Before and After ‘I Do’:
Marriage Processes For Mid-Life Gay and Lesbian Married Couples

Thesis

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By
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Abstract

This qualitative thesis examines how mid-life gay and lesbian married individuals navigate the institution of marriage. Using data from 30 couples in Massachusetts collected in 2013, 9 years after marriage equality was legalized in that state, this thesis seeks to complicate previous research which overwhelmingly focuses on the positive aspects of same-sex marriage for lesbian and gay individuals, relationships, and families. The central themes that emerge in the analysis are: 1) the symbolic power of the institution of marriage, 2) the pragmatic power of the institution of marriage, 3) the rejection of the power of the institution of marriage, and 4) ambivalence with marriage. These findings contribute to understanding not only the positive but also the negative and ambivalent effects of marriage access for lesbian and gay individuals. Additionally, this research provides new insight towards the larger goal of family studies that aims at exploring the multiple meanings of and experiences of this powerful institution.
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Table of Contents

Abstract................................................................................................................... ii
Acknowledgements............................................................................................... iii
Vita........................................................................................................................ iv
List of Tables .......................................................................................................... vi
Introduction........................................................................................................... 1
Background........................................................................................................... 4
Data and Methods................................................................................................ 12
Findings.................................................................................................................. 16
Discussion.............................................................................................................. 35
Limitations and Conclusion............................................................................... 40
References............................................................................................................ 42
Appendix: Tables................................................................................................. 46
List of Tables

Table 1. Demographic Information of Sample…………………………………………………………46
Table 2. List of Codes for Analysis ………………………………………………………………………47
Introduction

The United States Supreme Court legalized marriage equality in 2015 and same-sex couples now have the opportunity to address the question “Should we get married?” Coming to an answer is often a complex process influenced by many factors—especially for couples who have been in committed unions for several years. Prior to federal marriage equality, Massachusetts became the first state to legalize same-sex unions in 2004. Due to these legal changes, I explore the decision-making processes and experiences of marriage of lesbian and gay individuals in Massachusetts. This research provides a new perspective in understanding the changing life experiences of gay and lesbian individuals, as well as potential transformations to the institution of marriage due to marriage equality.

As both an institution and a relationship status, marriage represents “communal duty, loyalty, moral education, inherited property relations, and social and civic status” (Yamin, 2012, p. 1). Due to the plurality of public and private meanings associated with marriage, changes to the institution of marriage have immense effects on individuals and relationships. In this research, I look particularly at the negotiations of marital processes for lesbian and gay couples. Marriage maintains a central role in “the cultural construction of normative gender and sexuality” and continues to be important to study, particularly in the current context of marriage equality (Kimport, 2009, p. 4). I explore
the experience of marriage for lesbian and gay couples who got married by asking two sub-questions:

1) How do mid-life lesbian and gay married individuals talk about their decisions to marry and what factors contribute to those decisions?

2) How do individuals/couples feel that getting married affected their relationship?

Some previous research examines the experiences of marriage for same-sex couples (Ocobock, 2013; Lannutti, 2005; Porche & Purvin, 2008; Schecter, Tracy, Page & Luong, 2008; Haas & Whitton, 2015; Humble, 2013). Yet, this body of research focuses primarily on the decision to marry and the positive effects of marriage on an intimate relationship, failing to examine fully the complexity of marriage experiences from a sociological perspective for married mid-life lesbian and gay individuals. For example, critics of marriage have framed marriage as an oppressive institution or, alternatively, marriage has been framed as an emancipatory goal of the marriage equality movement. Historically and culturally, marriage is both a source of “recognition, reward, and inclusion” as well as “coercion, hierarchy, and exclusion” (Yamin, 2012, p. 5). Many lesbian and gay individuals have complex experiences of marriage due to the simultaneous positive and negative functions of marriage. Few studies examine this possibility empirically.

In order to fill this gap, I examine how mid-life gay and lesbian individuals and couples navigate the institution of marriage and articulate positive, negative, and ambivalent experiences with marriage. This research uses dyadic data from Massachusetts in 2013 (after the federal legalization of marriage equality). Interviews
were conducted with 30 mid-life married couples and each member of the couple was interviewed separately (N = 60 interviews total; 30 gay individuals and 30 lesbian individuals). Through this data, I contribute to understanding the implications of marriage equality for mid-life individuals. Due to the historical denial of access to the institution of marriage, marriage processes differ for the mid-life age group (Humble, 2013). Data from each individual provides a particular opportunity to examine similarities and differences in marital marriage processes across and within couples. The interviews took place at a specific historical moment when same-sex marriage was legal in Massachusetts but not federally. Investigating the negotiations and decisions about marriage within this context contributes to knowledge about the experiences of marriage for lesbian and gay couples more generally.
Background

The current literature examining same-sex marriage focuses primarily on the myriad positive effects marriage brings lesbian and gay individuals, families, and communities. Fewer studies critique marriage from a feminist or queer theory perspective (for a review of the critiques of same-sex marriage see Hopkins, Sorenson, & Taylor, 2013). However, virtually no research has empirically explored how married gay and lesbian individuals’ perceptions of marriage are complex and include either negative assessments of the meaning of marriage, or the simultaneous presence of positive and negative (i.e., ambivalent) experiences of marriage. Through a juxtaposition of the continuing importance of marriage and negative critiques of marriage, the present study complicates previous conceptions of marriage as merely positive or negative for lesbian and gay individuals. Below I outline the basic literature on same-sex marriage as positive, and research that highlights the negative critiques of marriage. I then discuss how the present study contributes to the growing research on experiences of same-sex marriage.

The Positive Effects of Marriage for Lesbian and Gay Individuals and Couples

Scholars have explored marriage as positive in many ways for same-sex couples, often citing such beneficial attributes as: an increase in rights and benefits (Badgett, 2009), security (Lannutti, 2005), improvement in familial relationships (Ramos et al, 2009), decrease in psychological distress (Riggle, Rostosky, & Horne, 2010), and a
product of and recognition of activism (Taylor et al, 2009). I discuss the research on the positive effects of marriage for couples with a focus on rights and benefits, security, and emotional and interpersonal effects of marriage. Research on the positive effects of marriage contribute to understanding why individuals choose to marry and the positive consequences that decision has. This list is not exhaustive, but points to research to date that explores positive effects of marriage and reasons marriage is important for lesbian and gay couples (for additional review, see Rostosky & Riggle, 2017).

*Rights and benefits.* Proponents of marriage equality have highlighted the benefits of marriage for same-sex couples including parental benefits, economic benefits, health insurance, and federal income tax, among others (Bennett & Gates, 2004). Prior to the legalization of marriage, research examined the various ways that same-sex couples negotiated their relationships *without* the legal sanctioning of their marriages (Riggle et al., 2006; Reczek, Elliott, & Umberson 2009). For example, scholars highlighted the use of alternative legal documents (wills, powers of attorney) in same-sex marriage and found that those who used these documents did so for protection, to show commitment, or because families of origin wanted them to (Riggle et al., 2006). Now that marriage is federally legal, these processes of creating and protecting same-sex relationships differ.

Research emphasizes the centrality of rights and benefits for same-sex couples (Haas & Whitton, 2015; Badgett, 2009; Riggle et al., 2006). Haas and Whitton (2015) explored the effects of cohabitation and marriage on the relationships of same-sex couples across forty-seven states. In this study, participant’s most common reason for marriage was access to legal rights and benefits (Haas & Whitton, 2015). Badgett’s (2009) work found that marriage provides direct benefits such as health insurance
benefits, federal taxes, social security, other federal benefits, and citizenship access. Badgett also summarizes indirect benefits of marriage such as the signaling of commitment and the promotion of the specialization of labor within families, and marriage acting as a guide for financial transactions and structuring of finances within families. For same-sex families, the benefits and rights associated with marriage are immense, with the financial costs of the inability to marry amounting to tens or hundreds of thousands of dollars (Badgett, 2009). The focus on financial reasons for marriage, while important, is not the complete picture. Research that juxtaposes both tangible and intangible reasons for marriage can capture the complexity of marriage processes for same-sex couples.

*Security.* Scholars have framed the positive effects of marriage in terms of security (Lannutti, 2005; Einarsdottir, 2013). Lannutti (2005) explored the multiple perspectives on marriage by interviewing older (ages 56-73) same-sex couples and found three main themes: increased sense of security, increased sense of recognition, and the presence of misgivings about marriage (Lannutti, 2005). Lannutti’s research contributes to a complex understanding of marriage and the experiences of marriage for lesbian and gay couples. This research particularly highlights how legal marriage—and the rights and benefits provided—cultivate greater feelings of security. However, Lannutti’s (2005) research focuses on older same-sex couples’ experiences which likely differ qualitatively from mid-life couples due to the length of relationship, as well as historical context of marriage.

*Emotional and Interpersonal Effects of Marriage.* In addition to the tangible positive effects of marriage for lesbian and gay individuals, research has explored how
marriage can have positive effects on interpersonal relationships with extended families. This literature includes both families created by same-sex couples and lesbian and gay individuals’ relationships with their families of origin (Ocobo, 2013; Ramos et al., 2009; Meezan & Rauch, 2005). Ocobo (2013) explored the complex effects of marriage on gay men’s relationships with their families of origin and found that marriage had perceived positive outcomes for over half of participants. These positive outcomes included “greater relationship recognition and legitimacy, new expressions of familial support, and additional family inclusion and belonging” (Ocobo, 2013, p. 195).

Similarly, a survey of same-sex couples in Massachusetts reported 83% of married gay and lesbian couples said their children were happier due to their parents’ marriage (Ramos et al., 2009).

Marriage is also central to people’s lives for cultural and symbolic reasons. Badgett (2010) emphasized these reasons by claiming that the increase in marriage for same-sex couples indicates that marriage is not purely for financial reasons but also due to the cultural or symbolic meanings associated with the institution. Other scholars have investigated the cultural and symbolic importance of marriage for both same-sex and different-sex couples (Hull, 2006; Swidler, 2013; Taylor et al., 2009; Cherlin, 2009). The shared cultural meanings of marriage as related to love, stability, and legitimacy are central to societal understandings of marriage, and experiences of marriage. Further research can explore how cultural meanings of marriage influence decisions and experiences of marriage.

*Negative Experiences and Critiques of Marriage*
While extensive research has explored positive effects of marriage for individuals and couples, some literature details the negative effects or misgivings and critiques of marriage. Scholars have levied several theoretical critiques pointing to the negative side of marriage as an institution since the 1960’s feminist movement. These scholars critiqued marriage as an oppressive institution either for women (Card, 1996) or for non-heterosexual individuals (Warner 2000). Critiques of marriage are based in the privileging of marriage as the ideal relationship form and the legitimacy associated with marriage. While marriage “confers legitimacy, belonging, and a sense of life-stage transformation” to those who marry (O’Brien, 2007, p. 142). This legitimating can serve to delegitimize other forms of relationships and family structures (Warner, 1999). The ways these critiques manifest in individual experiences of marriage provides an important link between the theoretical understanding of marriage and the lived realities of being married for lesbian and gay individuals. These complexities, along with the pragmatic benefits and symbolic role of marriage, may manifest as ambivalent experiences for lesbian and gay individuals’ navigations of the institution of marriage.

Empirical literature on the “dark” side of marriage for lesbian and gay couples is comparatively smaller than research on positive experiences and benefits. A focus on negative experiences of marriage includes new forms of familial exclusion (Ocobock, 2013) and misgivings about getting married (Lannutti, 2010; Porche & Purvin, 2008; Rolfe & Peel, 2011). Critiques of marriage focus on marriage as a patriarchal and heteronormative institution, delegitimating non-marital relationships, and the linking of marriage with full citizenship (O’Brien, 2007; Warner, 1999; Auchmuty, 2004). For example, in one of few papers that examines complex experiences of same-sex marriage,
Ocobock (2013) found that marriage was associated with positive changes in familial relationships for the majority of the sample; however, close to half of the respondents had perceived negative outcomes with their families of origin due to marriage. Other work explores misgivings about marriage by researching those who did and did not decide to marry (Porche & Purvin, 2008; Rolfe & Peel, 2011). Porche and Purvin (2008) investigated same-sex relationship longevity and couples’ misgivings about marriage. Findings indicated that age was a factor in the prevalence of misgivings about marriage, with the two oldest couples choosing not to marry. Research that explores both the positive and the negative perspectives on marriage for lesbian and gay couples reflects the complexity of experiences with marriage and further avenues for researching marriage.

*The Present Study: The Importance of Ambivalence*

Previous empirical research on the experiences of lesbian and gay individuals who married focuses on the positive effects of marriage equality — and to a lesser extent a critique of marriage equality. Yet, what is missing in this literature is research that examines the complex and ambivalent views of the meaning of marriage for same-sex couples. The present study extends previous research that complicates notions of marriage as merely positive or negative for lesbian and gay individuals, relationships, and families. In doing so, I contribute to research on the multiple meanings and experiences of marriage (Ocobock, 2013; Lannutti, 2005; Porche & Purvin, 2008; Schecter, Tracy, Page & Luong, 2008; Haas & Whitton, 2015; Humble, 2013) by understanding ambivalence and marriage equality in the lives of gay and lesbian individuals.
I employ the concept of ambivalence to investigate the complex marriage experiences of lesbian and gay individuals. I draw on another empirical study (Rolfe & Peel 2011) that employed ambivalence to explore perspectives on civil partnerships for those who chose not to become civil partners. Rolfe and Peel found paradoxes in the perception of civil partnerships for the same-sex couples in their study. Rolfe and Peel framed these paradoxes as contributing to the ambivalence lesbian and gay individuals have regarding legal recognition of relationships. However, ambivalence about the legal recognition of relationships will differ for those who chose to marry in ways that are important to explore.

Following Humble (2013) who explored marriage processes for 20 mid- to later-life lesbian and gay couples in Canada, I use “ambivalence” as a theoretical framework because it focuses on the likelihood of contradictory expectations, feelings and desires between and within individuals. Connidis and McMullin (2002) advance a conceptualization of ambivalence that emphasizes the relationship between individual action, agency, and social structures. This definition presents sociological ambivalence as a “feature of structured sets of social relations” (Connidis & McMullin, 2002, p. 559). The structured set of social relations presents “contradictions and paradoxes” that are “reproduced in interpersonal relationships” (p. 559). Connidis and McMullin’s conception of ambivalence is useful to the present research, which seeks to explore how changing social structures (marriage equality in this case) can influence individual feelings of ambivalence. I also explore how married gay and lesbian individuals negotiate and construct life decisions, relationships, and marriage within a structurally ambivalent context. This sociological work focuses explicitly on those who chose to legally marry
(rather than compare with those that did not) in order to explore the variation in experiences of marriage for those who navigate a heteronormative institution from a non-heterosexual perspective. In doing so, I confirm past research but also provide new perspectives on same-sex married couples’ orientation toward marriage.

In this research, I focus on lesbian and gay mid-life long-term married couples. These individuals were in lengthy relationships previously, and thus this combination of mid-life stage and relationship duration presents a “unique opportunity to study the transition to marriage” (Humble, 2013, p. 132). The opportunity to explore the transition to marriage can convey information about the institution of marriage more generally. Particularly, many mid-life individuals did not view marriage as something that would happen in their lifetime, and so constructed relationships outside of the institution. When marriage was legalized, these individuals were exposed to a new decision-making process and underwent marital processes differently and often ambivalent opinions and experiences. Focus on this unique transition to marriage, utilizing dyad data and including both men and women, are all strengths of the present study.
Data and Methods

The present study examines the motivations for marriage and the effects of marriage on the relationships of 60 mid-life married individuals in 30 couples (15 gay couples and 15 lesbian couples). Researchers collected the data for this study in 2013, 9 years after marriage equality passed in Massachusetts as part of the Massachusetts Health and Relationship Project. The time elapsed between marriage and interviews provides space for participants to consider the effects of marriage retrospectively. Individual data from both spouses provides an opportunity to compare the decision-making process for marriage across sexuality and gender for couples, as well as to explore similarities and differences within couples.

Data Collection

This research utilizes a subset of qualitative in-depth interviews (N=60); the original sample included 15 heterosexual couples, but these couples were not asked about reasons for marriage in similarly comprehensive ways, and therefore are not included in the present study. All of the participants were residents of Massachusetts, legally married, and in committed, long-term relationships. The research team recruited couples from the Massachusetts Registry of Vital Statistics by gathering the names, birth dates, addresses, occupations, and dates of marriage for all same-sex couples married in Massachusetts.
from 2004 to 2012. The research team recruited remaining couples through friends and family of participants, as well as local community centers and public spaces.

The research team conducted interviews for a larger project on marriage, health, and dyadic health behaviors, and I focus on the interviews of gay and lesbian participants in this research. The interviews reached saturation on each of the themes in the interview guide (Relationship History, Routine and Serious Illness or Injury, Partner Health Problems, Support and Stress, Mental Health, Relationships and Health Behavior, and Sexuality). This study focuses on the narratives collected in the first section of the interview on relationship history, including questions such as “How long did you date?”, “What led you to marry?” and “How did marrying change your relationship?” Interviewers often followed up these questions with clarification questions.

Sample Characteristics

The sample consists of 60 respondents, with an average of 50.4 years of age at the time of data collection, and a range of 41-63 years. This age range is due to the intentional focus on mid-life couples, as age was a main requirement for participation in this study. As for relationship duration, the average number of years cohabiting was 19.9 years, with a range of 8-32 years. The average number of years married within the overall sample was 7.5 with a range of 4-9 years married (see Table 1 in Appendix for complete sample demographics).

The sample includes fifty-six individuals identified as white, three as African-American/black, and one as Hispanic. I discuss the racial composition of this sample further within the limitations section. However, it is important to acknowledge the context in which the research team collected these interviews. According to census data,
Massachusetts is 82.1% white, 8.4% black, 6.6% Asian, and 2.9% other (United States Census Bureau). While this sample is still disproportionately white, it is less so considering the demographic context of Massachusetts.

Reflections on Secondary Qualitative Data

For this research, I utilize secondary qualitative data; data that I was not involved in collecting but was available to me from a larger project conducted by other scholars. Debra Umberson and Corinne Reczek led the data collection process, which was supported by NIH funding. The data were obtained through informal data sharing, when “primary researchers may share their data with others who were not involved in the primary research, and lead or be part of the secondary analysis team” (Heaton 2008:35).

There are both strengths and weaknesses of using secondary qualitative data. Key issues of secondary qualitative data include “the problem of not having ‘been there’” and “the problem of data fit” (Heaton 2008:40). Heaton refers to “the problem of not having been there,” when the researcher analyzes data that was collected by other researchers (Heaton 2008:40). While the problem of data fit is to what extent “data collected for one (primary) purpose can be re-used for another (secondary) purpose” (Heaton 2008:40). The former presents more of a problem than the latter in this research; understanding relationships and family was one of the main goals of the primary data collection, so this research is still aligned with the original goals. I address the “problem of not having been there” by working with individuals who were involved in the data collection process and can give that perspective.

Data Analysis
I chose an inductive data analysis approach, which entails looking for themes to emerge, and then coding based on those themes. For coding, I follow Charmaz (2014) to develop analytic categories inductively, search for variation, with the goal of contributing to theory construction and increase understanding of the meaning of marriage (Charmaz, 2014). In line with typical approaches to qualitative research, I utilized a two-stage process. For the first stage, I became familiar with the data by reading all interview transcripts and developing different memos for each demographic category (gay and lesbian) to look for initial themes. Then, I coded 10 interviews to develop a coding scheme for the data. The list originally had two main themes: marriage motivations and marriage effects. Marriage motivations were responses to questions about why they decided to get married, while marriage effects were responses related to how relationships changed after marriage. Because respondents do not always speak in a linear manner, many similar themes emerged in each section. Due to this, I drew a mind map to see how the codes related to each other. The mind map reflects itself in the final structure of the analysis section, through the main four themes.

Once I had constructed a list of themes and codes (see Table 2 in Appendix for list), I began the second stage of coding, a “focused, selective phase that uses the most significant or frequent initial codes to sort, synthesize, integrate, and organize large amounts of data” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 113). While I relied on the list of codes as the coding process progressed, new themes emerged such that the later list of codes looked slightly different from the list at the beginning.
Findings

This research provides a new lens into the changing cultural meaning of marriage and family by empirically examining mid-life gay and lesbian couples’ views on marriage with an emphasis on simultaneously positive and negative views of marriage. I ask, “How do gay and lesbian couples’ explain their decisions to marry and the effects of marriage? How does gender affect these decisions?” Four main themes, with subthemes, emerged: 1) the symbolic power of the institution of marriage, 2) the pragmatic power of the institution of marriage, 3) the rejection of the power of the institution of marriage, and 4) ambivalence with marriage. The themes are by no means mutually exclusive; respondents referenced multiple different themes simultaneously. Additionally, participants may utilize several different subthemes within a category. I apply ambivalence as a lens to understand the simultaneous presence of positive and negative perceptions and experiences of marriage, detailed below.

The Symbolic Power of the Institution of Marriage

Sixty-five percent of the respondents (n=39) referenced the symbolic power of marriage when discussing their decision to marry. The symbolic theme manifested through multiple sub-themes: the perception of others (n=30), experiences of legitimacy (n=26), spousal titles of “husband” or “wife” as important (n=15), and feelings of community and belonging (n=26).
Perception of others. Participants discussed how marriage altered the perception of others—including family members, friends, and co-workers. Thirty respondents—seventeen men and thirteen women—referenced this theme. When asked if there is a difference in the perception of others due to being married, one respondent—Ronald—answered:

Absolutely… [marriage] adds a legitimacy. On a couple of levels, on the legal level…there are certain things we can do now. Also, you know friends and family, we have moved into the category of some of my older brothers who are legitimately married.

In addition to the sense of legal legitimacy marriage gave Ronald, he thought his relationship was now viewed as equally legitimate compared to his (heterosexual) siblings.

Alternatively, some participants actively claimed that they did not think marriage changed how others’ perceived them. These respondents made a differentiation amongst the “others” and said that they did not feel like it made a difference amongst their family or friends, but it did to a wider, general audience who did not know them well. For example, Andrew said:

Our family and close friends already sort of knew we were together forever and made that commitment to each other. And I think outside of that, there is this extra level of you got…now I got a ring on, you are actually with that person forever, and it does not take knowing you well or knowing your relationship really well to get that.

The ring was a way of communicating the marital status to the world, outside of those that knew the couple closely. Due to marriage, many participants believed others took them more seriously, or the couple received increased respect and legitimacy.
Throughout the reflections on the perceptions of others, respondents often made comparisons to or felt measured against their heterosexual family members’ intimate relationships. While marriage is historically a heteronormative institution, getting married for these lesbian and gay couples gave them access to an institution, title, benefits, and relationship recognition that enabled heterosexual individuals to understand them as a couple better.

*Discussions of legitimacy.* Respondents’ sense of legitimacy related closely to the perception of others. Twenty-six participants discussed marriage as legitimating (fourteen men and twelve women). For example, Aaron referenced conversations with his coupled gay friends who described him and his husband, James, as “an institution.” The friends were discussing how the couples had met each other, and one friend told James and Aaron, “When I met you guys, you were married, so you guys are an institution.” Aaron reflected on that, saying:

> It is just interesting that our friends said, you guys are an institution, I met you guys when you were married. So they think of us as a unit, and I do not know if that would be different if we were not married. They would still think of us as a unit? I would think so, because as I said, it does not define my relationship. My relationship is as strong with or without this piece of paper.

Aaron and James’ marriage enabled others to perceive them as a unit. Aaron doubted whether others would still perceive them as “an institution” without marriage. Although he posited they would because marriage does not define the relationship, he was not confident. Here Aaron acknowledged the importance of marriage but also negated it by references to marriage as a “piece of paper.” Participants’ claims of the same relationship
strength—regardless of marriage—was central and I discuss this further in the rejection of marriage theme.

Additionally, participants invoked legitimacy to claim adulthood, not just legitimacy as a couple. Mel states that:

Marriage is a normalizer, just like buying a house…getting married is something that grownups do. These are rites of passage that people go through and I think when gay people aren’t allowed to get married, it makes things always doubtful… there’s just some legitimization that goes along with [marriage] to have the same rights and responsibilities.

Legitimization marks an individual’s adulthood and status as a responsible person. Mel’s statements on the role of marriage emphasized the multiple meanings marriage holds within society. Marriage, as a marker of adulthood, can also explain the continuing idea of marriage as the ideal form of relationship recognition.

The state—in this case, the state of Massachusetts—is important in the process of legitimization of relationships through marriage. While the state grants legal rights and benefits, the state also carries power to legitimate relationships symbolically or emotionally. When asked the difference between their commitment ceremony and marriage, David responded that:

The marriage was more real. The commitment ceremony was wonderful, we loved it, and it was really nice. We called it a blessing of our relationship actually…All of our family was there…friends, same church, same minister. But getting married and signing the paper…and having the minister say ‘By the power vested in me in the state of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts I now pronounced you married.’ Amazing, just amazing. So it was more of an emotional difference than a rational difference.

The acknowledgment of David’s relationship by the state evoked an emotional reaction different from his commitment ceremony, even though the two events were similar.
David’s emotional reaction emphasizes the symbolic importance of marriage which is linked to visibility and recognition by others and by the government.

*Naming and titles.* The importance of naming was central to both individual identity as well as the perception of others and the recognition of the relationship. Fifteen participants—nine men and six women—emphasized the importance of titles of “wife” or “husband.” The gender differences in positive references to “wife” and “husband” may be due to experiences of marriage as patriarchal, a critique of marriage I explore further in the section on the rejection of the power of marriage. For some, there was a direct difference in titles after getting married. When asked what changed in their relationship after marriage, David said, “The only difference was that we started calling each other ‘husbands.’” For others, there was more of an emotional connection to the ability to say “my husband.” “There’s a certain amount of pride when I’m somewhere and I can say he’s my partner, he’s my husband.”

Alternatively, others avoided the word “husband” because of possible reactions of others or potential homophobia. William said, “I think I’m still careful about introducing Richard as a ‘partner’ as opposed to a ‘husband’…because I just don’t know how people are going to react.” Factors that could potentially influence the difference in use of titles—and future research could explore—might include an individual’s activism in the marriage equality movement, prior experiences of homophobia, previous reactions to introducing their spouses, and the responses of family and friends to individual’s sexuality.

Some respondents made sure to correct individuals who used the incorrect titles—“partner” or “friend”—when referencing their husband or wife. This negotiation was an
important process in claiming the recognition and legitimacy associated with marriage for some respondents. Philip’s family would refer to Mark as Philip’s “partner,” the couple:

Would always correct people…I refuse, especially after standing in the bowels of the statehouse getting yelled at…and feeling threatened…and all of that, I just am like, no…I won’t let anybody refer to us as anything but husbands, because I worked too hard for that, and I deserve it.

Mark and Philip engaged in rigorous, and sometimes dangerous, activism in order to gain the right to the word “husband,” so they did not allow others to devalue that activism with the language of “partner.” The titles of spouse were linked with the institution of marriage and right to marry in ways that were important due to the symbolic power of marriage.

**Belonging and Community.** The symbolic power of marriage also emerged as a source of belonging and community for twenty-six of the respondents (fifteen men and eleven women). Participants articulated this theme in several ways: belonging to a family, belonging within a symbolic community, marriage as a site of community building, and belonging to a social movement. Sally’s reaction to being married surprised her. She described being married as an experience of greater connection with her partner, and her partner’s family. “I felt more deeply connected…with Heidi, and interconnected with her family and kind of having the force of the law behind us in certain areas of protection.” For Sally, the connections were to her partner and to her family, a greater sense of belonging within her family.

Others described the feelings of community and belonging to a larger community. Andrew described this feeling as “A sense of pride…knowing how far we’ve come as a community, [and] being sort of blown away by the fact that same gender marriages are
legal in the state of Massachusetts.” For Andrew, the feelings of community were with
the larger LGBTQ community. Marriage was a sign that progress had occurred and that
those who identified as lesbian or gay had achieved the same right to marry as
heterosexual individuals, a right that did not seem possible for most of his life.

Another participant framed their wedding as a community-building event. David
stated, “We had to [marry.] We wanted to make that statement. We wanted to be able to
say we were married to each other. We did it in our church…We wanted to bring
everyone together and be part of it.” David and his partner wanted all of their loved ones
to be part of the wedding, and their place of worship was an important site for that
gathering. This couple also reflected on their wedding as a larger event, the legalization
of same-sex marriages in Massachusetts, and stated that they wanted to be part of history
or social change.

Individual’s references to activism also reflected community and belonging.
Several respondents were activists in the movement for marriage equality and shared
their activism as evidence of belonging to a movement. When discussing their decision to
marry, some respondents shared their history with the marriage equality movement. Mark
said:

We were heavily, heavily involved in the Freedom to Marry movement in
Massachusetts, back when nobody was talking about marriage…but we
were front lines, like grass roots people in the Freedom to Marry
movement in Massachusetts, back when the movement could sit around
our dinner table.

The emphasis on the involvement in the marriage movement underlined the importance
of marriage and the right to marry for those respondents.
Another respondent, Kevin, framed his marriage as a way to honor marriage equality activism. When asked why he and his partner decided to get married, Kevin said, “In part, to honor the work that people had done to get same sex marriage legalized.” Kevin married both to celebrate his relationship and as a recognition of progress that had been made for LGBTQ individuals. Similarly, through marriage, individuals were able to claim a place in the marriage equality movement. Samuel’s marriage:

Was as much a personal statement and political statement…and social statement all rolled into one…we are part of the movement where we could say…I get to use the word ‘husband.’

Samuel framed marriage as becoming a part of history, as a right they had worked for, or in recognition of activist work for marriage equality. Each of these sub-themes—the perception of others, legitimacy, titles, and community—emphasize the symbolic importance of marriage for gay and lesbian couples and reflect positive perceptions and effects of marriage for participants.

*The Pragmatic Power of the Institution of Marriage*

Marriage, while symbolically important, was also central to participants’ lives and relationships for pragmatic reasons. Due to the rights and benefits associated with marriage, 68% of the respondents (n=41) referenced the benefits provided by marriage as a primary reason in their decision to marry. Participants described the pragmatic power of marriage by using four themes: legality (n=33), health-related protections (n=16), financial benefits (n=13) and protections related to parenting (n=12). Statements coded under “legality” focused on general rights and benefits, whereas health, financial, and parenting protections were subcategories of rights that participants emphasized.

Additionally, the social context influenced decisions to marry. The perceived threat of the
legal protections provided by marriage being taken away affected how individuals made
decisions about marrying. This perceived precariousness emphasizes the pragmatic
importance of marriage for lesbian and gay individuals as well as how decisions to marry
may differ for lesbian and gay individuals as compared to heterosexual individuals.

Legality. Some respondents—fourteen men and nineteen women—centered legal
reasons for marriage. Interviewees emphasized the historical importance of rights and
benefits for lesbian and gay relationships and families. Gerald illustrates this overall
category when he says, “The institution of marriage itself, we’re indifferent to. It exists. It
is something that if we participate in we can get something back from it. So we’ll do it.”
Marriage here is important solely because it served a purpose and benefitted them
through the provision of legal rights. This framework negates the symbolic importance of
marriage, and emphasizes the pragmatic importance of marriage. For Gerald, marriage
provided access to rights that are important for the protection of his relationship and
family. Other individuals focused specifically on legal, health, financial, or parenting
reasons to marry. Respondents referenced more than one of these dimensions, but
occasionally emphasized one as the most central reason for marriage.

One woman, Sharon, talked about how she and her spouse did not tell other
individuals about their marriage because they were worried someone would throw a
party. Instead, she compared her marriage to “how you sign a statement around
healthcare proxy or Power of Attorney…we signed a marriage license.” Here, marriage
was just another legal process. Sharon did not perceive marriage as a romantic or
symbolic moment for their relationship. Sharon’s illustration emphasizes marriage as a
legal form of protection for their relationship and family.
Financial benefits. Other responses regarding the importance of marriage were focused on financial benefits (n=13, eight men and five women). When asked how getting married changed their relationship, Troy responded, “It saved us $400 a month…we own property together…and it avoids any question of state inheritance taxes.” Another respondent, Tammy, discussed the difference in mortgage allowances based on marital status. She said:

When we applied for a mortgage we were only allowed like $150,000, yet…I was making over a $100,000 a year and [my partner] was making probably $85,000. How could we only afford a $150,000 when I know my friends that are married got a $600,000 house?

These narratives emphasize the financial benefits the state awards to married couples and references access to those benefits as central reasons to marry. Importantly, these pragmatic interests in the legal recognition of relationships resulted in increased perceptions of stability or permanence for some respondents. For example, because individuals now had more rights and legal recognition, they were able to perceive their relationships as more stable. The experiences of stability and permanence emphasize the overlap between pragmatic reasons for marriage and emotional changes within the relationship.

Health-related protections. Marriage was also important for health-related reasons. Respondents often cited narratives of previous health issues or fear of future health issues when discussing health as a reason to marry (n=16, seven men and nine women). Participants’ past experiences of being restricted from being with their partner or fears of future dire situations were prevalent in many of the interviews. When Mel,
Kathy’s spouse, shared with her mother their decision to marry, her mother replied that she did not believe in same-sex marriage. Mel responded:

That is because you do not need it…I just had surgery. Kathy had a baby…We have been in and out of hospitals. I cannot go into the hospital room to see Kathy because we are not married…if something happens we have no rights to see each other.

By providing health-related protections, marriage fostered feelings of security and increased confidence in their ability to handle crises.

*Parenting protections.* The final facet of pragmatic reasons to marry was family and parental protections. Twelve respondents (nine women and three men) referenced parenting as a reason for marriage. This gender gap is typical with same-sex couples today and could reflect a higher prevalence of parenting for the lesbian respondents and general trends that emphasize mothering for women. Pamela discussed parenting as a reason for marriage when she said, “I think part of it was the kids, my two, the two I gave birth to, [marriage] was just another added protection…it was just one of those things, if that’s some way to protect them or protect us, then ‘let’s do it’ kind of thing.” In adoption and birth processes, marriage served as an important protection for parents by easing adoption processes and providing another legal protection for their family and status as a couple.

*Threat of Rights Being Removed.* Another perspective on the effect of social context on marital decision-making for lesbian and gay individuals is the perceived precariousness of the right to marry in Massachusetts. Some respondents discussed their decision to marry as rushed due to worries that marriage rights would be revoked (n=15, ten men and five women). The urgency of marriage for some lesbian and gay respondents
is different from the experiences of heterosexual couples. Heterosexual individuals’ right to marry has not been questioned or subject to possible repeal or removal as law. Roger emphasized the perceived need to rush saying “I was adamant that we were going to do it those first days because I thought Romney was going to figure out a way to put an injunction in place and not let these marriages happen.” The decision to marry was not always at the time respondents would have chosen, because of the risk of the right being revoked. The decision to marry was rushed to ensure access to the rights and benefits that marriage provides. The social context, the individual history of activism and fears of marital rights disappearing, each influenced participant’s decisions to marry. Each of these sub-themes—legality, financial benefits, health-related protections, parenting protections, and threat of rights being removed—center the importance of rights and protections marriage provides couples. The institutional power of marriage is supported through the provision of rights by the state, rights that have positive effects for relationships and lives of the respondents.

*The Rejection of the Power of the Institution of Marriage*

While most respondents described one of the above beneficial themes of marriage, 73.3% of the respondents (n=44) also made concerted efforts to reject the power of marriage within their relationships. This theme manifested through various mechanisms: statements that marriage did not change their relationship (n=34), emphasis on critiques of marriage as heteronormative or “not for me” (n=14), and rejections of titles of “wife” or “husband” (n=7).

*No effect of marriage.* The most common form of rejection of the power of the institution of marriage—with 34 respondents (nineteen men and fifteen women)—was an
emphasis of no change in the couples’ relationship. Importantly, participants often
followed these statements with a “but…” that would reference a change external to the
couple due to marriage. Respondents emphasized that their relationship was just as solid
before, but that the only change was in the perception of others, or in the increased access
and benefits since marriage. An illustration of this sub-theme was when Gerald said “we
[now] have some protections…but has it changed our actual relationship between us, no.”
The rejection of the effect of marriage on their relationship emphasized that couples were
able to create equally solid and fulfilling relationships outside of marriage. In this
context, marriage either did not change anything or changes were not within the couple
dynamic, but external to it.

An illustration of claims that marriage did not change the relationship is when
Roger said that the decision to marry was easy because “we’d already been together 24
years. And it was like ‘we are married.’” These claims of marriage as only a “piece of
paper” serves several functions within these relationships. For respondents, this statement
emphasized the validity and legitimacy of their relationship regardless of the legalization
of same gender marriages. Additionally, these assertions emphasize that—for these
couples—marriage is just a piece of paper confirming what the couple already knows. In
contrast to a focus on the symbolic power of marriage, respondents negated that by
diminishing the role of marriage in the narrative of their relationship.

Critiques of marriage. Other narratives rejected the power of marriage by
emphasizing the heteronormative and patriarchal history of marriage (n=14, six men and
eight women). Sharon reflects on these critiques when she says “I think marriage is
ownership…It’s owning of children and names…so a ‘wife’ to me is part of that
historical terminology.” Sandy reflects further on the problematic history of marriage, saying, “Politically we didn’t necessarily think of marriage; we saw it as more of a heterosexual institution that was based on economic reasons historically.” These narratives reflect the disagreements amongst the LGBTQ community regarding whether or not the right to marry is a positive development for the LGBTQ community.

While there was little difference in the number of women and men who critiqued marriage, the critiques seemed qualitatively more vehement from women. This difference may be due to their identities as lesbian or as feminist paired with understandings of marriage as patriarchal. These critiques may have been even more prevalent if the sample included individuals who decided not to marry.

*Rejection of spousal titles.* The rejection of the institution of marriage also manifested through discussions of marital titles (n=7, two men and five women). Respondents rejected the titles related to marriage (of wife or husband). Sharon, who critiqued marriage as about economics and ownership, corrected individuals when they used the term “wife.” Kimberly is tentative about using the term wife because “wife feels very part of the male female dynamic. Like a wife and a husband go together. Two wives just does not sound right to me…wife sometimes sounds subservient to me.” For Kimberly, wife evoked heteronormativity and gender roles that made her uncomfortable. She also did not completely dismiss the term, but used it carefully and was more comfortable with terms less based in a heteronormative or patriarchal institution, such as “partner.” The gender difference in the rejection of titles may be due to gendered assumptions or connotations related to “wife.” These themes—the critiques of marriage, marriage as not changing the relationship, and rejection of spousal titles—are part of the
complex process of marriage for lesbian and gay individuals and indicate the ambivalence and complications of marriage for non-heterosexual individuals.

Ambivalence with Marriage

Synthesizing the three previous themes, both positive and negative appraisals of their same-sex marriage—known as ambivalence—emerged in the data. This occurred when the same individual vocalized both positive and negative appraisal of marriage. Two-thirds of respondents (n=41) had some level of ambivalence in their experiences of marriage. I measured this theme by looking for participants that utilized both: 1) the rejection of marriage and 2) the pragmatic power of marriage or the symbolic power of marriage (or both pragmatic and symbolic). Ten respondents referenced both the symbolic power of marriage as well as the rejection of the power of marriage. Thirteen respondents used both the pragmatic power of marriage and the rejection of the power of marriage. Eighteen participants utilized the pragmatic and symbolic power of marriage and the rejection of marriage simultaneously. Importantly, ambivalence could manifest to different degrees or in different ways. Ambivalence could be the simultaneous claiming of marriage not affecting relationships while also acknowledging pragmatic or symbolic benefits, or it could be critiques of marriage as heteronormative or patriarchal but getting married due to particular legal benefits. However, the prevalence of ambivalence within this study of people who did choose to marry speaks to the complexities of the marriage decisions as well as the complexities of perspectives on marriage for lesbian and gay people.

An illustration of ambivalence about marriage is when Mark discussed his wedding, saying:
We had 30 of our closest family and friends here to witness our marriage. But I mean, it felt so…it felt so, a little bit like a rote exercise because we’d already been, in our own eyes, married before…we got married in [country], we got a Civil Union…I mean, we just were collecting paper that said we were a couple, so…

For Mark, marriage was just the collection of papers because he felt like it was something they had done before due to past ceremonies and legal documents. However, when asked if it felt different from their marriage in another country, Mark said:

It did feel sweeter, in a way, because we had done so much directly to contribute to the success of that happening. I mean, standing day after day, night after night, in the bowels of the Statehouse, having people scream in my face all kinds of horrible, awful things … I mean, it was just, it was the worst, it was the worst. It was the best and the worst.

Mark’s marriage in Massachusetts was simultaneously “a rote exercise” as well as “sweeter” due to the work they did to gain marriage. Marriage is symbolically important for Mark and Philip, but came with complicated feelings due to potential feelings of repetition in marriage ceremonies as well as the homophobia he faced in the activism for marriage equality.

Sally also exhibited ambivalence in her discussions about marriage using both critiques of marriage and an emphasis on pragmatic benefits. When asked about the decision-making process of marriage, Sally said:

We thought about it….whether it made sense for us to [marry]. It didn’t seem like we should do it just because it was suddenly legal and I think having grown up with it not being available and suddenly being available, it seemed weird to do it just because. I think we also both had to kind of examine what being married meant to us because, previously, being married meant heterosexual people being married. There was all the baggage of the husband and wife thing, and you know, what that would, like what, why would we be getting married other than all of the legal benefits. Why would we choose to get married? So we wrestled with it for a while and Heidi wasn’t sure she wanted to… but we kept talking about it and we decided that we would for a lot of reasons, for the legal
benefits, for the, the ‘fuck you’ to people who didn’t want to see [same-sex couples] getting married.

The decision to marry was by no means simple for Sally. They had to negotiate what their conceptions of marriage were, as well as what the purpose of getting married would be. Finally, the pragmatic and symbolic reasons to marry did outweigh their trepidations. However, this process shaped how Sally and Heidi entered and experienced the institution of marriage and reflects similar processes for other gay and lesbian individuals.

Complex feelings about marriage for individuals created ambivalence within couples. Ambivalence also affected the couple experience. Couple ambivalence could have been that one individual viewed marriage positively and the other negatively, or both members were ambivalent about marriage which still influenced their decision-making process about marriage. In 15 couples (seven gay and eight lesbian couples) both partners individually expressed some level of ambivalence, so each reflected positive and negative perceptions of marriage. In other couples (n=10, five gay and five lesbian couples), one member expressed positive perspectives of marriage and one expressed ambivalent experiences with marriage, shaping how the couple negotiated the decision with each other. The varying levels of ambivalence within couples likely affects the experience of getting married for these lesbian and gay couples. Couple ambivalence does not necessarily mean individuals had conflict with each other about marriage, however couple ambivalence did sometimes manifest as conflict within the couple or as a longer process of negotiating the decision to marry.
Couple ambivalence was exhibited in several ways, either as longer decision-making processes about marriage or as conflict within the relationship. Richard reflected on his decision-making process with his husband, saying:

Initially when it passed, there was kind of like this, instantaneous, yes, let’s do it. And then there was later on, a little bit of a kind of hesitation, like, are we buying into a different paradigm … but… as they started talking about taking it away, it was kind of like, this is our right, and so we wanted to exercise that… there’s something about having that public legitimacy that says we’re treating this as seriously as your parents are treating their relationship.

Their initial reaction was to marry but then paused and considered whether that was a “paradigm” they wanted to engage with. After negotiating the pragmatic and symbolic benefits and critiques simultaneously, they did decide to marry.

Couple ambivalence was also illustrated by Karen and Debbie’s experience. Karen had a strong desire to marry. However, her partner, Debbie, opposed marriage and emphasized critiques of marriage as a heteronormative and patriarchal. When describing why the couple decided to marry after a conflicted decision-making process, Karen said:

It took [Debbie] a while but she does agree that it causes people to view us differently especially straight people when she tells them that we’re married they have a like ‘okay, I understand that.’ Which I am not saying is right or wrong but it is helpful.

The ability to portray the seriousness of the relationship to others more easily due to being married was central to couples’ decisions to marry. However, getting married was not an easy decision for Karen and Debbie to make and, due to their differing perspectives on marriage, resulted in ambivalent feelings within the couple.

Summary. Marriage is important symbolically due to the increased legitimacy with which they are viewed by others, and feelings of belonging. Marriage provides
important pragmatic benefits (legal recognition, financial benefits, access to healthcare, and increased protections through parenting). Respondents contradicted this power by emphasizing marriage as just a piece of paper, by discussing how their relationships were just as strong without marriage, and by sharing their critiques of marriage as heteronormative or patriarchal. Two-thirds of the participants referenced both positive perspectives on marriage as well as critiques of marriage, emphasizing the prevalence of ambivalence with the institution of marriage.

Each of these themes provide knowledge on the incredible variation in experiences and motivations of marriage for lesbian and gay couples. Previous perceptions of marriage as a problematic institution—reflected in critiques of marriage as heteronormative or patriarchal—combined with the pragmatic and symbolic benefits of marriage all influence complex or ambivalent experiences of marriage.
Discussion

The goal of this study was to explore the meanings and effects of marriage for lesbian and gay mid-life married couples. Most participants perceived marriage to have an immense affect on their lives and relationships, with a substantial percentage of respondents also rejecting the power of marriage through different mechanisms. The simultaneous acknowledgment of symbolic and pragmatic powers of marriage and the rejection or critique of marriage, or ambivalence, is important to understand in the context of marriage equality. These negotiations provide new empirical information on the experiences of marriage from a non-heterosexual perspective. This study also explores the micro-level consequences of larger policy changes, in this case the effects of marriage equality on individual lives and relationships. These explorations provide information on how marriage equality may operate in other states and nations. Additionally, through the framework of ambivalence I contribute to understanding how structural or theoretical critiques of marriage influence individual decisions and experiences. This research provides two vital contributions to the current literature, detailed below.

First, I found both positive and negative views of marriage abound, but the most striking finding was that most participants were ambivalent. Juxtaposed with the support found for the pragmatic importance of marriage (62% of respondents) and symbolic
importance of marriage (60% of respondents), were instances of rejection or negotiation of this power in their lives and relationships (74%). Two-thirds of the sample were ambivalent, or held views of the power of marriage while simultaneously negotiating with or rejecting this power. The prevalence of ambivalence in this research is remarkable precisely because the sample was comprised solely of individuals who did decide to marry. Respondents’ claims that marriage did not change their relationships were often coupled with simultaneous acknowledgments that marriage affected external factors (relationships with others or rights and benefits gained). The simultaneous claims of marriage as unimportant combined with the recognition that marriage affects other aspects of their lives speaks to lesbian and gay couples’ navigation of structural constraints with individual agency. Respondents constructed and represented their marital relationships in complex contexts and illustrates how individuals navigate institutions.

In the sample, ambivalent respondents often perceived marriage as a source of benefits and sign of greater legitimacy, while also rejecting marriage as “just a piece of paper,” heteronormative, or patriarchal. Ambivalence within the sample meant that decisions or experiences of marriage were rarely only positive or negative; rather marriage was complex and sometimes required considerations of implications and consequences of marriage. This process is different for lesbian and gay individuals—in reference to heterosexual individuals—due to the heteronormative history or structure of marriage. The simultaneity of negative critiques and positive perceptions within the same individual resulted in overall ambivalence about marriage as an institution for some. Lannutti (2005; 2010) has forwarded research that both illustrates benefits and misgivings about marriage for lesbian and gay couples, while Haas & Whitton (2015)
found a large majority of their study view marriage as positive and important to their relationship. My findings both support previous assessments of the importance and positive effects of marriage while also centering the complexities of marital experiences for lesbian and gay individuals.

Ambivalence also contributes to theoretical understandings of how marriage maintains institutional power. While marriage continues to be both symbolically and pragmatically significant, individuals resist this importance by rejecting the power of the institution. The emphasis on both pragmatic and symbolic importance of marriage were present simultaneously in this sample and point to the continuing significance of marriage. The numerous references to federal benefits supports Lannutti’s (2011) study that found that all married respondents referenced an increase in security (financial, medical, or relational). Slightly less than 2/3 of the present study’s sample referenced legal, health, financial, or parental rights as important for marriage. The continuing privileging of marriage with rights and benefits serves to maintain the institutional power of marriage. The maintenance of the institutional power of marriage contributes to discussions of the possible deinstitutionalization of marriage (Cherlin, 2004). This research provides support for the continuing importance of marriage in individual’s lives, both symbolically and pragmatically.

Second, I note that age, sexuality, and gender all influence the experiences and perspectives of marriage. In particular, experiences of marriage are qualitatively different for gay and lesbian individuals in this sample due to both their sexuality and age. One example of this difference is that marriage for gay and lesbian individuals was subject to a perceived precarity even when marriage was legal in Massachusetts. Due to the
continuing homophobia in the United States, some respondent’s decisions to marry was rushed or based in fear of the removal of the right to marry. The perceived precariousness of marriage equality influenced several couples’ marital decision-making. This precariousness had consequences for respondent’s decisions to marry, with some individuals choosing to marry regardless of their critiques of marriage due to the perceived scarcity of marriage. The rushed nature of these decisions demonstrate structural ambivalence within gay and lesbian individual’s lives when marrying. Structural ambivalence is a set of contradictions and paradoxes that influence interpersonal relationships and relates individual agency, action, and social structures (Connidis & McMullin, 2002). Changes—both in social structure via the legalization of marriage equality and the perception that marriage equality could be taken away—influenced lesbian and gay couples’ decisions to marry.

Marital experiences also differ by age. Cultural attitudes regarding marriage for mid-life individuals almost certainly differs from younger or older couples, as well as their heterosexual counterparts. The mid-life couples grew up in a particular period and formed relationships without the legal ability to marry through cohabitation, commitment ceremonies, legal documents, etc. Understanding the transition to marriage for these long-term committed couples is important due to the large numbers of couples who are now negotiating the decision of whether or not to marry due to marriage equality. These decisions may also still be subjected to perceived precariousness under a new presidential administration, further work could explore to what extent that is the case.

Finally, participant’s experiences of marriage as positive, negative, and ambivalent are gendered in ways that warrant further exploration. In this study, it appears
that lesbians were more hesitant to enter into marriage compared to gay men. While this study only included those who chose to marry, the critiques of marriage as heteronormative or patriarchal were strongest in several of the lesbian respondents. Other research has pointed to gender differences in negotiation of marriage decisions (Badgett, 2009; Humble, 2013). It is possible that lesbian individuals and couples may be more likely to experience ambivalence with marriage due to feminist critiques of marriage. Further work should explore to what extent feminist critiques of marriage factor into marital decision-making for lesbian and gay couples.

In summary, this research emphasizes the prevalence of ambivalence in marital experiences for many lesbian and gay individuals and couples. Additionally, ambivalence contributes to understanding how marriage maintains its symbolic and pragmatic power of marriage, while lesbian and gay individuals negotiated this power through their individual agency and relationship narratives. Lastly, the experiences of marriage are qualitatively different from heterosexual experiences of marriage due to the social context, marriage as heteronormative, and the prevalence homophobia experienced by lesbian and gay couples. These findings contribute to the understanding of experiences with the institution of marriage—a traditionally heteronormative institution—for gay and lesbian individuals and emphasize that the marriage process for lesbian and gay couples are complex and often ambivalent ones.
Limitations and Conclusion

This research contributes to work on relationship formation, ambivalence, sexuality, gender, and marriage; however, there are important limitations to note. First, the conclusions drawn from this data are constrained due to time of data gathering and the racial composition of the sample. The whiteness of the sample has implications for the conclusions drawn from this analysis. It is not the goal of this research to be generalizable, but rather to inform theories and assist in generating new hypotheses (Ocobock, 2013). However, following Ocobock (2013), there are several reasons the racial composition of the sample may be the case. The demographics could reflect the fact that non-white individuals get married at relatively lower rates than white individuals (Ocobock, 2013; Carpenter & Gates, 2008). Alternatively, the prevalence of white participants in the sample could be due to the overall difficulty of recruiting non-white LGBTQ participants (Ocobock, 2013; Moore, 2011). Additionally, while this research focused on the experiences of gay and lesbian individuals further research could explore how these themes are prevalent or not for bisexual individuals. While claims based on this research are valid, it is important to acknowledge the ways these findings reflect a particular (white, cis-gendered, mid-life) experience. This demographic composition is due partially to the social context; further work can explore how differences in race, class, and sexuality shape the experiences of marriage.
Third, this research occurs in a specific geographic and temporal context. Researchers conducted interviews in Massachusetts when marriage was legal at the state-level but not at a federal level. The lack of the federal legalization of marriage could have influenced the experiences of marriage. Further research could explore how the experiences of marriage differs based on geographical locations within a context of federal marriage equality.

Through this research, I contribute to knowledge of marriage processes for non-heterosexual individuals navigating the heteronormative institution of marriage. The simultaneous presence of positive and negative perspectives on marriage results in ambivalence for some gay and lesbian individuals and couples. This has material implications for how and whether individuals choose to marry, particularly because marriage is linked with pragmatic and symbolic benefits for those who participate. Perceptions and experiences of marriage are key to how gay and lesbian individuals navigate the newly available institution of marriage, and these processes are reflective of debates within LGBTQ communities about the desirability of marriage as a social movement goal. The institution of marriage has maintained its symbolic and pragmatic power, but individuals reject and negotiate this power on an individual level. These negotiations are increasingly prevalent due to the federal legislation legalizing the right of gay and lesbian individuals to marry but they vary based on age and relationship duration. The continuing significance of marriage for the respondents in this sample provide a new context to explore the institution of marriage and the intersections of sexuality, gender, family, and marriage.
References


Appendix: Tables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic Information of Sample</th>
<th>Overall Sample</th>
<th>Gay Participants</th>
<th>Lesbian Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td># of Respondents</td>
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Table 1. Demographic Information of Sample
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<tr>
<th><strong>Main Theme</strong></th>
<th><strong>Sub-Theme</strong></th>
<th><strong>Definition</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Symbolic Power of Institution</td>
<td>Sub-Theme #1 Perception of Others</td>
<td>How respondents feel others’ perceptions of them changed after marriage.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Sub-Theme #2 Use of Spousal Titles</td>
<td>Emphasis on the importance of the terms “wife” and “husband” related to the perception of others and legitimacy.</td>
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<td>Sub-Theme #3 Community/Belonging</td>
<td>Marriage as connected to a greater sense of community or belonging within families, identities, or social movements.</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Sub-Theme #4 Legitimacy</td>
<td>Marriage as making couples seem or feel “more real.” Linked with the perception of others.</td>
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<td>Pragmatic Power of Institution</td>
<td>Sub-Theme #1 Legal</td>
<td>Discussing legal benefits of marriage as related to why people chose to marry or how marriage changed their relationships.</td>
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<td>Sub-Theme #2 Health</td>
<td>Answers that focus on the importance of marriage for insurance or hospital emergency purposes.</td>
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<td>Sub-Theme #3 Parenting</td>
<td>Decisions to marry as related to protecting their family or their children.</td>
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<td>Sub-Theme #4 Financial</td>
<td>Money, home ownership, or taxes referenced as benefits of or reasons for marriage.</td>
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<td>Sub-Theme #5 Threat of Rights Being Removed</td>
<td>References to marriage due to the possibility of marriage rights being taken away.</td>
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<td>Sub-Theme #2 Critiques of marriage</td>
<td>How respondents feel others’ perceptions of them changed after marriage.</td>
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<td>Sub-Theme #3 Rejection of Spousal Titles</td>
<td>References to rejections of “wife” or “husband” often paired with critiques of those titles.</td>
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Table 2. List of Codes for analysis