


2014

## Same-Sex Couples' Lived Experiences of the Repeal of the Defense of Marriage Act's (DOMA) Section Three

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Same-Sex Couples' Lived Experiences of the Repeal of the  
Defense of Marriage Act's (DOMA) Section Three

by

Alicia A. Bosley

A Dissertation Presented to the  
Graduate School of Humanities and Social Sciences  
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

Nova Southeastern University

2014

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Alicia A. Bosley

December, 2014


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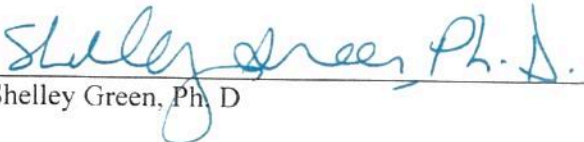
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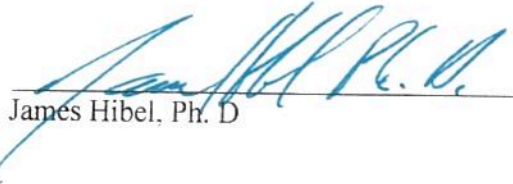
This dissertation was submitted by Alicia A. Bosley under the direction of the chair of the dissertation committee listed below. It was submitted to the Graduate School of Humanities and Social Sciences and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Family Therapy at Nova Southeastern University.

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## Acknowledgements

Completing this dissertation marks the most significant accomplishment of my life so far and I would like to express my appreciation and gratitude to those who have helped me along the way. To my parents, Bruce and Cathy Bosley, thank you for your love and support throughout the process, and for encouraging me to keep pushing when I was ready to give up. Thank you for giving me the gift of curiosity, a love of learning and academia (making me “nerdly”), and for teaching me from an early age that all people are equal. To my sister, Betsy, you have been my best friend and confidante throughout my adult life and words cannot express my happiness that I get to call you my sister. Now that I’m finishing this project, I think we can finally start planning this fabulous European trip of ours! To my grandmother, Leota Matheson, I sometimes think we’re the same person in two different bodies, and having you in my life has made it so much richer. Thank you for encouraging me and being proud of me throughout this process – and now for that cruise we talked about! To my friends, who came before and during this project, you are all such phenomenal and beautiful people, inside and out, and I am so thankful to know you. I couldn’t have maintained my balance through this and many other challenges without you. You make life fuller, richer, crazier, and more beautiful, and I look forward to seeing where we go next! Corey, I know you are with me every day, that wise small voice that encourages and comforts me when I am down and cheers me on when I am up. Thank you for everything you have been to me.

To Dr. Tommie Boyd, my committee chair and mentor, whose patience, wisdom, and attention to detail helped me to not only make it through this process, but to create something of which I am incredibly proud, thank you from the bottom of my heart. Your

kindness, encouragement, and insights have been so helpful during this project and throughout my entire doctoral program – not to mention the chocolate! Dr. Shelley Green, thank you for the inspiration you gave me to pursue this area of study, your enthusiasm for the project, and the great conversations we have had along the way! Dr. Jim Hibel, thank you for your encouragement and wisdom, for always challenging me, and for always being an absolute blast to work with! Dr. Ron Chenail, thank you for your tireless patience, incredible knowledge base, and wonderful conversation as you helped me to better understand qualitative research methodology. To Drs. Edward Simco, Carl Letamendi, Pei-Fen Li and Robert Witheridge, thank you for your experienced and patient assistance with SPSS and quantitative methodology. Michelle Manley, thank you for spending all those nights with me in the library, and for the countless cups of tea! To Drs. Kevin Lyness and Martha Marquez, thank you for your wisdom and insight regarding the COAMFTE’s relationship to this topic. To the late Dr. Jerry J. Bigner, thank you for inspiring me to bring my passion for supporting LGBTQ people into the field of marriage and family therapy, and for encouraging and supporting a budding academic in her first publication. I must also thank Dr. Amy Blanchard for supporting me as a student and encouraging me to pursue my Ph.D. – I am so grateful we were both at Antioch at the same time! I also send my sincere thanks to all the members of the faculty at Nova Southeastern University with whom I have worked throughout the years – your support, knowledge, and encouragement have been enlightening, sustaining, and encouraged me to always think differently.

Finally, to my phenomenal coresearchers in this project, my beautiful, wise, and wonderful participants – thank you for trusting me enough to share the details of your

lives and experiences with me. I was moved by your words and could not have done this project without you. You have taught me that, while life experiences are outwardly different, they are fundamentally similar in the significance they hold, and incredibly powerful in shaping our lives. You are not alone on the road to equality, and many are celebrating with you as we finally reach the precipice of positively changing the social conditions of our time.

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## Abstract

Same-sex couples are affected by the social and political climates in which they live, as these create the difference between acceptance and legalization, and discrimination and prohibition, of their relationships. This contingency is made increasingly impactful by the privileges and protections afforded to married couples by the federal government; same-sex couples, along with other couples that choose not to, or cannot, marry, are excluded from these benefits. Following the June 26, 2013 ruling that Section Three of the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA), which defined marriage as between a man and a woman, was unconstitutional, same-sex couples were given access to over 1,100 federal protections and benefits and supported legally for the first time. My research explored the lived experiences of same-sex couples following this milestone in order to develop an understanding of the psychological and relational effects of the DOMA repeal on same-sex couples. This understanding may assist therapists working with these couples by increasing comprehension of their context and the effects of the DOMA repeal on their internal and relationship functioning. By understanding these aspects, therapists may work more capably and sensitively with same-sex couples, and be more informed regarding potential problems these clients may bring to therapy.

Both qualitative and quantitative approaches were employed in order to gather comprehensive data on the topic, utilize the strengths of both methodologies, and enhance the results of each method with the other. A single instrument, an online survey, was utilized. The quantitative paradigm provided numerical data on the experiences of same-sex couples following the DOMA repeal, as well as differences in experiences based on variance in state laws. Under the qualitative paradigm, phenomenological methodology



was utilized to explore and convey participants' experience of the repeal in their own words. Responses were collected via survey to allow for more anonymity for participants, as well as a more representative sample of same-sex couples across the country. Qualitative and quantitative questions were included on the survey; responses were analyzed separately, and then merged during interpretation.

Implications for clinical practice derived from this study are reviewed, as well as implications for advocacy work and directions for further research. It is hoped that this study will provide a better understanding of same-sex couples' lived experiences following the repeal of DOMA's Section Three, and provide implications for therapists working with these couples.

## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

### Orientation

On June 26, 2013, in a highly controversial decision, the United States Supreme Court ruled that Section Three of the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA), which defined marriage as between a man and a woman, was unconstitutional (Freedom to Marry, 2013; Human Rights Campaign, 2013; Reilly & Siddiqui, 2013). Speaking for the majority, Justice Anthony Kennedy wrote:

The federal statute is invalid, for no legitimate purpose overcomes the purpose and effect to disparage and to injure those whom the State, by its marriage laws, sought to protect in personhood and in dignity. By seeking to displace this protection and treating those persons as living in marriages less respected than others, the federal statute is in violation of the Fifth Amendment. (Reilly & Siddiqui, 2013, para. 2)

By striking down this section of DOMA, the Supreme Court has taken steps to end the denial of over 1,100 federal protections and benefits of marriage to same-sex couples, and upheld that all married couples deserve equal treatment and respect under the law (Drescher, 2012; Freedom to Marry, 2013; Human Rights Campaign, 2013; Killian, 2010; Mathy, Kerr, & Lehmann, 2004; Pelts, 2014; Steingass, 2012). These privileges of legal married status had previously been available to all other married people, and thus the repeal of Section Three of DOMA was a major victory for marriage equality in the United States (Barnes, 2013; Freedom to Marry, 2013; GLAAD, 2013; Human Rights Campaign, 2013; Reilly & Siddiqui, 2013). Freedomtomarry.org celebrates the end of “a ‘gay exception’ that only caused pain, uncertainty, and financial harm” (para. 1) for many American couples. Several political figures spoke out in support

of the Supreme Court's decision, including Secretary of State John Kerry, Attorney General Eric Holder, Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel, Secretary of Health and Human Services Kathleen Sebelius, Secretary of Homeland Security Janet Napolitano, Acting Director of the U.S. Office of Personnel Management Elaine Kaplan (Raghavan, 2013), and President Barack Obama also voiced his support, citing the statute as "discrimination enshrined in law" (Raghavan, 2013, para. 2).

The Defense of Marriage Act was passed by Congress and originally signed into law under President Bill Clinton on September 21, 1996 (Freedom to Marry, 2013; GLAAD, 2013; Killian, 2010). Section Three prevented the federal government from acknowledging any marriages between same-sex couples for the purpose of federal programs or laws, even if the marriages are recognized in the couples' home states (GLAAD, 2013). Thus, under DOMA, married gay and lesbian couples were denied numerous, important protections and rights, such as social security benefits, immigration rights, family and medical leave, the ability to pool resources without heightened taxation, military family benefits, hospital visitation rights, healthcare benefits, numerous tax benefits, and immigration and nationalization benefits, to name a few (Andryszewski, 2008; Freedom to Marry, 2013; GLAAD, 2013; Goldberg, 2009; Mathy & Lehmann, 2004). Thus, same-sex couples were often forced to resort to complex, costly, and time-consuming legal methods to attain just a small portion of these benefits (Kopels, 1998).

The Supreme Court's ruling came after nearly 17 years of DOMA being in effect, during which time Section 3 had been ruled unconstitutional ten times at the district court, U.S. Bankruptcy Court, and U.S. Court of Appeals levels (Freedom to Marry, 2013). The constitutionality of DOMA had been hotly debated throughout this time, with

opponents of the Act maintaining that it was unconstitutional and legally sanctioned deprivation, discrimination, and inequality, and supporters insisting that it was morally correct, necessary to protect children, and biblically sanctioned (Barnes, 2013; Drescher, 2012; Freedom to Marry, 2013; GLAAD, 2013; Human Rights Campaign, 2013; Reilly & Siddiqui, 2013; Rimmerman, 2008). The Obama Administration instructed the Department of Justice to cease defending DOMA in court in February 2011, and requested heightened scrutiny in federal lawsuits (Drescher, 2012; Freedom to Marry, 2013, Pelts, 2014). In response to this, the Bipartisan Legal Advisory Group (BLAG) assembled to defend DOMA in the Department of Justice's place (Freedom to Marry, 2013).

Key in overturning DOMA's Section Three was *Windsor v. United States* (Freedom to Marry, 2013; GLAAD, 2013; Human Rights Campaign, 2013). Thea Spyer and Edith Windsor were married in Ontario, Canada in 2007, and later relocated to New York (Freedom to Marry, 2013). When Spyer died in 2009, she left her entire estate to Windsor (Freedom to Marry, 2013). However, when Windsor tried to claim the federal estate tax exemption for surviving spouses, she was barred from doing so by Section Three of DOMA, and forced to pay \$363,053 in estate taxes--and then denied a refund by the Internal Revenue Service (Freedom to Marry, 2013; GLAAD, 2013). Windsor then brought a refund suit against the United States, claiming that DOMA violates the principles of equal protection inherent in the Fifth Amendment (Freedom to Marry, 2013, GLAAD, 2013). The Supreme Court ruled against the United States, stating that Section Three of DOMA is unconstitutional (Freedom to Marry, 2013). The Court's decision was narrowly divided--five of the nine Supreme Court Justices held that the section was

unconstitutional (Barnes, 2013). “DOMA writes inequality into the entire United States Code,” wrote Justice Anthony M. Kennedy, who was joined by four other Justices in overturning Section Three (Barnes, 2013). He continued, stating that by suppressing federal recognition of same-sex couples “places them in an unstable position of being in a second-tier marriage. . . . The differentiation demeans the couple, whose moral and sexual choices the Constitution protects. . . and whose relationship has sought to dignify” (Barnes, 2013).

The Supreme Court’s ruling marked what gay-marriage advocates refer to as the first step in ending DOMA, and took effect on July 21, 2013--25 days from the decision (Freedom to Marry, 2013). Married same-sex couples living in 13 states, as well as the District of Columbia, now have their marriages federally sanctioned and will be eligible for the same federal responsibilities and protections that are available to all other married couples (Barnes, 2013; Freedom to Marry). This list represents more than a third of the population of the United States (Barnes), marking a historical high in the number of same-sex couples with similar access to federal recognition as heterosexual couples. The federal administration is currently working to ensure that the repeal is properly implemented and that married same-sex couples can gain access to the previously mentioned federal benefits and protections (Freedom to Marry). Many hope that same-sex couples in other states will soon have similar recognition and privileges; however, advocates caution that this will likely take time (Freedom to Marry; GLAAD, 2013).

For same-sex married couples, these new movements can make the difference between respect and all the federal protections for their marriages, and no protection at all (Freedom to Marry, 2013). By striking down Section Three of DOMA, the Supreme

Court has maintained that same-sex couples married in states that recognize same-sex marriage must receive the same benefits that heterosexual couples receive (Barnes, 2013), and the expansion of these protections to all married couples and families allows them to better care for, and be responsible for, themselves, leading to stronger couples, families, and communities (GLAAD, 2013). Additionally, with DOMA's ban on federal protections for same-sex married couples eliminated, the government will begin respecting the marriages of all federal employees; as the federal government is the largest employer in the country, this should have an enormous benefit for numerous same-sex couples and families (Freedom to Marry, 2013). However, only Section Three was ruled unconstitutional (Barnes, 2013; Freedom to Marry, 2013; GLAAD, 2013; Human Rights Campaign, 2013). The other significant section of DOMA, Section Two, maintains that individual states are not legally required to acknowledge the marriages of same-sex couples who were married in another state, and still remains (GLAAD, 2013; Freedom to Marry, 2013; Human Rights Campaign, 2013, Barnes, 2013).

Under current United States law, the federal government defers to state governments in determining whether a marriage is valid (Freedom to Marry, 2013); thus, despite national federal recognition of all *marriages*, same-sex couples who are prohibited from marrying in their states of residence are still denied access to the respective recognitions and privileges afforded to marriages. Additionally, there is no sole rule determining whether the validity of a marriage is decided by the couple's "place of celebration" (where they were legally married) or their "place of domicile" (where they are currently living), which leads to further uncertainty (Freedom to Marry, 2013). Thus, legally married same-sex couples who live in, or move to, states that do not

recognize their marriages may have difficulty accessing federal marriage benefits (Freedom to Marry, 2013; GLAAD, 2013; Human Rights Campaign, 2013; Pelts, 2014). Due to this inequality in state laws and recognition, the experiences of same-sex couples may be drastically different in states legitimizing their marriages than in states that do not. Thus, many argue that further work is needed to repeal the remaining sections of DOMA, to mandate that states recognize all marriages (Barnes, 2013; Freedom to Marry, 2013; GLAAD, 2013; Human Rights Campaign, 2013). As Pelts (2014) stresses, the 2013 DOMA ruling does not automatically equal national legalization of same-sex marriage, nor does it end discrimination toward sexual minorities and their relationships and families. Many states continue to disallow same-sex marriage, and thus millions of same-sex couples continue to be denied access to the benefits of marriage (Pelts, 2014).

#### **Statement of the Problem**

Research has shown that the majority of marriage and family therapists work, at least occasionally, with sexual minority clients (Bordoloi, O'Brien, Edwards, & Preli, 2013; Godfrey, Haddock, Fisher, & Lund, 2006), and that sexual minority clients find therapy beneficial and are frequent clients (Haas et al., 2010; Johnson, 2012). However, many MFTs report feeling unprepared and not competent to work with sexual minority clients, and most graduate programs still lack comprehensive training in working with sexual minorities (Giammattei & Green, 2012; Haas et al., 2010; Johnson, 2012; Long & Serovich, 2003). Despite the fact that the Commission on Accreditation for Marriage and Family Therapy Education (COAMFTE) has called for integration of sexual orientation training into the curriculum of MFT training programs, this area continues to be sparsely covered (Long & Serovich). This has led some authors to question the preparedness of

MFTs to work with sexual minority clients (Clark & Serovich, 1997; Laird & Green, 1995; Long, 1996, 2000; Long & Serovich). This is of concern as sexual minority clients are a vulnerable population and can feel misunderstood, devalued, or discriminated against by the very therapists who seek to help them (Chavez, 2011; Haas et al., 2010; Johnson, 2012; Rutherford et al., 2012). Therefore, it is important for MFTs to understand the lived experiences of sexual minority clients, including their experiences regarding larger-system legal discrimination such as DOMA and similar federal and state laws. While DOMA's Section Three has been repealed, this was a recent change in the legal and political systems involving sexual minorities, and effects of these laws are likely still felt by many. Additionally, other sections of DOMA are still in effect, as are similar laws and policies concerning sexual minorities and their relationships in federal law and the law in many, but not all, states. The variability between state laws pertaining to same-sex relationships can create frustration, confusion, and a sense of instability and insecurity for many sexual minorities, and it is important for therapists to be aware of, and sensitive to, this dynamic. Furthermore, Bordoloi et al. (2013) describe the AAMFT's non-advocacy for same-sex marriage as "inherently problematic, both from a social justice perspective and in the interest of maintaining a thriving professional identity" (p. 42). They caution that a lack of active leadership on issues such as same-sex marriage could leave marriage and family therapy as a profession "antiquated and surpassed by other mental health fields that are active in advocacy" (p. 42). Bordoloi et al. (2013) further warn that by refusing to advocate for legal recognition of same-sex marriage, an organization such as the AAMFT is in fact perpetrating discrimination and promoting the oppressive social systems that marginalize sexual minorities. Thus, it is an



important goal for therapists and scholars practicing within the profession of marriage and family therapy to become familiarized with the experiences and problems facing LGBQ individuals in order to move toward a more affirming profession-wide stance toward sexual minorities. While this study is not focused on encouraging marriage and family therapists to join the movement among mental health professions to advocate for sexual minorities, it is hoped that this study may contribute to the body of MFT literature (e.g. Bordoloi et al; Chavez; Haas et al.; Johnson; Rutherford et al.) emphasizing the stresses placed on this group and the need for the profession to join the movement to advocate for and support sexual minorities.

### **Objective**

Two overriding research questions will guide this inquiry. First, *What are the lived experiences of same-sex couples following the repeal of Section Three of DOMA?* Second, *What, if any, are the differences in perception of the repeal of Section Three of DOMA between same-sex couples living in states that have legalized same-sex marriage, same-sex couples living in states that have not legalized same-sex marriage but offer some legal benefits and protections, and same-sex couples living in states that have not legalized same-sex marriage and have Constitutional amendments outlawing same-sex marriage?* The first question will be assessed through phenomenological qualitative methodology; the second through quantitative methodology (descriptive statistics). Same-sex couples are highly sensitive to the social and political climates of their geographic locations (Barton, 2010; Killian, 2010; Knauer, 2010; Lyness, 2012; Natale & Miller-Cribbs, 2012). Thus, for the second question, it is hypothesized that respondents living in more progressive states will respond with different experiences regarding the repeal of

Section Three than will respondents living in more conservative states. I have not given a direction to my hypothesis as it is possible for this difference going either way (e.g., respondents living in states where their relationships are not legally sanctioned may perceive the federal law as trumping state laws and respond more favorably to the repeal; conversely, they may feel that state laws have more effect on their relationships than federal laws and see the repeal as ineffective, responding less favorably).

Through phenomenology, a qualitative approach to inquiry and research that endeavors to find the universal essence of a phenomenon as described by those who have experienced it (Creswell, 2013), the object of this study is to elucidate the lived experiences of the very couples whose relationships are affected, and in some aspects, dictated, by DOMA and its subsequent partial repeal. Additionally, through descriptive statistics, a common quantitative research methodology, a second objective of this study is to question whether living in a state that does recognize same-sex marriage corresponds with a more positive view of the repeal of DOMA's Section Three among same-sex couples than the view of same-sex couples living in states that do not recognize their marriages.

Guided by the contexts of the current sociopolitical debate regarding same-sex marriage, the scholarly literature, and the need within the field of marriage and family therapy (MFT), this research will be guided by the following specific areas of focus:

1. How has the repeal of DOMA's Section Three affected the couple and family relationships of same-sex couples?

2. How do the experiences of same-sex couples living in states that validate their marriages differ from the experiences of same-sex couples living in states which do not validate their marriages?
3. What are the implications for gay and lesbian affirmative therapy that arise from this study?

### **Personal Context - Self as Researcher**

In order to orient readers to the lens from which I am conducting this research, I believe it is important for me to be transparent and situate it within the contexts involved in my choice of research topic. As Creswell (2013) explains,

How we write is a reflection of our own interpretation based on the cultural, social, gender, class, and personal politics that we bring to research. All writing is positioned and within a stance. All researchers shape the writing that emerges, and qualitative researchers need to accept this interpretation and be open about it in their writings. (p. 179)

Thus, I believe it is important at this point to position myself in relation to this study and topic. I am a 31-year-old, unmarried, heterosexual, Caucasian woman. I currently live in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, and participate socially, occupationally, and politically in the active Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Questioning (LGBQ) community in both Fort Lauderdale and Miami. I have also participated in various activities involving the LGBQ community in other locations I have lived, including Keene, New Hampshire, and Fort Collins, Colorado.

I am currently a practicing marriage and family therapist, and have been seeing individuals, couples, and families in therapy in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, for the past

three years. I have also worked as a therapist in New Hampshire, for three years. As a marriage and family therapist, my clinical work has been largely focused on, and shaped by, the interpersonal nature of both problems and solutions which clients bring with them to therapy. I have also had the chance to work with adolescents, adults, couples, and families who identify as LGBQ (or have a family member who identifies as LGBQ).

My graduate studies, graduate programs, professional practice in the field, and personal relationships and experiences have all contributed to my passion for social justice, and interest in joining the movement for LGBQ equality and rights both personally and professionally. I specifically chose both of my MFT graduate programs, Antioch University New England's M.A. program and Nova Southeastern University's Ph.D. program, because of their reputations in the field for being committed to diversity and social justice. Additionally, I chose to attend Nova Southeastern University due to its location in a geographic area known for its diversity. Throughout the course of my studies, I became more familiar with the challenges faced by the LGBQ population in what is still a largely homophobic and heterosexist society, and the scarcity of scholarly research within the MFT field on working therapeutically with LGBQ clients in an affirmative way. My therapeutic work with LGBQ clients helped me see some of the pain resulting from experiences of discrimination, hate, and homophobia. My personal friendships with numerous gay, lesbian, and bisexual people have given me a much closer and more personal experience of what LGBQ people go through as well: I was told about, and also present during, instances of ostracism, taunting, threats, and unprovoked violence against sexual minorities. These experiences motivated me to pursue a doctoral degree so that I may focus my career on helping to develop a more comprehensive

understanding of these issues within the MFT field, so that we may provide more competent and affirmative therapy to LGBTQ clients.

While in my doctoral program, I was lucky enough to witness history in the making: Section Three of DOMA was repealed, and one of the largest steps forward in the marriage equality movement was made (Barnes, 2013; Freedom to Marry, 2013; GLAAD, 2013; Human Rights Campaign, 2013; Reilly & Siddiqui, 2013). Thus, I feel that my chosen topic of study not only coincides with my personal and professional beliefs in marriage equality and social justice, but with an exciting and historical moment in the LGBTQ rights movement.

### **Rationale and Purpose**

Relationships between the LGBTQ community and the field of mental health have had an uneasy history (Johnson, 2012). Until 1973, homosexuality was listed as a diagnosis in the APA's Second Edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Health Disorders (DSM II), and 'ego-dystonic homosexuality' was included as a mental disorder in the DSM III until 1986 (Rutherford, McIntyre, Daley, & Ross, 2012). Until the termination of these diagnoses in the DSM, psychotherapy with GLBTQ clients was focused on treating a mental disturbance, and following their removal as diagnoses, treatment was focused on reparative and conversion therapy (Johnson, 2012). Although professional associations including the American Association of Marriage and Family Therapy, American Psychiatric Association, and the National Association of Social Workers have declared these therapies to be non-therapeutic and probably harmful, they still exist in some sectors of the therapy field (Johnson, 2012). This focus on "curing" alternate sexualities has shifted from a model of pathology to one of viewing them as part

of a naturally occurring lifestyle; however, this is still an ongoing process and is contested by some members of the field (Johnson, 2012).

The marriage and family therapy field has its own specific history with, and relationship to, LGBTQ people. Giammattei and Green (2012) describe the connection:

Dominant definitions of relationship and family have historically not included sexual and gender minorities. This silence, which has its roots in heterosexism and homophobia, continues to have a profound impact on LGBTQ individuals, couples, and families. The field of couple and family therapy has, more often than not, mirrored public sentiment and helped perpetuate this silence. (p. 1)

Giammattei and Green continue to describe the views of influential, well-known leaders in the field which pathologize people and relationships which do not fit into the heterosexual norm. They point out that these leaders “trained thousands of therapists and published writings that were widely read from the founding of the field” (p. 2) and thus had a considerable impact on the perceptions held by the field. Additionally, much of the language utilized by the field (e.g., *marriage* and family therapy as opposed to *couple* and family therapy) is heteronormative in nature and may be experienced by LGBTQ potential clients as dismissive or unwelcoming (Hudak & Giammattei, 2010).

However, this heteronormative stance is changing within the MFT field, with more and more prominent scholars in the field taking a normalizing and affirmative stance toward LGBTQ couples and families, including Salvador Minuchin and John Gottman (Giammattei & Green, 2012). Linda Stone Fish and Rachel Harvey (2005) have made a considerable contribution to the field by creating a model of therapy that

combines developmental research, queer theory, and family therapy to nurture LGBTQ clients.

Despite these advancements, the majority of MFTs report feeling unprepared and not competent to work with sexual minority clients, and most graduate programs still lack comprehensive training in working with sexual minorities (Giammattei and Green, 2012; Johnson, 2012). This is a concern as research has shown that anywhere from half (Johnson, 2012) to 90 percent (Godfrey, Haddock, Fisher, & Lund, 2006) of MFTs work with LGBTQ clients at least occasionally. Further, LGBTQ clients have indicated to researchers that therapy is helpful to them, particularly affirmative therapy (Johnson, 2012). However, despite high rates of therapy utilization, sexual minorities report higher levels of dissatisfaction with services than do heterosexuals (18% versus 8%), partially due to experiences of discrimination within the context of therapy, and also partially due to therapists' lack of knowledge (Chavez, 2011; Johnson, 2012; Rutherford et al., 2012).

Research has shown that therapists do not have to identify as LGBTQ themselves to be helpful to LGBTQ clients, and in some cases, heterosexual and cisgender therapists can provide a corrective experience to everyday homophobic socialization (Chavez, 2011; Johnson, 2012). These studies indicate the importance of therapist competence in working with sexual minority clients (Chavez, 2011; Johnson, 2012; Rutherford et al., 2012), and create an important goal for the therapy field--to ensure that all therapists have a basic understanding and respect for the issues facing sexual minorities (Rutherford et al., 2012). Rutherford et al. (2012) stress that the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy (AAMFT), along with the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), and American Psychological Association (APA) have released statements

about appropriate therapeutic treatment of LGBTQ clients, which includes having knowledge of the LGBTQ experience and seeking continuing education to work with these clients. Finally, Bordoloi et al. (2013) point out that many of the problems faced by sexual minorities are of a relational nature, which makes marriage and family therapists uniquely suited to provide highly relevant and valuable therapy to LGBTQ clients.

Thus, this dissertation will be written in the hopes of providing a glimpse into the experience of LGBTQ individuals, couples, and families in this point in history, as a major victory in the marriage equality movement is won. This study is not intended to provide a comprehensive synopsis of the myriad experiences of LGBTQ people, but rather to contribute to the existing knowledge base that exists to educate and assist therapists in providing competent care to sexual minority clients. The findings of this study will be discussed in relation to informing work with sexual minority clients in Chapter 5. Much like abuse laws, age of consent, and other localized legal factors pertinent to clients, it is relevant and important to marriage and family therapy practice to be knowledgeable about local laws pertaining to sexual minority clients and their relationships. Knowing the current experiences, positive and negative, of the LGBTQ community in light of the LGBTQ equality movement and current political, legal, and social climates may help therapists to be more knowledgeable and sensitive to the experiences and needs of these clients.

### **Audience**

Due to the general nature of a marriage and family therapy dissertation, it is assumed that the primary audience for this study will be marriage and family therapy scholars and practitioners. As such, I believe it is crucial to accurately convey the lived



experiences and beliefs of those affected by DOMA, gay marriage laws, and the divided nature of the United States on these topics. It is my hope that, through this dissertation, I am able to convey the stories and voices of those who will be entrusting me with them in a manner as close as possible to their original essence, and relate these to the knowledge base and practice of marriage and family therapy.

### **Definition of Relevant Terms**

While this list is not meant to comprehensively cover all terms relevant to LGBQ people, relationships, and lives, the following are referenced within this text and thus defined here. The terms lesbian, gay, bisexual, questioning, queer, same-sex, same-sex couple, sexual minority, LGBTQ, LGBQ, LGB, GLB, and homosexual may be used interchangeably in this dissertation based on their situation and source. All of these terms refer to individuals, or a group of individuals, who are marginalized based on sexual orientation, gender identity, sexual identity, or a combination of these (Falvey, 2011). These groups are all included in the study as they all may potentially be involved in same-sex relationships, and are thus at risk of being personally affected by the Defense of Marriage Act. It is important to state here that transgender individuals are often included in these groupings, but transgender individuals constitute their own specific population with characteristics, strengths, and needs not shared by other individuals underneath the sexual minority umbrella. Understanding their experiences related to gender and sexual identity involves unique considerations which go beyond the scope of this dissertation; interested readers are directed to Brill and Pepper (2008), or Lev (2004). All definitions, unless otherwise noted, were written by Green and Peterson (2004).

**Bisexual:** A person emotionally, physically, and/or sexually attracted to both men and

women. This attraction is not necessarily equally split between genders and there may be a preference for one gender over others.

Gay: 1. Males who are primarily attracted to other males in a romantic, erotic and/or emotional way. It is important to note that not all men who engage in so-called “homosexual behavior” identify as gay; therefore, this label should be used with caution.

2. Term sometimes used to refer to the LGBTQI community as a whole; also an individual identity label for anyone who does not identify as heterosexual.

Heteronormativity: The assumption that everyone is heterosexual, and that heterosexuality is superior to homosexuality and bisexuality.

Heterosexism: Prejudice against individuals and groups who display nonheterosexual behaviors or identities, combined with the idea that heterosexuality is the “normal”, “natural”, or “correct” sexuality. Also, any attitude, action, or practice that subordinates people because of their sexual orientation.

Heterosexual: A person who is primarily emotionally, physically, and/or sexually attracted to members of the opposite sex.

Homophobia: The irrational fear or hatred of homosexuals, homosexuality, or any behavior or belief that does not conform to normative heterosexual ideals.

Homosexual: A person who is primarily emotionally, physically, and/or sexually attracted to members of the same sex.

Lesbian: A woman who is primarily attracted romantically, erotically, and/or

emotionally to other women. This term derives from the name of the Greek island of Lesbos and is therefore sometimes considered to be a Eurocentric category that does not apply to those of non-European descent; however, most women across diverse ethnic groups embrace the term as an identity label.

LGBQ/LGBTQ Affirmative: The view that LGBQ/LGBTQ people and issues are fundamental and self-defining, as opposed to secondary and subject to definitions created by the heterosexual norm (from Falvey, 2011).

LGBQ/LGBTQ Affirmative Therapy, then, is conducted based upon these assumptions.

Queer: An umbrella term utilized to refer to numerous sexual preferences, orientations, and habits of sexual minorities. It is sometimes used as a way of acknowledging that there are many more valid sexual orientations, identities, and activities than the heterosexual, cisgender, and monogamous norm. This word has historically been used as a slur, but has been “semantically overturned by members of the maligned group, who use it as a term of defiant pride” (Green & Peterson, 2004, p. 7). It is noted that many people to whom this term might apply may still consider it a hateful insult, and its use by heterosexuals and cisgender people is often considered to be offensive.

### **Organization**

This dissertation will consist of five chapters. Chapter One will delineate the contexts, objective, rationale, purpose, audience, and terminology for the study. Chapter Two will provide a review of the relevant, existing literature on the subject, to offer a deeper context, history, and support for the current inquiry. Chapter Three will detail the

methodology utilized in this study, as well as detail the participants, methods, materials, and analysis involved. Chapter Four will discuss the results of the research methodology, and analyze and present the findings. Finally, Chapter Five will connect any findings to the current knowledge on the subject, situate the findings within the relevant field, and discuss the implications of the findings for therapists and researchers within the field.

## CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

### Introduction

The road toward social justice for sexual minorities has been a long and arduous one, peppered by setbacks and narrow victories. Progress toward equal civil rights for sexual minorities has been slow, falling well behind that of women and ethnic minorities. (Dominguez, Solorzano, & Pena, 2012). Although sexual minority individuals currently have a higher level of political and social acceptance than ever before, they continue to face numerous legal and social inequalities and discriminations (Andryszewski, 2008; Goldberg, 2011; Knauer, 2012). Members of the LGBTQ community face legal barriers to relationship formation, tax benefits, health care decisions, adoption, immigration status, employment, housing, earned veterans' benefits, and eligibility for government benefits (Andryszewski, 2008; Goldberg, 2011; Knauer, 2012; Natale & Miller-Cribbs, 2012). In particular, older LGBTQ individuals face discrimination in the context of healthcare, older adult services, assisted living facilities, and end-of-life benefits (Jackson, Johnson, & Roberts, 2008; Haber, 2009; Knochel, 2012). Additionally, they face widespread social discrimination and disapproval, which not only remains legal in many states but is actively mandated in the case of marriage (Andryszewski, 2008; Goldberg, 2011; Knauer, 2012). This discrimination is compounded by the common misconception that discrimination toward sexual minorities has become a thing of the past (Arnup, 1999), and is thus often treated as irrelevant and unimportant today. Considering these challenges, Goldberg (2011) observes that it is particularly remarkable that so many same-sex couples are able to sustain lasting relationships in spite of the lack of support from family members, the legal system, and society.

The fight for marriage equality is perhaps the current major aspect of the struggle for LGBTQ equality in the USA (Elliott and Bonauto, 2005). Despite the importance of marriage equality for achieving social justice for sexual minorities, progress has been marred by setbacks and support on all levels has been mixed. Nationally, religious leaders, media spokespeople, and politicians are debating issues of LGBTQ rights including domestic partnerships, civil unions, and same-sex marriage (Barton, 2010; Sterngass, 2012). Culturally, although the majority of Americans support the legalization of same-sex *relationships* for the first time, and view them as acceptable, the majority of Americans continue to oppose the legalization of same-sex *marriage* (Woodford, 2010, emphasis added).

Even within the LGBTQ community, there is dissent on the topic: two major ideological groups have formed in response toward the marriage equality question: the assimilationist group and the liberationist group (Adam, 2003; Drescher, 2012; Goldberg, 2009; Knochel, 2012; Yep, Lovaas, & Elia, 2003). The assimilationist group, which views same-sex marriage as the key to full equality under marriage laws and social acceptance, believes that marriage may have a positive and stabilizing influence on LGBTQ relationships, thus improving the health and safety of the LGB community (Yep et al., 2003). The leading national LGB organizations, such as the Human Rights Campaign (HRC), the Freedom to Marry project, the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force (NGLTF), and the National Center for Lesbian Rights (NCLR), embrace and promote assimilationist ideology (Adam, 2003; Goldberg, 2009; Knochel, 2012; Yep et al., 2003). The second group within the LGBTQ movement, called the liberationist group, views marriage as an outdated, flawed, and oppressive institution which has historically

promoted white male privilege and oppression of women and minorities (Beyond Marriage.org, 2006, p. 2; Goldberg, 2009; Knochel, 2012; Obocock, 2013; Rimmerman, 2008; Yep et al., 2003). The liberationist camp sees same-sex marriage as continuing the stigmatization of those who form alternative family structures while privileging those who mirror traditional heterosexual marriage, and believes that society should recognize and support the alternative relationship configurations created and practiced by the LGB community (Beyond Marriage.org, 2006, p. 2; Goldberg, 2009; Knochel, 2012; Yep et al., 2003). However, even those who are the most critical of adopting same-sex marriage concur that married same-sex couples should have access to all of the benefits and privileges conferred on married opposite-sex couples (Goldberg, 2009; Obocock, 2013). Natale and Miller-Cribbs (2012) illustrated the underlying rationale of this point by comparing the privileges, rights, and responsibilities afforded, in turn, to civil unions, domestic partnerships, and marriages. They found that the most privileged status in the United States is marriage; the other arrangements offer far fewer benefits and the benefits they do provide vary by state (Natale & Miller-Cribbs, 2012).

Due to this variance in privileges afforded by state, the relationships of same-sex couples are highly impacted by their location (Killian, 2010; Maril, 2014; Natale & Miller-Cribbs, 2012). Laws supporting LGBTQ people and relationships vary widely by region, with those in the Northeast and West Coast offering more support for sexual minority individuals, couples, and families than areas such as the Southeast and Midwest (Barton, 2010). The most extensive of these, of course, are the laws forbidding or permitting same-sex marriage (Barton, 2010; Killian, 2010; Natale & Miller-Cribbs, 2012). This geographic variance in laws has far-reaching implications that may be

difficult for those not familiar with the LGBTQ political situation to comprehend (Killian, 2010). If a same-sex couple is married in one state and travels or commutes to another, the state in which they are currently standing can influence whether or not they are considered married by law (Killian, 2010; Knauer, 2010). Thus, in the event of an emergency, marital partners may or may not have legal abilities to, for example, make medical decisions or visit a sick partner, all based on their current physical location (Killian, 2010). Additionally, if a couple gets married legally in one state, relocates to another which does not recognize the marriage, and then decides to get divorced, they are often unable as the state in which they reside does not recognize the marriage in the first place (Knauer, 2010, Lyness, 2012). Because many states enforce residency restrictions for divorce, the couple may be required to relocate back to the original state for a period of time in order to acquire residency to qualify for a divorce – an option that is rarely, if ever, feasible (Knauer, 2010, Lyness, 2012). Consequently, these locational variances make major life decisions, such as occupational and residential choices and parenting decisions, much more constrained for LGBTQ individuals and couples than for their heterosexual counterparts (Arnup, 1999; Killian, 2010). Therefore, many scholars within the field believe that, despite recent progress toward equal rights for sexual minorities, the Defense of Marriage Act and similar laws prevent true equality for sexual minorities (Andryszewski, 2008; Arnup, 1999; Barton, 2010; Elliott & Bonauto, 2005; Freedom to Marry, 2013; Goldberg, 2011; Human Rights Campaign, 2013; Killian, 2010; Knauer, 2012; Maril, 2014; Sterngass, 2012).

This chapter examines the research within the mental health field regarding the same-sex marriage debate and laws, dynamics of currently existing same-sex marriages,



psychological and social implications of discrimination against same-sex couples, the historical effects of the mental health field on same-sex couples, resiliency factors of same-sex couples, the relationship between marriage and mental health, and the outcomes of marriage recognition on same-sex couples. Like many topics related to the LGBTQ population, there is a scarcity of literature within the marriage and family therapy field and related disciplines regarding the Defense of Marriage Act. Thus, the literature regarding DOMA will be covered; however, due to the shortage of research on the topic, the literature on closely related topics will be covered in order to give a more complete picture of the effects of legal and social inequality for same-sex marriage.

### **History of Same-Sex Marriage Rights**

Lesbians and gay men began publically challenging their exclusion from the legal and social rights of marriage in the 1970s (Andryszewski, 2008; Bernstein, 2011; Clarkson-Freeman, 2005; Rimmerman, 2008; Sterngass, 2012), although quieter challenges to legal inequality began as early as the 1950s (Elliott & Bonauto, 2005). Early national organizations for gay rights, including the Lambda Legal Defense and the National Gay Task Force, did not press the issue of marriage for several reasons (Rimmerman, 2008). Many were critical of marriage as a patriarchal institution, and rejected it, along with other norms associated with heterosexuality, such as sex roles and traditional family units; others saw marriage equality as a hopeless cause; and most had other priorities (Rimmerman, 2008). To many at the time, marriage was an “inherently patriarchal institution, which played a central role in structuring the domination of women” (Rimmerman, 2008, p. 100) and they thus sought to create new ways of living and having relationships. Overall, gay rights movements at the time were more focused

on the rights of sexual minority individuals, such as fighting employment discrimination, than on sexual minority couples (Knochel, 2012; Rimmerman, 2008). While there were some attempts to seek legal recognition of same-sex marriage, these were led by the couples themselves and not backed by legal or public advocates (Knochel, 2012; Rimmerman, 2008). However, in the 1980s, the AIDS crisis inspired increased efforts for full legal recognition of gay marriage in order for partners to deal with institutions such as hospitals, nursing homes, funeral homes, and state agencies in the interest of their loved ones (Rimmerman, 2008). Additionally, around this same time, the lesbian and gay “baby boom” occurred, with more same-sex couples choosing to become parents than ever before (Rimmerman, 2008). Then, in 1993, Minnesota became the first state to include sexual orientation as a protected class in its state civil rights legislation, and soon after enacted domestic partner rights (Dziengel, 2010). This step led to other states’ either following suit by marking a new emphasis on family issues or legislating in the opposite direction (Andryszewski, 2008; Rimmerman, 2008).

### **Proposition 8**

In 2008, the California Supreme Court voted that the state’s same-sex marriage ban was unconstitutional (Chonody, Smith, & Litle, 2012). Following this ruling, same-sex couples in the state began marrying legally, but the ruling was soon overturned and Proposition 8 was added to the November 2008 ballot (Chonody et al., 2012; Falvey, 2011). Proposition 8 aimed to amend the state constitution by prohibiting same-sex marriage and was upheld by a 52% majority of voters (Chonody et al., 2012). This ruling was vehemently debated for several years before Proposition 8 was found unconstitutional by the 9<sup>th</sup> U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals and overturned (Chonody et al.,

2012; Falvey, 2011; Pelts, 2014). Shulman, Gotta, and Green (2012) conducted a study in which they interviewed California adults in same-sex relationships about their anticipated experience of the impact of legally recognized marriage on their lives. Respondents reported an increased sense of security in all areas of their lives, including increased security in their couple relationships as well as feeling more protected by society (Shulman et al.'s, 2012).

### **Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA)**

The Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) was introduced in Congress by Representative Robert Barr of Georgia (Joslin & Minter, 2008). It quickly passed in both houses and was signed into law by President Bill Clinton in September 1996 (Andryszewski, 2008; Bernstein, 2011; Clarkson-Freeman, 2005; Freedom to Marry, 2013; GLAAD, 2013; Joslin & Minter, 2008; Mathy & Lehmann, 2004; Natale & Miller-Cribbs, 2012; Stevenson, 1998). Joslin and Minter (2008) clarify that when DOMA was originally enacted, its purpose was to allow states to disregard a legal relationship between two same-sex adults. At the time, the state of Hawaii was considering allowing same-sex couples to marry, and the members of Congress were concerned that same-sex couples from other states would go to Hawaii, get married, obtain declaratory judgments validating their marriages, and then use the declaratory judgments to argue against the laws of their own states regarding the validity of their marriages (Andryszewski, 2008; Bernstein, 2011; Clarkson-Freeman, 2005; Joslin & Minter, 2008; Rimmerman, 2008, Stevenson, 1998). According to Joslin and Minter (2008), the extent of the disability imposed on same-sex couples by this law was not fully considered by members of Congress, and Rimmerman (2008) and Joslin and Minter (2008) stress that in many ways,

Bill Clinton was under pressure to sign DOMA into effect. These ideas have important political underpinnings, but are beyond the scope of this review. Interested readers are directed to Rimmerman's (2008) and Joslin and Minter's (2008) excellent discussions of the topic. Following DOMA's enactment, numerous law scholars negatively commented on the new law, with descriptions ranging from "unnecessary" to "unconstitutional" (Joslin and Minter, 2008). Mathy and Lehmann (2004) write that "DOMA conveys an impression of protection despite depriving an entire category of people – non-heterosexuals – of the security, stability, and benefits with which marriage is associated" (p. 188). By denying same-sex couples the right to marriage, laws such as DOMA create an "apartheid" system of relationship recognition (Thomas, 2005), and codify and perpetuate discrimination against same-sex couples (Mathy, Kerr, & Lehmann, 2004). Interestingly, Bob Barr, who wrote the Defense of Marriage Act, and Bill Clinton, who signed it into law, have since joined gay-rights organizations calling for DOMA's repeal and supporting same-sex couples' right to marry (Wolfson, 2012).

### **Recent Developments**

After DOMA was written into federal law, many states followed suit (Bernstein, 2011; Bordoloi et al., 2013; Burnett & Salka, 2009; Drescher, 2012; Goldhaber, 2007). Nineteen states made amendments to their constitutions prohibiting same-sex marriage between 1998 and 2005, and in 2006, seven more states voted to ban same-sex marriage (Burnett & Salka, 2009). Overall, between 1993 and 2003, forty-eight of the fifty states introduced laws limiting legal recognition of same-sex marriages (Rimmerman, 2008). As of this writing, 35 states have constitutional amendments or laws prohibiting same-sex marriage (Freedom to Marry, 2013).

However, in 2000, the Vermont Supreme Court ruled that equal benefits must be available to same-sex couples, thus enacting The Vermont Civil Union Law (Chonody et al., 2012). This ruling provided rights and responsibilities to same-sex couples that were comparable to those provided to traditionally married couples (Chonody et al, 2012). Then, in 2004, Massachusetts became the first state to legalize same-sex marriage (Freedom to Marry, 2013; Lannutti, 2007; Natale & Miller-Cribbs, 2012), followed by Connecticut in 2008; Iowa and Vermont in 2009; New Hampshire in 2010; New York in 2011; the District of Columbia, Washington, and Maine in 2012; and Maryland, California, Delaware, Minnesota, Rhode Island, New Mexico, and New Jersey in 2013 (Freedom to Marry, 2013; ProCon.org, 2013). Also in 2013, several states moved to recognize same sex partnerships in some form: Colorado, Hawaii, and Illinois allowed civil unions; Oregon and Nevada allowed domestic partnerships; and Wisconsin allowed a more limited domestic partnership (Freedom to Marry, 2013). While they did not move to legitimize marriages of same-sex couples, Texas, Kentucky, Oklahoma, Tennessee, Utah, and Virginia struck down legislation to ban these marriages in the months following the Section Three repeal (Botelho and Mears, 2014; Ghiani, 2014). Further, Oklahoma, Missouri and Kentucky ruled that same-sex marriages performed in other states must be recognized. 2014 saw a significant jump in the number of states legalizing same-sex marriage: Illinois, Indiana, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Nevada, North Carolina, Alaska, Arizona, and Wyoming have all ruled in favor of same-sex marriage this year. Several other states struck down constitutional bans on same-sex marriage and are currently awaiting appeals for full marriage equality to take effect.

Overall, since the Section Three repeal, there have been 49 legal victories for marriage equality as of November 2014 (FreedomtoMarry.org, 2014). Only three court cases (in Tennessee, Louisiana, and Puerto Rico) have ruled against same-sex marriage since the repeal. Overall, same-sex couples can get married in 32 states, as well as in St. Louis, MO, as of the completion of this study on November 9, 2014 (FreedomtoMarry.org). Only six states (Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, Mississippi, Alabama, and Georgia) have same-sex marriage bans in place as of November 2014. For a complete list of state legalities, interested readers are directed to [www.freedomtomarry.org/states](http://www.freedomtomarry.org/states).

A less extensive, but important, development in the fight for equal rights is the extension of domestic partner benefits (DP benefits) to same-sex couples (Davidson & Rouse, 2005). One third of *Fortune 500* companies currently offer DP benefits to their LGBQ employees, citing that it is the “right thing to do” (Davidson & Rouse, 2005). This development, which began in 1990 with Lotus becoming the first *Fortune 1000* company to extend these benefits, has helped compensate for some of the legal losses incurred by DOMA and other, similar laws (Andryszewski, 2008; Davidson & Rouse, 2005). Interestingly, Davidson and Rouse (2005) found that, while 60% of these companies offered DP benefits to all unmarried couples, 40% offered them only to same-sex couples. However, much like equal marriage laws, the option of DP benefits varies by region, with areas such as New England and the Pacific Coast having higher numbers of companies offering these benefits and areas such as the Southern States, Mountain States and Midwest having fewer companies offering DP benefits (Davidson & Rouse, 2005; Freedom to Marry, 2013).

Progress toward full recognition of equal recognition of same-sex relationships has “waxed and waned” (Chonody et al., 2012, p. 277) and is likely to continue to be a highly divided and hotly debated issue. President Barack Obama has spoken in favor of gay marriage (Raghavan, 2013), while others, such as former President George W. Bush and Former Pope John Paul II, have spoken against it (ProCon.org, 2013). It is additionally important to consider that there continue to be gay-rights advocates who still do not support same-sex marriage (Ettlebrick, 1997; Lannutti, 2008; Rimmerman, 2008; Steingass). Ettlebrick (1997) argues that “marriage will not liberate us as lesbians and gay men. In fact, it will constrain us, make us more invisible, force our assimilation into the mainstream, and undermine the goals of gay liberation” (p. 758). Other gay-rights advocates argue that the focus on marriage equality takes attention off “urgent issues” such as homophobic violence (Rimmerman, pp. 126-127).

Despite setbacks and partial victories (such as civil rights bills rather than same-sex marriage legalization), the overall direction of progress nationally continues to be toward increased recognition of equal marriage rights (Drescher, 2012; Rimmerman, 2007). Nonetheless, there is currently a wide variability in laws, permissions, and support for same-sex relationships, with different states providing very divergent contexts in which same-sex couples must live their lives (Maril, 2014; Rimmerman, 2007).

### **Same-Sex Marriages**

Perhaps due to the recent legalization of same-sex marriage, there is very little existing research done on the nature of same-sex marriages. The majority of existing research focuses on public opinion of same-sex marriage, the effects of discrimination on same-sex couples, or the marriage equality movement. However, some research has been

done on same-sex relationships, and this research has found that same-sex relationships are similar in nature and functionality to heterosexual relationships (Gottman et al., 2003a; Gottman et al., 2003b; Julien et al., 2003; Kurdek, 1998; Kurdek, 2004; Kurdek, 2006; Kurdek, 2008; Means-Christensen, Snyder, & Negy, 2003). For example, Gottman et al. (2003a) found that stability and satisfaction in same-sex relationships was comparable to that in heterosexual relationships, and these relationships functioned based on similar operating principles as those of heterosexual relationships.

There are a few key areas in which gay and lesbian relationships are different from heterosexual relationships, however, and most of these differences show advantages for same-sex couples. Gay male couples reported more autonomy, and lesbian couples reported more autonomy and intimacy in their relationships than their heterosexual counterparts (Kurdek, 1998). Additionally, lesbian and gay couples were better at resolving conflict in their relationships than heterosexual couples (Gottman, 2003b; Kurdek, 2004). In fact, Kurdek (2004) found that when gay and lesbian couples scored differently on variables of relationship quality than heterosexual couples, they functioned better 78 percent of the time. Kurdek (2008) also found that same-sex couples showed more stability over time when compared to opposite-sex couples. A final strength of gay and lesbian relationships discussed in many studies was that of the increased self-appraisals of equality (Kurdek, 1998, Goldman, 2011).

There are a few areas in which gay and lesbian relationships experience disadvantages relative to heterosexual relationships. Compared to heterosexual couples, same-sex couples reported fewer barriers to leaving relationships, and more frequent relationship dissolution (Gottman, 2003a; Kurdek, 1998, Kurdek, 2004, Kurdek, 2006).



However, this is not necessarily an entirely negative aspect: Kurdek (2004) writes that this increase may indicate that gay and lesbian couples are less likely to find themselves trapped in unhappy relationships. Kurdek (2004) also writes that lesbian and gay couples experience lower perceived levels of social support from family members than heterosexual couples, which may in turn impact the couple relationship.

Overall, however, the existing literature shows that there are many more similarities than differences between same-sex and heterosexual couples. Kurdek (1998) found that the strength with which overall relationship quality was linked to relationship outcome (such as relationship maintenance or dissolution) was equivalent in lesbian, gay, and heterosexual couples. Particularly, he found (2004) that the same variables predicted concurrent relationship quality and stability for each group, indicating that processes that regulate relationship functioning generalize across couple types. Similarly, Julien et al. (2003) found no differences between heterosexual, gay, and lesbian couples in contributions to relationship equality.

Thus, the overwhelming majority of research shows that gay and lesbian relationships function similarly to heterosexual relationships, and offer many of the same benefits to partners (Goldman, 2011; Gottman et al., 2003a; Gottman et al., 2003b; Julien et al., 2003; Kurdek, 1998; Kurdek, 2004; Kurdek, 2006; Kurdek, 2008; Means-Christensen et al., 2003). Additionally, Lanutti (2007; 2008) found that same-sex couples residing in Massachusetts felt that marriage made their relationship more real in the sense that others would recognize them as a legitimate couple, and also perceived that they themselves perceived their relationships as more real, serious, and valid. These findings

therefore may support movements to legalize same-sex marriage and promote equality for gay and lesbian relationships.

One interesting study on same-sex marriages (Clarke, Burgoyne, & Burns, 2013) focused on the ceremonies with which same-sex couples publically presented their commitments to one another. Clarke et al. (2013) found that there were often elements of traditional, heteronormative weddings (white wedding dresses, exchange of rings, elaborate cakes) as well as elements of queer culture (dressing in non-gender normative ways) in the majority of these rituals. They also noted that many of the partners emphasized their enjoyment of the freedom they had to play with the details of their ceremonies due to the lack of a model for same-sex weddings. Lannutti (2008) also discusses this freedom; although not all of her respondents viewed this lack of traditional format as positive – many found it unclear, complicated, and frustrating. Another notable difference discussed by Clarke et al. (2013) was that often, same-sex commitment ceremonies celebrated an often pre-established and longtime commitment, rather than the making of such a commitment. Clarke et al. (2013) and Lannutti (2008) stress the lack of language available for their participants to discuss their relationship celebrations – many expressed discomfort using words such as “marriage” and “wedding”, but also felt terms such as “civil partnership” and “commitment ceremony” were poor imitations of the meaningfully connoted term “marriage” and indicated a lesser event. A final important aspect of same-sex wedding ceremonies discussed by Clarke et al. (2013) was the uncomfortable situations described by many participants in which they learned about, or experienced, their families’ true feelings about their sexual orientation. Due to anxieties about families’ homophobia, and incidents of actual familial homophobia, same-sex

weddings are not always joyful family occasions (Clarke et al., 2013; Lannutti, 2008; Obocock, 2013). However, notwithstanding this potential, many of Clarke et al.'s (2013) participants viewed external, particularly familial, affirmation of their relationships as a central motivation to have a public commitment ceremony; a finding echoed by Lannutti (2008). Despite the unique challenges to holding same-sex commitment celebrations, most of Clarke et al.'s (2013) respondents agreed that they were important for celebrating their relationships, marking their commitment to their partners, and communicating their innermost selves and desires.

### **Psychological and Social Effects of Heterosexism, Homophobia, Stigma, and Discrimination on Sexual Minorities**

#### **Psychological Implications**

Researchers report that due to the increased experiences of marginalization and discrimination, sexual minorities experience increased problems with mental health (Bordoloi et al., 2013; Goldberg, 2009; Haas et al., 2010; Johnson, 2012; Mathy et al., 2004; Mathy & Lehmann, 2004; Rutherford et al., 2012). Identifying as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or any of the other identities encompassed under the LGBTQ umbrella involves attributing to oneself a trait that is devalued and condemned by society, and the resulting emotional pressure is compounded by the acts of prejudice, discrimination, and hostile treatment they face daily, resulting in minority stress (Bordoloi et al., 2013). Minority stress can manifest as depression, anxiety, guilt, shame, demoralization, and hostility, and has been linked to a higher risk for substance use, mental distress, mental disorders, and suicide in sexual minorities along with members of other minority groups (Bordoloi et al., 2013). Researchers have reached a consensus that there is a direct link between minority stress and the social stigma, discrimination, and

hostile treatment based on sexual orientation (Bordoloi et al., 2013; Mathy, Kerr, & Lehmann, 2004). Additionally, if sexual minority individuals begin to believe the negative stereotypes about LGBQ people and apply them to themselves, known as internalized homophobia, the prevalence of depression and low self-esteem increases (Mathy et al., 2004). Conversely, a positive lesbian or gay identity has been shown to be correlated with healthy psychological adjustment (Mathy et al., 2004).

Additional factors can interact with minority stress, internalized homophobia, and resulting problems. For example, minority stress may manifest itself differently in ethnic and racial minority LGBQ individuals: research has found that White sexual minority individuals showed higher rates of mood disorders, while Black and Latino sexual minority individuals reported higher rates of lifetime suicide attempts (Haas et al., 2010). Ethnic or racial minority status can also interact with sexual minority status: people who are members of both minority groups can face racial discrimination within the LGBQ community, and homophobia within their ethnic or racial communities (Dominguez et al., 2012; Drescher, 2012; Goldberg, 2009).

The legal movements limiting LGBQ rights have been shown to have a strong effect on LGBQ individuals' mental health (Bordoloi et al., 2013; Haas et al., 2010; Knauer, 2012). Following the establishment of constitutional amendments limiting marriage to one man and one woman, researchers found that LGBQ people experienced higher levels of psychological distress and increased minority stress (Bordoloi et al., 2013). Increases in generalized anxiety disorder and substance use disorders were found in sexual minority individuals during extensive national media coverage of constitutional amendment campaigns against same-sex marriage, but not in heterosexual individuals

living in the same areas (Haas et al., 2010). It has been speculated that this negative mental health impact on LGBQ persons is primarily a result of the hostile political campaigns and related public discourse surrounding these amendments (Haas et al., 2010). This social and political climate can propagate stigma and reinforce the marginalized legal and social status of sexual minorities, which is considered to trigger anxiety, depression, and similar mental health problems for LGBQ people (Haas et al., 2010). In addition to the actual legal amendments, opponents of LGBQ civil rights often rely on forms of direct democracy, such as citizens' referendums or ballot initiatives, to reverse previously granted rights or court order (Knauer, 2012). It is not hard to imagine the effect of having one's basic and highly personal rights decided by the votes of one's fellow citizens. Accordingly, the American Psychological Association acknowledged the uncertainty sexual minorities experience regarding the legal status of their relationships and recognized it as a significant source of minority stress (Knauer, 2012).

Ironically, the very legal amendments that strip sexual minorities of their rights and contribute to mental distress also create significant barriers for some sexual minority individuals to procure psychotherapy to help cope with their problems (Haas et al., 2010). Partnered LGBQ individuals were found to be more than twice as likely to be without health insurance as their married heterosexual counterparts, principally because of lower rates of employer-provided coverage of partners (Haas et al., 2010). Researchers found that even when domestic partners are covered under insurance, the benefits were not financially equivalent to that offered to heterosexual married partners due to federal law requirements that unmarried partners must pay income tax on the value of their employer-sponsored insurance (Haas et al., 2010). This problem compounds itself

because lack of health insurance coverage in individuals with mental health problems has been connected to delays in treatment-seeking and self-treatment through substance abuse, thus intensifying or adding to the struggles of uninsured and stigmatized individuals (Haas et al., 2010)

### **Social Implications**

As mentioned previously, many people assume that discrimination against LGBTQ people is a thing of the past (Arnup, 1999). These prejudices, particularly antigay prejudices, are in fact decreasing: long-term research does show that homophobic attitudes have decreased (Avery et al., 2007) and the majority of Americans support same-sex relationships (Woodford, 2010). While these cultural shifts are a laudable achievement, evidence suggests that heteronormative biases remain a significant issue (Chonody et al., 2013). American culture continues to depict heterosexuality as the only acceptable sexual orientation, and because of this and similar cultural beliefs and norms, biases towards sexual minorities are perpetuated in the larger social systems (Chonody et al., 2013). These attitudes can have profound consequences for the self-image of gays and lesbians, as discussed in the previous section, but can also create daunting social barriers (Chonody et al., 2013).

One of the most formidable of these barriers is that surrounding the right to marriage (Steingass, 2012, Thomas, 2005; Wolfson, 1996; Woodford, 2010; Yep et al., 2003). Simply put, marriage holds significant cultural, social, and practical value, which other relationship formations do not offer (Obocock, 2013; Woodford, 2010). Thus, restricting same-sex couples from access to marriage places them in a position of “second-class citizenship” and “perpetuates discrimination” (Wolfson, 1996, p. 84). As

Evan Wolfson, of *Freedom to Marry*, explains, “One of the main protections that come with marriage is the word marriage, and the security, clarity, and dignity it brings to families. To be denied the vocabulary of marriage and its meaningful, resonant, and readily understood statement of love and commitment ... is not fair and not equal” (n.d., quoted in Knochel, 2012).

Civil unions and domestic partnerships have been compared to “separate but equal” laws (the legislated segregation of African-Americans and White Americans in the mid-twentieth century) (Steingass, 2012; Thomas, 2005; Woodford, 2010). As Thomas (2005) explains, this is a means of excluding sexual minorities – not only from a legal institution, but from belonging as respected participants in society. In turn, this exclusion becomes, according to Thomas (2005) “a harm to dignity, a denial of full membership in the community...the types of material and spiritual harm inflicted on persons who are denied equal rights are innumerable, and each harm aggravates the others” (p. 39). The denial of marriage to same-sex couples undermines their commitment to one another and threatens their relational and psychological wellbeing (Goldberg, 2009).

The societal and legal processes behind the formation of these laws are also troubling. Thomas (2005), in discussing Vermont’s Civil Unions law, concluded that the motivation behind the law was pacifying fears regarding gays and lesbians by denying equal marriage rights to LGBTQ residents. In doing so, Thomas (2005) argues, politicians demonstrated a high level of hostility toward sexual minorities through their propagation of rhetoric that “at best, lacks factual basis and, at worst, resembles hate speech” (p. 29). Thomas (2005) contends that this level of hostility suggests that civil union laws, rather than being based on factual evidence, stem from animosity toward a specific, vulnerable

group; and suggests that if this is the case, civil unions may in fact be unconstitutional. Tradition is often cited in arguments against same-sex marriage, but Thomas (2005) points out that this is not a valid justification for government-sponsored discrimination. Thomas (2005) also writes that LGBTQ supporters, by settling for civil unions or domestic partnerships, rather than marriage, for same-sex couples, help support the idea that same-sex couples are “different” and thus do not qualify for equal relationship recognition. The effects of these policies are widespread and can affect the simplest and most ordinary activities in sexual minorities’ day-to-day lives: studies have found that same-sex couples are provided slower service at shopping malls and have a harder time getting reservations at hotels, among other things (Mathy, Kerr, & Lehmann, 2004). This discrimination and lack of support permeate the many systems of society in which sexual minorities live their lives: families of origin, communities, state and national governments, and culture, and are thus constant and nearly inescapable (Goldberg, 2009; Kurdek, 2003; Kurdek, 2006).

In an extreme example of this, in February of 2014, legislators in the state of Arizona proposed a bill that would allow business owners to refuse service to gay men, lesbians, and others based on religious beliefs (Santos, 2014). This bill made national news as supporters argued that the bill allowed people to work and live by their religious beliefs, and opponents, including members of both major national political parties, contended that it was unnecessary, discriminatory, and may lead to further harmful laws (Santos). Arizona business leaders also argued against the bill, citing that it would be a “financial disaster” (Santos, para. 2) for Arizona and would also harm the state’s reputation. The proposition of the bill began negatively impacting the state before it was



even passed: the Hispanic National Bar Association cancelled its plans to hold its 2015 annual convention in Arizona, and the National Football League, which had planned to hold the 2015 Super Bowl in Arizona, began actively searching for other locations (Santos). George Takei, an actor and prominent gay-rights activist, posted an eloquent letter to the state on his Facebook page, discussing the harmful impacts the law posed if passed, and urging the vetoing of the bill (Takei, 2014). The Human Rights Campaign presented petitions with more than 63,000 signatures asking for a veto, and protesters converged around the Arizona State Capitol (Santos). In the end, Arizona Governor Jan Brewer vetoed the bill, stating that the law “[did] not address a specific or present concern related to religious liberty in Arizona,” and adding that it was “broadly worded and could result in unintended and negative consequences” (Santos, para. 3).

### **History of Sexual Minorities and the Mental Health Field**

The cultural permeation of negative attitudes toward sexual minorities is, at least in part, due to the actions of the mental health profession (Bordoloi et al., 2013; Drescher, 2012; Johnson, 2012; Mathy & Lehmann, 2004; Wolfson, 2012). As Bordoloi et al. (2013) explain, bias and prejudice involving sexual minorities are intermingled with the history of the mental health profession. Theories have varied widely, categorizing homosexuality as both pathological and as a normal variation of human sexuality, since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century (Drescher, 2012). Sigmund Freud, one of the best-known early theoreticians of the mental health field, took issue with the classification of homosexuality as a disease (Drescher, 2012). He noted that homosexuality was found in primitive cultures as well as early civilizations such as Greece and Rome, and disagreed with the prevalent theory of the time of homosexuality as a form of “degeneracy,” a

neurological theory that ascribed mental disorders to decadent lifestyles (Drescher, 2012). Freud also noted that many people who were homosexually oriented were highly capable, intelligent, and ethical, which also went against current common beliefs of the time (Drescher, 2012). He offered an alternative theory: homosexuality as a normal (albeit immature) step in human development (Drescher, 2012). Following Freud's death in 1939, however, psychoanalysts moved toward the pathological view of homosexuality that would follow (Drescher, 2012)

Another influential early expert, Alfred Kinsey, also contributed to the perspective of homosexuality as a normal human variation (Drescher, 2012). In the late 1940s and early 1950s, Kinsey and his colleagues found that homosexuality, rather than being rare, occurs somewhat frequently, and that the data, depending on how they are sorted, shows that 10-35% of his participants reported engaging in some kind of homosexual activity in adulthood (Drescher, 2012). These findings directly opposed the prevailing theory of the time that homosexuality was a rare phenomenon, and Kinsey, in his conclusion, posed the question, "If it's that common, how can it be a disease?" (Drescher, 2012, p. 126).

In the first edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), published in 1952, homosexuality was classified as a mental disorder (Bordoloi et al., 2013; Johnson, 2012). This diagnosis remained in the DSM for over two decades, and during this time therapy with clients was focused on treating a mental disturbance (Johnson, 2012). Thus, for several decades, mental health experts helped promote an idea of sexual minorities as mentally ill--both psychologically damaged and a threat--to the

public (Wolfson, 2012). To an extent, this image is still held by some members of society, despite copious research and literature indicating otherwise (Wolfson, 2012).

Homosexuality was removed from the DSM in 1973 (Bordoloi et al., 2013; Mathy & Lehman, 2004; Rutherford et al, 2012), but “ego-dystonic homosexuality” remained as a DSM diagnosis until 1987 (Bordoloi et al., 2013; Rutherford et al., 2012), perhaps because, at the time, 37% of the members of the American Psychological Association (APA) were opposed to the removal of homosexuality as a diagnosis (Bordoloi et al., 2013). Notably, homosexuality was not removed from the International Classification of Diseases until 1992 (Mathy & Lehmann, 2004). Following the removal of the diagnosis from the DSM, common treatment modalities focused on reparative and conversion therapy (Johnson, 2012). Although these therapies have been shown to be non-therapeutic and probably harmful, they continue to be practiced in some sectors of the mental health field even today (Johnson, 2012). With time, the focus on “curing” alternative sexualities shifted from a model of pathology to one viewing them as part of a naturally occurring lifestyle, and treatment shifted toward acceptance-based, rather than conversion-based, therapy (Johnson, 2012). Despite these positive steps, it is important to note that much of the progress is on the diagnoses regarding sexual orientation – sexual identity variations such as transgenderism are still frequently pathologized and included in the DSM (Bethea & McCollum, 2013).

The past thirty years have yielded a great expansion of research regarding the issues and experiences of sexual minorities (Adams & Phillips, 2009). With this expansion came increased belief by experts that homosexuality is healthy and a normal human variation (Johnson, 2012). In 2000, the APA published 16 guidelines for

therapists working with LGBTQ clients that focused on a positive and affirming approach (Johnson, 2012). Theorists began to utilize the minority stress model, previously used with ethnic and racial minorities, to understanding sexual minority mental health (Johnson, 2012). This application of the minority stress model to LGBTQ people was instrumental in shifting the focus of treatment to a gay affirmative approach that helps to comprehend the effects of discrimination, identity concealment, and internalized homophobia that many sexual minority individuals experience (Johnson, 2012). In addition, the APA publically encouraged mental health professionals to actively help remove the stigma of mental illness from sexual minorities, and in 2004, the APA Council of Representatives declared that denying same-sex couples the right to marry was a form of discrimination (Bordoloi et al., 2013). In 2004, the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) also pledged their support for same-sex marriage (Bordoloi et al., 2013). Drescher (2012) wrote that none of the changes in social policies that affect gay people would have occurred without the APA's decision to remove homosexuality as a DSM diagnosis.

Despite these steps toward affirming and supporting sexual minorities, there is still evidence of heterosexism within theory, research, and practice across various mental health professions, mirroring the heterosexual bias of the larger systems of American society (Bordoloi et al., 2013). Researchers have found evidence of heterosexism related to the paucity of LGBTQ-related content in academic journals, the attitudes of mental health students and therapists, the experiences of sexual minority students in training programs, and the lack of appropriate clinical training for working with sexual minorities (Bordoloi et al., 2013). While the term "affirmative therapy" is frequently used within the

field, there is currently no set method of LGBTQ-affirmative therapy (Johnson, 2012), indicating the distance the mental health profession has yet to go to work capably and effectively with sexual minorities. Additionally, the little that is known about sexual minorities is almost exclusively based on samples of middle-class, well-educated, Caucasian sexual minority individuals living in Western societies. Thus, these models may unintentionally misrepresent or even hide the experiences of many LGBTQ people (Adams & Phillips, 2009).

It is important to note that the American Association of Marriage and Family Therapy (AAMFT), in particular, has been slow in addressing issues of sexual variation (Bordoloi et al., 2013). The AAMFT did not incorporate sexual orientation into its code of ethics until 1991, and the COAMFTE did not include sexual orientation in its antidiscrimination clause until 1997 (Bordoloi et al., 2013). The AAMFT does currently offer a clear stance regarding therapy provision to sexual minority individuals, couples, and families, identifying homosexuality as a normal variant of sexuality, and expressing openness toward working with sexual minority clients (Bordoloi et al., 2013). However, the AAMFT does not state that same-sex couples deserve the same rights, including the right to marry, as their heterosexual equivalents – Bordoloi et al. (2013) describe the AAMFT's position on marriage equality as “nothing less than confusing...the organization has taken a curiously ambivalent stance on the issue” (p. 43). Making no statement on the issue still communicates a message to the LGBTQ community, and to society – that the AAMFT does not make efforts to end the established social oppression of sexual minorities, and thereby helps to perpetuate the discriminatory status quo (Bordoloi et al., 2012).

Additionally, there is a discrepancy between accredited MFT programs in their stance regarding sexual minorities, which has resulted in heated debate and division among programs, specifically between faith-based and non-faith-based programs (S. Green, personal communication, March 19, 2014; Long & Serovich, 2003). This tension between programs may, in part, inform AAMFT's reluctance to take a clear and strong position regarding same-sex relationships. Historically, the field of marriage and family therapy has strong ties to the pastoral counseling field, and this relationship continues into the present (Long & Serovich). Several COAMFTE-accredited programs are housed within religiously-based universities and colleges (Long & Serovich). While it is important to stress that religiously-based institutions are not necessarily at odds with affirmative therapy and working with sexual minority clients, there are some issues. Within the COAMFTE's Standards of Accreditation (COAMFTE, 2005a), it is stated that "religiously affiliated institutions that have core beliefs directed toward conduct within their communities are entitled to protect those beliefs" (p. 3). Thus, programs housed in institutions founded by the Seventh-Day Adventist, Church of Christ, Southern Baptist, and Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints are often bound by their respective church doctrines to oppose same-sex relationships and practices (Long & Serovich). Furthermore, if their institution's policies, based in religious beliefs, forbid hiring LGBT faculty or accepting LGBT students, the COAMFTE permits these programs to discriminate against sexual minority applicants to protect the core beliefs of their institution (Long & Serovich). While the COAMFTE does include sexual orientation as a topic to be addressed in Educational Guideline 102.02 (COAMFTE, 2005b), Long and Serovich (2003) write that some faith-based programs have responded to this standard by

including reparative/reorientation therapy, sexual identity management, and celibacy training for LGBT clients in their educational training, as congruent with their religious tenets. This aspect of some MFT training programs adds to the ambiguity towards LGBT-affirmative therapy within the profession of family therapy, and remains a complex and important issue.

However, recent changes in the COAMFTE standards have indicated a strong effort to be inclusive of sexual minorities (K. Lyness, personal communication, April 16, 2014). In the previous version of the COAMFTE Standards of Accreditation (Version 11.0) there was no requirement for programs to address issues of sexual diversity; only for issues of cultural diversity (COAMFTE, 2005a; K. Lyness, personal communication, April 16, 2014; M. Marquez, personal communication, April 15, 2014). However, in the most recent version (12.0) of the Standards of Accreditation, there are explicit standards regarding the inclusion of sexual diversity (for example, in Key Element II-A, FCA3, FCA8, and ACA1), creating a significant shift in the Standards (COAMFTE, 2014; K. Lyness, personal communication, April 16, 2014; M. Marquez, personal communication, April 15, 2014). In the new version there is a push for all programs to be explicit in their position on working with sexual minority clients, and specifically requires training with LGBT issues (COAMFTE, 2014; K. Lyness, personal communication, April 16, 2014). There has been a strong reaction to these developments in the standards, both positive and negative, as with many other movements toward more inclusivity in the field; however, the COAMFTE is moving toward a much more affirming stance (K. Lyness, April 16, 2014). As Kevin Lyness, the current COAMFTE Chair, related, “nearly 40

percent of the country now has laws allowing same-sex couples to get married; and we as a field need to reflect that” (K. Lyness, personal communication, April 16, 2014).

In addition to its ambiguous stance regarding homosexuality and same-sex marriage, the field of marriage and family therapy has also produced very little literature and research involving sexual minorities (Bordoloi et al., 2013; Mathy et al, 2004). One study found that only 77 out of 13, 217 articles published in MFT-related journals over 20 years focused on lesbian, gay, or bisexual issues or included sexual orientation as a variable; a follow up study showed a similar rate of LGBTQ-focused articles being published following the 20-year period (Bordoloi et al., 2013),. This indicates a clear scarcity of scholarly literature to inform clinical practice with a vulnerable population (Bordoloi et al., 2013), which reveals a crucial area for growth for the marriage and family therapy field.

In 2003, a debate arose surrounding the *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, which illustrates many of the points discussed above. In January 2003, the Journal published an article written by Christopher Rosik discussing foundational considerations in treating unwanted homosexual attraction (Rosik, 2003a). In his article, Rosik discussed some motivations and needs of clients seeking to change their homosexual orientation, the existing knowledge base of the effectiveness of change efforts and ethical considerations, and the interaction between clients’ desires and therapists’ beliefs. Rosik proposed that “MFTs are encouraged to recognize and accept, rather than ignore or deny the valid needs of clients who seek to modify their same-sex attraction” (p. 13). This article sparked an influx of responses reflecting a wide range of reactions (Wampler, 2004). Robert-Jay Green (2003) wrote a response to Rosik’s article, published in the



same volume, cautioning that conversion therapy has been repeatedly shown through research to be largely ineffective and often harmful to clients, and stating that therapists must ethically inform clients of these findings and proceed in supporting clients' goals, rather than proceeding based on their own values. Rosik (2003b) wrote a rejoinder in which he maintained the importance of therapists' realization of the impact of their underlying belief systems on their clients and therapy, and argued that both sides of the debate are driven by moral concerns. As Wampler (2003) writes, "while both Rosik and Green agree on the need to be sensitive to clients and the right of the client to self-determination, they have radically different views on where the harm lies" (p. 1).

Furthermore, Karen Wampler, who was editor of JMFT at the time, received numerous reactions from readers and reviewers regarding Rosik's article (Wampler, 2004). She wrote that she received "a range of reactions...focused, not on the article itself, but on me as an editor accepting it for publication" (Wampler, 2004, p. 395). These reactions ranged from gratitude for publishing the article to anger at the acceptance of something potentially harmful for GLBT individuals and their families (Wampler, 2004), further underscoring the divisions within the profession around these issues.

### **Resiliency Factors for Sexual Minorities and Same-Sex Couples**

With the numerous stressors faced daily by sexual minorities, research has often focused on the marginalization, oppression, and stigmatization of this population, ignoring the significant strides made by, and thriving culture of, the LGBQ community (Gates & Kelly, 2013). In actuality, the LGBQ community has frequently challenged the notion of itself as a stigmatized community completely lacking strengths and resources, and accordingly, mental health professionals must shift from the traditional focus on

problems and pathology to a focus on strengths and resources (Gates & Kelly, 2013). Strength-based work is based on the assumptions that people are experts on their own lives and have a myriad of interpersonal and psychological resources from which they draw on to optimally live their lives (Gates & Kelly, 2013). This focus can help researchers, therapists, and instructors identify the considerable strengths and resources that sexual minorities already possess, rather than working from a focus on discrimination and marginalization (Gates & Kelly, 2013). Marriage and family therapists, with their strengths-based and systemic training, are uniquely suited to working based on the strengths, rather than the challenges, faced by the LGBTQ population (Bordoloi et al., 2013). These strengths and resources are plentiful, as the following discussion will illustrate.

Literature covering New York City in the late nineteenth century and San Francisco following World War II described vibrant communities consisting of men and women experiencing same-sex desire (Gates & Kelly, 2013). These communities not only ameliorated stigmatization from the dominant culture but also challenged it (Gates & Kelly, 2013). In the 1950s and 1960s, the Homophile Movement marked important political engagement for sexual minorities: men and women challenged the dominant perception of homosexuals as deviants, and demonstrated against these ideas and the resultant threats to their safety and livelihood (Gates & Kelly, 2013). The Homophile Movement made great strides in forming affirmative political spaces for sexual minorities to come together to fight the rampant stigmatization within the dominant culture, providing the seeds for the gay liberation movement of the late 1960s, beginning with the Stonewall Riot (Gates & Kelly, 2013). The Stonewall Riot, resulting from anti-gay law

enforcement procedures and police brutality against sexual minorities throughout the first half of the twentieth century, consisted of the LGBQ community mobilizing, fighting back, and advocating for their needs and rights at the Stonewall Inn in New York City in 1969 (Gates & Kelly, 2013). The Stonewall Riot set a new, fundamentally different voice into motion which strongly challenged stigmatizing and discriminatory conceptions of LGBQ social spaces, relationships, and sexual practices (Gates & Kelly, 2013).

A few decades later, the LGBQ community again challenged the notion of themselves as a stigmatized community without strengths or resources (Gates & Kelly, 2013). With the emergence of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the 1980s and early 1990s, the development of safe-sex practices within the gay male community highlighted the population's ability to develop its own strategies to prevent the transmission of HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases (Gates & Kelly, 2013). Additionally, the organization of advocacy campaigns within the community demonstrated their ability and dedication to work in their own best interest: the lives and health of many members of the LGBQ community were threatened by the AIDS epidemic, yet the community demanded to be noticed, treated with humanity, and developed its own network of social and medical service organizations (Gates & Kelly, 2013). They also commanded essential local, state, and federal attention to the needs of all people living with HIV in the 1980s and 1990s (Gates & Kelly, 2013).

In the 1990s, early 2000s, and currently, members of the LGBQ community are actively fighting stereotypes that same-sex marriages are a threat to so-called family values through advocating for adoption rights and marriage equality, and forming families of their own (Gates & Kelly, 2013). These instances of the LGBQ community's

collective challenging of the larger systems' treatment of them show a remarkable strength to come together and demand change. Throughout the past century, the LGBTQ community has become, in the words of Gates and Kelly (2013), "a visible and formidable political force that has garnered the attention of policymakers and presidents alike" (p. 76).

Aside from challenging social beliefs and political policies affecting their lives, the act of participating in activism may in itself provide benefits to sexual minorities. Jones and Voss (2008) suggest that activism may provide a context for sexual minorities to develop community, create meaning, enhance self-esteem, identify allies, and protect their families and children from harmful legislation. While Jones and Voss's (2008) article discussed only activism in lesbian parents, it is assumed that many of their findings may apply to other sexual minority groups.

In addition to challenging social stereotypes and inequalities, sexual minorities show considerable strengths in protecting and improving their own inner lives. As discussed earlier, individual internalization of stigma have been found to be correlated with negative psychological effects (Gates & Kelly, 2013; Johnson, 2012; Mathy et al, 2004). Conversely, individuals who do not internalize stigma and reject others' stigmatization of them tend to experience little to no reduction in self-esteem as a result of stigma (Gates & Kelly, 2013). Thus, sexual minority individuals who are able to reject others' stigmatization of them as incorrect or unjust show a high level of strength in the face of adversity and higher levels of self-esteem.

Furthermore, despite a documented increased risk of suicide attempts among sexual minority compared to heterosexual respondents, those LGBTQ individuals are a

clear minority of those studied, estimated to be 12-19% of gay or bisexual males and an even smaller percentage of lesbian/bisexual women (Haas et al., 2010). While relatively little research has been done on the protective factors that keep the large majority of sexual minority people from suicidal behavior, existing studies have revealed several important factors (Haas et al., 2010). Family connectedness, caring from other adults, and school safety have been found to be significantly protective for LGB youth, and connectedness to a gay/lesbian community and positive sexual identity were found to be associated with greater social and psychological well-being in adults (Haas et al., 2010). Intimate relationship stability has also been proposed to be protective against suicide risk among lesbian and bisexual women (Haas et al., 2010).

Therefore, there are many ways in which sexual minority individuals, couples, and families possess extraordinary strength, resilience, and resources. It is recommended (Bordoloi et al., 2013; Gates & Kelly, 2013) that therapists and researchers working with sexual minorities remember these strengths, and utilize them to help create positive and lasting change for the LGBTQ community. As Mathy and Lehmann (2004) point out, “The fact that the vast majority of non-heterosexuals will not succumb to stress-related disorders despite the heavy weight of social oppression...is testament to their resilience” (p. 192).

### **Marriage and Mental Health**

Perhaps the best justification for extending equal marriage rights to same-sex couples are the profound psychological benefits of marriage (Rimmerman, 2008). Research has repeatedly shown that married individuals who are satisfied with their relationships have better physical and mental health than unmarried individuals (Falvey,

2011; Pelts, 2014). Marriage offers a higher level of emotional support than do other relationship statuses, and also connects couples to resources, such as spousal benefits and financial assets (Falvey, 2011; Ocobock, 2013). Finally, marriage offers social support and integration within couple, extended family, and larger community relationships (Falvey, 2011).

Consequently, marriage is well-known within the mental health field as a protective factor against suicidality and psychopathology, and the Defense of Marriage Act and subsequent analogous state laws deprive same-sex couples of its security in addition to the adverse mental health consequences resulting from the act discussed earlier (Mathy & Lehmann, 2004). In their study, Mathy and Lehmann (2004) found that suicidal ideations were significantly more common among women who were single or in a committed relationship than women who were married, and suicide attempts were significantly more prevalent among single than married women. Mathy and Lehmann (2004) also found associations between relationship status and difficulties with alcohol, use of psychotherapy, and use of psychiatric medications, indicating that relationship status itself may be influential on the mental health of lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals. These findings were replicated in a study of single and married Canadian and American men and women across sexual orientations (Mathy, Kerr, & Lehmann, 2004), indicating that married individuals across different demographics have the lowest suicide rates.

In addition to their findings regarding the relationship between mental health and relationship status, Mathy and Lehmann (2004) found significant associations between mental health and sexual orientation, as discussed previously. Mathy and Lehmann (2004) found that there were significant association between sexual orientation and

suicide attempts; past difficulties with drugs, alcohol, and sex; and past or present psychotherapy and psychiatric medication utilization. These relationships were particularly pronounced among women (Mathy & Lehmann, 2004).

Furthermore, Mathy and Lehmann (2004) found that the combined effects of sexual orientation and relationship status on mental health were greater than the effects of either alone, suggesting a particularly strong vulnerability and risk for sexual minorities who were single or in a committed relationship. Thus, the results of Mathy and Lehmann's (2004) and Mathy et al.'s (2004) studies suggest that DOMA poses a substantial mental health risk for sexual minorities, as it explicitly forbids same-sex marriage, despite marriage being a protective factor against mental health problems, and the mental health risks associated with sexual minority status and experiences of discrimination. They warn that DOMA ultimately increases the number of sexual minorities who may succumb to stress-based disorders such as depression (Mathy & Lehmann, 2004). While Section Three of DOMA has been overturned, it is important to note that equivalent laws at the state level are still in effect in the majority of the United States, and therefore continuing to legitimize the discrimination which has been connected to increased mental health risk in sexual minorities.

Rimmerman (2008) writes that because of the widely noted mental health benefits of marriage, same-sex marriage must be considered a public health issue, in addition to a public policy issue. He adds that same-sex marriage will also have a positive impact on the psychological well-being of children who are beginning to develop an LGBTQ identity, due to the provision of important positive LGBTQ adult role models in loving marital relationships (Rimmerman, 2004). Patterson (2013) also notes the numerous

advantages for children of LGBTQ parents when their parents are able to get married, including the security and stability of having two married parents, legal ties to both parents in the event of a divorce or death of one parent, and the ability to be included on either parent's health insurance coverage. Furthermore, the social and cultural endorsement and acceptance of same-sex marriage may offer additional psychological benefits in addition to the benefits of marriage, indicating the importance of repealing DOMA (Mathy & Lehmann, 2004; Rimmerman, 2008). As stated by Wolfson (2012): "There is now a mountain of evidence as to how marriage makes a difference in people's lives and how being excluded from the freedom to marry—with the commitment marriage brings, with the support marriage entails, and with the dignity marriage conveys—harms people, harms kids, and helps no one" (p. 34).

#### **Outcomes of Legal Recognition of Same-Sex Marriages**

Same-sex marriage opponents argue that, should same-sex marriage be legalized, several negative outcomes for the institution of marriage and society would result (Chonody et al., 2012; Clarkson-Freeman, 2005; Falvey, 2011). These hypothesized outcomes fall under several common themes: the sanctity of marriage theme, the procreation theme, the slippery slope theme, and the validation theme (Chonody et al., 2012; Clarkson-Freeman, 2005). However, all of these arguments have been repeatedly refuted by experts (Chonody et al., 2012; Clarkson-Freeman, 2005).

The sanctity of marriage theme posits that permitting same-sex couples to marry would disrupt the sanctity of the institution of traditional marriage, and remove marriage from its religiously-based roots (Chonody et al., 2012). Notorious celebrity marriages such as Kim Kardashian's 72-day marriage, which was speculated to be done purely for



publicity; Britney Spears 2-day marriage, performed in Las Vegas; and the multiple marriages of Elizabeth Taylor, Larry King, and William Shatner are frequently cited to demonstrate that divergence from the traditional model is already regularly occurring. Additionally, it has been pointed out that marriages entered into for immigration purposes, financial gain, and other non-relational reasons also vary from the traditional model, and many marriages are performed in legal, rather than religious, settings (Chonody et al., 2012).

The procreation theme argues that marriage is about procreation, and as same-sex couples cannot have children, they should not be permitted to enter into marriages (Clarkson-Freeman, 2005). However, some heterosexual married couples cannot, or choose not to, have children; and many unmarried couples have children (Clarkson-Freeman, 2005). According to the 2013 census, 27.8 percent of children live with only one parent (US Census Bureau, 2013). Furthermore, while it is true that same-sex couples cannot reproduce with one another, many become parents through artificial insemination, surrogacy, adoption, or previous relationships – methods which are also commonly used by opposite-sex couples (Clarkson-Freeman, 2005).

The slippery-slope theme is based on the idea that allowing same-sex marriages will effectively pave the way for legalization of polygamous and incestuous relationships (Clarkson-Freeman, 2005). However, the laws against polygamy and incest are separate from those against same-sex marriage, and would require a completely separate process to reverse (Clarkson-Freeman, 2005). In addition, same-sex couples only wish to have their monogamous relationships legalized, not to have polygamous or incestuous relationships (Clarkson-Freeman, 2005).

The final theme, validation, assumes that to allow same-sex marriages would approve or validate them, and encourage children to enter into same-sex relationships (Clarkson-Freeman, 2005). However, experts maintain that it is a factual error to assume that sexual orientation can be influenced through societal approval, and even if homosexuality can and should be forbidden, the feasibility of this is doubtful (Clarkson-Freeman, 2005). Thus, the majority of research-based evidence disputes the major arguments against same-sex marriage (Chonody et al., 2012; Clarkson-Freeman, 2005; Falvey, 2011; Patterson, 2013).

Despite the ideas proposed by same-sex marriage opponents, researchers agree that the great majority of the outcomes of legal recognition of same-sex marriages would be positive, and not only for same-sex couples themselves (Mathy, Kerr, & Lehmann, 2004; Portelli, 2004; Rimmerman, 2008; Yep, Lovaas, & Elia, 2003). First, within the LGBQ community, couples may reap the benefits associated with marriage (Goldberg, 2009). Researchers have found that same-sex couples reported changes in their commitment and love for one another following their civil unions, suggesting that legal recognition may have a protective and stabilizing role for relationships (Goldberg, 2009). Furthermore, research has shown that same-sex married couples felt that their marriages brought greater depth and completion to their relationships, as well as adding a heightened sense of security in their relationships and society (Goldberg, 2009). Removing the same-sex marriage ban would achieve the vast majority of the political work needed to achieve marriage equality (Rimmerman, 2008). It has been argued that denying same-sex couples the right to marry causes the most extreme political and psychological wound possible; thus, lifting the ban would provide sexual minorities with

greatly improved levels of liberation and social approval and respect (Andryszewski, 2008; Rimmerman, 2008).

Beyond the benefits to the LGBTQ community that could occur if same-sex marriage were legalized, researchers believe that the larger population, including heterosexuals, would benefit from this change (Mathy et al., 2004; Portelli, 2004; Rimmerman, 2008; Yep, Lovaas, & Elia, 2003). Mathy et al. (2004) point out that some lesbians, gay men, and bisexual women and men have entered into heterosexual marriages because of desires to have children or appear “normal”. However, these marriages frequently fail when the sexual minority partner is unable or unwilling to suppress his or her desires any longer and ends the marriage (Mathy et al., 2004). Divorce is known to be correlated with suicide attempts, depression, other psychological problems, and medical problems, and sexual minority divorcees and their heterosexual partners are faced with these issues following the divorce (Mathy et al., 2004). If same-sex marriage is legalized and common, this would help same-sex marriages seem “normal” and allow same-sex partners to have children with fewer obstacles, therefore decreasing the subjection of sexual minorities and their heterosexual partners to the adverse consequences of divorce (Mathy et al., 2004; Rimmerman, 2008). Moreover, Yep, Lovaas, and Elia (2003) suggest that with the legalization of same-sex marriage, there will be a cultural increase of monogamy within the LGBTQ community. In turn, Yep et al. (2003) contend that this will help to reduce the frequency of sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV/AIDS, ultimately assisting with the overall improvement of public health. Finally, Portelli (2004) writes that allowing same-sex marriage would strengthen the incentive to marry, therefore increasing the efficiency of marriage markets,

benefit states economically, and provide for more children to be raised by two-parent households, benefitting many in our society.

There are, however, a few potential negative outcomes of legalizing same-sex marriage (Yep et al., 2003). First, if the marriage-equality movement succeeds, unmarried sexual minorities might face greater social disapproval and discrimination, placing pressures similar to those faced by unmarried women past a certain age on these individuals and their partners (Yep et al.). Furthermore, marriage emphasizes a narrow and heteronormative relationship style, and if sexual minority couples begin to embrace this style, the unique attributes and styles offered by LGBTQ groups may weaken and disappear, thus reducing the diverse options for committed couple relationships available to all people (Ettlebrick, 1997; Yep et al.).

### **Summary**

Overall, the literature on the subject of same-sex marriage offers several key points. First, sexual minorities face extreme discrimination, oppression, and social stigmatization within the mainstream culture. These stressors are exacerbated by the ubiquitous political and social debates involving their basic rights, and the wide variability of sexual minorities' legal rights between states. Furthermore, acceptance, tolerance, and legal and social equality for sexual minorities has greatly improved in the past fifty years; however, there is still a large disparity between the freedoms, rights, and privileges enjoyed by individuals belonging to the heterosexual majority population and those awarded to GLB individuals. Laws such as Prop 8 and the Defense of Marriage Act have helped to perpetuate and litigate these inequalities. Heated debates over marriage equality and social justice for sexual minorities continues in social, political, and legal

sectors, and differences in opinion even exist within the LGB community. The mental health field has been a significant contributor to the historical marginalization and stigmatization of sexual minorities, but is currently working to help repair the significant harms done by these actions. The field of marriage and family therapy, however, has fallen behind other mental health organizations in lending support to sexual minorities and advocating for equal rights, and has produced a paucity of literature and research pertaining to sexual minority people and issues. The stigmatization, oppression, and discrimination of sexual minorities within American culture has been directly linked to, and is thought to be a major causative factor in, the increased mental health problems of sexual minorities. However, LGB people have shown remarkable resilience and strength in response to the social inequalities placed on them, and they are working actively to advocate for themselves, their families, and their community. Marriage has shown to be a major contributor to mental and physical health and a strong buffer against external stress and mental illness; furthermore, research has shown very few differences between same-sex and heterosexual relationships. Therefore, it is believed that legalizing same-sex marriage will provide great benefits to sexual minorities, as well as the larger culture overall. In Chapter 3, I will discuss how this study will address a new direction in the exploration of this topic.

## CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

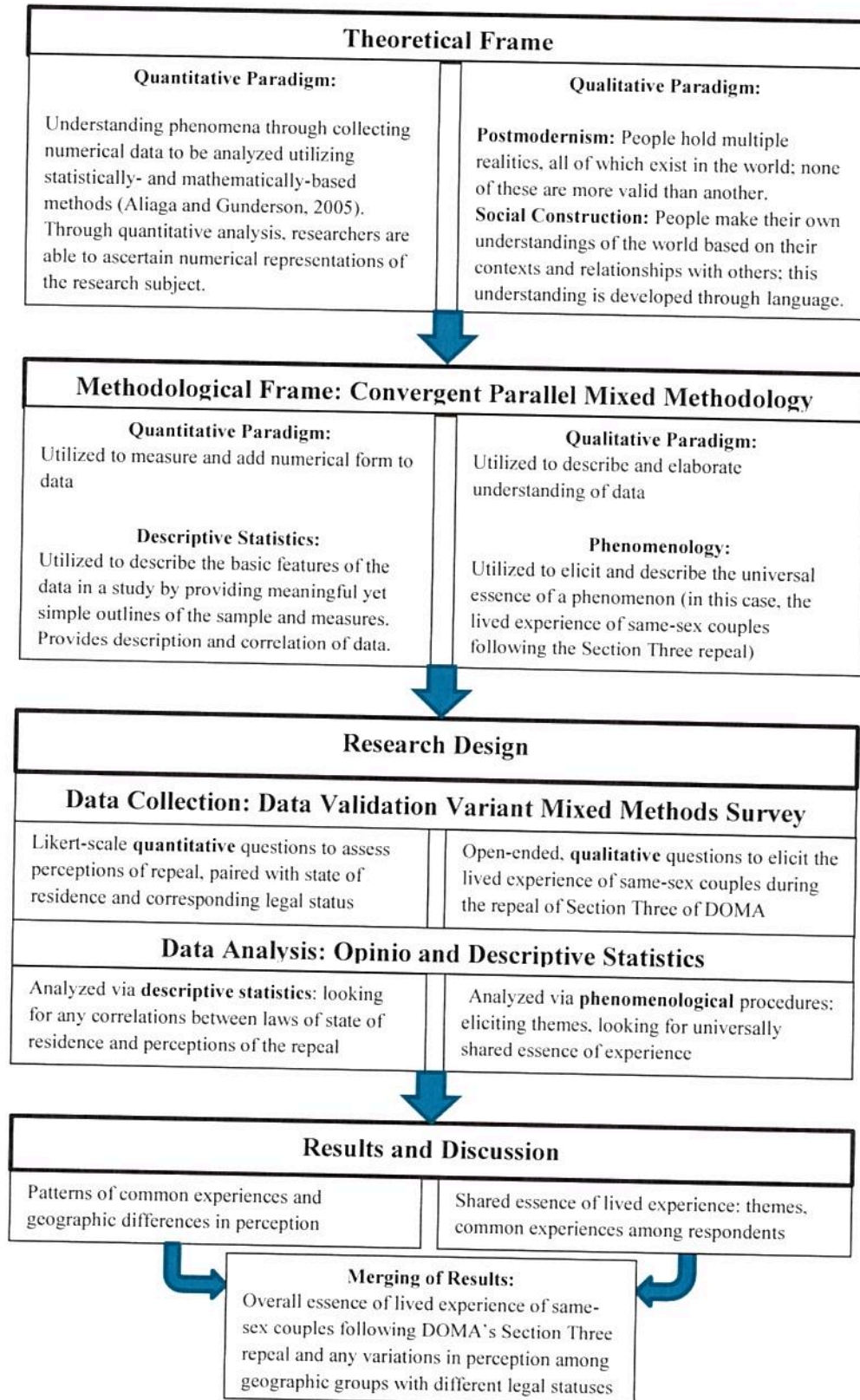
### Introduction

The progress toward legalization of same-sex marriage in the United States has been slow and arduous, and the inequality currently enforced by law has had negative effects for sexual minorities and heterosexuals alike. With the repeal of Section Three of the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA), a key step toward marriage equality has been made, and for the first time, same-sex married couples will be afforded the federal recognitions, rights, and protections enjoyed by heterosexual married couples (Barnes, 2013; Freedom to Marry, 2013). Leading organizations within the mental health field, including the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy (AAMFT), National Association of Social Workers (NASW), and American Psychological Association (APA) contend that it is crucial for therapists and researchers working with sexual minorities to possess working knowledge of the LGBTQ experience. Thus, this study is aimed toward providing marriage and family therapists, along with other mental health providers, with insight into the lived experiences of same-sex couples following the repeal of Section Three of DOMA. It is hoped that, in turn, this study will help contribute to therapist competence in working with same-sex couples.

In order to best address the aims of this study, a convergent parallel design was utilized to attain complementary data on the topic (Morse, 1991) to best understand the lived experiences of same-sex couples following the DOMA repeal, and combine the relative strengths of both quantitative and qualitative methodology. In this chapter, I will discuss the philosophical and theoretical framework, methodology, participants, ethical considerations, and research reliability and validity which will be included in the

construction of this study. Figure 3.1 illustrates the frameworks which were employed in the study.

Figure 3.1: Mixed Methodology Research Design





## **Theoretical and Philosophical Framework:**

### **Combining Qualitative and Quantitative Research Methods**

The choice of methodology in any research study should be based upon the nature of the problem or phenomenon to be studied, the applicable constraints of the setting and/or situation, and the researcher's intentions for the study (Morse & Field, 1995). Quantitative research methodologies are commonly utilized to measure and add numerical form to data, thus providing control and testing explanations; qualitative research methodologies are employed to describe and elaborate understanding of data (Boyd, 2000; Trochim & Donnelly, 2008). Both quantitative and qualitative methodologies were utilized in this study in order to facilitate a multifaceted understanding of the experiences of same-sex couples following the repeal of DOMA's Section Three. Previous research has shown the value of both methodologies in understanding the effects of legal recognition (or lack thereof) of same-sex relationships on sexual minorities (Arnup, 2008; Brewer, 2008; Burnett & Salka, 2009; Chonody, Smith, & Litle, 2012; Clarkson-Freeman, 2010; Falvey, 2011; Goldhaber, 2007; Jones & Voss, 2008; Killian, 2010; Knauer, 2012; Knochel, 2010; Kopels, 2008; Mathy et al., 2004; Natale & Miller-Cribbs, 2012; Portelli, 2008; Rothblum, 2005; Samar, 2005; Shulman et al., 2009; Stevenson, 1998; Thomas, 2005; Thomas, 2011; Tolleson, 2008; Wolfson, 2012; Woodford, 2010); however, a search of PsychInfo turned up only one article (Pelts, 2014) which examined the effects of the June 2013 ruling declaring Section Three of DOMA unconstitutional. This article discussed the history and current state of same-sex marriage, and was written from the field of social work; however, it did not include interviews with, or voices of, same-sex couples. It is crucial to fill this gap in the literature to better inform MFT scholarship and clinical practice with same-sex couples in

the current political environment: without at least a minimal understanding of the experience of sexual minorities, therapy with these clients may be slowed by therapist misunderstanding at best, and harmful to an already marginalized population at worst (Chavez, 2011; Haas et al., 2010; Johnson, 2012; Rutherford et al., 2012). Thus, this study was conducted in order to begin to address the gap in the literature in a more thorough and systemic way than would be provided by employing a single methodology.

Through the quantitative paradigm utilized in this study, the relationship between state of residence (and same-sex marriage laws within that state) and perceptions of Section Three's repeal was sought and assessed. This was accomplished through the use of Likert-style scaling questions to assess participants' perceptions of DOMA's Section Three and its repeal, followed by analysis through descriptive statistics to determine patterns of experience among respondents and differences in perception of the repeal between geographic groups. As discussed previously, it was hypothesized that respondents living in more progressive states would respond with different experiences regarding the repeal of Section Three than would respondents living in more conservative states, and quantitative measures were utilized to attempt to measure and identify these differences. The null hypothesis was that there would be no significant difference in experiences between groups.

The qualitative paradigm in this study was included to provide an experience-near, detailed picture of the lived experiences of same sex couples in the wake of DOMA's Section Three repeal. Through the qualitative methodology utilized in this study, participants were asked to describe their experiences related to the repeal, allowing for the closest possible glimpse into the lives of those most affected by Section Three's

ruling and repeal. This was accomplished through the utilization of open-ended, qualitative questions regarding respondents' experience of DOMA; of Section Three and its repeal; the social and political atmosphere and debates surrounding the marriage equality movement; the reactions of family and friends to the marriage equality movement and respondents' relationships; and impacts of these factors on respondents' couple relationships. Responses were reported and assessed based on respondents' own words to remain as close as possible to the unique truths of those most knowledgeable about the subject.

The strengths of utilizing a mixed-methods approach have been much lauded within social science research literature. Collins, Onwuegbuzie, and Jiao (2007) note that increasing numbers of researchers advocate its use within various fields of social and behavioral sciences; Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) cite it as a philosophical "third wave" (p. 17) in research that moves past the debate between qualitative and quantitative paradigms and allows researchers to make use of both the pragmatic method and philosophical systems. Johnson and Onwuegbuzie contend that mixed methods research is the logical counterpart to traditional quantitative or qualitative research, and argue that it produces superior research than single-method studies. Sprenkle and Piercy (2005) praise the ability of mixed methodology to allow researchers to "capitalize on the synergistic interplay between quantitative and qualitative approaches" (p. 13), while Boyd (2000) cites the ability to utilize the unique strengths of each methodology and the increased range and depth facilitated by a mixed methods approach. Furthermore, utilizing both methodologies provides for a more complete, detailed, and systemic picture of the research subject (Duffy, 1987; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Based on these

strengths of mixed methods research, this study employed mixed methodology to allow each paradigm to supplement and interact with the other, thus deepening and enhancing any understandings of the effects of Section Three's repeal gained from the respondents. It was hoped that the combined results of the quantitative and qualitative analyses would provide a more complete and in-depth picture of the experiences of same-sex couples following the most recent ruling in the ongoing movement for marriage equality.

### **Mixed Methods Design**

The convergent parallel design, one of the most commonly utilized mixed methods approaches across disciplines, was initially conceptualized in the 1970s as a "triangulation" design in which the qualitative and quantitative methods were used to gain triangulated results on a single topic (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Throughout the years, its name has been changed due to its being confused with triangulation in qualitative research and its applicability to purposes other than finding triangulated results; however, it remains an extremely useful approach to mixed methods research (Creswell & Plano Clark). Its overall purpose is to "obtain different but complementary data on the same topic" (Morse, 1991, p. 122), and combine the relative strengths of qualitative (e.g. detailed results, in-depth findings) and quantitative (e.g. generalization, numerical results) methods to gain a more complete understanding of the topic (Creswell & Plano Clark). In convergent design research, the researcher collects and analyzes qualitative and quantitative data separately and simultaneously, then merges the two sets of results into an inclusive interpretation (Creswell & Plano Clark).

It is this ability to compare and corroborate findings, synthesize complementary qualitative and quantitative findings to create a more complex systemic understanding of

the overall research topic, and illustrate quantitative numbers with qualitative language which led me to choose convergent parallel design for this study. I believe that both methodologies offer unique and equally important contributions to answering the research question, and therefore believe that utilizing both through a convergent parallel design may offer valuable information on this topic which may have been missed or underdeveloped by a single methodology. In turn, I believe that the results of a convergent parallel design study, with its potential for multiple methodological strengths and more complete data, may help to better inform marriage and family therapists in their practice with same-sex couples. I therefore used a convergent parallel design in the research process, following the *data validation variant*, in which the researcher includes both open-and closed-ended questions in a survey and then uses the results of the open-ended questions to corroborate and elaborate upon the results of the closed-ended questions (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011).

### **Quantitative Component**

#### **Quantitative Orientation**

Quantitative research methods are based on positivism, focusing on finding facts and causes of human behavior through “objective, observable and quantifiable data” (Duffy, 1987, p. 130). Quantitative methods have long been utilized in the social sciences to provide numerical form and measurability to data, establish relationships between variables, and allow for generalization of data (Bryman, 1992; Creswell, 1994). It is a research methodology that is widely accepted across disciplines, allowing for sharing of research beyond the immediate field of the researcher (Duffy). Utilizing a quantitative method of data collection and analysis offers extradisciplinary academic range, empirical

backing, and strengthened generalizability to findings. These strengths, along with the ability of quantitative methodology to establish relationships between variables, make quantitative methodology an appropriate and beneficial approach for this study.

While a primary goal of this study is to explore the overall lived experience of same-sex couples following the repeal of Section Three of DOMA, it is important to consider that these experiences may vary significantly based on many respondent variables, such as political involvement, length of relationship with a significant other, and level of social support from family and friends. One such variable that seems particularly relevant is the location in which respondents live. As discussed earlier, same-sex couples are highly affected by the social and political climate of the location in which they live, and legal supports and freedoms for same-sex couples vary greatly by region (Barton, 2010; Killian, 2010; Knauer, 2010; Lyness, 2012; Natale & Miller-Cribbs, 2012). Thus, it seems pertinent to assess whether same-sex couples residing in geographic locations that offer more rights and support for their relationships have different experiences of the Section Three repeal than those living in locations with fewer rights and support. If there is a difference between groups, it also seems appropriate to assess to what degree regional legal status corresponds to experience of the repeal. Thus, quantitative analysis was included to assess whether or not there is a connection between local legal atmosphere and experience of the Section Three repeal. The overall quantitative analysis was facilitated through Opinio data analysis software and descriptive statistics.

Descriptive statistics are utilized to describe the basic features of the data in a study by providing meaningful yet simple outlines of the sample and measures (Loether

& McTavish, 1974; Minium, 1978; Trochim & Donnelly, 2006). Combined with simple graphics analysis, they form the foundation of virtually every quantitative analysis of data (Trochim & Donnelly). Descriptive statistics are distinguished from inferential statistics in that descriptive statistics simply describe what the data shows, whereas inferential statistics attempt to reach conclusions beyond the data results, for example, to infer what a population might think based on the data (Loether & McTavish; Minium; Trochim & Donnelly). This descriptive aspect falls in line with the four major goals of science, along with prediction, explanation, and controlling/modifying (Reaves, 1992), thus fulfilling a major aim for all research. With descriptive statistics, large amounts of data can be presented in a manageable way, and quantitative descriptions can be presented in a manageable form (Trochim & Donnelly). Overall, descriptive statistics provide a powerful summary which may allow comparisons across units (Minium; Trochim & Donnelly).

A primary capacity of descriptive statistics is univariate analysis (Trochim & Donnelly, 2006). Univariate analysis facilitates the examination of one variable at a time across cases, specifically the distribution, central tendency, and dispersion of data for a variable (Gotkin & Goldstein, 1964; Reaves; Trochim & Donnelly). Furthermore, descriptive statistics allow for assessing correlation, which Trochim and Donnelly describe as one of the most useful statistics available. Correlations describe the relationship between variables and are frequently utilized in social science research (Trochim & Donnelly).

Descriptive statistics are therefore an appropriate approach to this study as they identify any patterns in participants' experiences or correlations between state of

residence and experience of the repeal. The results of the descriptive statistical analysis in turn contribute to the larger picture of the subject of this study by providing numerical data of the perceptions and experiences of same-sex couples following the Section Three repeal.

### **Quantitative Research Design and Procedure**

Several specific quantitative questions were asked in the survey. These included questions about the participants' experiences involving DOMA, the Section Three repeal, their perceptions of the larger sociopolitical climate, effects of these events and contexts on relationships with family and friends, and effects of these events and contexts on their couple relationships. Available answers to these questions fell on a Likert-style numeric scale ranging from one to seven. These questions were designed to assess respondent's perceptions and experiences surrounding the repeal and convert them into numerical, measurable form. As state of residence is so impactful on same-sex couples' legal standing, state of residence was inquired about to determine the legal standing of respondents' relationships, to add context to respondents' answers, and for correlational analysis. Quantitative questions will be listed in Figure 3.2.

Descriptive statistics were utilized to assess the association between respondents' state of residence, and corresponding legal status of same-sex marriages, with their perception of the repeal of Section Three of DOMA. State of residence was divided between three domains: equal marriage protections and recognition; some protections and/or recognition; and no protections or recognition. Perceptions of the repeal were divided into seven domains based on the Likert scale, e.g., highly negative (1); negative (2); slightly negative (3); neutral (4); slightly positive (5); positive (6); and highly



positive (7). Through the quantitative analysis, participants' perceptions of the repeal and related events (e.g. shifts in the larger political and social climates) were analyzed numerically to assess any common patterns. This study attempted to ascertain a correlational relationship between variables only, as many confounding variables preclude assessing for a causal relationship, and further analysis is beyond the scope and intention of this study.

## **Qualitative Component**

### **Philosophical Orientation**

What constitutes human experience? How do we make sense of our lives, and the events encountered within? Phenomenological theory proposes that we define the occurrences we experience by describing their essential impression on our conscious experience (Dahl & Boss, 2005). Throughout the ages, artists, musicians, and poets have shared their interpretations of the world and life through the phenomenological method, using their immediate essential experience of a thing or event to create and put forth their impressions into the world (Dahl & Boss).

Phenomenologists believe that reality, rather than having one supposedly true form that exists externally of those who perceive it, is socially constructed (Babbie, 2011; Dahl & Boss, 2005). According to social construction theory, individuals make their own understandings of the world based on the contexts in which they live and the relationships they form with others, and develop this understanding through language (Gergen, 2009). It is this understanding which shapes the process of phenomenological inquiry. Phenomenological researchers seek to understand participants' understandings of the world based on their own lived experience within the numerous contexts of their lives,

the relationships they maintain, and the events they experience and witness (Dahl & Boss). The language utilized to form these understandings, both individually and collaboratively with others, and to convey the understandings to others, is considered important in phenomenology (Dahl & Boss). Thus, it is considered paramount to utilize research participants' language and descriptions, rather than the researcher's interpretations of these, in order to convey as closely as possible the true essence of the lived experience of participants (Dahl & Boss, 2005). It is furthermore important to remember that truth is considered to be eternally elusive and relative within phenomenological theory; therefore, the experience of one person may be different from that of another encountering the same phenomenon, and it is important to remember that the researcher's truth is no more accurate than the research participants' (Creswell, 2007; Dahl & Boss). Thus, participants in phenomenological studies are considered to be the experts, and their understandings of the research subject and the language utilized to describe and convey these understandings are privileged throughout the study.

These tenets of phenomenological theory hold several important implications for this research study. First, because truth is considered to be elusive, relative, and socially constructed within phenomenological theory, this study attempted to explore the lived experience, through their own words, of those most affected by the existence, and subsequent repeal, of Section Three of DOMA, rather than based on ideas created by researchers (including myself), politicians, or others outside of the LGB population. Furthermore, differing stories can be accepted as multiple truths within phenomenological research, rather than being pejoratively titled "outliers" or "anomalies", as they may be in other research modalities. This will help to protect the

understandings constructed by LGB couples and the LGB community in their own unique contexts.

Second, as language is considered so important to understanding within phenomenological theory, efforts were made to ensure that the words of participants were upheld and reported as stated to remain close to participants' lived experience. Research participants' language provides "a source of information that is symbolically rich in meaning and information" (Dahl & Boss, 2005, p. 67). Therefore, respondents' descriptions of their experiences were reported as closely as possible to maintain their unique richness.

Third, because knowledge is considered to be constructed within phenomenological theory, events and situations can hold a variety of meanings to a variety of people (Dahl & Boss, 2005). It is therefore expected, through the variety of social and political contexts within the country, that different understandings may be attached to the recent DOMA repeal dependent on context. Thus, as Dahl and Boss (2005) stress, it is crucial for phenomenological researchers to listen to and witness the whole comprised of these varying responses, to better understand and convey the essence of the larger system involved in the phenomenon being studied. This study therefore involved research participants from as many states as possible to attempt to include responses from the widest possible range of social, political, and regional contexts.

Fourth, in phenomenological research, all people involved – whether participant or researcher – are considered equally knowledgeable, and there is little to no hierarchy involved (Dahl & Boss, 2005). However, there is always some hierarchy inherent in research situations, as often research participants view the researcher as somehow more

knowledgeable or important in the research process. Thus, I attempted to mitigate this potential by consistently working to privilege the knowledge, understandings, and words of participants throughout this study, rather than placing my own interpretations of these in a position of being more objective or correct. To do so, I completed the data analysis following the initial responses of participants, remaining as close as possible to the language and stories of participants. While it is typical in phenomenological research to return the findings to participants to accept, modify, or make additions, known as *member checking*, the data collection process and anonymity of the participants in this study precluded this process.

Fifth, and finally, according to phenomenological theory, bias is intrinsic in all research and researchers are not separate from the phenomena they study (Dahl & Boss, 2005). My feelings, beliefs, and responses related to the research topics influence both the questions I asked and my interpretation of the data, and I am inherently biased based on these. Furthermore, I have long been interested in working with LGBTQ clients in therapy, and have significant academic and therapeutic experience with reading about the topic and working with these clients in the therapy room, which may also create bias in my work. Thus, I maintain that I am a subjective reporter in relation to my research, rather than objective and removed from it, and understand that my beliefs, knowledge, and values that all couple relationships deserve equal rights and respect all shape and influence my work. I furthermore attempted to be reflective and aware of these biases and then set them aside throughout the course of this study, called *bracketing* by phenomenologists (Creswell, 2013; Dahl & Boss, 2005; Moustakas, 1994). I worked to be overt about my biases and experiences regarding this topic arising from personal

experience living through DOMA's creation and the repeal of Section Three; my personal relationships with sexual minority individuals, couples, and families; my beliefs regarding the larger social, political, and legal treatment of sexual minorities; my clinical experience working with sexual minority clients; and my academic experience studying, writing, and presenting about topics related to sexual minorities. It was important for me to monitor my biases here through self-reflection, consultation with my dissertation committee, and being transparent about these biases throughout the study. I worked actively throughout the process to bracket these personal beliefs, feelings, and perceptions to be more open to those of my participants.

Phenomenology was chosen as the methodology for this study due to its focus on describing the universal essence of a phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). Phenomenological studies focus on the shared meaning of lived experiences of a phenomenon, thus coming as close as possible to its basic nature through the words of those who have experienced it (Creswell). The majority of existing studies have focused on the observed social, political, and mental health effects *on* sexual minorities, rather than on their own experiences (Barton, 2012; Gates & Kelly, 2013). Barton (2010) points out that sexual minorities are frequently talked about, yet rarely listened to. Gates and Kelly (2013) argue that changing the focus of mental health research on sexual minorities from one based on pathology to one based on strengths entails understanding their lived experiences and the meaning they make out of them. Hence, phenomenology is not only a beneficial approach for studying the event of the 2013 Section Three repeal, but also may be helpful for promoting a more positive interaction between sexual minorities and the mental health field.

### **Qualitative Research Design**

In order to remain as close as possible to the research participants' words and truths following the Section Three repeat, I utilized the transcendental approach to phenomenology, which focuses more on participants' descriptions of their experiences rather than on the researcher's interpretations (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994.) Questions were open-ended and intended to find meaning within participant experiences, as discussed by Dahl and Boss (2005). Additionally, questions were designed to open space for respondents to discuss at length their experiences, and respondents were encouraged to write as much, or as little, as they liked to avoid unintentionally shaping responses due to length requirements. The questions were asked through a survey created with Opinio survey software, discussed below. Qualitative questions were included with quantitative questions on the survey and are listed in Figure 3.3.

### **Combining Results**

Following data collection, I analyzed the quantitative responses through descriptive statistics to provide data on common experiences and any differences between geographic groups, and analyzed the qualitative responses using procedures of theme development pursuant to phenomenological approach. I then identified content areas present in both data sets and transferred results as needed to facilitate relating the two data types, as discussed in Creswell and Plano Clark (2011). I did this by grouping quantitative responses with the appropriate qualitative thematic group, as discussed by Creswell & Plano Clark. Finally, I summarized and interpreted the separate qualitative and quantitative results, and noted ways in which they related to one another, converged,

diverged, and contributed to a shared understanding of the lived experiences of same-sex couples following the DOMA repeal.

### **Survey Research**

While many phenomenologists utilize in-person methods, such as interviews, to gather responses, this study utilized survey research to allow for a larger sample size than would be available otherwise. This larger sample size, along with other aspects of utilizing survey methods, provided several important benefits to the study.

First, utilizing survey methodology enabled me to gather responses from people across the country, providing a more representative sample of the larger national LGB population than would be feasible if I were utilizing in-person methods. Additionally, utilizing a larger and more diverse sample size helped me to minimize certain types of sampling error. Sampling error is the error involving how well or how poorly a sample represents the population of interest in a study (Nelson & Allred, 2005). As no sample is perfectly representative of the population from which it is drawn, all samples result in some error; however, careful sampling strategies help to mitigate the level of sampling error (Nelson & Allred). South Florida, the location in which I am currently working and living, has a large and visible LGBTQ population, and is somewhat tolerant of sexual minorities. Thus, if I were to rely on face-to-face interviews, time and financial constraints would result in my sample largely consisting of same-sex couples living in South Florida, an environment that may be significantly different than those in which many same-sex couples live their lives. This in turn may skew the sample and have biasing effects on the data. However, utilizing survey methods, I was able to reach same-sex couples living in a variety of sociopolitical environments and geographical locations,

thus providing a more diverse and representative sample of the larger LGBTQ population. Furthermore, as Florida currently has an anti-gay constitutional amendment, limiting the sample to respondents living in Florida would have precluded much of the quantitative section of this study, potentially eliminating a part of the larger systemic picture of LGBTQ experience following the repeal of Section Three.

A second advantage of utilizing this method is that the increased accessibility of survey research can help to reach respondents who may not be willing or available for in-person interviews. Many factors may impact potential respondents' decisions to participate or not in this study; however, specific aspects of survey research can remedy some of these. The increased accessibility of an online survey allows any potential respondent with access to the internet, literacy in English, and familiarity with basic computer skills to participate in the study. Thus, individuals who live geographically far from me, those living in rural or isolated areas, and those who may be interested in the study but lack the means, time, or interest to meet with me in person can participate. Furthermore, the relative ease of an online survey as compared to an in-person interview may retain other potential respondents who are not interested in scheduling an appointment for an interviewer to come to their home or meeting them at an office or public location. Respondents who may be averse to these options may respond to the survey questions in the comfort of their own homes or offices, on their own schedules.

A third advantage of survey research that provides a particularly strong benefit to this study is the increased anonymity provided by surveys. While this study focuses on public acknowledgement of same-sex couples, there may be some respondents who, despite involvement in serious and long-term relationships still maintain a largely



closeted LGBTQ identity. These respondents may be interested in participating in the study but may decide against participation if this required them to meet with me in a public space or office or invite me into their homes or offices, all of which may gain notice and questions from others. Furthermore, as the survey was set up to be completed solely on the computer, respondents never came face-to-face with me or had to answer questions in person, further increasing their ability to participate in the study with less chance of being connected to their responses or outed (having their sexual orientation publicly disclosed by another person against their will; Howard, 2012). Even participants who are out to the majority of their family, friends, and coworkers may appreciate the security of not having their answers directly connected to them, as might happen during an interview (Fowler, 1993).

Other advantages of survey research are more technical in nature. They include ease of entering and storing data, reducing data error, and shorter time needed to complete data collection (Fowler, 1993; Nelson & Allred, 2005). Surveys also provide ease in presenting questions requiring long or complex response categories and asking batteries of similar questions (e.g., asking about the effects of social responses to the Section Three repeal, the political responses, and responses of participants' family and friends). Also, data from survey research are analyzed based on questions asked and type of data gathered, allowing this means of data collection to be easily applied to the mixed-methods analytical design of this study. Finally, online surveys often have a very low cost to operate (Fowler; Nelson & Allred).

Despite these strengths, as with any research method, survey research does have some disadvantages (Nelson & Allred). Response rates for online surveys are often

unknown and may be lower than other methods, and samples are limited to individuals who are able to read and write in the language used in the survey, computer-literate, and use the internet regularly (Nelson & Allred). Furthermore, because respondents are interacting with a computer and not a live person who can clarify questions, offer probing or follow-up questions, or provide support, questions that are open to interpretation may lead to confusion, response bias, or discontinuation of participation (Fowler, 1993; Nelson & Allred). Additionally, Fowler warns that survey research is limited to what respondents are willing and able to discuss within the survey context – a weakness of many research methods in the social sciences. Finally, as Nelson and Allred (2005) caution, survey research's greatest flaw is the ease with which any step can be taken carelessly, adding to error and providing biased or invalid results. Because of this, great care was taken in each step of the process, through careful creation of research questions, cautious selection of contacts through which potential respondents were contacted, rigorous statistical analysis, validating results with participants, consistently checking the audit trail created through these processes, and working closely with the dissertation committee throughout the research process to reduce the potential for these errors.

Despite these potential drawbacks of using a survey methodology for data collection, I believe that the benefits of survey research outweigh the costs for this study and validate the modification of typical phenomenological data gathering practices by providing a more widespread and representative sample of the larger LGBTQ population in the United States. Additionally, the survey format leaves space for respondents to add their own thoughts, beyond the questions asked, allowing for unexpected additions to the data collected. Perhaps Nelson and Allred state it best:

The potential for survey research is in its breadth and depth. . . . Its heuristic value for pointing the field in useful directions is well established because its results often pose more questions than they answer. It is precisely this stance of curiosity and openness that makes survey research in family therapy useful and informative, as researchers and clinicians apply its results to their practices, to their theory, and to further research. (p. 233).

### **Instrument**

For this study, one instrument was utilized. This instrument was the survey answered by respondents, and is listed in Appendix C. The key variables for quantitative analysis were current state of residence (the independent variable) and perception of the repeal of Section Three of the Defense of Marriage Act and related contexts and events (dependent variables). These variables were based on participants' self-reports, as discussed above. Participants' perceptions of the Section Three repeal and related contexts and events were rated on a seven-item Likert scale, ranging from 1 (e.g., highly negative) to 7 (e.g., highly positive). These responses were then analyzed in conjunction with participants' state of residence, to determine if state of residence and the corresponding legality of same-sex marriages had any correlation with respondents' perceptions of the repeal.

### **Data Collection**

#### **Participants**

For this study, a sample size of 26 participants was utilized. This sample size is larger than a typical sample size for phenomenological studies, which generally include around 10 participants (Collins, Onwuegbuzie, and Jiao, 2007; Creswell, 1998; Morse,

1994), but smaller than a typical sample for quantitative studies, which generally have between 50-85 participants (Collins et al., 2007; Onwuegbuzie, Jiao, & Bostick, 2004). This sample size was chosen for several reasons. First, a sample size of 26 participants allowed for the creation of a rich description of participants' experiences; even if saturation is reached early on in the analysis (for example, after 5 participants), this provides added validity to the findings. Second, while many mixed-methods studies utilize separate samples for the quantitative and qualitative portions, this number allows for the utilization of the same sample for both, which creates a more integrated, valid, and solid study. Finally, this sample size, while diverging from typical methodological sampling procedures, creates a good midpoint between qualitative and quantitative needs for a more balanced study than if it were to align with typical procedures for only one methodology.

**Demographics.** Participants consisted of people identifying as male (n=18), female (n=7), and transgender (n=1) residing within the 50 United States, Puerto Rico, and the District of Columbia, who self-identified as being involved in a same-sex relationship. Participants identified as gay (n=19), lesbian (n=5), bisexual (n=1), or queer (n=1). Participants further identified as African American (n=1), Asian American (n=1), Caucasian (n=20), Hispanic/Latino (n=2), Native American (n=1), or Mixed Race (n=1). Participants also gave their age range as identified by 26-35 (n=11), 36-45 (n=5), 46=55 (n=7), 56=65 (n=2), or 66-75 (n=1). Finally, participants provided their state of residence. For a comprehensive picture of participant demographics, see Table 4.1.

**Recruitment and initial contact.** Participation was voluntary. Participants were initially contacted via a Facebook page I set up to promote the survey. The page

described the study, including its purpose, procedures, confidentiality, and criteria for inclusion; provided a link to the consent form and survey; and invited interested persons to participate. I promoted the study through word of mouth (e.g., inviting friends to “like” the page; connecting with other similar Facebook pages), as well as through Facebook’s promotional options. I also shared a link to my survey on the Human Rights Campaign’s web page, with their permission (Appendix F), and invited followers of the page to participate. Participants were notified that participation is voluntary and they were free to skip any questions or not complete the survey without repercussion. Prior to beginning the survey, participants were asked to give their informed consent and acknowledge that they were 18 years or older. Only participants who agreed to participate and acknowledged that they were at least 18 years of age were provided access to the questionnaire. Furthermore, only participants who identified as being in a romantically and emotionally committed same-sex relationship for one year or more were included in the study, as the focus of this study was on same-sex couples rather than on individuals.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Ethics and confidentiality were important aspects of this research. In research with human subjects, ethics and confidentiality are crucial and central concerns, particularly when dealing with sensitive and personal subjects, such as those included in this study. Furthermore, when dealing with sensitive populations, such as sexual minority groups, these issues take on additional importance as it is crucial to avoid further marginalizing or bringing harm to these groups (Kurdek, 2006; Willis, 2011). Finally, because of the interconnected and easily breached nature of internet communication, ensuring confidentiality in research is particularly important when utilizing online means

of interaction for research (Willis). Therefore, several measures were taken to ensure that participants and their information were treated confidentially and ethically throughout the study.

First, when obtaining consent, participants were fully informed of the nature, purposes, and processes of the study. They were informed that they were able to ask questions about the study and the consent form, that participation was voluntary, and that they could withdraw from the study at any time without repercussions, questions, or judgment. All participants were informed of the commitment to maintain their anonymity, and the commitment to ethical adherence throughout the study. They were further informed that upon withdrawal from the study, any information provided by withdrawing participants was destroyed. Prior to participation in the study, each participant was required to electronically sign the consent form (see Appendix D) and was given an electronic copy of the completed form.

Due to the nature of the study, participants' addresses, telephone numbers, and exact ages were not required and thus were not collected. Furthermore, as participants' names were not needed for the study, their names were not attached to consent forms or completed surveys, thus reducing the likelihood that answers can be traced back to an identifiable participant. Pseudonyms were used for each participant in the results and discussion sections, and all raw data and associated records (e.g., completed surveys, consent forms) were kept securely locked in a locked, private filing cabinet in my locked, private office. Furthermore, information that may be harmful to participants or the larger GLBQ population at large was dealt with carefully, consciously, and according to IRB and AAMFT ethical guidelines.

**Figure 3.2:**  
**Quantitative Questions**

1. On a scale of one (1) to seven (7), how would you rate your views of the Section Three repeal?
  - 1 (very negative)
  - 2 (negative)
  - 3 (slightly negative)
  - 4 (neutral)
  - 5 (slightly positive)
  - 6 (positive)
  - 7 (very positive)
2. On a scale of one (1) to seven (7), how would you rate your views of DOMA?
  - 1 (very negative)
  - 2 (negative)
  - 3 (slightly negative)
  - 4 (neutral)
  - 5 (slightly positive)
  - 6 (positive)
  - 7 (very positive)
3. If you have personally received any benefits or protections following the Section Three repeal, how much of a difference do you feel they have had for your life and/or relationship?
  - 1 (very unhelpful)
  - 2 (unhelpful)
  - 3 (slightly unhelpful)
  - 4 (neither helpful nor unhelpful)
  - 5 (slightly helpful)
  - 6 (helpful)
  - 7 (very helpful)
4. On a scale of one (1) to seven (7), how helpful do you expect the repeal of Section Three of DOMA will be for LGBQ couples in accessing the benefits and privileges already available to heterosexual couples?
  - 1 (very unhelpful)
  - 2 (unhelpful)
  - 3 (slightly unhelpful)
  - 4 (neither helpful nor unhelpful)
  - 5 (slightly helpful)
  - 6 (helpful)
  - 7 (very helpful)

**Figure 3.2 (cont.). :****Quantitative Questions**

5. On a scale of one (1) to seven (7), how much do you feel local and national laws affect the quality of your relationship with your partner?
  - 1 (not at all)
  - 2 (very little)
  - 3 (slightly)
  - 4 (neutral)
  - 5 (somewhat)
  - 6 (moderately)
  - 7 (significantly)
6. On a scale of one (1) to seven (7), how much do you feel social and public opinions and approval or lack of approval affect the quality of your relationship with your partner?
  - 1 (not at all)
  - 2 (very little)
  - 3 (slightly)
  - 4 (neutral)
  - 5 (somewhat)
  - 6 (moderately)
  - 7 (significantly)
7. If you reside in a state in which same-sex couples can legally marry, have you and your partner decided to get married? Why or why not? Please tell me about that decision process, and what it was like for you.
  - 1 (yes)
  - 2 (no)
8. If you reside in a state in which same-sex couples cannot legally marry, do you feel optimistic that your state will one day rule for the legalization of equal marriage rights? Why or why not? Please tell me about your feelings regarding this.
  - 1 (yes)
  - 2 (no)
9. Following the Section Three repeal, how hopeful do you feel that marriage equality will eventually become law on a national level?
  - 1 (not at all hopeful)
  - 2 (not very hopeful)
  - 3 (slightly unhelpful)
  - 4 (neither hopeful nor unhelpful)
  - 5 (slightly hopeful)
  - 6 (hopeful)
  - 7 (very hopeful)



**Figure 3.3****Qualitative Questions**

1. What are your overall impressions of the repeal of Section Three of the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA)?
2. Have you personally experienced any benefits following the Section Three repeal (e.g., partner health benefits through insurance, increased rights regarding shared finances and joint legal decisions, etc.)?
3. How, if at all, do you feel the increased legal and social recognition of same-sex couples has affected your relationship with your partner?
4. If you reside in a state in which same-sex couples can legally marry, have you and your partner decided to get married? Why or why not? Please tell me about that decision process, and what it was like for you.
5. If you reside in a state in which same-sex couples cannot legally marry, do you feel optimistic that your state will one day rule for the legalization of equal marriage rights? Why or why not? Please tell me about your feelings regarding this.
6. If you reside in a state in which same-sex couples can legally marry, did you have any type of formal recognition of your relationship subsequent to legal marriage (such as a domestic partnership or civil union)? Why or why not?
7. If you reside in a state in which same-sex couples cannot legally marry, but have some legal recognitions available to you, do you have any type of formal recognition of your relationship (such as domestic partnership or civil union)? Why or why not?
8. Have the national and local debates regarding the Defense of Marriage Act, the Section Three repeal, and the extension of equal marriage rights to same-sex couples impacted your experiences of your couple relationship in any way? Please describe.
9. What have the responses of your friends, family, and community to the marriage equality debate been like? How, if at all, do they affect you as an individual and in your relationship with your partner?
10. Is there anything else you would like to tell me, and readers of this study, regarding these issues?

### **Reliability and Validity**

According to Golafshani (2003), reliability and validity in qualitative research are “conceptualized as trustworthiness, rigor and quality in qualitative paradigm” (p. 604). Thus, to uphold these characteristics, the qualitative portion of this study was conducted with the following processes in mind. First, to ensure that the experiences discussed in this survey were the experiences of the population identified (same-sex couples), participants had to self-identify as being involved in a same-sex relationship to participate in the study. Second, emergent themes were identified from the survey data and discussed pursuant to phenomenological methodology.

Further steps were taken to uphold standards of reliability and validity within the quantitative portion of the study. Item validity and construct validity were established through the correct wording of questions to ensure that the survey instrument facilitated measurement in the intended content area, and in the intended way. Furthermore, sampling validity was established through working to find research participants in as many states as possible, and in as many age ranges as possible to represent the widest possible range of the larger GLBQ population. Throughout the survey, questions were carefully constructed to ask what I, as the researcher, was intending to ask to assure reliability. These questions were further reviewed by my dissertation chair and committee to further ensure validity.

### **Summary**

Through phenomenological inquiry and descriptive statistical analysis, the objective of this study was to elicit a sense of the lived experiences of same-sex couples during and following the repeal of Section Three of the Defense of Marriage Act. 25

respondents participated in the study by completing a mixed-methods Opinion survey which was developed by the researcher and guided by the existing literature on GLB individuals and couples. For the quantitative portion of the analysis, respondents' perceptions of the repeal were separated into groups based on geographic location and corresponding legal status of same-sex relationships, and analyzed utilizing descriptive statistics. This analysis provided numerical data reflecting participants' experiences and perceptions, as well as insight to correlations between state of residence and legal standing of same-sex couples and perceptions of the Section Three repeal. For the qualitative portion of the analysis, participants' narrative responses were read in entirety, and from these whole responses, themes were identified, analyzed, and discussed. These themes were presented as a representation of the essence of same-sex couples' lived experience of the repeal of DOMA's Section Three. The quantitative and qualitative portions of this research analysis supplement one another to provide a glimpse into the overall essence of the shared experiences of same-sex couples in the wake of DOMA's Section Three repeal. The resulting findings will be discussed in Chapter four.

## CHAPTER IV: RESEARCH FINDINGS

### Introduction

Contributing to the purpose of this study, I will now present the narrative of the experiences of the twenty-six respondents of this survey following the Defense of Marriage Act's Section Three repeal. Thirty-one respondents completed the survey created for this study. However, two of these respondents self-identified as heterosexual; two indicated that they were not currently in a same-sex relationship; and one was in a same-sex relationship with a duration of less than one year. Thus, these five respondents did not meet the criteria for the study and their responses were not included in the data analysis. Twenty-six respondents in all were included in the analysis. These respondents represented an age range from 26-75 and a variety of racial/ethnic backgrounds, sexual orientations, and gender identities. Further, respondents lived in several different geographic locations, therefore representing several different legal climates. All respondents identified as being in a committed same-sex relationship that ranged from 1.5 - 21 years. Additionally, respondents reported a wide range of involvement in LGBTQ rights advocacy. These participant demographics are discussed in more detail in the next section.

The results of the data analysis are separated into three sections:

1. Participant demographics
2. Common shared experiences of participants following the repeal
3. Comparisons between state groups based on legal standing of same-sex couples

First, the survey participants are introduced in order to familiarize readers with the demographics of those who participated in the study. Second, the overall themes derived from all participant responses are presented to provide a picture of the experiences of respondents across the country following the repeal. These themes are analyzed through horizontalization of the data, as discussed in chapter three. The resulting narrative is derived from the words of the respondents, consistent with phenomenological methodology. The narrative evolved in four categories:

- 1) Marry or Not?
- 2) Support or Not?
- 3) Impact or Not?
- 4) Progress or Not?

In each of the four central categories, subcategories and themes are identified; these are discussed within each category. Third, common themes among participants in each legal climate: states with fully legal same-sex marriage, states with some rights and protections for same-sex couples, and states with anti-same-sex marriage constitutional amendments are discussed, along with similarities and differences between groups. Together, these three sections provide an integrated overview of the lived experiences of respondents following the repeal of DOMA's Section Three.

### **Participant Profiles**

Participants ranged in age from 26 to 75. Eleven participants were between the ages of 26 and 35, five were between 36 and 45, seven were between 46 and 55, two were between 56 and 65, and one was in the age range of 66 to 75. Eighteen participants identified as male, seven as female, and one as transgender. Nineteen participants

identified as gay, five as lesbian, one as bisexual, and one as queer. One participant identified as African American, one as Asian American, two as Hispanic or Latin American, one as Native American, one as mixed race, and twenty as Caucasian.

Six participants indicated that they lived in Colorado; five in Wisconsin; three in Florida; two in New York, North Carolina, Texas, and Washington; and in Arizona, Connecticut, Michigan, and Oregon. Of these, three respondents lived in states with an anti-same-sex marriage constitutional ban (Arizona and North Carolina); six lived in states with legal same-sex marriage (Connecticut, New York, Oregon, and Washington); and seventeen lived in states that had a ruling in favor of same-sex marriage which was stayed at the time (Colorado, Florida, Michigan, Texas, and Wisconsin). It is important to note that Arizona, North Carolina, Colorado, and Wisconsin have all legalized same-sex marriage, and Florida and Texas have ruled in favor of same-sex marriage since these participants completed the survey. However, at the time the survey was closed and data collection was completed, only the participants in Connecticut, New York, Oregon, and Washington had the option to get legally married available to them; Arizona and North Carolina participants were still living under bans on same-sex marriage, and participants from the remaining states were living in states undergoing legal appeals on same-sex marriage. Thus, it is important to consider participants' responses in the context of their respective states' legal stances at the time they completed the surveys.

All participants reported currently in a committed relationship that had lasted for at least a year; 25 of these indicated their relationship was with a person of the same gender. The twenty-sixth participant was currently in two relationships, one male-female and one male-male. Despite his status of being involved in a legally married,

heterosexual relationship, he did fit inclusion criteria as he was also in a committed same-sex relationship. After careful consideration and conferral with my committee, I decided to include this participant in the study as his responses provided diversity and a perspective unique from the other participants. It is important to note that this participant also provided me with an opportunity to examine my own biases, as polyamorous relationships were not something I had considered when designing the study. Participants indicated a wide range of involvement or LGBTQ rights advocacy; four indicated that they were not at all active, eight not very active, eleven somewhat active, two very active, and one extremely active. Table 4.1 contains demographic information for all participants.

**Table 4.1**  
**Participant Demographics**

Variables	<i>n</i>	%
<b>Age Range</b>		
26-35	11	42.31
36-45	5	19.23
46-55	7	26.92
56-65	2	7.69
66-75	1	3.85
Total	26	100
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	18	69.23
Female	7	26.92
Transgender	1	3.85
Total	26	100
<b>Sexual Orientation</b>		
Gay	19	73.08
Lesbian	5	19.23
Bisexual	1	3.85
Queer	1	3.85
Total	26	100
<b>Ethnicity</b>		
African American	1	3.85
Asian American	1	3.85
Caucasian	20	76.92
Hispanic or Latin American	2	7.69
Native American	1	3.85
Mixed Race	1	3.85
Total	26	100
<b>State of Residence</b>		
Arizona	1	3.85
Colorado	6	23.08
Connecticut	1	3.85
Florida	3	11.54
Michigan	1	3.85
New York	2	7.69
North Carolina	2	7.69
Oregon	1	3.85
Texas	2	7.69
Washington	2	7.69



**Table 4.1 (cont.)**  
**Participant demographics**

Variables	<i>n</i>	%
Wisconsin	5	19.23
Total	26	100
<b>Relationship Status (In a committed relationship* for at least one year)</b>		
Yes	26	100
No	0	0
Total	26	100
<b>Relationship Makeup (Relationship with partner of same gender)</b>		
Yes	25	96.15
No**	1	3.85
Total	26	100
<b>Level of Involvement in LGBTQ Rights Advocacy</b>		
Not at all active	4	15.38
Not very active	8	30.77
Somewhat active	11	42.31
Very active	2	7.69
Extremely active	1	3.85
Total	26	100

\* For purposes of this study, a committed relationship is defined as romantically and emotionally committed to one another.

\*\* This participant was in two relationships; one was a male-female relationship and the other was male-male. As the participant was involved in a same-sex relationship, he was included in the survey despite answering “no” to this question.

### **Common Shared Experiences of DOMA's Section Three Repeal**

Many experiences regarding the Section Three repeal were discussed by multiple participants, indicating a shared experience across geographic locations, ages, genders, sexual orientations, and ethnic/racial backgrounds. These experiences provide a glimpse into the lived experience of respondents following the ruling and reveal the essence of this event for those most affected by DOMA's Section Three and its subsequent repeal.

#### **Marry or Not?**

As DOMA and its Section Three are both rulings concerning the definitions of legal marriage in the United States, it is perhaps unsurprising that a central theme arising from participants was that involving marriage and their decisions, or lack of ability to make decisions, related to it. The subcategories emerging from this category are Marriage Decisions, participants' decisions and options involving marriage, and Alternative Decisions, the decisions made by participants who cannot or have decided not to pursue legal marriage.

**Marriage decisions.** Many participants discussed their decisions regarding marriage in their responses to the survey. Several of those who were able to get married had done so; however, there were also many participants who had decided not to, and many who still did not have this option available to them. Emotions expressed by participants related to this category ranged from happiness at being able to get married, to contentedness with their relationships and related decisions, to frustration and sadness with the lack of available options. This theme was divided into the subthemes We Do!, Still Deciding, and Not Now.

*We do!* Participants within this theme had decided to get married to their partners, and most of them had already done so. Many participants expressed feelings that this was a logical step for their relationships, as it is for any other couple. One man from Connecticut stated, “We have been together for three years and when you are in love and are planning your life together, you get married.” Another respondent from New York replied that she and her partner had gotten married “the first month it was legal. [We] had been together 10 years. [We] own property together, it was an absolute no brainer.” Many respondents had been in their relationships for many years before getting married, presumably because of the relative newness of many state laws recognizing same-sex marriage; for example, one respondent replied, “We got married after 15 years of being together.” Other responses indicated the importance of the repeal in giving them the ability to get married: one respondent stated that “We are getting married and would not have before.” another explained, “As of June 30, 2014, we are legally married in Washington because we were registered domestic partners. Our partnership turned into marriage. We are very happy.” Others had decided to get married but had not yet done so; a male respondent from New York stated, “We are engaged to marry September, 2015.”

While many participants included in this theme had gotten married in their own states, others had chosen to get married in other states, as they did not have the choice in their own. For example, a man from North Carolina indicated, “My state doesn't allow same-sex marriage. We married in D.C. instead.” Others had multiple recognitions, taking part in the recognitions their states did offer while pursuing legal marriage elsewhere, such as a Colorado woman who wrote, “We have a Civil Union in our own state, but were married in Maine a few months ago.”

*Still deciding.* The decision to get married was not as simple for some respondents as it was for others. People included in this theme had extenuating circumstances to consider when deciding to get married, specifically, many had medical conditions that made it financially difficult on couples should they decide to legally marry. As one man from Colorado explained, “This will be a difficult decision for us. My partner is on Social Security disability, and we will need to weigh the economic issues with the social.” Another male respondent elaborated that

“... for us, getting married might not be a good thing. One of us lives with AIDS, and being married would screw up his needs-based medical care. Even being on the other's work insurance would cost us significantly more in premiums and copays (i.e., over \$500/month of additional medical expenses, as well as losing Medicare disability income).”

This respondent continued, “It is preferable for the partner with AIDS to be legally single because of the way Medicare and Medicaid rules are written. We considered the Designated Beneficiary system Colorado had a couple of years ago, and are glad we didn't do so. The state automatically transformed all the Designated Beneficiaries into Civil Unions, which would have given us the disadvantages of being married without any real advantages. And clearly, as has happened in other states, Civil Unions will be transformed into legal marriages.”

These responses indicated the high impact finances have for couples' decisions to marry, not unlike in many heterosexual relationships. However, these responses also

highlight the continued disproportionate burden and stigma placed on gay male couples by AIDS.

*Not now.* Other respondents indicated that marriage was not for them and their relationships at this point in time. Many respondents indicated that they were simply not ready to get married at the present time. One man living in Washington explained, “We have only been together for one and a half years - not yet ready to commit to a lifetime together. That said, we are very happy together and both believe marriage and children are possibilities for the future.” Another male respondent from Wisconsin expressed a similar sentiment: “We weren't ready to get married. We're happy we have the option, but we weren't waiting to get hitched or anything when the law was appealed. We feel it is still at least another one or two years down the road for us.” Age disparities were an aspect of another Wisconsin respondent’s decision to wait for marriage: “One thing to take into account with my relationship is that I'm 17 years older than my partner. We are at different places in our lives, so our views on getting married might be affected by our ages (31 and 48).”

Another group of participants indicated that they were not interested in marriage as an institution. One participant from Oregon summarized this sentiment by stating,

“We have decided not to get married. We've only been together for a little over a year. We live together, do have shared expenses and shared responsibilities, but at this time marriage is not what we want. Not to mention that we both think marriage is a capitalist institution that historically has been used as an excuse to keep women subjugated. If and

when we do decide to legally get married, I think it might be just out of convenience.”

This participant continued, “It’s not important to us at this moment. We know we love each other and don’t need a piece of paper to tell us that.” Responses within this group mirror the sentiments espoused by the liberationist group [that marriage is an outdated, flawed, and oppressive institution which has historically promoted white male privilege and oppression of women and minorities (Ettlebrick, 1997; Goldberg, 2009; Rimmerman, 2008)] discussed in Chapter Two.

Other participants indicated that they had not legally married because they could not. One North Carolina participant expressed, “No local or state rights are extended to us, sadly.” Several others indicated that they could not get married as their states were currently in the process of appealing rulings regarding same-sex marriage. One man explained, “We’re in legal limbo in Wisconsin as the ruling overturning same-sex marriage bans are being appealed.” A respondent from Colorado illuminated the fluidity and delicacy of the day-to-day rights of same-sex couples in these states: “The legal situation in CO is in flux from day to day and county to county.”

**Alternative decisions.** Several participants discussed their decisions regarding alternative forms of relationship recognition, such as civil unions, domestic partnerships, and religious ceremonies. In the absence of full legal marriage, these methods provide some level of benefits, protections, and recognition not otherwise available to same-sex couples.

**Legal unions.** While many participants indicated that they had considered civil unions or domestic partnerships, only five of the twenty-six participants had actually

entered into an alternative form of legal relationship recognition. The low levels of reported alternative recognitions by participants mirror the concepts of civil unions and domestic partnerships as lesser recognitions that mirror “separate but equal” laws, as discussed in Chapter Two (Steingass, 2012; Thomas, 2005; Woodford, 2010). As one participant put it, “We would prefer to be married legally.”

Many of the participants who had entered into this type of relationship specified that these decisions had been made in order to gain some of the benefits associated with these relationships. One man explained, “Wisconsin wasn't issuing same sex marriage licenses then. We wanted protections such as hospital visitation rights.” Only one participant out of the twenty-six spoke favorably about alternative recognitions: “I am a supporter of civil unions as long as they are nationally recognized and provide me the same rights as marriage. Marriage in my opinion is a religious act, and I do not agree with my views being forced upon the church. Call it what you want, I just want the rights and benefits.”

*Religious unions.* Two respondents indicated that they had entered into a religiously recognized union. For these respondents, the important aspects of relationship recognition were demonstrating their commitment to one another and having their relationship recognized according to their faith. As one Colorado man expressed, “We had a church covenant ceremony 19 years ago, but no legal ceremony. Of course back then, there were no legal options available at all. For us the important thing was stating our commitment before God and our friends, not necessarily involving the State.”

### **Support or Not?**

Respondents reported varying levels of support for their relationships and their rights for equality. Support, as defined by participants in this category fell under two broad subcategories. The first, Legal Support, included laws supporting same-sex couples and the resulting benefits that occurred following the repeal. This subcategory was further divided into two themes: *We've Got Benefits*, in which participants reported receiving legal rights, benefits, and protections following the repeal, and *Still Fighting*, in which participants discussed their ongoing struggles in attaining legal equality with other couples. The second subcategory, Social Support, included support from participants' families, friends, and communities following the repeal. This subcategory was also divided into three themes: *Positive*, in which participants reported mainly positive reactions from their social circles; *Mixed*, in which participants reported some positive and some negative reactions; and *Opposed*, in which participants reported opposition and lack of support from others.

**Legal support.** Only six of the twenty-six respondents discussed having legal support, as opposed to social support, which the majority of respondents discussed experiencing. This could be seen as an indication of the relative newness of the extension of benefits to same-sex couples, the limited number of LGBTQ people who actually have access to these benefits, and the work still needing to be done on the extension of benefits to same-sex couples.

*We've got benefits!* Six respondents replied that they had received benefits as a result of the repeal. These respondents reported receiving several legal benefits and protections and indicated that these were very helpful for their relationships and lives.



One respondent from New York replied that now, as she and her partner were legally recognized as a couple, they found themselves worrying less about legal issues. A male respondent from Wisconsin expressed, “Being able to share health insurance when we marry is huge. It will give us so much more flexibility and, honestly, a better, fairer quality of life.” A man from North Carolina had a slightly different response from others: “I had many of these benefits from before because my partner works at a very LGBT friendly company, Verizon Wireless.”

***Still Fighting.*** The vast majority of respondents reported that they had received no benefits following the repeal, often because of their respective state laws. Some even reported that they had experienced more discrimination after the repeal. A Colorado man explained,

“I work for a community college and our human resources department has determined that the definition for spouse is different for faculty than it is for classified staff. State employees in same sex relationships in Colorado are supposed to now receive some benefits including family leave for spouse's health. Because I'm faculty and not a classified employee our HR department determined that I could not take a day of sick leave to be with my partner when he had a heart defibrillator installed even though my supervisor had approved the leave. After several weeks of fighting this I mentioned that I would be contacting One-Colorado (one of our state's LGBT rights groups). I then received an email from the vice president telling me to take the day off and they would ‘deal with paper work later’.”

Another respondent related a strikingly similar scenario:

“Weirdly, my partner's human resources department has become more hard-nosed against us since we don't have legal status. He had to move heaven and earth to get a family leave day to be with me when I had surgery, since we don't have any legal standing (in Colorado, currently, Civil Union). Before there were legal options, they just quietly looked the other way in those situations.”

These experiences support the literature regarding the backlash against LGBTQ groups following legal progress, as discussed in Chapter Two (Freedom to Marry, 2013).

**Social support.** Respondents' reported levels of support from families, friends, and community members varied greatly. While many respondents indicated that they'd received positive social support, many others reported mixed support from acquaintances and significant others, and a few reported continued discrimination and a lack of social support.

**Positive.** Many respondents reported that family members, friends, and other people in their lives had been extremely supportive. A man in Washington summed up the experiences of many participants in stating that the people around him had been “All positive and supporting,” and a woman in Colorado revealed that “My community is very open and accepting and I feel blessed to have moved here.” Other respondents discussed that, beyond simply approving of the relationships of their acquaintances, many of the people in their lives were supportive of the marriage equality movement. Another man from Wisconsin stated that “My family and friends are very supportive of my relationship and of marriage equality generally.” Similarly, a Connecticut man replied, “Generally,

people I know believe that gay people should be treated exactly the same as straight people,” and another respondent from Texas explained that “[My family and friends] feel I should be able to love and marry who I want.” A man from North Carolina described the responses of many of his social circles following the repeal:

“My brother, who is older than me and who works professionally as a lawyer, has had a good response. He shows legal interest in LGBT issues...My community has had a great response. Our local LGBT organizations and even some churches have been tremendous in publicly celebrating the victories for LGBT rights. My friends have also been wonderful. Most of my close friends have said some encouraging words to me about the repeal of Section Three of DOMA, and it has felt nice to have the encouragement.”

A Washington man discussed the responses of his family to both positive and negative legal events regarding same-sex marriage:

“When President Bush announced his push for an amendment against gay marriage, my mother cried and told me how worried she was for me and the troubles I would have because of my sexuality. I found myself comforting her and telling her that I am strong in the face of opposition, and that history is on my side. Now that we've been proven correct, everyone is congratulatory and supportive.”

*Mixed.* Others reported mixed responses from the people in their lives. The varied levels of support were often seen as unsurprising by respondents; as a Colorado man summarized, “Varied, of course!” One Colorado participant elaborated on the responses

of her family and friends: “Most very positive. A few neutral, a very few negative. We just ignore the negativity.” Many responses indicated different responses from family versus friends: Another Colorado resident stated that “My community is very accepting...my family is not accepting of my "choice" but does love me and my partner. They do not know we recently got married.” Similarly, a Florida woman replied, “For the most part things have been positive. There are still members of our family who believe marriage is between a woman and a man.” Other participants felt varied levels of support within their families; the North Carolina resident who explained that his older brother had a good response went on to say that “Other family members haven't said much about the issue.” Additionally, some people felt different levels of support between their own and their partners’ families. As a Wisconsin man stated,

“My family and friends are very supportive...I have not felt pressured by them to propose to my partner. I am interested to see how it affects my partner's family, since his mother's side is extremely religious (Catholic) and generally anti-gay.”

Again, this response backs up research from Chapter Two which discussed the relative impacts of religion family support on couple relationships (Clarke et al., 2013; Lannutti, 2008; Obocock, 2013).

*Negative.* Despite the majority of respondents reporting positive reactions from social contacts, some respondents reported negative responses from people in their lives. Often, this came from acquaintances rather than close friends or family members: A Colorado man reported,

“I do feel that the debate has caused some of the community who oppose marriage equality to increase their level of opposition. Only in the past few years have I really felt strongly discriminated against at our college. We have several folks in our human resources department who feel it is their responsibility to save the college from the ‘liberal gay agenda’. The former director of our human resources department informed me that she has chosen to live her life by ‘biblical standards’, unlike what I’ve done. Another human resources employee called me in to ‘explain the nature of my relationship’. Prior to the current climate of debate about marriage equality they just pretty much left me alone.”

Overall, respondents reported that negative responses were very low, and felt this was partially due to their choices in social contacts: An Oregon respondent explained that “the people we choose to surround ourselves with are all for marriage equality and some have even had ceremonies of their own.”

### **Impact or not?**

A major issue discussed by respondents was the impact of the repeal, their relationship progressions, and the responses of those around them on their individual and relationship well-being and functioning. Generally, participants felt that the repeal had had positive effects on themselves and their relationships, but a few spoke of ways that it actually increased the pressure on them. When family, friends, and communities were positive and supportive of respondents and the repeal in general, the impacts on respondents were largely positive. However, if these responses were negative, respondents reported negative impacts on themselves and their relationships, but often

also reported themes of resilience and strength in the face of this adversity. Responses in this category fell under two subcategories, Relationship Impacts and Individual Impacts.

**Relationship impacts.** Most of the impacts reported by respondents were related to their couple relationships. When family, friends, and communities were positive and supportive of respondents and the repeal in general, the impacts on respondents were largely positive. However, if these responses were negative, respondents reported negative impacts, but often also reported themes of resilience and strength in the face of this adversity. Responses within this theme were further divided into two subthemes, *We've Been Affected*, in which participants felt their relationship had been impacted by the repeal, and *Still the Same*, in which participants felt that their relationship had been unaffected by the repeal.

*We've been affected.* One of the most commonly reported impacts was that of social support benefitting respondents' couple relationships. Respondents felt that the support from family and friends helped strengthen their couple relationships. A Wisconsin man wrote that the responses of family and friends had been "Nearly 100% positive and supportive. Their support and love has helped our relationship grow and mature," while another stated, "We feel stronger as a couple with their support."

Another common experience reported by respondents was that the legal changes had positively impacted their relationships. A Wisconsin resident wrote that "I feel we have more of an opportunity for long term success as a couple by having some federal (and maybe state) recognition if we get married." He added, "We have bonded over many happy moments and overcoming challenges associated with equal rights."

Finally, many respondents in this theme reported feeling safer following the repeal. A New York man wrote, “Although we still are harassed for being gay and together it happens much less frequently.” In turn, these respondents felt more able to be open about their sexual orientations and relationships. A woman from Colorado explained, “We are able to be more open without fear of bigoted responses.”

Unfortunately, not all effects on respondents’ relationships were positive. Several respondents reported feeling increased pressure to get married, as discussed in Chapter Two (Yep et al., 2003). For example, a Wisconsin man replied that the repeal had

“Actually made [our relationship status] a bit more insecure. We do not live together, and it’s caused questions of commitment to come up. Now that we *can* get married in certain states (and soon nationally), will we? If not, what is our relationship all about and where is it leading?” (emphasis in original).

He continued,

“It’s easier to stay uncommitted, when full legal commitment (marriage) is not available. In our case, I am more than ready to take the leap into full commitment and marriage. My boyfriend is not there. At least, not yet. . . . One thing to take into account with my relationship is that I’m 17 years older than my partner. We are at different places in our lives, so our views on getting married might be affected by our ages (31 and 48).”

Another common source of stress following the repeal was the financial situation posed by marriage for some couples. A man from Colorado elaborated,

“Actually, it’s put a bit more stress on us. We’ve been together 21 years, and now all our straight allies are asking ‘Are you going to get married?’ It’s raised questions for us we hadn’t previously really considered. After all, we met right after Colorado’s Amendment 2 -- marriage rights weren’t even on the radar! We love and are committed to each other -- which is what the ideology of marriage is about for us -- but the financial consequences are quite negative in our case.”

He continued:

“We’ve felt pressure to marry from friends who don’t appreciate that it might not be good for us. We also have felt some internal pressure - - if we really believe in marriage equality, and consider ourselves partners for life, and have made a spiritual/religious covenant of living together -- why not just be married? The connotations of being married (commitment, mutuality, protections) are attractive. But AIDS...”

These examples underline the additional stress that HIV/AIDS put on many gay men, and reveals a related, underexplored new problem posed for this population.

*Still the same.* While many respondents felt that their relationships had been impacted by the repeal, others felt theirs hadn’t been affected. In response to a question asking whether the repeal had impacted him or his couple relationship, a Wisconsin man replied,

“I’m not sure if it has. We have lived in a progressive community for our 4-year relationship. Our families have always been very supportive. And,



even with the repeal, I don't know if we're headed down to the rural south any time soon.”

He added, “It's spurred some good discussion, but it hasn't really affected our relationship.” A respondent from North Carolina mused, “Not so much... We have mostly remained the same.” And a woman in Colorado replied that “Our relationship is rock solid. Increased legal and/or social recognition is just the icing on the cake. We deserve equality and are glad it is happening but did not expect to see it in my lifetime.” Many respondents indicated a conscious effort to not be impacted by laws or others' ideas, for example, “No--we know that there are many differing opinions out there so we just focus on ourselves.”

**Individual impacts.** Most respondents reported that impacts of the repeal were primarily on their relationships rather than on them personally. It seems likely that this may be due to the relational nature of the law. However, as the law targeted the LGBTQ population specifically, some respondents felt individual impacts as well. Responses in this subcategory were further separated into the themes *I've Been Affected*, in which participants felt they'd been impacted by the repeal, and *Still the Same*, in which participants did not feel they'd been affected by it.

*I've been affected.* Again in this theme, respondents spoke of feeling safer following the repeal, this time in an individual sense. A Wisconsin man explained, “I'm happy that opinions are changing, it makes me feel safer, physically and emotionally.” A man from Washington added to his response that “Given the relatively young status of my relationship, the effects of progress have been primarily on me personally, not on my relationship.”

*Still the same.* Other respondents felt that the repeal and related social responses hadn't impacted them as an individual. A North Carolina resident explained that "My other family members haven't said much about the issue, but that's okay with me, because I've learned to not need their support so much. I continue on with my life anyway." Another respondent from Texas wrote that the repeal "has not affected me personally or my relationship."

### **Progress or not?**

In the final category, participants gave their overall opinions of the repeal, its impacts on the legal and social circumstances of the LGBTQ community, and their personal feelings in response to the repeal. Responses in this category were divided into Overall Assessment, participants' thoughts and critical evaluations of the repeal, and Affective Experiences, participants' affective reactions to the repeal.

**Overall assessment.** Participants' views of the repeal as a whole were largely positive, indicating that it was both a major event in the national movement for LGBTQ rights and the morally right decision for the country. Many respondents also indicated that the repeal was "long overdue" and expressed their relief that it had finally occurred. Finally, a large percentage of respondents felt that while the repeal was a significant step forward, there is still much left to be done in the fight for LGBTQ rights and equality. This theme was divided into four subthemes: Major Event, Right Decision, About Time, and Next Steps.

**Major event.** Many participants felt that the Section Three repeal was an important, even historical event for the country. Participants used phrases such as "An awesome win for equality" and "It's been a good thing" to describe the repeal and

indicated beliefs that it had “Laid the groundwork for a lot of marriage bans being struck down” and was “A wonderful and huge step in the right direction for LGBT rights.” As one man from New York elaborated, “It is a major domino falling that signifies the beginning of the downfall to marriage inequality throughout the country.” A North Carolina participant described the repeal in a historic context: “It was sweeping enough, or one could say broad enough, to be an important and historic ruling...it is a wonderful and huge step in the right direction for LGBT rights.” Another man from Colorado spoke of the repeal beyond its immediate implications: “I feel the repeal has meaning far beyond marriage and deals more with basic human dignity.”

***Right decision.*** Many participants also spoke of the repeal in an ethical context, expressing their feelings that the right decision had been made. A Wisconsin man wrote that “It felt like the right time and right decision for our country.” A New York man echoed this sentiment, stating that “It was the right decision, morally and legally.” Finally, one respondent spoke specifically to the legal ethics of the repeal, expressing, “It was the right decision . . . anything else would be unfair and (more importantly) unconstitutional”.

***About time!*** Several respondents made statements to the effect that it was “high time” that the law had been repealed. This theme was highly saturated in the data, with several respondents using the phrase, “it’s about time” or “it was about time” to describe their feelings about the repeal. One participant in Connecticut used slightly stronger language to express himself on this topic: “It is about damn time!!!” (emphasis in original)

*Next steps.* While participants were nearly unanimous in their feelings that the repeal represented a significant step forward for marriage equality, they also strongly indicated that there was more to be done to bring LGBTQ couples to the same level of rights and recognition as heterosexual couples. Several participants referenced the importance of overturning state bans on same-sex marriage, as one North Carolina man expressed: “I believe the next step is to see change across additional states with the removal of state constitutional bans on same-sex marriages.” Others discussed the importance of societal education and acceptance for same-sex couples. A New York man wrote that “It will be a long time before it is accepted throughout the nation in more than a legal sense,” while a Colorado man discussed that “Many who support marriage equality don't really seem to understand that we don't already enjoy the same benefits.”

Many respondents also discussed the importance of changing laws beyond those related to marriage to reach true equality for same sex couples. A Michigan woman discussed some of the financial inequalities faced by same-sex couples, as detailed in Chapter Two (Haas et al., 2010): “I don't like the fact that a federal institution such as the IRS can recognize my marriage and therefore penalize me financially when I don't enjoy any benefits from the federal government for being in a lesbian relationship. I feel like they shouldn't be able to ‘have their cake and eat it too’”. A Colorado man highlighted the significance of the repeal as well as the remaining need, explaining, “Marriage equality is exciting - but alone may be a mixed blessing. More needed is an inclusive Employment Non-Discrimination Act, for example, and genuine healthcare reform that doesn't condemn those with AIDS or other chronic diseases to penury.” This statement backs up research cited in Chapter Two discussing the work of the LGBTQ community to

fight for humane and fair treatment and access to support following the introduction of AIDS in the US (Gates & Kelly, 2013) as well as the importance of fair employment practices (Davidson & Rouse, 2005). Finally, an Oregon resident discussed hopes that “Maybe some of the groups listed above (LGBTQ) as well as the money going towards these groups will now hopefully be used to address bigger issues in the community, like homelessness, access to healthcare, violence perpetrated against Trans individuals particularly Trans women of color. There are so many things that need attention and this marriage crap is taking all center stage when it's not the most pressing issue to be fighting.”

**Affective Experiences.** As may be expected following a major event that impacts intimate and important aspects of people’s lives, respondents reported having affective experiences to the repeal. These responses were often positive and indicated happiness, hopefulness for the future, and feelings of validation and acceptance, creating the four themes within this subcategory: Happiness, Hopefulness, Validation, and Acceptance.

**Happiness.** Many respondents expressed strong feelings of happiness following the repeal. Along with happiness, several people mentioned feelings of excitement, celebration, and relief in response to the ruling. A Wisconsin man summarized the statements of many: “Overall very excited and hopeful for more equal rights for everyone.” He continued, “I hope we are on the right track and Wisconsin fully legalizes gay marriage! It was inspiring to see friends get married at the Capitol and courthouses shortly after the ban was lifted.” Some responses were mixed: A Florida woman stressed that, “It shouldn't have been passed in the first place but I am excited that it was repealed.” Overall, however, responses in this subtheme were extremely happy and

celebratory. As a Colorado woman wrote, “My state is on the verge of allowing same-sex marriage. We will celebrate again when it happens.”

*Hopefulness.* Hopefulness was frequently reported by respondents across states, legal standing, personal experiences, and views on the repeal. Many wrote that the repeal renewed their levels of hopefulness for continued victories and progress toward full marriage equality. Many respondents discussed their hopefulness that their state laws would follow the example set by the DOMA repeal. As a Colorado man explained, “It's only a matter of time before CO quits the patchwork quilt of rulings and has uniform marriage equality.” Another respondent stated, “We are optimistic that legal marriage will bring us some benefits, even in Texas.” Similarly, a North Carolina man responded, “Despite the type of culture NC is known for (straight-laced southern culture), I do believe we'll have marriage equality in NC sooner rather than later. My personal estimation is within 10 years, which is really not that long to wait, honestly. I am happy to wait and see what unfolds and happens next.”

Other responses indicated hopefulness for further equality at the national level. A Texas man articulated, “I believe that this is the beginning of national equal rights.” He explained this sentiment further, citing a historic 1967 ruling in which the Supreme Court invalidated a law banning interracial marriage (Lawing, 2000): “I believe that same sex unions will prompt a Supreme Court of the United States ruling as it did for Loving vs Virginia.” Another Texas man concurred, “I feel all states will eventually allow same sex marriage.” A Wisconsin man revealed a sense of confidence in addition to his hopefulness for the future, stating that the repeal had “made us hopeful about the

direction we are headed (toward marriage equality).” A woman in Florida also expressed these sentiments, expressing that “Things are changing and we are extremely hopeful.”

Other respondents expressed broader implications in their hopefulness. For example, a Florida man wrote, “I wish that same sex marriage would be approved in every single country of the world.” A Colorado man expressed a shift in expectations: “A few months ago I wasn't nearly as hopeful . . . I do feel that public opinion is beginning to swing in favor of equality.” A Florida woman expressed feelings of wellbeing along with her recently increased hopefulness, adding that “It's comforting to know we are moving in the right direction and more hopeful we will be able to marry.”

*Validation.* Aside from happiness and hopefulness, many respondents reported feelings of validation resulting from the repeal. A Colorado man stated that he and his partner were “Starting to feel a little less like ‘second-class’ citizens.” (emphasis in original). Several respondents discussed feeling more legitimized, as a Wisconsin man explained: “Our relationship feels more “real”, more legitimate, more in step with heterosexual relationships.” A New York man wrote,

“It has reaffirmed our relationship and given us the dignity and respect our relationship deserves. . . It has helped to show conservative relatives that we have the right and are privileged to be recognized by them and that we are just another loving couple.”

A man from Wisconsin added, “I definitely feel validation from the repeal. My marriage (I'm not married yet) will be as real as my brother's straight marriage.” Speaking of the validation he expected if his state laws followed the national ruling, a North Carolina man wrote,

“It would be nice to be able to turn to someone who disapproves of my relationship with my husband and say, ‘Well, even the law says it’s okay, so you need to shut up.’ I say that in jest, but seriously I do think it would be nice to know the law is on my side. It would give me a bit of confidence I sometimes lack now.”

*Acceptance.* Similar to the feelings of validation, many respondents discussed experiencing higher levels of acceptance from others following the repeal. A Colorado woman, discussing her partner, wrote that, “She feels more accepted and is more open about our relationship.” Overall, she continued, “We feel more accepted by straight people and socially more outside of our LGBT friends.” A male respondent from Colorado agreed: “I think we are more accepted by some of our straight friends as a couple than we used to be.”

### **Summary of Common Shared Experiences of DOMA’s Section Three Repeal**

Respondents participating in this survey shared similar thoughts, feelings, and reactions to the repeal. One of the most commonly shared themes across respondents was that of hopefulness. Overall, respondents indicated that the repeal had renewed their hope for eventual national marriage equality and shared access to the same rights, protections, and benefits enjoyed by heterosexual couples. Further, respondents across states reported a lot of relief, happiness, and celebration following the repeal, as well as feeling more confident, secure, and open regarding their sexuality and relationships. Additionally, respondents across the country indicated that support from family, friends, and society strengthens their couple relationships.



However, participants indicated that the repeal has not eliminated all problems faced by same-sex couples in the U.S. Many participants indicated a vulnerability they feel, even after their relationships and sexual orientations were effectively legalized and legitimized on a national level. Many indicated that national and state laws do have an impact on their relational and psychological well-being, and very few participants had actually received benefits following the repeal. Finally, among participants, there were very few alternative relationship recognitions such as civil unions or domestic partnerships, and participants indicated that these recognitions were as legitimate as marriage. Thus, participants indicated that while the repeal was a large success for marriage equality and LGBTQ rights, there is much more work to be done to attain full equality for LGBTQ couples.

### **State Comparisons**

In addition to the themes found across all respondents, several themes emerged based on geographic legal groups. Responses were divided into three categories:

- 1) Respondents living in states with constitutional bans (Arizona, North Carolina)
- 2) Respondents living in states without full legal marriage but some rights (Colorado, Florida, Michigan, Texas, and Wisconsin)
- 3) States with legal same-sex marriage (Connecticut, New York, Oregon, and Washington)

In analyzing and comparing these categories, distinct themes within groups and significant differences between groups were identified, giving a clear picture of the different experiences of respondents based on state of residence. For an illustration of participant responses to quantitative questions, refer to Figures 4.1- 4.10.

### **Participants in States with Constitutional Bans on Same-Sex Marriage**

Same-sex couples living in states that had constitutional bans on same-sex marriage live in areas in which their relationships and, often, orientations are devalued and openly discriminated against. Laws of the states they live in are often mirrored, and fueled, by local public opinion, so in addition to a lack of legal rights and protections, they face social judgment as well. They have fewer rights and protections than same-sex couples living in other states, and some have no options for state-recognized unions. These conditions were referenced in responses and provide a context for the answers given by respondents living in this group of states.

**Qualitative Responses.** Respondents living in states with constitutional bans gave answers indicating resiliency and finding ways to thrive despite the lack of state support. For example, one man from North Carolina wrote,

“My state doesn’t allow same-sex marriage. We married in Washington, D.C. instead... We made a decision before DOMA Section Three was repealed that we would be married whether or not the law allowed it. And we did so. And then DOMA Section Three was repealed shortly after and it was a little bit validating for us.”

Participants living in these states showed high levels of optimism and hopefulness for eventual marriage equality, despite the current legal situation in which they lived. However, they also indicated higher levels of vulnerability to legal situations and social opinions; one respondent mentioned that no local or state protections were available to him and his partner, but mentioned, “It has felt nice to have the encouragement” from significant others following the repeal. Finally, respondents in these political climates

reported finding comfort in the new federal benefits extended to them. For example, a North Carolina man stated, “It is nice to know that as we own our home together it is safely owned between us, and that we have some other rights now granted to us from a federal standpoint.”

**Quantitative Responses.** Respondents in states with constitutional bans were less active in their level of activity in LGBTQ advocacy than all other groups (see Figure 4.1); two of the three respondents indicated that they were “not at all active”, and the other selected “not very active” in advocacy efforts. This group of respondents rated their views of the Section Three repeal very highly; one respondent chose “positive” and the other two chose “very positive” to describe their views of the repeal. One respondent rated the Defense of Marriage Act as “very negative”; the other two rated it as “very positive”. It is speculated that this may have been an error with the question. Two of the three respondents in this group had received benefits following the repeal, and rated these differences as “helpful” and “very helpful”. Respondents rated the helpfulness of the repeal in assisting same-sex couples in accessing benefits as “slightly helpful”, “helpful”, and “very helpful”. For the effects national and state laws had on their relationships, respondents in this category indicated that their relationships had been “somewhat”, “moderately”, and “significantly” impacted by the repeal, which fell slightly above the responses of other groups (see Fig. 4.5). They also rated the effects of social opinion and approval as “moderately” and “significantly” impactful on their relationships, again slightly higher than the responses of other groups (see Fig. 4.6). Of the respondents in this group who answered the question, all responded “yes” when asked if they were optimistic that their states would one day rule for marriage equality. None of the

respondents in this group who answered the question had any formal recognition of their relationship within their state such as a civil union or domestic partnership. Finally, respondents revealed that they were “slightly hopeful”, “hopeful”, and “very hopeful” that one day marriage equality would be present across states.

**Table 4.2**

**Responses of Participants in States with Constitutional Bans on Same-Sex Marriage**

Question 8: Level of activity in LGBTQ advocacy	1 (n=2), 2 (n=1) (Not at all/Not very active)
Question 10: Views of repeal	6 (n=1), 7 (n=2) (Positive/Very positive)
Question 11: Views of DOMA	1 (n=1), 7 (n=2) (Very negative/Very positive)
Question 12: Benefits received since repeal	Y (n=2), N (n=1)
Question 13: Difference benefits have made	6 (n=2), 7 (n=1) (Helpful/Very helpful)
Question 14: Helpfulness of repeal for accessing benefits	5 (n=1), 6 (n=1), 7 (n=1) (Slightly helpful/Helpful/Very helpful)
Question 15: Effects of laws	5 (n=1), 6 (n=1), 7 (n=1) (Somewhat/Moderately/Significantly)
Question 16: Effects of social opinion/approval	5 (n=1), 6 (n=2) (Moderately/Significantly)
Question 19: Optimism for future state repeal	Y(n=2), No answer(n=1)
Question 21: Formal recognition of relationship	N (n=2), No answer (n=1)
Question 24: Hopefulness for national marriage equality	5 (n=1), 6 (n=1), 7 (n=1) (Slightly hopeful/Hopeful/Very hopeful)

### **Participants in States with Rulings for Same-Sex Marriage Currently in Appeals**

Participants who lived in this group of states were living in political and social climates undergoing change. While each of these states had struck down state constitutional bans on same-sex marriage and/or ruled for legalizing same-sex marriage, all of them had subsequently seen appeals on these laws, thus leaving same-sex couples residing in those states in a sort of legal limbo. As such, many of these states were

undergoing legal proceedings, increased advocacy efforts for same-sex marriage, and increased campaigns protesting the legalization of same-sex marriage. These conditions were again referenced in responses and provide a context for the answers given by respondents living in this group of states.

**Qualitative responses.** Respondents in this group showed higher levels of frustration with the legal proceedings, social debates, and instability they faced in regards to their relationships and legal standings. One Colorado man described the situation in his state, as well as the frustration, mingled with hope, felt by many:

“Over the past few weeks the courts have made a lot of rulings on the constitutionality of Colorado's ban. While the courts have all agreed there is still public pressure being applied which has led each judge to stay their rulings. The political shenanigans are frustrating. Our attorney general is a far right conservative and of course is appealing all of the rulings and suing county clerks who try to issue marriage licenses. I do feel that public opinion is beginning to swing in favor of equality.”

Despite their frustration, most respondents from these states were not sitting idly by, waiting for the courts to make their decisions. Respondents in this group had higher levels of political action and awareness than the other groups, as indicated by their levels of activity in LGBTQ advocacy as well as their open-ended responses to questions. For example, a Wisconsin man wrote in response to a question about the repeal:

“It was about time. I read the Supreme Court transcript after the decision came out. The prosecution couldn't make a strong argument for a legitimate reason for DOMA to be in place. The burden of argument was

on them, and they didn't have anything full-proof to warrant excluding a group from marriage and its associated rights. I would have felt sickened if DOMA was upheld. Upholding DOMA would have continued discrimination and also would have seemed to neglect logic. If it was upheld, I would have been frustrated and saddened by the country.”

A Colorado respondent wrote that he felt Colorado was close to following the national repeal: “I feel that Colorado is already close, especially in light of the recent ruling in Denver.” Another Colorado respondent added that in the state, “Court appeals already are under way. Demographic changes in this state assure a reversal of current prohibitions within a few years.” Finally, a woman from Colorado differentiated between legal and religious recognitions of same-sex marriages: “As long as straight couples can marry without the involvement of any religious institution, the matter is a CIVIL rights issue. Churches can opt out, but the Constitution cannot!” (emphasis in original).

In addition to political awareness and activism, respondents in this group of states showed high levels of optimism for future change – when asked about her hopefulness for uniform national marriage equality, a Colorado woman summed up the beliefs of many: “It’s in the works!” This level of optimism for future equality was similar to respondents in states with constitutional bans on same-sex marriage. Respondents in states in legal flux and states with bans also shared a tendency to find ways to get married regardless of options in their own states. Many respondents in this group of states had gotten married in other states or were planning to do so, despite expressing regrets that they were not able to get married in their state of residence.

A key characteristic of respondents in this group was that they were vulnerable to changes in legal and social climate, as indicated in their answers to the survey. A Wisconsin resident explained that following the repeal, he and his partner had experienced an “Outpouring of love and support from family and friends which has helped strengthen our bond.” A Florida woman wrote that following the repeal, she and her partner felt safer and more comfortable; this experience was also mentioned by a Colorado resident. While many of the impacts reported by this group of respondents were positive, others felt more negative impacts, such as increased hostility from opponents of marriage equality, as discussed above. All respondents who mentioned experiencing increased opposition following the repeal lived in this group of states, perhaps due to the corresponding changes in these states’ laws. Overall, this group reported more shifts in their couple relationships following the shifts in their social and legal contexts than did other groups. The qualitative responses from this group of participants, more than the other groups, reflected both the benefits and damages of outside factors on couple relationships.

**Quantitative responses.** Respondents in states with recent state repeals and appeals were more active in their level of activity in LGBTQ advocacy than any other group; eleven out of seventeen respondents indicated that they were at least “somewhat active” (see Fig. 4.1). One respondent chose “not at all active”, five chose “not very active”, eight chose “somewhat active”, two chose “very active”, and one chose “extremely active”. This group of respondents rated their views of the Section Three repeal very highly, similar to other groups; nine respondents chose “very positive”, six chose “positive”, one chose “neutral”, and one chose “very negative” to describe their

views of the repeal. Ratings of the the Defense of Marriage Act by this group corresponded with their ratings of the appeal; thirteen respondents rated DOMA as “very negative”, one as “negative”, two as “neutral”, and one as “very positive”. Again, it is speculated that the rating of the repeal as “very negative” and DOMA as “very positive” may have been due to a misinterpretation of the questions, as with the previous group. Only two of the seventeen respondents in this group had received benefits following the repeal; however, six respondents evaluated these benefits, with one choosing “very helpful”, two “helpful”, two “slightly helpful”, and only one choosing “slightly unhelpful”. Further, respondents rated the helpfulness of the repeal in assisting same-sex couples in accessing benefits as “neither helpful nor unhelpful” (one respondent), “slightly helpful” (one respondent), “helpful” (eight respondents), and “very helpful” (seven respondents). For the effects national and state laws had on their relationships, respondents in this category indicated a wide range of impacts, identifying that their relationships had been “very little” (two respondents), “slightly” (three respondents), “neutral” (one respondent), “somewhat” (three respondents), “moderately” (three respondents), and “significantly” (five respondents) impacted by the repeal. They also varied in their evaluations of the effects of social opinion and approval, rating them as having “very little” (two respondents), “slightly” (two respondents), “neutral” (one respondent), “somewhat” (four respondents), “moderately” (five respondents), and “significantly” (three respondents) impacted on their relationships. Of the respondents in this group who answered the question, all but three responded “yes” when asked if they were optimistic that their states would one day rule for marriage equality. Of those who did not respond “yes”, only one replied “no”; the other two indicated this was not



applicable to them. Only three of the respondents in this group had any formal recognition of their relationship within their state such as a civil union or domestic partnership; eight responded that they did not and six replied that this was not applicable to them. Finally, all respondents revealed that they were at least slightly hopeful that one day marriage equality would be present across states: one chose “slightly hopeful”, two chose “hopeful”, and fourteen chose “very hopeful”.

**Table 4.3**  
**Responses of Participants in States with Rulings for Same-Sex Marriage Currently In Appeals**

Question 8: Level of activity in LGBTQ advocacy	1 (n=1), 2 (n=5), 3 (n=8), 4 (n=2), 5 (n=1) (Not at all active/Not very active/Somewhat active/Very active/Extremely active)
Question 10: Views of repeal	2 (n=1), 4 (n=1), 6 (n=6), 7 (n=9) (Negative/Neutral/Positive/Very positive)
Question 11: Views of DOMA	1 (n=13), 2 (n=1), 4 (n=2), 7 (n=1) (Very negative/Negative/Neutral/Very positive)
Question 12: Benefits received since repeal	N (n=15), Y (n=2)
Question 13: Difference benefits have made	3 (n=1), 5 (n=2), 6 (n=2), 7 (n=1), (Slightly unhelpful/Slightly helpful/Helpful/Very helpful) No answer (n=4), N/A (n=7)
Question 14: Helpfulness of repeal for accessing benefits	4 (n=1), 5 (n=1), 6 (n=8), 7 (n=7) (Neither unhelpful or helpful/Slightly helpful/Helpful/Very helpful)
Question 15: Effects of laws	2 (n=2), 3 (n=3), 4 (n=1), 5 (n=3), 6 (n=3), 7 (n=5) (Very little/Slightly/Neutral/Somewhat/Moderately/Significantly)
Question 16: Effects of social opinion/approval	2 (n=2), 3 (n=2), 4 (n=1), 5 (n=4), 6 (n=5), 7 (n=3)  (Very little/Slightly/Neutral/Somewhat/Moderately/Significantly)
Question 19: Optimism for future state repeal	N (n=1), Y (n=14), N/A (n=2)
Question 21: Formal recognition of relationship	N (n=8), Y (n=3), N/A (n=6)
Question 24: Hopefulness for national marriage equality	5 (n=1), 6 (n=2), 7 (n=14) (Slightly hopeful/Hopeful/Very hopeful)

### **Participants in States with Legal Same-Sex Marriage**

Participants living in this group of states had had their marriages recognized by their states prior to the DOMA repeal; however, these marriages were being federally recognized for the first time. These participants also tended to live in more socially progressive areas, in which their relationships were more supported than those of other groups and were not seen as “a big deal”, as an Oregon respondent put it. As with the other groups of respondents, this group had share characteristics distinctive to the group and their own unique experiences to share.

**Qualitative responses.** Respondents in states with legal same-sex marriage gave answers reflecting a higher level of relationship freedoms and choices than the other groups. More respondents in this group were married than in the other groups; of the seven respondents who indicated they were legally married, four were in this group. Further, this group was the only one in which a participant indicated an independent choice not to get married, rather than not getting married due to financial or legal barriers or not feeling ready to get married. Additionally, respondents in this group discussed “moving forward” and the next steps following the repeal more than the other groups, such as the Oregon respondent discussed above who indicated the importance of support and funding for issues such as homelessness, access to healthcare, and violence toward sexual minorities, and the precedence given to “this marriage crap”. Finally, respondents in this group of states indicated higher levels of social support for their relationships and sexual orientations/identities, perhaps reflecting the general social opinion of these locales. For example, one respondent stated that “We live in a pretty liberal area so us being a couple is not surprising nor a big deal.”

**Quantitative responses.** Participants in this group were more active in LGBTQ advocacy efforts than those living in states with constitutional bans on same-sex marriage, but less active than those living in states currently undergoing legal transition related to same-sex marriage (see Fig. 4.1). Of the six respondents in this group, one indicated they were “not at all active”, two indicated they were “not very active”, and three indicated they were “somewhat active”. This group rated their views of the Section Three repeal highly, similar to other groups; four respondents chose “very positive”, one chose “positive”, and one chose “slightly positive” to describe their views of the repeal. All respondents in this category responded that their views of DOMA were “very negative”. Only two of the six respondents in this group had received benefits following the repeal, with one replying that these benefits had been “slightly helpful”, and one that they were “neither helpful nor unhelpful”. This group rated the benefits received following the repeal as less helpful than the other groups (see Fig. 4.3); it is surmised that this may be due to the relatively high level of local support these respondents experienced prior to the repeal. All respondents in this category rated the helpfulness of the repeal in assisting same-sex couples in accessing benefits as at least slightly helpful, with one selecting “slightly helpful”, two selecting “helpful”, and three selecting “very helpful”. For the effects national and state laws had on their relationships, three respondents in this category designated that these laws impacted their relationships “somewhat” (three respondents) or “moderately” (three respondents). They varied in their evaluations of the effects of social opinion and approval, rating them as having “neutral” (two respondents), “somewhat” (two respondents), “moderately” (one respondent), and “significantly” (one respondent) impacted their relationships. Of the respondents in this group who answered

the question, four of six replied that they had chosen to get married, and only one had any kind of legal recognition prior to marriage. Finally, most respondents in this group indicated that they were hopeful for future national marriage equality: one chose “neutral”, one chose “hopeful”, and four chose “very hopeful” to describe their hopes for future national equality.

**Table 4.4**  
**Responses of Participants in States With Legal Same-Sex Marriage**

Question 8: Level of activity in LGBTQ advocacy	1 (n=1), 2 (n=2), 3 (n=3) (Not at all/Not very/Somewhat active)
Question 10: Views of repeal	5 (n=1), 6 (n=1), 7 (n=4) (Slightly positive/positive/very positive)
Question 11: Views of DOMA	1 (n=6) (Very negative)
Question 12: Benefits received since repeal	N (n=4), Y (n=2)
Question 13: Difference benefits have made	4 (n=1), 5 (n=1), N/A (n=4) (Neither helpful nor unhelpful/Slightly helpful)
Question 14: Helpfulness of repeal for accessing benefits	5 (n=1), 6 (n=2), 7 (n=3) (Slightly helpful/Helpful/Very helpful)
Question 15: Effects of laws	5 (n=3), 6 (n=3) (Somewhat/Moderately)
Question 16: Effects of social opinion/approval	4 (n=2), 5 (n=2), 6 (n=1), 7 (n=1) (Neutral/Somewhat/Moderately/Significantly)
Question 19: Optimism for future state repeal	N (n=2), Y (n=6)
Question 21: Formal recognition of relationship	N (n=4), N/A (n=1), Y (n=1)
Question 24: Hopefulness for national marriage equality	4 (n=1), 6 (n=1), 7 (n=4) (Neutral/Hopeful/Very hopeful)

**Figure 4.1**  
**Engagement in LGBTQ Rights Advocacy**

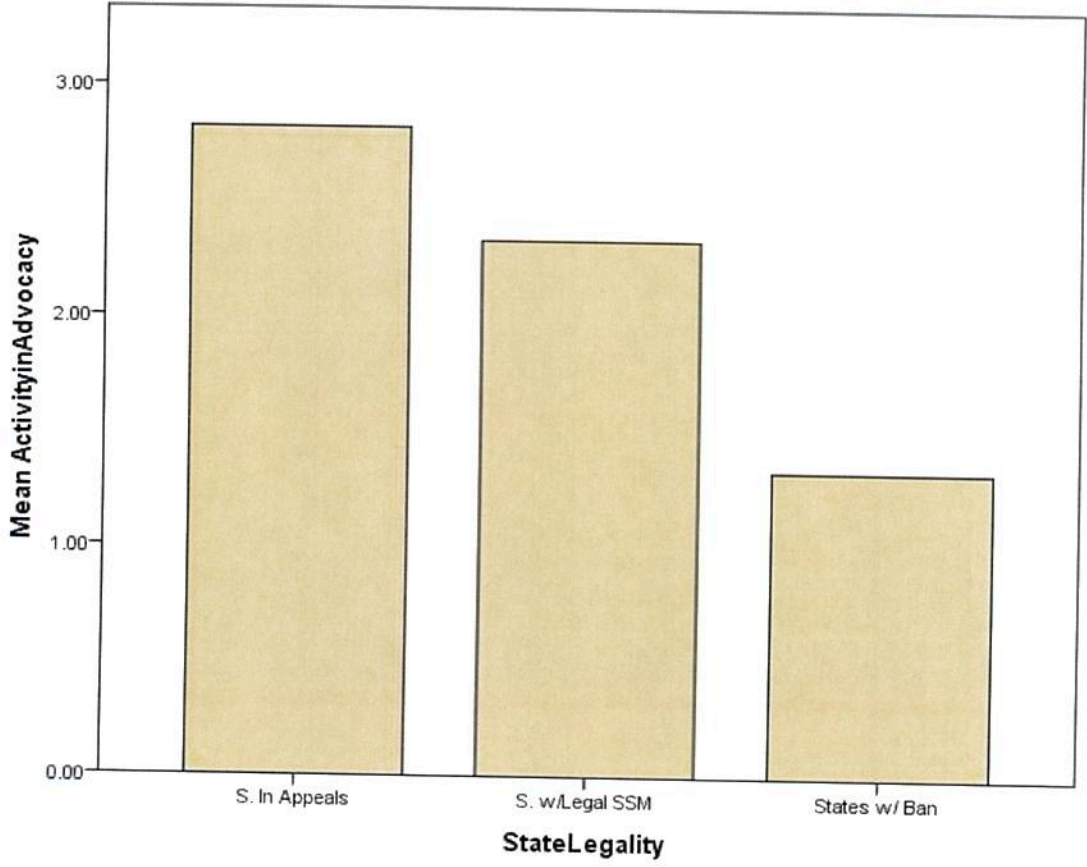


Fig. 4.1. Average level of activity in LGBTQ rights organizations in respondents in respondents from each group of states.

Figure 4.2

Views of DOMA Repeal

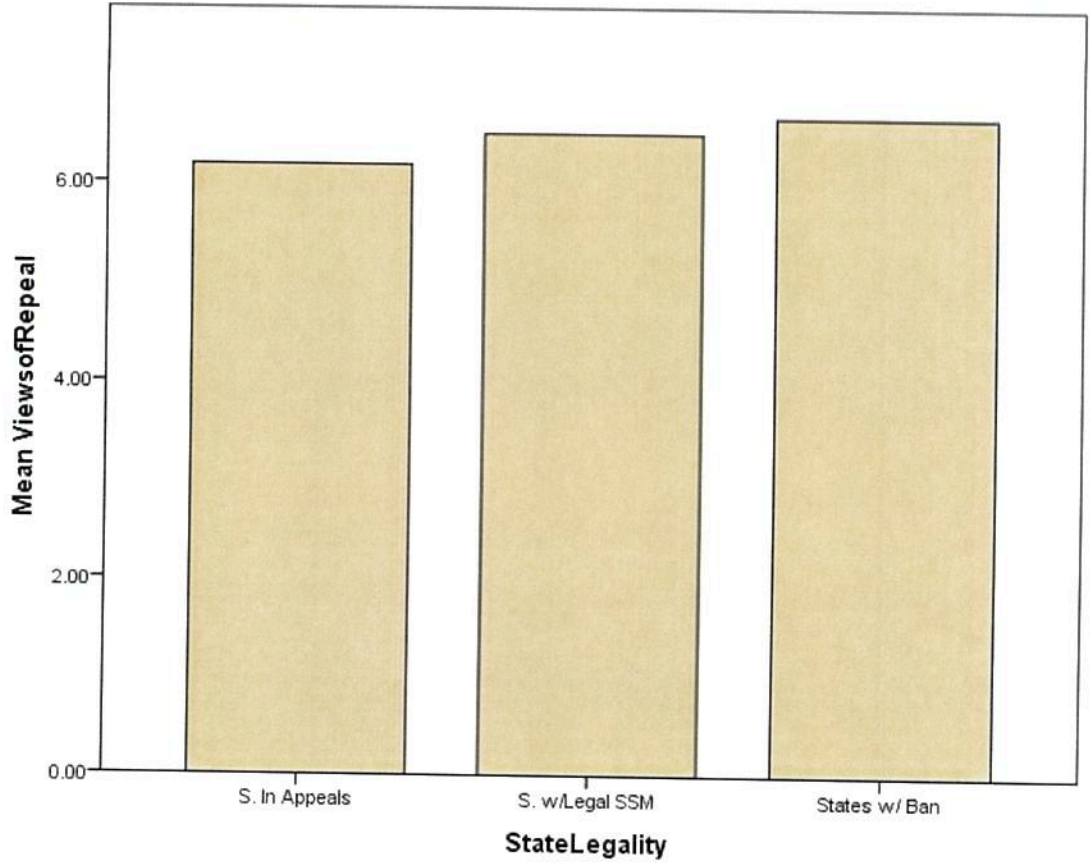


Fig. 4.2. Average views of DOMA's Section Three repeal by respondents in each group of states.

Figure 4.3

Benefits Received Following Repeal

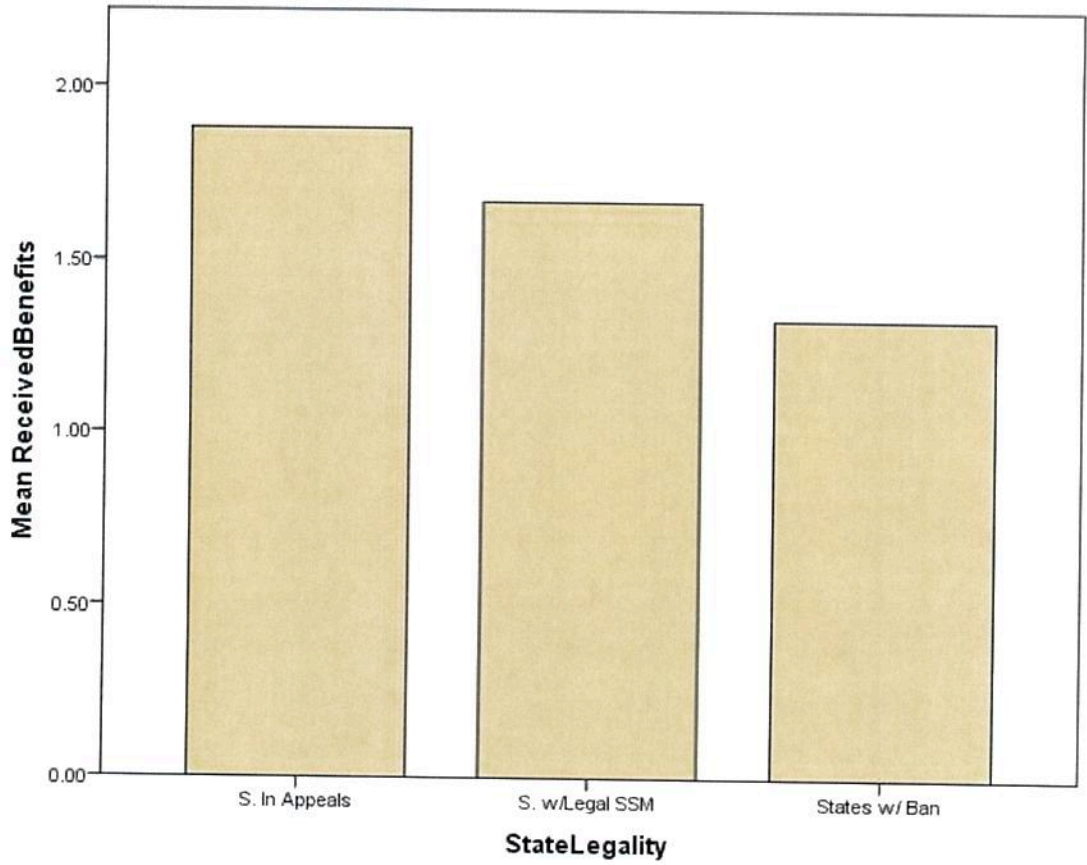


Fig. 4.3. Percentage of respondents from each state who have received benefits following the repeal in each group of states.



-Figure 4.4

**Impacts of Benefits Received Following Repeal**

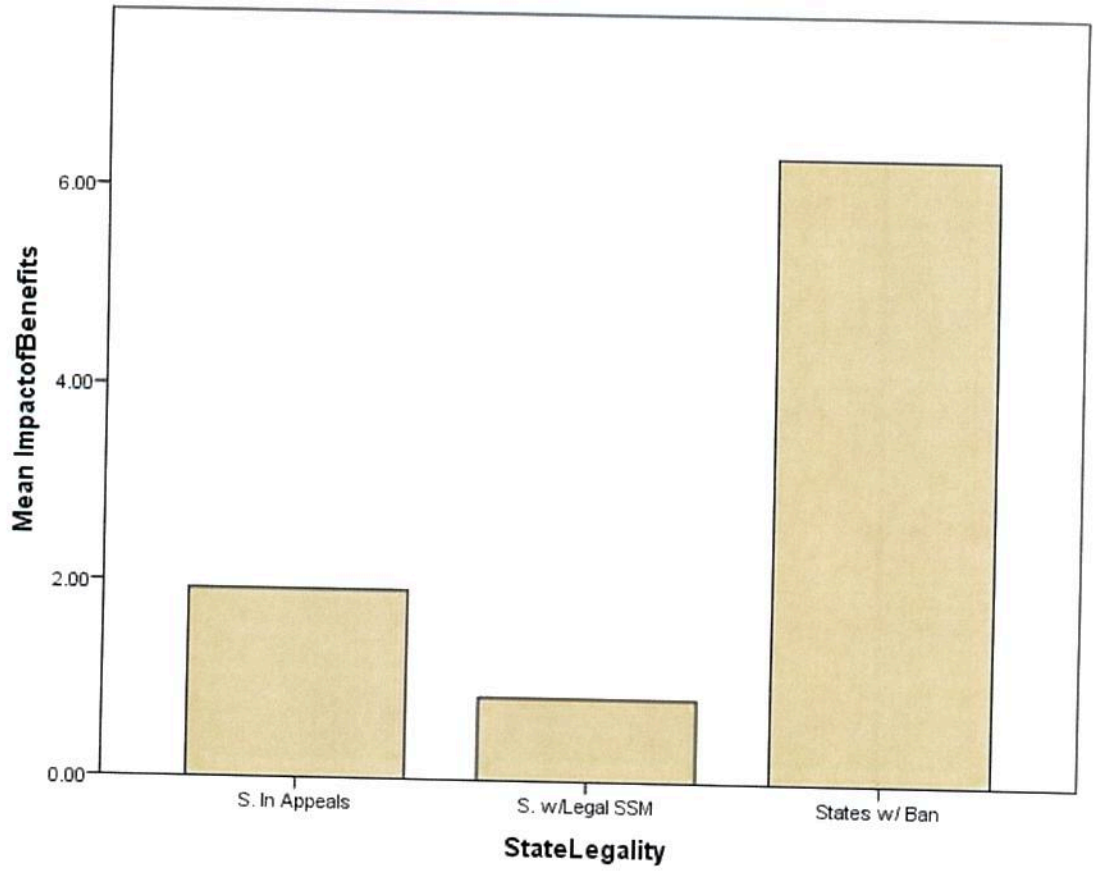


Fig. 4.4. Average perceived impacts of benefits on respondents in each group of states.

Figure 4.5

Expected Helpfulness of Repeal in Accessing Benefits

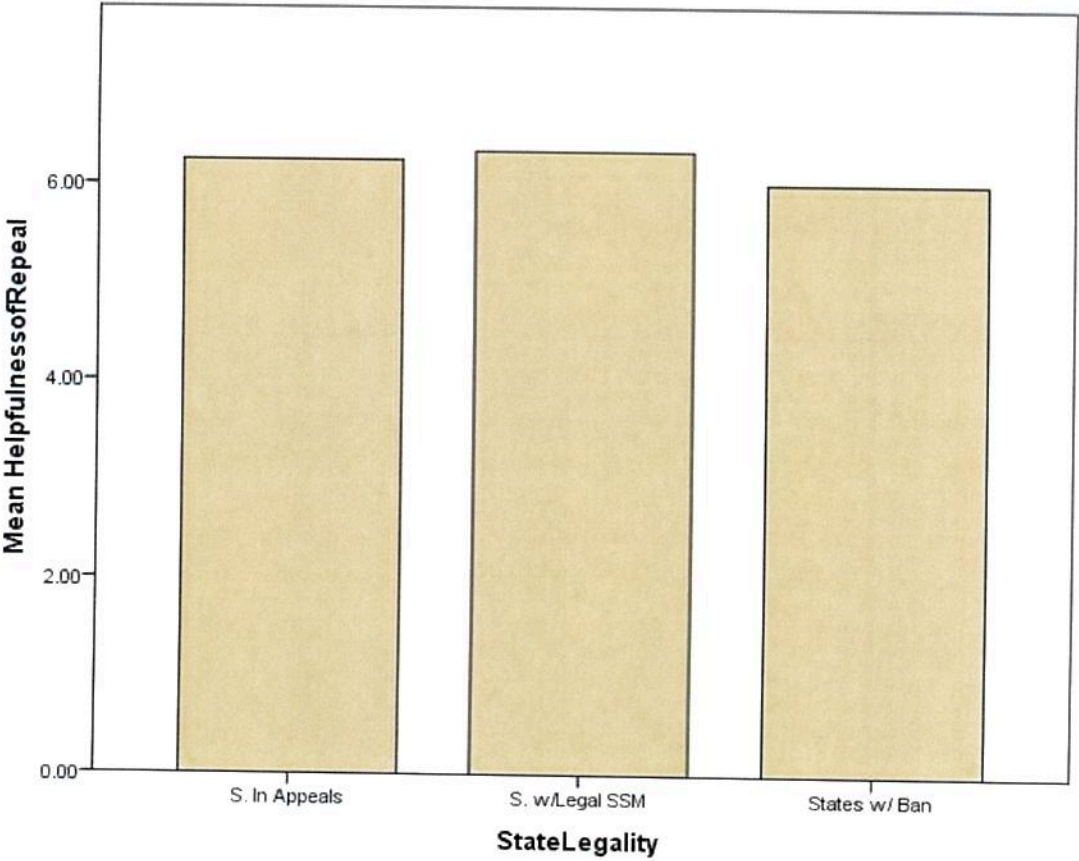


Fig. 4.5. Average expectations for helpfulness of the Section Three repeal in respondents in each group of states.

Figure 4.6

Impact of Laws on Couple Relationship

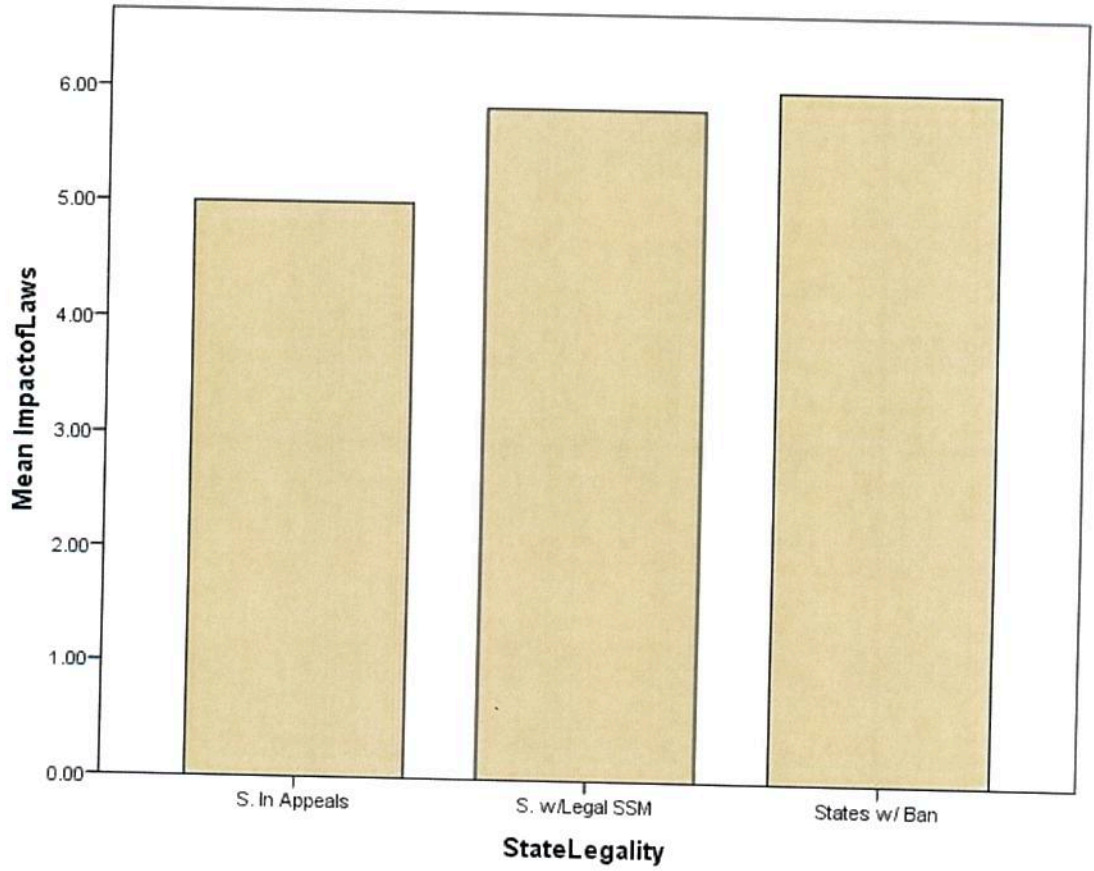


Fig. 4.6. Average perceived impacts of local and national laws on relationships by respondents in each group of states.

Figure 4.7

Impact of Social and Public Approval on Couple Relationship

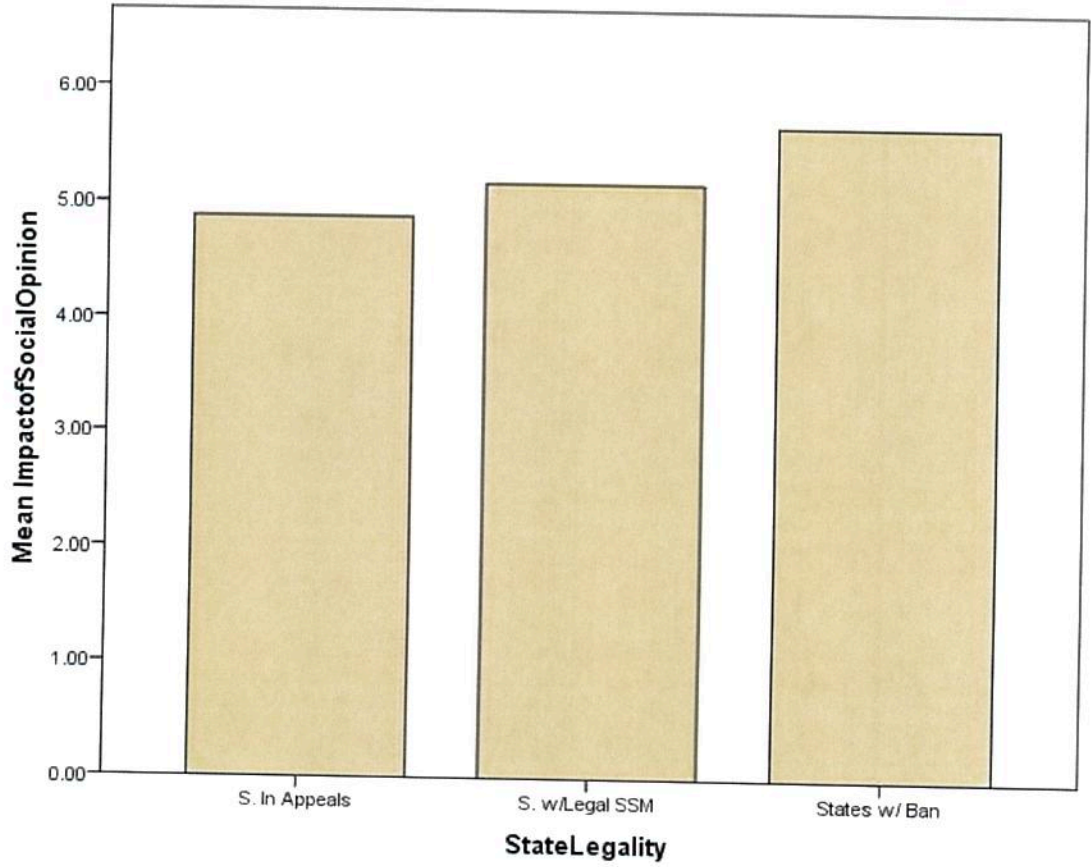


Fig. 4.7. Average perceived impacts of social and public opinions and approval by respondents in each group of states.

**Figure 4.8**  
**Hopefulness for National Marriage Equality**

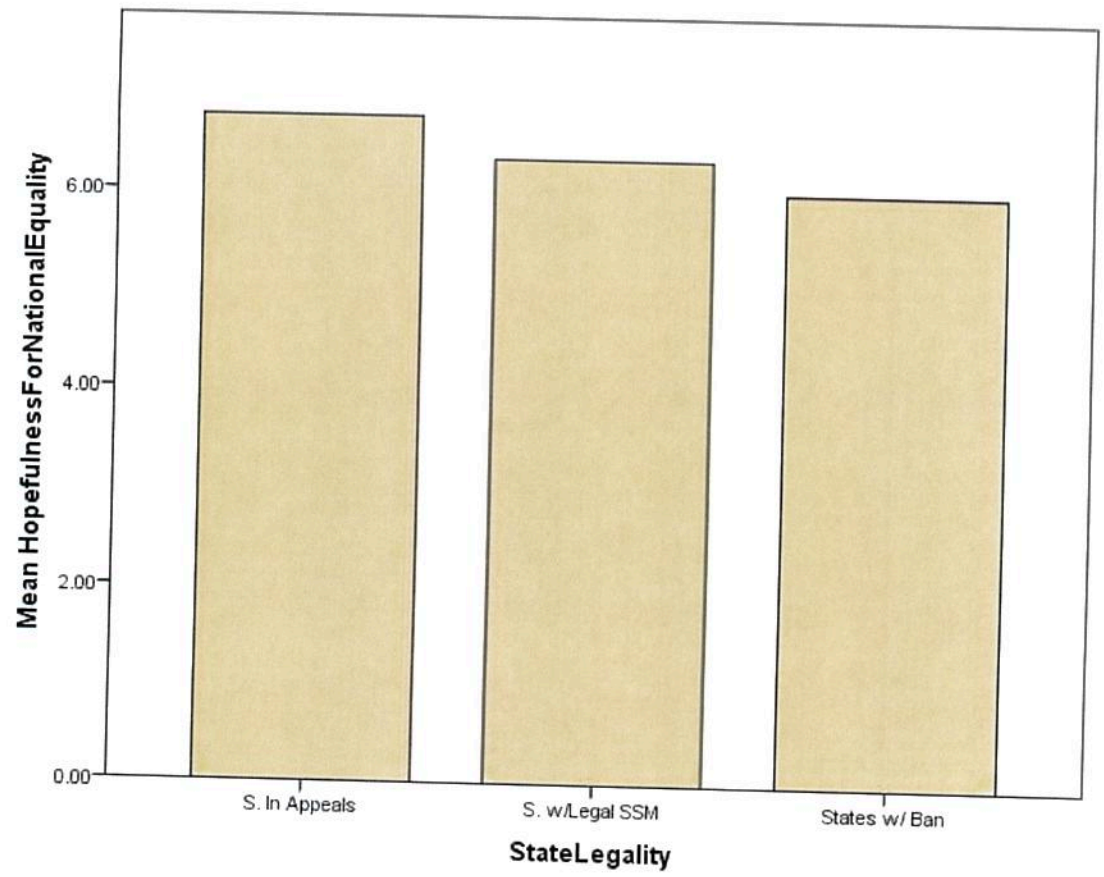


Fig. 4.8. Average hopefulness for national marriage equality in respondents in each group of states.

**Figure 4.9**  
**Group Means for Quantitative Questions**

State Legality	How active are you in LGBTQ rights advocacy (e.g. Human Rights Campaign, PFLAG, Gay-Straight Alliances, local LGBTQ rights organizations)?	On a scale of one (1) to seven (7), how would you rate your views of the Section Three repeal?	On a scale of one (1) to seven (7), how would you rate your views of DOMA?	If you have personally received any benefits or protections following the Section Three repeal, how much of a difference, if any, do you feel this has had for your life and/or relationship?	On a scale of one (1) to seven (7), how helpful do you expect the repeal of Section Three of DOMA will be overall for LGBTQ couples in accessing the benefits and privileges already available to heterosexual couples?	On a scale of one (1) to seven (7), how much do you feel local and national laws affect the quality of your relationship with your partner?	On a scale of one (1) to seven (7), how much do you feel social and public opinions and approval or lack of approval affect the quality of your relationship with your partner?	Following the Section Three repeal, how hopeful are you that marriage equality will eventually become law on a national level?	Have you personally received any benefits or protections following the Section Three repeal (e.g. partner health benefits through insurance, increased rights regarding shared finances and joint legal decisions, etc.)? If so, which benefits?
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States with Ban (1.00)	Mean N Std. Devia tion	1.33 3 .577	6.67 3 .577	5.00 3 3.464	6.33 3 .577	6.00 3 1.000	6.00 3 1.000	5.67 3 .577	6.00 3 1.000	1.3333 3 .57735
States with Legal Appeals (2.00)	Mean N Std. Devia tion	2.82 17 .951	6.18 17 1.334	1.76 17 1.678	1.92 13 3.402	6.24 17 .831	5.00 17 1.837	4.88 17 1.728	6.76 17 .562	1.8824 17 .33211
States with Legal Same-Sex Marriage (3.00)	Mean N Std. Devia tion	2.33 6 .816	6.50 6 .837	1.00 6 .000	.83 6 2.858	6.33 6 .816	5.83 6 .753	5.17 6 1.169	6.33 6 1.211	1.6667 6 .51640
Total	Mean N Std. Devia tion	2.54 26 .989	6.31 26 1.158	1.96 26 2.029	2.23 22 3.408	6.23 26 .815	5.31 26 1.594	5.04 26 1.509	6.58 26 .809	1.7692 26 .42967

### Summary

The results of this study helped me to illuminate the voices and experiences of same-sex couples living across the country in the wake of the repeal of the Defense of Marriage Act. The respondents represented a wide range of ages, genders, sexual orientations, ethnic backgrounds, and geographic locations. Thus, though small, the sample provided a diverse participant base, and represented many states and sociopolitical contexts.

Through the responses to the survey questions, I was able to identify similarities across respondents in experiences following the repeal. Respondents discussed their decisions regarding marriage, as well as the lack of legal means to marriage for several respondents. They also discussed the level of legal benefits they received following the repeal, as well as the social support they experienced from family, friends, and community members; support from both of these venues varied widely. Respondents also discussed the levels of impact these legal and social supports had on them personally and on their couple relationships. Finally, respondents gave their evaluations of the DOMA repeal itself, as well as their resulting affective experiences to the repeal.

In addition to the qualitative data providing insight into the phenomenon of same-sex couples' experiences of the DOMA repeal, this study helped me to assess whether there were any differences between participants based on states and their respective sociopolitical contexts. Responses indicated that, while small, there are important differences between states in residents' experiences of the repeal and related phenomena such as legal changes and social support. The results of both levels of analysis may



provide important information for therapists and LGBTQ advocates alike, and will be discussed in more detail in the following chapter.

The combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches to data analysis allowed me to gain multiple levels of information about the experiences of same-sex couples following the DOMA repeal, which complemented and supported one another, providing a more complete and multifaceted picture of the experience for participants. These results contributed to an understanding of the unique thoughts, feelings, and experiences of same-sex couples following a significant legal shift in the rights and recognitions afforded to their couple relationships. Chapter 5 will further discuss these findings as well as their implications for clinical practice, research, and LGBTQ advocacy.

## CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION

### Introduction

This study explored the lived experiences of same-sex couples following the repeal of Section Three of the Defense of Marriage Act. The resulting narratives and responses created a picture of the essence of this phenomenon for those most affected by DOMA and its repeal. An overall portrait of the experience for the study's participants, as well as differences in experience between states, were revealed, providing a depiction of the overall experience of the repeal for participants and affording implications for clinicians, researchers, and advocates.

Situated within the scholarly literature and the current sociopolitical context of the country and the states in which participants reside, this study was conducted with the following specific areas of focus:

1. How has the repeal of DOMA's Section Three affected the couple and family relationships of same-sex couples?
2. How do the experiences of same-sex couples living in states that validate their marriages differ from the experiences of same-sex couples living in states which do not validate their marriages?
3. What are the implications for gay and lesbian affirmative therapy that arise from this study?

The answers to these questions, as provided by the study participants, guide the organization of this chapter. I will also discuss further implications, next steps, and limitations of the study, and conclude with personal reflections.

## Discussion of Results

### Review of Overall Shared Experiences

In Chapter Four, I presented the narrative produced by survey participants. Through qualitative phenomenological analysis of participants' responses, four emergent themes developed: 1) Marry or Not?; 2) Support or Not?; 3) Impact or Not?; and 4) Progress or Not? These themes collectively constructed the overall lived experience of participants following the Section Three repeal, and provided important insight for professionals working with same-sex couples.

**Marry or not?** The emergent theme Marry or Not revealed that many participants were actively making their own decisions as to whether or not they wanted to get married. For some, they had already married in their own state; others had gotten married in other states as the option was not available in their own state. Others had gotten engaged following the repeal and their changed legal options. The accompanying comments indicated that this was the next logical step for their relationships, highlighting the similar relationship progression and functionality in same-sex and opposite-sex couples, and connecting to previous research findings (Gottman et al., 2003a; 2003b; Julien et al., 2003; Kurdek, 1998; 2004; 2006; 2008; Means-Christensen et al., 2003). Many of these couples also reported being together for several years before getting married, indicating a high level of commitment and relationship strength despite the recent unavailability of legal marriage. The statements of several participants expressing regret or sadness that they had to travel to another state to get married suggests that state bans on same-sex marriage may have a negative impact on the well-being of the LGBTQ community.

Other respondents indicated that they were still deciding whether or not they wanted to get married. Respondents in this category discussed the complications created by medical conditions in regards to marriage. In particular, AIDS was cited as adding obstacles to these decisions for some respondent couples, backing the research citing the difficulties disproportionately faced by gay and bisexual men related to HIV/AIDS, and the need to continue to improve HIV/AIDS-related medical care and legislation (Gates & Kelly, 2013).

Finally, some respondents replied that they had decided not to get married. For some, this was simply because that they were not ready at the time. These respondents generally reported their relationships were relatively new, or they were personally not ready to get married. Again, these sentiments were not unlike situations often cited by heterosexual couples, once more connecting to the research highlighting the similarities between same- and opposite-sex couples (Gottman et al., 2003a; 2003b; Julien et al., 2003; Kurdek, 1998; 2004; 2006; 2008; Means-Christensen, Snyder, & Negy, 2003). Others replied that they did not believe in marriage as an institution, backing up research highlighting the liberationist views regarding the potential negatives of same-sex couples entering into the traditional institution of marriage (Ettlebrick, 1997; Goldberg, 2009; Rimmerman, 2008).

Other respondents indicated that they had gotten alternative forms of relationship recognition. Some had gotten legal forms of recognition, such as civil unions or domestic partnerships, in order to access some of the benefits and protections provided by legal marriage; others had chosen religious recognitions to formalize their commitment. However, only a few participants (8 out of 26) had chosen alternative forms of

recognition, and many of these couples had gotten legally married once the option was extended to them. Additionally, only one participant out of 26 mentioned favorable views of alternative legal recognitions, and many participants reported that they preferred legal marriage to alternatives and were willing to wait for the ability to marry legally. These findings connect to the existing literature which cites the inequality of marriage and other recognitions, compares relegation of same-sex couples to alternative relationship recognitions to separate but equal laws, and highlight the importance of extending legal marriage to all (Steingass, 2012; Thomas, 2005; Woodford, 2010).

**Support or not?** The emergent theme Support or Not explored participants' experiences of support from the federal government and other legal systems, as well as from family, friends, and community members. Participants' reported levels of support varied widely, from almost complete legal and social support to almost no legal or social support. In general, the highest levels of support were reported from participants living in states with legal same-sex marriage and/or progressive social culture. Conversely, the lowest reported levels of support came from participants living in states with constitutional bans on same-sex marriage and/or conservative and traditional culture.

While most respondents reported experiencing social support, only a few reported having any type of legal support. Only 6 of the 26 respondents in this study reported having any legal benefits following the repeal, revealing an important area for progress in the road to marriage equality. While the participants who had received benefits reported that they were helpful in their lives and relationships, others expressed an inability to access these benefits due to state laws, and a few participants even reported further discrimination following the repeal. This discrepancy both backs up the research

describing the variance of legal support for same-sex couples between states (Barton, 2010; Killian, 2010; Maril, 2014; Natale & Miller-Cribbs, 2012), and provides an important area for attention for advocates and therapists working to help the LGBTQ community, which will be discussed in more detail below.

Reports of social support from participants were much more common and more evenly distributed across state groups. However, participants in states with constitutional bans against same-sex marriage again reported the lowest levels of social support, and participants in states with legal same-sex marriage generally reported the most social support. This is perhaps unsurprising as state laws regarding same-sex marriage are generally decided and maintained through vote (Burnett & Salka, 2009; Chonody et al., 2012; Knauer, 2012), but reveals an important consideration for therapists and advocates alike, as uncertainty regarding the legal status of their relationships can be a significant source of minority stress for same-sex couples (Knauer, 2012). Further, many participants reported mixed social support and discrimination, and indicated that they made efforts to avoid those who discriminated against them and their relationships, and surround themselves by people who were caring and supportive, indicating the strong coping skills and self-protection of the LGBTQ community discussed in the literature (Bordoloi et al., 2013; Gates & Kelly, 2013, Haas et al., 2010; Mathy & Lehmann, 2004).

**Impact or not?** The emergent theme Impact or Not revealed the effects, or lack thereof, participants felt the repeal had had on them and their relationships. Respondents indicated that these impacts were mainly positive; however, some respondents felt they'd experienced negative effects following the repeal. Responses from family and friends, as well as events related to the repeal, were positively correlated with impacts on

participants. For example, participants who experienced positive and supporting reactions from significant others and increased recognition and benefits following the repeal reported being positively impacted by the repeal; whereas participants who experienced increased discrimination from opponents of marriage equality and pressure to marry following the repeal reported more negative impacts. Again, this supports previous research discussing the vulnerability of LGBTQ people to their geographic locations and corresponding sociopolitical climates (Barton, 2010; Killian, 2010; Knauer, 2010; Lyness, 2012; Natale & Miller-Cribbs, 2012).

The majority of reported impacts were on the couple relationships of participants. Many participants discussed the positive, congratulatory, and supportive responses of their families, friends, and communities following the repeal. They often reported that these responses helped strengthen and solidify their couple relationships, and the legal support provided by the repeal had provided similar benefits to their relationships. Many respondents also reported feeling safer and more confident following the repeal and responses of others. The frequency and strength of these responses suggests the positive effects that national marriage equality might have on the relationships of LGBTQ couples across states and sociopolitical contexts, and the LGBTQ community overall. Further, this reported increased sense of well-being highlights an additional justification for those working with the LGBTQ community to promote national marriage equality.

The reported impacts from the repeal on respondents' relationships were overwhelmingly positive; however, a few participants indicated that the repeal had put more pressure on them to get married. In turn, these participants reported that the pressure had increased the stress in their relationships. This pressure, as well as increased

relationship stress, connects to the literature discussing the potential for marriage equality for same-sex couples leading to increased pressure to get married, similar to the pressure on straight women (Yep et al., 2003). Additionally, some respondents indicated that getting married would have negative financial impacts on them due to medical costs and tax inequalities. These responses again support the literature discussing the HIV/AIDS-related difficulties disproportionately affecting gay and bisexual men, and the need to continue to improve related medical care and legislation (Gates & Kelly, 2013). Additionally, this finding indicates a need for additional reform to medical and tax laws before true marriage equality may be reached.

While most of the reported effects were on participants' relationships, a few participants indicated that the impacts they'd experienced were more impactful on them individually. In general, those who felt the impacts had been on them personally were in shorter relationships than those who felt the impacts were on their relationships, with one respondent indicating themselves that this was the reason for the more individual impacts. Additionally, a few participants reported impacts on both their relationships and themselves as individuals, or a lack of impacts on either. The multiple impacts again support the research citing the vulnerability of same-sex couples to their sociopolitical contexts (Barton, 2010; Killian, 2010; Knauer, 2010; Lyness, 2012; Natale & Miller-Cribbs, 2012); conversely, lack of impacts may indicate the resiliency and self-sufficiency of the LGBTQ population widely cited in the literature (Bordoloi et al., 2013; Gates & Kelly, 2013, Mathy & Lehmann, 2004).

**Progress or not?** The emergent theme Progress or Not elicited the overall thoughts and feelings participants reported experiencing in response to the repeal. Again,



these were overwhelmingly positive and indicate the impacts that progress in marriage equality may have for the LGBTQ population overall. Participants described the repeal as a major, important, and historic event which had made a large stride forward on the path to marriage equality and LGBTQ rights. Many participants also made a moral or ethical connection to the repeal, indicating that they felt it was the right decision for the country to make. Several participants indicated that the repeal was long overdue. Despite acknowledging the gravity and importance of the repeal, as well as the progress it had made for marriage equality, participants also stressed the work left to be done to achieve true equal rights for same-sex couples. Some areas for remaining improvement mentioned were similar repeals on state bans against same-sex marriage; public education and shifts in public opinion; changes in related laws, including tax, employment, and medical laws; and efforts and resources being shifted from marriage equality efforts to issues such as homelessness, violence against sexual minorities, and prejudice in support systems.

Resulting affective experiences to the repeal were overall very positive. Happiness over the ruling and hopefulness for further legal and social progress were commonly reported, as well as feelings of validation and acceptance. Across states, respondents described intense relief and celebration following the repeal, as well as feeling more confident, secure, and open regarding their sexuality and relationships. These positive emotional reactions suggest the positive impacts further affirmative legislation and social shifts may have for same-sex couples and the LGBTQ community overall.

### **Comparisons of Participant Experiences Between States**

Through Opinio and SPSS analysis, further detail was elicited, adding important information about the differences in experience between participants in different states. These differences answer the second research question and provide additional information to the overall understanding about participants' experiences following the repeal. Important differences were identified between groups, as well as some overall similarities.

Respondents in states with same-sex constitutional bans showed high resiliency and ways of thriving despite having the lowest levels of legal and social support. Respondents in states with some legal protections for same-sex couples but not full marriage equality also exhibited these characteristics. One way respondents in these groups fought back against these inequalities was to get married in other states, despite the lack of options for marriage in their own states, or recognition of the marriages by these states. These respondents also reported finding comfort in the legal benefits and increased social support that were extended to them following the repeal. These findings again indicate strong resiliency, resourcefulness, and optimism in same-sex couples and the LGBTQ community, despite unequal legal standing and discrimination. They also align with existing research (Bordoloi et al., 2013; Gates & Kelly, 2013, Mathy & Lehmann, 2004), and indicate important strengths which may be useful in therapy with this population.

There were also differences in levels of reported activity in LGBTQ rights advocacy and organizations. Respondents in states with constitutional bans were the least active in this area, followed by respondents from states with legal same-sex marriage, and

respondents from states with current appeals in the courts were the most active. While differences between groups on this measure were slight, the data suggest the highest levels of activity in states currently in legal flux regarding marriage equality. The quantitative data were supplemented by qualitative responses from respondents in these states, which indicated both a high level of political acumen and activity related to marriage equality and related issues. It may be that same-sex couples in these areas feel the most need for action, or see more potential for gains, than those in states with bans not being challenged or with marriage equality already in place. While this hypothesis needs further research to substantiate it, this finding suggests the importance of hope and perceived possibility for motivation for involvement in LGBTQ advocacy.

In regards to vulnerability to outside factors, participants in states with constitutional bans on same-sex marriage reported the highest levels of impact on their relationships from social and public opinion and approval, followed by respondents in states with legal same-sex marriage. Respondents in states with rulings in appeals had the lowest group mean on this dimension. Further research needs to be done to confirm this finding, but these results suggest that a lack of legal backing with no indication of change in the immediate future may leave same-sex couples more vulnerable to social opinion and approval. Conversely, when same-sex couples have comparable legal standing to heterosexual couples, they may feel slightly more comfortable with their relationship and are thus less vulnerable to social and public opinion.

Similarly, in regards to the levels of perceived impact that local and national laws had on their relationships, participants in states with bans on same-sex marriage felt that laws had more of an impact on their relationships than those in other states, followed by

participants in states with legal same-sex marriage, and participants from states with rulings in appeals indicating the least impacts on themselves and their relationships from legal standing. While further research needs to be conducted to validate these findings, they suggest that federal and state laws do have an impact, for better or worse, on same-sex couples and their relationships. This finding is backed up by the statement by a North Carolina resident from earlier, who wrote that “I do think it would be nice to know the law is on my side. It would give me a bit of confidence I sometimes lack now.” As with the responses in regards to the impact of social and public opinions and approval, the lower means of respondents from states with rulings in appeals may indicate that in transitional periods, where both legal and social climates are changing, both of these factors become less impactful to the relationships of same-sex couples and the LGBTQ community in general. However, more research needs to be undertaken to further understand this correlation.

As discussed above, only six of twenty-six participants reported receiving any type of benefits following the Section Three repeal. This was an unexpected pattern which reveals an important area for further work toward marriage equality. However, there were important distinctions between participants in different groups in their ratings of the helpfulness of these benefits. Participants in states with bans on same-sex marriage indicated that the difference these benefits made in their lives was significantly helpful. Conversely, participants in states with rulings in appeals rated the difference made by these benefits as much less helpful, and participants in states with legal same-sex marriage rated the differences made as least helpful. More studies are needed to explore the reasons participants in the latter two groups found these benefits to be largely

ineffective in making a difference for themselves and their relationships; however, these results suggest that in states with state constitutional bans on same-sex marriage, the receipt of federal benefits makes a beneficial difference for the lives and relationships of same-sex couples.

On other dimensions, responses were similar across state groups, indicating similarities for same-sex couples regardless of geographic location and unified experiences of the LGBTQ community as a whole related to the repeal. Across groups, participants in states with bans on same-sex marriage, rulings in appeals, and legal same-sex marriage reported strongly positive views of the Section Three repeal.

Additionally, respondents across groups had strong negative views of the Defense of Marriage Act. While the group mean for participants in states with same-sex marriage bans was 5.00, or “slightly positive” for views of the Defense of Marriage Act, this result may be skewed as two-thirds of the respondents in this group chose “very positive” as their response, and may have been the result of misreading the question. However, the remaining respondent in this group chose “very negative” in response to this question, which was in line for the means of the two other groups. These results suggest that, with a potential discrepancy in regards to views of DOMA, members of same-sex couples across the country view DOMA as largely negative, and the Section Three repeal as largely positive.

Furthermore, participants across state lines showed high levels of optimism for their anticipated effects of the repeal. Participants from states with bans on same-sex marriage, states with rulings in appeals, and states with same-sex marriage rated their anticipations of the repeal’s helpfulness for same-sex couples to access the benefits and

protections of marriage highly, indicating that most participants believe the repeal will be helpful for same-sex couples attempting to access these benefits, regardless of the states they reside in. Despite similar responses across state groups, it is interesting to note that anticipated helpfulness is lowest in states with constitutional bans on same-sex marriage and highest in states with legal same-sex marriage. While this difference is slight, it may support the findings discussed earlier which indicate the possible mediating effect that state bans can have on federal gains for same-sex couples.

Finally, respondents across states indicated that they had high hopes that one day marriage equality will be legally upheld on a national level. Responses from states with bans on same-sex marriage, rulings in appeals, and legal same-sex marriage all fell between “hopeful” and “very hopeful” for national marriage equality. This echoes the numerous open-ended responses discussing hope as a response to the repeal, and suggests an important common experience of same-sex couples following the Section Three repeal.

### **Implications of Study**

Several implications for affirmative therapeutic practice and research with same-sex couples can be derived from this study. The emergent themes of the qualitative analysis answer the question posed by the first area of focus for the study, regarding how the repeal of DOMA’s Section Three affected the couple and family relationships of same-sex couples. Results of the quantitative analysis answer the question posed by the second area of focus, concerning how the experiences of same-sex couples living in states that validate their marriages differ from the experiences of same-sex couples living in states which do not validate their marriages. The following section answers the question

behind third and final area of focus, regarding the implications for gay and lesbian affirmative therapy that arise from this study. Implications for further research and advocacy will also be discussed. Many of these recommendations have relevance to more than one of these related, often overlapping contexts in which many therapists work.

### **Implications for Therapeutic Practice**

Several implications for clinical work with same-sex couples arise from the results of this study. First, the responses of participants indicate that same-sex couples are influenced by the larger social and legal climates in which they live. Accordingly, therapists practicing in states which have a ban on same sex marriage in place, as well as those in states currently in legal and social transition, should assess the effects that the legal standing of clients' relationships may have on them, both individually and relationally. Participants' statements reflect that having their ability to make highly important, personal, and emotional decisions, such as the decision to marry, effectively decided by others and debated publically has far-reaching and powerful impacts on both individual and couple well-being. Further, while same-sex couples living in states with legal same-sex marriage may less frequently face experiences of legal and social discrimination, they are still residing in a national context in which discrimination against same-sex couples and the LGBTQ community occurs on a regular basis. Therefore, therapists working with same-sex couples and others from the LGBTQ community should assess for clients' experiences of these factors and the perceived impacts on clients' lives. It is also recommended that therapists familiarize themselves with both the legal standing and cultural climate in which they work, and be aware of resources for the

LGBTQ community in their area, including but not limited to LGBTQ organizations, legal support, faith communities, online resources, and support groups.

Furthermore, responses from participants in states undergoing legal change as bans on same-sex marriage underwent appeals indicate a level of parallelism between legal changes and relationship changes for same-sex couples. According to the participants in this study, shifts in legal and social contexts surrounding same-sex couples often lead to shifts within their couple relationships and individual functioning. These parallel processes between larger and smaller systems can have positive effects; as many participants indicated, support from families, friends, and communities can strengthen the couple relationships. However, these dual processes may also have negative impacts on same-sex couples, such as the heightened levels of frustration and relationship uncertainty as discussed by participants. It is therefore recommended for therapists working with same-sex couples to explore any parallel processes between the couple relationship system and larger sociopolitical system, as well as any positive or negative changes arising from this process. Conversely, a number of participants indicated that national and state laws, as well as social approval, do not impact them individually or their relationships. These participants indicate that they have learned to ignore any negativity and do not rely on others' approval for their own happiness. Thus, while it is important to assess for underlying stress related to these issues, therapists are advised to explore clients' individual experiences and avoid assuming that all same-sex couples and LGBTQ clients consider legal and social standing as pertinent to their individual and relational well-being.



Regardless of the experienced impacts of legal and social change, it is crucial to consider that sexual minorities are often impacted in many ways, including legally, financially, socially, and emotionally, by the legal and societal contexts in which they live. For many LGBTQ individuals, couples, and families, their standing within society is unstable and subject to change. Moreover, rulings in favor of same-sex marriage do not necessarily mean total acceptance and relief for LGBTQ people and can actually increase uncertainty and stress within the couple relationship, as well as increased animosity from opponents of same-sex marriage. As such, therapists should avoid assuming that legal progress is totally positive for same-sex couples and other LGBTQ clients, and instead are advised to engage in conversation with clients to assess their experiences of these events. Moreover, because of the potentially negative effects of political and social backlash and individual and relational stress resulting from recent changes, therapists are encouraged to assess for supports and areas of strength with clients. Support and strength may come from within the couple relationship or from significant others, such as family and friends. It is also important to note here that several participants indicated experiencing significant support from their faith communities, so therapists may find it helpful to explore clients' experiences of and access to support from faith communities, rather than assuming that this type of support is unavailable to clients. If necessary, the therapeutic relationship can serve as a space to strengthen and expand these supports.

Therapists may want to consider that legal rulings such as the DOMA repeal automatically lead to progress for same-sex couples, as the majority of respondents in this study indicated that they had not received any benefits following the Section Three repeal. Furthermore, while participants generally agreed that the repeal had been largely

positive and helpful for them, they also largely indicated that more needs to be done to attain true equality for same-sex couples. As such, it follows that therapists' assumptions that the repeal has resulted in immediate benefits for couples may be incorrect and preclude discussion of the actual results of the repeal for clients. It is therefore advised that therapists ask each client couple whether or not they have, in fact, received any benefits, how helpful these benefits have been for them, and if there are areas in which they feel progress must still be made.

Similarly, therapists may benefit from avoiding assumptions that all same-sex couples want to get married, as indicated by participants. Responses to this survey combine with previous research findings that some sexual minorities view marriage as a flawed and heteronormative institution and prefer to form relationships in their own ways. Further, for some couples, it is better not to get married for medical, financial, or other reasons, regardless of their views of their relationship and marriage as an institution. Also, some couples simply do not feel ready to marry, whether due to length of relationship duration, or due to this being a relatively new option for their relationships. For all of these situations, marriage is not necessarily the right choice for every couple, and feelings of being pressured by family, friends, and acquaintances, as well as assumptions that they should get married, can increase stress on couples. It is thus important for therapists to avoid perpetuating this process and adding to the pressure felt by these couples by examining their own assumptions regarding marriage, and exploring clients' ideas regarding their relationship progressions. Exploring the meanings and steps taken in clients' relationship recognitions, whether these are legal marriages, domestic partnerships, civil unions, religious unions, or other forms of recognition, can help to

honor and strengthen these bonds, as well as help therapists create an affirmative space for work with LGBTQ clients.

A final clinical implication of this study involves the largely positive response of participants to the Section Three repeal. Over 90 percent of participants in this study indicated that the repeal was a positive event in their lives and over half of participants rated the repeal as “very positive”. The repeal resulted in widespread happiness, hopefulness, celebration, and confidence among participants, and may have inspired similar feelings and experiences for other LGBTQ clients. Consequently, while it is important to assess clients’ feelings on the situation and avoid assuming the repeal was positive for all LGBTQ clients, therapists may find this to be a source of positivity, happiness, and strength with which to work with clients.

#### **Implications for Future Research**

The results of this study indicate that the repeal of the Defense of Marriage Act’s Section Three was an important, historic, and welcome step forward in the eyes of same-sex couples living in the United States. Future studies are needed, however, to substantiate and expand upon these findings. In particular, future qualitative interviews with members of the LGBTQ community would promote deeper and clearer understandings of this population’s experiences of the DOMA repeal. In turn, these understandings may help clinicians and advocates identify potential needs and areas of focus when working with LGBTQ clients. Other future research should include variance between perceptions of DOMA repeal based on demographics such as gender, sexual orientation (e.g., gay, lesbian, bisexual, queer), race, age, and relationship status (e.g. single, in a relationship but not married, married, civil union, domestic partnership).

Further, as research has shown the buffering effects of a positive LGBTQ identity against stigma and discrimination (Gates & Kelly, 2013; Mathy et al., 2004), it would be relevant to explore whether individuals with more positive LGBTQ identities and a tendency to reject social discrimination have different experiences of the repeal than those with more internalized homophobia and sensitivity to others' opinions and treatment. Understanding the differences in perceptions of the repeal between different demographic groups will help to add a more diverse and comprehensive understanding of the variety of experiences of sexual minorities following the ruling.

Other areas for potential future research relate to specific impacts of the repeal on sexual minorities. For example, it would be helpful to assess any impacts from reactionary hostile anti-same sex marriage campaigns, as discussed by Haas et al. (2010) on mental health and emotional well-being of LGBTQ individuals, couples, and families. More research is also needed to assess the changes and adding to the resisting literature in legal, financial, and emotional support for married same-sex couples following the repeal. This could be especially relevant in connection to the research by regarding the psychological benefits of marriage (Rimmerman, 2008; Wolfson, 2012), the protective effects of marriage against mental health problems (Mathy & Lehmann, 2004; Wolfson), and the emotional support and financial benefits provided by marriage (Falvey, 2011; Wolfson).

As these findings only describe the experiences of same-sex couples who were directly impacted by the repeal, further research is needed to explore the experiences of significant others of these couples following the repeal. Research involving parents, siblings, children, extended family members, and families of choice is important in

understanding the broader impact of the repeal on the significant others and support systems of sexual minorities. Based on the research by Patterson (2013), it seems particularly pertinent to assess the impacts of the repeal on children of same-sex couples, now that new possibilities for marriage exist for more of these couples. Further, research exploring the impacts of the repeal on children and teens who are developing an LGBTQ identity (as discussed by Rimmerman, 2008) may also contribute to the understanding of developing LGBTQ identity in contemporary society.

While the Defense of Marriage Act, the Section Three repeal, and this study specifically involved LGBTQ couples, many of whom are married or would like to get married, it is important to also consider the impact on the repeal on members of the LGBTQ community who are single or who have chosen alternative forms of relationship recognition. Some of the respondents in this study discussed the increased pressure to get married they had felt following the repeal, substantiating previous literature which reviewed the potential for this occurring (Yep et al., 2013). Additionally, literature has highlighted the potential for marriage equality to negatively impact the diverse relationship forms previously celebrated within the LGBTQ community (Yep). It thus seems crucial to assess the impacts of the repeal on single members of the LGBTQ community, those who have chosen other methods of acknowledging their relationships, and those who have chosen not to engage in any formal recognition of their relationships, in order to gain a more complete and detailed understanding of all members of the LGBTQ community.

### **Implications for LGBTQ Advocacy**

Many of the implications for therapy with same-sex couples, as discussed, also apply to advocacy work. A primary finding of this study is that same-sex couples are impacted by the social and legal contexts in which they live, and inequalities and discrimination do have impacts on both individual and relationship functioning. Furthermore, legal and social shifts, even those that are positive, can add to these effects, particularly if the change processes are accompanied by public campaigns against same-sex marriage and the LGBTQ community involve contentious legal and social debates, or result in frequently shifting, contradictory legal rulings.

Something to consider in conjunction with participants' reported sensitivity to political and social climates are the findings in the literature and the results of this study indicating that in some ways, discrimination against same-sex couples have increased. Following the repeal, anti-same-sex marriage groups and legislators have increased their levels of opposition, and responses to this survey indicate that social discrimination has been amplified in some situations, as identified in the "negative" section on social support in Chapter 4. Moreover, the repeal does not definitively end legal discrimination against same-sex couples. The repeal of DOMA's Section Three does not repeal the other major section of DOMA, which permits states to refuse to recognize same-sex marriages from other states, and many state bans continue to remain in place. Also, the majority of participants in this study reported that they have not received any benefits following the repeal, indicating a continued discrepancy in the extension of federal protections following the repeal. These revealing findings indicate the need for continued advocacy

for public acceptance and support of sexual minorities, in addition to continued work for further repeals of state bans on same-sex marriage and the remaining sections of DOMA.

Another important implication of this study is that for some same-sex couples, marriage is not an institution they are interested in engaging in. Accordingly, it is important, while engaging in advocacy for same-sex marriage, to avoid further marginalizing members of the sexual minority population who prefer alternate relationship recognitions, as well as the numerous and diverse recognitions celebrated within the LGBTQ community. As revealed through this study, advocacy work needs be dedicated to honoring, celebrating, and increasing visibility for the many alternative options for relationship recognition that are utilized by many LGBTQ couples.

Finally, an important implication for advocates of same-sex marriage is simply the indication from both the literature and the participants of this study that support from others, whether family, friends, or the larger community, is a significant source of strength and protection for sexual minorities. Continuing to provide education to the larger society, legal efforts to promote national marriage equality, and support to the LGBTQ population are crucial in the effort toward true equality for all.

### **Limitations of the Study**

While the participant sample in this study reflects a diverse range of demographics, participants were predominantly male, cisgender, Caucasian, and identified as gay (as opposed to bisexual, queer, or other sexual orientation options). Therefore, results may not apply to all LGBTQ individuals. A second limitation involves the sampling method utilized to recruit participants. While Facebook is a widely used form of social media, and is frequently utilized by members of the LGBTQ community, it

only provided access to people who were literate and had both computer access and a Facebook account. Furthermore, other social media sites (e.g., Instagram, Twitter) were not utilized, which may systematically impact the sample. Finally, three participants indicated they viewed DOMA as “very positive” and one participant viewed the repeal as “very negative”. While these responses may indeed reflect these participants’ views, there is a possibility these participants misinterpreted the question. Thus, the wording of the question itself, or its placement in the survey, may have created confusion and is important to consider when reviewing, redesigning and replicating the study.

Overall, it is important to note that the findings of this research study represent the experiences of the twenty-six participants following the repeal and cannot be generalized to all same-sex couples after the repeal. Additional research would contribute valuable information and understanding of the experiences of same-sex couples following the repeal of DOMA’s Section Three.

### **Participant Feedback**

Another important area within this study involved important feedback from participants regarding the study. This feedback indicated two areas of researcher bias which were not identified through bracketing or peer debriefing. First, one participant mentioned in his comments that “your question ought to identify what Section Three of DOMA is/was”. This highlighted my bias that all members of the LGBTQ community would know the specifics of DOMA prior to the study. Second, the participant with two partners revealed that these attempts to bracket my biases as a researcher did not allow for consideration of relationship formations outside of monogamous dyads. While his relationship status and identification did not fit with the presumed participant



demographics under which I constructed the study, his responses highlighted the importance of considering alternative relationship choices in future studies.

Other feedback from participants generally related to their appreciation for the opportunity to share their experiences, and for the study itself. One woman wrote, “We have been together for 15 years and going stronger than ever. We hope our participation in this survey will help others. Thank you!” Another respondent from North Carolina added, “What a fantastic survey. Thanks for inviting me to participate!” Finally, a man from Colorado asked to see the results of the survey: “Thank you for the opportunity to share some of my experiences. I would be very interested in the outcomes of this survey.” He included his email address for sending the results, which I will send upon publishing.

### **Mixed Method Outcomes**

In combining the results of the qualitative and quantitative analysis, several patterns in participants’ responses were elucidated. First, both the qualitative and quantitative results revealed that on many topics, participants’ experiences, beliefs, and feelings were same across state groups. Both paradigms revealed that overall, participants across groups viewed the Section Three repeal as a positive, important, and historic event. Furthermore, participants in all states reported that they believed the repeal would be very helpful in providing same-sex couples access to the privileges and benefits of marriage, as well as supporting the movement toward national marriage equality. Additionally, both the qualitative and quantitative results indicated that very few participants in any group had received any benefits following the repeal. Following this finding, participants in all groups felt that while the repeal was a very positive event and

a success for equality, more progress must be made to attain full marriage equality in the United States.

In addition, both paradigms highlighted important differences between groups. While differences were slight, both qualitative and quantitative results indicated that participants in states with bans on same-sex marriage felt that both legal status and social opinion had more impact on their couple relationships than did participants in either states with legal same-sex marriage or states in appeals. This finding highlights the vulnerability of sexual minorities to local sociopolitical climates and leads to important implications for therapy, research, and advocacy work, as discussed above.

Further, while very few participants in any state group indicated they had received benefits following the repeal, participants in states with bans on same-sex marriage reported the least benefits received out of the three groups, but also indicated these benefits were more helpful to them than did participants in other groups. This finding was supported by both qualitative and quantitative results and highlights an important discrepancy between need and actual support provided to participants in states with bans, and again suggests important work to be done by therapists, researchers, and LGBTQ rights advocates.

In all of these areas, participants' statements in response to qualitative questions regarding these topics were backed up by the numerical results of the quantitative questions, and the numerical data was elaborated upon and fleshed out by the open-ended responses. Thus, the utilization of both qualitative and quantitative methodologies in this study allowed for a more complete, detailed, and systemic picture of the experiences of same-sex couples following the DOMA repeal. By utilizing a convergent parallel design,

I was able to combine the relative strengths of both qualitative and quantitative methodologies, and gain triangulated qualitative and quantitative results on participants' experiences, as discussed in Chapter 3. The overall purpose of the convergent parallel design is to "obtain different but complementary data on the same topic" (Morse, 1991, p. 122). Therefore, despite minimal findings of statistical significance between groups, the findings of both paradigms support and elaborate on one another, providing a multifaceted, systemic view of the phenomenon being studied and supporting the use of a mixed methodology for this study.

### **Evaluation of the Hypothesis**

The hypothesis for this study was based upon the second research question, *What, if any, are the differences in perception of the repeal of Section Three of DOMA between same-sex couples living in states that have legalized same-sex marriage, same-sex couples living in states that have not legalized same-sex marriage but offer some legal benefits and protections, and same-sex couples living in states that have not legalized same-sex marriage and have Constitutional amendments outlawing same-sex marriage?*

It was hypothesized that participants living in different state groups (states with anti-same-sex marriage constitutional bans, states with rulings for same-sex marriage currently in appeals, and states with legal same-sex marriage) would differ in their experiences of the repeal. Conversely, the null hypothesis was that there would be no differences between groups.

Overall, the results of the quantitative analysis did not show statistically significant differences between groups. Only two questions, Question 8 (involving level of activity in LGBTQ rights advocacy) and Question 12 (involving the perceived

helpfulness of benefits received following the repeal), revealed a statistically significant difference between groups. Therefore, in a purely quantitative sense, the hypothesis was not supported and the null hypothesis was supported on six of the eight questions.

However, when examined in conjunction with the qualitative results, small but important differences between groups were found between groups on all questions except views of the repeal, perceived helpfulness of the repeal, and hopefulness for future national marriage equality. Thus, the overall findings support the research hypothesis and reject the null hypothesis, indicating slight but vital differences between state groups.

### **Reflections of the Researcher**

My primary goal in undertaking this project was to accurately portray the experiences of the people who have shared their personal experiences with me. My hope is that I have been able to do so. I have been impressed throughout this process by participants' commitment, strength, vulnerability, and joy. It has truly been a privilege for me to be trusted by my coresearchers with their innermost thoughts, feelings, and experiences related to such an important event in their lives.

Participants expressed their appreciation of having a means to share their experiences of the repeal, and indicated was an important aspect of participating in this project for them. Several expressed their thanks for the invitation to be involved, and a few mentioned that they hoped their participation would help others. Others requested the results of the survey when the analysis was finished, and provided their email for me to send the results of the survey to them. It is my hope that they will find the finished product to be an accurate representation of their lived experience and worth their time and effort.

For me, as for many phenomenological researchers, the truth of history lies in the experiences of those most intimately connected to the event. It is therefore my job as a researcher, a marriage and family therapist, and an ally, to listen and to believe. The narratives of this study indicate that the repeal was an important and monumental event for LGBTQ rights, with far-reaching implications for marriage and human rights within the United States. However, these narratives also reveal that the fight for marriage equality is not over; there is still much to be done. I fully believe that we, as marriage and family therapists, have a unique potential to assist in this process, and with the construction of a new understanding of marriage for all members of our society.

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## Appendix A

## Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA)

Source: <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/BILLS-104hr3396enr/pdf/BILLS-104hr3396enr.pdf>

H.R.3396

One Hundred Fourth Congress of the United States of America

AT THE SECOND SESSION

Begun and held at the City of Washington on Wednesday, the third day of January, one thousand nine hundred and ninety-six

An Act To define and protect the institution of marriage. Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled,

SECTION 1. SHORT TITLE. This Act may be cited as the “Defense of Marriage Act”.

SEC. 2. POWERS RESERVED TO THE STATES. (a) IN GENERAL.—Chapter 115 of title 28, United States Code, is amended by adding after section 1738B the following:

“§1738C. Certain acts, records, and proceedings and the effect thereof “No State, territory, or possession of the United States, or Indian tribe, shall be required to give effect to any public act, record, or judicial proceeding of any other State, territory, possession, or tribe respecting a relationship between persons of the same sex that is treated as a marriage under the laws of such other State, territory, possession, or tribe, or a right or claim arising from such relationship.”. (b) CLERICAL AMENDMENT.—The table of sections at the beginning of chapter 115 of title 28, United States Code, is amended by inserting after the item relating to section 1738B the following new item:

“1738C. Certain acts, records, and proceedings and the effect thereof.”. SEC. 3.

DEFINITION OF MARRIAGE. (a) IN GENERAL.—Chapter 1 of title 1, United States Code, is amended by adding at the end the following: “§7. Definition of ‘marriage’ and ‘spouse’ “In determining the meaning of any Act of Congress, or of any ruling, regulation, or interpretation of the various administrative bureaus and agencies of the United States, the word ‘marriage’ means only a legal union between one man and one woman as husband and wife, and the word ‘spouse’ refers only to a person of the opposite sex who is a husband or a wife.’”.

H.R.3396—2 (b) CLERICAL AMENDMENT.—The table of sections at the beginning of chapter 1 of title 1, United States Code, is amended by inserting after the item relating to section 6 the following new item: “7. Definition of ‘marriage’ and ‘spouse’.”.

Speaker of the House of Representatives.

Vice President of the United States and President of the Senate.

## Appendix B.

### Consent Form

1. Consent Form for Participation in the Research Study Entitled  
Same-Sex Couples' Lived Experiences of the Repeal of the Defense of Marriage Act's (DOMA) Section  
Three

Funding Source: None.

IRB protocol #: 14/2014

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For questions/concerns about your research rights, contact:  
Human Research Oversight Board (Institutional Review Board or IRB)  
Nova Southeastern University  
(954) 262-5369/Toll Free: 866-499-0790  
IRB@nsu.nova.edu

What is the study about?

You are invited to participate in a research study. The goal of this study is to understand the experiences of same-sex couples after Section Three of the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) has been repealed.

Why are you asking me?

We are inviting you to participate because you have identified yourself as being in a same-sex relationship for at least a year. You also have identified yourself as being at least 18 years of age, living in the United States, District of Columbia, or Puerto Rico, and proficient in English. There will be approximately 25 participants in this research study.

What will I be doing if I agree to be in the study?

You will answer a 25 question survey online, which will ask you open- and closed-ended questions about your experiences following the DOMA repeal. You will also complete a 10-question scale asking about your perceived stress levels. Finally, you will also provide some demographic information, such as the state in which you reside and your approximate age. The survey should take you an hour or less to complete.

Is there any audio or video recording?

This research project will not include any audio or video recording.

What are the dangers to me?

Risks to you are minimal, meaning they are not expected to be greater than other risks you experience every day. Entering information online means that confidentiality cannot be guaranteed; however, you will not be entering any information that will identify you or connect you to your answers. Sharing your experiences about DOMA and its repeal may make you anxious, angry, or sad; however, this is anticipated to be minor, not last more than a short time, and may not be experienced at all by participants. Furthermore, the questions will be focused on positive aspects of the subject, such as the repeal of DOMA and resulting benefits to same-sex couples. If you do not want to answer any questions because they

cause stress for you, you can skip them. If you have questions about the research, your research rights, would like a copy of the consent form, or if you experience an injury because of the research please contact Ms. Bosley at ab1119@nova.edu. You may also contact the IRB at the numbers indicated above with questions about your research rights.

Are there any benefits to me for taking part in this research study?

There are no direct benefits to you for participating. However, a potential benefit of your participation in this study is that this research may improve mental health professionals' understandings of the strengths, needs, and experiences of same-sex couples following the repeal of DOMA's Section Three, and enhance these professionals' ability to work with lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals, couples, and families.

Will I get paid for being in the study? Will it cost me anything?

There are no costs to you nor payments made for participation in this study.

How will you keep my information private?

Maintaining privacy and confidentiality is highly important to this study. The survey will not ask you for any information that could be linked to you. It will not ask you for your name, address, or any other information that could reveal your identity. Only pseudonyms (made up names) will be used in discussing results of this study. All survey responses will be destroyed 36 months after the study ends. All information obtained in this study is strictly confidential unless disclosure is required by law (e.g., if abuse, neglect, or intent to harm is suspected). The university's human research oversight board (Institutional Review Board or IRB), regulatory agencies, or Dr. Boyd may review research records.

What if I do not want to participate or I want to leave the study?

You have the right to leave this study at any time or refuse to participate. If you do decide to leave or you decide not to participate, you will not experience any penalty or loss of services you have a right to receive. If you choose to withdraw, any information collected about you before the date you leave the study will be kept in the research records for 36 months from the conclusion of the study and may be used as a part of the research.

Other Considerations:

If significant new information relating to the study becomes available, which may relate to your willingness to continue to participate, this information will be provided to you by the investigators.

Voluntary Consent by Participant:

By clicking the "I agree" box below, you indicate that

- this study has been explained to you
- you have read this document or it has been read to you
- your questions about this research study have been answered
- you have been told that you may ask the researchers any study related questions in the future or contact them in the event of a research-related injury
- you have been told that you may ask Institutional Review Board (IRB) personnel questions about your study rights
- you are entitled to a copy of this form after you have read and signed it
- you voluntarily agree to participate in the study entitled "Same-Sex Couples' Lived Experiences of the Repeal of the Defense of Marriage Act's (DOMA) Section Three"

I agree

Submit



## Appendix C

### Opinio Survey Questionnaire

#### Perceptions of DOMA Repeal

1. The first set of questions will ask you for basic demographic information.

Please indicate your age.

- 18-25
- 26-35
- 36-45
- 46-55
- 56-65
- 66-75
- 76-85
- 86 and over

2. Please indicate your gender.

- Male
- Female
- Intersex
- Queer
- Transgender
- Other (please specify)

3. Please indicate your ethnicity.

- African American
- Asian American
- Caucasian
- Hispanic or Latin American
- Native American

- Pacific Islander
- Mixed Race
- Other (please specify)

4. Please indicate your sexual orientation.

- Gay
- Lesbian
- Bisexual
- Pansexual
- Queer
- Heterosexual
- Other (please specify)

5. In which state do you currently reside?

6. Are you currently in a committed relationship (romantically and emotionally committed to one another) that has lasted for at least one year?

- Yes
- No

7. If you answered "yes" to question 6, is this relationship with a person who identifies as the same gender as yours?

- Yes
- No

8. How active are you in LGBTQ rights advocacy (e.g. Human Rights Campaign, PFLAG, Gay-Straight Alliances, local LGBTQ rights organizations)?

- Not at all active  
  Not very active  
  Somewhat active  
  Very active  
  Extremely active

9. The following set of questions will ask you about your perceptions of the Defense of Marriage Act, the repeal of its third section, and your experiences in the time following the repeal.

What are your overall impressions of the repeal of Section Three of the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA)?

10. On a scale of one (1) to seven (7), how would you rate your views of the Section Three repeal?

- Very negative
- Negative
- Slightly negative
- Neutral
- Slightly positive
- Positive
- Very positive

11. On a scale of one (1) to seven (7), how would you rate your views of DOMA?

- Very negative
- Negative
- Slightly negative
- Neutral
- Slightly positive
- Positive
- Very positive

12. Have you personally received any benefits or protections following the Section Three repeal (e.g. partner health benefits through insurance, increased rights regarding shared finances and joint legal decisions, etc.)? If so, which benefits?

- Yes
- No

13. If you have personally received any benefits or protections following the Section Three repeal, how much of a difference, if any, do you feel this has had for your life and/or relationship?

- Very Unhelpful
- Unhelpful
- Slightly unhelpful
- Neither helpful nor unhelpful
- Slightly helpful
- Helpful
- Very helpful
- N/A

14. On a scale of one (1) to seven (7), how helpful do you expect the repeal of Section Three of DOMA will be overall for LGBTQ couples in accessing the benefits and privileges already available to heterosexual couples?

- Very unhelpful
- Unhelpful
- Slightly unhelpful
- Neither helpful nor unhelpful
- Slightly helpful
- Helpful
- Very helpful

15. On a scale of one (1) to seven (7), how much do you feel local and national laws affect the quality of your relationship with your partner?

- Not at all
- Very little
- Slightly
- Neutral
- Somewhat
- Moderately
- Significantly

16. On a scale of one (1) to seven (7), how much do you feel social and public opinions and approval or lack of approval affect the

quality of your relationship with your partner?

- Not at all
- Very little
- Slightly
- Neutral
- Somewhat
- Moderately
- Significantly

17. How, if at all, do you feel the increased legal and/or social recognition of same-sex couples has affected your relationship with your partner?

18. If you reside in a state in which same-sex couples can legally marry, have you and your partner decided to get married? Why or why not? Please tell me about that decision process, and what it was like for you.

- Yes
- No
- N/A

19. If you reside in a state in which same-sex couples cannot legally marry, do you feel optimistic that your state will one day rule for the legalization of equal marriage rights? Why or why not? Please tell me about your feelings and/or thoughts regarding this.

- Yes
- No
- N/A

20. If you reside in a state in which same-sex couples can legally marry, did you have any type of formal recognition of your relationship prior to legal marriage (such as a domestic partnership or civil union)? Why or why not?

- Yes
- No
- N/A

21. If you reside in a state in which same-sex couples cannot legally marry, but have some legal recognitions available to you, do you have any type of formal recognition of your relationship (such as a domestic partnership or civil union)? Why or why not?

- Yes
- No
- N/A

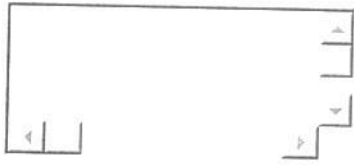
22. Have the national and local debates regarding the Defense of Marriage Act, the Section Three repeal, and the extension of equal marriage rights to same-sex couples impacted your experiences of your couple relationship in any way? Please describe.

23. What have the responses of your friends, family, and community to the marriage equality debate been like? How, if at all, do they affect you as an individual and your relationship?

24. Following the Section Three repeal, how hopeful are you that marriage equality will eventually become law on a national level?

- Not at all hopeful
- Not very hopeful
- Slightly not hopeful
- Neutral
- Slightly hopeful
- Hopeful
- Very hopeful

25. Is there anything else you would like to tell me related to these issues?



Thank you very much for your time and input! If you are interested in the outcomes of this study, or if you have any further questions, please feel free to contact Alicia Bosley, Principal Investigator, at [ab1119@nova.edu](mailto:ab1119@nova.edu).

Powered by  
[Opinio Survey Software](#)

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Appendix D

Consent Form

Consent Form for Participation in the Research Study Entitled  
Same-Sex Couples' Lived Experiences of the Repeal of the Defense of Marriage Act's (DOMA)  
Section Three

Funding Source: None.

IRB protocol #:

Principal investigator

Alicia Bosley, M. A.

3625 College Ave.

Rolling Hills Apts. #1885

Fort Lauderdale, FL 33314

970-219-7346

Co-investigator

Tommie V. Boyd, PhD

3301 College Ave.

Fort Lauderdale, FL 33314

954-262-3027

For questions/concerns about your research rights, contact:

Human Research Oversight Board (Institutional Review Board or IRB)

Nova Southeastern University

(954) 262-5369/Toll Free: 866-499-0790

IRB@nsu.nova.edu

**What is the study about?**

You are invited to participate in a research study. The goal of this study is to understand the experiences of same-sex couples after Section Three of the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) has been repealed.

**Why are you asking me?**

We are inviting you to participate because you have identified yourself as being in a same-sex relationship for at least a year. You also have identified yourself as being at least 18 years of age, living in the United States, District of Columbia, or Puerto Rico, and proficient in English. There will be approximately 25 participants in this research study.

**What will I be doing if I agree to be in the study?**

You will answer a 25 question survey online, which will ask you open- and closed-ended questions about your experiences following the DOMA repeal. You will also complete a 10-question scale asking about your perceived stress levels. Finally, you will also provide some demographic information, such as the state in which you reside and your approximate age. The survey should take you an hour or less to complete.

**Is there any audio or video recording?**

This research project will not include any audio or video recording.

**What are the dangers to me?**

Risks to you are minimal, meaning they are not expected to be greater than other risks you experience every day. Entering information online means that confidentiality cannot be guaranteed; however, you will not be entering any information that will identify you or connect you to your answers. Sharing your experiences about DOMA and its repeal may make you anxious, angry, or sad; however, this is anticipated to be minor, not last more than a short time, and may not be experienced at all by participants. Furthermore, the questions will be focused on positive aspects of the subject, such as the repeal of DOMA and resulting benefits to same-sex couples. If you do not want to answer any questions because they cause stress for you, you can skip them. If you have questions about the research, your research rights, would like a copy of the consent form, or if you experience an injury because of the research please contact Ms.



Bosley at ab1119@nova.edu. You may also contact the IRB at the numbers indicated above with questions about your research rights.

**Are there any benefits to me for taking part in this research study?**

There are no direct benefits to you for participating. However, a potential benefit of your participation in this study is that this research may improve mental health professionals' understandings of the strengths, needs, and experiences of same-sex couples following the repeal of DOMA's Section Three, and enhance these professionals' ability to work with lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals, couples, and families.

**Will I get paid for being in the study? Will it cost me anything?**

There are no costs to you nor payments made for participation in this study.

**How will you keep my information private?**

Maintaining privacy and confidentiality is highly important to this study. The survey will not ask you for any information that could be linked to you. It will not ask you for your name, address, or any other information that could reveal your identity. Only pseudonyms (made up names) will be used in discussing results of this study. All survey responses will be destroyed 36 months after the study ends. All information obtained in this study is strictly confidential unless disclosure is required by law (e.g., if abuse, neglect, or intent to harm is suspected). The university's human research oversight board (Institutional Review Board or IRB), regulatory agencies, or Dr. Boyd may review research records.

**What if I do not want to participate or I want to leave the study?**

You have the right to leave this study at any time or refuse to participate. If you do decide to leave or you decide not to participate, you will not experience any penalty or loss of services you have a right to receive. If you choose to withdraw, any information collected about you before the date you leave the study will be kept in the research records for 36 months from the conclusion of the study and may be used as a part of the research.

**Other Considerations:**

If significant new information relating to the study becomes available, which may relate to your willingness to continue to participate, this information will be provided to you by the investigators.

**Voluntary Consent by Participant:**

By clicking the "I agree" box below, you indicate that

- this study has been explained to you
- you have read this document or it has been read to you
- your questions about this research study have been answered
- you have been told that you may ask the researchers any study related questions in the future or contact them in the event of a research-related injury
- you have been told that you may ask Institutional Review Board (IRB) personnel questions about your study rights
- you are entitled to a copy of this form after you have read and signed it
- you voluntarily agree to participate in the study entitled "Same-Sex Couples' Lived Experiences of the Repeal of the Defense of Marriage Act's (DOMA) Section Three"

Appendix E  
Participant Demographics

Variables	<i>n</i>	%
<b>Age Range</b>		
26-35	11	42.31
36-45	5	19.23
46-55	7	26.92
56-65	2	7.69
66-75	1	3.85
Total	26	100
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	18	69.23
Female	7	26.92
Transgender	1	3.85
Total	26	100
<b>Sexual Orientation</b>		
Gay	19	73.08
Lesbian	5	19.23
Bisexual	1	3.85
Queer	1	3.85
Total	26	100
<b>Ethnicity</b>		
African American	1	3.85
Asian American	1	3.85
Caucasian	20	76.92
Hispanic or Latin American	2	7.69
Native American	1	3.85
Mixed Race	1	3.85
Total	26	100
<b>State of Residence</b>		
Arizona	1	3.85
Colorado	6	23.08
Connecticut	1	3.85
Florida	3	11.54
Michigan	1	3.85
New York	2	7.69
North Carolina	2	7.69
Oregon	1	3.85
Texas	2	7.69
Washington	2	7.69

## Appendix E (cont.)

## Participant demographics

Variables	<i>n</i>	%
Wisconsin	5	19.23
Total	26	100
<b>Relationship Status</b> (In a committed relationship* for at least one year)		
Yes	26	100
No	0	0
Total	26	100
<b>Relationship Makeup</b> (Relationship with partner of same gender)		
Yes	25	96.15
No**	1	3.85
Total	26	100
<b>Level of Involvement in LGBTQ Rights Advocacy</b>		
Not at all active	4	15.38
Not very active	8	30.77
Somewhat active	11	42.31
Very active	2	7.69
Extremely active	1	3.85
Total	26	100

\* For purposes of this study, a committed relationship is defined as romantically and emotionally committed to one another.

\*\* This participant was in two relationships; one was a male-female relationship and the other was male-male. As the participant was involved in a same-sex relationship, he was included in the survey despite answering “no” to this question.

## Appendix F

## Permission from Human Rights Campaign

feedback HRC <feedback@hrc.org>

Wed 5/7/2014 9:14 AM

To: Alicia Bosley;

Hello Alicia,

Thank you for contacting the Human Rights Campaign regarding your study.

We receive numerous requests of this nature and unfortunately cannot accommodate them all. Therefore, we have a policy not to post messages or materials on our site that are not directly related to HRC's work. However, you are welcome to share a link to your study on our Facebook <<http://www.facebook.com/humanrightscampaign>> page. While we certainly encourage the free exchange of ideas and comments on our Facebook page, please note that we reserve the right to remove the survey if it is not LGBT related, offensive in nature, or does not meet Facebook policy standards.

Thank you again and good luck!

Respectfully,

Hillary  
HRC Member Services Team

## Appendix G

## Flyer

Nova Southeastern University

# Volunteers Wanted for Research Study

## Same-Sex Couples' Lived Experiences of the Repeal of the Defense of Marriage Act's (DOMA) Section Three

On June 26, 2013, the United States Supreme Court ruled that Section Three of the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA), which defined marriage as between a man and a woman, was unconstitutional. This ruling ended the denial of over 1,100 federal protections and benefits of marriage to same-sex couples, and upheld that all married couples deserve equal treatment and respect under the law for the first time. This research study will be conducted in the hopes of providing a glimpse into the experience of lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) individuals, couples, and families in this point in history, as a major victory in the marriage equality movement is won.

Participants will complete a 25-question survey, comprised of questions regarding their experiences of DOMA and its repeal, and will also complete a 10-question scale assessing their levels of perceived stress. These two items should take less than an hour to complete and will be completed entirely online, through an OpinioSurvey questionnaire.

### Eligibility

Participants must be:

- Over 18 years of age
- Involved in a relationship with a person of the same-sex for at least one year
- Proficient in English
- Living in the 50 United States, the District of Columbia, or Puerto Rico

For more information regarding this research study, contact:

Alicia Bosley, PhD Candidate

Principal Investigator

[ab1119@nova.edu](mailto:ab1119@nova.edu)

This research is conducted under the direction of:

Dr. Tommie V Boyd

Department of Family Therapy

Nova Southeastern University

## Appendix H

## Horizontalization of Themes

Theme	Marry or Not?	Support or Not?	Impact or Not?	Progress or Not?
Subthemes/ Categories	<b>1. Marriage Decisions</b> a. We do! <i>i. Own state</i> <i>ii. Other state</i> b. Still deciding c. Not now <i>i. Not ready</i> <i>ii. Decided not to</i> <i>iii. Cannot</i> <i>iv. Legal Limbo</i> <b>2. Alternative Decisions</b> a. Legal unions b. Religious unions	<b>1. Legal Support</b> a. We've Got Benefits! <i>i. Legal benefits</i> b. Still Fighting <i>ii. More discrimination</i> <b>2. Social Support</b> a. Positive b. Mixed c. Opposed	<b>1. Relationship Impacts</b> a. We've Been Affected <i>i. Positive</i> <i>ii. Stressful</i> b. Still the Same <b>2. Individual Impacts</b> a. I've Been Affected b. Still the Same	<b>1. Overall Assessment</b> a. Major Event b. Right Decision c. About Time! d. Next Steps <b>2. Affective Experiences</b> a. Happiness b. Hopefulness c. Validation d. Acceptance

### **Biographical Sketch**

Alicia Anne Bosley was born in Fort Collins, Colorado. Living in a small town in northeastern Colorado with a large immigrant population, she was aware at an early age of the interactions of race, socioeconomic status, and privilege within our society, and these lessons had a profound impact on her views of the world. She received her bachelor's degree in Human Development and Family Studies from Colorado State University, and her masters' degree in Marriage and Family Therapy at Antioch University New England, where her love of social justice was nurtured and encouraged. Following her graduation, she worked for a year as a Clinical Supervisor at a residential treatment facility for teenage boys with severe developmental, psychological, and behavioral problems. She then moved to Fort Lauderdale, Florida, to begin work on her PhD in Marriage and Family Therapy.

Alicia is currently working toward licensure as a marriage and family therapist, and is a member of the American Association of Marriage and Family Therapy, as well as the International Family Therapy Association. She is currently the secretary of The Equality Cub at Nova Southeastern University and is also involved with the Gay-Straight Alliance at NSU. She is a member of Delta Epsilon Iota Academic Honor Society. She has published in peer-reviewed journals and presented nationally and internationally on topics related to the LGBTQ community. She is hoping to continue her career as a full-time professor of marriage and family therapy, as well as a clinician.

In addition to her professional pursuits, Alicia enjoys reading, attending hockey and baseball games, painting, traveling, cooking, yoga, and movies. She is close to her



family and friends, and enjoys supporting humanitarian, animal welfare, and ecological organizations.