Same-Sex Marriage

**Definition:** same-sex marriage from *The Macquarie Dictionary*

1. the union of a man with a man or a woman with a woman, legally recognised under certain legislatures, with the implication that they will live intimately together and enjoy some or all of the legal benefits of traditional marriage.

**Summary Article:** Same-Sex Marriage from *Encyclopedia of Gender and Society*

Same-sex marriage is the union of two people of the same sex that is sanctioned by the state. The term is often deployed to talk about legally registered same-sex civil unions or cohabitation. In everyday usage, the term is sometimes employed to denote unregistered same-sex partnerships that have been marked by commitment ceremonies. Same-sex marriage became a high-profile social and political topic in the 1990s. For some commentators, the topic symbolizes the historical moment of lesbian and gay equality or citizenship; for others it is symbolic of the demise of the institution of marriage. Same-sex marriage can be viewed in conflicting ways with respect to what it signifies about changing gender and sexual relations. Some commentators interpret it as the triumph of heterosexual norms that privilege the kind of privatized couple relationships and that, in turn, promote the subordination of women in modern societies. Other commentators interpret it as a radical challenge to the cultural privileging of the heterosexual couple and as potentially queering of the institution of marriage itself. Research on lesbians and gay men suggests a more complex picture than these dichotomous views promote, especially where it highlights the personal-political ambivalence that many lesbians and gay research subjects express about the issue. Recent research and theory on the changing nature of heterosexual marriage also suggests the need to look beyond the dichotomous frame (emphasizing either normalization or queering) of the debates about same-sex marriage, to grapple with its more complex significance. In this entry, the legalization of same-sex marriage; the political, social, and cultural impacts; and the differences in same-sex marriage are discussed.

**Legalizing Same-Sex Marriage**

Globally, only a relatively small number of states currently recognize same-sex marriage, and the tendency is to legislate some exemptions from the automatic rights and responsibilities afforded heterosexual married couples (for example, with respect to adoption rights). Civil unions and registered cohabitation are more common ways of legally sanctioning same-sex relationships. They offer some of the symbolic and material advantages associated with marriage, but with more restricted legal status. Currently, however, most same-sex partners must rely on affirmation and commitment ceremonies they create themselves, or on spiritual blessings where they can be accessed. The unwillingness of many states to allow same-sex couples to marry their partners of choice—often argued to be a basic human right—is viewed by many as symbolizing lesbians and gay men’s second-class status as citizens. Same-sex marriage is therefore an important social and political issue because it raises the significance of marriage as a route to sexual citizenship. But this is also a contentious issue, not least because...
marriage has historically been bound up with the regulation of gender and the reproduction of gender inequalities.

Political, Social, and Cultural Impacts

There is an ongoing debate in the lesbian and gay literature about the value and implications of same-sex marriage and about the political, social, and cultural significance of marriage. The core debate is articulated around dichotomies of normalization and resistance, and is concerned with the extent to which same-sex marriage is the basis for a radical challenge to heteronormativity or if it represents the hegemony of heterosexual norms and values. Marriage, some argue, is the legitimate aim of lesbian and gay politics and is the most effective strategy for full lesbian and gay citizenship. This view conceptualizes marriage as symbolizing an economic, affective, and psychosocial bond that is freely entered into and understands heterosexual and same-sex relationships as essentially identical in nature. Advocates of this position sometimes argue that the legitimizing same-sex marriage could facilitate the modernizing of the institution of marriage in keeping with gender and sexual equality.

In contrast to this view, many feminist and queer critics argue that same-sex marriage represents the cultural dominance of heterosexual norms and values and ultimately threatens the creativity of lesbian and gay cultures of relating. Feminist critics argue that positing marriage as the indicator or facilitator of lesbian and gay citizenship is a naïve political strategy. They point out the role that the institution of marriage has historically played in the reproduction of patriarchal structures and unequal gender relations. Same-sex marriage, some feminist and queer critics argue, is an extension of social regulation and the desire for marriage, from this perspective, is rooted in outmoded and dubious ideals of commitment that enlightened and egalitarian heterosexual couples would themselves reject. Ultimately, some argue, same-sex marriage might lead to normative constructions of socially responsible (married) and irresponsible (unmarried) homosexuals, in much the same way as marriage has traditionally promoted gendered ideologies about how responsible men and women should act and relate, which have in turn supported men's economic and social dominance over women. Critics of same-sex marriage point to the danger of imposed rules that could stifle the creative potential for undoing gendered norms of relating that they see same-sex relationships as enabling.

Existing research illuminates the personal-political dilemmas that marriage presents for lesbians and gay men themselves. Although some same-sex couples embrace the idea of same-sex marriage for symbolizing and validating their relationship, other couples reject it on the basis that it mimics heterosexual models of relating. Others still express considerable ambivalence about the issue. Research suggests that such ambivalence stems from desires for creativity and validation that are sometimes experienced in conflicting ways. Many lesbians and gay men, for example, are keen to avoid mimicking heterosexual marriage and want to maintain the sense of personal agency and freedom they perceive their relationships to allow. At the same time, however, they want to have their relationships recognized and treated as equal to heterosexual ones, and because marriage-like arrangements are the traditionally sanctioned ways for recognizing relationships, their attraction is powerful. The ambivalence stemming from this is underlined by research that suggests that although most of its lesbians and gay participants wanted the right to marry, a majority would not marry given the opportunity. Ultimately, this ambivalence can be viewed as the precarious balance of perceived potential losses and gains: although marriage might facilitate a personal sense of recognition validation for the individuals and couples involved, it might also entail a loss of agency with respect to the ethics and practices of relating that has been hitherto necessitated by the lack of institutional supports and cultural guidelines.

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Changes in Tradition: The Differences in Same-Sex Marriage

Many studies suggest that the lack of existing supports and guidelines promotes the adoption of friendship ethics in same-sex couples. This in turn encourages a commitment to mutuality, independence, and equality that is argued to be distinct from an ethics of interdependence assumed in heterosexual relationships. Studies also suggest that sexual and emotional exclusiveness as the basis of commitment, and the primacy of the couple, tend to be more open to negotiation and less likely to be assumed in same-sex relationships. The issue of how same-sex couples affirm their commitments has also been studied, where the focus has been on ceremonies, traditions, and rituals that couples create themselves. These studies emphasize the theme of creativity, but also the issue of ambiguity. Although elements of conformity are evident in how same-sex relationships are celebrated and ritualized, couples often appear to challenge traditional ways of doing things. Some studies illustrate how lesbian and gay commitment ceremonies simultaneously indicate conformity to wider values (associated with heterosexual couple and family commitments) and introduce “queering” messages at crucial points. Studies also point to contradictory ways in which self-made ceremonies and rituals can be simultaneously normalizing and empowering.

Same-sex marriage represents relatively new social and personal possibilities, and it is impossible to say what its political and cultural impact or implications will ultimately be. But research on self-made rituals highlight the need for a nuanced analysis of how same-sex marriage might support or undo traditional (gendered) meanings of marriage or otherwise. In analyzing the issue, the changing nature and significance of heterosexual marriage itself should be considered. Several recent studies of family and intimate life have pointed out how the historical separation of marriage from the needs of reproduction have combined with women's increasing economic independence from men to—potentially at least—transform the meanings of heterosexual marriage. Some theorists cite statistics on divorce, cohabitation, single parenting, and solo living as evidence of the demise or fragility of the institution of heterosexual marriage. These statistics are, for some, indicative of how processes of detraditionalization and individualization have made marriage a “zombie” institution. For others, these statistics indicate how marriage is becoming merely one choice among others for how commitments in the late modern era are recognized and practiced. In this era, some theorists argue, heterosexual relationships are becoming more like homosexual ones in that they are relationships between economic, social, and intimate equals.

Conclusion

The relationship between how same-sex marriage has become a high-profile political issue and the changing nature of heterosexual marriage can be interpreted in various ways. On the one hand, some interpret the recognition of same-sex marriage as an attempt to reinvigorate or reinvent an ailing institution. From a related perspective, some suggest the issue can only be understood as one of the various ways in which welfare states are shifting social care responsibilities back onto individuals and their families "post" women's and sexual liberation. On the other hand, some view recognition of same-sex marriage as tacit cultural acceptance of how all kinds of relationships—heterosexual and homosexual, married or otherwise—must be defined and made anew by those who enter into them. Others still view recognition as movement from acknowledging how citizenship is gendered, to a deeper sense of understanding about how citizenship is also determined by positioning with respect to sexuality. Irrespective of how it is interpreted, the issue of same-sex marriage is becoming increasingly significant to debates about changing sexual and gendered relations in late modern societies.

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See also
Homosexuality; Lesbian; Marriage; Same-Sex Families

Further Readings

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