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The Psychology of Same-Sex Marriage Opposition

How does opposing same-sex marriage affect heterosexual and same-sex attracted
Australians?

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Same-sex marriage and the need for Australian research

The introduction of legal recognition of same-sex marriage in many parts of Europe and the United States has prompted psychologists to investigate how opposing same sex marriage (whether the opposition is coming from the government, media or acquaintances) impacts same-sex attracted people.

Marriage is as an institution that is linked with health and wellbeing, as well as financial and social support (Wienke & Hill, 2009). As such, a number of psychologists have argued that same-sex marriage may be protective for same-sex attracted people, improving their psychological and physical health. Opposition to legalizing same-sex marriage, however, also sends a powerful message to sexual minority youths and adults – and with the marriage debate raging in Australia these people are consistently exposed to arguments from both sides of the debate.

In the preliminary research findings reported herein, we present data from Australian participants looking at this issue. Specifically, we asked, what impact does being exposed to OPPOSITION to Same-Sex Marriage have on same-sex attracted Australians? We also wanted to go further, and find out how heterosexual Australians responded to this opposition.

What did we do?

It was important for us to get good, reliable data on how opposition to, or support for same-sex marriage impacts on same-sex attracted and heterosexual Australians. We therefore designed a study in which 1/3 of participants read three articles arguing against same-sex marriage, 1/3 of participants read three articles arguing in support of same-sex marriage, and the final 1/3 read three articles that were unrelated to same-sex marriage. We also asked participants to tell us **how often they had contact with people who opposed same-sex marriage**, allowing us to look for an association between long-term exposure to opposition to same-sex marriage and health and happiness.

Who took part in our study?

We created an online experiment, and disseminated it widely across same-sex focused Internet sites (e.g., samesame.com), mailing lists and facebook groups. To recruit heterosexual participants we mailed out links to the survey and posted links on public facebook sites (e.g., 'Australia' and various sporting and community organization sites). Preliminary sample size = 810.

- 514 Same-sex attracted (63.5%); 296 Opposite-sex attracted (36.5%)
- Aged 18-77 (Mean Age = 30.80, SD = 10.83)
- 534 Female (66%), 275 Male (34%), 1 Intersex
- 50% of participants had completed some tertiary education
- 75% of participants earned \$60,000 per year or less

What impact does OPPOSING same-sex marriage have on same-sex attracted people?

When compared with same-sex Australians who were randomly exposed to articles supporting same-sex marriage, those randomly **exposed to articles opposing same-sex marriage** were statistically significantly:

- More likely to report feeling **negative and depressed** (e.g., they were more likely to agree that they felt distressed, upset, guilty, scared, afraid, ashamed and nervous)
- More likely to report that they felt **lonely**
- More likely to report that they **felt weak and powerless**
- And less likely to report that they were feeling happy or positive (e.g., they were *less* likely to report that they felt strong, enthusiastic, proud, active, inspired and excited)

Same-sex attracted Australians who reported having **frequent contact with people who actively opposed same-sex marriage** were statistically significantly more likely to:

- Report **self-hatred** (e.g., agree to statements such as “Sometimes I feel that I might **be better off dead** than have same-sex attractions”)
- Feel that having a happy, healthy relationship was **not** a possibility for them (e.g., agree to statements such as “A long-term, loving, committed relationship cannot happen between same-sex attracted people”)
- Expect to be **physically or verbally assaulted** on the basis of their sexual orientation (i.e., they were more likely to expect to be beaten, kicked, punched, spat on, sexually harassed and insulted)
- Feel unsatisfied with their life and **hopeless about the future** (i.e., they were more likely to agree with statements such as “I feel that my **life has been a failure**”)

By sharp contrast, same-sex attracted participants who had frequent contact with people who **actively supported** same-sex marriage had greater satisfaction with their lives, more hope about their romantic relationships, and less self-hatred.

What impact does OPPOSING same-sex marriage have on heterosexual people?

Thus far the data shows that opposition to same-sex marriage has a very real and immediate effect on same-sex attracted Australians. We were very aware, however, that it was important to see how support for and opposition to same-sex marriage might impact heterosexual Australians.

Our findings show that similar to same-sex attracted Australians, positive and supportive news articles made heterosexual Australians feel better than did negative or oppositional articles.

We were also interested to see how **close and extended contact with people that opposed same-sex marriage** might be related to heterosexual Australians’ homophobia. Heterosexual Australians who reported having contact with people who **actively opposed same-sex marriage** were statistically significantly more likely to:

- **Display anti-gay prejudice** (e.g., agree to statements such as “Lesbians are sick” and “Male homosexuals should be condemned”)
- Indicate that they would go out of their way to avoid coming into contact with same-sex attracted people
- And report that they would feel anxious about interacting with a same-sex attracted person

Conversely, those that had frequent contact with people who **supported** same-sex marriage were more likely to experience empathy for same-sex attracted Australians, and reported less homophobia.

What does this research mean?

In simple language, we show that same-sex attracted Australians who read articles opposing same-sex marriage (a relatively minor experience compared to Governmental opposition) reported feeling distressed, lonely and powerless. In addition, those who had frequent contact with people who opposed same-sex marriage reported more self-hatred, fear about attack, and less hope about relationships.

Reading articles opposing same-sex marriage also had negative consequences for heterosexual Australians. That is, they felt less positive and more negative when they were exposed to these articles. Further, heterosexual Australians who were in frequent contact with people who opposed same-sex marriage reported more anti-gay prejudice, anxiety and a desire to live in segregation from same-sex attracted people.

How do our findings fit with previous research?

The findings from our study on the psychological impact of opposition to same-sex marriage are consistent with previous Australian and international findings. For example, past research has shown that being denied the right to marry makes same-sex attracted people feel that they are inferior to or somehow “less than” their heterosexual counterparts (Dane, Masser, MacDonald, & Duck, 2010; see also Herek, 2006 for a review). Further, a recent 2-wave study by Hatzenbuehler et al. (2011), found that the incidence of diagnosed mental disorders among same-sex attracted people living in US states that have a ban on same-sex marriage had significantly increased compared with those living in states with no such ban. For example, there was a 36.6% increase in mood disorders and a 248.2% increase in generalized anxiety disorders. No similar increases were found among heterosexual individuals living in either type of state.

Concluding comments

The preliminary results that we have presented in this report speak directly to the same-sex marriage debate. They show that opposition to same-sex marriage has a direct, immediate, and negative effect on the health and wellbeing of the people to whom marriage is denied. If we extrapolate from our current results, it is possible that the Government’s current stance on same-sex marriage may have a marked and harmful effect on the health and happiness of sexual minority individuals at large, as well as increase intolerance towards this group among a sector of the Australian population.

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