The impact of marriage equality on sexual minority women’s relationships with their families of origin

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Abstract
Support from family of origin is important to the health and well-being of sexual minority women (SMW) and structural stigma may impact that support. The recent extension of marriage rights to same-sex couples in all U.S. states provided an opportunity to examine whether this change in law would impact the relationship of SMW with their families of origin regarding their same-sex relationships, including marriage. Interviews with 20 SMW were conducted to their perceptions of how support from families of origin had been impacted by or changed since the U.S. Supreme Court decision (Obergefell v. Hodges, 135 S. Ct. 2584, 2015). Thematic analysis of the narrative responses revealed stories of continued family support; increases in acceptance or support; mixed support/rejection or unclear messages; “don’t ask, don’t tell” or silence; and, continued or increased family rejection. Most participant narratives included more than one theme. Implications for SMW health and relationships are discussed.

Keywords: bisexual women, family relationships, lesbian, marriage equality, same-sex relationships
The impact of marriage equality on relationships between sexual minority women and their family of origin

Introduction

Past research has found sexual minorities experience a wide range of reactions and support from their families of origin regarding their sexual identity and same-sex relationships. Many families, particularly when including extended families, respond to a sexual minority identity and same-sex relationships with a mix of accepting and rejecting attitudes (D'Augelli, Hershberger, & Pilkington, 1998; Lanutti, 2014; LaSala, 2010). Research suggests some families of origin become more accepting and supportive over time, while others remain rejecting and disapproving of sexual minority identities, and same-sex relationships in particular (D'Augelli, Grossman, & Starks, 2008; Roe, 2017; Ryan, Huebner, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2009). Given the importance of family support for individual and relational health and well-being for lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) youth and sexual minority adults (Bouris, Guilamo-Ramos, Pickard, Shiu, Loosier, Dittus, et al., 2010; Carastathis, Cohen, Kaczmarek, & Chang, 2016; Khaddouma, Norona, & Whitton, 2015), it is important to understand more about how family of origin support may change, or stay the same, in response to the recent major structural change legalizing marriage for same-sex couples (i.e., marriage equality).

Laws excluding same-sex couples from marriage are a visible example of structural stigma (Hatzenbuehler, 2016). From a socio-political perspective, changes in laws to recognize the civil marriage rights of same-sex couples could be expected to have an impact on social norms and behaviors (Kreitzer, Hamilton, & Tolbert, 2014), including family members’ attitudes toward and support of same-sex relationships (Badgett, 2011; Kennedy, Dalla, & Dressman, this volume; Lanutti, 2014). Marriage equality laws signal cultural inclusion and political and social
legitimacy (Hull, 2006), and expand the full citizenship of sexual minority individuals (Herek, 2006). In the context of changes in marriage laws, beginning in 2003 in Massachusetts and continuing through the U.S. Supreme Court decision legally mandating marriage equality in all 50 states (Obergefell v. Hodges, 135 S. Ct. 2584, 2015) in June 2015, we anticipate that families of origin may change how they view and interact with sexual minority family members.

The current study reports findings from qualitative interviews with 20 sexual minority women (SMW; i.e., lesbian, bisexual, and queer). The interviews included questions about how supportive participants perceived their families of origin to be about their sexual identity, their family’s reactions to marriage equality, and how those reactions impacted familial relationships. Thematic analysis of the narrative responses focused on discovering the impact of marriage equality on these relationships.

**Family Support for Same-Sex Relationships**

Structural stigmatization of same-sex relationships through marriage restrictions impact sexual minority individuals and members of their family of origin (Horne, Rostosky, & Riggle, 2011). Past research suggests non-marital relationship statuses did not have the same social legitimacy or meaning as marriage. For example, Rothblum, Balsam and Soloman (2011) found same-sex couples in civil unions in Vermont experienced more family support than couples not in civil unions, but less support than their heterosexual married siblings. Civil unions and domestic partnerships were available to same-sex couples, but their cultural meanings were different than marriage and often unclear to family members.

Qualitative studies have found that legal relationship recognition and marriage equality impact the relationships of same-sex couples and their families of origin. For example, in Lanutti’s interviews (2014), same-sex couples perceive marriage equality contributes to an
increase in family support of their relationships over time. This increase was attributed in part to the social legitimacy marriage added to their relationship. In Badgett’s (2009) cross-cultural interview studies in the Netherlands and the U.S. (Massachusetts), some same-sex couples reported feeling their relationship gained legitimacy in the eyes of their family after they got married. Other couples reported their families continued to oppose marriage equality and to reject their same-sex relationship. Kennedy et al. (this volume), interviewing 35 same-sex couples who were married before Obergefell v. Hodges decision, found that families had a range of reactions to the couples’ marriages, from increased legitimacy to increased rejection.

Marriage provides a framework, helping families understand same-sex relationships, and giving couples a greater sense of security and legitimacy in interactions with their families (Haas & Whitton, 2015; Lannutti, 2008; Shulman, Gotta, & Green, 2012). Yet, for other couples, marriage equality exposes conflicts or amplifies alienation from their families. For example, in Moore’s (2011) study of black lesbian couples, marriage fostered a personal sense of security; however, the sense of security felt tenuous when the couple visited their family, especially in states that did not recognize their marriage and where they might still face rejection of their relationship.

In a study of reactions of LGB adults and their heterosexual siblings after the U.S. Supreme Court’s decision in United States v Windsor [133 S.Ct. 2675 (2013), in which the federal government was required to recognize same-sex marriages], Clarke and colleagues (2016) found some heterosexual siblings were supportive of the decision and marriage equality while others were not. Lack of support caused family tension. Also, some heterosexual siblings express no opinion about the decision because they were relatively unaware of the Supreme Court action and meaning for their LGB sibling. A lack of awareness and knowledge may
dampen impact of changes in laws on family reactions and support for sexual minority individuals in same-sex relationships.

Quantitative studies of the impact of same-sex marriage and court decisions regarding same-sex marriage rights have focused on general public opinion (e.g., Flores & Barclay, 2015; Powell, Quadlin, & Pizmony-Levy, 2015; Tankard & Puluck, 2017), not family attitudes or behaviors. Most studies focusing on members of same-sex couples and their perceptions of family reactions were conducted prior to the Supreme Court decision resulting in marriage equality in all 50 U.S. states. The current study used a sample of SMW who were single, dating, in committed relationships, or married, interviewed after Obergefell v Hodges (2015). The primary aim of this study was to explore SMW’s perceptions of their families’ support and reactions to marriage equality, including how marriage equality has impacted the way their family responds to their current or potential relationships.

**Method**

**Participants**

Participants were chosen from respondents to an online screening survey (total sample pool n = 548). Participants were screened for eligibility (age and sexual identity) based on responses to demographic questions in an on-line screening survey. Interviews were conducted with 20 participants, selected purposively to include a diverse range of experiences (e.g., race/ethnicity, sexual identity, relationship status, geographic location).

Women who participated in the study lived in 15 different states, representing all four census regions in the U.S.: West (California, Colorado, Hawaii, Idaho, Washington), Midwest (Indiana, Ohio), South (Georgia, Maryland, North Carolina, South Carolina, Texas, Virginia), and Northeast (Maine, Pennsylvania). They ranged in age from 23 to 75 years old. The majority of the sample (n = 8) were 23-35 years old; four participants were 35-44, four were 45-54, and
four were age 55 or older. The sample included women who were single or dating (n = 7), in committed relationships (without legal recognition; n = 6), or married (n = 7). All women in the study identified as “female,” although one participant identified as “female, gender non-conforming.” More than one-half of sample identified as lesbian (n = 12), four as bisexual, and four as queer. Racial and ethnic identity included Asian-American/Native Hawaiian (n = 3), Black/African-American (n = 5), Latina/x (n = 3), and White (n = 8); one participant identified as both White and African-American. Educational background included eight participants with advanced graduate degrees, eight with bachelor’s degree; three with some college, and one with a high school degree.

Procedure

An announcement for an online screening survey invited lesbian, bisexual, and queer identified women, ages 18 and older, who were interested in sharing their thoughts and life experiences regarding recent changes in marriage laws and other policies to participate. The announcement was distributed via Facebook (e.g., Lesbians Unite), Twitter, listservs, and online publications (e.g., Curve Magazine and Autostraddle). Potential participants were contacted based on information provided in the screening survey.

Recruitment prioritized diversity of the sample pool in terms of age, racial and ethnic identity, educational level, relationship status, and state of residence. Initially, a total of 67 women completed the short survey focused on collecting demographics for screening. The majority of these respondents were identified as White, married, and had post graduate degrees. Nine women were selected to participate in in-depth interviews based on their demographic characteristics. A second survey, containing the screening questions, along with questions about the outcome of the 2016 election and marriage equality, yielded 481 volunteers. Eleven
participants were chosen from this sample pool based on characteristics under-represented in the initial nine interviews. Interviews were conducted until data saturation occurred (i.e., no new information or thematic categories emerged), including repetition of information within subgroups, such as non-married participants.

Participants were given a choice of receiving information about the interview and informed consent materials via email, text, or a link to a webpage (all study materials were approved by IRBs at the University of Illinois-Chicago and San Jose State University). A mutually agreeable time was scheduled for the telephone or online audio or video interview. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight participants in June and July 2016, and with 12 participants between December, 2016 and April, 2017. Interviews were conducted by three of the authors (Riggle, Drabble, & Wootton) and a trained, supervised graduate student. Interviews lasted an average of 60 minutes. Participants were given a $30 Amazon gift card in appreciation of their participation. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim by professional transcribers.

Participants were asked if they had read the consent form and invited to ask questions before they consented to participate. The semi-structured interview asked participants a series of general prompts, including: “In general, how do you get along with your family of origin, and how much support do you feel from them, for your identity and your relationship(s)?” “Do you know how members of your family reacted to the change in marriage laws? Did they share anything with you?” “How do you think the change in marriage laws has impacted how your family treats you and your relationship(s)?” The interviewer defined family as “not just your parents, but including your extended family” in order to get a broader understanding of family
interactions. Responses to these interview prompts were extracted from the transcripts and used in the current analysis.

**Analysis**

Responses were considered to be reflective of the experiences of the participants. Therefore, experiential-based thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013) was used to understand the responses of participants in the context of the interview. Given that participants represented a range of ages and relationship statuses, and lived in states that recognized same-sex marriages at different times, analyses were conducted on two separate questions. First, the responses were read to understand the perceptions of general support and reactions of family of origin to the participant’s sexual identity and relationships. Second, the responses were read to understand perceptions of family of origin reactions to changes in marriage law and whether there had been any changes in how family had treated the participant or their relationships.

The three research team members who conducted interviews (Riggle, Drabble, & Wootton) conducted the primary analysis. First, the coders divided and independently coded interviews by reading each participant’s responses and making descriptive notes about the meanings communicated in the response. Then, initial notes about emerging categories were reviewed by all coders, revised for consistency across the responses, and thematic summaries of the descriptions and their meanings were drafted. The thematic summaries of the coders were compared and a consensus was reached on a provisional set of themes related to each question. Differences in provisional themes were discussed among coders until agreement was achieved. The coders then re-read and re-coded the responses to ensure consistency in categories and to verify whether meanings were adequately represented by the themes. The themes were finalized and consensus reached on their definitions for presentation in the results (Braun & Clarke, 2013).
Creswell and Poth (2017) suggest using at least two validation strategies in a qualitative study. The two primary validation strategies in the current study centered on engaging in reflexivity and having a peer debriefing or review of the research process. First, we continued an open critical dialog about the emerging data and each of our perspectives. Specifically, the first four authors met regularly throughout the data analysis process to challenge one another about similarities and differences in interpretation and to reflect on the ways in which individual biases, values, and experiences may have influenced analysis. Second, as a final check on the stability and trustworthiness of the data, the findings were examined and verified by the last author who had not previously participated in data analytic activities.

**Results**

Analyses revealed five narrative themes of family reactions to marriage equality. The themes reflected: (a) supportive family responses; (b) increases in family support and acceptance; (c) mixed family support and rejection or unclear messages from family, including struggles to be accepting and supportive; (d) family engages in “don’t ask, don’t tell” or does not talk about sexual identity or marriage equality issues; and, (e) family continues or increases rejection. The themes are discussed and illustrated below. See Table One for a summary of participant demographics and thematic codes of responses.

Most participants (n = 16) mentioned more than one theme in their response; one participant mentioned all five themes. Participants frequently contextualized responses with stories about their long-term relationships with family and changes or evolution over time. Several participants were married (to same-sex partners) before the marriage equality decision by the U.S. Supreme Court in 2015. These participants reflected on previous changes in family reactions to their marriage as well as current reactions.

**Family Supportive**
While 13 participants made direct statements about at least one or more family members being supportive of marriage equality in response to the Supreme Court decision, only three participants (4, 17, 20) reported their family had been totally supportive since they disclosed their sexual identity (came out), with support continuing in response to marriage equality. For example, Participant 17 explained she grew up in Connecticut where same-sex marriage became legal in 2008 and same-sex families were “normal”; her parents were supportive of her identity and marriage equality.

For the other 10 participants who reported supportive responses, their narratives also included other themes indicating a range of responses across various family members. For example, Participant 12 reported that her sister, who had always been supportive, gave her a hug and cried with her when the Supreme Court marriage equality decision was announced, while other members of her family remained silent on the topic.

Some participants experienced family members actively sharing in the celebration of marriage equality. Participant 5 remembered her mother, “texted me, I think it was the 2013 Supreme Court Decision, overturning DOMA. She texted me early that morning that she had just heard about it on the radio and that she was really excited about it.” Her mother’s support continued after the 2015 decision and she reported feeling like her mother now has an easier time telling people she has a gay daughter because of marriage equality. Extended family also provided support. Participant 14 noted,

[My] nephews, who are all in their late 20s and 30s, they are all like, 'Yeah, you go.' And I told them that we’re going to have a big ceremony at the end of March, and they’re like, 'Oh cool, that’ll be great.'
Some participants reported family support for marriage equality based on the desire for their sexual minority family member to be happy. This might occur despite personal or political objections. For example, Participant 14 also shared a story about her conservative father telling her, “Well honey, if you want to get married I’ll be there for you,’ so I think his love for me is stronger than his politics.”

For two participants, family reactions and support were perceived as being linked to having other openly LGB family members or friends. For example, Participant 19 made this connection, “I know my parents were really stoked about it. When I say my parents, I mean my mom and my stepdad. They were actively very excited about it. They have a lot of friends who are gay couples.”

**Support or Acceptance Increased**

Seven participants shared stories of family support or acceptance of their relationship increasing after marriage equality. Participants who experienced increased family acceptance attributed this change to the legitimacy conferred on their relationship by marriage equality. This included single and dating participants whose family recognized the participant now has the option of marriage.

For many participants, an increase in support was the culmination of an evolution of family attitudes that began prior to the marriage equality decision. Participant 8 described the evolution of her Irish Catholic parents’ support for marriage equality,

[When I came out in 2010] same-sex marriage was not really a natural thing quite yet. I think that both of my parents were really grieving a life that they had planned for me or thought that I would have. I think that was really hard, especially in their Irish Catholic community. There's no gay families visible. I think that they didn't wish that for me. Then
I would say things started to shift when I met my current partner. It probably took a year and a half. I think that they probably had a moment where they realized that [either] we are onboard with it, or we're not going to have our daughter in our life in the way that we want. By the time we got married, my parents were super, super supportive [of marriage equality].

However, some participants felt their family had become more supportive following marriage equality and attributed this more directly to the change in laws and the social message that their relationship was just like their heterosexual peers. Participant 3 reported, “It's possible that it gives further legitimacy to our relationship maybe, but I couldn't be sure about it. I have no doubt they will come to the wedding now when we get married, so that's a tangible impact.” Participant 6 shared the impression that her family takes her relationship and marriage “more seriously” following marriage equality. She elaborated,

There's more of an attention to the fact that we are a union, that our decisions about things, how we spend our time, where we go on vacation or where we might spend time for the holidays, that that is a joint decision. There is more of a recognition that being in this committed relationship and now being married and now being also parents to a child together means that everything about how we move and what we do and decisions that we make are joint. They're recognizing that both of us are who they're talking to and will be clear about that. In that sense, yes. I think it has changed some of how our families interact with us.

Participant 15 had a similar experience with her mother and aunts,

Post-legalization, I certainly felt much freer to be open about my relationship. I think my mom especially, after there was this opportunity or possibility of getting married, was a
lot more supportive. And asking, like, she was very clearly asking about my wife and the 
kids, whereas before it was hard for me to say how she viewed our relationship. Even my 
aunts would ask. And they never did before. It’s not like they didn’t care, but it’s just 
now that we’re married and we live together and we’re doing this family thing, it’s a 
much more-- I mean they treat us more like a family.

Mixed Support and Rejection or Unclear Messages

More than one-half of the participants (n = 12) reported a mixture of support and 
rejection or unclear messages from family members. For example, Participant 15 explained the 
responses of different family members,

I feel like my two sisters and my mom are completely supportive of marriage equality. I 
just feel like my brother is a little more guarded. He has some very traditional ideas. …I 
don’t really know—he’s polite in the same way my dad was. I think he’s also a 
homophobe though. But he won’t say it to me.

Most of the narratives of mixed responses included stories of family members evolving 
over time. Participant 13 explained that one of her sisters had refused to attend the participant’s 
holy union ceremony but later actively lobbied the legislature for civil unions for same-sex 
couples; however, she was uncertain about whether the sister supported marriage equality. The 
responses of two other participants indicated uncertainty about how supportive or rejecting their 
family was. For example, Participant 9 offered, “It’s nothing my family discusses, but they do 
love me. …Nothing negative, nothing positive, just ‘here’s the situation.’”

Participant 1 thought that the marriage equality decision was causing her family to 
rethink their reaction to her coming out but their support was still uncertain. She explained,
They are very liberal oriented in their politics, but on a personal level it was hard for them to accept me. I think when the [change in law] first happened they didn’t really know any gay people and so it’s like ‘yea, marriage equality’…then I came out and they realized, oh my gosh, we know a gay person and now we have to watch how we talk and how we act and be concerned because it actually affects some of their family. This is new to them…like them understanding their daughter can still get married.

Some participants perceived that family members were struggling with their reactions after the marriage equality decision. Participant 7 talked about her mother,

I’d say she’s battling, but I don’t know that she’s battling. She wanted to be supportive, but also has been a little passive aggressive at times. I’d say she’s waiting to hear that I’m getting married again at some point, [but] I don’t discuss much about my personal life with her. I think that most likely my family would treat my relationship the same…my future wife would just have the same level of disrespect as everybody else’s.

Silence or “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell”

Eleven participants reported that some or all of their family did not talk marriage equality. This silence included an absence of discussion of their sexual identity and their relationship (dating, committed, or married). Some participants felt angry that their family had nothing to say about marriage equality; others were resigned to the silence or even avoided the topic themselves, in part to avoid conflict and confrontation. Discomfort with the lack of communication was often linked to feeling alienated from family or creating boundaries and keeping distance from family.

Participant 2 actively avoided hearing her family’s reaction to the marriage equality decision: “It makes me feel more hesitant to talk to them about things. If it comes on the news
and we're all around, I want to leave. I don't want to deal with it.” Participant 18 reported that her children, “when the marriage thing came up, they had questions about that but they don’t believe in it. So consequently, we don’t talk about it.” Participant 10, whose family does not accept her relationship with her partner, shared,

    I’m okay not talking to them about [marriage equality], because I know how they feel about it and they know how I feel about it. So, unless they change their minds, like I would want to know that, but also I’m perfectly content not talking about.

When asked about her family’s reaction to marriage equality, Participant 12 indicated that, with the exception of a supportive sister, “they didn’t say nothing directly, I got more feedback with friends on Facebook than my own family.” Participant 14 reported her father and sister were supportive of the change in marriage laws, but she was still hesitant to talk with her brother about it:

    Well to be honest, I haven’t talked to my brother. Because I’m nervous. I don’t know how he’s going to react, because he’s got a South Carolina mentality, in the stereotypical way. And so I don’t know how that’s going to go. He knows I’m gay. And I think he sort of feels like, you know, as long as I don’t make it obvious or anything, he’s okay with it. But I could be wrong. We’ll see.

**Rejection Continued or Worse** Seven participants reported some level of rejection by family. Participants with stories of rejection also consistently reported dynamics of "don’t ask, don’t tell" or silence in their narratives. However, in these cases silence was accompanied by verbal and nonverbal communications that were openly hostile to marriage equality or disapproving of same-sex relationships.
For some participants, family members who opposed marriage equality became more vocal about their opposition after the Supreme Court decision. Participant 2 reflected on her family’s response to both the marriage equality decision and North Carolina’s HB2 (which forced people to use public restrooms according to their “sex assigned at birth” instead of their gender identity and expression and prohibited local governments from adding sexual orientation and gender identity to their non-discrimination policies),

I think especially now that I'm back in North Carolina, it feels like HB2 has given people a license to be more vocal with their hateful thoughts and their opinions about what LGBTQ people are like. When gay topics come up [such as marriage equality], they’re very inflammatory just calling people the F word. I'm sitting here, like, ‘You're making all these assumptions, and you're sitting here looking at one and you wouldn't even know it’.

When asked about her family’s reaction to marriage equality, Participant 11 inferred rejection based on her families attitudes and behaviors,

When the law changed, I didn't hear a peep from any of them. It's a little bit disappointing, but I've grown used to that kind of response from them. My family is, they're pretty conservative Catholics and they're relatively conservative socially. And so I don't think they really approve of same sex relationships. They know that I'm with my wife who obviously for many years was my partner. And we went up to visit my family a few times together and they were cordial towards her, but they never really acknowledged our relationship and certainly never acknowledged the marriage.

**Discussion**
Major changes in policies, such as marriage equality, may reduce structural stigma and impact individual attitudes. However, the removal of a structural stigma does not eliminate social stigma or necessarily change individual attitudes—immediately or over time (see Tankard & Paluck, 2017; see also Haines, Boyer, Giovanazzi & Galupo, this volume). Participants in our study reported a range of responses from their family of origin. Many participants had already experienced an evolution of support from family members before the marriage equality decision (e.g., Kennedy et al., this volume; cf., LaSala, 2010) and some perceived increased support, acceptance, or positive responses following marriage equality. However, marriage equality did not translate into greater familial support or acceptance for all participants.

Many participants in the study reported a lack of communication with family about marriage equality. Although participants perceived changes in law had important implications for their lives and relationships, their family did not acknowledge this important structural change. Some participants found this hurtful, while others indicated this was consistent with a family’s past behavior and therefore was expected. Sometimes this was accompanied by optimism or hope the family would continue to evolve and become more supportive eventually.

The difference between legal acceptance and family acceptance may become more evident following the change in marriage laws, because it highlights the lack of family support. Social support, including familial support, is important for sexual minority women and same-sex couples (Rostosky & Riggle, 2017a; 2017b). In the changing legal context, continued lack of family support may contribute health disparities among sexual minority women, such as higher risk for substance abuse, depression, and lower self-reported general health (e.g., Everett, Hatzenbuehler, & Hughes, 2016; Feinstein, Wadsworth, Davila, & Goldfried, 2014; see also Hatzenbuehler, McLaughlin, Keyes, & Hasin, 2010, for impact of marriage laws on health).
Changes in laws and social acceptance are often recursive, making it difficult to pinpoint, “which came first?” Attitudes toward same-sex relationships and marriage equality have changed rapidly over the past two decades in the United States (Pew Research Center, May 12, 2016). Relatively little time has elapsed since the full implementation of marriage equality in all U.S. states; however, our findings provide some evidence that this policy has had an impact on relationships between sexual minority women and their families of origin, for better or worse. These changes may reflect evolution within a family as well as more general social and legal changes. For individuals in this sample who were married prior to marriage equality in all 50 U.S. states, family support had often already evolved in response to that event.

Changes in marriage laws are a signal of more general social legitimacy of same-sex relationships. However, changes in laws may not immediately result in improved attitudes toward marriages or relationships of same-sex couples. It may even result in what some of our participants experienced as increased rejection or “backlash” (see Flores & Barclay, 2016).

The recognition of marriages of same-sex couples supports the use of the same language and cultural scripts used for heterosexual relationships and marriages. This may promote acceptance of same-sex couple relationships, as experienced by some of the participants in this study. Changes in marriage laws may also change the target of disapproval of same-sex relationships from the family member specifically to laws and the political system at the broader level of the system. This could result in either improved familial relationships or create increased conflict.

The assumption that families evolve and eventually become supportive was only partially evident in the narratives of respondents. Many families engage in a “don’t ask, don’t tell” silence around sexual identity and same-sex relationships. This may cause tension for same-sex
partnered or same-sex attracted family members who feel unable to express their identity or talk openly about their relationship. Lannutti (2013) explored how married and engaged same-sex couples regulate privacy and disclosure in interactions with family members in the context of same-sex marriage. Lannutti found that decisions to marry were often a catalyst for changing "rules" related to privacy, such as increased acknowledgement of the couple's relationship in communications among family members. At the same time, rejection of efforts by couples to change family rules were often experienced as challenging and hurtful.

Individual participants in the current study, regardless of relationship status, described feeling constrained or hurt by their family’s silence or "don't talk" rules. Even among unmarried participants, a family norm of silence about marriage equality contributed to feelings of alienation. Others experienced a continuation of a mixture of family support, rejection, and silence. These mixed responses, while often containing support, did not convey full acceptance or support and thus may still create negative feelings and risks for well-being. While not discussed by participants in these interviews, marriage equality may also lead to lower levels of support for unmarried couples or individuals because of the application of social norms to same-sex couples (see Lannutti, this volume).

The sample included 12 participants whose self-identity was African-American, Latina/x, Asian-American, or Native Hawaiian. These individuals were more likely to report experiencing rejection, in conjunction with family silence or engaging in “don’t ask, don’t tell.” Those who experienced rejection often cited cultural reasons related to their racial or ethnic background, including religious objections by their family. On the other hand, five of these individuals reported positive experiences with family reactions, including continued family support or increases in support. Thus, it is important to recognize that while ethnic/racial minority families
may be more likely to engage in rejecting behaviors (e.g. parental rejection of LGB youth, Richter, Lindahl, & Malik, 2017), there are also stories of family support. Future research that give greater contextualization to the responses ethnic/racial minority families is needed.

**Limitations and Future Research**

This study included 20 women from a range of backgrounds. As with any interview study with a limited number of participants, generalizations cannot be made based on any specific demographic characteristics of the participants. Further research with samples of significant numbers of participants of different identities is needed to assess the impact of these identities on family relationships. In addition, more in-depth study of familial interactions may highlight potential causes of family reactions, such as the religious background of family (a factor mentioned by several participants in this study).

This sample included only sexual minority women; samples of sexual minority men may give additional insights into family relationships, including the possible role of gender. In the U.S., same-sex female couples have been more likely to marry than same-sex male couples (New York Times, 2016). It is unclear whether this statistic will change or how it impacts the interactions of sexual minority men with their families around marriage equality. Future research would need to distinguish between changes in family relationships associated with changes in law versus changes in sexual minority men’s behaviors or attitudes post marriage equality (see Umberson, Thomeer, & Lodge, 2015). Additionally, since marriage equality had different impacts for transgender individuals, future study that focuses on the impact of marriage equality on relationships between transgender individuals and their families is needed.

Changes in marriage laws did not solve the problem of lack of family support for all sexual minority women in this study. Many participants faced silence about the issue, and some
experienced explicit rejection. Minority stress (including rejection) originating at the family level may have a negative impact on women’s same-sex relationships as well as their health and well-being (Aranda, Matthews, Hughes, Muramatsu, Wilsnack, Johnson, & Riley, 2015; Puckett, Woodward, Mereish, & Pantalone, 2015; Reczek, 2015; Rostosky & Riggle, 2017b; Swendener & Woodell, 2016). This is an ongoing issue that needs to be studied over time to determine the full impact of legal change on broader socio-cultural change and changes in support within families.
References


Kennedy, H. R., Dalla, R. L., & Dressman, S.. (this volume). “We are two of the lucky ones”: Experiences with marriage and well-being for same-sex couples. *Journal of Homosexuality*.


http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/2329496514562964

http://doi.org/10.1089/lgbt.2013.0024


http://doi.org/10.1177/1066480716679651


http://doi.org/10.1111/jomf.12178
### Table 1

Participant demographics and thematic codes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ID</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Highest Degree</th>
<th>Sexual Identity</th>
<th>Relationship Status</th>
<th>State</th>
<th>Theme Codes</th>
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<tr>
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<td>25</td>
<td>Latina</td>
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<td>Dating</td>
<td>CA</td>
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<td>Graduate</td>
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<td>ID</td>
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<td>WA</td>
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<td>MD</td>
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<td>M</td>
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<td>BA</td>
<td>Bisexual/Queer</td>
<td>Separated/divorced</td>
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<td>S, I, M</td>
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### SMW RELATIONSHIPS WITH FAMILIES OF ORIGIN

<table>
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<th>No.</th>
<th>Age</th>
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<th>Gender</th>
<th>Sexual Orientation</th>
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<th>State</th>
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<td>GA</td>
<td>S</td>
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</table>

*Note: S = Support; I = Increased support; M = Mixture of support and rejection or unclear messages; D = Don’t ask, don’t tell/Silence; R = Rejection*