin if something should happen to both of them. So there's still other legal things. [But] I have to say, it was sad to have to go to a lawyer and be like, "If Nora is in the hospital I want to be able to visit her because she's my mom."

Participants like Rachel alluded to their parents' efforts to obtain legal safeguards as strategic actions aimed to minimize legal insecurities. Being forced to do this (to "play the game of law"; Ewick & Silbey, 1998, p. 48) was not only experienced as unfair in that it required LGB families to work much harder to obtain even the most basic legal protections but also was viewed as contributing to symbolic inequities within the family. Vicky, 19, explained, "My main problem with it is that I don't have the same legal rights with one of my parents as I do with the other one."

In regard to the right to be adopted by one's nonbiological parent, 14 participants (10 women, 3 men, and 1 gender-queer respondent) emphasized the ways in which marriage would help with *custody* issues, by protecting the rights of the nonlegal parent or requiring her or him to pay child support and/or live nearby, post-separation. For example, Annie, a 24-year-old heterosexual woman, had been raised primarily by her biological lesbian mother and her mother's partner, whom she had met when Annie was 3. But her mother had originally intended to

raise Annie with an ex-partner from whom she had separated when Annie was an infant. The ex-partner had tried to gain joint custody of Annie but failed: “She sued for joint custody of me, which my mother opposed, and the California court threw it out, because . . . there wasn’t any legal basis for that.” Annie, who had no contact with this woman, often wondered whether the courts would rule differently today than in at that time, which was the late 1980s. Similarly, several other individuals whose LGB parents had split up also wondered whether court involvement would have led to more contact with their nonlegal parent.

Finally, four young women, whose parents were married, described how marriage at the federal level would help alleviate the stress of dealing with a system in which their parents’ relationships were recognized at the state but not the federal level. They discussed their experiences of filling out college financial aid forms to illustrate how such inconsistencies created dilemmas when it came to accurately portraying their family. For example, they were forced to indicate that they had been raised by a single parent, when in fact they had two married lesbian parents.

Symbolic benefits. A majority of the participants also emphasized the various *symbolic benefits* of marriage. These participants, who largely comprised individuals who were unconditionally supportive of marriage equality, recognized that the law has symbolic power, which can theoretically promote legitimacy of same-sex relationships (Woodford, 2010). In turn, 26 participants (21 women and five men) noted that marriage marks relationships as *intelligible and legitimate* and would thus encourage other people to recognize their parents’ relationships, and their families, as “real” (Lannutti, 2007, 2008). Kerry, a 23-year-old White heterosexual woman who had been raised since the age of 5 by her lesbian mother and her mother’s partner, shared the following:

Marriage would make those relationships real to other people. It would make them understand that it’s such a real thing. These are real people, they want real families, they want real relationships. Because it’s a nationally recognized process to get married. . . . That’s what you do when you’re in love with someone and you want to have a family.

All but 2 of the 26 participants who emphasized the significance of marriage in

terms of its ability to legitimize their families’ relationships had been raised by LGB parents from birth or early childhood. These individuals likely experienced less choice regarding whether to be “out” than those whose heterosexual parents divorced when they were older, and they may also have had more extensive and continuous experiences with marginalization (Goldberg, 2007). Indeed, they were more intimately familiar with the daily and long-term stresses of legal inequality. Highly attuned to the ways in which their parents’ relationship was delegitimized in the absence of marriage, they may have been especially sensitive to its potential to legitimize family relations.

In addition to encouraging outsiders to view their relationships as real and valid, seven participants (five women and two men) also viewed marriage equality as having the capacity to help immediate family members to define their relationships as real *for themselves* (Lannutti, 2007). For example, two young women noted that they probably would have been encouraged to view their mothers’ partners—that is, their “stepmoms”—as parents and to call them “Mom” if they had been married to their mothers. Thus, they viewed marriage as having the power to lead them to construct certain relationships as familial. Kerry, for example, observed that she may have been more likely to identify her mother’s partner, Jane, as a parent if they had been married:

I think I see her as being a bit more than just an aunt; you know? I see her as somebody who was a caretaker and a big role in my life. And I’m sure that I would have probably thought of her more as a mom and a parent if they had been married, because I would have called her “Mom.” Because I didn’t call her “Mom.” I mean, we did a lot of stuff as a family. We went on vacations all together and we went out to movies and out to dinner. I mean, we did all the things that families do, but that still didn’t make it seem like she was my mom. It was more just like a friend/aunt sort of figure type of person. So I—it may have been the same. But I think it also had the potential to be different.

Kerry’s musings that marriage might have encouraged her to view, and treat, her mother’s partner as another parent as opposed to just a friend underscores the power of marriage—as a formal and socially recognized bond—to actually transform other familial relationships.

In addition to potentially helping children to define certain legally tenuous or undefined family relationships as real, 19 participants (13 women and 6 men) viewed the symbolic legitimization associated with marriage as having direct effects on *children's well-being* by helping them to feel less different (i.e., from children with heterosexual-parent families) and, ultimately, more secure and validated. Echoing Porche and Purvin's (2008) and Lannutti's (2008) findings that LGB parents often emphasized the symbolic benefits of marriage for their children, they observed that "*marriage* is an important word, and it would help kids feel better if their parents were married." Annie, age 24, asserted,

I think it's probably nice to have maybe a little more of a framework, to tell your 7-year-old friend on the playground, "Yes, my parents are lesbians. They got married. They're not that different." . . . It would have been nice to have an additional degree of sameness.

Vincent, a 23-year-old White heterosexual man with two mothers, shared:

I was just thinking about this with a couple of friends and just was in tears thinking about how different my childhood might have been had same-sex marriage been legalized 25 years ago. . . . The cultural, legal status of same-sex couples impacts the family narratives of same-sex families—how we see ourselves in relation to the larger culture, whether we see ourselves as accepted or outsiders.

It is notable that half of the participants who endorsed this theme were men. It seems that men may be especially sensitive to the ways in which having LGB parents marks them as "different." Indeed, research indicates that children with LGB parents, especially boys, may be teased about their own sexuality (Kosciw & Diaz, 2008; Tasker & Golombok, 1997), and boys with lesbian mothers may be less likely than their female counterparts to be open with peers about their mothers' sexuality (Bos et al., 2008). The type of homophobic teasing that boys endure may be more brutal than the teasing that girls endure, and it may have more negative effects on boys' well-being than other types of teasing (Swearer, Turner, Givens, & Pollack, 2008). In turn, boys may be especially sensitive to the ways in which marriage equality might shield them from stigma.

Extending the argument that marriage equality would invite greater recognition of same-sex couples (Meezan & Rauch, 2005), six participants (five women and one man) suggested that marriage equality might promote *greater acceptance of sexual minorities*. They noted that if the current generation of children comes of age in a time when sexual minorities can marry, this could ultimately encourage more positive views of LGBTQ people, a notion that has also been voiced by LGB people as one hoped for consequence of marriage equality (Shulman, Weck, Schwing, Smith, & Coale, 2009). Tasha, 22, for example, believed that "allowing gay marriage would show that society was more accepting of it as a legitimate lifestyle, and I think that would come down to the kids' level." But several of these individuals also emphasized that although marriage equality was a step in countering societal heterosexism, it would not eradicate negative attitudes toward LGB people. They resisted the idea that changes in the law would lead to broad-scale social transformation, at least not right away. As Kade, a 24-year-old White heterosexual man with two mothers, said, "If you change the law right now, I don't think that kids will immediately feel safe or welcome. I think it's a necessary, but not sufficient, step towards gay equality." Thus, these participants at once acknowledged the power of the law as well as the limitations of legal authorities to dictate social change (Ewick & Silbey, 1998).

Stabilizing influence. Eight participants (five women and three men) emphasized the *stabilizing influence* of marriage. This group included mostly those who were unconditionally supportive of marriage equality but also two who held more critical views. These individuals believed that marriage could improve or benefit same-sex relationships by fostering greater commitment and investment. For example, access to marriage might help couples take the next step in making their relationships more serious, and it might also keep couples together who might otherwise have split up. Brianna, a 28-year-old White heterosexual woman who grew up with a lesbian mother, mused that "If there was a possibility of . . . having legal rights, having all of these things that build up to the actual ceremony, [having] family involved in it and just that feeling of community, I think some relationships might be better or last longer." Lexy, age 24, felt that "having a legally recognized marriage can

be part of a whole network of social factors that help people stay together . . . and society recognizing the relationship generally takes strain off of a relationship.

A few of these participants, whose lesbian mothers had previously separated, wondered whether their parents would have split up if they had been married. They were aware of the stabilizing influence of marriage, in that marriage (or at least the burden of acquiring a legal divorce) can act as a barrier to couple dissolution. Aaron, a 23-year-old White heterosexual man whose lesbian mothers had split when he was 6, reflected, “I often wonder . . . had they been married at the time, would they have handled their relationship differently? Maybe, maybe not.”

Perceived Potential Disadvantages of Marriage

Possible negative outcomes associated with extending marriage to same-sex couples were described by seven women, five of whom were among those who voiced resistance to the institution of marriage. Namely, two of these women observed that “with marriage comes divorce.” Both of their lesbian mothers had broken up, and they mused that, had they been legally married, the divorce might have been more difficult. Specifically, one of them reflected that divorce was so “final” and that it precluded the fluidity that was possible in nonmarried relationships. She observed that her parents later got back together—something that might not have occurred had her parents been legally married and then legally divorced. The other woman described her parents’ split as amicable but observed that it might have been “nastier” if it had been an actual divorce.

In three cases, participants articulated that if same-sex couples were to marry, it would make those relationships more visible, which would cause couples, or their children, to lose heterosexual privilege, however illusory. One of these women reflected that if her lesbian mothers had been married, it would have made the nature of her parents’ relationship more evident to others, something she would have found difficult in high school. Two women noted that their lesbian mothers continued to receive military and other benefits through their ex-husbands—a privilege that they would lose if they married.

Two participants identified potential losses for the LGBTQ community. Echoing concerns

voiced by some LGB people (Schechter et al., 2008), one woman worried that access to marriage would normalize LGB-parent families, erasing what made them unique from heterosexual-parent families. One woman worried that marriage would create schisms within the LGBTQ community (Woodford, 2010), differentiating LGB individuals in coupled relationships from those who did not want to marry, and those who were single or in polyamorous relationships: “Queer families who don’t look like what we want queer families to look like [would] be marginalized even further.”

DISCUSSION

The current exploratory study represents the first in-depth examination of how adolescents and emerging adults with LGB parents think about marriage (in)equality. Their voices add insight and nuance to the current debates surrounding marriage equality for same-sex couples.

Young Adults’ Beliefs About Marriage Equality: Varied and Contextually Influenced

More than two thirds of the participants articulated fairly unequivocal support of marriage equality, adopting a perspective that is closely aligned with that of feminist philosopher Cheshire Calhoun (2000), who has argued that marriage should be at the center of gay politics, inasmuch as access to marriage can help to destabilize heterosexual privilege and ultimately end LGB people’s exclusion from civil society. It is notable that, within this group, individuals who had grown up with LGB parents since birth or early childhood tended to describe their feelings about marriage (in)equality in personal, emotionally charged terms. Growing up in an LGB-parent family had sensitized them to the numerous implications of marriage (in)equality, and, in turn, they viewed marriage as an essential right that, if accessed, could help buffer some of the stress that LGB families such as their own experienced on a daily basis (Fairtlough, 2008; Meyer, 2003). Their narratives nuance prior quantitative research that has demonstrated the powerful role of the sociolegal context in exacerbating, or lessening, LGB family members’ exposure to stigma and, in turn, their risk for stress and mental health problems (Goldberg & Smith, 2011; Riggle, Rostosky, & Horne, 2010). They go beyond these findings, however, by

giving voice to the perspectives of the vulnerable offspring of LGB parents and by highlighting the conditions (e.g., growing up with LGB parents from birth) that may be particularly likely to foster strong support for marriage equality.

About one quarter of participants voiced some criticism of the institution of marriage and/or the amount of resources being funneled into the fight for marriage equality. Their narratives echo some of the more critical perspectives voiced within the LGB community (Card, 2007; LaSala, 2007), yet these participants also fully engaged the reality that, in the absence of overhauling the institution of marriage, marriage equality was worth supporting. In this way, they positioned themselves as both against the law (in theory) and also with the law (i.e., playing the “game” of law, in order to obtain certain benefits; Ewick & Silbey, 1998). It is notable that those who did voice fairly critical perspectives sometimes observed that they were “speaking from a place of privilege.” They recognized that their material circumstances had enabled them to bypass many of the barriers that are associated with marriage inequality and had in turn shaped their views on marriage. It is interesting that there was also a tendency for individuals who had grown up with LGB parents, as well as queer-identified individuals, to espouse critical perspectives. Perhaps a high level of identification with the LGBTQ community enabled them to feel more comfortable advancing critical views of marriage equality, compared with those with a lesser sense of entitlement (i.e., people whose parents came out later in life, heterosexual individuals). Of note is that several of the participants who advanced more critical views had LGB parents who had recently entered into civil marriages. It is possible that if their parents had been able to marry (and had) when they were younger, they might have held more favorable views of marriage, instead of challenging the cultural narrative that suggests the need for such an institution. As Ewick and Silbey asserted, legal consciousness is influenced by personal experiences and availability of resources; thus, both their cohort status and privilege may have facilitated this group’s more critical views of marriage.

Finally, several participants—all of whose LGB parents had come out in the context of a heterosexual divorce—claimed to “believe in” marriage equality but noted that their

conflicted feelings about their LGB parents precluded them from taking a more unequivocal stance. Furthermore, these participants were not as personally affected by their LGB parents’ inability to marry in that they were legally connected to both of their (previously heterosexually married) parents. Their conflicted feelings about their parents’ sexuality, and the reality that they were not personally affected by marriage equality, led them to construct marriage as something that they believed in but were not advocates of. Their positioning against the law was therefore somewhat mitigated by their parent–child relations and unique circumstances (Ewick & Silbey, 1998). These participants’ stance on marriage equality speaks to the incredible complexity and multiple transitions that mark the lives of many individuals with LGB parents and cautions us against thinking of or referring to young adults with LGB parents as a monolithic group.

The Good and the Bad: Perceived Benefits and Costs of Marriage Equality

Participants were generally highly aware of how the material well-being of LGB-parent families was negatively affected by marriage inequality (Meezan & Rauch, 2005) and named a range of legal benefits associated with marriage that would have made their lives easier. Their stories of the day-to-day stresses of living without marriage add to a nascent body of research on how societal heterosexism has an impact on youth with LGB parents (Bos et al., 2008). Many of these participants described having to visit lawyers to purchase legal safeguards, an experience that was recalled as humiliating and unfair. Participants whose nonbiological parents had been unable to adopt them, as well as those whose parents had successfully adopted them, viewed this extra step to ensure legal recognition of both parents as both financially and symbolically burdensome. Marriage, they believed, would eliminate many of the emotional and financial strains that their parents encountered in their efforts to construct a patchwork quilt of protection for their children (Rosato, 2006), thus reducing the minority stress with which LGB-parent families contend.

In addition to ensuring that children would have two legal parents, marriage equality was seen as valuable in that it would help to protect children in the event of their parents’ relationship

dissolution. Several participants described how, had their parents been married, they might have maintained greater contact with their nonbiological or nonlegal parents. These data add nuance to and expand previous discussions about how the absence of societal recognition of, or even acceptable terminology for, same-sex marriage and divorce may adversely affect both same-sex couples and their children (Morton, 1998). More research is needed that examines the experiences of youth whose LGB parents have split up to better understand how families coped with this transition in the absence of legal recognition between partners and/or between parents and children.

The symbolic value of marriage was also noted by many respondents who believed that the symbolic recognition associated with marriage would alleviate stresses related to having to explain their families and would encourage others—and in some cases, themselves—to recognize their family relationships as real (Lannutti, 2007). This is somewhat consistent with research showing that same-sex couples in legally recognized relationships reported lower levels of stress and internalized homophobia than same-sex couples in legally unrecognized unions (Riggle et al., 2010). Of interest is whether the positive, stress-reducing properties of legal partnership recognition carry over to spouses' children. Some participants hypothesized that, had they been able to invoke the language of marriage, they may have felt more confident in the legitimacy of their families and more empowered in their interactions with others; men in particular were sensitive to the ways in which the language of marriage might have helped them feel less “different.” In the absence of legal recognition, alternative families such as LGB-parent families must rely heavily on discourse to construct their families (Breshears, 2010); in turn, the presence of easily recognized institutional structures such as marriage could alleviate much of the work that LGB-parent family members put into explaining their families. Yet a recurrent theme in participants' narratives was their perspective that although the law (e.g., marriage) had the power to influence LGB-parent family relationships and beliefs about LGB-parent families, the law did not define LGB-parent families; that is, LGB-parent families were able to create healthy, meaningful familial relationships in the absence of legal recognition, a finding that speaks to the resilience

and resourcefulness of marginalized kinship structures more generally (Levine, 2008).

Some participants believed that marriage might have a stabilizing influence on LGB-parent families by deepening couple bonds and helping couples stay together during tough times. Their ideas echo traditional notions of marriage as a symbolic and legal contract that has the power to facilitate relationship stability (Glenn, 2007). They also converge with some LGB people's accounts of their personal experiences with marriage, whereby they describe “an unexpected qualitative deepening of commitment” on marrying (Schechter et al., 2008, p. 413). That young adults with LGB parents, specifically, emphasized the power of marriage to enhance relationship stability speaks to the vulnerability that these individuals may feel in the absence of marriage. Given that divorce is sometimes an inevitable outcome of marriage, future work should investigate postdivorce parent–child relations in LGB-parent families. Of interest is whether marriage will foster connectedness between nonresidential parents and children after same-sex couple relationship dissolution, in much the same way that second-parent adoption has (Gartrell, Rodas, Deck, Peysner, & Banks, 2006). Perhaps marriage might have a stabilizing influence for LGB-parent families in the event of divorce, in terms of the level of involvement that nonresidential parents have in children's lives.

It is notable that several participants highlighted potential disadvantages associated with marriage, including the reality that with marriage can come divorce (Shulman et al., 2009), the reality that legal recognition of same-sex relationships would make LGB-parent families more visible and vulnerable to scrutiny, and the potential for marriage to “heteronormalize” same-sex relationships (Schechter et al., 2008) and create schisms within the LGBTQ community (LaSala, 2007). These participants, in highlighting the negative aspects of marriage, stood against the law in that they rejected the notion that marital relationships should receive privileged legal (and social) status.

Limitations

Our sample comprised mostly White, middle-class participants, from a limited number of geographic regions (and overrepresented in California), and it represented a convenience

sample of adolescents and emerging adults. Thus, our findings do not reflect the perspectives of all individuals with LGB parents. Participants' views are likely influenced by class privilege and other forms of privilege. More work is needed that examines the perspectives of individuals with LGB parents from more varied backgrounds. For example, the inclusion of individuals from low-income families may reveal ways in which access to the many benefits associated with civil marriage could ease economic burdens for their families. On the other hand, individuals with LGB parents from low-income families, as well as those who self-identify as racial/ethnic minorities, might view certain issues (e.g., health care and racism) as more pressing than marriage equality. Given that this study was advertised as research about marriage equality, it is likely that respondents were those for whom marriage is a key issue; this might also explain why a large number of them were from California, a state in which the marriage equality debate is especially salient. Furthermore, these participants may have a unique vantage point in that marriage equality became a topic of national debate—and civil marriage for same-sex couples became available in some states—during their youth. Thus, historical and generational contexts likely played a role in how they view marriage equality. Younger children with LGB parents, who have always lived during a time when marriage for same-sex couples was a topic of national conversation (and who may have LGB parents who have always been married) might have differing views. Finally, our sample was intentionally limited to individuals whose parents identified as LGB. The inclusion of individuals with transgender parents may elucidate other ways that marriage inequality affects children with LGBTQ parents.

Conclusion

As Rosato (2006) argued, children of same-sex couples are “protected by a bare patchwork quilt” (p. 75). Our findings provide powerful evidence of the types of everyday stresses and anxieties that legal inequities create for children and young adults with LGB parents, yet at the same time they highlight the resourcefulness and resilience of these individuals, who construct their family relationships as meaningful in spite of legal nonrecognition. Indeed, at the same

time that participants recognized the power of the law, many were also adamant that their families' relationships were not defined by the law. Their narratives highlight the complex ways in which adolescents and emerging adults with LGB parents live with, and position themselves in relation to, the reality of a discriminatory legal system. This study thus contributes to our understanding of the experiences of adolescents and emerging adults with LGB parents, as well as our knowledge of both the changing and enduring significance of marriage for all families.

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