Maybe “I Do,” Maybe I Don’t: Respectability Politics in the Same-Sex Marriage Ruling

Jes L. Matsick* and Terri D. Conley
University of Michigan

Frost and Gola (2015) offer empirical evidence that same-sex and different-sex relationship partners are similar in their experiences of intimacy and, as a result, the meaning of marriage will not fundamentally change with the legalization of same-sex marriage. In this commentary, we offer another perspective: given the unique aspects of same-sex relationships, we argue that the meaning of marriage may indeed change as same-sex partners legally wed. We extend Frost and Gola (2015) by considering the limitations of respectability politics when advocating for same-sex relationships and by shedding light on those who may seek to change the meaning of marriage.

“No union is more profound than marriage, for it embodies the highest ideals of love, fidelity, devotion, sacrifice, and family. In forming a marital union, two people become something greater than once they were.”

—Justice Anthony Kennedy (2015; author added emphasis)

In the ruling of Obergefell v Hodges (2015), Justice Kennedy’s majority opinion echoes the societal belief that marriage—and the monogamy that is presumed to come with it—is the superior structure of romantic relationships. Likewise, research demonstrates that monogamy is perceived as the optimal relationship type (Conley, Moors, Matsick, & Ziegler, 2013; Conley, Ziegler, Moors, Matsick, & Valentine, 2013). Specifically, monogamy and marriage are believed to provide a host of benefits, including greater relationship commitment, trust, meaningfulness, and physical/sexual benefits—all of which emerged as key components of intimacy found in Frost and Gola (2015). Thus, marriage is indeed a sacred
institution within our society and the entrance of same-sex couples into this lauded arena, then, is on the one hand, a major victory.

As Frost and Gola (2015) predicted, a primary argument for legalizing same-sex marriage relied on evidence that relationships between same-sex partners are more similar to than different from different-sex relationships. In particular, Frost and Gola’s findings illustrated that same-sex and different-sex couples’ experiences of intimacy are nearly indistinguishable from one another. Therefore, marriages between same-sex partners would not radically change the meaning of marriage—putting to rest the conservative right’s meaning-based justifications for defending traditional marriage (i.e., the belief that same-sex couples have different marital values, such as love, commitment, and intimacy). ¹

Although some same-sex partners may embrace social and psychological meanings and values that are consistent with the heterosexual ideal, gay and lesbian history is also filled with nonassimilationist perspectives (e.g., Moon, 2010). Indeed, it might be argued that the elephant in the room of the marriage equality debate is that some gay men are not espousing monogamy (“fidelity” in the language of Justice Kennedy). Some research shows that approximately 20–56% of gay men in relationships mutually agree with their partners to engage in extradyadic sex (Campbell, 2000; Hickson et al., 1992; LaSala, 2004, 2005). Although Frost and Gola (2015) emphasize the shared meaning of marriage for different-sex and same-sex couples, it seems unlikely that monogamy is consistently part of this shared belief system. Yet, monogamy is often perceived as synonymous with marriage among heterosexual couples. Gay men who do not practice monogamy may opt out of the institution of marriage—but more likely, given the practical benefits of marriage, they will choose it. And some of those that do will take marriage down a fundamentally different path than was intended by the Supreme Court’s decision. ² Thus, Frost and Gola’s (2015) emphasis on the similarities in meanings of and experiences of relationships (or marriage) between same-sex and heterosexual relationship partners may be a result of overlooking a fundamental aspect of relationships: monogamy.

The debate surrounding marriage has thus far foregrounded respectability politics. That is, political organizations (i.e., those promoting marriage equality)

¹ Meaning-based arguments appear to be more harshly applied to police minority groups’ deviations from sociocultural norms than deviations made by dominant groups. For example, heterosexual partners who forego key components of marriage, such as vows of monogamy, are not denied marriage rights for redefining the rules of marriage for their own purposes.

² Given some married couples agree to deviate from monogamy while married (e.g., open marriages and swinging lifestyles; Anapol, 2010; Barker & Langdridge, 2010; Jenks, 1985), it is unlikely that people who practice consensual nonmonogamy will suddenly choose monogamy now that marriage is a viable option. Instead, we expect that people who do not practice monogamy and who were denied marriage before the ruling will now choose marriage and will expand the rigid boundaries of marriage to fit their needs. Put differently, our best prediction for the future is that there will be more people who are married but are not monogamous.
attempt to assimilate lesbian and gay relationships into mainstream marriage rather than attempt to garner societal acceptance for difference and deviation (see Reczek & Rothblum, 2012; Young, 1990). Indeed, establishing commonality with heterosexual relationships (as in the case of Frost & Gola, 2015) was, as it appears, an effective strategy in the marriage equality struggle. However, given that there is now national jurisdiction in support of same-sex marriages, we suggest that efforts to press the definitional boundaries of marriage may be in the best political interests of a number of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer (LGBQ) individuals. Challenging the idea that marriage is tantamount to monogamy may be one way in which we can do this. By doing so, even monogamous heterosexual couples may benefit (see Conley & Moors, 2014 for suggestions about how monogamous couples could learn from nonmonogamous relationships). For example, gay men in consensually nonmonogamous relationships have higher sexual satisfaction than those in monogamous relationships (Valentine & Conley, under review) and people engaged in consensual nonmonogamy report higher levels of trust and lower levels of jealousy than individuals in monogamous relationships (Conley, Valentine, Moors, Ziegler, & Matsick, under review).

With the legalization of same-sex marriage, we hope that researchers and gay rights activists need not be so entrenched in respectability politics when affirming same-sex relationships and instead can allow differences to prevail. Many LGBQ people believe that their approaches to relationships (e.g., greater gender role flexibility in household labor and family traditions; Carrington, 1999; Oswald, 2002) is something unique from and better than those created through heterosexuality and it would undermine a special aspect of queer culture to deny such differences. As a result, same-sex partners may, in fact, alter the meaning of marriage by incorporating their relationships into mainstream culture. Likewise, lesbian women with feminist sensibilities may rightfully challenge the idea of participating in an institution that has historically been utilized to control and regulate women as the property of men (see Ziegler, Matsick, Moors, Rubin, & Conley, 2014 for a discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of marriage for women). Thus, their entry into the institution of marriage may help to dismantle patriarchal values that are embedded in marriage vows. Though these individuals who will rework and expand definitions of marriage are relatively overlooked in the celebration of the historic Supreme Court ruling, they are worthy of our consideration.

References


JES L. MATSICK is a Ph.D. candidate in the departments of Psychology and Women’s Studies at the University of Michigan. She received her undergraduate degree from The Pennsylvania State University. In her research, she examines the perspectives and experiences of minority group members in their relationships with dominant group members, in their experiences of romantic and sexual relationships, and in their representations in academic settings (e.g., STEM disciplines).
TERRI D. CONLEY is on the Psychology and Women’s Studies faculty at the University of Michigan. She received her Ph.D. in social psychology from UCLA and her undergraduate degree from University of Wisconsin. In her research, Professor Conley explores gender differences in sexuality, such as casual sex, desire, sexual fantasy, and orgasm rates; monogamy and departures from monogamy; and also the relationship between members of different groups, with a particular interest in marginalized group members’ perceptions of dominant groups.