Moving from Ambivalence to Certainty: Older Same-Sex Couples Marry in Canada*

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RÉSUMÉ

Une étude qualitative, dans la perspective du parcours de vie, a exploré la transition vers le mariage pour les couples de même sexe au milieu ou plus tard dans la vie. Vingt personnes (soit 11 couples) ont été intérrogées – 12 lesbiennes, sept hommes gais, et une homme bisexuel. Au moment de leurs mariages, les participants avaient de 42 à 72 ans (âge moyen: 54), et avaient vécu avec leurs partenaires entre six mois à 19 ans (moyen: 7,5 ans). Trois thèmes soulignent la manière dont les expériences de ces couples de même sexe, en décidant de se marier, ont été influencés par les expériences dans leurs parcours de vie. Premièrement, *l'intégration*: les individus ont dû integrer le mariage dans leur psychisme. Deuxièmement, *la justification*: ils ont dû demander pourquoi ils se marient avec leurs partenaires spécifiques. Le troisième thème était *la déliberation*: les participants à l'étude ont demontré comment leurs expériences de planification de mariage et les caractéristiques de leurs noces etaient impregnées à la suite de leurs expériences conscientes de vie en ce qui concerne l'homophobie et/ou l'hétérosexisme.

ABSTRACT

A qualitative study, within a life course perspective, explored the transition into marriage for mid- to later-life same-sex couples. Twenty individuals (representing 11 couples) were interviewed – 12 lesbians, seven gay men, and one bisexual man. At the time of their marriages, participants were between 42 and 72 years old (average age: 54) and had been with their partners from six months to 19 years (average: 7.5 years). Three processes highlighted the ways in which these same-sex couples' experiences of deciding to marry were influenced by their life course experiences. First, individuals had to integrate marriage into their psyches (*integration*). Second, they had to consider why they would marry their specific partner (*rationale*). Third, the study participants demonstrated how their experiences of wedding planning and their wedding characteristics were imbued with intentionality as a result of lifetime experiences of homophobia and/or heterosexism (*intentionality*).

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Historically, same-sex families have developed ways to create and sustain themselves in the absence of legal recognition, support, and protection (Oswald, 2002a). For example, private commitment ceremonies and power of attorney documents have helped same-sex couples develop a sense of family and provide a modicum of protection during times when their families did not fit within larger societal, hegemonic norms. Nationally

representative studies, however, suggest shifting social norms in Canada. In 2003, close to 60 per cent of Canadians viewed the "traditional family" (a married man, woman, and child) as the ideal family (Bibby, 2004); by 2012, three in five Canadian adults felt that same-sex couples should have the right to marry (Angus Reid, 2012). Not surprisingly, younger Canadians had more liberal attitudes, with 71 per cent of those between the ages of 18 and 34 supporting same-sex marriage (SSM) compared to 48 per cent of individuals aged 55 and older.

In 2001, Nova Scotia implemented a Domestic Partnership Registry, which allowed heterosexual and same-sex common-law couples to officially register their relationships. Additionally, beginning in 2003, court rulings in various provinces, including Nova Scotia, ruled that the denial of marriage to same-sex couples was unconstitutional. Such legal precedents (see Lahey & Alderson, 2004, chapter 5 for a discussion) and the changing acceptance of same-sex relationships led to Bill C-38, the Civil Marriage Act, implemented July 20, 2005. This act legalized SSM across the country and resulted in Canada's becoming the fourth country to legalize these unions. Census data indicate that the percentage of married same-sex couples, as a proportion of all same-sex couples, almost doubled between 2006 and 2011, increasing from 16.5 per cent to 32.5 per cent (Statistics Canada, 2012a).[1]

This relatively new political landscape provides a unique opportunity to explore processes and interactions within a context that was previously only accessible to heterosexual couples. In particular, how do individuals decide to marry after being denied the institution for so long, particularly older individuals, many of whom have been in long-term committed relationships? Some research has begun to explore legal SSM, yet little research exists on older individuals' experiences (Lannutti, 2011).

Forty-seven percent of Canadian SSMs involve individuals 45 years of age or older, compared to 68 per cent of opposite-sex marriages (Statistics Canada, 2012b). Older married lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) individuals who enter marriage are unlike younger cohorts. They have lived most of their lives within environments hostile to their sexual orientation and unaccepting of their intimate relationships, whereas younger Canadians disclose their sexual orientations and develop relationships within contexts of increased acceptance. Additionally, many older individuals have been in lengthy, committed relationships, which present a unique opportunity to study the transition to marriage. Thus, because older individuals' SSM experiences may be different from those of younger cohorts, exploring their experiences will broaden our theoretical understanding of SSM.

To contribute to the emerging literature on older same-sex couples' intimate relationships, I interviewed mid- to later-life LGB individuals who married after Bill C-38 came into effect. Influenced by a life course perspective (Cohler, 2005), I explored how and why they decided to marry and the characteristics of their weddings and wedding planning.

Literature Review

In the *Journal of Marriage and Family*'s decade review issue, Biblarz and Savci (2010) discussed the decade's research trends on lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) families.[2] They noted numerous advancements and increasing diversity in the study of these families. For example, nationally representative studies in the United States were starting to include sexual orientation as a variable, and some quantitative studies specifically focusing on lesbian and gay families had been implemented. Much of their reviewed research focused on topics such as the transition to parenthood (particularly "planned parenthood"), the impact of LGB families on children, LGBT youth's family experiences, and legal issues related to LGBT families. Literature on older LGB families was not reviewed. Moreover, LGB families in mid- to later life were not mentioned as a future research topic (except for a mention of older bisexual individuals), despite the fact that same-sex couples and LGB families later in life are understudied (Cohler, 2005).

The transition into marriage is typically studied in young heterosexual individuals, exploring how factors such as income, race, and ethnicity influence cohabiting couples' transitions into marriage (e.g., Osborne, Manning, & Smock, 2007). The role that sexual orientation plays in union transitions is rarely explored. Badgett's (2009) book about gay marriage in the Netherlands, the first country to legalize SSM, is one exception. Nineteen couples were interviewed (but only nine of them were married at the time of their interviews, and six participants were actually American), and individuals ranged from 35 to 50 years of age. The decision to marry was "an intricate, layered process" (p. 22) that involved many elements of choice, some of which were considered specific or more relevant to same-sex couples.

A small amount of literature discusses American, Canadian, and British LGB individuals' experiences of having commitment or marriage ceremonies (e.g., Alderson, 2004; Dalton & Bielby, 2000; Green, 2010; Lannutti, 2007, 2008, 2011; MacIntosh, Reissing, & Andruff, 2010; Porche & Purvin, 2008; Reczek, Elliott, & Umberson, 2009; Smart, 2007). Several of these articles focused on the wedding ceremony and reactions from friends and family members to the announcement of the ceremony, and some gave a few details about changing views of the self.

With two exceptions focusing on Massachusetts (Lannutti, 2011; Porche & Purvin, 2008), none of the published SSM research has centered on older couples. "The study of LGBT older people and couples is a timely addition to theoretical, empirical, and practical literatures in gerontology, with much to contribute to understanding aging and relationships under stigmatized conditions" (de Vries, 2007, p. 22). Some current couples will have been together for many years during which marriage was never an option for them. How this affects their experiences of getting married needs to be explored.

Porche and Purvin (2008) interviewed nine couples in long-term relationships lasting 20 years or more, identifying six characteristics such as buying a home together that reinforced the participants' views of themselves as families and their commitment to each other. Lannutti (2011) explored how 36 older couples reacted to the local legalization of SSM. Individuals reported an increased sense of security and recognition but also had misgivings about SSM. These studies are important steps in including older individuals in SSM research, but had limitations. In both studies, not all couples were legally married. Additionally, Lannutti's research was collected through telephone calls and instant messaging, which may have biased participation selection to individuals with computer literacy and Internet access and limited the amount of detail that could be gathered.

One final limitation of the North American SSM studies is that they did not explore the process of getting married within a context of *national* legal recognition. Although three studies involved Canadian participants, two (Alderson, 2004; MacIntosh et al., 2010) collected their data prior to 2005, and the third (Green, 2010) collected data from couples married both prior to and after the Civil Marriage Act. Ambert (2005) noted the importance of researching the impact of Canada's SSM legalization; yet no research to date has studied the impact of this legislation on same-sex couples. To fill in these gaps, this study examined married older same-sex couples' experiences of transitioning into marriage in the years immediately following Canadian legalization of SSM.

Theoretical Framework

Following other researchers (e.g., Lannutti, 2011; Porche & Purvin, 2008; Reczek et al., 2009), this study was informed by the life course perspective (Bengston & Allen, 1993; Elder, 1994) which draws attention to how historical events and their timing impact individuals' lives. Individuals' agency in negotiating their lives is also considered (Elder, 1994). The life course perspective is helpful for examining cohort influences on social psychological transitions experienced by LGB individuals

(Cohler, 2005; Connidis, 2010; Kimmel, 2004). Historical time is particularly important because of its influence on whether or not a couple is open about being in a same-sex relationship (Connidis, 2010). Older individuals' actions and agency within a given context may also be influenced by earlier life events.

> Members of a generation-cohort share in common the experience of particular socio-historical changes which interplay both with individual life-circumstances and also such intra-cohort variation as geography, social position, and sexual orientation in determining the meaning of these changes for particular lives. (Cohler, 2005, p. 71)

Common life experiences of homophobia and heterosexism may contribute to shared understandings of oneself and others while taking into account individual circumstances.

As stated earlier, many (but not all) older LGB individuals will share in common the experience of being aware of their sexual orientation and being in intimate relationships within a societal context in which neither were accepted, which is different from the experience of younger individuals. As a result, older LGB individuals may have contrasting expectations compared to younger cohorts. Cohler (2005), for example, suggests that they will have lower expectations in terms of others' reactions and accommodations. Consequently, they may not necessarily be upset with lack of accommodations because they expect little to begin with. How this plays out when legal acceptance is in place is unknown. Additionally, older LGB individuals' aging parents also share common attitudes and experiences concerning sexual orientation that may influence their reactions to their adult children's weddings, and, as such, need to be considered. People's experiences are "typically embedded in social relationships with kin and friends across the life span" (Elder, 1994, p. 6). Thus, the life course concept of linked lives (Elder) is also key.

Methodology

Design

I used a qualitative approach, working from a social constructionist/interpretivist paradigm (Daly, 2007). Qualitative methodologies are appropriate for studying family diversity, subjective experiences, and the "processes by which families create, sustain, and discuss their own family realities" (Daly, 1992, p. 4). Qualitative research has been highlighted as particularly helpful for exploring the complexity of LGB individuals' lives (LaSala, 2005) and for gerontological studies (Schoenberg, Shenk, & Kart, 2007).

I received ethics approval from the university to conduct a study on same-sex couples' wedding experiences.

Twenty-eight individuals were interviewed, who (a) were at least 19 years of age or older; (b) had married after July 20, 2005; (c) had been married for at least two months; and (d) were living in Nova Scotia. Although couples could have married in nine of the 13 provinces and territories prior to Bill C-38, I focused on individuals who married *after* this act was passed, choosing to explore whether or not national legal acceptance played any role in individuals' marital decisions.

This study focused on participants ($n = 20$) who were 40 years or older when they married. Forty is viewed as the start of middle age, the point at which gerontologists begin to study aging. However, LGB individuals may view the aging process differently compared to heterosexual individuals.[3] In particular, gay men may see themselves as "older" at a younger age compared to their heterosexual counterparts, according to the theory of accelerated aging (Schope, 2005). A quantitative study by Schope showed that gay men felt that a person became old at 38.8 years, and lesbians felt that individuals became old at an average age of 48.4 years. Qualitative research on older LGB adults has used 40 to 45 years of age as the starting point (Grossman, 2008); thus, this study's age criterion was consistent with previous research.

The study was promoted by an article that discussed the study and the issue of LGB marriage in a local newspaper with the highest provincial circulation. Advertisements were also placed in smaller newspapers around the province. Most participants responded as a result of the newspaper article.

Interviews were carried out in 2010 and 2011. All individuals were interviewed without their spouse so that they could respond to questions without any potential influence from partners. Interviewing partners separately also allowed for a comparison of spouses' responses, which indicated very similar story-telling perspectives. Interviews took place in whatever locale was most comfortable and convenient for each person, which was usually their home. Interviews lasted between one and two hours, asking individuals to describe (a) how they decided to marry (e.g., who asked whom to marry, how they got "engaged"), (b) what their weddings were like, and (c) how they experienced wedding planning. A short demographic questionnaire was also completed. Interviews were transcribed verbatim, with pseudonyms assigned and identifying information removed. Individuals were offered the opportunity to review their transcripts: 11 people requested this, and 2 sent back minor edits. Some individuals were contacted once or twice by email after their interviews for clarification on issues. Their written email responses were added to their transcripts. Brief field notes were also included in transcripts for analysis.

Sample

The 20 individuals who were 40 years or older when they married consisted of 12 lesbians, seven gay men, and one bisexual man. Their ages ranged from 42 to 72 years, with an average of 54 years. Eighteen individuals were from nine couples married to each other. Two women's spouses were under the age of 40 when they married; these spouses were interviewed, but their experiences are not included here. Thus, because not all individuals' experiences from the 11 couples are included in this analysis, the results focus on individual rather than dyadic accounts.

At the time of the interviews, the couples had been married from less than half a year to five years, but had been with their partners prior to marrying from six months to 19 years (average: 7.5 years). Over two thirds of SSMs in Canada are first-time marriages (Rose, 2012), and similar proportions were found in this sample. Fourteen of the 20 individuals were marrying for the first time; two women and four men had been previously married to someone of the opposite sex. Seven couples had children from a previous heterosexual relationship; one woman had a child from an earlier lesbian relationship.

All identified as White, European Canadian. Four couples lived in rural areas. Just over half (11) stated that they had no religious affiliation; the rest identified as Baptist, Episcopalian, Anglican, or "other". A few individuals attended church once or twice a year; two gay couples attended weekly, but otherwise most did not attend. The sample was well educated – 11 had a bachelor's or graduate degree – although there was a range of education. Eight people worked full-time, two worked part-time, three were unemployed, and six were retired. One declined to identify employment status.

Personal incomes ranged from less than $20,000 (one woman, one man) to $100,000 or more (two men) per year. This was a sample with higher than average incomes, compared to the 2009 median family income in Nova Scotia, which was $62,550 (Statistics Canada, 2011). However, this income level did not mean that their weddings were expensive. Wedding costs ranged from $300 (an urban lesbian couple with a high household income) to $20,000 (an urban gay couple with the highest household income in the sample), with an average cost of $6,000 and a median cost of $5,000. *Wedding Bells* magazine (2012) reported that the average amount spent on a wedding was $22,429 (excluding honeymoon) in 2012, although wedding magazine readers may spend more on weddings than non-wedding-magazine readers. Nova Scotians may also typically spend less on weddings compared to those living in other parts of Canada; they have one of the lowest median incomes in the country (Statistics

Canada, 2011). All indicated that they and/or their spouses had paid for the wedding. Occasionally a parent provided some assistance.

Analysis

A qualitative methodology called *interpretive description* (Thorne, 2008; Thorne, Kirkham, & O'Flynn-Magee, 2004) was used for analysis. This methodology, which emerged from the nursing field, is helpful in applied disciplines. It recognizes multiple, complex realities and the interplay between the researcher and those being studied (Thorne et al., 2004). Data do not "emerge" out of findings; instead, understanding is constructed through the researcher's interpretation (Thorne et al., 2004). Design strategies in interpretive description draw from other methodologies such as grounded theory, ethnography, and phenomenology (Thorne et al., 2004). This interpretive descriptive study was influenced by grounded theory.

One of the epistemological assumptions of the social constructionist/interpretivist paradigm is that there is not one reality but many realities "that can be articulated based on the values, standpoints, and positions of the author" (Daly, 2007, p. 33). Thus, I offer these findings as only one possible interpretation of these individuals' experiences based on my standpoint as a middle-aged, heterosexual, married woman (which I revealed either directly or indirectly to everyone I interviewed) who has conducted research on heterosexual weddings in the past (Humble, 2009; Humble, Zvonkovic, & Walker, 2008). I believe marriage is a right that all couples should have regardless of their sexual orientation, but my focus on the transition to marriage does not mean I devalue other types of committed relationships, particularly the common-law, cohabiting relationships of many long-term same-sex couples.

Data analysis began with reading the transcripts and then conducting open coding (Richards & Morse, 2007). A constant comparative process (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) ensured that codes consistently reflected interpretations assigned to the material. Data analysis and management benefitted from MAXQDA qualitative data analysis software (version 10) through the use of of basic features such as (a) multiple ways to assign codes, (b) word searches, (c) activation of various codes and transcripts for comparison of themes, and (d) the assigning of different memos to various parts of the project file. The *code matrix browser* feature was occasionally used to examine the presence and prevalence of codes.

Memos kept track of ideas in several ways. First, *document memos* provided overall descriptions and key quotes from each participant. *Code memos* described

codes that were considered theoretically important. Finally, as the analysis progressed, I focused on increased abstraction to make sense of the data, and these interpretations (i.e., emerging reflections on the main themes) were entered into *free-standing memos*.

Findings

Getting married later in life involved three processes. The concept of marriage first needed to be integrated into the view of oneself as an LGB person in a committed same-sex relationship. Reasons for getting married to one's specific partner also had to be considered. Finally, wedding planning and the characteristics of weddings were imbued with intentionality and meaning related to participants' sexual orientations and their intimate relationships.

Moving Beyond Ambivalence: Integrating Marriage into One's Psyche

The legalization of SSM across Canada was an important historical event for these couples, yet it did not necessarily result in an immediate desire to get married or the act of getting married. Most of the women and two of the men mentioned that it took time to adjust to the idea that marriage was now a reality for them. Of the six men who needed no time to adjust, all lived in rural areas, four had been previously married, and four were very religious.

The *national* right to marry may have acted as a catalyst for some to consider whether marriage was a choice they wanted to make. It influenced the timing of marriage for about half of the participants to whom it applied. Thirteen individuals (representing seven couples) could have married up to 10 months earlier than July 2005, as SSM marriage had been legal in Nova Scotia since 2003. Of these, 11 commented on the influence of the national legalization. Six said it factored into their decision making, and of these six, four were men. One of these, Brad, said, "We waited until same-gender marriage became legal throughout Canada because we wanted to have our legal status recognized in whatever province we visited."

The other five participants indicated that it did not make a difference; they married because it was the right time, or they indicated that the Nova Scotia legislation had been enough for them. Of those five, however, two indicated that the move towards nationalization was important to them. Monica said that she and her partner were "both so pleased, as that seemed to make it truly legitimate to have it nationally rather than just provincially. Look at the mess they have in the [United] States now with some states allowing it and others not."

Once legalization occurred, however, individuals still needed to determine if marriage was something that was right for them. Many never thought they would marry, even after it became legal for them to do so. Domestic partnership had existed in Nova Scotia for several years and had already given same-sex relationships more visibility and recognition. Those in long-term cohabiting relationships already felt married and questioned whether or not there was a need to legally marry. They were "delighted" that the option was now available, yet they did not initially see it as a choice they would make for themselves. For some, there was a sense of ambivalence or apprehension. Monica said, "Okay, now that we *can* get married, the idea was 'well, meh', it's always 'meh'."

Many individuals had been out for years and/or in long-term relationships, but they still had to address internalized beliefs such as they could not marry, marriage was not for them, and they had never "seen themselves in that picture". Erica said, "It was just something in my growing up and 'coming out' I never thought would be part of my life, the idea of walking down the aisle with another woman." Some continued to view the institution of marriage as only for heterosexual individuals. For example, Sally said her Catholic upbringing influenced her to continue to believe that marriage should only be between a man and woman. SSM was also sometimes initially considered as something that younger LGB cohorts would do. Sharon made a reference to how difficult experiences earlier in life influenced how she saw marriage being a part of her life, noting that her apprehension was due to being "through a little bit more" than the "new modern lesbian", and Dennis said:

> We grew up in a society that told us we weren't allowed to get married, so marriage was never, ever an option. …. Because you grow up thinking you can't do something, just because it became legal, [my partner and I] never even talked about it. It was not an issue. It was just something – well the young kids will get married, the next generation.

Other reasons were offered for not marrying. One lesbian couple had to work through their feelings about marriage's oppression of women and whether or not they could be a part of what they saw as a historically oppressive institution. Molly suggested that young lesbians might be more inclined towards marriage, noting that "there probably are more older lesbians who don't want to be in any way linked to what they'll see as a patriarchal arrangement". Noelle, who had been previously married to an abusive man, was not sure if she wanted to remarry, regardless of whether or not it was to a woman.

A person's level of "outness" to the community could also come into play. One respondent noted how a number of her lesbian friends were in their fifties and had never come out to their parents. Getting married, in their minds, would necessitate a coming out to their relatives that they were not ready to consider. Only one respondent in this study, however, noted that this was a factor for her.

The Personal and the Political: Deciding to Marry

In addition to integrating marriage into their sense of self, the second process individuals underwent was to consider *why* they would marry. This usually took on a more personal meaning, as it related specifically to their partner. The reasons for marrying one's partner varied, and an examination of MAXQDA's code matrix browser showed that respondents seldom invoked just one reason. If they did give just one reason, however, it was because they loved each other or wanted to take their relationship to a different level. Erica said she married because she felt there was no other way to show her partner how much she loved her. Ryan and his partner, who initially did not want to marry until it was legal in other countries (e.g., United States) said, "Finally we came to the point where maybe it would bring us closer together … and we'd form a stronger bond if we got married."

Marrying for legal reasons or to gain health benefits for one's partner occurred for a number of couples, and of course, it did not mean that the couple did not also marry for love. Not surprisingly, in the face of inadequate legal protection, several long-term couples already had various legal documents in place. Seven individuals from five couples commented on this, but they also came to realize that these documents might be insufficient. In Nova Scotia, a common-law relationship does not provide the same level of asset protection as marriage despite many people's assumptions to the contrary. Some participants had experienced significant financial losses from previous relationships whereas others realized they had considerable shared assets needing protection.

Marrying for legal reasons also included the recognition that came with marriage. Laura said it was "confirmation in the eyes of the law that, yes, we are connected, we are family for real, and no one can change that or take it away or decide something differently." "Validated", "legitimized", and "liberated" were common words used by respondents to describe what the right to marry meant to them. Dylan described it as "icing on the cake".

The final decision to marry usually occurred over time, as it was intertwined with the process of integrating marriage into one's psyche (an individual process not necessarily happening at the same time for each spouse).

For several individuals, however, the final decision occurred suddenly when a friend or acquaintance convinced them with a carefully worded argument that they should marry. Sharon and her partner decided to marry after a conversation with a friend who informed them that their legal documents provided insufficient protection, and she described how driving home after the conversation, they "just decided that day that we should do this legally, for the legal reasons". Dennis changed his mind after a colleague noted that his decision not to marry seemed contradictory to the educational work he did around gay rights. When he asked his colleague why he should marry, she responded "Because you *can*", and it was this simple statement that finally convinced him that marrying was the right thing to do.

Reasons for marrying sometimes included a "political" element, although participants were not always comfortable with this adjective. Dennis said, "I suppose I'd say 'political' but there's no other good word to use. It's not really political, I mean, it would have been political had we gotten married and it was illegal – *that* I consider political." One couple highlighted the importance of recent political debates in their decision to marry. Some of these couples had married soon after Bill C-38 came into effect (i.e., within the year 2005). The Liberal government had passed the act, but not without considerable resistance from the Conservative opposition, and shortly after the passing of this law another national election took place. Leading into that election, the Conservative opposition promised to repeal Bill C-38 should they be elected, which they were. Shauna stated:

> The [repeal] vote was to be in the fall of 2006. We decided to get married in part to be among the legally married same-sex couples that the [Conservative] government would have to deal with should they repeal the bill. Another reason to be married was to show support of the LGBT activists who had spent their lifetimes working for marriage equality.

Not Rocking Boats: Being Intentional in Wedding Planning

Planning a wedding was a joyful experience for most of the study participants. There were, however, subtle ways in which the historical exclusion to marriage influenced their actions and the features of their weddings. This third process describes how intentionality permeated these older couples' wedding preparations in a number of ways.

First, decisions concerning who to invite were made carefully. In general, it was important to have wedding guests who knew them well and supported them. Given the historical exclusion, marrying was highly meaningful

to couples, and they did not want to share it with just anyone. Alex noted that he would not invite people that were "not happy that I'm gay or I'm going with a guy", and Becky said that she did not want people at the wedding who wanted to say, "Gee, I went to the big gay wedding."

Nevertheless, invitations were still sometimes carefully extended to family members who were unsupportive of the person's sexuality or their relationship, and in a number of situations individuals came out to a family member or friend at the same time they informed them of their upcoming nuptials. Some aging parents, in particular, had struggled with their adult child's sexuality, and responses varied to the news. Several eventually came to support their children in ways that were very moving for me to hear during interviews. In contrast, there were others (in particular, fathers) whose initial response was negative and who continued to struggle with the idea of SSM. Family members and friends occasionally stepped in to attempt to change these individuals' minds and made a difference in some cases. Ingrid described a conversation her brother had with her mother: "I don't know what he said to her, but he made her realize that she wasn't being very supportive. The very next day she went into work and she told everybody at work that I was getting married."

For the most part, however, individuals reported supportive responses from family and friends, and at times their comments demonstrated graciousness in their acceptance of people's difficulties in adapting to change. For example, Becky noted that SSM was relatively new in the Canadian landscape, and it would take time for some people to adjust to the idea. The debate about SSM in the gay community often referred to in the media and by academics was not present in any of their stories. Dennis said, "Since [the fight for] gay marriage has been won, you don't hear it anymore."

Intentionality also played out in the locations where people married. Weddings tended to take place in private locations such as homes or small restaurants temporarily closed to the public. It was not uncommon to have a small ceremony with a few people followed by a reception with more guests, which sometimes occurred a few weeks later. Even the one gay couple who spent $20,000 on their wedding followed this pattern, although they had their reception on the same day.

Various wedding features demonstrated intentionality. Some respondents felt that the incorporation of gay symbols such as rainbow stoles, flags, and candles transformed their weddings from "straight" to "gay". Sharon said that the way she maintained her lesbian identity was with a rainbow flag, commenting, "That big gay flag, just standing there, made all the difference,

because you couldn't *not* have your eye on it, no matter where you went. So you *knew*." Individuals who desired to make a statement found their own ways of doing so. Dennis, who had been with his partner for two decades, put together a slide show documenting their relationship. He said, "We've been together for 20 years. And we were never allowed to get married. So I said, 'I'm going to make them look at the fact'." Dennis noted how the slide show was particularly moving for his spouse's brother, who realized while watching the show that he was not in one single picture, and made a decision from that point onward to be more involved in his brother's life.

Respondents avoided features they felt were associated with heterosexual weddings, such as napkins with names, elaborate table centerpieces, or white wedding dresses. Additionally, the lack of institutionalization for same-sex weddings meant that there was a sense of freedom in their wedding features. One couple used superheroines for their cake topper; another couple married at sunrise.

One unique aspect of these weddings was that those who had already had previous commitment ceremonies sometimes reused symbols or vows from those events. They saw no need to purchase new rings, for example, when the rings from their first ceremony would work well enough and were, in fact, infused with meaning for them. Melissa noted, "There's something about tying the past together in the rings that didn't feel like it would be true – wouldn't feel the same – if it was a new ring that somebody had made for us."

Intentionality was present in how individuals described the importance of making a good impression for heterosexual guests. These couples wanted to throw a good party for their guests, but a few also talked about feeling a responsibility to represent well SSMs. Some were conscious that their wedding might be the first or only same-sex wedding that guests might attend, and this was on their minds as they considered their wedding plans. Sharon said, "I didn't want them to look and say, 'Wow, look at them freaks getting married.' So basically we tried to get away from that aspect and started trying to make them comfortable and us comfortable too." Alex, who lived in a rural area, commented, "I know how some people feel about gay marriages or gays, so I said [to the officiate], 'just make [the wedding ceremony] short'." A few worried about publicly kissing their partners in front of others – particularly parents – for the first time. Erica said, "One of the things that was completely setting me aside was how am I going to kiss this woman in front of her parents, my mom?"

Finally, although individuals' experiences with the wedding industry were overwhelmingly positive, intentionality also radiated out to decisions concerning what wedding-related services to use (e.g., officiates, jewelry designers). Participants sought to mitigate or prevent negative reactions through a careful "pre-assessment" of various situations. For instance:

> Since I came out I don't pull any punches, and I just tell people right up front this is what I'm here for. So, when I went in that's exactly what I did. I said, "Okay, I'm a gay man"; I said, "we're planning a wedding", and they were happy. It was no issue at all; they didn't bat an eye. (Ray)

Sally asked individuals, "Are you comfortable with doing a gay wedding? Because whether you're legally able to do it or not is one thing, if you're not comfortable I don't want you doing my wedding." Sometimes participants' actions were in response to previous experiences of heterosexism. When Dennis searched for an engagement ring at jewelry chain stores in shopping malls, the salespeople assumed he was buying it for a woman. As a result, when it came time to purchase wedding rings, he looked for a private jeweler, which he thought might work better.

Discussion

Using interpretive description (Thorne, 2008; Thorne et al., 2004) and informed by a life course perspective (Bengston & Allen, 1993; Elder, 1994), this study examined the transition to marriage for 20 mid- to later-life LGB individuals who married after SSM became legal across Canada. The marriage decision involved three processes, and as was the case in Badgett's (2009) study, two of them appeared to be different from heterosexual couples.

The first unique process was *integration:* the concept of marriage had to be integrated into one's psyche as something that an LGB individual would do.[4] Then, similar to heterosexual couples, the second process was *rationale*: the personal – and sometimes political – reasons for marrying one's partner were considered. The other unique process of these individuals' experiences, compared to those of heterosexual couples, was that the features of their wedding planning and weddings reflected *intentionality* (Oswald, 2002a).

With the exception of the first process, these processes were generally experienced by all participants, although variation occurred (e.g., one person hesitated about marrying due to not being out to her parents whereas another hesitated because of her beliefs about women's oppression in marriage). Participants had similar experiences despite differences in the length of their relationship prior to marrying (which Lannutti, 2011, suggested would make a difference), socioeconomic status, geographic location (urban or rural), and age at marriage. Their collective experiences, I contend, were

influenced by their shared historical life course experiences of heterosexism and homophobia.

Historical time is key in influencing life course family transitions of older LGB individuals (Cohler, 2005). They have lived through years of homophobia and heterosexism, which undoubtedly has affected their worldviews. They have also witnessed important historical events in Canada such as the decriminalization of homosexuality in 1969, anti-discrimination laws related to sexual orientation in 1996, and the Civil Marriage Act in 2005, all of which had important implications for their health, intimate relationships, and kinship bonds. Yet the act of legalizing SSM may be insufficient to impel them towards marriage.

Some older same-sex couples, particularly those in long-term relationships, may already view themselves as married and thus do not initially see the need for the legal piece of paper (similar to the findings of Lannutti, 2011). Many have demonstrated agency in the absence of societal or family support, holding private ceremonies or procuring legal documents demonstrating their mutual commitment to each other. Thus, the fact that other ways of celebrating and protecting the relationship have been invoked influences whether marriage is seen as relevant or desired. The stage of a couple's relationship will influence future decisions about it (Reczek et al., 2009). After a certain point, the odds of a long-term relationship transitioning into marriage may decline for same-sex (and heterosexual) couples. This study, however, demonstrates that some individuals in committed same-sex relationships do transition into marriage after many years as a couple and that sociohistorical events (e.g., policy changes) play a role in that transition. Gay men and lesbians tend to be, on average, about 10 years older than heterosexual individuals who marry, which Rose (2012) suggested may reflect a postponement of marriage until it became legal.

Support from social networks can influence how individuals' agency and choice plays out. For Dennis and Sharon, chance conversations with friends were the "spark" (Badgett, 2009) they needed to consider marriage in a different light, whereas Sally needed considerable time to make up her mind because she was not out to her family. Conversely, the decision to marry can set in motion a necessary coming out to others, potentially changing the lives of those associated with the couple.

SSM legalization can necessitate a psychological reassessment of one's place in society and one's relation to the institution of marriage. Badgett (2009) noted that one barrier some same-sex couples face in making the decision to marry is their opposition to the institution of marriage. Being an "outlaw", as one woman indicated in this study, can fundamentally change a person in ways that mean it takes time to integrate marriage

into one's psyche. This contemplation is connected not to one's specific partner but to one's position within a heteronormative world.

Historical exclusion to marriage can create a sense of ambivalence about whether or not to marry, even when it becomes legal. Socially structured ambivalence (Connidis, 2003) may come into play for older cohorts: the "meh" in Monica's comment. Indeed, life course transitions can sometimes bring ambivalent feelings to the surface (Connidis, 2010). Thus, deciding to marry can be a complicated decision for same-sex couples (Badgett, 2009; Lannutti, 2008), particularly for those who are older, whose "concerns about mainstreaming … are likely rooted in historical experience" (Lannutti, 2011, p. 75). This points to the importance of cohort differences in researching same-sex couples' marriage experiences. Those who struggled with whether or not SSM was for them were clear that it was something they could see younger generations doing.

Moreover, lesbians may be more hesitant to enter into marriage compared to gay men. Badgett (2009) noted that many lesbians came out "in the midst of fervent feminist critiques of marriage and other sexist institutions in the 1960s and 1970s, and these lesbians often retain a critique of marriage that remains a formidable barrier to marriage" (p. 35). In this study, only two women explicitly mentioned women's inequality in marriage, in contrast to Badgett's research in which a feminist resistance to and suspicion of marriage was more common. However, it may be that other reasons for resisting marriage (e.g., questioning whether or not one wants to be part of a family configuration that for so many years has oppressed them, continuing to see marriage as only for heterosexuals) are part of a feminist critique of marriage but are less obvious. SSM dialogues are inextricably tied with feminist critiques of marriage's patriarchal and heteronormative nature (e.g., Bevacqua, 2004; Green, 2010). Bevacqua noted that "with same-sex marriage recognized as a legal right, both gays and straights will have to grapple with the question of whether or not they will participate in a fundamentally flawed institution and what they will do to change it" (p. 38). Because heterosexual marriage disadvantages women relative to men, lesbians may be more likely than gay men to question marriage in any form.

Additionally, the six men in this study who did not express any reservations about marrying shared similar characteristics. All lived in rural areas, four were previously married, and four were highly religious, all factors that could contribute to one's willingness to marry. For example, rural life is "tightly organized around personal networks that value heterosexual kinship, religious conservatism, social conformity, and superficial

privacy" (Lindhorst, 1997, cited in Oswald, 2002b, p. 323), and this type of community may influence one's motivation to marry. Additionally, church attendance is related to marital commitment (Larson & Goltz, 1989).

Ambert (2005) noted the importance of studying the impact of Canada's SSM legalization. This study indicates that the point at which it became a national possibility was key in the timing of many same-sex couples' weddings and played a role in some of their decisions. About half who could have married prior to the Civil Marriage Act said that it made a difference to them; provincial legalization was not enough. Moreover, it was on some participants' minds that it would be increasingly difficult for the newly elected Conservative government to repeal the law if many same-sex couples married. Thus, due to the timing of these couples' weddings (taking place shortly after Bill C-38), marrying did take on a political tone for some of them. Political reasons existed in Badgett's (2009) Dutch study as well but to a lesser extent, as that country's "tolerant social and legal climate dulled the political point of marriage" (p. 32). The significance of getting married during these proximal years was demonstrated by Dennis' colleague, who said he *should* get married simply because he *could*. Within this particular historical timeframe, same-sex couples' personal choices to marry thus took on a political tone. MacIntosh et al. (2010) also described the political aspect of SSM. However, this political element may decline as it becomes more common, and it may also be less common in younger cohorts who grow up and develop their relationships within a context of greater societal acceptance.

The life course perspective recognizes that cohorts' current choices and sense of agency may be partly influenced by their past experiences (Cohler, 2005). Such shared life experiences may contribute to shared understandings of self and others. As a result of shared experiences of heterosexism and homophobia, wedding planning experiences and weddings are infused with intentionality – strategies such as "choosing kin, managing disclosure, building community, ritualizing, and legalizing" (Oswald, 2002a, p. 375) that gay and lesbian individuals invoke to create and sustain their families within contexts that provide little support. Intentional strategies may continue even within a context of national legalization and an immediate context of much support from families and friends. Intentionality is present in who individuals invite (Badgett, 2009, also noted this), how they invite people, where they marry, and wedding characteristics. This subtle intentionality is rooted in concerns about heterosexism or homophobia, which sets these couples' experiences apart from the heterosexual individuals I have interviewed in previous research (Humble, 2009; Humble et al., 2008).

Weddings involve negotiations with many people. This happens for heterosexual couples, but there are additional issues for same-sex couples. In particular, "publicly announcing a lesbian or gay wedding often entails confronting the resistance of others to what they identify as either gender or sexual nonconformity within the institution of family" (Dalton & Bielby, 2000, p. 46). A public wedding can put a family on display for heteronormative assessment (Dalton & Bielby), and even LGB individuals who are long out to friends and family can experience resistance from their social networks (Dalton & Bielby; Smart, 2007). Older LGB individuals' agency in marrying thus affects others. For example, weddings can be a type of coming out unanticipated by older parents, having come to terms with their adult child's sexual orientation but not including SSM in that picture. Acceptance of an adult child's sexual orientation may be more of a truce than a full acceptance (Oswald, 2002c), and life course transitions such as weddings may bring these differences to the surface.

The marriage of an adult child may reveal new and different levels of resistance, and it demonstrates the interconnectedness of lives (Elder, 1994). Straight fathers appear to have more difficulty with their adult children's same-sex relationships than mothers, pinpointing the role of gender (Connidis, 2003). Nevertheless, the assumption that older parents will struggle with their adult child's sexuality is not always correct. Lannutti (2011) found that SSM, in general, did not change her participants' family relationships, suggesting that older couples would have negotiated their relationships with other family members years earlier. In this study, although not everyone was ultimately supportive, there were stories of parents coming to support their adult children's marriages. Older parents can develop new conceptions of family life as a result of the agency of their adult children and other individuals, and they, too, can be influenced by shifting societal attitudes.

The pervasiveness of heteronormativity is seen in some couples' desires to be socially acceptable to their guests. Although the lack of institutionalization for SSM can result in a sense of greater freedom in weddings, it does not entirely remove heteronormative influences. "Same-sex marriage, both as an institution and as a specific form of expressing commitment, has complex and contradictory implications" (Lannutti, 2007, p. 242), thus resistance to heterosexuality is complex.

In some cases, resistance may be obvious; in other cases, it may be subtle. Definite resistance to heterosexual symbols could be seen; yet many of the ceremonies and receptions could be identified as typical weddings. Older same-sex couples understand that there may be boundaries they have to work within, and guests have expectations as well. Accordingly, those marrying are

willing to occasionally compromise. Moreover, a few respondents felt pressure to be good SSM "ambassadors", given that SSM had recently been legalized and a newly elected government was unsupportive of it. The historical timing of their weddings, thus, may have influenced some wedding features. Where resistance emerged most clearly was through the use of the rainbow motif, which was found on flags, ribbons, candles, and stoles. Occasionally, couples' ceremonies or receptions involved "statements" such as a slide show documenting their longtime relationship.

Oswald and Suter (2004) theorized about how heterosexist normativity results in different experiences between heterosexual individuals' and LGBT individuals' experiences at heterosexual weddings. Both groups can struggle with aspects of weddings that they dislike or have to tolerate, yet LGBT individuals are more likely to feel less involved and part of a family than heterosexual individuals. Examining LGB individuals' wedding experiences suggests that they may also experience their own weddings differently from heterosexual individuals. Thus, this study provides an alternative perspective on how heteronormativity influences family rituals.

Limitations and Future Research

It is not possible to generalize these results to all older LGB individuals. Only those who had positive experiences or mostly positive experiences may have agreed to talk with me. Participants were from one part of Canada (Nova Scotia) and were White, European. They also were individuals who *did* marry. Same-sex married couples may only represent a select group of LGB couples who wish to establish a committed, monogamous relationship (Ambert, 2005). Future research will benefit from studying a broader range of older LGB individuals. Given that older individuals, by virtue of their extensive life histories, may be less interested in marrying, examining other committed LGB relationships will contribute to our understanding of the diversity of committed relationships later in life. Research on same-sex relationships should not reify or reinforce "the construction of a hierarchy within queer communities [that places] those who are respectably married on a higher tier, further marginalizing those in alternative relationships" (Mulé, 2010, p. 78). Including sexual orientation in nationally representative Canadian studies (along with variables such as religiosity, current and previous types of relationships, and urban/rural status) will strengthen quantitative studies exploring varied relationship transitions and experiences.

The concept of ambivalence has great applicability for studying the intergenerational relationships of individuals in same-sex relationships, and little research has explored the experiences of LGB adult children's parents (Connidis, 2010). Future studies could explore parents' reactions to their children's marriages, particularly those who struggle with the idea of SSM and eventually come to accept it. Research can also explore, in greater detail, individuals' experiences of support in other realms such as the wedding industry.

Prospective research may want to explore potential connections between gender, sexual orientation, and the ease through which a person can adopt a married identity. Interestingly enough, the gay men in this study seemed to more easily integrate SSM into their self-concepts, but this may also have been related to being religious, rural-dwelling, and previously married. Separate studies carried out with female couples or male couples and comparing young adults with mid- to later-life adults for cohort differences may be helpful. Only one person identified as bisexual in this study, and Lannutti (2007) has noted bisexual-lesbian couples' experiences may be unique. Moreover, transgendered individuals were not studied. Research looking at the wedding and marriage experiences of both bisexual and transgendered individuals is needed.

Finally, as noted earlier, I was a heterosexual woman interviewing LGB individuals. It is possible that the participants may have given different responses to an LGB interviewer/researcher or that I may not have asked some pertinent questions (e.g., I did not ask about how integrated participants were within an LGB community, which Porche and Purvin, 2008, suggested might make a difference). There are both benefits and drawbacks of having an insider status (LaSala, 2003).

Conclusion

Canadians, in general, accept SSM (Angus Reid, 2012), and increasing numbers of same-sex couples are marrying (Statistics Canada, 2012a). Yet older same-sex couples remain understudied. This qualitative study was unique in its focus on older same-sex couples' transitions to marriage in the years immediately following SSM legalization in Canada.

Exploring how past experiences and recent sociohistorical events influenced the development of older LGB individuals' relationships expands our understanding of intimate-relationship diversity and family-of-origin dynamics later in life. Using a life course perspective highlights the ways in which middle-aged and older LGB individuals' experiences of marrying are rooted in their life histories. For participants in this study, marrying involved three processes: (a) they decided if SSM was something they saw themselves doing; (b) they determined if marriage was the right choice within their current relationship; and (c) they planned their weddings with intentionality and deliberateness as

a result of past experiences of heterosexism and homophobia. Older couples who married in the five years following Canada's SSM legalization recognized the historical newness of their ability to marry, and, accordingly, traversed this new landscape carefully and cautiously at times. Future gerontological research needs to continue to explore how older LGB individuals move through this territory.

Notes

1 Same-sex common-law couples were counted for the first time in the 2001 Canadian Census, and SSM enumeration began in 2006. Same-sex married couples represented 0.1% of all married Canadian couples in 2006 and 0.8% in 2011 (Statistics Canada, 2006, 2012a).

2 The acronym "LGBT" is used when referring to research that specifically included transgendered individuals. de Vries (2007) noted the ubiquitous but challenging aspects of this and similar acronyms.

3 LGB individuals may also experience aging differently than heterosexual individuals. They have a lower life expectancy (Banks, 2003) due to social exclusion (a social determinant of health) encountered as a result of their non-heterosexual sexual orientation.

4 Many heterosexual couples, particularly those living in Québec, in which cohabiting unions are now the norm (see Le Bourdais & Lapierre-Adamcyk, 2004), and those who are younger may also grapple with the question of whether or not marriage is for them, but the extent to which such questioning occurs is likely much higher in same-sex couples. Moreover, the majority of Canadian heterosexual couples outside of Québec still marry.

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