

SAME-SEX WEDDINGS AND THE CULTURAL IMPACT OF ALTERED RITUAL

by

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A Thesis

Submitted to the
Graduate Faculty

of

George Mason University

in Partial Fulfillment of

The Requirements for the Degree

of

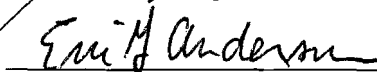
Master of Arts

Interdisciplinary Studies

Committee:



_____ Director






_____ Program Director


_____ Dean, College of Humanities
and Social Sciences

Date: 
_____ Fall Semester 2010
George Mason University
Fairfax, VA

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Fall Semester 2010
George Mason University
Fairfax, VA

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ABSTRACT

SAME-SEX WEDDINGS AND THE CULTURAL IMPACT OF ALTERED RITUAL
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George Mason University, 2010

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This study examines the growing population of married and formally committed same-sex couples by performing a qualitative investigation of their wedding rituals and the ways in which they negotiate gendered wedding traditions. Respondents' weddings closely followed a heteronormative wedding script, but also adapted some heterosexual rituals to maintain their cultural relevance in an LGBT setting. As same-sex marriage exists in a hostile social and legal climate, adherence to and adaptation of this cultural script is a strategy to attain social legitimacy in the face of social and political oppression. The study further investigates same-sex weddings as a site for identity performance, and describes the ways in which same-sex couples perform self- and community identity through wedding and commitment ceremonies. Particular attention is paid to the use of language to perform or sublimate LGBT identity based on the perception of safety. Finally, the study examines the impact of same-sex ceremonies on the cultural framework they inhabit. Same-sex ceremonies can alter notions of gendered behavior by creating a ceremony without rigid gender roles that is free from the encumbrance of patriarchal

stigma. Furthermore, same-sex ceremonies can affect the perception and expression of LGBT identity. The “marriage debate” present in literature by and about the LGBT community seems irrelevant to younger same-sex couples, and the study hypothesizes the existence of a generation gap within the LGBT community regarding marriage.

INTRODUCTION: AN ARGUMENT FOR THE STUDY OF SAME-SEX WEDDINGS

As Wendy Leeds-Hurwitz (2002) remarks in her book *Wedding as Text: Communicating Cultural Ideas Through Ritual*, weddings are one of the few American rituals that are publicly celebrated and incorporated in the popular culture to the extent that, even if someone has not experienced their own, they certainly have distinct ideas – gained through attendance at others’ weddings, popular television, movies and books – as to what a wedding should look like. These ideas are typically strongly gendered: the bride in white and the groom in black, a bouquet toss and a garter throw, a father-daughter dance and a groom’s cake. However, when there are two grooms or two brides, the gender binary is disrupted and the safety of ritual is disordered. Which party will be escorted down the aisle, and whose family goes into debt to pay the caterers? In a same-sex wedding ceremony, the couple must choose which wedding traditions to adopt, discard or modify, and address the social ramifications of those choices. This study examines the growing population of married/formally committed same-sex couples by investigating their wedding and commitment ceremonies. The history of sanctioned same-sex ceremonies of commitment is a short one, and studying the ways in which same-sex couples have structured their ceremonies in this period can provide valuable new insight into same-sex relationships, gender roles and structures, and the ways in which ritual is changed and adapted to retain its cultural relevance.

Leeds-Hurwitz identifies several reasons why weddings are an excellent site for cultural investigation. As a rite of passage ritual, they are complex events with many symbols, codes and related events that can be studied. Furthermore, they often involve elaborate planning and great expense, which can illustrate what is valued by a culture. Additionally, as “a publicly celebrated and widely documented” event, weddings are easily accessible to a researcher, and because they are inherently performative, the presence of a researcher is unlikely to affect the form taken by the ritual (Leeds-Hurwitz 2002,10). Weddings are also a kind of public display event, a topic of frequent study by scholars in many of the social sciences. A public display event is an occasion where a community gathers to display and reaffirm group identity through symbols and action.

Weddings are a specific kind of public display event called a limited participation festival. These events are occasional, rather than periodic, frequently mark the transition from one life stage to another, and are usually limited to the members of a kinship group (Smith 1972, 162). These events serve several functions. One, especially for larger public display events, is “to give an occasion for men [and women] to rejoice together – to interact in an ambiance of acceptance and conviviality” (Smith 1972, 167). This promotes social cohesion as participants identify with each other and “relate to and identify with the community” (Smith 1972, 167). Furthermore, public display events that are also a rite of passage - e.g. weddings, bar mitzvahs, christenings - function to assign a new role to the individual and reinforce their membership in the group. As in a wedding, the celebration may be directed toward a given person only once, but they will participate often in the ceremonies of others, creating a familiarity with the event and providing

many occasions for this social cohesion to occur (Smith 1972, 165). Public display events delineate moments in time to allow reaffirmation of cultural values, promote cohesion within a community and honor an individual's changing role within the group, qualities which make them excellent sites for cultural investigation.

Negotiating gendered wedding traditions: what do same-sex weddings reveal about tradition and identity?

This study seeks to discover the methods by which gay and lesbian couples negotiate gendered wedding traditions, and what this negotiation can tell us about ritual, cultural tradition and identity. Many questions surround this new marital format. For example, are same-sex ceremonies adaptations of heterosexual wedding ceremonies or a new ritual reflecting the values and identity of the LGBT community? Participants in this study held wedding events that were structurally very close to the cultural script of the western Judeo-Christian heterosexual wedding, raising questions about the role of "tradition" in the development of their rituals. If same-sex ceremonies are adaptations of heterosexual ceremonies, what strategies do the couples employ to alter them into a relevant form? Furthermore, what might it mean in the broader social sphere for same-sex couples to emulate this ceremony previously exclusive to heterosexuals? Are there shared symbols between same-sex and different-sex weddings, and are different meanings conveyed in each context? Finally, what does a ritual of commitment with tenuous legality mean for gay identity, and how do same-sex couples use their wedding rituals to perform that identity? Inquiry into same-sex weddings/commitment ceremonies can answer these

questions and reveal insights about LGBT identity and the role of ritual in cultural change.

Methodology

The methodology of this project is a case study; an examination of the weddings of same-sex couples, including both legal weddings and commitment ceremonies held in areas where same-sex marriage is not yet legal. I conducted ten qualitative interviews with eleven members of married/formally committed same-sex couples. I interviewed both members of one couple together, and the other interviews were with a single member of a given couple. The interviews were conducted via telephone or webcam to allow access to a more geographically diverse sample, and were all digitally recorded. When possible, I also examined material culture from participants' ceremonies, including wedding photographs, vows, and other related paraphernalia. The interview questions focused on the ceremony and reception, excluding questions about related events like showers or bachelor/ette parties. I used a semi-structured interview instrument; each participant was asked the same questions, but digressions or skipped answers were permitted. The list of interview questions is included as an appendix to this document.

My analysis of the data is strongly influenced by Critical Discourse Analysis. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) examines the ways in which “power abuse, dominance and inequality” can be enacted through discourse, including verbal, written, and acted discourse (Van Dijk 2001, 352). Because CDA focuses “primarily on social problems and political issues” and takes a multidisciplinary approach to explaining discursive

structures in terms of the social environment (Van Dijk 2001, 353), it was an ideal methodology to employ for an examination of same sex marriage. All academic work is situated within the sociopolitical sphere rather than at an objective reserve; forces affecting the subjects of a study also affect the scholar studying them. This creates a situation in which scholars are actively engaged with the social discourse rather than at a polite distance.

A key feature of this kind of analysis is the examination of differing levels of power in social interaction and the ways in which participants in the discourse resist or accept this power, a method of thinking that I have employed throughout the study. In their creation of commitment rituals similar to those of heterosexuals, same-sex couples are using the language of ritual to engage in a discourse about power relations between homo- and heterosexuals. These rituals can be interpreted in many ways: as homosexuals claiming power through imitation of the dominant group, homosexuals rejecting the power of the dominant group by changing their traditions to fit, homosexuals bowing to the social structure put in place by the dominant group, or any number of other interpretations. Through collection and examination of my data, I detail these new rituals and theorize possible social explanations for their creation and practice. As I analyzed my data, each interview transcript was coded for six themes: family, politics and legal issues, religion, self-identity, gender, and traditions and ritual action. Although this study is not a complete discourse analysis, this thematic approach allowed me to zero in on main ideas and highlight the ways in which participants engaged power structures during their wedding process through verbal and acted discourse. Throughout the project, my

thinking has been influenced CDA, and focuses on the changing dynamic of wedding traditions, the ways in which ritual is adapted to maintain cultural relevance and how changing traditions reflect cultural identity.

Research Population

Participants for this study are members of married and formally committed same-sex couples. Participants were located through my network of acquaintances and referred to me by friends and colleagues. I announced the project to this group in person and via social media, and provided my contact information to be passed along to potential participants. Participants then contacted me via phone or email to set up an interview. While it is not within the scope of this thesis to provide a representative sample of all married/formally committed same-sex couples, consideration was given to potential informants from a range of ages, genders, ethnicities, and geographic regions in an attempt to keep a diverse sample. However, because the sample was small and qualitative in nature, certain factors remained homogeneous within the participant group. The group skewed young, with the participants being mostly in their late twenties and early thirties. The youngest participant was 25, the eldest, 43. The participants were also overwhelmingly Caucasian, although the racial and ethnic identity of their partners is not always stated and could be from other backgrounds. There was no intent to deny the experiences of same-sex couples from other ages or racial and ethnic backgrounds in participant selection, but the sample available to me was homogeneous in these areas. Other areas of participant selection were more successful in terms of diversity. I

interviewed members of six female couples and four male couples, roughly corresponding to the gender breakdown among the married/formally committed same-sex population in the United States (Gates 2009, i). Also, informants were located in states around the U.S., residing in California, New Hampshire, North Carolina, Connecticut, New York, Oregon, and Florida. More participants reside in areas of the country where same-sex marriage or domestic partnership are legal, but this also corresponds to national trends. Participants are also mixed between legally married and formally committed couples, with 60% being legal in the United States or Canada, and 40% being unrecognized by a government entity.

A brief biographical introduction of the informants is as follows:

Beatrix – Beatrix, 26, and her partner Anne were legally married in a non-religious ceremony at the San Francisco Courthouse in August 2008. Beatrix, a journalist, and Anne, an artist, reside in San Francisco, CA. Both are Caucasian and identify as female.

Jack – Jack, 28, and his partner Alan were married in June 2010. They held a legal courthouse ceremony in Connecticut, and a Catholic mass and reception the following day in New York City, where they currently reside. Both are Caucasian and identify as male.

Jules – Jules, 31, and her partner Carly held a civil union ceremony in New Hampshire in June 2008, shortly before the birth of their first child. When same-sex marriage was later legalized in New Hampshire, the couple filed paperwork to change their civil

union to a marriage in February 2010. Jules is Caucasian and did not disclose Carly's ethnicity; both partners identify as female. They reside in New Hampshire.

Katherine – Katherine, 29, and her partner Amelia held a civil union ceremony in September 2009 in San Francisco, CA. Although they did not profess a religious identity, their ceremony was officiated by a Presbyterian pastor. Katherine is Latina, and did not disclose Amelia's ethnicity; they both identify as female. Katherine, the director of a non-profit, and Amelia, an attorney, currently reside in the Bay Area of California.

Alice and Bobbi - Alice, 26, and Bobbi, 29, were married in Florida in a non-legal ceremony in May 2007. They both claim no religious identity, but had a Christian minister perform their ceremony. Alice, a musician, and Bobbi, who asked that her occupation not be disclosed, reside in Florida. They are Caucasian and both identify as female.

Phillip – Phillip, 43, and his partner Stephen were legally married in a Christian ceremony at their home in Connecticut in November 2008. They are both Caucasian and both identify as male.

Marshall – Marshall, 25, and his partner Dave were married in a civil ceremony March 2009 in Boston, MA. They held a reception later that month in North Carolina, where they both reside. They are both Caucasian and identify as male.

Mason - Mason, 27, and his partner Patrick were married in Michigan in a non-legal

ceremony in June 2007, followed by a legal ceremony in Toronto in July 2007.

Mason is Caucasian and did not disclose Patrick's ethnicity. They both identify as male, and currently reside in Oregon.

Rebecca – Rebecca, 32, and her partner Claire held a Jewish civil union ceremony in 2006 in San Francisco. When marriage became legal in California they changed their civil union to a marriage in 2008. They currently reside in California.

Rachael – Rachael, 25, and her partner Kristy were married in New York in a non-legal Pagan handfasting ceremony in September 2007. They are Caucasian and both identify as female. They currently reside in upstate New York.

This study will be limited by several factors. The pool of informants is limited to couples that have been legally married or have held a formal commitment ceremony. To keep the focus on the ceremony, same-sex couples that have a civil union or are registered domestic partners but did not hold any sort of formal event have not been included in the study. As much as possible I have used technological assistance (telephone, webcam, etc.) to expand my access to informants, but due to distance and the small size of the project, some areas of the country are better represented than others. To keep the sample manageable and within the scope of this thesis, I have limited the number of interviews to members of ten couples. All participants were given details on how the information collected will be used and they have been given the opportunity to limit what information may be used in the study. To protect their privacy, they will be

referred to by pseudonyms throughout the study, and any identifying information has been omitted from the final product.

History of same-Sex Marriage Research

Same-sex weddings are, like all rituals, complex texts to unpack. To assist me in my exploration of this topic, I have consulted literature on two relevant themes: ritual and same-sex weddings/commitment ceremonies. As weddings are rituals, same-sex or otherwise, an examination of the academic discourse on ritual is essential to understanding the impact of the wedding ceremony. There is a wealth of material in the fields of anthropology and folklore, but the texts included here are regarded as major works and their key concepts have influenced the construction of my project. Barbara Myerhoff (1992), in her work, “We Don’t Wrap Herring in a Printed Page: Fusions, Fictions and Continuity in Secular Ritual” clearly elucidates both the importance and the impact of ritual. A “working definition of ritual,” she asserts, “is an act or actions intentionally conducted by a group of people employing one or more symbols in a repetitive, formal, precise, highly stylized fashion” (Myerhoff 1992, 129). The repetition and formality of ritual allows difficult cultural concepts to be addressed without social consequence. Think of a wedding; the dangerous concepts of sex, love, money and changing familial relationships are all at play, but contained within the ritual format these things are safe to address.

According to Myerhoff (1992), a ritual primarily functions as a frame, an artificial demarcation of time where aspects of the social world are singled out and remarked upon.

Artifice and stylization are essential to ritual; rituals, she argues, are essentially mutual agreements to suspend disbelief about the actions taking place. Participants agree that the action is not “made up,” that it is in fact meaningful, and that the symbols involved exist without contradiction. (Myerhoff 1992). What all this stylization is in aid of, Myerhoff (1992) suggests, is the provision of continuity for the participants, both continuity of “the individual’s sense of unity as a person (individual-biographical continuity), and the sense of being “One People” on the part of the whole group (collective-historical continuity).” Myerhoff was working with a group of Jewish women who had emigrated to the United States during and after WWII, so this sense of both individual continuity over time and distance, as well as collective continuity as a member of a diaspora were readily apparent in her research group. However, these concepts apply equally to other groups; a wedding ceremony may reflect the couple’s sense of self by acting as a special defined moment of passage from one life stage to another, and can also reflect collective continuity through the use of dress, liturgy, music and events that have been passed down through the community. Myerhoff asserts that a successful ritual is “a drama of persuasion,” an event that must convince the participants to willingly suspend their everyday attitudes and enter a space where cultural ideas can be examined, remarked on and reinforced (Myerhoff 1992, 156).

Clifford Geertz, in his “Notes on a Balinese Cockfight” asserts that events can be studied and analyzed in the same way as texts, an assertion that is crucial to interpreting rituals. He suggests that events work with “a vocabulary of sentiment” that is obscured by deconstructing and classifying it (Geertz 1973, 449). If it is analyzed as one might a

text, the singular sentiments involved work together to create an image of that society. The themes present in a single event – as in the cockfight’s “animal savagery, male narcissism...status rivalry, mass excitement, [and] blood sacrifice” – are connected by a concept (in this case rage and fear of rage) that amasses those themes into a set of codes and rules by which a society operates (Geertz 1973, 450). In a wedding, themes of monogamy, romantic love, sex, and life passage are connected in a similar fashion, and the codes expressed there are part of what defines a culture’s value system. The ritual, Geertz suggests, is more than what is actually happening physically, but is underpinned by cultural structures that exemplify a shared meaning and value system. As the text of a ritual is read and re-read by the participant, he or she can “see a dimension of [his/her] own subjectivity” making those thematic underpinnings familiar and reinforcing them to the participant, strengthening their bond with the community (Geertz 1973, 450).

David Kertzer’s *Ritual, Politics and Power* elucidates the ways in which ritual can be used to alter, support or dismantle power structures and social hierarchies. The chapter with the most application for this study, “Rite Makes Might: Struggling for Power Through Ritual” has a number of observations on the role of ritual in power struggles. Ritual, Kertzer suggests, can do more than support the status quo. It has a transformative power that can be harnessed by groups, such as gays and lesbians, seeking advancement in a social hierarchy. Kertzer cites several examples of this transformative power throughout history, noting that in pre-literate societies, ritual and its related symbology was the sole way in which hierarchy and power relations were expressed. For example, being allowed to stand near a king during a ritual event provided a physical association

between the two parties, visually asserting and reinforcing their political bond (Kertzer 1988, 104). The visual associations in rituals today continue to express ideas to observers and participants; for example, the exchange of wedding rings is a visual symbol of connectedness implicitly understood by the audience. Kertzer also notes that ritual can be used to establish or legitimize groups. He describes a strategy he calls “ritual attack,” wherein an oppressed or subjugated group redefines the political hierarchy through the use of ritual (Kertzer 1988, 111). For example, a group might develop a new ritual that competes with an older one put on by a more powerful group. As the new ritual, which usually contains some elements of the old, gains in popularity, the group putting on the ritual also gains by association. An altered ritual allows a subjugated group to subsume the power of the superior group; this has strong implications for same-sex marriage ceremonies. Finally, Kertzer notes that in addition to making claims to power, ritual actions also send messages to the public (Kertzer 1988, 107). Mass rites, which are held at symbolic centers of power, can alert the public to a subjugated group’s cause, and are designed to sway public opinion. Through a ritual claiming of power, as in the same-sex mass-marriage events that have been held outside courts and government institutions, a group can change their position in a power structure.

Leeds-Hurwitz’s previously mentioned *Wedding as Text* has a number of useful insights for this study. Her book is primarily concerned with weddings in which there is an element of difference in the participants; the weddings she studied are either international, interfaith, interracial, interethnic, interclass or some combination of these. Her focus on difference is useful as couples of different backgrounds often alter the

wedding ceremony to better fit their needs, something that also frequently occurs in same-sex ceremonies. Leeds-Hurwitz identifies four themes present in wedding ceremonies: community, ritual, identity and meaning. She defines community as “a group of people who share sufficient characteristics that they take the same things for granted” and explores a wedding’s potential to both combine different communities through the union of a single couple, but also to create a tension between the community and individual (Leeds-Hurwitz 2002, 65).

The union of a couple creates more than just a bond between its participants; it can be symbolic of a union of two community groups, be they families, ethnic groups, or other kinds of cultural communities. When this union occurs, varying levels of tension arise as members get accustomed to their new commingled status. Leeds-Hurwitz addresses ritual specifically in relation to weddings, highlighting the transformative power of ritual to affect culture, asserting, “ritual may do more than mirror existing social arrangements...it can act to reorganize or create them” (Leeds-Hurwitz 2002, 95). Same-sex weddings through their very existence and visibility reorganize the social sphere, a concept that Leeds-Hurwitz expands upon. Identity, a statement of self conveyed during ritual, is particularly relevant to those who choose design their own ceremonies, like intercultural and same-sex couples. Leeds-Hurwitz identifies a tension between public and private that may be present during expressions of identity, and suggests that during weddings one simultaneously performs self-identity and cultural identity. Meaning is the term Leeds-Hurwitz uses to describe the use of signs, symbols or codes to convey what is important to participants about a given ceremony.

Anne Lewin, in her *Recognizing Ourselves: Ceremonies of Lesbian and Gay Commitment* also addresses thematic elements of wedding ceremonies, but in a specifically homosexual context. The book is the result of Lewin's extensive research in the early 1990's on same-sex wedding and commitment ceremonies. She identifies five themes around which she bases her research: tradition, family, community, authenticity and resistance. The first three themes are essentially varying degrees of self-expression that exist in wedding ceremonies. Lewin portrays tradition as a force which rituals are constructed with or against, but always in relation to, and suggests that adherence to or deviation from tradition can be a strategy for conveying self-representation or situating oneself in the social sphere. Lewin represents the concept of family as another site for self-representation, suggesting that weddings make statements about family through inclusion or exclusion, ceremonial roles for family members, or through the use of ceremonial rhetoric as a platform for declaiming on the participants' notion of family. Community for Lewin is also tied to self-representation; it is "a way of defining the self" through costume, language, music, etc. that is "comparable to ethnicity and race" (Lewin 1998, 45). Community ties and affiliations can be expressed or transcended through these elements of a wedding ceremony.

Authenticity and resistance are tied closely together in Lewin's work, mainly because at the time of her research the first gay marriage laws had not yet been passed. Her concept of authenticity deals with the ways in which a union that is not legal and defies cultural norms can be legitimized through ritual action. Rituals can be altered to emphasize aspects of importance to the community holding the ritual. The concept of

love, she suggests, takes on a greater importance than law in the wedding dynamic when the union is not legally sanctioned. When the author uses the term “resistance,” she refers to the concept by which gay and lesbian unions can represent resistance to heteronormative ideas and gender conventions. She suggests the same-sex union itself can be used as a vehicle to challenge gender dynamics in mainstream society. These themes are tied together in her work by the language of subversion and challenge, a function of working in a system where gay marriage was legally impossible. While same-sex marriage is by no means mainstream, it is at present legal in four states, and the aspects of weddings that Lewin identifies as subversive may be somewhat less so in the current social climate.

Suzanne Sherman’s *Lesbian and Gay Marriage: Private Commitments, Public Ceremonies* similarly addresses attitudes toward same-sex marriage in a time prior to the legalization of that institution. Sherman tackles the topic by examining both the political and personal aspects of same-sex commitment ceremonies (at the time of publication, no state offered legal marriage for same-sex couples) and their impact on the lives of same-sex couples that choose them and those that reject them. The book is constructed largely as a series of profiles of committed same-sex couples drawn from interviews conducted by Sherman. These profiles are introduced with two short essays by LGBT community leaders arguing each side of what Sherman calls “the marriage debate,” an ongoing discussion within the LGBT community about the pros and cons of seeking legal marriage for same-sex couples.

Although most of the aforementioned sources emphasize the positive aspects of the marriage ritual, the argument against same-sex marriage is presented by Paula Ettelbrick, legal director of the Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund. Ettelbrick argues strongly that gays and lesbians have a culture separate from heterosexuals, and that marriage is detrimental to the continuation of that culture. Marriage for same-sex couples, she suggests, is merely a mimicry of patriarchal heterosexual tradition that undermines LGBT culture and would force assimilation and render same-sex couples invisible (Ettelbrick 1992, 21). She finds fault with the institution of marriage - which she asserts has been oppressive to women and supports unequal power structures in relationships - and questions what benefit same-sex couples might derive from supporting a flawed system. In addition, she suggests that marriage supports the status quo and tacitly declares that the nuclear family is superior to other kinds of family structures. In essence, Ettelbrick suggests that the government is subsidizing the monogamous romantic couple through the economic benefits offered to married couples, and oppressing those who choose alternate relationship modes. Marriage, Ettelbrick asserts, “runs contrary to two of the primary goals of the lesbian and gay movement: the affirmation of gay identity and culture and the validation of many forms of relationships” (Ettelbrick 1992, 21).

The argument for same-sex marriage, however, is presented by former Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund executive director Thomas B. Stoddard. Stoddard argues that same-sex couples would receive several benefits from legal marriage. From a purely practical standpoint, legally married same-sex couples would have access to the many

economic benefits of marriage, including tax breaks, government benefits such as social security, and access to health insurance. Stoddard also suggests that same-sex marriage could create a change in the way same-sex relationships are perceived. same-sex marriage is in some ways a legitimizing union, and strikes at the conception that same-sex relationships are less meaningful or permanent than heterosexual relationships. He further argues that same-sex unions could transform the institution of marriage itself, freeing it from historic gender disparity and oppression and creating a legally recognized union of equals. While Stoddard acknowledges the problems that historically exist with heterosexual marriage, and does not suggest that marriage is a solution for all committed same-sex couples, he maintains that the right to marry should be an option. It is “not the desirability of marriage,” he argues, “but of the right to marry” that is beneficial to same-sex couples (Stoddard 1992, 18). Seeking legal marriage, he argues, is a political act and a visible stand demanding equal treatment under the law for gay and lesbian citizens.

It is in this context of the marriage debate that Sherman presents her profiles of same-sex couples. The profiles are structured into two sections: “private commitments,” which features committed couples who have chosen not to hold a ceremony, and “public ceremonies,” featuring couples who have held commitment ceremonies. The couples in the “private commitments” section describe their reasons for not holding a commitment ceremony and reiterate several of Ettlbrick’s arguments through their description of their choices not to commit ceremonially. Similarly, the couples in the “Public Ceremonies” section echo Stoddard’s arguments through their description of their commitment ceremonies and the reasons they elected to have one. By setting up a dichotomy between

the two groups, Sherman describes the controversy in the LGBT community surrounding same-sex marriage through the words of the people involved in the debate, and addressed the themes of community and self-identity at play in same-sex ceremonies.

It is within the context of these works that I conduct this study. Weddings are socially important ritual events. They are rites of passage, they are sites for the performance of identity, and they mirror the values and social codes of a given community. Through the study of weddings, we can gain insight into how a culture functions. In this study of same-sex weddings, I use the wedding as a frame through which to investigate the emerging population of married and formally committed same-sex couples. The heterosexual wedding ceremony with which we are most familiar is strongly gendered in myriad small ways. When gender roles are disrupted as in a same-sex wedding, conflict arises and the heteronormative cultural script must be altered and rewritten. As the participants operate in a social climate of tenuous legality and approval, I first examine the ritual strategies same-sex couples employ to adopt and adapt heterosexual wedding rituals and legitimize their unions. Secondly, I analyze how the same-sex couples in this study engage the heterosexual script through ritual action, changing the ways in which self- and cultural identity is performed at the wedding. Finally, I consider how same-sex weddings remake the cultural framework, addressing the implications of these marriages for gender roles and LGBT identity. In exploring how same-sex couples negotiate gendered wedding traditions, this study aims to explore concepts of identity, ritual and the LGBT community.

Chapter One will address the intersection of tradition and legality. The weddings detailed in this study were frequently described by participants as “traditional,” and closely followed the heterosexual wedding script. I assert that this adoption of heterosexual wedding traditions is a strategy much like the “ritual attack” identified by Kertzer, designed to attain the status conveyed by heterosexual weddings. same-sex weddings exist in a hostile social climate. They are illegal in a vast majority of the states, and are the subject of popular and political debate about their right to exist. Participants combat this second-class status by employing heterosexual rituals to gain social legitimacy. Adopting these rituals allows outsiders to recognize their event as a wedding, and bestow the approval and social status appropriate to such an event. Furthermore, participants also attained status by seeking governmental sanction for their unions. Legality was vital to the participants, who went to great lengths to be legally married even if it would not be legal in their home state. In seeking legal and social approval for their weddings, participants are utilizing the tools of heterosexual wedding ritual to subvert the climate of oppression in which they exist.

Chapter Two explores the concept of weddings as a venue for identity performance, and the ways in which same-sex couples simultaneously perform different identities within that arena. Both self- and community identity are performed at weddings. Participants frequently expressed self-identity through objects, such as personalized wedding jewelry, but community identity performance was more complex. All people belong to different community groups, including familial, religious and cultural groups. Membership in these separate groups has different expressions within the wedding. I

explore the importance of family identity performance through the examination of ceremonial roles for family members. Religious identity can sometimes exist in conflict with same-sex marriage, and participants describe how they negotiated those boundaries. Finally, the expression of LGBT identity is exclusive to same-sex weddings, and I analyze the ways in which the participants used language to perform or sublimate this identity during the planning and execution of the wedding.

In Chapter Three, I address the ways in which same-sex weddings remake the cultural framework. Same-sex weddings impact the world around them, and the chapter examines their implications for gender roles and LGBT identity. Same-sex weddings are political as well as emotional acts, and couples use their weddings as a vehicle to challenge cultural assumptions and break down gender barriers. They frequently accomplish this through altering the heterosexual wedding script. Gender roles at same-sex weddings are more fluid, and participants altered heterosexual wedding rituals to make them less gendered and free same-sex weddings from the burden of historical gender roles. The chapter also explores the impact of same-sex weddings on LGBT identity expression, and identifies a generation gap between members of the LGBT community that seek marriage and those that do not choose to marry. Finally, I address the ways in which participants used their weddings as a statement on marriage equality, challenging the cultural discourse about LGBT identity.

CHAPTER ONE – TRADITION AND LEGALITY

The germ of this research began in a comment from a friend. She had just attended a lesbian wedding, and remarked with surprise that it was the most traditional wedding she'd ever been to. I wondered, were all same-sex weddings especially traditional, and if so, why? As I conducted the study, every participant seemed eager to engage the topic of tradition¹, and discussed at length what they saw as their adherence to or deviation from a “traditional” wedding norm. It appeared that my friend was onto something; overwhelmingly, study participants used words like “traditional,” “normal,” and even “conservative” to describe their ceremonies. Indeed, apart from the gender of the participants, they did tend to closely follow the cultural script set out for a Western heterosexual wedding. As members of a subculture, why would these couples almost universally elect to adhere to a mainstream cultural norm for their wedding ceremonies?

The answer lies in the power differential between heterosexual and homosexual couples, and the power of ritual to defy social hierarchy. Heterosexual couples possess rights denied same-sex couples, even in states where same-sex marriage is legal.

¹ For the purposes of this analysis, the term “traditional wedding” will be defined and utilized in the sense that the participants used it, as a series of cultural codes and ritual behaviors, gleaned through attendance at weddings and popular culture, that together signify “wedding” to most Americans. While obviously not all American weddings are the same, there is a general script they follow. This can include the heterosexual couple dressing in gender-specific attire, standing before friends and family to recite vows, having a clergy person or government official lead the ceremony and declare the couple married, holding a reception after the ceremony with food and dancing, and ending the evening with a special cake that the bride and groom cut together.

Heterosexual married couples receive federal recognition of their union, tax breaks from the IRS, and are able to travel between states without jeopardizing the legality of their marriage. Politicians and religious leaders debate the right to same-sex marriage in the media, and it is outlawed in 45 states. Same-sex marriage exists in a hostile social climate, and the future legality of the institution is far from certain. Couples choosing to legally marry must address the fear of potential forceful dissolution of their marriages, as well as devaluation within the social environment. Kertzer asserts that ritual can be a tool for social change, and his concept of “ritual attack” – the adaptation of a dominant group’s ritual to subvert their power structure - is applicable here (Kertzer 1988, 111). Tradition has become a weapon in the fight for equality. These couples engage and employ heterosexual wedding rituals as a strategy to attain recognition and legitimacy for their unions.

To understand the unstable political climate in which same-sex marriage is situated, a brief sketch of the history of legal same-sex marriage is necessary. Gay commitment ceremonies have been held privately for decades, but following the Stonewall riots² and expanding with the first domestic partner registries³ in the early 1980’s, same-sex couples have more frequently been holding public ceremonies to celebrate their commitment. To understand the context in which these changes are occurring, one must understand that civil laws regarding marriage and legalized

² The Stonewall Riots were a series of violent demonstrations and altercations with police that occurred outside the Stonewall Inn, a gay bar in New York City’s Greenwich Village. They began June 29, 1969 and lasted six days, and are commonly considered to be the beginning of the gay rights movement (Carter, 2004).

³ Domestic partner registries and civil unions exist in several states, and the rights vary by locale. None of these grant the full rights and privileges of marriage.

commitment - such as domestic partnerships and civil unions - between couples of the same sex in the United States have been shifting dramatically over the last 20 years. Individual states and localities have at various times seized the right for same-sex couples to marry. This legalization typically comes through the courts rather than the legislature. The legality of same-sex unions is in constant flux as individual states decide and reconsider the issue of same-sex marriage.

In 1993, Hawaii became the first US state to tackle the question of same-sex marriage. The *Lewin v. Baehr* decision asserted that laws forbidding same-sex marriage were unconstitutional, with the court eventually finding in 1997 that those laws defied the state constitution's Equal Protection clause⁴ (Human Rights Campaign). Same-sex marriage remained completely unrecognized in the U.S. until 2000, when Vermont legalized civil unions for same-sex couples. In 2003, Massachusetts courts recognized full marriage for same sex-couples, and the first legal same-sex marriages in the U.S. were performed there in 2004 (Human Rights Campaign). The Massachusetts decision was followed in 2008 by a brief 6-month period of legality in California (overturned by voter referendum) and then by full legalization in Connecticut (2008), Iowa (2009), Vermont (2009), New Hampshire (2010), and the District of Columbia (2010) (Human Rights Campaign). Various other states and localities recognize marriages performed in other states, and others offer domestic partner registries. It is in this context of unstable legal recognition that gay and lesbian couples elect to celebrate their commitment.

⁴ However, the decision sparked years of legal wrangling, during which no marriages were performed, and in 1998 a voter referendum amended the state constitution to remove marriage from the court's purview and give all oversight on marriage laws to the state legislature.

The political climate and consequent lack of security and legal standing for LGBT marriages is a constant concern and frequently a factor in an LGBT couple's decision to marry. California's Proposition 8 (Prop 8) referendum ending legal marriage in that state – and the subsequent court case that decided the legal fate of the marriages conducted during the period of legality in California – was a critical event in the evolution of same-sex marriage laws, and all of the study participants married after the decision referenced it at least once. As the first state to retract a decision to legalize same-sex marriages after marriages had already been performed, California became a symbol to the LGBT community that legal changes would not always go in their favor. San Francisco resident Rebecca describes Prop 8 as feeling “like that wave of change just like came to a screeching halt” (Rebecca, 2010). No longer were LGBT citizens uniformly gaining new rights across the country, and the interviews reflected the disappointment, worry and ultimately resolve that came out of the decision.

For one participant, the passing of Prop 8 was the impetus for his decision to marry his partner of eighteen years, so much so that they planned and executed their legal Connecticut ceremony in just seven days. After the state legalized same-sex marriage in 2008, Phillip and his partner Stephen made plans to marry in 2010, on their 20th anniversary. However, he said:

When in California the Proposition 8 vote came up...we decided that we didn't want to get stuck like some of the couples out there who had been engaged, and couldn't suddenly get married...so [Connecticut] approved it on the 14th of November in 2008; we gave ourselves seven days and got married, so it was kind of a very quick preparation time. (Phillip, 2010).

Many couples spend months or years planning a wedding. For fear of having it taken away, Phillip and Stephen took a tiny fraction of that time to ensure that they would gain the rights and legitimacy of legal marriage. Their actions suggest a lack of faith that any new rights might be retained in this unreliable political environment. Marshall also changed his plans to marry in California because “it was uncertain if people who got married would still be legal when Proposition 8 came into effect” (Marshall, 2010). This uncertainty about legal rights was evident in several interviews, as was the importance of political action to combat it. Discussing their ultimate decision to marry, Phillip notes,

...[Stephen] kept saying to me, “but what if they do, what if they do?” you know, “what if they strike [the same-sex marriage law] down, and you know, we’re on the outside?” He said “wouldn’t you rather be in the courtroom fighting?” And I agreed with him, that’s why we did it so fast. (Phillip, 2010)

Phillip’s repetition and speed when relating his partner’s concerns about legality suggest tension and worry over whether their marriage will remain legal. While he does indicate a willingness to fight for their right to marry – a sentiment that was common amongst the participants – the anxiety over their unequal status remains evident.

Desire for legal protection was also a factor in Jules’s choice to hold her June 2008 civil union (which they updated to a marriage license when same-sex marriage became legal in New Hampshire in 2010). When she was seven months pregnant with their son, Jules and her partner Carly held a ceremony and registered their civil union with the state of New Hampshire. She stated:

The reason we had the ceremony then was because as long as we got it done before I had [my son] we could both be on the birth certificate, so like, immediately from the day he was born she was legally his guardian in New Hampshire already, so it saved us from having to do the second parent adoption,

although we did do that anyway because that wouldn't have been recognized in other states. Um, so we still had to do it in case something happened in Massachusetts or we were in Maine and something happened, but the purpose [of the civil union] was so that it was immediately legal in New Hampshire. And she was his parent. (Jules, 2010).

Jules first refers to the union making Carly not their son's legal parent, but his "guardian in New Hampshire;" the ways Jules qualifies her statement about the legal issues of her civil union are indicative of a constant awareness of her union's fragile legal status and the implications for their child. Jules suggests that nearby states where they might travel, including one where same-sex marriage is legal, are danger zones without additional legal protection, highlighting a conscious worry about the tenuous and incomplete legality of their union. In the face of this worry, the familial protection offered by a legal, recognized partnership was a key factor in Jules and Carly's decision to hold a civil union ceremony.

Same-sex couples in the study countered this uncertain legal status with actions that emphasized the visibility of their unions, an emphasis that stems from the evolution of the LGBT subculture and LGBT civil rights movement. In the latter half of the 20th century, the advent of the LGBT rights movement fundamentally changed homosexual behavior. Homosexuals were encouraged to "come out of the closet," and take pride in their orientation and community. At rallies in cities across the country, marchers shouted "we're here, we're queer, get used to it!" LGBT rights activists utilized parades and rallies to introduce the concept of visibility and pride as a cultural value in the LGBT community, gradually replacing the culture of secrecy and shame present in earlier decades. Marriage is possibly the most visible step same-sex couples can take, and in

recent years same-sex marriage has become a major issue in the organized LGBT rights movement. During the course of this study, it became apparent that visibility and political action were values frequently highlighted in same-sex weddings as a challenge to their shaky legal status.

Several participants stated that, in addition to its powerful emotional component, their wedding was also intended to make a visible political statement through the use of ritual. Participants arranged their wedding ceremonies in a structure made familiar from heterosexual weddings, therefore positioning their unions as equally legitimate. If an event is socially perceived as a wedding, the status it conveys is the same regardless of the participants' gender. The study participants understood this concept and used the established framework of a wedding ceremony to communicate political concepts about marriage equality and civil rights for the LGBT community.

Rebecca saw her wedding as a political as well as an emotional act, referring to her wedding as a “soapbox” which she could use as an “opportunity to get [attendees] educated and get them talking to their families, to their friends...kind of getting the conversation going so [same-sex marriage] is not so weird or taboo” (Rebecca, 2010). Jack similarly used his wedding as a platform for political advocacy, notifying his guests that the couple was making donations to marriage equality groups in lieu of wedding favors. Katherine asserted, “just existing in [LGBT] relationships is a political act;” more importantly, *visibly* existing in LGBT relationships is a political act (Katherine, 2010). These couples are taking the ultimate step out of the closet, and publicly acknowledging their same-sex relationships in an extraordinarily visible manner.

Furthermore, several participants emphasized the importance of strength in numbers, implying that the more same-sex marriages exist, the more visible the community of married LGBT partners, and therefore the more political clout they will carry. Jules avowed, “we want to be one of those numbers when they say this many people got civil unions this year, we want to be one of those numbers, um, because every one of them counts to show that, like, this is how many people are affected by this in a positive way,” implying that by demonstrating the increasing numbers of people affected positively by same-sex marriage, the more rights and social legitimacy will become available to that group (Jules, 2010). Jack asserted that “numbers are really important...to show the state legislature that New Yorkers care” about same-sex marriage, and will support and encourage change in New York’s marriage laws (Jack, 2010). Referring to the federal Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA)⁵, he further states “the more and more states and the more and more couples that take advantage of the state recognition of marriage, the more and more people will realize the stark unconstitutionality of that law” (Jack, 2010). Interestingly, this discussion of numbers and visibility suggests a faith in the democratic system, that change in legal status will come from the people, and a cultural shift in perception will lead to legal recognition. They imply that using marriage rituals to sway public and political opinion is both desirable and possible. Participants characterized the debate over legal marriage as “just like any other civil rights movement”, and despite current instability, most seemed confident that eventually, through political action and

⁵ The federal Defense of Marriage Act, passed in 1996, defines marriage as between one man and one woman, and asserts that states are not required to recognize same-sex marriages performed in other states.

fighting same-sex marriage opponents in government, marriage equality would be a reality (Rebecca, 2010).

A step beyond visibility, and perhaps in response to their fears about the political and legal instability of their unions, participants frequently characterized the political dispute over same-sex marriage as a fight. In his interview, Phillip employed the language of combat, stating twice that he and his partner are prepared to “fight” for their legal right to marry and remain married. Worried Connecticut lawmakers might reverse the decision to allow same-sex marriage, Phillip stated that part of the reason they married was “also to make that kind of, you know, political statement, like we’re here, and we’re married, and you can’t separate us now, and we’ll go, we’ll go to the wall to fight you on it if we have to” (Phillip, 2010). His use of the second person, e.g. “*you* can’t separate us” and “to fight *you*,” (emphasis mine) suggests an invisible opponent, that those who would outlaw same-sex marriage are aligned like an army that Phillip and Stephen plan to battle. This aggressive language illustrates how seriously they take their right to marry, and he employs this language in an endeavor to secure a measure of control in the debate over same-sex marriage. In taking an offensive stance with his language, he is asserting his agency within the discourse.

Jack took a similarly aggressive stance, identifying same-sex marriages as “clashes” with the government that will end in eventual capitulation. “The federal government will realize,” he said, “that [discriminating against same-sex couples] is wrong and unconstitutional” (Jack, 2010). By invoking the image of the Constitution, a symbol for justice and equality, Jack associates the cause of same-sex marriage with those ideals

beloved to American national identity. Furthermore, despite the 2008 setbacks for legal marriage in California, Rebecca exhorts, “you have to keep going in the fight for equality, for anything really. It’s not over, you gotta keep working toward the goal” (Rebecca, 2010). In the face of a loss of ground for same-sex marriage advocates in her state, Rebecca employs the language of resistance and perseverance to effect social change. The social and legal volatility experienced by same-sex married and committed couples is provoking a response of opposition amongst their community, expressed through the language of struggle.

The sense of legal instability, when combined with the cultural esteem for visibility and willingness to fight engendered by the LGBT rights movement, has a curious expression in same-sex weddings. As a whole, members of the LGBT subculture are not typically characterized in popular culture⁶ as staid or conservative. LGBT pride festivals, nightclubs, and community events are frequently celebrations of the flamboyant. Therefore, one might assume that same-sex weddings would follow a similar exuberant path, departing from straight weddings with “rainbow-colored tuxedo[es],” and ceremonies held “barefoot on the beach” or with other non-traditional structures (Phillip, 2010). However, same-sex couples that choose to marry, particularly those in states where they can obtain legal marriages, are celebrating their unions with events that closely follow the cultural script set down for heterosexual weddings. By making their weddings more visible and using heterosexual ritual to undermine social hierarchies,

⁶ Whether popular culture accurately portrays the lives of gays and lesbians is up for debate, but the fact remains that it still creates that expectation of flamboyancy.

same-sex couples fight to legitimize their unions in the face of political and social opposition.

In the interviews conducted for this study, participants almost universally used adjectives like “traditional,” “normal,” “staid,” and “conservative” to describe their weddings, and every participant used one of those terms at least once. Several also stated that, had one member of the couple been switched for someone of the opposite gender, the wedding would have remained structurally the same (Katherine, 2010 and Phillip, 2010). Every participant processed formally toward their guests, frequently escorted by a family member or close friend. The couples stood together in front of a group of guests while an officiant conducted their ceremony. They all made vows to each other. They all held a reception at some point after the ceremony. They all ate wedding cake. The traditional trappings of a heterosexual wedding are present in these same-sex ceremonies, and while some are adapted to adhere to the participants’ beliefs and values, many exist in an unadulterated form. LGBT couples are deliberately adopting and adapting heterosexual commitment rituals to gain recognition for their same-sex wedding ceremonies.

For some participants, adherence to heterosexual wedding norms stemmed from their religious beliefs. Rebecca stated that the traditional components in her wedding were related to her faith, as it was important to them to have a “Jewish wedding” (Rebecca, 2010). She and her partner Claire were married by a cantor, signed a ketubah⁷, and

⁷ A Jewish wedding contract

circled each other at the beginning of their ceremony⁸, all parts of the heterosexual Jewish wedding tradition. Interestingly, she notes, “the synagogue that I was a member of pretty much my whole life growing up would not officiate over our wedding not because we were the same sex, but because my wife is Catholic...they would have if she was a Jewish woman” (Rebecca, 2010). Rather than adapting their wedding because of a disparity about same-sex marriage, they, like many heterosexual couples, changed their plans because of the complexities of interfaith unions. Phillip noted that he took “a very sort of traditional route,” with his ceremony, adding “[biblical] readings and somebody leading the Lord’s Prayer” to the civil ceremony provided to him by the Justice of the Peace that officiated his ceremony (Phillip, 2010). Faith-based rituals were important for him to include he said, because “every time I close my eyes and imagine getting married, I always imagined that there would be some sort of religious aspect in there” (Phillip, 2010). Phillip included the traditional communal recitation of the Lord’s Prayer because the tradition fit his imagined ideal of a wedding, an ideal constructed through images present in the cultural consciousness and in ceremonies of friends and colleagues. Employing rituals that are present in heterosexual ceremonies gives his wedding the same cultural resonance as a heterosexual union.

Participants also performed traditional secular components of weddings. One of the most enduring cultural images of a wedded couple is of the bride and groom in special wedding attire. Brides wear a formal (usually white) dress, and grooms a suit or tuxedo.

⁸ An adaptation of the custom of the bride circling the groom at the altar common at modern Jewish weddings

Gender roles will be addressed in far more detail Chapter Three, but of the ten couples interviewed, nine couples both wore their gender-specific attire (i.e. two dresses or two suits), adhering to traditional attire for their gender. A reception with food and dancing was another secular tradition consistently upheld by same-sex couples. The couple's first dance as married partners was frequently a highlight of wedding discussion. Rachael and her partner danced to a special song in a candlelit dance area, an experience she describes as "perfect" (Rachael, 2010). Her adherence to heterosexual wedding tradition completed her ideal wedding. Cake was another popular secular tradition. Mason and his partner got a special cake from a baker who "had won several Food Network Challenges," suggesting that the level of work was excellent and the cake a significant component of the day (Mason, 2010). By not only including the traditional wedding cake but making it particularly visible and exceptional, Mason tacitly identified his wedding with those of his heterosexual peers. In adopting these and other secular wedding traditions, participants gained the legitimacy conferred by using the rituals of the dominant culture.

Kertzer and Leeds-Hurwitz agree that ritual is a dynamic and transformative cultural performance, and while it *can* mirror existing social arrangements and support the status quo, it also has great potential for upending the social hierarchy (Kertzer 1988, 111). Kertzer's further assertion that ritual can be used to establish or legitimize groups has broad application in the field of same-sex marriage. Despite their use of heterosexual wedding traditions, LGBT couples are not thoughtlessly aping the rituals of heterosexuals. Rather, same-sex couples adopting and adapting heterosexual wedding

traditions are using ritual as a tool to claim for themselves what has been restricted by the dominant group. Adherence to and adaptation of the rituals of heterosexual weddings legitimizes a subjugated union, and allows members of the LGBT subculture to claim the privileges previously held only by members of the dominant heterosexual culture.

Rituals communicate ideas and behavioral codes among the members of a community; it is a form of symbolic discourse. Altering or adapting a ritual can alter that discourse and lead to cultural change. Kertzer identifies a strategy called “ritual attack,” wherein members of an oppressed group use ritual to adjust their position within the social hierarchy by adapting the rituals of more powerful groups or creating new, competing rituals. As those new rituals enter the cultural discourse and gain in status, so too does the group that created them. Adaptation of heterosexual wedding rituals frequently occurred amongst the participant sample. Bobbi discussed changes made to their vows: “they weren’t like, standard vows, but they were like, similar. They were like, de-heteroed. De-patriarchied” (Bobbi, 2010). She struggles to describe the differences between her vows, which were “similar” to and based on traditional heterosexual vows, but it’s clear that her vows were altered to address inequalities and areas where they felt heterosexual vows were inadequate descriptors of their commitment. She frames her vows as like traditional vows, but with something removed, in this case language discriminatory of homosexuals and women. By removing parts of traditional vows, Bobbi and Alice emphasized through ritual changes they would like represented in the broader culture.

Lewin asserts that all rituals are constructed with a relationship to tradition, be it with the flow of traditional ideas or reversing and reorganizing traditional elements to situate oneself within the social sphere (Lewin 1998, 47). As Dan Savage puts it, “non-traditional weddings can never really free themselves from the specter of a traditional wedding;” the wedding ritual is so deep in the cultural consciousness one cannot help but hear the words participants do not say in addition to those that they do (Savage 2005, 145). The rituals they choose not to perform, or the presence of two people of the same gender at the altar create a cognitive dissonance for attendees that emphasizes same-sex couples’ unequal status, and highlights their claim to civil rights. Myerhoff asserts that ritual’s primary function is as a frame, an artificial demarcation of time during which aspects of the social world are singled out and remarked upon (Myerhoff 1992, 130). These rituals, through copying heterosexual ones with some adaptation, remark upon the unequal status of same-sex couples.

While some rituals could be adapted, it was important for participants to take certain rituals verbatim from heterosexual ceremonies. Vows were of particular importance, and participants emphasized the emotional and cultural impact of saying vows that had been restricted from them. When asked what was the most important part of his wedding day, Phillip answered:

...the vows, just the, you, when you get to that point as a gay man, I never ever thought I would say those vows that you had heard so many times when you're standing in a church. You know, with this, with this ring, I thee wed. And, that was, you know, the repeat after me, you know, I take you to be my lawfully wedded husband. I, that to me was probably the most important thing, and I got choked up on that, and I still do because I just I never thought it would happen, I never thought that I would be saying those words. So that was probably the most

important thing, um of that day for - I think both of us...but the vows, the actual saying those words, you know? Carried a lot of weight. (Phillip, 2010).

He reiterates that he “never thought” he would be able to say those words, that “as a gay man” he would be denied access to the privilege of the dominant group. By adopting those formal ritualized words of commitment, the words their grandparents said, words they had “heard so many times when you’re standing in a church,” they are adding their commitment to a tradition embedded deep in the cultural consciousness, and in doing so, claiming a place for their relationship in that consciousness. By claiming a right to speak those words, a right supported by law, same-sex couples are claiming the forbidden, and seizing legitimacy through adopting a heterosexual ritual.

Participants also expressed a desire to make their same-sex unions recognizable to heterosexual guests and spectators. They wanted their weddings to look like the cultural ideal of a wedding so that they would receive the same respect given to heterosexual married couples. Katherine noted that during her “more traditional” commitment ceremony, she “wanted to stick with what people would feel comfortable recognizing as the basic structure of a wedding” (Katherine, 2010). Using ritual structures and familiar images to put her commitment ceremony into a frame with which her guests were “comfortable,” Katherine ensured that they mentally aligned her ceremony - and by extension her relationship - with the legal heterosexual ceremonies that serve as the cultural norm. She expanded, “we wanted to make sure that [the commitment ceremony] had the same like, ceremonial weight as my sister’s wedding so that the family would, you know, recognize” that the event was equally as important as the “super-traditional

Catholic mass” held at her sister’s wedding (Katherine, 2010). In holding an event that hit all the cultural touchstones of a legal heterosexual wedding, Katherine expressed to her family and guests that her union was equally as serious, sacred and important as a legal heterosexual marriage.

Phillip and Stephen went a similar route with their backyard wedding ceremony. As one of the first legal same-sex marriages in Connecticut, they too were navigating uncharted waters, and used traditional structures to identify their event as a wedding. “We did it in a fashion,” Phillip remarked, “that I think anybody would have been there or seen it would have imagined that it could have be a guy and a girl [being married], and there wasn’t a lot of gayness to it...”(Phillip, 2010). By structuring a ceremony that was visually interchangeable with a heterosexual wedding, Phillip and Stephen attached the legitimacy of that imagined wedding to their own ceremony. Marriage has long been seen as the “official” step heterosexual couples take to formalize their relationship. Same-sex couples who previously had no option to formalize their commitment are seeking the same cultural resonance in their ceremonies that was present in those of their friends and family, in order to drive home to those same friends and family that their relationship is official and permanent.

Couples that are legally married express a marked difference in the perceived social legitimacy of legal weddings versus commitment ceremonies and suggested that the goal of same-sex unions was the recognition of a legal wedding. None of the participants who had access to a legal marriage chose another type of union such as domestic partnership. Marshall, a North Carolina resident, traveled to Boston, Massachusetts to be legally

married - despite the fact that the marriage would not be honored in his home state – rather than have a commitment ceremony at home that would not be legally sanctioned. Before deciding on Boston, the couple considered marrying in California, where they had family, but the pending Prop 8 referendum made them unsure of the future of legal marriage in that state. They then considered marrying outside the United States. “At the time,” Marshall says, “ we were looking at Canada -we briefly looked at Belgium and Spain but they both have residence requirements - but if Canada didn’t work out we were looking at South Africa” because residency was not required and “in their constitution they required equality on the basis of sexuality” (Marshall, 2010). That they considered world travel to gain the legitimacy of a legal union speaks to how vital it was to them to receive legal recognition. When Massachusetts repealed a law barring out-of-state residents from coming there specifically to get married, the couple decided to remain in the United States but travel seven hundred miles for a legal ceremony. Residing in North Carolina, Marshall and his partner receive no benefits from being legally married, but they so valued a legal union that they and their families took the time and expense to travel to another state to have their union legally sanctioned. Their actions clearly express the value they place on legality, and the strength of their preference for the perceived social legitimacy conveyed by such a ceremony.

Legally married participants expressed acute awareness of the legal difference between legal weddings and civil ceremonies and strongly preferred the legitimacy conferred by legality. Phillip stated,

Personally, I don't know, commitment ceremonies are great, but I have always said that I'm not gonna wear a ring until I'm married. You know, there's something about the ceremony, the fact that it's on a piece of paper, that fact that it's, you know, sanctioned by your government. Like the commitment stuff to me always felt one step to the side of that. And I just totally disagreed with that...the government should allow people to be married. (Phillip, 2010).

Phillip suggests commitment ceremonies are irrelevant to the political discourse and missing the essential element that legitimizes legal marriages. For him, "the government" that doesn't allow marriage equality suddenly becomes "your government" when marriage is legal. Phillip suggests here that legally married couples have a stake in the political sphere that unmarried couples do not; the possessive indicates a privilege that takes government from an oppressive entity to a body beholden to its constituents. "I always felt," he said, "that the commitment ceremony itself was just sort of, it was kind of like the redheaded stepchild" next to marriage, and "I'm not gonna do it until there's a piece of paper that's called a marriage license that has my name on it" (Phillip, 2010). Commitment ceremonies, Phillip asserts, are lesser entities than marriages, illegitimate and unequal. "Commitment ceremonies are great," he implies, but not *important*, and consequently, neither are those who participate in them. Legitimacy and social power are conveyed by one thing only: legal equality.

Legality is perceived as an undisputed benefit to these couples, who will obtain it - and the status it conveys - whenever possible. The two participants (Jules in New Hampshire and Rebecca in California) who originally wed in a non-legal ceremony and live in states where marriage was later legalized both chose to file paperwork to make their commitments into marriages in the eyes of the state. They could have remained as

registered domestic partners, but chose to take advantage of the increased social legitimacy and legal protections offered by marriage. These wedding “upgrades” serve to further legitimize their relationships. Beatrix related the story of another couple she met in San Francisco City Hall while waiting for her own legal marriage ceremony to take place.

There were other gay couples in line [to be married] and everybody was like, so excited, um, so excited, and you know, this one lesbian couple that was there were like, “you know, this is our third time getting married. We got married fifteen years ago, and then we got married when it was temporarily legal” or they declared it legal, and now that’s like, when [San Francisco Mayor] Gavin Newsom took over San Francisco and was like, “I’m gonna let the gays marry,” like that random proclamation...so they got married then, and they were getting married again now that it was officially legal. And it was just exciting to see somebody who, you know, cared about each other enough to get married all those times. (Beatrix, 2010).

In expressing admiration for the thrice-married couple, Beatrix tacitly expresses acceptance of the concept that legality conveys legitimacy. She demonstrates respect that their commitment was strong enough to persevere through legal struggle to become “officially” and legitimately married. Rebecca and Claire dissolved their civil union and married legally on their anniversary, shortly before the birth of their first child. Marrying legally, she said, “was like the icing on the cake, being able to just have that validation that we are real, that our relationship matters, and that it’s equal...to anybody else’s. It was just very meaningful” (Rebecca, 2010). Rebecca expresses eloquently what many of the participants said. Legal marriage bestows protection and validation on previously devalued relationships, and in claiming that status through ritual action, the members of those relationships are likewise protected and validated.

In this study, same-sex couples chose to marry in ceremonies that closely follow the heterosexual cultural script. The source of this behavior appears to stem from the climate of legal instability and fragility surrounding same-sex marriage. Because of the second-class status of same-sex unions, couples must continually assert that their relationship is equal to that of a heterosexual couple. This assertion takes the form of ritual discourse that uses the language of the dominant power to claim influence by association and transformation. Adopting and adapting heterosexual rituals allows same-sex couples to legitimize their union and gain status within the social hierarchy.

Following a community exhortation of visibility, gay and lesbian couples choose to publically celebrate their commitments, and in light of the hostile social climate, employ strategies to gain social legitimacy and recognition for their unions. In the present atmosphere of legalized discrimination in this country, participants are using heterosexual ritual to combat heterosexual oppression. Their ritual strategies include the use of legal tools to attain the legitimizing benefits of government recognition and mimesis of heterosexual ritual to attain community status and social recognition.

Weddings are ritual events that serve many social purposes. They combine families and communities, allow couples to publically express their love and commitment – a topic which will be further explored in the next chapter on identity performance – and convey a new status upon the married couple. In seeking legal protection for their unions and adopting and adapting heterosexual wedding traditions, same-sex couples are using ritual behavior to combat a social power differential and enhance social status.

CHAPTER TWO – IDENTITY PERFORMANCE IN THE SAME-SEX WEDDINGS

Weddings and their related rituals, symbols and behaviors have multiple social functions. As rites of passage, they mark the couple's new joined identity and status within the community. As elaborate social events, they allow the wedding couple to express their self-identity, tastes and interests to the group. As family and religious gatherings, they allow the couple to publically reaffirm their membership to a larger group. In *Wedding as Text: Communicating Cultural Identities Through Ritual*, Wendy Leeds-Hurwitz asserts that rituals like weddings serve “as a vehicle for the performance of identity,” and it is this concept of identity performance that runs through all wedding events (Leeds-Hurwitz 2002, 129)⁹. At a wedding, participants perform self- and community identity, using signs, symbols and codes to convey what is important to them. Moreover, participants perform different identities simultaneously and inclusively of each other. With various personal, familial, religious and cultural expressions at play, weddings are rich areas of investigation for identity performance.

Ritual is one way of using actions and symbols to tell and re-tell ourselves the story of us, of our identity. A ritual such as a wedding is a venue in which we perform identity, whether it's self-identity or community identity. At a wedding, the couple is standing before their community and asserting their choice to marry, establishing their

⁹ For more on weddings as a vehicle for identity performance, see Leeds-Hurwitz, chapter 4, “Identity.”

new self-identity as part of a couple, as well as creatively using the ritual elements to perform their own self-identity to the group. Beatrix, a music journalist, had her wedding rings engraved with a lyric from a favorite rock band. She and her partner each have half of the lyric, symbolizing their connection and interdependence. By incorporating her interests and profession into their rings, Beatrix is using a traditional ritual element to perform her self-identity. Rachael and her partner Kristy had a strong sense of how they wanted their event to reflect their identity and interests. The brides wore medieval-style dresses and donned faerie wings for their ceremony. They also decorated their backyard site with candles, ribbon, branches and leaves to make the outdoor wedding look “like a faerie festival” (Rachael, 2010). The couple used faerie paraphernalia to invoke the connection with nature and the unseen world that is spiritually important to them. Moreover, by holding the wedding at their shared home, the two symbolically invoked domestic images and reified the concepts of hearth and home to represent their self-identity as a couple.

Marshall and his partner Matt exchanged rings made of “azurite and malachite ore, which [are] these two minerals that grow together naturally” (Marshall, 2010). In addition to the wedding rings’ traditional symbolic interpretations, Marshall and Matt expressed their self-identity by adding additional layers of meaning with the intertwined minerals. In designing their weddings, each of these couples added symbolic elements and adapted traditional wedding materials that allowed them to perform self-identity.

Like self-identity, community identity is also performed at weddings through the use of ritual and traditional elements. Rituals drawn from a given group’s tradition are a

public declaration of affiliation with that group, and serve to reinforce the participant's membership and status within the group. In this study, participants particularly displayed community identity through displays of family identity, religious identity or LGBT identity.

When asked what was the most important part of their wedding day, many participants referenced the presence of their family. Myerhoff asserts that ritual provides continuity within the familial group, and provides a method by which members can evolve their roles within the group (Myerhoff 1992, 151). Having family members witness and participate in the union was extremely important to participants. Katherine noted that it was important at a wedding "to see friends and family all gathered in the same place," (Katherine, 2010) and for Jack, it was key "to share our vows in front of friends and family" (Jack, 2010). The importance of this family gaze lies in the fact that family attendance recognizes the couple's new position within the family matrix, and allows them to publically affirm their changing identity and roles within the family group. The presence of family also brings their social authority to bear on the new couple. "You kind of like, swear in front of all your family and friends that this is what we're gonna do. And so that way, if you like, don't do it, then you're an asshole," (Alice, 2010). Her comments demonstrate how family provides both recognition and regulation of the wedding, and is central to the wedding's success.

Performing family identity is equally important in same-sex weddings as it is in those of heterosexual couples. In addition to having extended family members in attendance, participants also crafted roles for family in the ceremony and used material items to

illustrate family affiliation. Phillip and his partner Stephen are a good example of the types of ceremonial roles for family members that were common amongst the participants. His sister, a flautist, provided music for the ceremony, and their nieces and nephews acted as attendants and read aloud. He said, “we actually worked our wedding around [Stephen’s] niece and nephew” by changing the wedding date so they were free to attend and participate (Phillip, 2010). Phillip also included rituals to memorialize his father, who had passed away twenty years earlier. “The Lord’s Prayer, and the psalm...that was...two of his favorite things,” Phillip said, and “we also incorporated some of the music that [my father] liked... just to sort of bring him in as well” (Phillip, 2010). Incorporating his deceased father’s favorite prayers and songs helped invoke his presence at the ceremony and strengthen Phillip’s affiliation to that family group through association with his father’s memory. Through creating these ceremonial roles for family, Phillip is using ritual to reaffirm and solidify his place within the family group as a brother, uncle and son.

Some participants invoked family members in the ceremony through the inclusion of material items. Physical tokens from deceased family elders were particularly common in participant responses. If much of the family members’ function at the wedding is to recognize and regulate, physical remembrances of family leaders can stand in and symbolize the family member’s approving presence at the union. For example, Beatrix recalls:

My younger sister, she brought me the handkerchief that my great-grandmother had, um, my great grandmother had given [my sisters and I] handkerchiefs before she passed away, and I hadn’t even remembered them until my sister brought

them, and it was great remembering my great grandmother in that moment. (Beatrix 2010).

The handkerchief is a physical reminder of her great-grandmother that acts as a symbol of Beatrix's family identity to those family members who can interpret its significance.

Moreover, that her sister brought it for her from Louisiana further signifies her acceptance of the union by using a material object as a symbol of familial relationships.

Rather than using one of his mother's possessions, Mason designed a ritual using items she loved to represent her presence.

My mother had passed away about a year previous, so there was also an element of connecting to her in this and that was a arrangement of...white sweetheart roses, which were actually one of the wedding flowers during her wedding...I asked that everybody that was there, at the end of the evening, everyone would take one [rose] with them so that the entire arrangement would be disseminated by the end of the ceremony...My mom was totally into flowers, totally into gardening, so it was totally appropriate for her. (Mason, 2010).

The roses that she loved represented Mason's mother's presence at the wedding, and the ritual claiming of the flowers, underscored the symbolic community affiliation, ensuring that the symbolic presence of his mother was clear to all present. As Beatrix and Mason demonstrate, material items can be effectively used to perform family identity at a wedding.

Same-sex weddings, as marginalized and contested unions, can also create strain within a family. Several participants dealt with family members who disapproved of the marriage. Others dealt with family members who were absent for reasons of distance or finance. For these participants, demonstrating affiliation with the family of their partner or a familial community of friends seemed particularly important. Bobbi, whose parents

chose not to attend the wedding for religious reasons, said “the only element [she] would have liked to have had at the wedding” was her parents’ presence.

Alice: Yeah, same thing for me.

Bobbi: What?

Alice: I wish your mom and dad had been there.

Bobbi: Yeah. Well, both of your parents were there. (Alice and Bobbi, 2010).

Bobbi implies that, while disappointing, her parents’ absence was acceptable because Alice’s parents hosted and attended the wedding. Bobbi used the wedding ritual to establish herself as a member of Alice’s family when her own would not attend.

Beatrix’s parents did not attend her wedding for financial reasons, but she relates, “I am close to my family, but I feel even closer to the friends I’ve made.” She had only two family members at the wedding, but “it was pretty awesome” because, “forty-five people showed up to the party, and it’s just like, wow, I can’t believe this many people were so excited about coming out to see us” (Beatrix, 2010). Her family of choice stands in for her biological family and she equally reaffirms her position within that group.

Furthermore, her interview placed a great deal of emphasis on the presence of her partner Anne’s family. She said that family was the most important part of the wedding day, and described the moments after the ceremony when she and Anne took photographs with their family members. “And just that kind of love,” she said, “and seeing the love that Anne’s parents have for her, and for us, and us getting married, that was really amazing” (Beatrix, 2010). In marrying Anne, Beatrix was establishing her role within their combined families, and her appreciation of Anne’s parents downplays the emotional difficulty of not having her parents attend her wedding.

Rachael, whose mother was also absent, was unable to afford a wedding so her friends raised funds to provide one for the couple. She said, “it was at that point that I realized [my friends] know how important this is to us, and they want it as much as we do, which was, oh my God, I cried for days. I literally cried for days when that happened” (Rachael, 2010). Rachael said that being the focus of the love and support of her friends, “made us feel safe, and that we needed and had to” get married (Rachael, 2010). By providing financial and emotional support, Rachael’s friends took on roles typical of family members, and reestablished the couple’s ties to that familial community of friends. While her mother could not attend for business reasons, Rachael’s friends fulfilled the role of family, and provided a community in which she could marry and express her community identity.

Community identity extends far beyond the family group. Expressing their identity as members of a religious community was also very important to those participants who maintain a religious practice. Religion is an area packed with ritual action; indeed, some of the elements of weddings that come most easily to mind are rooted in religious ritual. By participating in these religious rituals participants reaffirm their membership in that community. Those participants who identified as practicing a religion highlighted the importance of celebrating religious traditions in their ceremonies, connecting them through ritual to members of their religious community.

While the significance of religious expression came up often in the interviews, the fraught relationship between some major religions and homosexual orientation caused complications for some participants who wanted to celebrate their faith at their wedding.

Participants with this issue seemed to find a middle ground, celebrating and affirming their relationship to an immediate religious community or congregation while circumventing the policies of the larger religious group. Jack spoke at length about the importance of incorporating his Catholic faith into his ceremony. Because same-sex marriage is not legal in New York, Jack planned separate civil and religious ceremonies, the legal ceremony in Connecticut, and a religious ceremony the following day at his local church in New York City. “I was raised Catholic,” he says, “and I wanted that to be a part of the commitment I was making” (Jack, 2010). Through the rituals of a wedding mass, he is performing his commitment to the religious community he has been a part of since childhood. Although the Catholic Church does not support same-sex marriage, Jack says it was “really important to me to have a mass involved in some way, because that’s what’s important to me and my faith and my belief system” (Jack, 2010). The restrictions are stringent; they were not “allowed to go up on the altar” or “do anything that simulates matrimony,” during the mass, but they were allowed to have family members perform some rituals to celebrate them, like special readings and music (Jack, 2010). Despite the fact that Jack and Alan were already legally married and could not be formally recognized during their own religious wedding service, Jack places great emphasis on the importance of religious community when holding a wedding. “Even though the mass isn’t going to be technically part of our matrimony per se,” he said, “it is important for me to have that be a part of [the wedding]”(Jack, 2010). Although it may appear that Jack is defying the church by circumventing its regulations, Jack’s actions are still reaffirming his identity within his supportive local religious community.

Growing up, Jack's mother "always posed [Catholicism] in a kind of very always spiritual and pragmatic way" as opposed to offering strict adherence to every church doctrine (Jack, 2010). Moreover, his priest is "a vocal advocate for gay marriage" who has issued pastoral letters condemning discrimination against gays and lesbians, and who is "going out on a limb" to hold their wedding mass (Jack, 2010). It is this immediate community of Catholics to which Jack strengthens his ties through ritual. He is performing identity with this accepting religious community rather than the entire community of the Catholic faith.

Other participants were able to express their faith without having to create distinctions about community allegiance. Rebecca expressed the importance of holding a Jewish wedding, and although they could not be married in a synagogue because it was an interfaith marriage, their wedding was officiated by a cantor and included many Jewish traditions. They signed a ketubah, danced the Hora at their reception, and circled each other at the altar. They also included the recitation of prayers and vows in Hebrew. She said that Jewish vows were important and "meaningful" to her because she thinks as opposed to other religious vows they express more agency on the part of the couple (Rebecca, 2010). "In the Jewish religion," she says, "you're owning it. *I am taking you as my life partner...not in those words, but that was the essence of it.*" In choosing traditional Jewish vows, Rebecca used religious ritual to perform community identity.

As members of religious communities, participants looked for ways to include their faith's traditions on their wedding day. Some who found their LGBT identity in conflict with their religious identity took steps to integrate the two. By localizing the scale of the

religious community, Jack was able to reconcile his Catholic identity with his identity as a gay man, and affirm his membership in a smaller but more supportive religious community. For others, the inclusion of religious tradition was less complex, but equally as meaningful. The rituals of Rebecca's traditional Jewish ceremony both celebrated her relationship and tied her closer to the religious community who created those rituals. Including religious rituals in their wedding ceremonies was an important way for participants to display their membership in a religious community.

At same-sex weddings, in addition to other community identities like family, religious or ethnic identity, participants are also performing as members of a marginalized subculture. Simply by publically marrying, same-sex couples are performing their identity as part of the LGBT population. LGBT identity is obviously not a fixed point on the social compass, and is by no means universal to every person that identifies as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender. We can, however, locate some key concepts that help characterize membership in the LGBT community. LGBT identity can include concepts like self-discovery, pride in one's orientation, self-disclosure and coming out, activism, feelings of social marginalization and subversion or play with gender roles.

Groups use specialized language to convey ideas and concepts important to the community. A concept commonly batted around within the LGBT community is "the pronoun game," a verbal strategy whereby one protects their closeted status by using plural gender neutral pronouns (they, them) to refer to a partner rather than gender specific singular (he, her). This selective adaptation of language is indicative of the

constant tension between disclosure and privacy occurring in the LGBT community.

Language at use within a community provides information on how members perform their collective identity and situate the group within the cultural framework.

Terminology is a useful tool in examining how LGBT married couples perform their identities. In this study, methods of linguistic expression reveal tension regarding safety and the disclosure of marginalized relationships.

Specialized linguistic expression is exemplified in the terminology same-sex couples use surrounding marriage. For example, same-sex couples frequently negotiate linguistic hurdles when referring to their spouse. Heterosexual couples will sometimes use the term “partner” when speaking of their spouse, but most commonly use the gendered terms of “husband” and “wife”. Same-sex couples don’t have this default option. When they marry, same-sex couples must choose if they will adopt the gendered terms already in place, or use another gender-neutral term like “partner” or “spouse”.¹⁰ In this name game, study participants frequently took a plural approach, choosing not just one term, but applying each as they deemed appropriate for the situation. This linguistic dichotomy can reflect tension regarding the legality and recognition of same-sex unions and the safety of those openly living in marginalized relationships.

Many participants stated that whether they use husband/wife or partner “depends on the company that [they] happen to be in” (Phillip, 2010). While all participants that responded to the question expressed a preference for the gendered terms, they also

¹⁰ While same-sex partners may sometimes refer to their spouse as the married term of the opposite gender, i.e. a woman might refer to her female partner as “husband,” none of the participants in this study chose that option, so I have omitted it for lack of data.

highlighted a need to obfuscate their marriage to a same-sex partner, particularly in a work environment. Rachael stated, “when it comes to work I call her my partner, but when it comes to everyone else and their brother, I call her my wife” (Rachael 2010). Phillip similarly related that to friends and relatives “he’s my husband, but like in a work situation, depending on who you’re talking to, he could be my partner” (Phillip, 2010). This division between work and home life is unsurprising, considering that fewer than half of U.S. states have laws prohibiting employer discrimination based on sexual orientation¹¹. Same-sex couples are safer from discrimination if they have an option to fly under the radar. Rebecca states, “I try not to use the term partner, but generally use it when I don't know how the other person feels about gays” (Rebecca, 2010). For Rebecca, it’s a strategy of protection, heading off potential discrimination by withholding information.

Alice suggested that using wife or partner was a question of formality. She uses partner in “more formal settings, for instance, conversations with colleagues at work” and saves wife as “a term of endearment” rather than an appellation. However, she too uses language to remain safe from discrimination. Her distinction between formal and informal suggests she is not entirely comfortable claiming the term wife in the public sphere, a step that would be taken for granted were they a heterosexual couple. This possibly stems from the “private” nature of their union; their Florida commitment ceremony was not legally sanctioned, and her partner Bobbi faces termination if her employer becomes

¹¹ According to the Human Rights Campaign’s 2009 “The State of the Workplace” report, 20 states and the District of Columbia have laws preventing discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation.

aware of her sexual orientation. In a work situation, the consequences of facing discrimination are more severe than in a purely social situation; participants could miss out on promotions and other opportunities or potentially lose their job. By employing gender-neutral language, married LGBT employees can ensure that their positions remain safe.

Physical and emotional safety can also be an issue for married same-sex couples, and in unfamiliar or potentially dangerous situations they will protect themselves with ambiguous language. Several participants choose to use the gender-neutral term “partner” when traveling to environments potentially hostile to homosexuals. “Sometimes,” Marshall says, “in certain parts of the South, I’ll state things in such a way that the nature of our relationship is not made explicit” (Marshall, 2010). By using vague terminology, he is, in a sense, “passing,” using the assumptions of the dominant culture to blend in, therefore remaining safe from harm and reaping the benefits of membership in the dominant group. Phillip remarks on the complexities of this strategy; despite preferring “husband,” he says:

I guess we tend to say [partner] most of all. It's interesting because depending on where you are, of course, we're married in Connecticut, but if we go to New York state, you know, is he really my husband? According to them, probably not, so we generally just refer to each other as, “you're my husband,” if it's in company that we keep, and if it's somebody else, generally I'll say, you know, “he's my partner.” So it's weird. (Phillip, 2010).

Phillip uses the terms “weird” and “interesting” repeatedly, suggesting that he is aware that this linguistic limbo is unusual and that he is not entirely comfortable with it.

Connecticut is a safe space where his marriage is recognized and legal, but other states

may be places that disagree with their union and represent a threat to the legitimacy of their marriage. Strangers and strange locales are potentially dangerous, he suggests, so it is safer to use ambiguous language.

Participants also used language to circumvent uncomfortable social situations, protecting themselves from the emotional harm of discrimination. “When I'm traveling in the South,” says Beatrix, “I refer to her as partner, as it's a little easier to swallow? I'm a peacekeeper, I guess” (Beatrix, 2010). Beatrix touches on a key point; although she likes “the significance of the word” wife, in potentially hostile company Beatrix uses a term that doesn't bring up the volatile issue of same-sex marriage. Partner is “easier to swallow” because it does not inherently suggest a legal union in the way that wife would. She is keeping the peace between opposing fronts of the same-sex marriage debate by using ambiguous language and avoiding the issue altogether. Leeds-Hurwitz, writing about intercultural marriages, asserts “when others with different [cultural] identities are present, we are more likely to mark our identities visibly” (Leeds-Hurwitz 2002, 130). I would argue, however, that in a situation of power imbalance, one might sublimate aspects of one's identity to remain safe. Same-sex couples sometimes use language to make their LGBT identities less visible in the presence of heterosexual outsiders, due to fear of discrimination, physical or emotional harm.

Susan Widdicombe reminds us “identity is available for use: something that people do which is embedded in some other social activity and not something they ‘are’” (Qtd. in Leeds-Hurwitz 2002, 131). Identity, like the terminology used to describe it, is fluid. We can perform different identities at different times, or even simultaneously. Same-sex

couples are particularly adept at employing this flexibility of identity, with their expression dependent upon the situation and those with whom they interact. During the wedding process, participants sometimes related experiences of “coming out” to potential wedding vendors or other strangers about their upcoming same-sex wedding. There was frequently tension in these conversations as participants decided what to disclose about their identity and what to protect. When relating times in which they used language to disclose or conceal their sexual orientation, participants invoked themes of marginalization, discrimination, education, agency, and safety.

Phillip encountered difficulty when using overt language that disclosed his LGBT identity to a potential wedding vendor:

I was down in Hartford and we hadn't decided what to do with the cake yet, so I went to a pretty famous Italian bakery down there, and I was trying to get prices from them and I said to the guy, you know, do you have two grooms? And he looked at me and he said "Why would you want two grooms on your cake!?" And I said, "Because I'm marrying a guy, I'm marrying a man." And he looked at me and he was like, "No no no you can't do that." I'm like, 'Yeah I can, the law was just passed and we're trying to put this together really quickly. And what can you do?' And he like, shook his head and he basically, he walked away. And then he sent out like, another guy, and the other guy that came out was probably the next generation out and we started talking and he kept saying 'You gotta forgive him, you gotta forgive - pop I think he called him - he's from the old country they don't do that there.' Well we ended up getting our cake from somewhere else. (Phillip, 2010).

In using overt language to describe his relationship, Phillip encountered discrimination when disclosing his sexual orientation to a stranger. In this exchange, he places emphasis on the baker's gaze, repeating, “he looked at me and said...” (Phillip, 2010). Looking someone in the eye suggests forthrightness and possibly aggression. Phillip's repetition suggests near disbelief at the ease with which the baker discriminated against him, and

the behavior of the apologist relative. He mentions that the bakery is “pretty famous” and well-regarded, but it is still practicing discrimination. Phillip closes the story with a comment that spins the encounter in his favor, relieving the tension of the moment. In return for the treatment he received, Phillip exercises his agency and goes elsewhere for the cake.

While Phillip encountered opposition when his language revealed his LGBT identity to a stranger, Alice used ambiguous language to conceal her married identity, something she now regrets.

Just prior to and just after our wedding I was occasionally performing in public schools (grades K through 12). During the obligatory Q&A sessions which accompanied these performances, students would always ask about my personal life. Little ones especially wanted to know whether or not I was married. After the wedding, I decided I would answer "Yes" even though it wasn't technically true. (I didn't feel qualified to explain the nuances of marriage law in the United States to second graders and saying "No, I'm not married" would have tasted like a lie). Once I started answering "Yes" the flood gates opened and all of a sudden the kids wanted to know a thousand things about not only me but about my "husband" as well: "What is your husband's name?" "What is your husband's job?" "How old is your husband?" Since I have the good fortune of having a partner with a sexually ambiguous name (Bobbi), I was able to simply answer all of these questions honestly. However, I never once explicitly corrected the kids saying something like "Actually, I don't have a husband. I have a wife." Looking back, I really regret not doing that. I feel like I lied by omission. (Alice, 2010).

Alice acknowledges the power inherent in ambiguity, giving her the option to disclose or withhold her sexual orientation. She used linguistic flexibility to avoid uncomfortable questions because again, her job depended upon her answers being palatable to her employers in the school system. She was unsure of her reception, and sublimated part of her identity to remain safe, avoiding potential controversy with parents or the school administration that could jeopardize her position. However, her use of linguistic

flexibility in this instance left her dissatisfied. Her desire for safety in her job conflicted with her desire to be open about her marriage, and while she was able to negotiate the situation with her job intact, she was forced to sublimate her identity to do so.

In their use of specialized language, participants used appellation and disclosure as tools to perform their LGBT identity. Concerns about safety frequently prompted the use of a linguistic flexibility that uses gender-neutral terms and cultural assumptions to help obscure LGBT identity. Furthermore, same-sex couples use this flexibility to retain control over the disclosure of their sexual orientation and avoid discrimination. However, use of this linguistic control is emotionally complex, and sometimes leads to dissatisfaction. In this study, methods of linguistic expression reveal tension regarding safety and the disclosure of marginalized relationships.

Same-sex couples express self- and community identity at weddings. Participants frequently expressed self-identity through the adaptation of symbolic wedding elements to add additional layers of meaning. Expression of community identity at LGBT weddings most often occurs in the realms of family, religious affiliation and LGBT identity. Same-sex couples create roles for family members and find it especially important to perform their identities in front of that group, solidifying their place within the family unit through ritual. Additionally, despite opposition from religious authority, same-sex couples continue to reiterate their affiliation with religious groups through wedding rituals. Furthermore, participants used language to perform or sublimate LGBT identity as they deemed appropriate. Concerns about safety often prompted same-sex couples to employ language that allows them to avoid confrontation, detection or

discrimination. Participants used these traditional structures to perform multiple identities within the wedding event.

CHAPTER THREE – REMAKING THE CULTURAL FRAMEWORK

Same-sex weddings do not occur in a vacuum. Weddings are powerful cultural touchstones where the communal story is told and retold through ritual. They abound with cultural expectations and carry the emotional and cultural weight of centuries of tradition. In adapting this ritual from a heterosexual script, participants are grappling with complex cultural concepts, and acting to remake the cultural framework in which they operate. Through their use of ritual they engage and challenge cultural assumptions. Same-sex weddings defy social conventions about gender roles and LGBT identity, changing the meaning of rituals through their very existence. These ceremonies and the ways they adapt ritual become a vehicle to challenge assumptions about LGBT identity and the oppressive gender dynamics that can be present in heterosexual weddings.

Same-sex weddings feature a necessary fluidity of gender roles. In early, non-legal same-sex unions, a member of the couple might choose to inhabit the gender role of the opposite sex, including attire and behavior, and the ritual proceeded as in a traditional heterosexual ceremony (Sherman 1992, 117). However, the participants in this study transcended gendered wedding traditions in numerous small ways, creating a visible challenge to stereotypical gender roles. Simply standing at the altar with a same-sex partner changes the wedding script, freeing it from certain cultural expectations about gender. Study participants expanded this potential for change by creating additional

wedding elements that challenge cultural assumptions. The resulting ceremony has more fluid expectations than the rigid roles present in heterosexual ceremonies.

Participants in same-sex weddings frequently altered heterosexual wedding rituals or discarded them altogether to better fit their ceremony. During both the ceremony and reception, participants retained gender-neutral ritual activities and discarded activities with specific gender roles, creating a ceremony with an emphasis on equal partnership. For example, each of the participants had a wedding cake and sliced it with their partner during the reception¹². However, gendered elements such as the garter toss and bouquet throw were almost universally omitted. Mason related:

The typical reception elements of the garter toss or the bouquet toss or whatever, we tried to drop all of that as kind of cheesy and annoying and also really awkward to replicate with a gay couple...it's awkwardish in the sense of we just feel like we're trying to shoehorn that in and that's all extremely gendered in its expression. And we didn't have bouquets and we didn't have the things that would really translate and kinda felt like that would feel artificial. (Mason, 2010).

Mason suggests that visibly gendered elements feel inauthentic in a same-sex wedding, and that attempting to “shoehorn” heterosexual wedding traditions into a gender-neutral same-sex ceremony would be awkward at best and annoying at worst. Gendered expression is undesirable because the implicit power dynamics that come with it do not fit couples choosing to celebrate an equal partnership. In excluding gendered traditions, same-sex couples are creating a ceremony that has the cultural resonance of a wedding without the encumbrance of gender role dynamics. The gendered requirements of

¹² Traditionally the cake-cutting can be subtly gendered by the prescribed placement of the man and woman's hands on the knife, however, the specific placement of the man's hands over the woman's isn't commonly mentioned outside of wedding etiquette books, and none of the participants suggested they knew anything about that aspect of the activity. As such, I'm treating the cutting and consumption of cake as a gender-neutral tradition.

heterosexual wedding tradition impose roles on those practicing them. For example, no matter the bride's actual disposition, during the garter toss she is a passive object symbolically disrobed so her intimate apparel can be tossed to a group of single men. Replicating this with same-sex partners would impose a gendered power structure that participants suggested would be uncomfortable. However, genderless rituals like the exchange of rings, cutting of cake or dancing at a reception easily fit into a same-sex ceremony and were included by nearly all the participants.

Another gendered tradition discarded by several female study participants was that of the bride being escorted down the aisle and "given away" by her father. Rachael found the idea of being "given away" unappealing, and chose to walk down the aisle with her partner Kristy to demonstrate their agency in choosing to marry. She says:

For me, the issue of a father giving their daughter away...personally, I don't really agree with that. I think that you're your own person and to walk down the aisle with Kristy, I was just reaffirming for myself that this was the most important person in my life, that I didn't need anyone to give me away; I give myself freely. (Rachael, 2010).

For Rachael, being "given away" by a male family member negates her personhood and downplays her choice in the marriage ceremony. By choosing to walk together she and Kristy liberated themselves from traditional gendered norms they considered restrictive. Katherine stated that both her parents walked her to the altar, "versus just having a father do it," indicating her deliberate choice to alter the gendered nature of that tradition (Katherine 2010). Many participants changed this tradition to create a more inclusive atmosphere free from the historical implications of women as the property of male relatives.

The language of wedding vows and contracts was another element frequently changed by study participants to reflect same-sex equal partnership. In the ceremony, gendered terms like husband and wife were eliminated or replaced with neutral terms like partner, and, unless they chose to write their own vows, each half of the couple generally repeated the same vows, without any changes for the gender of the participant. Phillip, for example, promised to be a “faithful partner in life,” rather than a husband, with all the gendered expectations that would entail (Phillip, 2010). Rebecca chose her ketubah artist partially because the artist “had some texts that were nice because they weren’t male and female focused...that [were not] specific to man and woman” (Rebecca, 2010). In purchasing from this particular vendor, Rebecca was speaking with her dollar, using her power as a consumer to effect cultural shift. By expressing a preference for a ketubah with non-gendered, egalitarian language, she is likewise expressing a preference for a more equal society. As previously mentioned, Bobbi described her vows as having had oppressive language removed. Instead of “standard vows,” hers were “de-heteroed. De-patriarchied” (Bobbi, 2010). Heterosexual hegemony and patriarchal ideas present in the standard text are eliminated, leaving vows that describe an equal partnership free from the constraints of those forces. The gender neutral language employed by participants suggests the value they place on equal partnership rather than gender role expectations.

Same-sex weddings also tend to allow participants of any gender to fulfill ceremonial roles. Seven of the ten participants had ceremonies officiated by women, and others had family members and friends function as aisle escorts and attendants. Ceremonial roles in same-sex weddings are not dictated by gender as is the norm in heterosexual weddings.

Jules was escorted down the aisle by her female best friend, replacing the traditional male escort with the person with whom she felt most comfortable. Alice and Bobbi had female attendants for their wedding, but played with gender roles by giving them cross-gendered titles. "Our sisters were our best women," said Bobbi, laughing, "we called them the best men though" (Bobbi, 2010). Although staying within heterosexual norms by having female attendants, their choice of appellation indicates flexibility and a sense of humor surrounding the strictly gendered roles for honor attendants with which we are most familiar. Many participants had wedding parties that included both genders, mixed on both sides of the aisle. By honoring friends and family - and not simply their genders - in the wedding, participants are demonstrating a desire for a gender-blind event. The role of ceremony officiant was most frequently filled by women in the study sample, subverting the expectation that a man would officiate an important ceremony and tacitly suggesting women are capable leaders.

Participants also frequently chose to discard the gendered tradition of taking the husband's surname after marriage. Even the terminology, "maiden name" suggests a hierarchical gender paradigm; despite her age or establishment at the time of marriage, the woman is tied to the image of youth and inexperience, while the husband is already complete. Of the study participants, 50% chose to hyphenate their last names to demonstrate their equal partnership within the marriage. Legal name changes (other than a woman changing her name after marriage) are expensive and complex. Marshall noted that "getting [our names] changed and make sure our name change with through and including that Social Security knew about [it] was just sort of a task that for me was part

political” (Marshall, 2010). That same-sex couples are undergoing the trouble and expense to legally hyphenate their names suggests a commitment to a non-gendered equal partnership. Some couples chose to simply keep their own names. Beatrix and her partner Anne kept their names for professional reasons; as they were already establishing themselves in their fields it made little sense to confuse the issue with a new name. Mason had a more individualistic view, saying, “just because we got married doesn't mean we're magically not still our own person, so we kept our own last name” (Mason, 2010). This naming structure also conveys two equal, independent people in a marriage arrangement. Only 20% of participants chose to take one partner’s surname and even then it was unrelated to gender; Jules simply disliked her original last name, and Rebecca’s partner changed hers so the “whole family, with kids” would share a surname (Rebecca, 2010). The naming traditions of marriage affect same-sex couples differently, and their choices reflect a disregard for the role of gender in naming.

Addressing the ways gender can operate in a major ritual like a wedding is an vast topic, worthy of a thesis in itself. Although the discussion of the topic here is by necessity condensed, I do not mean to imply that adjustment to or reversal of a simplistic gender binary is all that occurs in a same-sex wedding. Gender roles in major rite of passage rituals can be rigidly in place in the cultural consciousness, and any alteration to the complex social codes can create tension. The participants changed elements to create events in which the power dynamics of gender roles have a less prominent role than in heterosexual ceremonies, but were in no way creating or intending to create genderless events. While altering or removing traditions involving obvious male/female coordinated

actions such as the garter/bouquet toss, and those with connotations of power differential, such as giving away the bride, participants particularly subscribed to codes of attire and behavior set for their own gender. The area of dress was particularly fraught for some couples, and indeed was the only area in which the topic of gender expression arose. With a single exception, study participants wore the clothing typically worn at weddings by their respective gender¹³. By sticking to the attire common to their own gender, participants were deviating from the heterosexual wedding script, but remaining within gendered norms. They demonstrate that an event need not exclude gendered ideas to avoid the at times restrictive or oppressive connotations of gendered behavior.

Three participants indicated an identity binary such as butch/femme within their relationships, but all used qualifying terms to suggest -and sometimes to state outright - that the binary didn't fully apply to them. Rebecca's wedding was the only one of those surveyed in which one half of the couple wore a dress, and the other a "tuxedo with tails" (Rebecca, 2010). She says:

Claire is much more um, butch-y than I am, I'm much more femme-y than she is, even though we're not exactly those, you know...we wouldn't consider ourselves butchy-y or femme-y, but we're more of those lines. (Rebecca, 2010).

While Rebecca doesn't feel that the butch/femme binary of gender expression describes her relationship, she does suggest that their dress at the wedding indicates an association with those roles. However, she modifies the terms, e.g. "butch-y," rather than use them at their full power, suggesting discomfort with the gender binary they emulate. Her

¹³ One female couple did both wear outfits with pants rather than dresses, but given the range of options in modern women's attire, pants are not a singly-gendered article of clothing. The ensembles worn by this couple were women's pantsuits rather than menswear, and as such I have counted them as "female" clothing.

clarification suggests that she wants to avoid being labeled with a term that suggests they perform differing gender roles.

During my interview with Alice and Bobbi, they had a playful disagreement over gender performance. I asked them to elaborate on their choice to wear dresses to their ceremony, and they responded:

Bobbi: I would feel awkward in anything other than [a dress] at a dress-up kind of thing, I guess. You know? We don't have a specific gender role in our relationship, I don't think?

Alice: Yeah we do, Bobbi's the boy.

[both laugh]

Bobbi: Why has that become like a thing that you do when you try to call me names is, I'm a boy? [laughs] We're gonna have this argument in front of the interviewer, and I don't want to do it. Its like a, it's like this thing you do when you try to insult me, I'm the boy, oh no you're the boy, so what you're doing really, you're saying that lesbians who take on the gender role of male should be embarrassed, is that what you're doing?

Alice: No, that's not what I... [laughs] It used to bother you, but apparently it doesn't now.

Bobbi: No, [inaudible]. It's okay. (Alice and Bobbi, 2010).

This debate over gender roles suggests that even within same-sex relationships gender can be a fraught issue. Bobbi calls the exchange "this argument," suggesting that it's one they've had before. Their tone was playful, and they laughed frequently, but there was a seriousness to the exchange as well. Bobbi finds being called a boy insulting, but at the same time defends the right of other lesbians to perform that gender role without embarrassment. This respect for gender expression further illustrates the fluidity of gender performance in same-sex relationships.

Some participants expressed adherence to gender roles through ways other than dress. Jack and Marshall both made a specific point about the importance of having a mother-

son dance at their weddings. An obvious corollary to the father-daughter dance popular at many heterosexual weddings, the mother-son dance maintains the tradition of a parent-child dance while still subscribing to the gendered notions of partnered dancing. There is no special father-son dance because conventions of the parent-child dance involve a pair of dancers of opposite sexes. Several anti-marriage authors have suggested that socially disruptive behavior like same-sex weddings “homosexualize” men and “heterosexualize” women (Kunkel et al., 2000, 283). In other words, women are supposed to want to marry, and are fulfilling gender expectations in doing so, making them closer to a heterosexual ideal. Men, on the other hand, are not supposed to desire marriage and doing so makes them further from a heterosexual ideal. By transcending gender restrictions in marrying a same-sex partner, but still performing their own gender through elements like dancing and attire, perhaps participants are intending to circumvent this conception. In adhering to some gendered conventions participants allowed gender roles to be a part of the wedding without engaging the power differential that can occur in heterosocial interaction.

These same-sex weddings challenge notions of gender and the performance of gender roles. First, their very existence as a union between two people unmarred by the baggage of gendered expectation has implications for all weddings, creating a space for them to transcend historical precedent to be a union of equals. Additionally, by not relying on participants of a certain gender to fill roles within the wedding, they provide an opportunity to honor friends and family without regard to their gender. Furthermore, participants negotiated the minefield of gender performance by subscribing to codes of

attire and behavior set for their own gender, while avoiding situations that emphasized gendered power differences in marriage.

Gender roles are not the only ways in which same-sex marriages affect the cultural framework. They also challenge ideas about what it means to be part of the LGBT subculture and how gay identity is expressed. One element of LGBT identity highlighted in both the academic literature and popular media is the concept of “the marriage debate” within the LGBT community. While many same-sex couples are fighting for their right to marry, some members of the LGBT community question the value of same-sex marriage entirely. Those in the LGBT community who oppose same-sex marriage have many arguments. Some think marriage is a flawed system that has been historically oppressive to women, and perpetuating that system is wrong (Hunt et al., 2004, 88). Others believe that separation of church and state means that marriage should be left to the religious community and civil unions should be available for all couples (Hunt et al., 2004, 84). Another group claims that marriage unfairly privileges married couples over single people, and any fiscal benefits from the state should be equally applied (Hunt et al., 2004, 86). Still others argue that marriage is assimilationist, and would destroy the unique LGBT subculture (Abraham, 2000, 12).

This “marriage debate” and its varied arguments appear frequently in the academic literature on LGBT marriage¹; the articles by Ettlbrick and Stoddard in Sherman’s *Gay Marriage: Private Commitments, Public Ceremonies* detailed previously in the literature review are a good example of the genre. These ideas are also prevalent in the mainstream media. A March 2010 *Washington Post* article profiled three area couples as they

debated taking advantage of the newly legal same-sex marriage in Washington, DC. The article, “In Washington area, gays' new right stirs up old conflicts,” has its focus right there in the title: conflict. The couples profiled are split on whether or not to marry, and the authors frame the story of the legalization of same-sex marriage through the lens of these couples’ perspectives. However, Rob Williams, a social worker contacted for comment in the article makes a key point about this marriage debate. He said that, “although most same-sex couples he works with are in agreement over whether to marry, couples who came of age at different times tend to disagree more over it” (Bahrapour and Hesse, 2010). He goes on to state that younger people are more likely to want marriage, while older people are less likely (Bahrapour and Hesse, 2010). This generation gap in LGBT attitudes about marriage is changing the tenor of the marriage debate, and in some cases eliminating it altogether. The debate doesn’t appear to be relevant to younger same-sex couples that have come of age as LGBT rights are being expanded. As my study sample were mostly between the ages of 25 and 35, conclusive proof of this concept isn’t within the scope of the study, but interviews with these younger same-sex couples do provide support for the idea. None of the younger couples I interviewed expressed any hesitation about choosing to marry, or referenced any sort of debate.

The key word resonating through almost all the interviews was “normal.” For most of the participants, particularly those in their twenties, it was simply “normal” to get married regardless of one’s sexual orientation. Rebecca related her engagement this way:

Claire actually proposed to me in a really, I'm going to say traditional way. We were on vacation in Hawaii and she walked me onto the beach and she got down on one knee and she gave me a ring and she asked me to marry her...it just seemed like the normal thing to do. (Rebecca, 2010).

This scenario is straight out of the heterosexual script. The beach, the kneeling, the ring, all are elements “normalized” by the dominant heterosexual culture. That Rebecca found this “the normal thing to do” suggests that she perceives no fundamental difference between heterosexual and homosexual relationships. In envisioning and executing their engagement, she and her partner both kept to the social norms established by heterosexual couples with no debate about what that might mean for LGBT identity. The lack of debate and adherence to societal norms likely stems from their growing up in a climate friendlier to LGBT relationships.

Jack was one of the participants who directly expressed the existence of this generation gap. “It’s funny,” he said, “I think that the generation above us, I don’t think that consideration [to get married] happened...for them, because they weren’t allowed to” (Jack, 2010). The restrictive climate experienced by older same-sex couples discouraged them from seeing marriage as a viable or desirable option for themselves. In contrast, Jack says “it never really entered my mind [that I might not marry]... I found out I was gay when I was in middle school. From that point on I never doubted that I would be getting married” (Jack, 2010). From an early age, Jack viewed marriage as both desirable and attainable, likely due to the more permissive climate in which he was raised. Mason took this concept further, and stated that he and his partner felt they were “entitled to” a wedding, and “never thought for a second that we didn’t deserve” to be married

regardless of their sexual orientation (Mason, 2010). There was no debate, because both immediately agreed that marriage was something they wanted and deserved to have.

Marshall sums up the feelings of this new generation of LGBT couples well in describing his decision to propose to his partner.

I decided to propose when I was away from him for two months on a trip to Rome and Naples, and while there a couple of [straight] friends in the program ended up getting engaged in that time, and I realized...through seeing these couples decide to get married I realized what I wanted was to get married. I mean, we had talked about it before, and we both viewed that as a goal...I think our conception of the relationship is pretty traditional too, in that you find someone you want to be with and get engaged to that person and then you get married. (Marshall, 2010).

He suggests marriage is a “goal” attained through a linear progression of relationship steps that leave no space for questioning the value of the institution or one’s right to inhabit it. That Marshall “realized what [he] wanted was to get married” by seeing straight couples pursue that end, suggests that he didn’t question his right to the institution to which the straight couples already had access. In identifying with these couples, Marshall implies that their relationships are the same, and should seek the same goals. Couples like Marshall and Dave, who seek a stable married life, are challenging ideas about what it means to be a member of the LGBT community. Interviews with the participants in this study suggest that opinions about marriage are shifting within the community. There appears to be is a generational shift from a group wary of marriage and eager to debate its merits to a group who feels entitled to marriage and pursues it unquestioningly.

Other evidence from the study also supports this theory. Phillip, the only respondent above age 40, spoke a great deal about the lengthy decision-making process he and his

partner Stephen undertook when choosing to marry. The couple had been together 18 years prior to their marriage, significantly longer than any of the other participants. They discussed holding a commitment ceremony several times over the years. Phillip said, “Stephen wanted to do it years and years ago,” but Phillip disagreed (Phillip, 2010). They finally chose to marry when same-sex marriage was legalized, only two weeks after the decision became law. The legitimacy and meaning conveyed by the new law provided a context in which they could resolve their conflicting ideas about marriage.

Some participants also indicated that this marriage debate was still occurring among the slightly older set of the LGBT community. “Actually, you know,” Phillip said, “I’m taking some flack for [marrying] from our gay friends” (Phillip, 2010). His friends, he says, object to marriage, and suggested that long-term same-sex couples could set up “wills and living wills and healthcare proxies” and stay unmarried (Phillip, 2010).

Mason also indicated that a disconnect occurs within the generations of LGBT couples regarding marriage.

Interestingly, inter-generationally, we had friends of our age who did almost very similar stuff to what we had done, and there was a couple in their 30s, a couple in their 40s a couple, in their 50s that we kind of all compared and contrasted notes [with] about [marriage]. The couples that we’ve met that have been older generation have not been *critical*, but to some degree that kind of, ‘that’s kinda great for you, but I really don’t know why you’d want to bother to go through all of that, I certainly don’t really need it nor do I want it. (Mason, 2010).

Mason’s comments certainly suggest the existence of an inter-generational gap in perceptions about same-sex marriage. He portrays the elder couples as almost dismissive of marriage, while the younger couples follow the same route he took, directly to marriage in their twenties.

In the face of disapproval from both within and outside of the LGBT community, young people that choose to marry frequently indicated political action and promoting civil rights were one factor in their choice to marry. Although some referenced private debates with older members of the LGBT community, participants were most clearly concerned with the civil rights aspect of marriage equality, rather than promoting them as the right choice for all same-sex couples. The participants focused most of their activism outside the community, on the heterosexual people with whom they interacted on a daily basis and the lawmakers that controlled the legality of their unions.

Same-sex weddings, in addition to being a statement about the participants' love and commitment, are also statements demonstrating their beliefs about the meaning of equality. Many participants embraced this ritual as an opportunity to change minds about same-sex marriage. Some chose small ways to demonstrate this activism. Katherine affirmed the idea that visibility is key to activism when she described day-to-day life within a same sex relationship as a "political act" (Katherine, 2010). In lieu of wedding favors, Jack and Alan made donations to marriage equality groups on behalf of their guests, simultaneously spreading the word to friends and family about the importance of marriage equality and providing financial support to organizations working toward that goal. Rebecca related that her wedding was "certainly" a political act, adding,

I'm a pretty politically active person when it comes to marriage equality rights for the LGBT community and so, you know, for us [during] this whole process I really was trying to figure out ways that I could get on my soapbox and tell people, you know, this is how it should be. (Rebecca, 2010).

She was very straightforward about wanting to use the soapbox of her wedding to spread the message that same-sex marriage should be a legal option.

Marshall related that getting married “affected our lives as part of the queer community,” changing their status from just another same-sex couple to spokespeople for marriage equality (Marshall, 2010). After their wedding, Marshall and his partner Dave - as well as several other participants - were contacted by local news stations, newspapers and other media outlets to be featured in segments and articles about same-sex marriage. Marshall thought that their wedding portrayed them as “just sort of a normal couple in a normal social context,” which is an important step toward adjusting the dominant cultural perception of same-sex marriage from outlandish to ordinary (Marshall, 2010).

“People go off and talk” after weddings says Phillip (Phillip, 2010). By making a political statement in marrying, the participants ensure that what they’re talking about is marriage equality, creating dialogue and hopefully effecting change. In taking an activist stance during and after their weddings, same-sex couples are using the power of ritual to alter the cultural framework. By envisioning their weddings as a simultaneously emotional and political act, the participants have harnessed the power of the cultural imagination to make statements about marriage equality that affect the cultural conception of the institution.

Weddings are big events, and they engage big concepts. Same-sex weddings function as political acts as well as emotional ones, challenging the cultural script through adapted ritual. As a generational shift occurs in attitudes on same-sex marriage, they challenge what it means to be a member of the LGBT community. As the dominant culture shifts

to become more open to the idea of same-sex marriages, these unions become statements about the participants' values. And as attitudes about gender roles change, they serve as examples of the way the institution of marriage can support equality and need not be tied to a patriarchal past.

When I began this research I had many questions, and very few answers. Were same-sex couples having traditional weddings, and if so why? What's different about a same-sex wedding, and how do the participants engage the heterosexual script? How do same-sex couples make such a gendered event relevant? While the purpose of this study is not to definitively answer any of these questions, I have been able to draw some conclusions that make the asking worthwhile.

I discovered that study participants were indeed holding weddings that follow the heterosexual script. The theme of recognition and legitimacy and coupled with tenuous legality appeared in every interview, leading me to surmise a cause and effect relationship between the two. Participants spoke passionately about marriage equality, and described the worry that arises when marriage is recognized in one jurisdiction but not another. Their comments suggested that the unequal status of same-sex marriage is a primary concern in their lives. With the legal and social status of their marriages in constant jeopardy, it's unsurprising that they might employ strategies to gain recognition and social legitimacy. The first of these strategies was legal recognition, which several went to great lengths to attain despite the lack of any tangible benefits. The second strategy utilized the rituals of heterosexual weddings to attain the status those rituals convey. By shaping their weddings on the form created by heterosexual wedding

tradition, same-sex couples identified their unions with heterosexual unions, gaining the social legitimacy bestowed by that institution. When guests and onlookers perceive an event as a wedding, they are more likely to perceive the couple at the center of that wedding as a legitimate entity. Participants in this study understood that ritual has the power to defy social hierarchy. By designing their weddings by the heterosexual script and seeking government sanction, they are able to legitimize a socially subjugated union.

In addition to conveying status, ritual has many other roles in a wedding. Rituals are actions communities use to tell and re-tell their own story, reinforcing community and self-identity. Identity performance was another strong theme in the participant interviews. Community identities such as family and religious identity were performed simultaneously throughout the event. Participants repeatedly emphasized the importance of a family presence at their weddings, and used ceremonial roles to honor family members. However, when tension arose because of the contentious nature of same-sex marriage, participants relied on the family of their partner or a community of supportive friends to fill this role. The performance of religious identity was also sometimes fraught. Those participants who belong to religious traditions that oppose same-sex marriage changed the focus of religious ritual, and affirmed their membership in an immediate religious community rather than a global religious tradition. With these strategies, participants performed multiple, disparate identities at their weddings.

The most distinct theme to come out of this investigation of identity was the use of language to display or sublimate LGBT identity and maintain the perception of safety. Participants used different terms to name their partners depending on the situation; in job

situations all participants who discussed the topic reported referring to their spouse by a gender-neutral term. While some were comfortable with this action, most expressed anxiety or regret when obscuring their identity in this way. However, the danger of jeopardizing their career was too great, and even participants who disliked it continued to use this system. Unknown people or locales were also reasons for participants to linguistically sublimate their LGBT identity through the careful use of pronouns and non-gendered terms. By obfuscating their identity, participants were able to avoid the potentially contentious topic of same-sex marriage and remain safe from discrimination. Identity performance at same-sex weddings was complex and multi-layered, much like identity itself. Participants used their weddings to perform different facets of their identity.

Same-sex weddings also serve to remake the cultural framework in which they operate. Participants challenged cultural assumptions about gender and LGBT identity and created events with the potential to transform the arena in which they exist. Heterosexual weddings have many gendered wedding traditions; in designing their ceremonies, participants eschewed those traditions that highlighted gender difference and retained those that were gender-neutral. They further expressed a preference for gender neutrality in the naming conventions they used after the wedding. With these actions, and indeed by their very existence, same-sex weddings allow the couples to avoid being tied to gender roles related to a historical power differential. Gender can be expressed while avoiding the unequal power dynamic that clings to heterosexual weddings. These weddings stand as a union of two people unburdened by centuries of gender expectation

in spousal roles, creating a space for all weddings to transcend historical precedent and become a union of partners who are not defined by the strictures of gender roles.

Same-sex weddings are also challenging cultural assumptions about LGBT attitudes toward marriage. The “marriage debate” so prevalent in the literature was absent from interviews with the younger participants. In fact, they demonstrated a sense of entitlement regarding marriage that strongly differs from opinions expressed by older generations of same-sex couples. The interviews suggested that a generation gap exists regarding marriage within the LGBT community. The marriage debate appears to be irrelevant to a younger section of the LGBT community that ultimately chooses marriage.

The wedding is a discourse, both spoken and unspoken, that uses ritual to communicate ideas about family, community and self. The participants who provided interviews here helped locate same-sex weddings in the matrix of cultural expression. Their weddings were frequently mimetic of the heterosexual script, but were also wholly expressions of the participants’ self- and community identities. In analyzing these ritual events I have attempted to explain the role ritual plays in the complex social discourse that is a same-sex wedding.

APPENDIX

Interview questions

- 1) Cultural identifiers: age, state in which informant lives, ethnicity, religious affiliation, gender identity.
- 2) When and where was your wedding/commitment ceremony?
- 3) Was it legally sanctioned?
- 4) Describe your wedding.
- 5) What did you wear?
- 6) Did you have attendants? If so, what was their relationship to you and why did you choose them?
- 7) Was your family involved in the planning or execution of the ceremony? If so, describe the ways in which they were involved.
- 8) Was there a religious aspect to the ceremony? If yes, what kind of religion, and why was its inclusion important to you?
- 9) Who officiated your ceremony, and what was their relationship to you? Why did you choose them?
- 10) What traditional elements were most important for you to include in the ceremony and why? If you didn't include traditional elements, describe how you arrived at the look and feel of the final ceremony.

- a. Were there any handed down family items or behaviors?
- 11) What were your vows? Why did you choose those vows?
 - 12) Did you have a reception? If so, when and where did you choose to hold it, and why?
 - a. Describe your reception.
 - 13) What term do you use to refer to your spouse, husband/wife/partner, etc?
 - 14) Did you or your spouse change your last name?
 - 15) Was there a time when you had to explain about having a same-gender partner during the wedding process, and what was the response?
 - 16) Before you got married, had you ever been to a same-sex wedding before? What was that like?
 - 17) Why did you choose to have a ceremony?
 - 18) Other than marrying someone of the same gender, did you feel like there was anything gay/queer about your wedding?
 - 19) Looking back, were you thinking at the time about your wedding in terms of the broader culture, as a political act as well as an emotional one?
 - 20) What was your favorite part/the most important part of the ceremony?
 - 21) Is there anything else you'd like to share about your wedding/commitment ceremony?

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