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# An Exploration of the Experience of Female Same-Sex Marriage

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AN EXPLORATION OF THE EXPERIENCE OF FEMALE SAME-SEX  
MARRIAGE

A Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of  
Antioch University Seattle  
Seattle, Washington

In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements of the Degree  
Doctor of Psychology

By

Melissa Mulick

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AN EXPLORATION OF THE EXPERIENCE OF FEMALE SAME-SEX  
MARRIAGE

This dissertation, by Melissa Mulick, has  
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who recommend that it be accepted by the faculty of  
Antioch University Seattle at Seattle, WA in partial fulfillment  
of requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PSYCHOLOGY

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## ABSTRACT

AN EXPLORATION OF THE EXPERIENCE OF FEMALE SAME-SEX  
MARRIAGE

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In June 2015 the Supreme Court of the United States ruled in favor of nationwide legalization of same-sex marriage. While same-sex marriage had previously been legalized in individual states, this ruling effectively increased the population of women legally married to other women. A review of research historically conducted on female same-sex relationships indicated that they were often fraught with heteronormative assumptions and biases, leaving the conclusions questionable at best. This dissertation used Amedeo Giorgi's (2009) qualitative methodology of Descriptive Phenomenology in order to explore the essence of the experience of female same-sex marriage. Ten cisgender women who were legally married to cisgender women were recruited as participants. As a result of open-ended qualitative interviews, the following twelve psychological meanings were determined to be essential to the description of the experience of same-sex marriage: (a) individuality, (b) commitment, (c) communication, (d) enjoying shared time, (e) gratitude for current times, (f) legitimacy and validation, (g) legal security, (h) differences, (i) comfort, (j) support, (k) lack of gender roles, and (l) stigma. The findings from this study supported the need for additional qualitative, open-ended research into female same-sex relationships.

This dissertation is available in open access at AURA, <http://aura.antioch.edu/> and Ohio Link ETD Center, <https://etd.ohiolink.edu/etd>

## **Dedication**

This dissertation is dedicated to the ten women who participated in my study. Representing a broad spectrum of ages and experiences, I felt so honored to be invited into your living rooms and personal spaces to hear your stories. It is no small thing to spend hours with someone you just met, disclose intimate details of your life experiences, and share in both tears and laughter. The beautiful, unique nature of intimate romantic relationship between two women was described to me in the best way possible throughout all ten interviews. Thank you for sharing pieces of yourselves with me and any future readers.

## **Acknowledgements**

I would first and foremost like to acknowledge my dissertation committee for their unconditional enthusiasm and support for my study from day one. Thank you, Dr. Waters, for your constant presence, availability, and encouragement. Your attention to detail, timeliness in responses, and high level of organization were so helpful in keeping me on track with my aggressive timeline. You were the best cheerleader, listener, and easily my biggest support. Thank you, Dr. Heusler, for bringing to my awareness the historical relevance and importance of my study. You told me from the beginning this study would capture an important moment in history and freeze it in time. I did not entirely understand what you meant until I conducted my interviews, but now I see how important it was to understand what the nationwide legalization of marriage meant to same-sex couples. Thank you, Dr. Bowes, for your enthusiasm and willingness to provide direct and honest feedback on everything from methodological issues to graphics. All three of you contributed to a committee that was an absolute joy to work with. I would also like to acknowledge my classmates and non-psychology friends alike, who supported me throughout this long and stressful process by providing moral support, celebrating each completed step along the way, and continuing to invite me to activities no matter how many times I had to respond “sorry I can’t, I’m working on my dissertation.”



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## Introduction

On June 26, 2015, the Supreme Court of the United States (SCOTUS) ruled the federal constitution grants same-sex couples equal rights to marriage. This decision effectively legalized same-sex marriage across all 50 states (Human Rights Campaign, 2015). This decision provided legal rights to same-sex couples across the United States that their peers in Washington State had been experiencing (for most intents and purposes) since 2012 (Dolan, 2013).

Partly due to the short timeline of the existence of this new population, legally married lesbians are inherently understudied. However, the available research on the lesbian population in general carries a heavy heteronormative bias (Rose, 2000). Many studies on lesbians and lesbian relationships use assessment tools that were developed based upon heterosexual research and may not ask questions relevant to lesbians (Cohen, Byers, & Walsh, 2008).

The literature review that follows this introduction outlines the currently available research on lesbian relationships and makes a strong case for the need for unbiased lesbian research. The few studies that exist on legalized lesbian marriage address some questions, but more effectively raise many additional questions and concerns. These studies indicate a more exploratory and less biased approach to studying lesbian marriage is a necessity. There are currently no known peer reviewed and published qualitative studies exploring legalized lesbian marriage. The lesbian population—and particularly the legally married lesbian population—is grossly understudied and largely misrepresented within the current literature. Qualitative, exploratory research honoring the experience of lesbian

marriage while attempting to minimize heteronormative bias is needed to support a new foundation of lesbian research.

This study was designed to minimize heteronormative bias and to explore and honor the authentic experiences of legally married lesbian participants. It is hoped that this study, along with future like-minded research, will contribute to a database of information on lesbians upon which non-heteronormative assessment measures can be developed. Unbiased assessment tools could then be used to study large groups of lesbians without many of the biases embedded in current instruments.

The primary research question asked in this study was “what does lesbian marriage look like?” This question was asked of ten individual cisgender women legally married to cisgender women. The focus of data collection was on the facets of experience elicited by participants with a minimal use of leading questions or narrowed topics reflective of the researcher’s biases. The researcher identified and actively set aside discernible beliefs and assumptions regarding the experience of lesbian marriage. In this manner, the goal was to approach data collection and analysis without a specific or directional hypothesis.

The primary limitation of this study was generalizability. The demographics of the ten participants indicate that the experiences described may or may not apply to larger groups of legally married women. Further, the results are reported below in a manner that describes the experience of lesbian marriage in the words of the participants. However, another limitation of the study was that it is presented through the lens of the researcher. Personal details about the

researcher herself is provided below so that the reader can contextualize the researcher with the delivered results.

The proposed study was designed to provide a minimally heteronormatively biased piece of literature on lesbian marriage. The unbiased design of this study makes it unique among currently available lesbian research. It is significant as one of very few pieces of lesbian research that portrays the lesbian experience without a heavy heteronormative bias.

Throughout the following paper, the terms heterosexism, heteronormativity, and homophobia are used frequently. For the purposes of this document, the three terms are defined as follows. Heterosexism is “the belief and expectation that everyone is or should be heterosexual” (Yep, 2002, p. 167). Heteronormativity is an “ideological system that denies, denigrates, and stigmatizes nonheterosexual forms of behavior, identity, relationship, or community” (Herek, 1993). Homophobia is a “fear of homosexuality, and is often used in context to describe an attitude of hostility toward homosexual people and behaviors” (Ahmad & Bhugra, 2010).

The author would also like to comment on the usage of the word *lesbian* throughout this document. Not all participants identified specifically as lesbian and at times the term can be viewed as a label exclusive of some women who are romantically or sexually attracted to other women. Some participants identified as queer, gay, or not straight. Lesbian is used as a general term throughout this paper for purposes of efficiency. However, it is important to note that not all women

who are legally married to women identify with this term, nor does the author wish to label them individually as such.

## **Literature Review**

Legalized lesbian marriage is an institution that did not exist in the United States until 2004 (Human Rights Campaign, 2015). As such, there exists a new population, that of married lesbians, for which there is not yet a large body of research. However, there is a large amount of research pertaining to related topics such as the United States history of same-sex marriage and societal attitudes toward same-sex marriage. In addition, topics related to lesbian relationships and heterosexism in psychological research have been heavily explored. As these variables partially provide context to the premise of lesbian marriage, this literature review will explore not only that research that exists on lesbian marriage, but the historical context and potential influence on the experience of lesbian marriage.

### **The Heterosexist History of Same-Sex Marriage in the United States**

When reviewing research on the history of same-sex marriage in the United States, it is not difficult to identify a pervasive heterosexist bias against lesbian couples. This bias manifested in societal attitudes as well as legal statutes limiting the rights and equalities of same-sex couples (Baunach, 2012). This section will explore the history of both societal attitudes and legislation related to same-sex marriage.

**Societal attitudes toward same-sex marriage.** Baunach (2012) studied the trends in attitudes of United States residents toward same-sex marriage from 1988–2010. In 1988 he found that nearly all participants were against same-sex marriage. The exceptions to that rule were individuals in particularly specialized

subgroups such as the highly educated, urban, and/or nonreligious. Throughout the studied time period, Baunach found that attitudes began shifting dramatically. By 2010, he found that the majority of participants were supportive of same-sex marriage and that the exceptions were limited to specific subgroups such as older Americans, evangelical Protestants, African-Americans, and Republicans (Baunach, 2012). Much of this change was attributed to intracohort change, or the idea that when a new generation replaces the older one the younger adults gain more tolerance for the diversity of their own cohort (Baunach, 2012).

This was displayed distinctly in a separate study that looked at attitudes toward same-sex marriage between 1988 and 2008. This study found that the 1945 cohort (consisting of participants born between 1940–1945) indicated a significant shift toward acceptance as compared to those born before 1940 (Sherkat, Powell-Williams, Maddox, & DeVries, 2011). The shift in attitude was attributed to increasing rates of secularism and education, both of which have been shown to be associated with more liberal and progressive ideas (Baunach, 2012). A 2011 study analyzed the attitudes associated with a positive opinion of same-sex marriage. The researchers found that individuals who were “politically liberal, less religious, supportive of gender equality, willing to try anything once, considered television a primary form of entertainment, watched political talk shows, and read blogs” were associated with a positive attitude toward same-sex marriage (Lee & Hicks, 2011, pp. 1398–1399).

In contrast to other LGBTQ advocacy issues such as employment discrimination and hate crimes, same-sex marriage has drawn moral arguments

from its opponents (Barclay & Fisher, 2003). The moral and religious argument for gay rights to equal employment and protection from physical harm is justified by a desire for protection and tolerance for all, regardless of personal decisions about sexuality (Barclay & Fisher, 2003). However, the research does not indicate there to be a strong moral or religious argument that compels people to allow same-sex individuals to obtain legal marriage recognition, as the United States societal norm (based in religion) has always been that marriage is traditionally between a man and a woman (Barclay & Fisher, 2003).

Religion has been a primary factor in fueling attitudes against same-sex marriage (Brewer & Wilcox, 2005; Sherkat et al., 2011). Led by evangelical Protestants, many religious groups in the United States that promote a literal, fundamentalist interpretation of the Bible have argued fervently that in order to protect the religious sanctity of the institution of marriage, it should only legally be allowed between one man and one woman (Baunach, 2012). This belief is often cited from the existence of two biblical passages. The first is one highly controversial passage from Leviticus that has been interpreted to state that a man who lies with another man shall be put to death. The second is a passage from Genesis that proscribes man to marry a woman (Schuman, 2008).

In 2003, in a survey of religious individuals, researchers found that “88% of highly committed white evangelicals, 64% of committed white Catholics, and 74% of black Protestants believed that homosexual conduct is sinful” (Schuman, 2008, p. 2). These individuals (and voters) were unable to separate the condoning of homosexual behaviors from the legalization of same-sex marriage; they



believed that to approve marriage equality was to place a public vote in favor of all homosexual acts (Schuman, 2008). In other words, the conservative religious view illuminated in this study was that “homosexuality is a sin, and same-sex marriage is an unacceptable extension of that sin” (Schuman, 2008, p. 3).

A crossover between conservative religious groups and the Republican Party was also shown to promote negative attitudes toward same-sex marriage at a political level (Baunach, 2012; Sherkat et al., 2011). In the 1980s the Republican Party began advertising a platform of *family values* that included moral conservatism and—specifically—heteronormative family structures (Baunach, 2012; Brewer & Wilcox, 2005). When same-sex marriage became a popular political issue, this commitment to family values translated to anti-gay marriage platforms (Brewer & Wilcox, 2005). While the intent of this campaign message throughout the 1990s and 2000s was intended to recruit followers who agreed with the message, it may have also had the opposite effect.

Research has shown that familiarity with the unknown can make it more acceptable and comfortable. Thus, the presence of the topic in general—regardless of the intended message—could have influenced some moderate and conservative individuals to become more accepting of it (Baunach, 2012). This idea was further substantiated based on the findings of a study conducted on media influences on attitudes toward same-sex marriage. People who watched TV were found to be more accepting toward same-sex marriage and the researchers concluded that this was likely because of the increased exposure to gay couples on TV shows (Lee & Hicks, 2011).

A study conducted by Moskowitz, Rieger, and Roloff (2010) explored the possibility of gender differences in heterosexual attitudes toward same-sex marriages. Unsurprisingly, they found that homophobia was associated with anti-same-sex marriage attitudes (Moskowitz et al., 2010). Additionally, they further concluded that men who experienced increased homophobia toward gay males as compared to lesbians were more likely to support lesbian marriage but not marriage between two males. Women did not indicate any difference; women who reported homophobic attitudes were against gay marriage overall, regardless of the gender of the same-sex couples (Moskowitz et al., 2010). This study substantiated prior research that indicated that heterosexual women are more accepting of LGBTQ individuals than males and that heterosexual males view gay men as more socially and sexually deviant than lesbians (Moskowitz et al., 2010).

Another factor shown to affect attitudes toward same-sex marriage is that of changing public policy. As legislatures, courts, and public voters have legalized same-sex marriage over the past decade, some individual citizens appear to have changed their attitudes toward the topic based on this alone (Kreitzer, Hamilton, & Tolbert, 2014). In a unique study conducted on citizens in the state of Iowa immediately prior to and following the Iowa Supreme Court ruling on July 3, 2009, in favor of the legality of same-sex marriage, researchers found that some respondents changed their attitude to a more favorable one following the ruling (Kreitzer et al., 2014). Some respondents in this study reported feeling unfavorable toward same-sex marriage before the ruling, and then changed their reported feeling to favorable once they found out that the court had ruled that

same-sex marriage should be allowed in their state. The researchers found that these attitude-changing respondents tended to be those whose demographics indicated that they were more likely to be in favor of same-sex marriage overall (young Democrats) (Kreitzer et al., 2014).

This type of research offers a hypothesis regarding the cause of the speed at which the legalization of same-sex marriage has spread across states from 2012–2014. Once citizens realized that a state's population approved of gay marriage, some of the stigma and vigor of the movement against it may have been lost (Kreitzer et al., 2014). This discussion of attitudes toward same-sex marriage is incomplete without a timeline of the often changing state-by-state legality. The following section outlines how the legislation for and against same-sex marriage fluctuated over the period of the 1970s – present day.

**Legal history.** From a legal standpoint same-sex marriage was a largely unnoticed and uncontested issue until 1971. In 1971, individuals first began to file legal cases pertaining to the state constitutionality of same-sex marriage (Barclay & Fisher, 2003). From 1971–2004, in each state and in each case in which the legality of same-sex marriage equality was challenged, the courts ruled unanimously against it (Barclay & Fisher, 2003). These court rulings were in line with the dominant public opinion at that time, which supported a heterosexist view of normality and rejected same-sex couples' claims of equality (Baunach, 2012).

As such, prior to 2004, legalized same-sex marriage did not exist in the United States. Marriage equality was a utopian future dreamed of by many lesbian

citizens from at least the 1950s on (Enszer, 2013). However, LGBTQ advocates were highly focused on fighting for rights such as “employment discrimination, abolition of sodomy laws, hate-crime statutes that applied to LGBTQ individuals, resources to prevent and treat breast cancer and AIDS, and domestic partner benefits” (Egan & Sherrill, 2005, p. 229). Legalizing same-sex marriage was often viewed as an issue of lesser importance. Advocating for laws that protected the employment and safety of LGBTQ individuals took precedent over the legalization of marriage (Egan & Sherrill, 2005).

In 1996, however, same-sex marriage became a topic of nationwide public discourse when President Bill Clinton signed the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) into law. This law defined marriage at a federal level as a legal contract between one man and one woman (Dolan, 2013). DOMA effectively banned recognition of same-sex marriages at the federal level and deferred the right of state recognition to each individual state (Salka & Burnett, 2012). As a result of the federal implications of DOMA, many individual states quickly began passing their own legislations (Barclay & Fisher, 2003). Prior to 1996, two states had enacted laws restricting same-sex marriage (Hawaii and Utah) (Human Rights Campaign, 2015). Following the passage of DOMA and the illumination of a social issue that many Americans had previously considered a non-issue, 28 individual states passed legislation restricting same-sex marriage between 1996 and 2000 (Barclay & Fisher, 2003). Following these well-publicized legislative acts, LGBTQ rights become an issue of contentious public debate. The new laws also helped define a new primary focus for LGBTQ advocates. Employment and

safety were still of grave concern to these advocates, but the publicity of the marriage equality debate required immediate attention (Egan & Sherrill, 2005).

The public debate over the legality and morality of same-sex marriage intensified quickly. LGBTQ advocates began working extremely hard to promote their message of acceptance and equality (Barclay & Fisher, 2003). Many states between 1996 and 2004 responded by legalizing civil unions or domestic partnerships (Human Rights Campaign, 2015). At times, states would even go so far as to legalize same-sex marriage. However, often these rulings were passed and then quickly contested and overturned, resulting in same-sex couples who became legally married in their home state only to have them nullified by the state a short time later (Dolan, 2013).

On May 17, 2004, Massachusetts became the first United States state to legalize same-sex marriage. In November 2004, 11 states responded quickly to this event by passing laws defining marriage as explicitly between a man and a woman (Human Rights Campaign, 2015). During the period of 2004–2012, many states legalized same-sex marriage, issued marriage licenses to same-sex couples, and then overturned the legality via a court decision (Kindregan, 2004). All of these marriage legalizations up until 2012 were performed via acts of state congress or court rulings on state constitutions (Human Rights Campaign, 2015). In the fall election of 2012, Maryland, Washington, and Maine become the first states to legalize same-sex marriage as the result of a popular vote (Human Rights Campaign, 2015).

In June 2013 DOMA was repealed by SCOTUS in a case known as *United States v. Windsor (Windsor)* (Human Rights Campaign, 2015). SCOTUS opined that defining marriage between one man and one woman was unconstitutional and in violation of the Fifth Amendment to the Constitution, which guarantees equality of personal liberties (Dolan, 2013; Smith, 2014). Essentially, the overturn of DOMA meant that the federal government began recognizing married same-sex couples who resided in states where same-sex marriage was already legalized (Smith, 2014). This federal recognition had major tax ramifications (same-sex couples who were married according to their state of residence could begin to file as married instead of single). It also had benefit effects for those with federal jobs as married spouses often receive benefit coverage not available to unmarried partners (Alm, Leguizamon, & Leguizamon, 2013). What the overturn of DOMA did not do was provide federal recognition of same-sex marriage for couples who resided in a state that had not individually legalized it (Smith, 2014).

Also in June 2013, SCOTUS ruled in *Hollingsworth v. Perry* that the proponents of California's Proposition 8 (which stated that marriage in California was legal only between one man and one woman) did not have legal standing to appeal the California Supreme Court's ruling that Proposition 8 was unconstitutional (Dolan, 2013). As such, SCOTUS upheld the state's right to rule independently on the issue of same-sex marriage (Dolan, 2013). This ruling was considered a non-judgment, but effectively left the legalization of same-sex marriage as state law in California (Dolan, 2013).

The repeal of DOMA caused many lower courts in various states to begin ruling against prohibitions of same-sex marriage. These courts often cited that to ban same-sex marriage violated “equal protection and due process principles” (Smith, 2014). While the *Windsor* and *Hollingsworth v. Perry* rulings implied that SCOTUS respected state rights to define marriage and that the federal government recognized the equality of same-sex marriages, it failed to make a strong, definitive statement on the constitutionality of same-sex marriage (Smith, 2014). By March 2015, 37 states and the District of Columbia had legalized same-sex marriage, while seven states still explicitly banned it (Human Rights Campaign, 2015). However, these statistics were deemed irrelevant by a SCOTUS decision that was delivered in June 2015 (Human Rights Campaign, 2015).

In April 2015, SCOTUS heard oral arguments on a case named *Obergefell v. Hodges* (*Obergefell*). This case represented individual cases from four states (Ohio, Michigan, Kentucky, and Tennessee) in which same-sex marriage was not yet legalized (Human Rights Campaign, 2015). The intent behind SCOTUS accepting these cases was to provide a federal ruling on same-sex marriage that was more definitive than its 2013 *Windsor* and *Hollingsworth v. Perry* decisions (Human Rights Campaign, 2015). In June 2015, with a 5–4 decision, SCOTUS ruled that the federal constitution grants same-sex couples equal rights to marriage (Human Rights Campaign, 2015). As such, all states were instructed to begin issuing marriage certificates to same-sex couples immediately and that to deny to do so would be illegal under federal law. The *Obergefell* decision

immediately legalized same-sex marriage in all 50 states (Human Rights Campaign, 2015).

This complicated legal history of same-sex marriage shifted dramatically over time and often in the same direction of the fluctuating dominant culture's heterosexist attitudes (Baunach, 2012). Prior to 2015, same-sex couples experienced not only social but legal discrimination against their relationships. The ramifications of these legal restrictions experienced by lesbian couples are largely understudied (as discussed in further detail below) (Rose, 2000). Further, the impact of the June 2015 SCOTUS decision is so recent there has been little time to conduct formal research on the topic. Exploring how married lesbian couples have been impacted by these legal constraints is a critical factor in better understanding the experience of lesbian marriage overall.

**Same-sex marriage in Washington.** The intended population of the proposed study consists of legally married lesbians currently residing in or near the state of Washington. As such, an understanding of the specific nuances of the history of same-sex marriage within Washington is warranted to provide appropriate contextual detail.

The earliest known decision regarding same-sex marriage in the state of Washington came in 1974, when a male couple was denied a marriage license by King County and consequently brought suit (Dolan, 2013). The court opined against the couple, stating in its opinion "the institution of marriage as a union of man and woman . . . is as old as the book of Genesis. . . . This historic institution manifestly is more deeply founded than the asserted contemporary concept of



marriage and societal interests for which petitioners contend” (Dolan, 2013, pp. 1129–1130). This reliance of a court upon a religious argument was not out of the ordinary in the 1970s. Rather, this was a common practice that that did not come as a surprise and was not widely viewed as a violation of the separation of church and state (Reinbold, 2014).

This common exercise of ruling in the favor of traditional moral practices came to a halt in 2003 in a case called *Lawrence v. Texas*, when the court declared that “the fact that the governing majority in a State has traditionally viewed a particular practice as immoral is not a sufficient reason for upholding a law prohibiting the practice” (Reinbold, 2014, p. 263). Although this precedent marked a shift that would greatly affect future cases based on the religious argument against gay marriage in the state of Washington, the effects were not seen immediately (Dolan, 2013).

In 1998, following the 1996 passage of DOMA, the state of Washington legislature passed its own state version of a Defense of Marriage Act. This Washington law officially defined legal marriage within the state as between one man and one woman (Washington State Legislature, 2015). The legality of same-sex marriage was challenged in court again in Washington in 2004, when two more same-sex couples filed suit against King County and the State. Again, the court decided against the couples, stating that their claims were not convincing enough to declare the 1998 Washington Defense of Marriage Act unconstitutional (Dolan, 2013). State law prohibiting same-sex marriage remained in place until 2012 (Washington State Legislature, 2015).

Christine Gregoire, Washington State Governor, signed a senate bill into law on February 13, 2012, legalizing same-sex marriage for residents of the State of Washington for the first time in history (Dolan, 2013). Anti-marriage equality advocates quickly gathered enough signatures in support of a referendum and Referendum 74 (R-74) was put to popular vote in November 2012 (Dolan, 2013). The highly publicly contested referendum passed by a small majority and same-sex couples began getting legally married on December 6, 2012 (Human Rights Campaign, 2015).

One important facet of the Washington same-sex marriage law is its stated religious exemption. The law states that “no . . . official of any religious organization is required to solemnize or recognize any marriage,” a clause which was an important component in the passage of R-74 (Dolan, 2013, p. 1121). A second important facet of this new law was that it dissolved all domestic partnerships, which were previously developed as a means to provide equal legal protection to same-sex couples who were registered as domestic partners. With few exceptions, all domestic partnerships were either dissolved or converted into legal marriages as of June 30, 2014 (Washington State Legislature, 2015).

### **Lesbian Marriage**

As discussed earlier, the population of legally married lesbians is new and thus inherently understudied. In the research that has been conducted, the primary topics appeared to be wellbeing and commitment. This section provides a review of the literature currently available.

**Wellbeing.** Of particular interest in all marriage research (regardless of gender makeup) is how marriage affects overall wellbeing (Cherlin, 2013). Two known studies exist on the wellbeing of legally married lesbian couples. The first was designed and conducted by Ducharme and Kollar (2012) who surveyed 225 individual married lesbians in the state of Massachusetts. They used previous research on heterosexual marriages regarding the *marriage benefit*, which is an identified increase in overall wellbeing in married couples as compared to non-married couples and singles. The intent was to explore whether the same increase in wellbeing existed for married lesbians. Using the results of the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS) and the World Health Organization Quality of Life-Brief Instrument (WHOQOL-Bref), the analysis indicated that being married was associated with higher rates of psychological, physical, and financial wellbeing in lesbians (Ducharme & Kollar, 2012).

One notable issue with this study is that the WHOQOL-Bref is a 26-item self-report survey was developed on the basis of research on heterosexual couples. This means that this study has a heterosexist bias; asking questions of lesbians based off of research conducted on heterosexual couples means that any unique aspects of the lesbian experience are neither asked about nor answered. The results of this study are questionably unreliable, as readers do not know what the results would have been like had the assessment instrument been open-ended and less heteronormative. Ducharme and Kollar's (2012) study is informative on some aspects of the impact of marriage on lesbians; however, further lesbian research is

needed in order to inform the development of surveys that directly relate to known factors of lesbian wellbeing.

To expand on the dangers of the assumptions made in Ducharme and Kollar's (2012) study, one should reference an article written by Cherlin (2013). Cherlin proposed that because the research on same-sex couples has indicated that benefits to health and wellbeing are comparable to heterosexual couples that we should expect that "marriage will have similar meanings for same-sex and different-sex partners and to therefore have similar effects on health" (p. 64). To make this assumption is to ignore the fact that much of the previous research conducted on lesbian couples has been heteronormative in nature (see extended discussion of this in the "Lesbian Relationships" section below). Further, it ignores the impact of oppression and a history of marital discrimination toward lesbian marriages, which are topics irrelevant to heterosexual couples. To state that lesbian marriages probably have the same effects on individuals as heterosexual marriage is to perpetuate heteronormativity and to diminish the authentic experience of married lesbians.

Another study on married lesbians and wellbeing was conducted by Wight, LeBlanc, and Badgett (2013). They used results of the 2009 California Health Interview Survey, which included respondents of all identified sexualities. The results of this study concluded that gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals who were legally married were "significantly less psychologically distressed" than their legally unmarried counterparts. Further findings indicated that married heterosexual individuals were also less psychologically distressed than their

legally unmarried peers, and were also less psychologically distressed than the legally married gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals (Wight et al., 2013).

This study indicated that there is likely a qualitative difference between lesbian marriage and heterosexual marriage. While both types of marriage increased psychological wellbeing, it is important to note that there is another variable that made married heterosexual couples less distressed than the non-heterosexual participants (Wight et al., 2013). This could be attributed to oppression, length of marriage, or some other unidentified factor. Without additional qualitative research on lesbian marriage, these additional factors will likely remain unidentified, unanalyzed, and unacknowledged. As such, this research article makes a strong argument for the need for additional studies on the qualitative factors present in lesbian marriages.

**Commitment.** Prior to 2004, lesbian couples in the United States were left to non-legal forms of commitment and to determine what that meant to them as a couple and individually. While commitment is expected to be individualized and look differently for each couple, the legalization of same-sex marriage changed the context by allowing lesbian couples the same opportunity as heterosexual couples to legally declare their long-term commitment to one another. A study was conducted on registered same-sex domestic partners in California in 2008, prior to the California Supreme Court decision that legalized same-sex marriage. The study consisted of surveying 696 individuals on what they anticipated the effects of legalized marriage would have on them (Shulman, Gotta, & Green, 2012). The results of these online surveys indicated that same-sex domestic

partners believed that being able to become legally married would provide a sense of security in multiple areas of their lives, including “increased permanence in their couple relationship as well as feeling protected as a unit by the larger society” (Shulman et al., 2012, p. 158). While this study was informative as to anticipated benefits and illuminated some of the reasons why couples wanted to pursue legal marriage, it does not provide any updated information on the actual outcomes of legalized marriage.

One known study was found on same-sex couple commitment following the legalization of same-sex marriage. While it is not exclusive to lesbians, it does include them in the data set. Fifty married and unmarried same-sex couples were interviewed following the legalization of same-sex marriage in their state of residency, Massachusetts. Legally married couples reported “a deeper sense of commitment to one another, greater acknowledgment of the couple by families and professional peers, a sense of social equality and legitimacy, and reduction of internal, familial, and societal homophobia” (Schechter, Tracy, Page, & Luong, 2008, p. 417). While some couples reacted positively to their legal marital status and felt “normal, ordinary, and the same as heterosexual couples,” others expressed fear that they had lost an important quality that contributed to the uniqueness of being a member of the gay/lesbian community (Schechter et al., 2008, p. 418).

The most salient finding of this study was that the couples overwhelmingly stated their support of same-sex marriage due to the increased access to “legal protections, validation and recognition by others, integration into

families, enhanced family bonds, and countering homophobic messages about gays and lesbians” (Schechter et al., 2008, p. 418). This qualitative study that used open-ended questions appears to have avoided much of the heteronormative bias embedded in nearly all other research included in this literature review. While the findings are applicable to lesbians, the study was not exclusive to lesbians or to legally married couples. In review of the existing literature, the married lesbian population remains largely unstudied.

While the studies cited within this section illuminated some issues relevant to lesbian marriage, it is very clear that this population has been the subject of a limited amount of research. Further, much of the research that has been conducted has been done with an obvious and/or implicit heterosexist bias. This bias makes even the small amount of available research difficult to interpret as the reader does not know what types of responses would have been given by participants who were allowed to answer unbiased questions. It is clear that in order to better understand the experience of lesbian marriage more studies need to be initiated. Additionally, heterosexist bias must be minimized as much as possible in order to explore lesbian marriage itself rather than how the constructs of heterosexual marriage apply to lesbians.

### **Lesbian Relationships**

As reviewed in the previous section, the amount of research published on legally married lesbian couples is scant. This section reviews the currently published research exploring facets of lesbian relationships in general, regardless of the relationships’ legal statuses. Salient themes identified related to lesbian

relationships include relationship status, social support, physical intimacy, emotional intimacy, equality, commitment, and the effects of heteronormative stigma.

**Relationship status.** Research on heterosexual couples has consistently shown that married heterosexual couples report higher levels of wellbeing than unmarried heterosexual couples; further, heterosexual couples overall have reported higher levels of wellbeing than heterosexual singles (Wiencke & Hill, 2009). Much of the research conducted on lesbian relationship status has been in an attempt to determine whether lesbians experience similar increases in wellbeing.

Wayment and Peplau (1995) designed a study to look at lesbians, social support, and wellbeing. Their findings indicated that white, middle-class lesbian couples experienced higher levels of wellbeing than their single counterparts. Their psychological wellbeing was assessed using the Index of General Affect, a 30 page questionnaire (Wayment & Peplau, 1995). A concern with this study is that it was performed only on white, middle-class women and a causal relationship between wellbeing and relationship status is indeterminable as it may be possible that individuals with high levels of individual wellbeing are more likely to maintain a relationship (Wayment & Peplau, 1995).

To further support the idea that being part of a couple increases lesbians' wellbeing, Wienke and Hill (2013) performed a study that found that lesbians that occupied multiple roles (worker, partner, parent) were associated with increased wellbeing in comparison to lesbians that occupied one or fewer. These findings



further support the idea that to be part of a couple provides a benefit to individual wellbeing. One challenge to the validity of these results which may be common among studies of same-sex populations is that the determination of “same-sex” versus “heterosexual” sexual orientations was based entirely on behavioral reports and not on how individuals may personally identify or verbally describe themselves (Wiencke & Hill, 2013, pp. 313–314). The fluidity of human sexuality makes it difficult to isolate lesbians from heterosexuals or bisexuals into a discrete category for the purposes of research. This problem becomes exacerbated when researchers use their own subjective criteria in order to sort subjects into specific categories. The lesson from this study is the importance of researcher transparency and a well-thought out method for categorizing sexuality. Future research should seek to clearly articulate how participants were identified as lesbian, as sexuality can be extremely fluid and varied.

Wiencke and Hill (2009) authored another study that explored whether the marriage benefit attributed to married heterosexual couples was also experienced by partnered (but legally unmarried) same-sex couples. Surveys related to health and happiness were given to people of all sexual orientations and relationship statuses, and the results indicated that same-sex partnered couples experienced more happiness than single individuals of any sexuality, but less happiness than married heterosexual couples (Wiencke & Hill, 2009). One issue with the data analysis used to assess the marriage benefit of same-sex couples in this study is that they were merely compared to scales that had previously been measured in heterosexual couples. The question arises whether there are different experiences

that contribute to same-sex couples' happiness and wellbeing that are left unmeasured. If that is the case, researchers run the risk of concluding on results based upon a heteronormatively biased scale.

Another factor found to be an important part of lesbian relationship status is the pace at which the status develops. There is a societal stereotype that lesbian relationships move toward serious commitment at a faster pace than heterosexual or gay male relationships (Rose & Zand, 2000). Respondents in a study conducted in order to explore different types of lesbian relationships reported that when entering into a romantic relationship, "women are just ready to move in" and "a date could last for days and be a really intense experience" (Rose & Zand, 2000, p. 98). These comments were collected from lesbians asked to report what is unique about lesbian relationships. Because these results were based only on lesbians' perceptions of what is unique or different about their relationships, they set the foundation for further research comparing the actual pace of relationships between various types of couples. However, based on the fact that many lesbians perceive their relationships to move faster than heterosexual women, this is a factor that should be taken into contextual consideration when comparing married lesbians with other marriages. It is possible the experience of feeling that the relationship progressed very quickly may affect things such as happiness, wellbeing, and health.

**Physical intimacy.** Physical intimacy has been shown through research to be a very important aspect of lesbian relationships. Passion, sometimes defined as a combination of "physical attraction and sexual attraction" has been shown to be

an important contributor to relationship satisfaction (Cusack, Hughes, & Cook, 2012, p. 173). While this is true of heterosexual couples as well, research indicates that there are some factors related to this topic that appear to be unique to lesbians. Physical intimacy as reviewed in this section includes topics of passion, sex, and physical attraction. Discussion of interpersonal violence is also included as relevant to the lesbian relationship research base.

One consistent point of confusion found within research on lesbian physical intimacy has to do with the definition of sex. Some acts of physical touch amongst lesbians may be considered sex to them whereas the same act may not be considered sex by a heterosexual couple (or even another lesbian couple) (Cohen & Byers, 2014). The lack of clear definitions of lesbian sexual acts and the heteronormative phallic-centric definitions of sexual acts makes it difficult to compare the results of studies done on lesbians. Even more difficult is to compare lesbian reports of frequency or duration of sex to heterosexual reports (Cohen & Byers, 2014). This point is repeatedly brought up in the discussion sections of many research articles, indicating that it is a problem researchers are aware of but are sometimes unable to fix due to the ease of availability of pre-collected data sets and a lack of non-heteronormative measurement tools. That said, the following review of research conducted related to lesbian sex will include a definition for each study as to how sex was defined for the participants (if, in fact, it was at all).

Many researchers have found that physical touch is an element of lesbian relationships that appears to be highly related to relationship satisfaction (Brashier

& Hughes, 2012). Brashier and Hughes conducted a study that surveyed 209 heterosexual women and 94 lesbians to measure rates of relationship satisfaction, sexual satisfaction, communication, and physical touch. They concluded that there were no significant differences other than that lesbians reported higher levels of relationship satisfaction with more physical touch, and heterosexual women reported higher levels of relationship satisfaction with more words of affirmation (Brashier & Hughes, 2012). One implication of these findings was that if lesbians focus more time and energy on physical touch they may experience higher levels of relationship satisfaction. A limitation noted by the author was the lack of definition of physical touch. The study used a popular survey known as “The 5 Love Languages” questionnaire to compare subjects (Brashier & Hughes, 2012). While all subjects were asked the same questions, it is unclear whether there was a difference between sexual touch and non-sexual physical touch that may have influenced the findings.

Cohen et al. (2008) studied the costs and rewards associated with sex for lesbian women. Definitions of sex were not provided to participants in this study; rather, they were asked how many sexual partners they had had, the gender(s) of those partners, and then self-reported on the costs and rewards experienced as a result of having sex. Essentially, participants were left to define sex in their own manner and provide input about the effect they believe it has had on them (Cohen et al., 2008).

The top five rewards that lesbians reported experiencing as a result of having sexual relations included “emotional intimacy and companionship (100%),

physical intimacy (69%), feeling accepted, understood, safe, and supported (48%), communication (48%), and a positive view of self (39%)” (Cohen et al., 2008, p. 167). These results indicated that there was a connection between physical intimacy and emotional intimacy (which is discussed in a later section below). The study further reported that the top five costs associated with sex for lesbian women were “lack of cultural recognition of same-sex relationships (48%), how same-sex relationships are regarded by family, friends, and acquaintances (39%), loss of independence/personal freedom (30%), vulnerability to rejection/loss (26%), and communication problems (22%) (Cohen et al., 2008, p. 168).” The two most common costs (lack of cultural recognition and community regard) indicate aspects of the experience of lesbian women that differ from that of heterosexual women. These thoughts and emotions are a part of the minority experience and are thus absent from studies which explore lesbian relationships using heteronormative assessment measures.

Cohen et al. (2008) recognized the issue of heteronormativity and designed this study by giving an open-ended questionnaire that allowed participants to write in responses. They then gave lesbian participants a copy of the *Rewards/Costs Checklist* (developed directly from research on heterosexual sex). Researchers asked them to provide direct feedback on items that were not appropriate for lesbian relationships as well as items that were relevant to the lesbian experience but missing from the checklist. Thirty-five percent of lesbian participants reported that items asking about “amount/type of foreplay,” “frequency of sexual activities,” and “how easily you reach orgasm” were

interpreted as heteronormative and felt directive in the types of sex the participants “should” be having (Cohen et al., 2008, p. 170). Further, lesbian participants also reported that no questions related to sexual minority status were included and that critical issues related to the “lesbian/gay community, minority sexuality self-acceptance, ‘outness,’ comfort engaging in same-sex sexual activities, restrictions on publicly showing affection, and lack of social/cultural recognition” were entirely left out (Cohen et al., 2008, pp. 168–170).

This study is an excellent example of how heteronormative instruments (in this case, the survey based on heterosexual research) often produce heteronormative results. Had the researchers given the *Rewards/Costs Checklist* to the lesbian participants and not allowed them to answer open-ended questions, they would have missed the two most important costs associated with lesbian sexual relationships. Due to the lack of unbiased lesbian research currently available, there is an immediate need for future research to qualitatively assess the lesbian experience without starting from a place of heteronormative bias.

Much like the above study that specifically asked lesbians about costs and rewards, Wood, Milhausen, and Jeffrey (2014) explored the general reasons that lesbians gave for having sex. The top five most common reasons for having sex were “(1) it feels good, (2) I wanted to express my love for the person, (3) I wanted to experience the physical pleasure, (4) the person had a desirable body, and (5) I wanted to show my affection for the person” (Wood et al., 2014). Further, the top five least common reasons for having sex were “(1) I wanted to manipulate her into doing something for me, (2) I wanted to hurt/humiliate the

person, (3) I was curious about what the person was like in bed, (4) I wanted to be used or degraded, and (5) I wanted to change the topic of conversation” (Wood et al., 2014, pp. 81–83). A critique of the results of this study is that the 140 item questionnaire given to the lesbian participants was based on the results of studies done on heterosexual males and females and their respective reasons for having sex. This study does not address whether there are additional reasons for having sex that are unique to the lesbian population. There were no open-ended self-report questions included in this study.

In an attempt to better understand specific types of lesbian sex and their frequencies, Cohen and Byers (2014) designed another study of 586, primarily white, lesbian women. The study was partially designed in an attempt to challenge previous research findings that indicated that lesbians have less sex than heterosexuals or gay males. Cohen and Byers’ hypothesis was that these previous findings were based on a heteronormative, phallic-centric definition of sex. The results of their study found that “on average, participants engaged in some form of nongenital behavior once a day or more and some form of genital sexual activity between one and three times per week. Further, sexual activity lasted 57 minutes, on average” (Cohen & Byers, 2014, p. 898). These findings are critical to illuminating the heteronormative results of previous studies.

Researchers who ask lesbians the same questions regarding sex as they asked gay males or heterosexuals inevitably ask questions about phallic-centric sex, something that may or may not be present in lesbian sexual encounters at all. Cohen and Byers’ (2014) study included nongenital and genital types of sex in

order to include all different types of physical contact. This allowed responses that included a wide spectrum of sexual activities to be reported. Previous studies on heterosexual sex have found that the average length of heterosexual sexual encounters is 18 minutes (Cohen & Byers, 2014). Thus, perhaps frequency is not the best way to compare the amount of sex various couples are having, if the average lesbian sexual encounter is more than three times longer than the average heterosexual sexual encounter. Further exploration of duration, intensity, and frequency of sexual activity is needed in order to better understand how a comparison between types of couples may or may not be appropriate. It is notable too that patterns of frequency and patterns of sexual activities have changed over time (Gotta et al., 2011).

Gotta et al. (2011) used archival data sets to compare the responses of 783 lesbians to questions related to sex in 1975 and again in 2000. They found that lesbians reported higher rates of monogamy in 2000 than 1975. Along with this was a decreased amount of overall reported sexual activity, however, some of that was attributed to the decrease in extra-relational affairs. It is unknown how the increase in social acceptance of lesbian relationships related to the increase in monogamy or decrease in sexual activity, or if one of these factors has a causal relationship to the other. This research has also been used to support lower rates of sexual activity for lesbians and for the concept of lesbian “bed death” (Iasenza & Rose, 2002, p. 111).

This was another study that did not define sex for the respondents; rather they were left to report sexual activity based on their own subjective opinions



(Gotta et al., 2011). As such, it is possible that lesbians, due to internalized heteronormativity, reported only certain types of sex (i.e. vaginal penetration) and left out other forms of lesbian sex. Iasenza and Rose (2002) discussed this phenomenon specifically. They noted that a major problem is the wording of questions such as “how many times have you had sex?” which implies that sex is measurable as “discrete genital acts” (and ones that traditionally include a penis). The researchers further argued that many lesbian women engage in acts such as “hugging, touching, kissing, and holding” more frequently and for longer periods of time before genital stimulation than do their heterosexual counterparts (Iasenza & Rose, 2002, p. 114–115).

Partner violence is another element of physical intimacy that is present among couples of all sexualities and genders, lesbians being no exception (Eaton et al., 2008). In fact, much research has shown that lesbian interpersonal violence (IPV) exists at rates comparable to heterosexuals (Eaton et al., 2008). Eaton et al. specifically studied the factors that co-occurred with IPV among lesbian couples and found that “power imbalance and inequality when making sex-related decisions” were the two most prevalent factors identified. These results were found among 226 lesbian women present at the Atlanta Pride Festival (p. 697).

Relationship equality is a factor that much research has supported as a critical component of lesbian relationships in general. This topic is discussed in length in a later section. While studies done on lesbian IPV have shown some similarities in prevalence to heterosexuals, West (2002) stated that lesbian IPV has been understudied and attributed this to heterosexism. A common perception

of IPV is that males are perpetrators and females are victims, and so lesbians have been largely left out of IPV research (West, 2002). West further suggested that violence inclusive of emotional, verbal, physical, psychological, and sexual abuse should be included in studies of lesbian IPV.

The literature reviewed related to physical intimacy and lesbians is informative and also supports the case for additional, non-heteronormative research. As evidenced through most of the studies, both the lack of a definition of sex and an overly narrow definition of sex provide problems in gaining legitimate results. When lesbians are confined to heteronormative answers or are not allowed to provide detail of their unique sexual experiences, results become biased and/or incomparable with studies done on other populations or using different methods. In order to better understand the unique elements of physical intimacy amongst lesbians, it is critical that measurement tools based in lesbian research be developed.

**Emotional intimacy.** Along with research supporting the importance of physical intimacy, reports of emotional intimacy as a critical component of lesbian relationships are also widespread. Honesty, communication, and connection appear to be common themes that arise as a result of research conducted on lesbian relationships. Rose and Zand (2000) found that when emotional and physical intimacies were intertwined, they contributed to a faster paced and more highly satisfied relationship.

Consistently throughout the literature reviewed, honest and positive communication was reported by lesbians to be an important element contributing

to relationship satisfaction. As another result of the study conducted by Wayment and Peplau (1995) (discussed above), they found that the wellbeing of lesbian women was highly associated with *reassurance of worth support*, which they often received from their partner. Reassurance of worth was defined as “providing feelings of competence from people who know and appreciate the individual’s abilities and social roles” (p. 1189). These findings were in contrast to the findings on heterosexual participants, whose wellbeing was more highly associated with “guidance support” (Wayment & Peplau, 1995, p. 1189). Other studies have confirmed that constructive communication was found to be vital to high levels of satisfaction amongst lesbian couples (Cusack et al., 2012).

In their longitudinal study, Gotta et al. (2011) found that lesbians maintained approximately the same levels of equal communication in 1975 and 2000, and in both years had higher rates than heterosexual or gay male couples. They further concluded that lesbians experienced less conflict than other couples. This seemed to be influenced more by gender than by sexuality, however, it was still identified as an important component of lesbian relationships (Gotta et al., 2011).

A lesbian stereotype known as *merger* refers to “a relational process in which the boundaries between the individual partners are blurred and a premium is placed on togetherness and emotional closeness” (Ossana, 2000, p. 281). Merger was explored by Biaggio, Coan, and Adams (2002) where they discussed both positive and negative impressions of lesbian merger by various parties. They argued that although merger is viewed as a problem by many therapists and

laypeople (also termed enmeshment or fusion), this is a heteronormative argument that is based on a discomfort with merger being something that is much less common in heterosexual relationships (Biaggio et al., 2002). Further, they stated that many lesbians report highly valuing merger, desiring it, and having a stronger capacity for managing it than heterosexuals. “The desire for a close emotional connection seems to be the primary mark of lesbian relationships. Attachment, emotional involvement, intimacy and general closeness are highly correlated with satisfaction in lesbian relationships” (Burch, 1997, pp. 93–94). Ossana further supported the reasons for merger by suggesting that uniting strongly as a couple may be a way for lesbian women to have a stronger presence and more support in the context of societal oppression.

**Relationship equality and lack of gender roles.** In addition to good communication within lesbian couples is the concept of perceived partner equality. Blumstein and Schwartz (1983) found that lesbians highly value equality in their relationships and are more likely than heterosexuals to achieve it. Lesbians reported higher levels of happiness when the relationship was “perceived as fair or equal with regard to decision making” (Beals, Impett, & Peplau, 2002). Unique from heterosexual couples, lesbians do not have traditional gender roles upon which to rely in order to determine who should do what (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983). As a result, differences in assumed gender roles and overall relationship equality between the two women create important factors for understanding lesbian relationships.

Huxley, Clarke, and Halliwell (2011) conducted a study on lesbian women and how their relationships affected their feelings about their physical appearance. The findings pointed to varying effects of being in a same-gender relationship. Some participants stated that their body image was more positive because they felt that their partner could relate to similar issues and they did not feel as pressured to conform to a particular gender stereotype for what their bodies should look like. On the other hand, some participants reported an increase in negative body image because they were constantly comparing their body to their partners' (Huxley et al., 2011). Although it was affected in different directions for different women, having a partner of the same gender impacted the way each participant in this study viewed her own body. A primary finding of this study was that shared gender experience between partners can lead to increased empathy (Huxley et al., 2011). The authors believed that this increase in empathy was due to a personal understanding of some of the issues that each woman's partner was experiencing (Huxley et al., 2011).

Because there are no traditional gender role expectations, shared decision making can be a particularly important aspect of lesbian relationships (Kurdek & Schmitt, 1986). In a study measuring relationship quality amongst various types of relationships, lesbians were found to have higher rates of relationship quality when decision making was shared rather than designated to a particular partner (Kurdek & Schmitt, 1986). Rose and Zand (2000) found that "freedom from gender roles . . . suggested that lesbian dating is more egalitarian than heterosexual dating" (p. 99). This argument implies that lesbians are inherently

more equal within the context of a relationship than heterosexuals simply due to the lack of gender roles and expectations. Behaviors such as paying for meals/activities, making decisions about sex, cleaning the house, and taking care of children were found to be shared by both partners (or decided upon without consideration of gender), which differs from traditional heterosexual relationships (Rose & Zand, 2000).

Part of the findings reported by Gotta et al. (2011) indicated that lesbians had higher rates of equality on “traditionally “feminine” housework, traditionally “male” housework, finances, support, communication, requesting/refusing sex, and decision-making” than heterosexual women. These rates declined within the lesbian population from 1975 to 2000, however remained steadily higher than heterosexuals (Gotta et al., 2011, pp. 361–367).

**Commitment to relationship.** Commitment to lesbian relationships is clearly impacted by all of the elements discussed above. Physical intimacy, emotional intimacy, equality, and relationship status all contribute to lesbian levels of commitment to a relationship. In addition to these factors, four studies looking at commitment specifically found that that a lack of desirable alternatives was particularly important to commitment (Beals et al., 2002; Cusack et al., 2012; Kurdek, 2007; Kurdek & Schmitt, 1986).

The availability of alternatives does not necessarily need to reflect an alternative romantic partner; rather, Beals et al. (2002) found that the presence of time commitments related to friends, work, sports, or even desired alone time contributed to a lack of relationship commitment. Kurdek (2007) used the

following definition of desirable alternatives in his study: “potential outcomes derived from the best available options to the current relationship” (p. 292). In his study of relationship commitment among 252 cohabitating lesbian couples, he found that both quality of alternatives and avoidance motivation contributed to relationship commitment. Examples of items related to quality of alternatives were “the people other than my partner with whom I might become involved are very appealing” and “my needs for intimacy, companionship, and so forth could easily be fulfilled in an alternative relationship” (Kurdek, 2007, p. 297).

Avoidance motivation was indicated by endorsement of items such as “I stay in this relationship because my family would be upset if we split up” and “I stay in this relationship because I dread having to divide up the things we got together” (Kurdek, 2007, p. 297). These items and results indicated that the lesbians in the study may not be committed to their respective relationships because of the presence of positive factors, but rather because of the lack of availability of anything better and/or the avoidance of negative repercussions of ending the relationship.

Prior to the legalization of same-sex marriage, another concept related to lesbian relationship commitment was the impact of social pressure. Without legal marriage, many gay and lesbian couples lacked a formal barrier to ending a relationship. As such, it is possible that lesbians may have been more committed to their current relationships than heterosexuals who did not face the same oppressions (Cusack et al., 2012). However, this is an inference based on limited research and is a topic that requires further investigation in order to validate.

The existence of heterosexism in general, regardless of the status of legal marriage equality, may indicate that lesbians have higher levels of relationship commitment than heterosexuals merely due to the fact that there are more obstacles to overcome to be in a relationship at all. The following section will review articles related to heterosexism and homophobia as a factor in lesbian relationships.

**Effects of stigma/homophobia.** Internalized homophobia, as well as external societal oppression, can have an effect on lesbian relationships. Internalized homophobia was defined by Meyer and Dean (1998) as “the gay person’s direction of negative social attitudes toward the self, leading to a devaluation of the self and resultant internal conflicts and poor self-regard” (p. 161). Hertzmann (2011) suggested that these internal feelings cause individuals within lesbian relationships to constantly (consciously or unconsciously) question one’s own and one’s partner’s sexuality. This insecurity and questioning can cause decreases in relationship stability and commitment (Hertzmann, 2011). A study conducted by Frost and Meyer (2009) found that internalized homophobia lowered relationship quality and caused higher levels of relational problems within lesbian couples. It is further possible that the internalized homophobia experienced can cause an individual to blame her sexuality for the presence of problems, rather than the relationship itself (MacDonald, 1998).

Internalized homophobia has also been associated with higher rates of psychological aggression in lesbian couples (Lewis, Milletich, Derlega, & Padilla,



2014). Researchers in this study identified a common pattern amongst participants whereby internalized homophobia leads to rumination, or “brooding about oneself or life situation,” which contributes to decreased relationship satisfaction and psychological aggression (Lewis et al., 2014, p. 535). Psychological aggression toward a partner included actions such as “name-calling, humiliation, threatening, and controlling” (Lewis et al., 2014, p. 535).

### **The Harmful Effects of Heterosexism on Lesbian Research**

Heterosexist attitudes, legislations, and biases have been previously discussed within the context of each section of literature reviewed. However, it is additionally important to understand the depth and breadth of heterosexism in research in order to best understand the dire need for unbiased lesbian research. Heterosexism is an attitude that is deeply ingrained in our culture and one that has prohibited fair or equal study of lesbians and their experiences. This section will delineate the effect that heterosexism has had on lesbian research and how it has severely limited our knowledge of and research on the lesbian population.

**Heterosexism in research.** The research that has been conducted on lesbians has historically been deeply entrenched in heteronormativity and homophobia. As has been highlighted throughout the previously reviewed articles within this literature review, there are few studies designed, conducted, or concluded on without significant heteronormative bias.

The existence of heteronormative bias within lesbian research is well-recognized and documented by many researchers. The first wave of lesbian research (conducted while homosexuality was still a diagnosable mental disorder)

sought to identify “causes of sexual orientation and/or the psychological abnormality of lesbianism” (Rose, 2002, p. 2). The second wave of lesbian research attempted to depathologize lesbians by illuminating experiences that were relatable and normalized (Huston & Schwartz, 1995). Following this second wave,

what has not been fully accomplished is an exploration of lesbian experience from the perspective of what lesbians view as important. Most current research on relationships contains embedded heterosexist biases that continue to guide what is asked and, subsequently, what is known about love, attraction, and mating. (Rose, 2000, p. 316)

Some research that addresses heterosexism or heteronormativity by name appears to actually perpetuate the very concepts they seek to mitigate. Even the American Psychological Association (APA) itself, in attempting to advocate for the legalization of same-sex marriage on the Division 44 (entitled the Society for the Psychological Study of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Issues) website perpetuated a heteronormative argument. A portion of a statement posted in January, 2014 on this topic stated:

Although it may seem intuitively obvious to many of us in Division 44 that same-sex partners’ motivations for marriage would be similar to heterosexuals’ and that same-sex marriages would be associated with the same psychological benefits as heterosexual marriages, such information is still a revelation to many people in the U.S. and in other countries. (American Psychological Association, 2014)

While the intent of the statement was likely the purpose to argue that same-sex marriage should be valued at the same level as heterosexual marriage, it is also an invalidating assumption to state that lesbians would have the same psychological benefits from marriage as their straight counterparts as if it is a foregone fact. The section of this literature review that covers research conducted

on lesbian marriage clearly illustrated that little to no legitimate research has been done on married same-sex couples, so to conclude that the same-sex marital experience is the same as the heterosexual experience is to ignore the qualities that differentiate same-sex individuals and relationships from their heterosexual peers.

Some of the essential experiences of being a lesbian may affect lesbian couples' motivations for marriage; coming out as a lesbian in an oppressive, heteronormative society alone could provide very different motivations and reasons for pursuing a marriage. It should also be noted that, because the legality of same-sex marriage is so recent, the vast majority of married lesbians did not begin their relationships with the anticipation of being able to one day become legally married (Huston & Schwartz, 1995). This in itself is a quality that differentiates the population of married lesbians from married heterosexuals. How that factor affects a lesbian marital relationship is yet to be researched.

In addition to the APA, individual researchers have made similar heteronormative errors. Conley, Roesch, Peplau, and Gold (2009) stated as a basic argument for their research on lesbians that "extending models developed specifically for heterosexual couples to . . . lesbian couples would provide evidence for the generalizability of these concepts." The problem with this argument is that it failed to address the fact that using models based on heterosexual couples entirely ignores any unique factors that may be present in lesbian couples. Many models used in research for increased generalizability in this manner create results that indicate that lesbian couples are very similar to

heterosexual couples (Rose, 2000). However, these results may not be an accurate depiction of reality. It may not be that lesbian couples are the same, but rather that they are very different on scales that simply are not measured.

The Cohen et al. (2008) study discussed above was a good example of this problem. Had they used the heteronormative survey the lesbian results would have been similar to the heterosexual results. However, by giving lesbian couples open-ended questions, top responses unrelated to any of the survey items were elicited. This illustrates the importance of building a foundation of lesbian research based on open-ended questions. Using surveys developed from heterosexual research produces heteronormatively biased results.

This problem with heteronormative instruments is further depicted by Beals et al. (2002). They described a heteronormative society where lesbians experience prejudice and oppression. “It is understandable that a model developed initially to understand heterosexual relationships might not give prominence to contextual influences” due to the fact that heterosexuals experience benefits from the heteronormative culture (Beals et al., 2002, p. 60). Attempting to understand the lesbian experience without an analysis of the social context is to ignore prominent factors and likely to reach biased conclusions” (Beals et al., 2002).

The existence of heteronormative bias in lesbian research is undeniable. The only way to begin to amass a research base that is contextual and truly representative of the experience of lesbians is to approach that research from a place of open curiosity and with minimal heteronormative bias. When open-ended, qualitative questions were asked of lesbian participants within the studies

reviewed in this document, often answers were given that could not have been elicited using the heteronormatively developed surveys. It follows that in order to actually study the lesbian population, more open-ended, qualitative research needs to be performed and published in order to accurately inform the development of unbiased assessment tools and future research.

## Method

In choosing a methodological approach to study lesbian marriage, a study conducted by Cohen et al. (2008) was a heavy influence. These researchers designed a study exploring the costs and rewards of sex for lesbians. Lesbian participants were given a quantitative survey which had previously been developed for use on measuring costs and rewards of sex for heterosexual individuals in order to review it for heteronormative bias (Cohen et al., 2008). Lesbian participants were subsequently given an open-ended questionnaire on which they were asked to freely write about any costs or rewards of sex that they experienced. The top two costs identified (cultural recognition and social support of same-sex relationships) would not have been found, as they were not asked about at all in quantitative survey (Cohen et al., 2008).

The aforementioned study perfectly illustrates the dangers of taking heteronormative instruments, applying them to sexual minority groups, and proclaiming the results to be valid and generalizable. Had Cohen et al. (2008) completed their study using only the quantitative survey, their results would have indicated that the lesbian experience of sex was similar to the heterosexual experience. When using a heteronormative instrument, researchers run the risk of creating heteronormative results that do not accurately reflect the realities of the studied group. The greater issue is that there appears not to be any non-heteronormative instruments used uniquely for lesbian research. Further, there lacks a non-heteronormative research base on which to support the development of such an instrument. This is the research base to which this study intended to

contribute. In doing so, the goal was to use an approach affording study of the lesbian experience (and namely, lesbian marriage) with as little heteronormative bias as possible.

Phenomenological qualitative research specifically supports the intent to minimize bias as much as possible by theoretically and philosophically positioning from a place of exploration and illumination. The qualitative method of bracketing was utilized to parse out researcher assumptions before data collection in order to best acknowledge preconceived notions about lesbian marriage and set them aside (Heppner, Wampold, & Kivlighan, 2008). What follows is a description of the philosophical and historical underpinnings of phenomenology, and a specific description of Giorgi's (2009) version of Descriptive Phenomenology, which was followed for the purposes of this study.

### **Phenomenology**

Phenomenological research is designed to elucidate the essence of a given experience for a particular group of people (Creswell, 2013). Unlike narrative studies which seek to understand one individual's experience, phenomenology "describes the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experience" (Creswell, 2013, p. 76). Phenomenological researchers identify a phenomenon of interest (in this case, lesbian marriage) and collect data from individuals who have lived experience of the chosen phenomenon (Heppner et al., 2008). Data analysis is conducted in an attempt to identify common themes of the participants' experiences. Those common themes constitute the results of the study, which is

intended to shed light on core aspects of the lived experience of the given phenomenon (Heppner et al., 2008).

**Husserl and the foundations of modern phenomenology.** In the mid-1700s Kant occasionally used the word *phenomenology* in his writings, and Hegel is known to have described it as “the science of describing what one perceives, senses, and knows in one’s immediate awareness and experience” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 26). However, Edmund Husserl, a German mathematician, was widely credited for popularizing the modern phenomenological approach in the late 19th Century (Creswell, 2013; Giorgi, 2009; Heppner et al., 2008; Moustakas, 1994). Husserl was a philosopher at a time when the world highly valued empirical knowledge and scientific proof. The more measurable a phenomenon, the more valid it was considered to be (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). Husserl’s embracing of the unknown and immeasurable represented a deviation from the norm of his peers, and he was often criticized for such. His approach was reminiscent of ancient philosophy which held its roots in understanding and valuing the individual’s own perception of his/her experience (Giorgi, 2009; Moustakas, 1994). Husserl believed that in order to broaden knowledge of human experience, one must value and accept the validity of conscious descriptions of that experience (Giorgi, 2009; Moustakas, 1994). He philosophized descriptive phenomena as the basis of all human knowledge (Moustakas, 1994). Husserl differentiated between facts and essences. He viewed measurable, observable, verifiable facts as useless without the human perception and self-reflection to analyze and understand the data; to utilize one’s perceptions of self and the world



in order to describe the essence of experience was viewed as the only valid method of acquiring valuable knowledge (Moustakas, 1994). Husserl emphasized the only things we can know for certain are those that appear consciously before us (Moustakas, 1994).

Clark Moustakas was a well-published American, Humanistic psychologist who is often cited as a primary source on Husserl philosophy and phenomenology. The nine points cited below are quoted from Moustakas (1994) as these points summarize the foundational Husserl philosophical beliefs used in this study:

1. Phenomenology focuses on the appearance of things, a return to things just as they are given, removed from everyday routines and biases, from what we are told is true in nature and in the natural world of everyday living.
2. Phenomenology is concerned with wholeness, with examining entities from many sides, angles and perspectives until a unified vision of the essences of a phenomenon or experience is achieved.
3. Phenomenology seeks meanings from appearances and arrives at essences through intuition and reflection on conscious acts of experience, leading to ideas, concepts, judgments, and understandings.
4. Phenomenology is committed to descriptions of experiences, not explanations or analyses. Descriptions retain, as close as possible, the original texture of things, their phenomenal qualities and material properties.
5. Phenomenology is rooted in questions that give a direction and focus to meaning, and in themes that sustain an inquiry, awaken further interest and concern, and account for our passionate involvement with whatever is being experienced. In a phenomenological investigation the researcher has a personal interest in whatever she or he seeks to know; the researcher is intimately connected with the phenomenon. The puzzlement is autobiographical, making memory and history essential dimensions of discovery, in the present and extensions into the future.
6. Subject and object are integrated—what I see is interwoven with how I see it, with whom I see it, and with whom I am. My perception, the thing I perceive, and the experience or act interrelate to make the object subjective and the subjective objective.

7. At all points in an investigation intersubjective reality is part of the process, yet every perception begins with my own sense of what an issue or object or experience is or means.
8. The data of experience, my own thinking, intuiting, reflecting, and judging are regarded as the primary evidences of scientific investigation.
9. The research question that is the focus of and guides an investigation must be carefully constructed, every word deliberately chosen and ordered in such a way that the primary words appear immediately, capture my attention, and guide and direct me in the phenomenological process of seeing, reflecting, and knowing. Every method relates back to the question, is developed solely to illuminate the question, and provides a portrayal of the phenomenon that is vital, rich, and layered in its textures and meanings. (Moustakas, 1994, pp. 58–59)

Since Husserl's time, many researchers have modified his techniques (and some philosophies) to fit their own approaches to research (Heppner et al., 2008). However, most hold true to Husserl's overarching philosophical assumptions (Creswell, 2013). Hermeneutical phenomenology is one type of methodology that has been derived from Husserl's initial philosophies (Creswell, 2013). The primary point of differentiation in this approach is that beyond just describing the lived experiences of individuals, the researcher is expected to make interpretations of meaning based on what is seen in the data (Creswell, 2013). Phenomenological methodologies including this nuance are also referred to as interpretative phenomenology (Creswell, 2013).

**Giorgi's descriptive phenomenology.** Amedeo Giorgi is an American psychologist who adapted Husserl's primary philosophies and methods into his own version of phenomenological research. He called this adaptation Descriptive Phenomenology (Giorgi, 2009). Giorgi described Descriptive Phenomenology explicitly as "a philosophy [that] seeks to understand anything at all that can be experienced through the consciousness one has of whatever is "given"—whether

it be an object, a person, or a complex state of affairs—from the perspective of the conscious person undergoing the experience” (Giorgi, 2009, p. 4). This emphasis on the conscious experience was a part of Husserl’s foundational beliefs as well, as the only real experience we can attest to is what we perceive in front of us. Thus, the conscious experience is the most valued form of knowledge (Giorgi, 2009; Moustakas, 1994).

Giorgi (2009) further explained the phenomenological researcher aims to record and communicate the description of the experience without adding or taking anything away from it. In order to do this, the researcher must bracket previous beliefs, expectations, and biases about the given experience and remain unbiased to any possible descriptions obtained from the participants (Giorgi, 2009). Bracketing—also referred to as *epoché*—helps to reduce the risk of the researcher adding personal ideas about the experience to the participants’ descriptions (Giorgi, 2009). Bracketing, per Giorgi, does not mean the researcher must work to forget anything known prior in an attempt to be a “blank slate.” Rather, the researcher should identify past attitudes and beliefs about the experience under study, acknowledge such, and set aside (Giorgi, 2009). This allows for viewing the experience in the current moment without assuming it will be similar to previously held thoughts or experiences (Giorgi, 2009). Choosing a phenomenological approach including bracketing is important for this study on lesbian marriage, because the context is within a heteronormative society and many heteronormative assumptions and beliefs have likely been internalized. One of the primary purposes of the study was to contribute to the research in a way

that minimizes heteronormative bias. To write out, acknowledge, and bracket off known biases was the best way for this author to obtain pure descriptions of the essence of lesbian marriage.

Giorgi (2009) broadly outlined the steps in his descriptive phenomenological method as follows (see below for a more detailed description of each step in data analysis): First, the researcher must adopt a “phenomenological attitude” (Giorgi, 2009). This means the researcher must step out of the every-day mentality of going through the “life-world.” Living in the life-world indicates that an individual is taking many facts for granted and making many assumptions (Giorgi, 2009). A researcher who has adopted the phenomenological attitude steps away from those assumptions and considers everything that is an experience to be valid and worthy of experiencing; there is no differentiation between what is “real” and what is perceived (Giorgi, 2009). For example, a child who believes Santa at the mall is real, has an authentic and valid experience of belief and perception. It is irrelevant that an adult researcher may “know” that there is no such thing as the real Santa; the essence of the experience is the child’s conscious perceptions (Giorgi, 2009).

Second, the researcher should find participants having consciously experienced the identified phenomenon. Descriptions of participant experience are gathered by face-to-face interview or through a written survey form (Giorgi, 2009). These obtained descriptions are provided by “ordinary people in their natural attitudes.” A lack of understanding by the participants of phenomenological theory is helpful and, in fact, is actually desired (Giorgi, 2009).

Phenomenological research seeks to describe the essence of phenomena as they are lived. This means the data is expected to be complicated and, “mixed precisely as it is lived, thick with its ambiguities and relationships” (Giorgi, 2009, p. 99). While it is important for the researcher to step out of the life-world and adopt a phenomenological attitude, it is just as important for the participants to describe their experience in the life-world (Giorgi, 2009). Therefore, the participants’ descriptions should not be put through a self-filter; rather, they should be described just as experienced in ordinary life (Giorgi, 2009).

As related to topics of interview, the particular situations described by the participants are to be chosen by the individuals and not dictated by the researcher (Giorgi, 2009). This requires the researcher leave the interview questions very open-ended. As such, the researcher should not ask any specific questions about particular aspects of marriage. What comes up to the individual participants as relevant when speaking about their experiences of lesbian marriage will provide the best information on this phenomenon. Typically, the interviews are conducted face-to-face, recorded, and then transcribed before beginning data analysis.

Third, after the researcher has gathered descriptions of the phenomenon and transcribed them, the data should be read through and descriptors of the essence of the lived experience identified. As a tool, the method of “free imaginative variation” is used in order to determine the essential components (Giorgi, 2009). Free imaginative variation means to take the group of factors deemed potentially essential to the described experience and to experiment by imagining the removal of one at a time. If the removal of one factor changes the

overall experience in a significant way, then that factor is considered an essential piece. However, if the imagined removal of that factor does not change the overall essence of the experience then it is considered a contingent—nonessential—piece (Giorgi, 2009).

Fourth, once the researcher believes the essence of the experience has been identified, it then needs to be described (Giorgi, 2009). Description is preferred by Giorgi rather than interpretation because interpretation implies that the researcher is assigning meaning and intent to the subjects through personal assumptions and worldviews (Giorgi, 2009). Description is also preferred by Giorgi over explanation and construction, both of which lend themselves to manipulation of the raw essence of the description by the researcher (Giorgi, 2009). By seeking to describe, rather than to interpret, explain, or construct, the researcher seeks to share the essence of the experience in the participants' own words. In this way, the experience is communicated in an attempt to remain as true to the actual experience as possible (Giorgi, 2009). Husserlian philosophy, again, views any conscious experience as inherently valid, so any attempt to further account for an experience's validity is redundant and runs the risk of altering the data with the researcher's personal biases and assumptions (Giorgi, 2009).

## **Procedures**

**Adopting a phenomenological attitude and bracketing.** A critical aspect of Descriptive Phenomenological research is for the researcher to acknowledge personal biases and previous experiences with the given

phenomenon. This is done so they can be set aside (bracketed) and potential assumptions and biases can be managed in order to more clearly allow for pure descriptions of the experience by the participants (Giorgi, 2009). The risk is that if pre-conceptualized ideas about lesbian marriage are not acknowledged, participant responses that support these biases may unconsciously be overvalued by the researcher. Without bracketing, participant responses that contradict the researcher's biases may be selectively ignored. The goal is to identify biases beforehand so the researcher can bring conscious awareness to the analysis of responses that do and do not fit in with preconceptions.

Prior to conducting the interviews, a document was written up by the researcher using a stream of consciousness/free association style regarding thoughts, ideas, and beliefs about lesbian marriage. The document was reviewed and biases were identified and consciously noted to be mentally set aside while conducting interviews. Additionally, the researcher took an online implicit association assessment designed to identify bias regarding homosexuality, noting that the results indicated a strong automatic preference for straight people compared to gay people. This assessment is located at:

<https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/education.html>

With an awareness of these implicit biases and beliefs about women with same-sex attractions and in same-sex relationships, the researcher maintained a conscious internal awareness while conducting interviews. When a line of questioning seemed to be directing a participant toward confirming one of these

biases, the researcher made an effort to ask more open-ended questions and be open to responses that led in any direction.

**The researcher.** At the time of interviews and data analysis, the researcher was a 30-year-old, Caucasian cisgender female PsyD student living and attending school in Seattle, Washington. At the time of research and analysis she was single, never married, and identified as a femme lesbian. She was aware of her sexuality from the age of five and consciously came out to herself and others at the age of 24. She initially pursued a career in accounting and worked as a professional accountant for six years before pursuing her doctorate in clinical psychology. She grew up in a small, rural town which she experienced as openly homophobic and inhibitive of her ability to come out as an adolescent.

**Participant recruitment.** Social media (namely, Facebook) was used to recruit ten participants (see Appendix A for copy that was posted to social media). Other means of recruitment (listserv emails, snowball sampling, newspaper advertisements) were planned for but not utilized as ten interested participants who met criteria were easily found within a week of the initial social media post.

**Number of participants.** Giorgi (2009) described the philosophical tenet of phenomenology that all conscious experience is inherently valid. As such, even one participant could contribute valuable data. However, as the goal was to describe the phenomenon of lesbian marriage, enough participants were recruited to identify salient themes. Giorgi referred to these themes as the “essence” of the experience. He further advised researchers to use professional judgment as the interviews are conducted in order to identify when



enough—but not too much—data had been collected (Giorgi, 2009). He stated that a researcher should seek to obtain enough information from a group of participants to feel the phenomenon has been amply described, but not so much extraneous data that analysis becomes too lengthy (Giorgi, 2009).

With this guidance in mind, ten participants were used and interviews were stopped when the researcher believed “as complete a description as possible of the experience the participant has lived through” was acquired (Giorgi, 2009, p. 122). To determine when this had occurred, the researcher attentively looked for the emergence of repeated themes within the participant’s descriptions, a sense of full and saturated descriptions of the nuances of the experience, as well as when the participant’s energy within the narrative lost energy and naturally drew to a close.

**Inclusion and exclusion criteria.** Eligible participants were individuals over the age of 21 who identified as women and were legally married to individuals who identified as women. A minimum age of 21 was selected because the intent of this study was to explore the experience of marriage between two adult women. As 18–20 year olds are more likely to be in college and/or still in a primarily adolescent stage of development, the minimum age for participants was set at 21.

Only participants who obtained their own marriage licenses were included and those whose domestic partnerships were automatically converted to marriages were excluded. Couples who were registered as domestic partners who obtained a marriage license and became legally married were included.

The intent of this study was to study married lesbian women currently identifying as being in a monogamous relationship. Polyamorous and non-monogamous participants were excluded.

Transgender women were also excluded from this study. The transgender experience likely influences the experiences of females in a same-sex marriage in a manner that might significantly differ from women who were assigned female at birth. The participants' assigned genders at birth were asked as a part of the eight screening questions (see Appendix B).

Finally, and to clarify, this study was not intended to study the dynamics of couples, but rather the individual experience of lesbian marriage. As such, none of the participants were married to each other. A question regarding verification of whether a participant's wife had already participated in the study was included in the screening questions (see Appendix B).

**Identifying potential participants.** Upon seeing the social media post or being given the information by someone else who saw the post, participants contacted the researcher via email or social media messaging. Eight screening questions were then asked to determine whether she fit the appropriate inclusion criteria (see Appendix B). After answering yes to each of the eight questions, she was invited to participate in the study.

**Participants.** At the time of interview, P1 was a 33-year-old Caucasian cisgender female who identified as gay. She and her wife had been together for five years and were legally married in 2015. She stated that she always knew she

was gay and came out to friends and family over time between the ages of 16 and 23. This is her first marriage and she and her wife did not have any children.

At the time of interview, P2 was a 33-year-old Caucasian cisgender female who identified as queer. She and her wife had been together for 13 years and were legally married in 2014. She came out to herself about her sexuality at the age of 13, which was followed by disclosures to friends and family around the ages of 14–15 . This is her first marriage and she and her wife did not have any children.

At the time of interview, P3 was a 61-year-old Caucasian cisgender female who identified as lesbian. She and her wife had been together for 22 years and were legally married in 2013. She came out to herself at the age of 21, following her first marriage and subsequent divorce from a man. She came out to others about her sexuality at the age of 23. Neither she nor her wife had children from their current or previous relationships.

At the time of interview, P4 was a 54-year-old Caucasian cisgender female who identified as lesbian. She and her wife had been together for 16 years and were legally married in 2014. P4 had two previous marriages, both with men, and has four children from those prior relationships. She came out to both herself and others about her sexuality at the age of 38.

At the time of interview, P5 was a 53-year-old Caucasian cisgender female who identified as lesbian. She and her wife had been together for seven years and were legally married in 2013. She came out to herself about her sexuality at the age of ten and came out to others at the age of 20. While this is her first legal marriage, she was in a previous long-term relationship with a woman that she

considered to be marriage-like in its long-term commitment. Her wife has a son to which she is a step-mother.

At the time of interview, P6 was a 56-year-old Caucasian cisgender female who identified as lesbian. She and her partner had been together for 24 years and were legally married in 2014. Note that she and her partner do not prefer usage of the term *wife* so while wife will be used as a general term throughout the results and discussion chapters, when speaking specifically of P6's experience *partner* will be used. This is P6's first marriage and neither she nor her partner had any children. She came out to both herself and others about her sexuality at the age of 18.

At the time of interview, P7 was a 32-year-old Native American and Caucasian cisgender female who identified as gay. She and her wife had been together for 5.5 years and were legally married in 2012. This is her first marriage and she and her wife have a daughter together. She came out to herself about her sexuality at the age of 15 and began disclosing this to others at the age of 22.

At the time of interview, P8 was a 31-year-old African American cisgender female who identified as not straight. She and her wife had been together for five years and were legally married in 2012. This is her first marriage and she is a step-mother to her wife's daughter from a previous marriage to a male. She reported that she has always known that she is not straight and that she came out to others about her sexuality at the age of 21.

At the time of interview, P9 was a 31-year-old East Indian and Caucasian cisgender female who identified as lesbian. She and her wife had been together

for 3.5 years and were legally married in 2015. This is her first marriage and neither she nor her wife had children. She came out to herself about her sexuality at the age of 26 and to others at the age of 28.

At the time of interview, P10 was a 26-year-old Caucasian cisgender female who identified as lesbian. She and her wife had been together for five years and were legally married in 2014. This is her first marriage and neither she nor her wife had children. She came out to herself about her sexuality at the age of 13 and to others at the age of 14.

All participants lived within a three hour driving radius of Seattle, Washington at the time of interview (October 2015). The participants lived in a wide spectrum of cities ranging from small, isolated, and rural to urban city centers.

**Generalizability.** With the above inclusion and exclusion criteria in mind, the generalizability of this study is limited. The results describe the essence(s) of the experience of lesbian marriage as described by women over the age of 21, who are legally married in the state of Washington, who identify as monogamous, and who obtained their own marriage licenses. These experiences may not apply to women who are married to women under the age of 21, who identify as transgender, who were registered as domestic partners and then underwent an automatic conversion to marriage, or who engage in polyamorous relationships.

**Scheduling interviews.** Once a participant answered yes to all eight screening questions was identified, she was contacted via email to schedule an interview. She was given the offer to meet at her home at her convenience for an

interview between 2–4 hours in length. All interviews were conducted in private homes (nine participants) or work offices (one participant). Further, the participant was told ahead of time to expect very open-ended interview questions regarding her experience of lesbian marriage. She was encouraged to spend some time thinking before the interview about the aspects of her experience that she deemed important or essential (see Appendix C for emails sent).

**Conducting the interview.** Descriptive Phenomenological methodology dictates that either written surveys or in-person interviews are standard procedures for data collection, however, in-person interviews are preferred (Giorgi, 2009). Conducting an in-person interview is preferred because it allows the researcher to either redirect a verbose participant back to the topic at hand or encourage a reticent participant to say more. It also allows the researcher to build rapport, which encourages the participant to speak comfortably and honestly (Giorgi, 2009). As such, all interviews were conducted in-person.

The basic phenomenological interview question is stated as such: “Please describe for me a situation in which you experienced \_\_\_\_\_” (Giorgi, 2009, p. 124). In adapting this for this project, after demographic data from the participant was collected, she was asked to “please describe your experience of same-sex marriage.” If this initial prompt did not elicit enough of a response, more specific questions were then asked. See Appendix D for a full list of demographic and interview questions.

Appendix D was used as a guideline for a semi-structured interview. The intent was to ask very generalized questions in order to elicit topics of importance

to the participant. Once the participant highlighted essential experiences related to marriage that were important to her, more direct questions were asked to ensure a full understanding of what she was describing and how it related to her experience of marriage. Giorgi (2009) described this process as follows: “what one seeks from a research interview in phenomenological research is as complete a description as possible of the experience that a participant has lived through” (p. 122).

Giorgi (2009) stated that the researcher must use her best judgment as to when to redirect the participant back to the topic at hand and when to conclude the interview. The researcher should be continually asking the question “is the participant revealing an aspect of how she was present in the experience?” If not, then redirection or further questioning to return to the topic of lesbian marriage is appropriate (Giorgi, 2009).

To aid in making these decisions to redirect, Giorgi (2009) differentiated between leading and directing the participant. Leading implies pushing the participant to speak about topics that support the researcher’s biases or personal interests. In contrast, directing the participant is about the researcher directing the participant toward the topic being researched. When participants began speaking tangentially and the researcher noticed them speaking of an experience that was not related to lesbian marriage, she redirected them. Directing the participant to remain on topic and to speak as fully as possible regarding lesbian marriage is both acceptable and necessary (Giorgi, 2009).

All data collected had to be analyzed, so the researcher worked to find a balance between collecting enough data to sufficiently describe the experience but not so much that the amount of time required for analysis was overwhelming (Giorgi, 2009). Further, because the experience of lesbian marriage may be considered very personal and private for some participants, time was spent early on in the interview getting to know the participant and building rapport.

**Compensation.** Five dollar Starbucks gift cards and hand-written thank you cards were offered as compensation for participating in this study after completion of the interview. The small gift was considered menial and a token of gratitude. The gift cards were not of high enough value to persuade participants to join the study against their will. They were mailed the gift cards and hand-written cards upon the researcher receiving consent that it was acceptable to send mail to the participant's home address.

**Participant confidentiality.** The participants in this study may have felt compelled to share information that they believed to be very private in nature (see Appendix E for informed consent document). As a necessity of this project, names were collected throughout participation recruitment and signing of informed consent. Once participants were secured they were assigned a participant number (P1, P2, P3, etc.). These aliases were used to identify all data from that point forward. A master list of real names and their assigned aliases was stored in a password-protected Excel document on a private laptop. The laptop was carried with the researcher or stored in a locked home at all times.



When participants used their own name while speaking during the recorded interview, the name was not included in the transcription. Rather, the alias (P1, P2, etc.) was used in place of the participant's name. When the participant used the name of another person, that information was also removed during textual transcription (for example, replacing "my friend, Sarah" with "P1's friend"). Additionally, the informed consent documents were scanned and stored on the researcher's private laptop under password protection. Hard copies of the signed informed consent forms were shredded. At no time was a participant's name connected to the actual interview data.

**Emotional support for participants.** While the intent of the study was not to ask specifically about particularly negative or emotionally upsetting experiences, it is possible that some participants shared information that they experienced as upsetting. It was assumed that some individuals' experiences of same-sex marriage may consist of highly emotional memories. As a part of the informed consent (see Appendix E), participants were advised that they may discontinue the interview at any time, that they only needed to share information they were comfortable sharing, and they were provided with resources in case an emotional crisis should occur. Participants were given time to review the informed consent form, ask any questions, and signed the form before the interview began. While some participants became emotional at times during the interviews, they did not appear to be in severe emotional distress nor require follow-up care.

## **Data Analysis**

The following detailed description of the steps in data analysis was developed directly from Giorgi's (2009) directions and formatted to fit the context of this particular study. Microsoft Excel, a spreadsheet editor software program, was used to organize and analyze data as detailed in the following steps.

**Step 1: Transcription.** Two audio recording devices were used during each interview to ensure a recording would be retained if one device were to malfunction. All recordings were completed without incident and duplicates were permanently deleted following transcription. One copy of each interview has been saved on the researcher's laptop in a password-protected folder.

Once audio recorded interview data was obtained from all ten participants and "as complete as possible a description of the lived-through experience" (Giorgi, 2009, p. 122) was acquired, the interviews were transcribed verbatim into Word documents by the researcher herself. Each participant interview was transcribed into a separate Word document labeled by participant number (P1, P2, P3, etc.). During transcription all identifying information was redacted and left out of the textual document.

**Step 2: Read for a sense of the whole.** Next each transcription was read through to get a sense of the described experience as a whole. Descriptive Phenomenology states that the beginning of a response should not be analyzed at a detailed level without the knowledge of what is also said at the end. This first read-through was performed with the intent to get a sense of the individual's overall described experience (Giorgi, 2009). The researcher read through all ten

documents while consciously working to remain open to any and all resultant themes which might emerge.

**Step 3: Determine meaning units.** After the data was read over for a sense of the whole, the researcher went back through and began to identify individual meaning units. Per Giorgi (2009), this means that pieces of information that are considered meaningful from a “psychological phenomenological perspective” were being sought. “As one begins to reread the description, one makes an appropriate mark in the data every time one experiences a significant shift in meaning” (Giorgi, 2009, p. 130). These meaning units were not meant to be objective and, in fact, are acknowledged to be very subjective to the individual researcher (Giorgi, 2009).

The researcher read through each interview carefully, marking with a number each place where she experienced a shift in meaning. These shifts did not always line up with the end of a sentence, but rather represented a change in direction by the participant. See Appendix F for example of how meaning units were marked. These individual meaning units were then copied and pasted into individual cells in column B of the analysis spreadsheet in Excel (see Appendix G).

**Step 4: Transform natural expressions into phenomenologically psychologically sensitive expressions.** Giorgi (2009) described this step as the most work-intensive and the “heart of the method.” The researcher is to go back to the beginning of the data and work to restate each meaning unit in a manner that conveys the psychological meaning behind the life-world description. In

other words, the participant's description is taken and the psychological process that is occurring is parsed out. To perform this step the researcher first restated each meaning unit into a more coherent, grammatically correct version, termed a "transformed meaning unit." This is illustrated in Appendix H (see column C), where the numbers on the left correspond to the meaning units in Appendices F and G. From these transformed meaning units, the researcher determined the psychological structure underlying them. Some of these units represented individual psychological structures while others were grouped together. This step is also illustrated in Appendix H (see Column D). The researcher performed these steps for each of all ten participant transcripts, until a list of 815 psychological structures was compiled.

According to Giorgi (2009), another purpose during step four is to identify common psychological meanings or processes behind multiple descriptions of the experience which will likely vary in content. This is not meant to uncover universal meanings of the experience of the phenomenon; rather, the intent is to reveal common psychological characteristics amongst the current participants (Giorgi, 2009). The researcher sorted through the 815 psychological structures and grouped them into 120 common categories.

From these 120 common categories 12 salient psychological meanings were then identified which were believed to be essential to the description of female same-sex marriage. These 12 common characteristics became the descriptive results of the phenomenon. In order to select the essential themes, free imaginative variation was used. As discussed above, free imaginative variation is

the process of imagining a description of the phenomenon without a given psychological meaning. If the essence of the described experience is then altered significantly, that meaning should be retained. If it is not, then the assigned psychological meaning is not an essential element of the described experience (Giorgi, 2009). The 12 final psychological meanings were selected by the researcher to most fully represent the essence of the experience of female same-sex marriage. These meanings are reported in the Results chapter below and expanded upon in the Discussion chapter later.

**Reliability.** Giorgi's (2009) Descriptive Phenomenology assumes that each individual researcher has a subjective view of data and expects that the results might vary if performed by a different analyzer. However, it is the responsibility of the researcher not to add to, subtract from, or manipulate in any way the original descriptions provided by the participants (Giorgi, 2009). In practice, this means that during step four the researcher must develop psychological meanings that are based on—and only on—the actual life-world descriptions provided by the participants (Giorgi, 2009). The researcher followed Giorgi's methodology by comparing the original meaning units with the transformed meaning units and psychological meanings as they were written out. This was done to ensure that she was neither adding nor subtracting from the participant's original description throughout the analysis process.

Giorgi (2009) acknowledged that a different psychological researcher may have come up with different psychological results given the same data, but the researcher should be able to clearly articulate how she arrived at the psychological

meanings from the original dataset. If the researcher did not add to, subtract from, or manipulate the data in any way to derive those psychological meanings, other psychological professionals and researchers should be able to follow the train of thought (Giorgi, 2009). Therefore, the results are considered reliable when other psychological professionals can view the participant data and understand how the researcher derived the psychological meanings behind the meaning units. The researcher was able to explain how she derived her psychological meanings from the original data to her dissertation chair without issue. Her dissertation chair was easily able to follow and understand how each meaning was derived from the participant's original statement.

## Results

The results of the data analysis utilizing Giorgi's (2009) Descriptive Phenomenological methodology included 12 essential psychological meanings associated with the experience of female same-sex marriage. Those meanings are as follows:

1. Individuality. In an effort to maintain a sense of self separate from their relationship, participants placed importance on building individual identities by supporting and maintaining relationships, activities, and growth independently from their wives.

2. Commitment. Participants experienced a sense of long-term commitment to their marriage vows, productively working through issues, and to their wives themselves. This was a stronger feeling than the level of commitment they remembered from their relationships (with the same partner) prior to becoming legally married.

3. Communication. Communication was described by participants as an essential factor of marriage; conversation was commonly experienced as a means to increase emotional intimacy, resolve conflict, and as a source of pleasure.

4. Enjoying Shared Time. Participants experienced pleasure related to time spent together. Whether traveling, participating in local activities, or just in day-to-day routine, pleasure was derived by experiencing life together.

5. Gratitude for Current Times. Participants conveyed a gratitude for the fact that they were a member of a same-sex marriage in the current cultural

atmosphere, rather than earlier in history when homophobia was more widely accepted and same-sex relationships more dangerous.

6. Legitimacy and Validation. Participants had been in their current relationships prior to the state and federal legalization of same-sex marriage and described an increase in the felt legitimacy of their relationships. When their relationships were legally recognized, they felt validated in their feelings that their same-sex relationships had just as much value as heterosexual relationships.

7. Legal Security. Legalized same-sex marriage provided important legal protections around healthcare decision making and financial (mainly tax-related) considerations for the participants, which supported them in feeling comforted and secure around being able to take care of one another in both medical emergencies and future estate planning.

8. Differences. Participants experienced differences in personality, communication and conflict resolution styles. While these differences shaped their marital relationships and created an increased need for communication, they were also viewed as factors that make their relationships stronger and more balanced.

9. Comfort. Participants experienced a sense of comfort and safety related to their marital commitment, the legal recognition of that commitment, and the hope that their relationship will last forever.

10. Support. Participants described a great amount of importance placed on the support they gave and received within their relationship, as well as positive support received from close friends and family.



11. Lack of Gender Roles. All participants came from a culture where heterosexual marital relationships are considered traditional and include general expectations of the types of roles and responsibilities men and women should partake in. As such, participants experienced a lack of guidance around who "should" do what. Without these obligations, they felt a sense of equality as well as a need for communication around who will be responsible for what in order to support a functional relationship and household.

12. Stigma. As their relationships existed within the context of a heteronormative culture, participants experienced stigma related to their status as a member of a same-sex marriage. The anger, fear, and hatred conveyed to them by friends, family, and strangers alike caused varying levels of distress.

These psychological meanings are discussed in further detail—and substantiated with direct excerpts of participant statements—in the Discussion chapter below.

## Discussion

This chapter will discuss each of the 12 essential psychological meanings associated with the experience of female same-sex marriage, accompanied by discussion of the interaction between the pre-existing literature where applicable.

Giorgi's (2009) Descriptive Phenomenology dictates that the researcher should work to neither add nor detract from the participant's authentic descriptions of their lived experience. As such, effort was made to include large amounts of direct participant quotes used to illustrate each of the 12 essential psychological meanings deduced by the researcher. Presenting the results in this way preserves the essence of the participants' experiences and allows the reader to encounter the results with minimized researcher bias.

### Essential Psychological Meanings

The following discussion expands upon the 12 essential psychological meanings associated with the experience of female same-sex marriage as determined by the researcher. They are listed in no particular order of importance and all are deemed essential. A meaning was decided to be essential if the researcher imagined the essence of female same-sex marriage and could not envision a complete description without it.

**Individuality.** Participants discussed multiple ways in which expressing and supporting the individual identity of each wife was essential to their experience of same-sex marriage. Individuality showed up in various ways for different participants, and most often it was described as intentionally fostering individual activities, interests, and personal friendships.

P3 discussed her wife and her's intentional practice of pursuing individual activities. She described in the excerpt below how she believes that because they are recently retired they need to work to spend time apart in order to avoid falling into a relational rut:

We try to do different things to bring things into our relationship . . . especially now that we're both retired. . . . We both volunteer for different things. I'm a woodworker [so] I spend a lot of time in the shop. So that's part of the commitment, is bringing new things into your relationship. Keep it kinda fresh, y'know, because you can get into a rut kind of easily and the longer you're together the easier it is.

P6 described a practice of her partner and her engaging in separate activities while physically near each other at home. However, a much more important aspect of her value of individuality was relayed as a commitment to personal growth and individuation as a person. She stated emphatically more than once throughout her interview that it was very important to her that her relationship and identity as part of a couple did not ever subsume her identity as an individual. P6 said that supporting each other as individuals was important and a commitment they made to each other early on in their relationship:

I think the value of supporting each other's individual development and process and path [is important]. I mean in some ways—although it wasn't in our more recent vows—but early on when we got together we kinda committed that we wouldn't stand in each other's way. . . . Y'know, and I'm more apt to appreciate being alone and she's sometimes more outgoing. I guess if I were to use that terminology it's just around trying to be conscious and heartfelt around recognizing that people are also individuals. We're not coupled to become homogenous. Although we are homos. Haha.

P10 discussed how her wife and she have very different hobbies that they pursue on their own time. While she appreciates the ability to pursue her own

interests separately from her wife, she also described a fondness for their reciprocal support for one another's activities:

And that's what I think, again, like one of the big things about my wife is that she supported me in starting all my photography stuff back then. I hadn't done that for a long time and it's amazing that she even finds it interesting, but she'll just sit there and watch me edit pictures. And like I'll go and hang out with her because she has this '66 mustang that she works on and I'll go hang out with her while she works on that. The um, the opposites attract thing I think really works for us.

Another way participants described independence within their marriages was in fostering and maintaining individual friendships outside of their romantic relationships. In the following excerpt P7 described the importance of maintaining outside friendships as a means of supporting individual identities for each wife:

I think growing together is really important. I think it's really important to not only grow together but grow as yourself, cuz I think I've been in relationships where you feel like you're just growing with them and that's it. And you don't have your own life. And she and I—we have our own friends, we're friends with each others' friends, but we also do stuff without each other. And I think that's important. We don't do a lot of stuff without each other, but I think it's important that I'll go out to drinks with one of my best friends of childhood and she'll stay home. We still encourage each other to have our own lives [and to] keep working on our own friendships and relationships in our lives and then on top of it incorporate us. Like we have our own separate lives. We also have one big life together that kinda umbrellas over everything. And then so I feel like we're growing together, we're growing as separate people, so we both have identities and I think that's really important. I don't ever want to lose my identity in her and I don't want her to ever lose her identity in me.

P8 also described the importance of having her wife support her independent time with her friends. While she stated that often her wife is invited to join P8's social gatherings anyway, she values that her wife is supportive of her having independent social time in general:

Another way [that independence shows up is] I think like going out with your friends and having a mate that's okay with that. I literally have

friends that go out [on their own] and their spouse—their mate—is really angry at the end of the night and they have a big fight. And my wife just being like she did not wanna come when we—she was watching a movie that night. I was out with my coworkers and we FaceTimed her, and I'm like they want you to come out and they were like we miss you and she's like no, you guys have fun. She's like that, like you guys do your thing, go have fun and then it's like just come on, so she got dressed and she did come. But so just being cool with it, like she's genuinely okay with that.

The manner in which participants described the importance of individuality did not imply that they did not like spending time together. On the contrary, enjoying time spent together is another essential meaning described below. Rather, the impression made upon the researcher was that in addition to all of the energy spent toward supporting their lives as a couple, it was essential for participants to also invest time and energy into individual growth and relationships.

**Commitment.** Participants described commitment as an essential component of their experience of same-sex marriage. There was an explicitly stated and implicitly felt sense of eternal commitment associated with marriage.

P2 spoke about how her wife and she met when they were 18 and 19 years old (they were 33 and 34 at the time of the study) and that because of the amount of time they have invested in each other she is committed to working through any issues that arise and preserving their marital relationship. In the following excerpt she described her view on her commitment to making her marriage work:

I feel like there's like two different stories people tell, right, like there's one story: if you get married to somebody, you should be with them until one of you dies and that's what your vows mean and they're sacred. And if you don't do that you're just selfish with that person and so that's like narrative one. The other narrative is if one person is a jerk ever you just have to take care of yourself, like don't stick in a relationship with somebody who's not good enough to you or who isn't able to change in

the ways that you need them to change. Right, and so there's these two different kind of dynamics. I tend to be more of the 'figure it out, make it work' type of person. . . . It feels like she and I have to keep making the decision that we're gonna make this work because we really love each other and because I can't imagine experiencing the world—like my experience of the world would be way less if I didn't have her. . . . I feel like when we made this decision to get legally married, we were making the decision that we're gonna figure this out. Like OK, we're legally entangling ourselves together and we're just gonna figure this out. So I think it's both that we made the decision to get married and because of a shared belief or hope that we can continue to make things good for our relationship. Or have a relationship that's satisfying and healthy for both people.

P7 discussed commitment as related to her wedding vows. In the following excerpt she described how she recalls her commitment to be with her wife even when she feels irritated or annoyed by some of her behaviors:

And I think keeping in mind that when you marry someone you're marrying them unconditionally. I think that it's a hard—it's not hard to remember why I love her—but like on the tough days I'm like K, I married this. The weaknesses, the strengths, the hardships, the things she's not great at, I married all of it because I love all of it. And so I think reminding myself that throughout all of these things, I knew all these things going into it, she knew all of the things about me going into it, all my baggage, all my issues that I had going into it, knowing that someone loves me unconditionally and I in return love them unconditionally. . . . I think it's a constant reminder that I have [to give myself].

P7 went on to discuss the extra level of commitment that she feels toward her wife which she believes is influenced by the existence of their legalized marriage:

I think too, having marriage being behind [our relationship] is like yes, you can obviously get out of it, but because there's that legal document, that like legality behind it, it's like I don't wanna get out of this, I wanna get through this with you. Because I think if we weren't married, at least for us, I feel like I'd be like I don't have time for this right now! And I think I would not wait 10 min [to cool off], I think I'd be like I can't talk to you for a few hours, I think it'd be a lot longer. And we wouldn't break up, but we wouldn't try as hard.

P10 and her wife (then girlfriend) broke up for a period of time while they were both in college. In the excerpt below she described how when they got back together and pursued marriage that it was with the intent that the marital commitment would be forever:

We had actually broken up for quite a long time during our college years, and I regretted it, and so immediately once I had the chance to be back together with her I knew that I wanted our life to be everything that marriage could offer, including just that bond and that promise that you'll always have each other.

Participants described influences on their marital commitment as spiritual, legal, and relational factors. It was clear that participants felt that the act of getting married required a level of commitment that differed from their previous relationship statuses.

***Related literature.*** This psychological meaning is aligned with the findings of the previously described study conducted by Schechter et al. (2008). The researchers in that study found that legally married same-sex couples in the state of Massachusetts experienced “a deeper sense of commitment to one another, greater acknowledgment of the couple by families and professional peers, a sense of social equality and legitimacy, and reduction of internal, familial, and societal homophobia” (p. 417). Participants in the current study described aspects of their relationships related to commitment and outside validation that were practically identical to the quoted experience from the Massachusetts study. The Schechter et al. study was previously highlighted as one of very few open-ended qualitative studies on same-sex couples that effectively minimized

heteronormative bias. It should be noted that these studies were conducted in similar manners and produced very similar results in this content area.

**Communication.** Participants described communication as a primary function of their marital relationships. Conversation was commonly described as a source of pleasure and connection as well as a means to resolving conflict.

P1 described how important she believes communication to be to her relationship as a whole. She then went on to discuss her experience of working through the stressful and argumentative nature of selling and purchasing a home with her wife. These elements are described in the following excerpt:

Communication, like that's the most important thing in our marriage. Just like I said before just keeping it open, and talking and dealing with issues as they come up and not burying them. When it's going really well it's like you don't even almost need to even talk. Haha. I mean we can get along with our day and understand, y'know, what needs to be done . . . at the house or in life. When it's bad . . . it's just, y'know, like you feel bad, you feel like something hanging over you. You need to deal with it. You can't just let it go. . . [Buying a new house] was stressful. We're renting our townhouse so that was adding to the stress of . . . if we didn't get those renters in we wouldn't be able to afford this house. There was a lot of stuff up in the air before we were finally able to buy a new house. But I think we've dealt with it pretty well. Thankfully our real estate agent was a good therapist too. But we had to sit down and talk about everything and it was just a lot. We had to keep talking, make sure both of us felt comfortable with what we were doing, how much the other house was gonna go rent for, what we were gonna do to fix up the other house, so it was just—I don't know . . . what limit we had for this house here. Just constantly talking and making sure the plans were going OK.

P4 emphatically stated how much she enjoys talking with her wife and relayed that communication is a big source of pleasure for her within her marriage:

I think that it's whether we're sitting here playing on our phones or our tablets or whatever or we're sitting in the hot tub. I mean we can sit in the hot tub and we were in that hot tub for hours last night. Just visiting and



talking. And again for us, we are so much on the same plane work-wise, y'know, like I said we're two CEOs and so we can sit and talk about work, we talk about health insurance, and we talk about this, we talk about that. And she's actually the CEO of her company, the CFO of mine, plus we have two other businesses together. And that are doing different things and so there's a lot of business talk and a lot of personal talk and talking about health insurance . . . I mean we can talk about everything.

P9 described how communication has been difficult for her in her marriage, but that she cares so much about her wife's wellbeing that she is willing to try harder to communicate better. She also identified that lack of communication has contributed to conflict in the past, and discussing the conflict has been their approach to resolving it:

Sometimes it does get a little hard for me because I'll say something to her and she will react not how I thought and so then it starts a little thing. And then, like that's not what I meant, y'know, I'm sorry, and then in my mind I'm like ugh, you're just being overly sensitive. But then we talk and then we talk and I never would've done that in the past. Y'know, it has to be—it's her—that is why I'm able to sit and actually have those conversations. Because I care. Like I don't want . . . I care so much about her that I don't want her feeling like that. Even if it's out of context, like she heard me wrong or something like that, I still don't want her to feel like that so it really forces me to sit and to listen to why she's upset and then to think about how I could've maybe said something differently. I guess, yeah, communication has been . . . yeah. Communication definitely has been something that's been challenging throughout the relationship, but it always has been getting better. And that's just—that's a different aspect of being with a woman. . . . And then we feel like we're better versions of ourselves after the little spat that we have because then we sit and then we talk about it. So, without that, without feeling comfortable to like communicate, I don't think that this [relationship] would have lasted til now. And then let alone would I think that it would last later. [We communicate] just to understand each other better. Like, well I can think of like the last major little spat we got in and it happened because of [a lack of] communication.

P3 discussed how she views communication as an essential factor within her marriage, as well as how she has struggled to communicate in a way that is well-received by her wife. In the excerpt below she described how working on

better communication skills has been a lifelong work for her inside and outside of her relationship:

I think it comes back to with anyone in a relationship the experience would be how you communicate together and how you interact. It's essential for me in my marriage to have good communication. . . . I think sometimes both of us tend to—and more me than she—[struggle to] communicate in a way that she can understand and I can understand. Um, when you talk to someone like 'this is the way I want this done,' versus 'have you thought about maybe if we did it like this? This might be the end result, and that might be better?' For me to learn good communication skills, like how's someone gonna receive it on the other end, has been a lifelong thing for me.

P6 described how important communication is for her and her partner because if they do not verbally clarify their experiences, it becomes easy to read into body language or energies and make assumptions about the other person. In the following excerpt she talked about how making assumptions can lead to relational conflict:

So, yeah, it's just about the clarification. So also trying not to read into what facial or body expressions are. I'm not much into that kind of thing anyways because you never really know what's going on until you have a conversation with somebody. So yesterday I went 'what's going on with you,' y'know, because she seemed a little off, so just kinda open the door and instead of me projecting that maybe she's angry at me or whatever. So yeah, so it's been really helpful to check in and try to clarify whatever the feeling in the air is.

P8 discussed how important open communication is to her. She specifically cited conversations around their sex life as an important example of how comfortable they are with deep levels of communication:

I think one of our other foundations besides the friendship piece and the fun is our communication and it's something that we do really well. And you'll probably hear later what happens when that breaks down, but consistently we do that very, very well with each other; we talk about things that are hard to talk about. I tell my [straight] friends and they are shocked to hear; 'oh my god—you guys talk about stuff like that?! Like

this is girl talk' and I'm thinking, 'it's what works for us!' It's that communication, you have to just be able to be—if we can't be honest with each other, then who can you? We're married, y'know, it's us, forever. The communication piece is huge for us. Because in a relationship—and when you're with somebody for a long time—you get to this place where it's comfortable or you get a little lax and you maybe don't do the things that you used to do in the beginning, that you did five years ago. And now that we're on the other end of the five years. So we'll have conversations. We'll sit outside and we'll have a beer, we'll laugh, we'll play games and we'll say something like 'gosh, y'know, it's been a few weeks since we've been intimate,' y'know, we'll have conversations like that and my [straight] friends are like 'oh my gosh, I'd rather just vent to you guys and just sit there and be miserable.' And I'm thinking why, because we have those discussions because sometimes we just wanna be on the same page.

Communication was described by participants as a stand-alone element of their relationships, as in the importance of daily conversations. It was also an experience of marriage that was interwoven with nearly every other essential psychological meaning. Participants discussed how communication was how they managed the lack of gender roles. Verbal conversation was a primary way participants received and relayed support. Communication was an essential component of same-sex marriage that was emphasized all the way throughout each and every interview.

***Related literature.*** Throughout the literature reviewed for the purposes of this study, communication was cited repeatedly as an essential aspect of female same-sex relationships (Cusack et al., 2012; Gotta et al., 2011; Wayment & Peplau, 1995). Although there were no studies conducted on this specific topic on a population of legally married women, it is plausible that the importance of communication between two women who are dating does not decrease once they become married.

**Enjoying shared time.** Enjoying time spent together was an essential element of same-sex marriage described by participants. They shared examples of day-to-day activities, travel, and emphasized the amount of fun they had as a couple.

P8 appeared visibly enthusiastic as she discussed how much fun she has with her wife and how much she enjoys spending time with her. In the following excerpt she described some of the activities she and her wife most enjoy doing together:

Friendship, mixed with fun [is essential to my marriage]. You have to have fun. You have to laugh, and we do that so much. And we used to do that so much too. So the laughing, the fun, just being silly, crazy. Some fun things um . . . I'm trying to tell you some that are appropriate. Nothing sexual, but something, hahaha. Um, I'll just talk about the activities that we like to do that help us have fun. We spent a lot of the summer going tubing, it's like our new thing. Like floating down the river with beer. It's like our thing now. The coast has been nice. We go and always stay the night, we never go for the day we always stay, we also always do a bonfire and bring our cooler and have our drinks and just us. Like we have fun just sitting there laughing, talking, we'll go get in the water. Last October we went and we were in the ocean in October, we just have fun. We just do silly things.

P2 described how even after being with her wife for 13 years she still really enjoys spending time with her:

So we went yesterday we took the bus and we just walked around all day and we went to a few shops. We walked a lot, we came back, we went to dinner, and we just talked the whole time about like 'oh, what do you think about this' or 'what about that' or, y'know, whatever. It was just really fun to be able to do that with someone who I've been with for so long. Like you'd think at some point you'd get bored, like you don't have anything new to say to me, but it was really fun, it was just like a really perfect day. . . . Fun [is an essential part of our relationship]. A lot of fun, a lot of togetherness, like doing stuff together . . . so we go camping with our friends a lot or we go to the coast and swim, just a lot of doing outdoor stuff. I think that's been really good. I think a lot of, um . . . just togetherness and doing stuff and like experiencing the world together.

P4 talked about how much time her wife and she spend together. She relayed that they enjoy their shared time together so much that they sometimes go through emotional withdrawals when an intensive time period together ends and they have to spend more time apart:

The companionship. I mean, she's like my best friend and so you get that all wrapped up into one. Which is interesting, because when you're having any kind of challenges in your relationship it's like wait a minute, I need to talk to my best friend. If you could put that other hat on for a minute, because I need to talk about my wife, y'know, and so that makes it a little bit interesting. But we do everything together. I mean it's very, very, very, very close. And so we are um, I don't wanna say constant because we both, y'know, work and we both have our other friends, but we do spend a tremendous amount of time together. And have fun at it. Have fun at it. I mean we can be in Arizona with just the two of us for two weeks and come home and kinda go through that almost separation anxiety, cuz it's like, 'oh, I miss you! Where's that time?' I mean we do, we've been on our boat for three weeks at a time and it's like, y'know, you think that you get tired of having that person in your space and we really, really don't. So it gets; so it is . . . I love that part of the relationship. Just that knowing that companion is right there.

One of the things P9 described as an essential part of her marriage was the fun that she and her wife have together. She talked about how they share a childlike sense of play and fun:

And then just like more lighthearted, fun. Silliness and we're both like kids at heart, um, with my job and with her current job but it's something that won't go away with her. Like just the love of just life, like just having fun, doing things, like we both love just going and doing activities like whatever it is, puzzles, coloring, toys. Like I'm more immature and she's not. I wouldn't even say that she's immature. But y'know, I'm immature. And that's one of my greatest strengths for my job is the fact that I can get on the level of a middle schooler, as weird as that is to say, but we just have so much fun together, and we know how to make each other laugh. And so just being able to go have fun and try to do things and travel, we wanna do more traveling later and just um, we have fun regardless. Like even if we're just sitting here we have fun and love just like playing games and like our favorite thing to do is go to this local restaurant and play cribbage or shuffleboard. That's just what, we could sit there for hours and hours playing cribbage and have fun. So that's nice.

P7 also relayed an appreciation for spending time playing games and engaging in day-to-day activities with her wife:

I think just the little things. Like this is gonna sound cheesy, but sometimes we read books together. I love that. It's fun; I love to share that stuff with people. We, y'know, when our daughter goes to bed we play games together. Y'know, um, we like to do stuff together because she makes me laugh, I make her laugh, like she's the best part of my day besides my daughter. It's just such a benefit to wake up to her every day and know that she's gonna be there when I go to bed at night.

**Gratitude for current times.** Participants represented a range of ages between 26–61 years old. This inevitably provided participants who were born and raised with varying levels of societal stigma associated with same-sex relationships. The three oldest participants were in relationships with their now-spouses for 15–23 years before becoming legally married. The youngest participant, who was 26 years old at the time of the interview, stated that same-sex marriage was legalized around the time that she and her then-girlfriend began considering a long-term commitment anyway. She did not feel that there was a significant amount of time between her consideration of engagement and the availability of the option of a legal marriage.

The range in experience between these participants as related to the timing of the legalization of same-sex marriage within their lifespan is vast. However, participants of all ages described an appreciation of and gratitude for their ability to be alive during this time where same-sex marriage is nationally legalized and social stigma around same-sex relationships in general appears to be decreasing.

P5 relayed these feelings as she described how she was asked to speak in front of her congregation at church when same-sex marriage became a ballot

measure in her home state. In the excerpt below she described that experience as well as her long-held expectation that marriage would never be for her, due to her sexual orientation:

So just prior to the legalization that came before our legal wedding, I think that might have happened in 2012. . . . So I was asked to speak at our church about same-sex marriage and they asked three of us to speak to the whole congregation, before the legalization, before the vote, and they asked us ‘would you be willing to share your story?’ And I shared that when I was a kid, I knew early on that I was gay and I thought well, marriage is not for me. I just won’t be getting married because marriage is only for a man and a woman, right, so there was that long period in my life where I just thought marriage is not for me. . . . And I said that in my speech to the congregation, right, like as I was preparing my speech I started to get crabby. I started to get angry finally. It’s like I feel like I lived a pretty good life, I’ve had lots of pleasant experiences and good relationships with people and so the fact that I wasn’t able to marry somebody didn’t really keep me from achieving lots of other goals, y’know. But what I started to feel was that frustration of wait a minute, you haven’t treated me the same. Wait a minute, my wife doesn’t get my retirement. I was like ok, I really wanna talk about my love with these people but there is that piece, it’s like wait, let’s look at this and acknowledge that until that’s legal I don’t get that.

While P5 did not explicitly state her consequent appreciation for the eventual legalization of marriage, it was implied by her admission of anger related to her inability to become legally married that she was grateful to be living in a time where same-sex marriage was legalized. She mentioned many times throughout her interview that financial planning for the event of her own death was incredibly stressful and exacerbated by the legal complications prior to the state and federal legalizations of same-sex marriage. The legalizations relieved much of this pressure for her, as expressed below:

I’m almost ten years older than her so I envision that I probably won’t outlive her. And so one of the things that I said to people when we were trying to get marriage [passed] that’s really important to me is like what will her life be like when we’re apart? . . . What will her life be like if I’m

not there? Not to say it wouldn't happen the other way, but I earn more money, we'll plan on living on my retirement, and my pension, and so having legal ways, means, for that to happen, without the legalization of same-sex marriage, we wouldn't have necessarily had that.

P1 discussed how she never thought she would be able to get married and her resultant feelings of gratitude, happiness, and luck that she was able to do so:

I like the fact that like I never thought that I would get married. Cuz I always knew I was gay growing up and, y'know, I always thought I'd be in a committed relationship; like I saw myself in that. So I feel very lucky that we've been able to get married. . . . So that's the biggest thing about marriage. About my marriage, I guess. Is that I didn't think I'd ever get to call my partner my wife. Ha. Or uh, be able to, y'know, have all my family there. I always worried for the wedding that my extended relatives wouldn't come, but they were all happy. We fed 'em beer, it was fine. I think it's been great like knowing that I have the support of all my family, and they're happy for our marriage, just like they would be for my [straight] cousin who's getting married in a couple weeks. Like, that's been nice that the families have been supportive. . . . I thought I would just have like a commitment ceremony with some . . . with a big kind of party. Commitment ceremony but not like a marriage. We had a minister, her cousin was a minister, like I really didn't think we'd have any religious and if I had a commitment ceremony it was not going to be religious at all. So . . . that influenced our wedding and yeah, I didn't think I'd get married. I didn't think I would have this commitment that I do now. It's good though. I like it. I'm definitely happy in it. I think that's the biggest thing . . . is that I didn't think I'd ever get legally married.

P3 described her gratitude for the progressively more positive attitudes toward same-sex relationships as well as an acknowledgment that equality is not yet a fully realized reality:

People have certain beliefs and have a hard time, y'know. [My mother] still doesn't introduce my wife as my partner. 'Oh, this is my daughter and my daughter's friend.' And I usually say 'yes, this is my partner, y'know, this is my spouse.' So . . . it is tough. But you're in a generation that I'm glad for you because it's different and people—especially kids—that are brought up today have a whole different viewpoint of all kinds of things that are accepted. It's very interesting. Kind of how I never thought in our lifetime that marriage would be legal, that they would pass the laws, so I'm very grateful that that happened. But, y'know, there's still a lot of things that need to come to light in all kinds of arenas.



P7 discussed her appreciation for living in a time where she and her wife were able to be legally married:

I think both of us are so grateful that we got to be married and in the 21st Century. Because I can't imagine being married, even in the 90s. As two women. Not legally married, obviously, but, um, in seeing all the ups and downs of [same-sex marriage equality in] California and it being overturned and I just think we're so lucky. Marriage between two women I think is really special.

P10 also expressed a deep gratitude for her experience as a lesbian in this day and age:

And, y'know, it's like . . . so I did an English lit degree and it's like you read work by women who were lesbians even just a century ago. It's like they were not living their life like women who are lesbians are now; at least not for the most part. And how awesome is it that we can? Like I just don't feel like there's anything in this world that we can't do or have based on our sexuality.

***Related literature.*** Participants overwhelmingly conveyed a sense of excitement and positive energy around the 2015 SCOTUS decision that effectively legalized same-sex marriage nationwide. All participants lived in states that had individually legalized same-sex marriage prior to 2015, but the optimism around the ubiquity of the 2015 SCOTUS ruling was palpable.

Many participants expressed a gratitude for the fact that a larger number of friends and family than was expected came to the wedding and openly supported their same-sex relationships. P1, P2, P4, P9, and P10 specifically stated their initial sense of worry that some loved ones would not show up and their consequent relief and happiness when they did. In the aforementioned study conducted by Kreitzer et al. (2014), researchers found that individuals are more likely to openly support same-sex marriage if it has been legalized. The

implication is that individuals may feel safer and more comfortable accepting same-sex relationships when they believe that society (or the courts) are backing them up. It is possible this factored into the presence of the participants' family members at their weddings. While each of these participants obtained their marriage licenses prior to the 2015 SCOTUS ruling, they all resided in states where same-sex marriage was locally legalized.

**Legitimacy and validation.** Once they were able to and became legally married, participants described a felt sense of legitimacy and validation of their relationships. They often cited examples related to the ability to use the word “wife” as a means to adequately explain the status of their relationship.

P5 discussed her experience of realizing with the legalization of same-sex marriage that she had previously felt like a second class citizen. She stated that she did not realize she felt invalidated until she experienced what validation was like:

[Our ceremonial marriage in 2011] wasn't legal and there was that piece of feeling like well, I kinda feel like a second class citizen; you won't let me get married. I think my rationale after that was like 'well it's just a legal document anyway, I don't need that to feel legally married.' But once we did it there's that piece of feeling like well it's legal and I actually can, I'm not as much of a second class citizen, to use that verbiage that everybody throws out. But it sort of did feel like I was being recognized or acknowledged in a way that I hadn't before. This was the 2011 wedding...I don't think it's like that one didn't count. I feel like everyone that was there knows it counted. But each time a law passes I do feel like there's something in me I didn't know before that feels more validated. . . . I didn't know how invalidated I felt until I felt validated and it was like 'oh, now that you bring it up, you should've done this sooner, what the hell,' kind of thing.

P2 described her experience of validation as related to being able to use the term “wife,” transferring health benefits, and sharing a last name:

So that's been hard, like how do we explain our relationship to our neighbors or to people we just met? And being married has made that easier because it's just not like, y'know, was she my girlfriend, was she my partner, was she whatever? It's like no, she's my spouse, she's my wife. I kind of use those words interchangeably. That's made it a lot easier. . . . I think part of that is like OK, so now we have like a more easy to understand way to describe our relationship to people. But also like our culture has changed a little bit and evolved a little bit too, so people are more like—there's been more of a media dialogue and stuff like that, so people are more like 'oh, well I guess [same-sex] people get married now.' So, yeah . . . one of the biggest—this is stupid—but it's just like, y'know, when we were domestic partners, I hated this. She could be on my insurance but because of DOMA I had to pay taxes on the part that my employer contributed to her part of the plan so, y'know, they paid \$200 a month for her and I paid \$100 a month or something and I was taxed on that amount that they paid extra as the extra pay for me. So I mean things like that were just super complicated, right? . . . The other thing we did when we got legally married is we changed our last names. So up until that point she'd kept her last name, I kept my last name, and part of that was like just logistic reasons. She's a teacher and she was in a school where kids knew her by her last name. But she's at a first name school now where kids call her by her first name so it didn't seem as impactful to the students for her to change her last name or for them to not have a harder to say last name. So we did that when we got legally married and I feel like that helped people to kind of understand that OK, these two ladies are in some kind of relationship. Haha.

P7 discussed how her legal marriage conveyed a sense of legitimacy about her relationship to her family, her heterosexual friends, and to herself:

Everyone in [my wife's] family's been married in the church and sadly we weren't able to. But the fact that we were still able to get married I feel like almost brought more. Her dad didn't come to our wedding. And I think having it be legal and us getting married, I think kind of finally clicked for him that this is something that was legit. . . . I think it added legitimacy to a lot of our life. And being recognized as a couple, because I feel like pre-being able to get married—and I don't know if anyone else has said this but—a lot of our friends are straight. We don't have a lot of gay friends. They will say things like 'y'know you're always with each other.' And it's like well, we're together. Like, we live together. 'Y'know you guys always have dinner together,' well we live together. So now it's like 'well, they're married.' Whereas I feel like with straight couples it's like yes, there's that stereotype of "you're always with your boyfriend" but when they got married it was like well, they're married, they live together, they have a life together, and now I feel like people don't say

that as much. . . . I feel like it just from everyone's standpoint that everyone just had this kind of ah-ha moment, not to quote Oprah, of just like I think it just kind of opened everybody's eyes to this is a real thing and people can love who they wanna love and it's legal.

P4 relayed how her legalized marriage has made her feel more validated in her own relationship:

I like the legality of it. I like knowing that this is my wife and not my girlfriend. It's just—I think it elevates it to another level. . . . And plus it's nice to have that equal. We're not just—this is my girlfriend, it's not that. Like this is my wife. And I think it says something. You can say well, you're legally bound to, y'know, wake up with her in the morning. . . . I don't think that there's either one of us going anywhere and so it's nice, it's nice to have it all sealed up with the marriage and we're good to go. We're good to go.

P9 discussed her preference for the term wife and what it means for her in terms of her relationship:

The most exciting part is being able to call her my wife and to say it out loud and not to have to be like oh, my girlfriend. Because that always sounded like childish to me, like my girlfriend. And I didn't ever like partner because I wanted people to know her sex, I guess, I don't know, it was an important part for me to be like no, my lady friend or my girlfriend, so wife is now a lot easier and so that's been the most fun. . . . Because I never even thought about if it wasn't legal and I [had] filed for a domestic partnership, she still wouldn't be my wife. I didn't really think about the fact that the word itself had so much power, I guess.

**Legal security.** Participants described benefits of marriage related to legal securities such as estate tax planning, filing joint tax statements, and protections around healthcare decision making.

P4 stated that once same-sex marriage was legalized in her home state, her attorney became very vocal about his opinion that she and her wife should get married as quickly as possible. She described how once they were legally married they experienced an increase in legal rights:

The tax implications [are an important benefit] and it has to do with our property and when you are not legally wife and wife, when you couldn't be legally married, then if we both are co-owners in this house and it says that the house automatically physically transfers, y'know, it paper-wise goes to the other person. My estate would've transferred to her, [the taxes] would've bankrupted her and once we're legally married it transfers for free. . . . We're legally married. And I think to have all of the legal and you just don't realize how many places it matters. And how many things you have to do to try to cover for what people that are married legally have just automatically. Before DOMA what was it like, six hundred and some legal rights that we were denied? Because even though we had been a couple for y'know 16, 15 years, you still weren't legally married to each other, you didn't have those legal rights. So that was a big thing for us.

She went on to describe the fear she experienced when traveling prior to legal marriage related to the risk of a healthcare emergency and how that changed post-marriage:

I was talking about the tax implication and that kinda thing, but the other big thing was knowing that we could be in some kind of a medical situation and know that we couldn't be denied access to each other. And that's just this fear that that, y'know, we live with. And you just didn't know what was gonna happen. You get into a hospital and have someone say no, sorry, you're not next of kin, you can't come in. And it happens. And it even was a point of when you travel even from state to state, we've heard stories of friends that have traveled with their legal paperwork, that's sad, y'know, so we had a plethora of attorneys create this pile of documentation to try to keep us tied to each other. But you've got a hospital that you're arguing with and now we can just say we're married. That's my wife.

P2 described the benefit and increased ease of being able to file a joint federal tax return:

I keep falling back to like financial stuff because it was *so* frustrating. So we were able to file when we were domestic partners, we were able to file a combined state tax return, but individual federal tax returns which was like just so confusing. So this year we were able to file jointly federally and for the state and made it it's just so much easier. So it's really like stuff like that has just been a lot easier.

P5 reiterated throughout her interview how important it was that—in the event of her death—she could plan for her estate to pass to her wife with the tax benefits afforded legal spouses:

One of our mentors had said when we were preparing to get married, y’know, ‘yeah, it’s really exciting and everything but you do have to be prepared for the day that you’re not together.’ And I thought ohhh, that’s really, like, that’s really poignant. That’s really a powerful thing to stop and acknowledge. What will her life be like if I’m not there? Not to say it wouldn’t happen the other way, but I earn more money, we’ll plan on living on my retirement and my pension, and so having legal ways, means, for that to happen, without the legalization of same-sex marriage, we wouldn’t have necessarily had that. So security, I think that that’s the thing that I feel about the legalization. Um, cuz I’m not sure how I would’ve outsmarted the system to make that happen without it being legal.

P3 relayed her concern about her wife and her being able to make medical decisions for one another and cited stories she had heard about other same-sex couples prior to the legalization of marriage:

We wanted to [get married] just for all of the reasons . . . y’know, to protect each other. Her brother had finally kind of come to an understanding. He was her only sibling, but he still had some—there were some negative connotations with their relationship. And we both wanted to make sure that no one would ever interfere with the legalities of the way we wanted things in our lives, as far as how our will was drawn up, or how we were gonna take care of each other if there was any illnesses, the understandings, y’know. We wanted everybody to be on the same page and there not to be any confrontation. Cuz we’d seen that with friends of ours who had gone through that. And their families and how they intervened, like you are not a blood relative, you cannot make that decision and some of those things did happen back then. And so it was really not a pleasant situation for a lot of people. And I said I don’t ever wanna be in that position that if I’m managing your care and you’ve left that up to me that I’m able to do that without any outside interference and vice versa. I don’t want anyone in my family [interfering].

***Related literature.*** As discussed above, Shulman et al. (2012) conducted a study on same-sex domestic partners in the state of California. The researchers asked participants about their anticipated benefits of legalized marriage. They

found that participants believed that being able to become legally married would provide a sense of security in multiple areas of their lives, including “increased permanence in their couple relationship as well as feeling protected as a unit by the larger society” (Shulman et al., p. 158). The beliefs anticipated by the participants in the Shulman et al. study align with the participant experiences relayed in the current study. Participants discussed how becoming legally married made them feel as if their relationships were better validated by society.

**Differences.** Participants described ways in which they are different from their wives. They most often detailed differences in personality, communication, and conflict resolution styles. They talked about how communication was typically necessary in order to address these differences and also expressed a sense that the existence of these differences makes their relationships stronger.

P6 discussed how her partner and she have different ways of processing emotions and how it helps to be aware of that fact:

What I’m learning more recently, too, is to not get so caught up in what I think I’m seeing. So she more often than not is less expressive than I am and also is—particularly around anger. I’ll like explode and then it’s gone. So the difference in how we process our emotions. Early on in our relationship she’d come back like three days later and I’m like ‘what the hell are you talking about?’ Y’know, because I was so beyond whatever that was, and but now it happens a little bit more immediately so sometimes that creates a little bit more fire. So I think that the attentiveness to (like I said earlier) for us to recognize our differences and how we process emotions, what could be bothering us, how we want to go about dealing with that. And both of us have a propensity to—in some ways—to deny the vulnerabilities, y’know. And so . . . for both of us it’s an important part to be able to have the conversation about what I might consider the softer emotional aspects of who and what we are.

P6 also went on to describe how fundamental differences in their characters are part of what drew them together:

I think that that other point of ease is, um, recognizing the things that in our own individual natures are . . . y'know, she's probably more practical and not a risk taker. I'm more of a risk taker and she'll say that she was attracted to my dark side and in part I was attracted to her innocence. So we have very different backgrounds.

P5 described how she and her wife have different approaches to processing emotions and how an awareness of that fact has helped them become closer and overcome challenges. She also talked about how this awareness is an ongoing work in progress and has yet to be perfected:

I think, y'know, we recognized that we process differently. I'm kind of a talker, but I do a lot of internal processing. Rehearsing those things in my head all the time before I say them. And she'll say some things but she looks calm on the outside but she's not calm on the inside. Um, so, she's not a talker but then, y'know, so we do have different modes of processing it. But I think the fact that we recognize that requires us [to] . . . then when she says something and I'm the kind of person that's like . . . if you ask me something nicely and politely and don't come right out and say it, I probably will miss it. I will miss that that's really important to you, so if it's really important to you I need you to say it directly. On the other hand, that's not her style of communication so I know that when she says something I have to be paying attention to [the fact] that [it] might be really important even though it sounded really soft. So I think we both recognize that our styles are different and so we have to be conscious of both styles to be successful. We're not always very successful at that. Sometimes I'm really—I miss it. Yeah. And I have to remember, right, and so we have different ways. Like she knows that though I'm a talker, if I'm getting really quiet, it means I'm really problem solving inside, I'm trying to think it through. Something's on my mind, I'm really trying to work it through.

P8 discussed a short list of things she finds essential to her experience of marriage, with communication being one. She went on to describe how the differences in each wife's approach to communicating and resolving conflict are an important aspect of their relationship:

I mean communication, fun, friendship, love, of course. I mean they're all mixed in. And I don't really, of course communication, I don't wanna say I put anything as number one because you need all of those things at all



times in different times, it just depends, because sometimes you can say communication's number one, but what if she doesn't want to communicate right now? That's something that I had to learn over the years with her. She's the person that sometimes in the moment she needs you to just give her space. And I didn't know all of that about her so I'm the person—like I said I'm very confrontational, I wanna talk about it now, work it out and let's move on, let's talk it out, talk it out—and she's like I just need time. So can you imagine when you don't communicate what you really need, the types of personalities you have, what that looks like? It looks like one person's like ahhhhhhh, and the other's like oh my god, y'know, so having to learn that about her . . . learning each other, *constantly* learning each other because you're constantly changing. Different things, y'know. Things are always changing, so just being open to different likes and different needs. So that's what I think. I'm no expert.

P10 also described scenarios in which her wife and she manage stress in markedly different ways:

We have really different personalities in terms of how we deal with stress and so it's been learning about how to just process that with each other. She gets like—I wouldn't say she has an anger problem—but she is much more like her brothers in terms of she gets angry, she just has to like say it and it's loud and it all comes out at once and then it can be over with. The second that you talk about it she drops it. Whereas I am a lot more sensitive where I feel like even if she's upset about something totally unrelated to me, she's trying to process it, like, with me and alongside me but I take it as a personal attack, like 'why are you raising your voice about this issue with me?' And I have to realize like okay, 'she's not upset with me, she's upset about something totally different but this is how she thinks through her thoughts and so how can we reach a happy medium?' But, y'know, if you're not used to that . . . I'm from a really mellow family and her family all just talks over each other; it's just different. I would say at first when we first got married, I would just stew over it. I would hold it in and just think to myself like, I can't believe she can just get that upset and then the next minute it's just over. And I would take it so personally so, y'know, we talk to each other and I tell her how it makes me feel and I learned a lot in terms of how she just—like I said, I don't have to say everything to process it and when you realize that there's people in the world that really do, it really helps them, so I had to get away from my thinking that I was always right and that, y'know, it doesn't work like that, everybody's different. Because I would think well, you don't need to get, like, that worked up over something that small, but for her it wasn't small.

P7 shared a similar story indicating that her wife and she have different styles of communicating and working through conflict, which is something they consciously work on on a daily basis:

Communication is a huge thing in between she and I. I 'm a talker, I wanna talk all day long, I wanna tell you how I feel at the moment that I feel it, if I'm upset you know I'm upset. She's like breaking into... a like a, I don't even know, like there's like a lockbox and then like a panic room and then it's like breaking down . . . like you need nukes to open her up. And so that's kind of been a struggle, I think. And not necessarily that like she is our weakness; we don't have to analyze everything all the time, like I'm always let's analyze it right now, let's talk about it right now. And she's like let's not talk about it right now, it's midnight, we work tomorrow, we're not doing this. So things like that and she's very much someone that's not so easy going, she could mend and meld into any situation and, y'know, blend into any situation. Um, really easily. And go with the flow. I'm not that as much, anyway. In that way. So I think that has been a frustration because I don't like change. Not like life changes, but if there's a plan then I have a really hard time changing the plan cuz I'm OCD, so I'm like, I have got my day planned out and she's like I don't know what's going on and I'm like ahhhh. . . . So I think that's just been a learning curve for both of us, trying to figure out a) how to communicate to each other about what our needs are and so we constantly work, we work on that every day.

P3 also cited differences in personality and approaches to resolving conflict as a part of her marriage. She described how she sees those differences interacting with each other and creating balance:

She has always been good at grounding me and we have such different ideas about some things in life and that's been a good balance. Y'know, I learned a lot from her over the years and she said that she has felt the same way about situations and experiences and how to kinda look at things from a different viewpoint. Like, um, how somebody acted at work, since we both worked at the same organization. Doing different things. Her perspective of how she worked with that person versus my perspective of that person. It was her insight like 'well, what about this part of their productivity or the way they handled this situation that maybe was volatile at the time in a group setting?' I'm like 'ohh, I hadn't thought about that, that's a good point.' And so bouncing those ideas off each other and it's just explaining a different viewpoint than maybe you were coming from; quite a different direction than your partner was. Um, so . . . I think those

kinds of things have been interesting over the past 22 years. . . . That kind of balance in our life about spiritual thoughts and feelings and having discussions about that like ‘oh, what about what do you think about this, the hereafter or your spiritual grounding?’ Or, y’know, just those kinds of differences. And looking at different—just like you do in day to day life with your friends and family members . . . different perspectives like ‘oh, I hadn’t thought about that.’ And being open to that. And I think with a partner, if you open yourself up, open yourself up. Y’know, really say ‘okay, I might not agree with it but I need to be open to listen to the conversation you wanna have about your feelings about this.’ So . . . that’s been a very good balance. For both of us.

Differences were identified by each and every participant in some manner and seemed to be both an inevitable and essential aspect of female same-sex marriage.

**Comfort.** Participants described feelings of safety and comfort related to their marital commitment (both legal and relational) and the day-to-day experience of sharing a home with a wife.

P6 talked about the feedback she receives from friends and family about how loving and comforting her home feels to them. She interpreted this as a reflection of the love and comfort she experiences in her marriage:

I was walking around the other day because we have to put our house up for sale and I was allowing myself to get emotional about it because we’ve designed a beautiful space that, y’know, when people walk into our home it feels loving and comforting and stuff like that and that’s what people have always said about our homespace, no matter where we’ve lived. So it’s nice to, one, hear that, but also have that affirmation that our home is a place of comfort. And that’s because we’re comfortable. We’re comfortable with each other. And our dog.

P1 described comfort as the knowledge and experience of having her wife to come home to each day. She also went on to explain the shift in her experience of comfort and stability once they became married:

I really like just coming home to her and like having your best friend there. That's what I like. It feels stable and it feels like I can have the worst day and you have someone there to talk to about it, so that's what I like. The stability and just knowing I have someone there just to talk to. I have other best friends. But definitely she knows the most about me and everything like that so . . . I feel very happy. Like it felt different being married. Like we'd been together for 3.5 years but got married and it did feel different. Like traveling with her on our honeymoon; just knowing that she was gonna be there for everything else that happened from then on. That was the biggest thing while we were on our honeymoon, like this was the start of our life and that she was gonna be there for every experience that I had and I'd be there for every experience that she had. That's what I like the most about marriage so far is security and comfort. I think that's what it comes down to.

P9 used a childhood analogy to describe the deep level of comfort she experiences within the context of her marriage:

It's that feeling of when—like when you were a kid and maybe you stayed the night at someone's house and at the end of it you're just like 'OK, that was fun' and now you go home and it's like this ahhhhh, like this feeling of just comfort. The moment you stepped into your house. And like that's the feeling that I have when I'm with her and when I know that we're gonna be together forever; which is part of the whole marriage thing that's been, y'know, leading up to the marriage is like whoa, y'know, forever. That's a long time. But it's not, it's not like that. It's like I want this type of life y'know for the rest of my life. So to me that's okay. . . . Because my view on marriage changed because I knew that I never not wanted to be with her. I knew that I could never not have her in my life. Like she became such a steady part of my life, like, that idea of home, that necessity and sort of thing.

P7 described how prior to meeting her wife she did not feel comfortable in many places. After meeting her wife she experienced feelings of comfort and a sense of being home:

I don't have any emotional attachment [except] to people, so when I met her, as cheesy as this sounds, but it's so true, I felt home. Like I felt like I can be anywhere in the world and if she's there, I'm okay. I'm fine. I'm home. I feel comfortable. And I kind of think me moving around so much [growing up] is just I never felt a sense of calmness. And in college I was crazy, like, drank a ton and I was crazy, and I was so just not comfortable because I just never had a place that I could just go to and just feel

comfortable and content. And when I met my wife, and all of my really good childhood friends say this about me, 'she is your zen.' And it's totally true. It's like I feel like I grew up. Not that I found myself in her, but I started to become the person that I really wanted to be and it's not like she did anything, like she's an incredible person, but I just all of a sudden felt like I had a home. And that was such a great feeling. Like, I go to my parents house. I love my parents, they're amazing people. But I still don't feel like that's my home, and I grew up there. Because as soon as I moved out my mom got rid of all my stuff. And I didn't want it. So I didn't come with anything, I like came with clothes and that was probably it and then hand me down furniture and I was like that's fine, like I don't need anything. And now it's like I feel like I finally have set up shop so to speak. So I think establishing marriage and family was just such a huge thing for me cuz it was like now I'm establishing my home.

**Support.** Participants described two primary types of support within their marital relationships: individual support received from their wives and outside support for the relationship from friends and family.

P1 relayed her appreciation for the support her wife provides her, even in what she considers to be small matters such as recreational softball games:

I like having someone just as excited for good news of like promotion at work, y'know, just as excited as I am, so . . . y'know that kind of stuff. Or doing good in a recreational softball game. She actually likes to come and watch and I'm like 'really? You don't have to, it's gonna rain,' but she likes to support me even in the smallest situations like a recreational softball game. That's the most surprising. I'm like really, like, I'm just going to play a softball game, like I didn't expect it. Again, like one way or the other, you can come if you want, but she enjoys coming and being there and supporting. It's good.

P5 spent a significant amount of time throughout her interview emphasizing the importance of teamwork within her marriage. She described how she felt supported by the idea of her wife being a teammate:

That's what our life together is about right now, is that we're a team. And we're about making our life together, making the things that we want to have come to be. So I don't know, y'know, like that word joyful was nice in your question because that's what it is for me, it really is joyful because it's being with someone who wants to work as a team to make our dreams

come true. That we're a team, that we support each other and we root for each other and we want each other to be successful, individually and together.

P3 discussed how impactful it was when her wife had an emotional reaction to P3's new hobby. She relayed a sense of deep appreciation for her wife's support of her passion:

The first time I did a cool carving, a wood piece, and I brought it to the back door I said 'look what I did today' and she burst into tears. Yeah, like, 'oh, that is so great!' She's more of an emotional person than I am, but that's always nice to have that emotion impact something that you've done that is special to you or creative and somebody enjoyed it that much.

P3 then went on to describe how her wife has supported her in more logistical matters as well, as related to her recovery from a surgery:

I had a hip replacement. Man, I don't know what I would . . . I felt bad for all the people who didn't have someone [to support them through recovery]. She took two weeks off work and helped me in and out of bed at night. My hip surgery went extremely well so I was very fortunate, some people's don't go that way, but I can't imagine not having a partner that I could trust and rely on. And she went to physical therapy with me so she knew what kind of exercises to help me with. We needed two people. One person couldn't do it by themselves and here we are all the way up here and if I had to have gone through that all by myself . . . and, y'know, some situations were really hard and being two women, um, I can't shave my legs but I really want 'em shaved today, so can you help me out with that? Haha. Y'know, things like that.

P9 described a different aspect of support as she talked about the importance of the support of her relationship from friends and family:

And I talked about it in our wedding. I gave a toast and that's what I'm most thankful for is that we are not one of those stories of, y'know, family members not coming because they don't approve. Or any sort of weirdness. So we're lucky. So family . . . each others' families have been really supportive. Having my family first of all accept me was huge. Likewise for her. But then just both families accepting the person like um, whether it's any sort of relationship, whether it's a hetero relationship, you always want your family to like your significant other. And there was just an immediate connection with both myself and her family. And then her

and my family. And everyone has really been close already. And so it's really cool. Her entire family helped me do my proposal cuz it was while we were on a trip together, so I had to get all their assistance. And like with our wedding everyone just helped tremendously put together all these things that she found on Pinterest that she wanted. And uh, good god you should've seen this place, weeks before we were getting married, there was like an assembly line of jars and I was hot gluing these little things on them and burnt my hands like five million times and I'm like 'it's for her, it's for her.' Haha. So, y'know, I would just elope. But yeah, so support's been huge.

P4 discussed the experience of her wedding day, where her wife and she felt deeply loved and supported by friends and family:

As my wife said, she's never had a day that's been all about her. And I think that that marriage and to be able to at that point, share it with everyone and have all the love of all the people that were around and be happy for us and um, that was what has made it even more special, so it's to be able to have that opportunity.

P10 also stated how she benefits from the support of her in-laws, even though she feels that she is different from them in some ways:

And so . . . I feel like now that, y'know, we're married and things, it's like that feeling that I was describing where they're just there for you no matter what. I feel like I get to be part of that whole package. And that just because I like to do photography and go on hikes and that kinda thing, it's like it's not because they don't like that stuff or value it, it's just because they've never even really been exposed to it.

**Lack of gender roles.** Participants described an awareness of the fact that they are part of a relationship that is outside the traditional societal norm. Within heterosexual marriages there are traditional ideas of which partner might be responsible for particular tasks. While individuals may deviate from those traditional norms, they exist nonetheless. Participants relayed feelings of equality and an increased need for communication around deciding which wife should be responsible for which tasks.

P2 described how she experiences lack of gender roles within her relationship:

Y'know, the thing about being married to another woman that's hard is there's no script. There's no like person A does this, person B does that. And in some ways that's good, right, because you have to decide OK, what does this look like for us? You have to have a lot of conversations about that, but on the other hand sometimes that's exhausting too. Knowing it's just like well, we're figuring it out and at the same time it's just, y'know, people have to figure this out no matter what type of relationship they're in and no matter the gender of their partner, they have to figure that out for themselves too. And it's just stupid domestic stuff, like who calls to make an appointment for a car repair. Y'know? Or who is the person who goes to the grocery store? Like how does that get figured out? So I think that's part of it, and then it's like who gets the birthday card for one person's mom or something like that, y'know like, those types of roles that are gendered and scripted in some relationships, it's just like I don't know, we're gonna figure it out. [We've figured it out with ] lots of negotiations (haha) hostage negotiations. So we finally figured out she's gonna do the dishes and I'm gonna do the laundry. That works for us. That way we have . . . here's your job, here's my job, there's no overlap in between the jobs. So some of it's like what's one person good at? What's one person hate the most? So she tends to do a lot of the cooking, I pay the bills, because that just works with how we like to do things. But sometimes it's just like we don't know and there's conflict about it . . . so there's a lot of like just talking about stuff.

P6 talked about how she and her partner split up responsibilities based on interest and skill:

There's just certain things it's like OK, she's very good at taking care of the finances and I'm like I really have no idea how much money we have. She's paying the bills, but I realize that every once in awhile I check in but then I'm bored and it's like whatever, here's my paycheck and off you go. So um yeah, so there's certain things where yeah, the trust of whoever's taking care of things . . . so I'm learning all about the RV and so she's just gonna trust that I'm not gonna blow us up with the propane tanks or whatever. So it's kinda like learning who has what talents, but she's a great dishwasher. So. Hahah. So I'll cook. She does the dishes. Keeps the hands soft, I think.



P10 described how others may view her as more feminine than her wife and assume that they conform to traditional gender roles because of that. She discussed how that is not how her marriage is set up:

I think that people may think from the outside view me as the more feminine person, but I like that our marriage doesn't confine to those roles. Where what I mean by that is like she's the one that gets up in the morning and she goes to the gym and she comes home and she makes breakfast for us and coffee for us and she cooks dinner at night. She does a lot of things that people would probably consider to be more feminine roles and I like that our relationship doesn't have to stick—confine—to those types of roles. And I see for example with her parents they're very much traditional where her dad works, her mom stays at home, has always stayed at home, does every ounce of cleaning and laundry and things. But she and I always say that anything we have we have it because we both worked for it. And so there's not like one goal in life that either of us could obtain without the other. It's hard sometimes, but it's good.

P3 expanded on her experience of roles and responsibilities within her marriage and how they decide who will do what:

She loves to grocery shop, I hate it. When we first got together, um, in past relationships [with men] I did the grocery shopping because my partners didn't like it, but somebody had to do it. From an early age I was the second to oldest child and so there were certain responsibilities out of five kids, so to say it lightly that way. But um, so the kinda check and balances even in day to day routines like when we clean house . . . 'OK, this is the part this person likes to do, OK, so do that part, this is the part I enjoy doing, OK, do that part. Same with outside, we have a big place to take care of, um, we put a lot of TLC in it, we entertain a lot, so there's certain things in a day to day routine that you're depending on your partner [for].

***Related literature.*** As discussed above in the Literature Review chapter, Beals et al. (2002) concluded from their study that lesbians reported a higher level of happiness when the relationship was “perceived as fair or equal with regard to decision making.” Blumstein and Schwartz (1983) also discussed how fair or equal decision making is more often achieved by female same-sex couples than

other types of relationships. They attributed this fact to a lack of traditional gender roles (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983). Happiness levels were not directly measured within the current study, but participants discussed their experiences with a lack of traditional gender roles in their relationships. They conveyed a sense of increased burden related to the need to communicate more often and more in-depth about roles and responsibility. Participants also described an increased sense of equality in the relationship due to the lack of gender roles that they had either experienced or heard about within the context of heterosexual relationships.

Rose and Zand (2000) found that “freedom from gender roles...suggested that lesbian dating is more egalitarian than heterosexual dating” (p. 99). While the current study did not compare the experience of female same-sex marriage to any other category of relationship, the participants relayed a sense of equality. This was often attributed by the participants to a lack of gender roles and resultant shared decision making.

**Stigma.** Participants described how their experience of marriage has been affected by societal stigma surrounding same-sex relationships. They talked about feeling anger, fear, and hatred conveyed to them by friends, family, and strangers alike. These feelings caused various effects on how participants felt about and acted within their relationship both publicly and privately.

P4 spent a significant amount of time during the interview emphasizing how much fun she had planning and partaking in their wedding. However, she also disclosed that it was upsetting to her that her brother did not attend:

We only have one person that wouldn't come to the wedding. That's my damn brother and his wife. They're religious. Wouldn't do it. 'Love you

both, but can't be there for your wedding.' I was irritated. I wasn't surprised. They'd been the same, consistent, for all those years, but y'know they come here for Christmas and everything else and we can do all those kind of things but they're not gonna come watch us get married, so I was hurt . . . I got over it real quick. And I said I'm sorry he missed the day, but I'm not gonna . . . my other brother and sister were there, my sister was in the wedding. My wife's brother was in the wedding. I mean it was okay. It was hurtful at first, but it was okay. It's your loss and at the end of the day, I don't want to worry about your experience.

P4 also talked about how she and her wife felt limited in their choice of honeymoon location due to fears of how same-sex couples are treated in various countries:

We went to Arizona. A little place down there and at one point we were looking all over the world. My wife was in charge of our honeymoon. And then we talked about going to New York and then we started looking at all these different countries we wanted to go to, on a cruise, and somewhere along the line we got this, um, we came across this article on lesbian travel. And it was scary. It was talking about what countries . . . it had different colors and it was saying and gay both y'know for men and women. And women particularly that are together, are not safe in a lot of countries. And there were some countries that was penalty by jail, some was penalty by death and it was like—it just rattled both of us and I said 'y'know, one, I wanna be safe, and two, I wanna be a couple. I don't wanna be somewhere where . . . I'm not a big PDA person and my wife is definitely not, but it is it's not fun when you can't be safe. We forget how far we've come here but we're still trying to get the rights in our own state and there's a lot of countries, so we said 'forget it!'

When describing details about planning her wedding, P4 talked about running into a homophobic attitude from her first choice of photographer:

I did though have a photographer [who] when I said I was getting married to another woman had this just bizarre look. I was like 'is that a problem?' and she's like 'well, we would prefer not to do the wedding.' And it was really kinda hurtful and afterwards I went back and I wanted to fire her, but she was gone, but I was gonna tell her thank you. I would hate for you to have said 'well it's money and I'll take it' and I don't want you ruining my day because you're there to capture our photography and you're gonna ruin it because you're not gonna be happy with what we're doing.

P9 discussed how she grew up in a small town and developed an idea of what marriage should look like. Once she came out about her sexuality, around the age of 26, she did not believe that she fit the stereotype of a person who would get married:

Once I just finally realized and said it out loud and said it to someone that I thought I was gay, then things started to fall in place. I got a job, I started to build a house and just things started to fall in line. But throughout all that time I didn't ever really think I was gonna get married. Even to a woman. Like even if it became legal. There was a part of me that I just like I don't know if it's for me. . . . I think because after living in a small town for most of your life you have this predetermined idea or concept of what marriage is and I was like 'well, y'know, can I have that?'

P9 also discussed her experience around coming out about her sexuality as a middle school teacher in a small, rural town where she often had to educate others about her identity:

Also, um, just being able to see the other people in this small community see a lesbian and see that I don't fit the stereotypes that they think. Like I had a particular student when he was new to me like halfway through the year last year just from a super rough background, really inherently racist. But it's from his family brainwashing him in a sense, and someone was saying something at the end of the year like 'where are you guys going on your honeymoon?' and he was like 'oh, you're getting married, what's your husband do?' And I was like 'actually, I'm marrying a woman.' And he's like 'but you don't have short hair.' And I was like, 'oh, is that what you think? All women who date women have short hair?' And he's just like 'yeah, I mean . . . interesting. So you're a-a lesbian?' And I was like 'yep, mm-hmm.' And he was just like—you could just see the wheels were just turning. But the kids are super respectful. I mean I've never had an issue. Which I was so scared about. Really, really fearful of it.

P3 discussed how her in-laws were extremely uncomfortable with her and her wife's relationship due to religious reasons. She talked primarily about her mother-in-law and brother-in-law:

Her mom would come here and they wouldn't stay at our home, initially. And they lived out of state and we'd say 'why don't you just stay we've

got a guest room,’ and they’d say ‘no, no,’ they had an RV, ‘we’ll stay in town’ and we’d shuttle them back and forth and we’re like OK. But her mother was very interesting because we’d be sitting at the kitchen table having a conversation and I’d ask her a question and she’d look at my wife and answer it. Because of religious beliefs she had a really difficult time so it was really hard for her. Y’know, my wife had talked to her at one point and said ‘overall, don’t you think I’m a good person? I’m honest and loyal and a good friend and I try to be a good daughter and good sister and all these things’ and she’d say ‘yes, you are a good person but I think you’re still gonna go to hell. And your partner too’ and she never called me by name. She says ‘I’m sorry that’s just the way I believe.’ . . . And her brother (that’s the psychologist) was very right wing and very over the top on his beliefs. Religiously, as well. I don’t know what else fed into it but it took him a long time too, like 13–14 years before he got there. So I hadn’t met him and we’d been together 22 years and I hadn’t met him for 14 years. He would call on the phone and say ‘this is Dr. \_\_\_\_\_ may I speak to (P4’s wife’s name).’ The first time he did that I cracked up, I thought he was joking. I said ‘oh hey! How are you doing?’ Cuz I’m just who I am? And he’s like ‘can I speak to (P4’s wife’s name).’ You could tell he was uncomfortable, having any kind of conversation. It took him a long time.

P4 worked to counter her mother-in-law’s homophobia by working to show positive aspects of their relationship in front of her:

Her mom was a lovely person in many ways, y’know, knew a lot about history and interesting, but it was real obvious how uncomfortable she was. I said if she’s gonna be in our home I’m not just gonna go away for two weeks or whatever, this is my home and that’s okay for her to know that. That’s okay for her to see that you have a good relationship and then she can get some experience with that. If you don’t show her a different way of life too, and show her that this is okay, then that’s gonna even feed her fears more.

P7 described how religious beliefs influenced her family to lack acceptance of her coming out as well as caused her wife to remain in the closet while teaching at a religious school:

There are only 3 grandchildren in our whole family, we don’t have very many kids—and I’m the only girl. I mean it was just like, I felt like I disappointed so many people. And it was so hard. My parents didn’t talk to me for almost nine months, I didn’t see them, they live ten minutes away. My mom said she wished I was one of her miscarriages. A lot of my

family I was really close to kinda just said ‘I don’t get it’ and dismissed me and didn’t talk to me for awhile . . . and then I met my now wife. And she was like ‘well, I work at a Catholic school and I can’t tell anyone’ because it was a Catholic school, and she could get fired, which . . . totally legit. But she didn’t tell her mom, obviously didn’t tell her dad, um, and certain family members and so it was just it was really hard for awhile.

She went on to describe how her father-in-law refused to attend their wedding and how her wife and she felt about that:

I think another huge event probably was her dad. He didn’t talk to her off and on for a couple years, I wanna say. And then leading up to the wedding . . . [he] didn’t come and I know that was really hard for her because she was really close to her dad. So him not showing up I think was really hard.

P7 described experiencing objectification from heterosexual men while out on a date with her wife:

We would go to a bar and have happy hour or something and we’ve had guys come and be like—we’re holding hands—and be like ‘you’re doing that for us aren’t you? You want our attention.’ And I’m like okay, you’re a douchebag. . . . [Another time] we went to a friend’s wedding and there was a guy sitting at our table who’s like ‘well, tell us about the first time you kissed.’ And I’m like this is not gonna go well. I hadn’t been drinking or anything and my wife had had a few drinks and she was like ‘oh my god, it was so sweet . . .’ and I’m like ‘that’s not why they’re asking.’ And he was like ‘and then what, and then what,’ and I’m like ‘please stop talking . . . it’s gross. I don’t ask you about . . .’ and then he wanted to know about sex and it just went to a really gross place.

***Related literature.*** P3 and P7, among other participants, specifically stated that they had family members who expressed discomfort with their same-sex marriages due to religious beliefs and influences. The religious influence on antagonistic attitudes toward same-sex relationships has been well researched and documented (Baunach, 2012; Brewer & Wilcox, 2005; Schuman, 2008; Sherkat et al., 2011). Conservative interpreters of the Bible have long argued that the only acceptable definition of marriage is between one man and one woman (Baunach,

2012). Participants encountered this attitude in the form of a strict lack of acceptance of their same-sex relationships from close family members. P4's brother-in-law, P7's father-in-law, and P3's brother all refused to attend the same-sex weddings of their loved one due to religious beliefs against homosexuality. Often, religious individuals who refuse to support same-sex relationships believe that same-sex marriage is a manifestation of the sin of homosexuality which should be condemned (Schuman, 2008). Participants shared their hurt over their family members' lack of support but each also conveyed a sense of patience and forgiveness. They seemed able to somewhat separate their family members' love for them as individuals from their lack of support for same-sex relationships.

Prior research has also supported the idea that as individuals gain exposure and become more familiar with same-sex relationships their attitudes tend to become increasingly accepting (Lee & Hicks, 2011). This was illustrated by P7's description of her experience of her father-in-law refusing to attend her wedding. She described how after they were legally married he began to view their relationship as more valid and legitimate and developed a significantly more supportive and accepting attitude.

## Conclusions

### Summary

Descriptive Phenomenology as theorized by Giorgi (2009) was utilized as a qualitative methodology in order to study the lived experience of female same-sex marriage. Participant recruitment and interviews were historically timely, as they occurred in September–October 2015. This was just three short months following the SCOTUS ruling that effectively legalized same-sex marriages nationwide. The excited energy around this recent legal win for same-sex rights was palpable throughout each and every interview. Participants ranged in age from 26–61 and in length of relationship from 3–24 years. These ranges provided for participants of multiple generations and varying experiences of the intensity of stigma surrounding their sexual orientations.

Participants were interviewed individually for periods of time between 45–150 minutes, depending upon their verbosity. The researcher worked to maintain a minimally biased stance and asked open-ended questions not intended to direct participants toward any particular responses. Following interviews, analysis of the data was performed by determining meaning units and deriving the perceived psychological meanings of the participants' statements. These psychological meanings were sorted and grouped and determined to be either essential or non-essential to the creation of a complete description of the essence of the experience of female same-sex marriage.

12 psychological meanings associated with the experience of same-sex marriage were deemed to be essential. Those meanings were as follows:



(a) individuality, (b) commitment, (c) communication, (d) enjoying shared time, (e) gratitude for current times, (f) legitimacy and validation, (g) legal security, (h) differences, (i) comfort, (j) support, (k) lack of gender roles, and (l) stigma.

Some of these themes were reflected in the review of pre-existing literature on lesbian relationships and marriage. However, some were not, which indicates there is much room for future study related to these results. This study was not intended to be a comparison between heterosexual and same-sex marriage, but some of the findings indicate that there are aspects of a same-sex marriage which are unique from its heterosexual counterpart.

One intention of the researcher was to give voice to a population that does not get heard as often nor as loudly as many others. As a lesbian herself, she felt starved for more research and literature that spoke to the authentic experience of women with same-sex attractions. The research world is dominated by research aimed at and designed for heterosexual couples. As the interviews were conducted, each and every participant expressed a gratitude for the opportunity to have her voice heard and recorded for others to experience. While there are countless other oppressed voices that want and need a similar platform, this study was able to provide that to ten very deserving women.

### **Limitations**

This study was limited by the nature of the interviews. Participants shared what they felt was appropriate and comfortable enough with an interviewer they had just met. While the researcher worked to build rapport early in the interview and felt that most participants appeared fairly comfortable, whether they held

back information that may have contributed to additional essential psychological meanings of the experience of female same-sex marriage is unknown.

A second limitation is related to the sample size and geographical location of the participants. Ten participants were included in this study, which is considered a valid number for use within Descriptive Phenomenology, however, it is acknowledged that the sample may not be representative of all experiences of female same-sex marriage. Additionally, all participants lived within a three hour driving radius of Seattle, Washington at the time of interview. This sample was not representative of women in same-sex marriages outside of the Pacific Northwest.

While some participants identified as ethnic minorities, seven of the ten labeled themselves as Caucasian. All participants identified as cisgender women. As such, the results may not be generalizable to women in same-sex marriages who represent more diverse ethnicities or who identify as non-cisgender.

Finally, the findings of this study are limited by the inherent bias of the researcher. Within the context of Giorgi's (2009) Descriptive Phenomenology, her subjectivity is viewed as inevitable and valid. However, the reader should understand that another researcher from a different context may have reached a varying set of conclusions.

### **Future Research Implications**

One notable area of lesbian research that had a heavy heteronormative influence was around sex and physical intimacy. As discussed in the Literature Review, nearly all questions about physical intimacy define sex in a phallic-

centric manner that is often inapplicable to women who sleep with women (Cohen & Byers, 2014). Lesbians have reported themselves that standardized questions related to sexual acts are often problematic as they do not accurately describe their sexual experiences (Cohen et al., 2008). Qualitative, open-ended research needs to be conducted on physical intimacy between two women. In order to draw conclusions about the frequency or depth of physical intimacy between two women, a stronger body of research on what physical intimacy looks like needs to first exist.

In addition to the specific topic of physical intimacy, there is a more general call to research on the lesbian community. As discussed within the Literature Review chapter, there have historically been two waves of research on lesbians (Rose, 2002). The first wave of lesbian research (conducted while homosexuality was still a diagnosable mental disorder) sought to identify “causes of sexual orientation and/or the psychological abnormality of lesbianism” (Rose, 2002, p. 2). The second wave of lesbian research attempted to depathologize lesbians by illuminating experiences that were relatable and normalized (Huston & Schwartz, 1995).

The current, or what could be considered the third, wave of research on lesbians should be an “exploration of lesbian experience from the perspective of what lesbians view as important” (Rose, 2000, p. 316) Rose went on to emphasize that too much research has been heteronormatively biased in both design and conclusion. This study was designed to contribute to the third wave of lesbian research by minimizing heteronormative bias, asking very open-ended questions,

and illuminating the experience of females in legal same-sex marriages in a way that had not previously been done. In this way, this study can be considered to be breaking new ground in lesbian research. However, it cannot stand alone as a definitive description of the lesbian experience. The ten participants' experiences were valid. However, more research with a similar open-ended approach must be conducted. This should be done on women from diverse contextual backgrounds in order to more richly contextualize the variety of lesbian experience.

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## Appendix A

### Social Media Copy

I am currently recruiting participants for my dissertation project on the authentic experience of same-sex marriage. If you know any women (over the age of 21) who are legally married to women (identifying as lesbian, bisexual, queer, doesn't matter) who might be interested in doing an interview with me, please let me know or have them email me at [xxxxxxx@antioch.edu](mailto:xxxxxxx@antioch.edu). I would really appreciate the referrals and am happy to answer any follow-up questions! Thanks! 😊



## Appendix B

### Screening Questions

(An answer of “no” to any of the questions below will result in exclusion from the study)

1. Are you over the age of 21?
2. Do you identify as a cisgender (female assigned at birth) female?
3. Are you legally married to a woman?
4. Does your wife identify as a cisgender (female assigned at birth) female?
5. Did you (or your wife) obtain your own marriage certificate (rather than having your domestic partnership automatically converted to a marriage by the state)?
6. Do you consider your marital relationship to be monogamous?
7. Can you verify that your wife has not already participated in this study?
8. Are you willing to meet with me privately for a tape recorded in-person interview that may last between 2-4 hours?

## Appendix C

### Sample Emails to Participants

### **Initial Email With Screening Questions**

Hi \_\_\_\_\_!

Thanks for showing some interest in my study. :) I have 8 screening questions to give you first to see if you qualify for participation. I'd be happy to answer any additional questions you have related to the study.

As a short introduction, I'm doing an exploratory study on the authentic experience of marriage between two females. Whatever that looks like or means to you is what I'm looking to learn about and report. It's very open-ended and I do not have any preconceived ideas that I'm trying to confirm or disprove.

If you could reply by answering the screening questions below, that would be a great start. And if you have any additional questions please send them my way!

Thanks,

Melissa

1. Are you over the age of 21?
2. Do you identify as a cisgender female (assigned female at birth)?
3. Are you legally married to a woman?
4. Does your wife identify as a cisgender female (assigned female at birth)?
5. Did you (or your wife) obtain your own marriage certificate (rather than having your domestic partnership automatically converted to a marriage by the state)?
6. Do you consider your marital relationship to be monogamous?



7. Can you verify that your wife has not already participated in this study?
8. Are you willing to meet with me privately for an audio-recorded in-person interview that may last up to 2 – 4 hours?

### **Follow Up Scheduling Email**

Hi \_\_\_\_\_,

Great, I'm looking forward to seeing you on the 4th! I'm pretty flexible on time...it would be great to get started sometime between 10am and 2pm? Let me know what works!

Also, to give you a heads up on my research...this is a very (very) open-ended study, meaning that I don't have any direct questions that I'm planning to ask at the beginning. I'll be asking very open-ended questions regarding your experience of marriage to a woman. Because I am seeking to understand the essence of **your** experience, I am going to try not to direct you toward any specific topic related to marriage. However, I will ask questions once you identify an aspect of your experience. With that in mind, you may want to spend some time between now and then thinking about what aspects of marriage are important to you and how you would describe your overall experience of same-sex marriage. Here's an example of some broad questions to get you thinking:

What about marriage do you find particularly exciting, productive, or joyful?

What about marriage do you find stressful, draining, or uncomfortable?

What is the most important part of your experience of marriage?

What about your experience with marriage do you consider to be essential? In other words, if you were describing your experience of marriage what could you not leave out?

What contexts, situations, or events have influenced or affected your experience of marriage?

If you have any additional questions that come up, please feel free to email or text/call ((503) 830-XXXX) at any time!

Thanks,

Melissa

## Appendix D

### Interview Questions

**Initial Demographic Questions**

1. Identification number: (P1, P2....P12)
2. What is your month and year of birth?
3. How do you describe your sexual orientation?
4. Are you legally married? In what state were you married?
5. When did you obtain a marriage license? Where?
6. Do you have any questions regarding confidentiality of this study?
7. Do you have any other concerns about anything else related to this study?

**Primary Interview Questions**

8. Please describe for me your experience of same-sex marriage.
  - a. (If inadequate response) What about marriage do you find particularly exciting, productive, or joyful?
    - i. How do you mean?
  - b. What about marriage do you find stressful, draining, or uncomfortable?
    - i. How do you mean?
  - c. What is the most important part of your experience of marriage?
    - i. How do you mean?
  - d. What about your experience with marriage do you consider to be essential? In other words, if you were describing your experience of marriage what could you not leave out?
    - i. How do you mean?

- e. What contexts, situations, or events have influenced or affected your experience of marriage?
  - i. How do you mean?
- 9. Any additional questions that arise based on the content of the participant's responses that will help to provide a more complete description of the experience are allowed.

### **Closing Demographic Questions**

- 10. What is your current zip code?
- 11. In what zip code have you spent the most years of your life?
- 12. How do you describe your ethnicity?
- 13. Do you have children? If so, how many?
- 14. Are your children biological, step, adopted, foster, or something else?
- 15. Is this your first marriage? If not, can you tell me about any previous marriages (gender, duration, etc.)?
- 16. Do you consider your marriage to be monogamous?

Appendix E

Informed Consent

Project: Lesbian Marriage: An Exploration of the Experience of Female Same-Sex Marriage

Researcher: Melissa Mulick, Psy.D. Student in Clinical Psychology

You are invited to participate in a research study. The purpose of this research study is to explore individuals' experience of legalized female same-sex marriage. You are being asked to participate because you are a woman over the age of 21 who is currently legally married to a woman.

If you participate in this research, you will be asked to partake in a 2 – 4 hour audio-taped interview. The content of this interview will consist of any topics you deem relevant to your personal experience of female same-sex marriage. You will also be asked basic demographic questions such as your date of birth, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and the city of your current residence.

The risk inherent in this study is the potential stress of emotional topics coming up within the interview process. Know that sharing personal experiences related to unpleasant memories can be uncomfortable or overwhelming for some people.

If, while answering the survey questions, you become overwhelmed by these feelings you are encouraged to: reach out to a psychotherapist, call the National Suicide Hotline at 1-800-273-8255, call your local crisis hotline, and/or access online crisis chat at <http://crisisclinic.org/find-help/crisis-chat/>. A potential benefit of participation in this study may include the personal satisfaction of sharing your experiences with others.

Your participation will take approximately 2 – 4 hours and you will be provided with a \$5 Starbucks gift card as a small token of appreciation for your time.

Your participation in this research is strictly voluntary. You may refuse to participate at all, or choose to stop your participation at any point in the research, without fear of penalty or negative consequences of any kind.

The information you provide for this research will be treated confidentially, and all raw data will be kept in a secured file by the principal investigator. Results of the research will be reported without the inclusion of any individually identifiable information.

You also have the right to review the results of the research if you wish to do so. A copy of the results may be obtained by contacting the principal investigator at the address below:

*Melissa Mulick*  
(503) 830-XXXX  
[xxxxxxx@antioch.edu](mailto:xxxxxxx@antioch.edu)

There will be no direct or immediate personal benefits from your participation in this research.

I understand that this research study has been reviewed and Certified by the Institutional Review Board, Antioch University, Seattle. For research-related problems or questions regarding participants' rights, I can contact Antioch University's Institutional Board Chair, Mark Russell, PhD at [xxxxxxx@antioch.edu](mailto:xxxxxxx@antioch.edu).

The primary researcher conducting this dissertation study is Melissa Mulick, PsyD Student. The supervising dissertation chair is Dana Waters, PsyD, who can be contacted at [xxxxxxx@antioch.edu](mailto:xxxxxxx@antioch.edu). If you have questions later, you may contact Melissa Mulick at (503) 830-XXXX or [xxxxxxx@antioch.edu](mailto:xxxxxxx@antioch.edu).

I have read and understand the information explaining the purpose of this research and my rights and responsibilities as a participant. My signature below designates my consent to participate in this research study, according to the terms and conditions outlined above.

Participant Name (printed): \_\_\_\_\_

Participant Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Participant Phone Number: \_\_\_\_\_

Is it OK to leave you a voicemail message on this phone?    Yes     No

In addition to agreeing to participate, I also consent to having the interview audio-recorded.

Participant Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Printed name of person obtaining consent \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of person obtaining consent: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_



## Appendix F

### Example of the Determination of Meaning Units

25/This time it was like Katie barlett. And it was so fun! And I think that it was fun to be engaged, a lot of our friends just were like oh, y'know, you guys are just ridiculous y'know, we don't need to do that, we've been together a lot of our friends have been together that same y'know 15-20 years, and they're like but now it's interesting because once we got into it and so it was fun. 26/And for my wife it was amazing because the acceptance for people to y'know she was like first of all she said okay, we'll we're just gonna have a small 50 people. I said ok, perfect. Here's our Christmas card list. You pick the 50 people who we're gonna invite and then we'll go from there. And then she was like yeah, ok. That's not happening. 27/And then she said I just don't think people are gonna want to come. And she told that to our kids were there and our son and oldest one were like who wouldn't be? What planet are you living on? Were you not at your 50<sup>th</sup> birthday? because we had a big 50<sup>th</sup> birthday. He said there are gonna be so many people that want to come to this. 28/And y'know and they're talking about the engagement and my wife would come home and she'd say oh put so and so on the list because they wanna come and she got so excited and emotional and understanding that acceptance. 29/It was and I kept saying, enough. Enough. The venue's not gonna hold any more people and so it was just the opposite—we had 180 people and it was the venue would seat 181. So we're right at max capacity with the venue. 30/So anyway, it was fun.

## Appendix G

Excerpt of Excel Data Analysis File (Individual Participant “P4” Tab) Column B:

Meaning Units

A	B
1	<b>Transcript Excerpt (Meaning Unit)</b>
25 26	This time it was like Katie barlett. And it was so fun! And I think that it was fun to be engaged, a lot of our friends just were like oh, y'know, you guys are just ridiculous y'know, we don't need to do that, we've been together a lot of our friends have been together that same y'know 15-20 years, and they're like but now it's interesting b/c once we got into it and so it was fun.
26 27	And for my wife it was amazing because the acceptance for people to y'know she was like first of all she said okay, we'll we're just gonna have a small 50 people. I said ok, perfect. Here's our xmas card list. You pick the 50 people who we're gonna invite and then we'll go from there. And then she was like yeah, ok. That's not happening.
27 28	And then she said I just don't think people are gonna want to come. And she told that to our kids were there and our son and oldest one were like who wouldn't be? What planet are you living on? Were you not at your 50th birthday? b/c we had a big 50th birthday. He said there are gonna be so many people that want to come to this.
28 29	And y'know and they're talking about the engagement and my wife would come home and she'd say oh put so and so on the list b/c they wanna come and she got so excited and emotional and understanding that acceptance.
29 30	It was and I kept saying, enough. Enough. The venue's not gonna hold any more people and so it was just the opposite—we had 180 people and it was the venue would seat 181. So were right at max capacity with the venue

## Appendix H

Excerpt of Excel Data Analysis File (Individual Participant “P4” Tab) Columns

C-D: Transformed Meaning Units and Structure

	A	C	D
1		<b>Transformed Meaning Unit</b>	<b>Structure</b>
25		P4 states that this wedding was a lot of fun because it was elaborate. She also found their engagement to be a lot of fun, although many of their lesbian friends didn't understand why they were getting married.	25/P4 had a lot of fun planning and executing an elaborate wedding, although many of her lesbian friends didn't understand why they wanted to pursue a wedding at all because they considered it heterosexist.
26			
26		P4 states that the process of their wedding was huge for their wife, who wanted a small wedding but then realized that they had too many people close to them to limit the guests to 50.	
27			
27		P4 states that her wife felt insecure that nobody would want to come to their wedding. Their children heard her say this and asked her how she could think that after how many people showed up for their 50th birthday party.	
28			26,27,28,29,/P4's wife felt insecure about inviting a lot of people to their wedding because she didn't expect that they would want to come. She was emotional and surprised by the enthusiasm that others expressed for her same-sex wedding.
28		P4 states that while they were engaged her wife would go out and talk to people about it and then come home and want to add people to the guest list. She felt emotional and excited about the surprising level of acceptance she was experiencing.	
29			
29		P4 states that she had to finally tell her wife enough, that the venue wouldn't hold as many people as she wanted to invite. They ended up having 180 people in a space with a max capacity of 181.	
30			