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Coming Out and Fitting In: Same-Sex Marriage and the Politics of Difference

- [Louise Victoria Richardson-Self](#)
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Introduction

This article argues in favour of same-sex marriage, but only under certain conditions. Same-sex marriage ought to be introduced in the Australian context in order to remedy the formal inequalities between lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) citizens and their heterosexual/cisgendered counterparts. One common method of justifying the introduction of formal same-sex relationship recognition has been via the promotion of LGBT “normalcy.” This article explores such a trend by analysing popular media and advertising, since media representations and coverage have been shown to affect the way the general public “learns, understands, and thinks about an issue” (Li and Lui 73). This article finds that the promotion of normalcy can, in fact, perpetuate hetero-norms, and only offer LGBT people an imaginary social equality. Such normalisation, it is suggested, is detrimental to a wider goal of gaining respect for LGBT people regardless, not in spite of, their identity and relationships. Yet, this article maintains that such imaginary equality can be avoided, so long as a plurality of possibilities for one’s intimate and familial life are actively legitimated and promoted.

Australian Same-Sex Relationship Recognition

The *Relationships Act 2003* (Tas) was the first piece of Australian legislation to formally recognise same-sex relationships. This act allowed Tasmanian residents to register a partnership, although these unions were not recognised in any other Australian State. However, despite this State-based movement, as well as other examples of same-sex unions gaining increasing recognition in the West, not all legal changes have been positive for LGBT people. One example of this was the Howard Government's 2004 reformation of the *Marriage Act 1961* (Cwlth), which made explicit that marriage could only take place between one man and one woman to the exclusion of all others, and also refused to acknowledge same-sex marriages performed legally overseas. Furthermore, 2012 saw the failure of several Bills which sought the introduction of same-sex marriage at both the State and Federal level. Thus, same-sex marriage is still illegal in Australia to-date. But, despite these major setbacks, other progress towards same-sex relationship recognition has continued. At the Federal level, different-sex and same-sex *de facto* relationship recognition became formally equal over the period of 2008-9. Furthermore, it is both official Greens and Australian Labor Party policy to support equal marriage rights. At the State level, the example of recognising same-sex civil unions/registered partnerships has been followed by Victoria, the Australian Capital Territory, New South Wales, and Queensland.

There are several reasons why same-sex couples may desire the right to marry. Some reasons are practical; in any given Nation-State where same-sex couples are without the right to marry, then same-sex partners are unable to claim the same benefits and undertake the same obligations as heterosexual married couples. They are formally unequal. On the basis of their empirical research Jowett and Peel argue that formal equality is a motivating factor for the same-sex marriage movement, noting that a likely incentive to engage in these unions would be security, since LGBT people have heretofore lived and continue to live with a very real threat of discrimination. This is largely why the option of civil unions was created in the West. The measure was first introduced by Denmark in 1989, and its purpose was to be a marriage-like institution, existing solely for the recognition of same-sex couples (Broberg 149). Although civil unions should theoretically offer same-sex couples the same legal benefits and obligations that heterosexual married couples receive, this is widely believed to be false in practice. The Netherlands has almost achieved full equality, at 96%; however, countries such as Belgium rate poorly, at 48% (Waalwijk 9). As such, it has been argued that civil unions are not sufficient alternatives to marriage. Amitai Etzioni claims, "many gay people feel strongly that unless they are entitled to exactly the same marriages as heterosexuals, their basic individual rights are violated, which they (and many liberals) hold as semisacred" (qtd. in Shanley 65). This opinion demonstrates that formal equality is a key concern of the same-sex marriage debate. However, it is not the only concern.

The organisation *Australian Marriage Equality* (AME), which has been at the forefront of the fight for same-sex marriage since its establishment in 2004, claims that "Civil unions are not as widely understood or respected as marriage and creating a separate name for same-sex relationships entrenches a different, discriminatory, second-class status for these relationships" (Greenwich, *The Case for Same-Sex Marriage* 3). They claim further that, if recognition continues to be refused, it maintains the message that same-sex partners are not capable of the level of love and commitment associated with marriage (Greenwich, *The Case for Same-Sex Marriage*). Thus, AME claim that not only do the legal entitlements of civil unions frequently fail to be formally equivalent, but even the difference in name contributes to the ongoing discrimination of LGBT people. Although neither marriage nor civil unions are federally available to same-sex couples in Australia, AME argue that marriage must be primarily endorsed, then (Greenwich, *A Failed Experiment* 1). The argument is, if Australia were to

introduce civil unions, but not marriage, civil unions would reify the second-class status of homosexuals, and would present same-sex relationships and homosexuality as inferior to different-sex relationships and heterosexuality.

Thus, the title “marriage” is significant, and one strategy for demonstrating that LGBT people are fit for this title has been by promoting representations of *sameness* to the heterosexual mainstream. To achieve the status that goes along with the ability to marry, same-sex couples have typically tried to get their relationships publicly recognised and legally regulated in two ways. They have sought to (a) demonstrate that LGBT people *do* structure their relationships and familial lives according to the heteropatriarchal normative stereotypes of traditional family values, and/or (b) they emphasise the “born this way” aspect of LGBT sexuality/gender identity, refusing to situate it as a choice. This latter aspect is significant, since arguments based on natural “facts” often claim that what is true by nature cannot be changed, and/or what is true by nature is good (Antony 12). These two strategies thus seek to contribute to a shift in the public perception of homosexuals, homosexuality, and same-sex relationships. The idea, in other words, is to promote the LGBT subject as being a “normal” and “good” citizen (Jowett and Peel 206).

Media Representations of Normal Gays

In Australia, the normalcy of same-sex relationships has been advocated perhaps most obviously in television advertising. One such advertisement is run by *Get Up! Action for Australia*, an independent, grass-roots advocacy organisation. This ad is shot from a first-person perspective, where the camera is the eyes of the subject. It follows the blossoming of a relationship: from meeting a man on a boat, to exchanging phone numbers, dating, attending social events with friends, sharing special occasions, meeting each other’s families, sharing a home, caring for sick family members, and so forth, finally culminating in a proposal for marriage. Upon the proposal it is revealed that the couple consists of two young-adult, white, middle-class men. The purpose of this advertisement is to surprise the audience member, as the gay couple’s relationship follows the same trajectory of what is typically expected in a heterosexual relationship. The effect, in turn, is to shock the audience member into recognising that same-sex couples are just like different-sex couples. Hopefully, this will also serve to justify to the audience member that LGBT people deserve the same legal treatment as heterosexuals. The couple in this advertisement appear to be monogamous, their relationship seems to have blossomed over a length of time, they support each other’s families, and the couple comes to share a home. Projecting images like these suggests that such aspects are the relevant features of marriage, which LGBT people mimic.

The second Australian advertisement from AME, features a young-adult, interracial, gay couple, who also appear to be middle-class. In this advertisement the families of the two partners, Ivan and Chris, comment on the illegal status of same-sex marriage in Australia. The ad opens with Ivan’s parents, and notes the length of their marriage—45 years. Ivan later claims that he wants to get married because he wants to be with Chris for life. These signals remind the viewer that marriage is supposed to be a life-long commitment, despite the prevalence of divorce. The advertisement also focuses on Chris’s parents, who claim that thanks to their son’s relationship their family has now expanded. The ad cuts between segments of spoken opinion and shots of family time spent at dinner, or in a park, and so on. At one point Ivan states, “We’re not activists; we’re just people who want to get married, like everyone else.” This reiterates the “normalcy” of the desire to marry in general, which is

confirmed by Chris's statement when he says, "It means that everyone would accept it. It's sort of like a normal... A sense of normalcy." This implies that to be seen as normal is both desirable and good; but more to the point, the ad positions LGBT people as if they are all *already* normal, and simply await recognition. It does not challenge the perception of what "normalcy" is. Finally, the advertisement closes with the written statement: "Marriage: It's about family. Everyone's family." This advertisement thus draws connections between the legal institution of marriage and socially shared normative conceptions of married family life.

While these two advertisements are not the only Australian television ads which support this particular vision of same-sex marriage, they are typical. What is interesting is that this particular image of homosexuality and same-sex relationships is becoming increasingly common in popular media also. For example, American sitcom *Modern Family* features a gay couple who share a house, have an adopted daughter, and maintain a fairly traditional lifestyle where one works full time as a lawyer, while the other remains at home and is the primary care-giver for their daughter. Their relationship is also monogamous and long-term. The couple is white, and they appear to have a middle-class status. Another American sitcom, *The New Normal*, features a white gay couple (one is Jewish) who also share a home, are in a long-term monogamous relationship, and who both have careers. This sitcom centres on this couple's decision to have a child and the life of the woman who decides to act as their surrogate. This couple are also financially well off. Both of these sitcoms have prime Australian television slots.

Although the status of the couples' relationships in the aforementioned sitcoms is not primarily focussed on, they each participate in a relationship which is traditionally *marriage-like* in structure. This includes long-term commitment, monogamy, sharing a home and economic arrangements, starting and raising a family, and so on. And it is the very *marriage-like* aspects of same-sex relationships which Australian equal marriage advocates have used to justify why same-sex marriage should be legal. The depiction of on-screen homosexual couples (who are gay, rather than lesbian, bisexual, or trans) and the public debate in favour of same-sex marriage both largely promote and depend upon the perception of these relationships as effectively "the same" as heterosexual relationships in terms of structure, goals, commitment, life plans, lifestyle, and so on.

A comment should be made on the particular representations in the examples above. The repetition of images of the LGBT community as primarily male, white, young-adult, middle-class, straight-looking, monogamous, and so on, comes at the expense of distancing even further those who do not conform to this model (Borgerson et. al. 959; Fejes 221). These images represent what Darren Rosenblum calls "*but-for* queers," meaning that *but-for* their sexual orientation, these people would be just the same as "normal" heterosexuals. Rosenblum has commented on the increased juridical visibility of *but-for* queers and the legal gains they have won; however, he criticises that these people have been unable to adequately challenge heterosexism since their acceptance is predicated on being as much like normative heterosexuals as possible (84-5). Heterosexism and heteronormativity refer to the ways in which localised practices and centralised institutions legitimise and privilege heterosexuality, seeing it as fundamental, natural, and normal (Cole and Avery 47).

If the only queers who gain visibility thanks to these sitcoms and advertisements are *but-for* queers, the likelihood that heterosexism will be challenged with the legal recognition of same-sex marriage drastically decreases. Appeals to sameness and normalcy typically refuse to critically examine heteronormative standards of acceptability. This results in the continued

promotion of the “sexually involved couple,” realised according to particular normative standards, as the appropriate, best, or even natural trajectory for one’s intimate life. Thus, a key reason that some LGBT people have rejected marriage as an appropriate goal is because assimilative inclusion does not offer a legitimately respected social identity to LGBT people as a whole. When legal changes promoting the equality of LGBT people are predicated on their assimilation to heteronormative relationship criteria, this can only achieve “imaginary” equality and the illusion of progress, while real instances of homophobia, discrimination, marginalisation and hostility towards LGBT people continue (Richardson 394).

Thus, given the highly specified representations of “normal” LGBT people, it is fair to conclude that there is a biased representation of same-sex relationships on-screen in terms of sex, race, ability, wealth, monogamy, and so on. The assimilationist strategy of publicising particularly *gay* identity and relationships as just like heterosexuality appears to *depoliticise* queerness and render lesbians, bisexuals, and transgender people more or less invisible. This can be problematic insofar as the subversive role that queer identity could play in bringing about social change regarding acceptability of other sexual and intimate relationships is lessened (Richardson 395-6). The question that emerges at this point, then, is whether same-sex marriage is doomed to perpetuate hetero-norms and designate all other non-conformists as socially, morally, and/or legally inferior.

Pluralisation

Ironically, while some activists reject civil unions, their introduction may be crucial to support a “pluralisation strategy.” AME is, in fact, not opposed to civil unions, so long as they do not pretend to be marriage (Greenwich, *A Failed Experiment* 1). However, AME’s main focus is still on achieving marriage equality, rather than promoting a diverse array of relationship recognition. A pluralisation strategy, though, would seek to question the very normative and hierarchical status of marriage, given the strategy’s key aim of greater options for legally regulated relationship recognition. Regarding polyamorous relationships specifically, Elizabeth Emens has argued that,

The existence of some number of people choosing to live polyamorous lives should prompt us all to [...] think about our own choices and about the ways that our norms and laws urge upon us one model rather than pressing us to make informed, affirmative choices about what might best suit our needs and desires.” (in Shanley 79)

While non-monogamous relationships have frequently been rejected, even by same-sex marriage activists, since they too threaten traditional forms of marriage, the above statement clearly articulates the purpose of the pluralisation strategy: to challenge people to think about the way norms and laws press one model upon people, and to challenge that model by engaging in and demanding recognition for other models of intimate and familial relationships.

When a variety of formal options for legalising various types of relationships is legislated for, this allows people greater choice in how they can conceive and structure their relationships. It also creates a political space where norms can be publicly assessed, criticised, and re-evaluated. Thus, the goal to be achieved is the representation of multiple relationship/family structures as being of equal worth, rather than fixing them in a relationship hierarchy where traditional marriage is the ideal. There exist many examples of people who “do relationships

differently”—whether they are homosexual, polyamorous, asexual, step-families, and so on—and the existence of these must come to be reflected as equally valuable and viable options in the dominant social imaginary. Representations in popular media are one avenue, for example, which advocates of this pluralisation strategy might employ in order to achieve such a shift. Another avenue is advocacy. If advocacy on the importance of formally recognising multiple types of relationships increased, this may balance the legitimacy of these relationships with marriage. Furthermore, it may prevent the perpetuation of hetero-norms and increase respect for LGBT identity, since they would be less likely to be pressured into assimilation. Thus, same-sex marriage activists could, in fact, gain from taking up the cause of refusing one single model for relationship-recognition (Calhoun 1037).

In this sense, then, the emergence of civil union schemes as an alternative to marriage in the West has potentially yielded something very valuable in the way of increasing options regarding one’s intimate life, especially in the Australian context where diverse recognition has already begun. Interestingly, Australia has come some way towards pluralisation at the State level; however, it is hardly actively promoted. The civil union schemes of both Tasmania and Victoria have a provision entitling “caring couples” to register their relationships. A “caring couple” involves two people who are *not* involved in a sexual relationship, who may or may not be related, and who provide mutual or one-sided care to the other. The caring couple are entitled to the same legal benefits as those romantic couples who register their relationships. One can infer then, that not only sexual relationships, but those of the caring couple as in Tasmania and Victoria, or possibly even those of a relationship like one “between three single mothers who are not lovers but who have thrown in their lot together as a family,” could be realised and respected if other alternatives were available and promoted alongside marriage (Cornell, in Shanley 84). While Australia would have quite some way to go to achieve these goals, the examples of Tasmania and Victoria are a promising start in the right direction.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that marriage is a goal that LGBT people should be wary of. Promoting limited representations of same-sex oriented individuals and couples can perpetuate the primacy of hetero-norms, and fail to deliver respect for all LGBT people. However, despite the growing trend of justifying marriage and homosexuality thanks to “normalcy”, promotion of another strategy—a pluralisation strategy—might result in more beneficial outcomes. It may result in a more balanced weight of normative worth between institutions and types of recognition, which may then result in citizens feeling less compelled to enter marriage. Creating formal equality while pursuing the promotion of other alternatives as legitimate will result in a greater acceptance of queer identity than will the endorsement of same-sex marriage justified by LGBT normalcy. While the latter may result in speedier access to legal benefits for some, the cost of such a strategy should be underscored. Ultimately, a pluralisation strategy should be preferred.

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