

# Marriage Equality for Same-Sex Couples: Counseling Psychologists as Social Change Agents

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## Abstract

The denial of civil marriage rights is a specific example of minority stress that can negatively affect the psychosocial well-being of self-identified lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) individuals in same-sex partnerships, their families, and their allies. Counseling psychologists have an important role in addressing the minority stress that same-sex couples experience as a result of the lack of marriage equality. In the service of social justice, counseling psychologists can use their training as practitioners, advocates, and researchers to effectively intervene at multiple levels of the ecological system. The purpose of this practice forum is to suggest interventions at the micro, meso, and macro levels that support the goal of social justice for same-sex couples and their families.

## Keywords

bisexual, gay, lesbian, marriage, social justice

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Civil marriage rights for same-sex couples have been a hotly debated, contentious political issue in American politics for over two decades. As of January 2011, voters in 29 states have passed “defense of marriage amendments” (DOMA) to their state constitutions restricting recognition of civil marriage rights to “one man and one woman.” An additional 12 states and the federal government have DOMA laws (enacted by a legislature). Only five states (Connecticut, Iowa, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Vermont) and the District of Columbia currently extend civil marriage rights to same-sex couples within their jurisdiction. (Other jurisdictions may give conditional recognition to civil marriages of same-sex couples performed elsewhere.)

The denial of equal access to the civil institution that supports intimate pair bonds and family formation is a social injustice that maintains socially constructed power relations. Just like heterosexual couples, not all same-sex couples want to marry. Some people (LGBTQ and heterosexual) consider marriage to be an oppressive institution. The issue at stake here, however, is the freedom to choose civil marriage if one so desires. In the majority of U.S. states and at the level of the federal government, same-sex couples, for no reason other than societal prejudice against them, are denied that right to choose and consequently are also denied the accompanying material, social, psychological, and health benefits that accompany civil marriage. As has been the case in marriage restrictions based on race, marriage equality will not automatically put an end to discrimination and prejudice. However, equality under the law is a crucial step in the long process of dismantling illegitimate power hierarchies based on socially constructed identities.

The issue of marriage equality is relevant to the practice of counseling psychology because denying civil marriage rights to same-sex couples is a specific example of minority stress that directly affects the psychological health and well-being of LGBTQ-identified individuals (Hatzenbuehler, McLaughlin, Keyes, & Hasin, 2010; Riggle, Rostosky, & Horne, 2010; Rostosky, Riggle, Horne, & Miller, 2009). Minority stress is the chronic stress that accompanies a stigmatized identity (Brooks, 1981). As applied to LGBTQ individuals, minority stress is a process that includes five interacting components. These components are (a) specific experiences of prejudice and/or (b) anticipation of rejection and hypervigilance, (c) identity concealment and disclosure decisions, (d) internalized negative messages about one’s identity (commonly called internalized homophobia or heterosexism), and (e) the coping efforts required to manage specific minority stressors (Meyer, 2003). Minority stress is associated with increased risk for depression, anxiety, chronic stress, and other physical and psychological health outcomes (e.g., Cochran, 2001; Mays & Cochran, 2001; Meyer, 2003; Riggle, Rostosky, & Danner, 2009).

As a particularly insidious minority stressor, marriage inequality permeates the social context of same-sex intimate relationships and affects LGBTQ-identified individuals and their same-sex partners at the macro (legal, policy), meso (local community), and micro (individual, couple, family) levels of the social environment. Same-sex couples and same-sex-partnered individuals are a diverse client population composed of individuals who may identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer (LGBTQ) or who may eschew these identity labels all together. Central to the focus of this article, laws that limit civil marriage to “one man and one woman” discriminate against all couples legally classified as “same sex,” regardless of the sexual or gender identity labels that the individuals in such relationships adopt. Where possible, therefore, we use *same-sex couples* or *same-sex partnered* to be most inclusive of the diversity within this population.

At the macro level, the lack of civil marriage directly affects the legal opportunity structure as well as the psychological well-being of same-sex-partnered individuals (see Riggle et al., 2010). For example, same-sex partners in a legally recognized civil marriage in Massachusetts are still forced to report their marital status as “single” on all federal government forms, such as IRS tax forms, directly invalidating their civil marriage. At the meso level of the system, same-sex couples may experience sexual prejudice and homonegativity in their communities as they go about their daily activities (Dudley et al., 2005). In the workplace, for example, an employer may not recognize the marriage of a couple or extend the same benefits to an employee with a same-sex spouse.

At the micro level, same-sex couple relationships are often ignored or rejected by parents and relatives rather than validated, supported, and celebrated. Same-sex couples who have had wedding ceremonies have reported being told by family members that they will not live “happily ever after” and that their choice of intimate relationship with a same-sex partner is “wrong” or “sinful” (Rostosky et al., 2004; Rostosky, Riggle, Dudley, & Wright, 2006; Rostosky, Riggle, Gray, & Hatton, 2007). Minority stressors such as these can have deleterious effects on relationship quality (Otis, Hamrin, Riggle, & Rostosky, 2006). Furthermore, couple members may internalize these and other negative messages about their identities and their intimate relationships, which can also negatively affect couples’ relationship quality (Frost & Meyer, 2009; Mohr & Fassinger, 2006).

As Dr. Elizabeth Vera (2009) succinctly stated, “When the human rights of any group are in jeopardy, we [counseling psychologists] are compelled to action” (p. 748). Counseling psychologists have an important role in addressing the minority stress experienced by same-sex couples who are denied marriage equality. Certainly, supporting and validating same-sex

relationships in the context of couples and family therapy is a crucial micro-level intervention that promotes psychological health and wellness by supporting self-determination and human intimacy needs (Prilleltensky & Prilleltensky, 2003). In this article, we offer suggestions for interventions at this level of the system. Then, following Goodman et al.'s (2004) expanded model of social justice work that addresses collective needs for social belonging, safety, and economic security (Prilleltensky & Prilleltensky, 2003), we also suggest additional interventions at the meso (community) and macro (legal, policy) levels that can help accomplish the social justice goal of marriage equality for same-sex couples. Since these interacting levels of the ecological system are nested (e.g., individuals live in communities that are affected by laws and policies), intervening at one level of the system affects the others. We challenge counseling psychologists to find the nexus between effective interventions and their particular skills and strengths while also considering how they might expand their roles and develop intervention skills that reach beyond the micro level to meso- and macro-level interventions on behalf of social justice for same-sex couples and their families.

## **Addressing Marriage (In)equality at the Micro Level of the System**

Counseling psychologists and mental health practitioners can provide support to same-sex couple members by facilitating positive coping with the stress that accompanies discrimination in the form of marriage inequality. To effectively provide this support, however, therapists must first educate themselves and examine their own internalized heterosexism to ensure that they provide competent services to this population (see Kashubeck-West, Szymanski, & Meyer, 2008). As long as marriage inequality exists, counseling psychologists and their same-sex-partnered clients are socialized in a cultural context that regularly stigmatizes and delegitimizes same-sex relationships while promoting, encouraging, and supporting heterosexual relationships. Many counseling psychology programs have increased the attention to training and research in LGBTQ issues in recent years; however, some evidence indicates that many clinicians and clinical supervisors still feel underprepared to address the needs of same-sex couples (Murphy, Rawlings, & Howe, 2002). Some excellent resources offer models for affirmative psychotherapy (e.g., Bieschke, Perez, & DeBord, 2007; Ritter & Terndrup, 2002); these LGBT affirmative approaches can provide foundational guidance for training practitioners to provide support and effective treatment to same-sex couples and their families.

When counseling psychologists have engaged in their own self-reflection and consciousness raising regarding heterosexual privilege, they are more likely to be effective in supporting and challenging their same-sex-partnered clients. Counseling psychologists can, for instance, help same-sex-partnered individuals to identify and label the negative stereotypes, beliefs, and attitudes, including the denial of marriage rights, that they encounter and to examine how they may have inadvertently internalized these negative views in ways that may be affecting the quality of their intimate relationship. Some same-sex couples (and their counselors), for instance, have unconsciously internalized the negative cultural belief that same-sex relationships are inferior to heterosexual relationships. Negative messages in the media and in religious communities have inaccurately portrayed same-sex relationships as shallow, short, and generally unhappy, despite decades of solid evidence establishing that same-sex couple relationships, even in the absence of legal recognition, are equally as stable and satisfying as different-sex couple relationships (see the review in Peplau & Fingerhut, 2007). Counselors can use cognitive-behavioral techniques to help same-sex couples to identify and dispute the negative stereotypes and negative messages about same-sex relationships that are commonly used to oppose marriage equality.

To further address internalized negative self-views, counselors can help same-sex-partnered individuals and couples to identify same-sex couples who have stable and satisfying relationships that can serve as positive role models or "relationship mentors." Increasingly there are biographical collections (e.g., Gambone, 2010) and memoirs (e.g., Taylor, 2007) available that offer positive role models for those who do not have strong ties to an LGBTQ affirmative network or community. Counselors can familiarize themselves with "virtual" positive role models with whom their clients might identify.

By incorporating strengths-based approaches and interventions, counselors can help same-sex couples to identify and appreciate the specific minority stressors that they have faced and overcome together. Asking couples to list the positive aspects of their relationship helps to marshal couple-level strengths and resources for coping with discrimination and stigma. Female same-sex couples, for instance, have reported that the opportunity to create an egalitarian relationship, free of prescribed gender roles and social scripts, is one of the positive aspects of being in a same-sex relationship (Riggle, Whitman, Olson, Rostosky, & Strong, 2008).

In the absence of marriage equality, counseling psychologists can also encourage their same-sex-partnered clients to take actions to get the necessary legal documentation to protect their relationship. Until the legal benefits that accompany civil marriage are available to same-sex couples, these

couples must take steps to protect themselves in the event of financial, health, or legal crisis. Internalized heterosexism, anticipation of rejection, fear, and communication difficulties often keep same-sex couples from discussing and acting to protect their relationship (Riggle, Rostosky, Couch, et al., 2006; Riggle, Rostosky, & Prather, 2006; Riggle, Rostosky, Prather, & Hamrin, 2005). Counseling psychologists can help couples to communicate, make decisions, and access legal information and resources. Enacting legal protections is one concrete, specific action that same-sex couples can take to empower themselves, honor their commitment to each other, and protect their futures.

Counseling psychologists can empower LGBTQ individuals and same-sex couples to educate their heterosexual family members, friends, and coworkers about the effects of marriage inequality on their daily lives. For instance, same-sex couples can talk about the legal uncertainties that keep them, and their children, vulnerable. They can describe the drain of emotional and psychological energy that results from frequently having to make decisions about when and where to disclose their couple identity and when and how to effectively confront false assumptions about their relationship.

Same-sex-partnered individuals may need support and skills for effectively communicating how the unfair practices associated with marriage inequality affect them. These kinds of conversations can be stressful for same-sex-partnered individuals. Counselors can validate and respond empathically to the anxiety that can arise from merely contemplating the possibility of asserting the worth and dignity of one's intimate partnership with those whose privileged status supports their discriminating and stigmatizing attitudes and behavior.

Within the context of the family, some same-sex-partnered individuals find themselves stunned and demoralized during rejecting or disrespectful interactions and may prefer to avoid possible confrontation by focusing on commonalities, or just fitting in and being "nonthreatening." This coping strategy is functional and may have certain positive outcomes. On the other hand, avoiding honest expressions of an intimate relationship may increase self-directed negative affect (e.g., Shelton, Richeson, Salvatore, & Hill, 2006) and minority stress. Counselors can help their same-sex-partnered clients to weigh the advantages and disadvantages of "just fitting in" rather than confronting inequities. Counselors can also help clients to cultivate a variety of active coping strategies to use in interpersonal interactions. For example, counselors may ask clients to practice assertive responses through letter writing and role-playing.

While encouraging same-sex couples to engage in social and political activism on behalf of marriage equality can promote personal empowerment, increase clients' access to social support, and contribute to social transformation, counseling psychologists should always prioritize client welfare and client needs and goals (Cattaneo & Chapman, 2010). Counselors should not encourage their clients to put themselves at physical or economic risk. Rather, practitioners can help same-sex-partnered individuals to realistically assess the personal risks and rewards of coming out and engaging in social justice activism in their communities. This assessment is important because some evidence suggests that social justice activism can increase psychological distress as a result of the increased exposure to stigmatizing and negative interactions (Levitt et al., 2009; Rostosky et al., 2009; Rostosky, Riggle, Horne, Denton, & Huellemier, 2010) even while increasing positive connection to the LGBTQ community (Russell & Richards, 2003).

In conclusion, it is important to support and validate the committed relationships of same-sex-partnered individuals in ways that promote their health and well-being. Leaders in the field of counseling psychology have recently challenged clinicians, researchers, and trainers to expand their conceptual frameworks and their professional roles beyond that of helping individuals and families to better cope with oppressive conditions that affect their psychological health. For same-sex couples, these conditions include marriage inequality. Counseling psychologists can also use the social power and privilege that accompany their education and training to effectively intervene at the meso and macro levels of the system, where the roots of social injustice reside.

## **Addressing Marriage (In)equality at the Meso Level of the system**

Counseling psychologists can address discrimination in the form of marriage inequality at the level of the meso system by providing psychoeducational support and consultation within the local community. For instance, counseling psychologists can offer psychoeducational workshops to the local LGBTQ community that address the specific psychosocial needs of same-sex couples and their families. For example, at the invitation of a state LGBTQ rights organization in our local community, we participated in a workshop for same-sex couples on the importance of advance legal planning. We have also written columns based on our research on same-sex couples for the local LGBTQ newsletter. Glenda Russell (Anderson & Russell, 2010), a counseling psychologist in Colorado, has conducted workshops with local community

organizations of LGBTQ-identified individuals and their allies, providing them with evidence-based tools for “surviving and thriving” in the face of anti-LGBT politics, including marriage amendment campaigns. An important intervention with these local communities is to help them to cope with political disappointments and losses by reframing these as part of a long-term social transformation effort that is much bigger than any single ballot initiative. Helping local communities to adopt this kind of “movement perspective” may also help prevent destructive forms of conflict and blaming that can arise under conditions of stress and loss (Russell, 2010).

Also at the level of the meso system, counseling psychologists can work with local community organizations, schools, and religious groups to reduce prejudice and discrimination and to create and support allies for marriage equality. Taking opportunities to speak to local organizations and writing articles for local newspapers can be effective ways to use professional expertise in the service of addressing discrimination and promoting fairness and equality for same-sex couples and their families. Community engagement activities on behalf of same-sex couples and their families should arise from collaborative partnerships and alliances with stakeholders to ensure that intervention efforts are beneficial and effective (Cattaneo & Chapman, 2010). Counselors may use their professional networks and community contacts related to their general psychological outreach, consultation, and advocacy work (which may not be directly related to LGBTQ rights) as opportunities for dialogues with those who are potentially, but not yet, allies for marriage equality.

Psychoeducational efforts with local community groups might begin with a history of cultural beliefs and attitudes about marriage that support and maintain heterosexual privilege and the denial of marriage rights to same-sex couples. These educational efforts can be incorporated into more general efforts to educate groups about healthy relationships and families. Ultimately, critical consciousness raising through psychoeducational efforts aims to elucidate the power differences that affect same-sex couples vis-à-vis the privileges of heterosexual couples. The research literature on prejudice reduction and intergroup relations is vast and beyond the scope of this brief article; however, some of the most recent experimental studies (e.g., Saguy, Tausch, Dovidio, & Pratto, 2009), when extrapolated to marriage inequality, would suggest that dialogues that stress how “alike” same-sex and mixed-sex couples are fail to address the fundamental legal inequities that exist.

Ultimately, to change the debate, the dialogue must focus on heterosexual privilege and the distribution of power. Even low-prejudiced heterosexual-identified individuals may not recognize nor reflect on their privileged status

unless prompted to do so (see Leach, Snider, & Iyer, 2002). Therefore, social justice advocates need to make the point that the privileged (heterosexual) group is forcing the stigmatized group (same-sex couples) into an unjust position through an unfairly gained advantage. By recasting the problem as discrimination and prejudice and unearned power and privilege conferred by larger social arrangements, the “problem” shifts from sexual identities to prejudicial attitudes and behaviors in the macro environment (see Oswald, Goldberg, Kivalanka, & Clausell, 2008). Increasing individuals’ empathy with an unfair situation by asking, “How would you like to be treated in this situation?” may be more effective than trying to increase empathy for the “other” whose identity carries a social stigma. This strategy may be less likely to invoke a defensive response by appealing to a fundamental and shared value of fairness.

In small group settings, simulation activities have been demonstrated to be effective in promoting perspective taking, empathy, and more positive attitudes while reducing personal defensiveness. For example, the “alien-nation” intervention (Hodson, Choma, & Costello, 2009) used a “spaceship exercise” to create situational constraints similar to those faced by gay men and lesbians, resulting in a reduction in prejudice among participants. Other research findings in support of the extended contact hypothesis (Wright, Aron, McLaughlin-Volpe, & Ropp, 1997) suggest that reading narratives and viewing other media that encourage empathy and perspective taking, if followed by peer discussion, are effective in reducing prejudice (Paluck & Green, 2009).

Small group settings are also ideal for ally development training. Consultation sessions or workshops with community leaders, educators, clergy and religious leaders, and social service providers can provide opportunities for individuals to experience and confront internalized heterosexism and the reality of heterosexual privilege, without being immobilized by feelings of guilt or defensiveness. Through local workshops, skilled practitioners can help increase knowledge and awareness about the costs to the community of social injustice while maintaining a nonblaming stance toward heterosexual individuals. With increased knowledge and awareness, allies can become empowered to generate small, doable actions that support and validate same-sex couples and their families.

Counseling psychologists can also empower heterosexual allies to engage in difficult dialogues with their peers. Training allies in advanced empathy skills and effective confrontation skills (Kiselica, 2004) can empower them to address discrimination and prejudice that they witness in their communities. In their review of the literature on prejudice reduction, Paluck and Green

(2009) conclude that mobilizing the positive influence of peers (through modeling and discussion) is one of the relatively few interventions that has consistently demonstrated effectiveness in reducing prejudice. Counseling psychologists can mobilize support among community members and facilitate collective efficacy for confronting discrimination and managing possible stressful encounters. In short, heterosexual allies can use heterosexual privilege to expose their unfair advantages.

Certainly, “speaking truth to power” in community contexts involves some risks for allies as well as for LGBTQ individuals; yet a critical psychological approach to practice suggests that empowerment and social justice activism promote not only community and societal well-being but also positive identity development and individual health and well-being in both privileged and oppressed populations (Prilleltensky & Nelson, 2002). Feminist and multicultural psychotherapy models have also noted the recursive relationship between personal growth and social transformation. Social justice activism on behalf of marriage equality can ignite the personal growth of heterosexual allies (e.g., Duhigg, Rostosky, Gray, & Wimsatt, 2010), build strong alliances between communities, and ultimately help to create a more just society.

## **Addressing Marriage (In)equality at the Macro Level of the System**

In many cultures, marriage is a “rite of passage” celebrating a developmental marker of adulthood and marking the attainment of full sexual citizenship (Herdt & Kertzner, 2006; Herek, 2006). With this rite of passage comes hundreds of legal rights as well as uncounted private benefits (e.g., couple membership at a private club). Ultimately, marriage equality for same-sex couples will necessitate changing legal and social norms and policies that privilege different-sex unions and exclude same-sex unions at the macro level of the system. Counseling psychologists can facilitate marriage equality at the macro level by conducting and disseminating research and by engaging in political advocacy efforts in conjunction with national organizations.

Goodman et al. (2004) notes that an important role in social change efforts is “giving voice” to oppressed groups through qualitative research. For example, as part of a social justice research agenda, we have documented the negative psychosocial effects of marriage amendment campaigns on LGBTQ individuals and their families using quantitative (Riggle, Rostosky, & Horne, 2009; Rostosky et al., 2009), qualitative (Rostosky et al., 2010) and mixed (Horne, Rostosky, & Riggle, 2011) methodologies. Qualitative research can provide positive narratives of same-sex couples (Rostosky et al., 2006) and

their families (e.g., Goldberg, 2007) that can help to change dominant negative stereotypes and myths.

It is important that counseling psychologists increase the macro-level impact of their research by sharing their findings with a broader audience. For instance, giving print, radio, or television interviews during marriage amendment debates or other campaigns (such as adoption restriction laws) that negatively affect same-sex couples and LGBTQ individuals is an effective macro-level intervention. Producing educational materials and writing for popular media outlets, in addition to academic journals, ensures that reliable science about same-sex couples and their relationships, rather than negative myths and stereotypes, is disseminated to the general public.

By relocating the problem from same-sex couples themselves to the macro environment that sustains prejudicial attitudes and unfair policies, counseling psychologists reframe the issue and reassign the responsibility for change to the collective. To help change the debate at the macro level of the system, counseling psychologists can serve as informational consultants to politicians, attorneys, and judges. For example, during the January 2010 trial in federal district court challenging the constitutionality of California's Proposition 8 (restricting the recognition of marriage to one man and one woman), research psychologists testified on behalf of the plaintiffs. One psychologist gave expert testimony and cited research on minority stress; another psychologist testified on the vast research literature demonstrating that child outcomes do not differ depending on parent sexual orientation. A reading of the judge's decision in favor of marriage equality makes clear the substantial impact of psychological research (see *Perry v. Schwarzenegger*, 2010).

Counseling psychologists can take steps to become advocates for marriage equality by educating themselves about local and state laws that affect their clients. The Human Rights Campaign and Lambda Legal are reliable sources of current information. Counseling psychologists can join an organization that is working for marriage equality. Networking and sharing information with professional colleagues at meetings and conferences are important and effective forms of advocacy. Advocacy also takes the form of simple actions such as wearing a marriage equality button, as did thousands of psychologists at the 2010 conference in San Diego, California.

At the national level, the American Psychological Association (APA) has provided an excellent model of political advocacy on behalf of same-sex couples in its statements and policies in support of same-sex marriage (Paige, 2005). Counseling psychologists can assist in these efforts toward marriage equality by contributing to the preparation of amicus briefs. Other professional organizations that have endorsed civil marriage rights for same-sex

couples include the National Education Association. More than 50 labor unions in California, including the American Federation of State, County & Municipal Employees (AFL-CIO), supported civil marriage equality in that state during the Proposition 8 referendum. These organizations and others can use the professional expertise of counseling psychologists to lobby legislators to support marriage equality. A significant source of power for social change lies in broad-based organizations such as these, composed of individuals who coordinate and cooperate (Speer, 2008) toward the attainment of marriage equality.

Counseling psychology training programs can indirectly affect social norms by providing students with the tools and supervised experiences needed to create leaders that can affect social change at the level of the macro system. Building partnerships with local and national LGBTQ organizations, for example, can provide trainees with opportunities to hone these leadership skills and envision themselves as social change agents as well as individual therapists. To intervene at the macro level, Toporek, Gerstein, Fouad, Roysircar, and Israel (2006) challenge counseling psychology training programs to equip trainees with skills in group work, consultation, community development, and political advocacy. These skills need to be grounded in conceptual and empirical understandings of power, conflict, and social change (Speer, 2008).

## Conclusion

Counseling psychologists have many roles to play in confronting marriage inequality at the micro, meso, and macro levels of the system. The social power that we have by virtue of our education and training can be used to challenge the cultural narratives that shape the rhetoric about marriage, to raise awareness about heterosexism and its impact, to design and evaluate interventions, to conduct basic research in support of the health and well-being of same-sex couples and their families, and to recommend and advocate for responsible community and organizational actions that are consistent with the core professional values of fairness and equality. Privilege, in the form of education and professional training, is a social resource that can be put to good use in the effort to build a just society. Although marriage equality will not end all discrimination and prejudice against same-sex relationships, counseling psychologists can use their professional skills and social power to lead the effort of examining, labeling, and challenging privilege and oppression in all of its forms.

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