Generational differences in attitudes to gay marriage

Word count: 3379

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Abstract

This paper considers arguments on the merits of legalising gay relationships in the light of qualitative data collected from interviews with 97 gay men. Interviews were collected from men aged 19–87 who were recruited in nine major cities: Auckland, Hong Kong, London, Los Angeles, Manchester, Melbourne, Mumbai, New York, and Sydney. I made contact with many of the interviewees through personal introductions and also Internet links. The interviews occurred between July 2009 and March 2011 and took place in all nine cities, as well as a small group of men I interviewed on Skype. Sixty-two men or almost two-thirds of this international sample said they were in favour of formal recognition of same-sex relationships, including gay marriage. Analysis of these men’s views showed that men aged 51 or older more likely to oppose gay marriage than younger men. The older men who opposed gay marriage tended to argue that it was a concession to heteronormativity and that gay culture has become too mainstream in a ‘family values’ way. The young men who argued in favour of gay marriage drew on two principal narratives, namely (a) relational and legal/property equality, and (b) recognition of relationship success.
One minor theme in evidence was support for gay marriage as a continuation of some men’s involvement in the gay liberation project.

**Key words:** civil partnership/union, generation, gay, marriage

**Introduction**

Social agitation for gay marriage rights gained momentum in the mid 1990s when the worst of the HIV-AIDS epidemic was over in the West. Canadian historian Angus McLaren (1999: 199) argues that at that time, the ‘havoc of AIDS’ created for many gay people in North America, a ‘nostalgia for family life’, and US historian George Chauncey (2004: 3) maintains that it was the lesbian and gay baby boom together with the AIDS crisis that provided the impetus for the gay marriage project in North America. Regarding the effect of HIV-AIDS on gay men’s personal and communal lives, I would argue that the experience many gay men had during the HIV-AIDS crisis in western countries, of being excluded from their partner’s funeral or when hospitals gave priority to members of dying men’s birth families, not their partners, contributed to the determination of gay-marriage activists to seek legislative certainty and security for gay, couple relationships. The Dutch historian Gert Hekma makes a stronger, political argument, which is that, as the HIV-AIDS epidemic created what he calls a ‘struggle for monogamy’, the irony for gay men was that, being denied the right to marry, they were thus shut out of the ‘institution that
It was this realisation in the 1990s that spurred on the movement for marriage equality in Europe (Hekma, 99–100).

As has often been the case when social reform has been required in the West, it is the Nordic countries that lead the way, followed by more socially enlightened countries elsewhere. In 1989, for example, Denmark passed legislation to provide ‘registered partnership for same-sex couples’, which was followed by Norway, Sweden, and Iceland in the 1990s and Finland in 2001. In 2005, Britain did the same, creating ‘civil partnership’ status for same-sex couples. The first country to provide for same-sex marriage was Holland, which did so in 2001. By 2008, Belgium, Canada, South Africa, and Spain had passed legislation allowing same-sex marriage (Polikoff, 2008: 110–20), and by 2013, the same rights will apply to same-sex couples in France, who will have the right also to adopt children (Age 5 July 2012). In countries where neoliberalism has a stronger hold, such as Australia and the United States, the response has been to pass legislation restating the heterosexual nature of marriage and its primacy.

Two principal arguments are made in favour of legalising same-sex marriage, both of which relate to equality in terms of property and relational rights. The first argument concerns equal property and legal rights and is a strong feature of the work of Martha Nussbaum (1999: 201–3) who argues that a common-sense approach to marriage equality must lead reasonable people to accept that gay men are entitled to access to the same financial benefits that married heterosexuals enjoy. In the USA, these benefits are directly connected with an individual’s marital statues and this, argues
Nussbaum, means it is inequitable that gay people are denied them because their relationships are not recognised in law in the same way that is marriage.

The second argument centres on equal relational status and recognition and has its genesis in the work of Georg Simmel who argued that by its existence as a privileged social institution, marriage creates a hierarchy of relationships, ‘a direct superiority of the [married] group with respect to a group without marriage’ (Simmel, 1999: 291). An associated argument relates to the prestige associated with marriage in the eyes of many young straight couples today and by extension many young gay couples. In the US context, Andrew Cherlin (2004, 855–6) argues that, as marriage has transformed, the ceremony is now no longer organised by and for the family and that, ‘the wedding … has become an important symbol of the partners’ personal achievements and a stage in their self development’. Carol Smart (2008) found evidence of a similar desire among a group of 54 same-sex people she interviewed in Britain to use marriage as a marker of relational success.

Scholars from sociology and allied disciplines have been researching same-sex marriage since the 1980s with increased activity in the late 1990s and even more so in the last decade (Boswell, 1995; Plummer, 1981; Rolfe and Peel, 2011; Shipman and Smart, 2007). Some, like Carol Smart (2008), have focussed on the experiences of both lesbians and gay men. My perspective in this paper is on the experience of an international group of gay men. While struggles around sexuality, freedom of expression and relational equality have been the basis for political coalitions between lesbians and gay men, they have distinctive, gendered attitudes towards marriage. My sociological research is gendered—thus my exclusive intellectual interests in
homosexual men, socially, culturally, and politically. The social conditions and social contexts of the homosexual man are qualitatively distinctive. In the sample of gay men I used for this paper, it was among men aged 31 and younger that I found strongest support for gay marriage, while men over 51 were most likely to oppose it. These generational differences between gay men’s attitudes to gay marriage are the central focus of this paper.

The study

The non-representative sample on which this paper is based comprises 97 men recruited from nine international cities, namely, Auckland, Hong Kong, London, Los Angeles, Manchester, Melbourne, Mumbai, New York, Sydney. The interviews—which were conducted as part of larger research for a book—took place between July 2009 and April 2011. I interviewed gay men from all social classes and a variety of ethnic backgrounds. Participants’ ages ranged from 19 to 87. There were 25 men (or 26 per cent) aged over 60 years, 41 men (or 42 per cent) aged between 40 and 59, and 31 men (or 32 per cent) aged 39 or younger. There was a large age range amongst participants in this study, including 20 men in their late teens and 20s and six men in their 80s with every decade in between represented. The 23 men in their 40s comprised the largest single age group. Ethnically, while the bulk of men from this sample had Anglo-Saxon or Anglo-Celtic backgrounds, the interviewees in this study included five distinct ethnic minorities, comprising one Aboriginal Australian man, five African- or Caribbean-American men, ten Chinese men, 11 men with a South-Asian background, and three Maori—or a total of 30 men.
I made contact with many of the interviewees through personal introductions and recommendations and via tentative links I made on the Internet. In the USA, the website called Craigslist was useful for making preliminary contacts but it was a chance connection with another author in the field that put me in touch with the majority of men I interviewed in New York and Los Angeles. After that, my personal e-mail account and the website Facebook were the means I used to keep in touch and confirm appointments. In Australia, England, Hong, India, and New Zealand, I made contact with potential interviewees by way of contacts that academics and activists provided me. Again, once contact was made, both my private e-mail account and Facebook were helpful for maintaining contact and setting up meetings for interview.

The interviews took place between July 2009 and March 2011 and occurred in a variety of settings including large and small urban parks, hotel lobbies, my hotel room, interviewees’ residences, and cafés or restaurants that were close to my hotel or interviewees’ workplace or home. I interviewed a small group of men on the Internet using the web-based application, Skype but the great bulk of interviews were face-to-face. I used a sixteen-question structured interview schedule for each interview. On average, interviews lasted 45 minutes. After transcription, I analysed them with the help of the Microsoft Word software programme.

Findings
My analysis of the men’s interviews showed that gay marriage was of greatest importance to young men, in particular men aged in their 30s and younger, and was less important to men aged 51 and older. Each interviewee was asked the following questions in relation to gay marriage: ‘Are you married; do you intend to marry? If the circumstances were right, would you marry a man?’ At times, the men’s answers included a short explanation as to why they favoured formal recognition of gay relationships but not marriage; some times they did not. On other occasions, some men conflated gay marriage with civil union or gay marriage and civil partnership. Then again, there were times when men spoke specifically against marriage because they associated it with religion and were agnostic, atheist, or anti-religious because they were disenchanted with formal religion, which was particularly the case with men from this sample and others with whom I have had informal discussions who were brought up Catholic.

The break down of men’s views on gay marriage is as follows. Sixty-two men or almost two-thirds of this sample of 97 men said they were in favour of formal recognition of gay relationships, including gay marriage. Twenty-three men or slightly less than a quarter of interviewees said they opposed gay marriage and twelve men (or twelve per cent of the sample) said they were unsure. When I examined the men’s answers about gay marriage by age, those over 51 were more likely to oppose it. Those under 31 were almost uniformly in favour of it. For this reason, I divided the sample into three age cohorts. The first cohort comprised men aged 18–31, who turned and will turn 21 after 2000; the second cohort was made up of men aged 32–51, who turned 21 between 1980 and the late 1990s; the third cohort
consisted of men aged 51–87, who turned 21 between the mid-1940s and late 1970s. In the sections that follow, the views of each age cohort is discussed in turn.

Twenty-two men aged 31 and younger comprised the first cohort. A significant majority (86 per cent) of these young men favoured formal recognition of gay relationships and, of the nineteen men who did so, fourteen favoured gay marriage as against five men who supported civil union or civil partnership but not gay marriage. The fourteen men who supported gay marriage referred to three narratives. First, they first said they had a right to relationship equality and were entitled to enjoy the same legal and property rights associated with marriage; second, that they should to be able to marry and have a ‘white wedding’ if they so wished; third that marriage equality was linked to broader social change. A core of four young men whose views I caught in my interviews were from privileged Melbourne backgrounds. All four men had been to elite, private schools, were enrolled in university courses, and were from upper-class or upper-middle-class backgrounds. The social practices they revealed elsewhere in their interviews were noticeably different from those of previous cohorts of gay men, who have tended to immerse themselves in the social institutions of the gay world and to populate their friendship group around gay friends after coming out. As the stories showed that these four men told of their social life, only a small proportion of their close friends were gay, most of them shunned gay clubs and bars, and their stated preference was to mix with straight friends when they socialised.

The second cohort comprised 34 men aged 32–51. Slightly less than three-quarters (or 24) of these men favoured formal recognition of gay relationships—a lower
proportion than for the men aged 31 and younger, but a decided majority nonetheless. Of the twenty-four men who supported formal recognition of gay relationships, sixteen were in favour of gay marriage and eight said they would support only a civil union or civil partnership. The sixteen men who supported gay marriage drew on two narratives. The first narrative was similar to that of the younger men and concerned the rights to relationship equality with heterosexuals and to enjoy the same legal and property privileges that attached to heterosexual marriage. The second narrative related to ceremonies appropriate to a gay marriage or civil union. In contrast to what the men aged 31 and younger, the options the men from the group considered did not include a ‘white wedding’. At one end of the spectrum, their alternatives included an intimate ceremony that held a very private meaning for the couple and, at the other end, a ceremony organised by a small group of friends involving participation from friends and family that was a complete surprise for the couple.

Forty-one men aged 51–87 comprised the third cohort. A slight majority of these men favoured formal recognition of gay relationships. The men from who opposed formalizing same-sex relationships did so for two reasons. First, because relationships based on cohabitation were sufficient and met their needs. Second, marriage was a failed social institution. The men who were in favour drew on three narratives. First, it was a continuation of involvement in gay liberation; second, marriage secured property; third, permanent relationships were crucial after what had been experienced during the HIV-AIDS epidemic. Seven men from this cohort said they would support civil union or civil partnership but not marriage, their reasons being first, that it was ‘strange’ gay men would want to marry when in many western
countries it was possible for same-sex couples to enjoy the same rights as a married couple in all but name and second, that the general public was not yet ready for it.

Conclusion

Sixty-two men or almost two-thirds of an international sample on which this paper is based said they were in favour of formal recognition of gay relationships, including gay marriage. Like earlier political movements such as gay liberation in the 1970s and ACT-UP, the movement that developed in the US in the late 1980s to pressure the Reagan government to provide funding for HIV-AIDS research and support for people living with the disease, the push for gay marriage has had a polarising effect on gay people and as this paper showed the dividing lines can be strongly generational. Analysis of the views of the men from my sample shows that the proportion of men opposing gay marriage was highest in the cohort aged 51–87; in contrast, almost all the men aged 31 and younger were in favour of it.

The older men who opposed gay marriage often argued that it was a concession to heteronormativity and that gay culture had become too mainstream, even boring in a ‘family values’ way. They had a less idealistic vision of gay marriage. Many of these men belonged to the ‘baby-boomer’ generation and their views were strongly influenced by feminist arguments about marriage as an oppressive social institution that circulated in the West in the late 1960s and 1970s. They queried the worth of marriage in general and gay marriage in particular. It was among this group and only this group, that a connection was made between gay men’s experience in the AIDS
crisis—when gay men often found that hospital staff, their partners’ parents or families did not acknowledge their relationships—and the beginning of the modern movement for gay marriage. I say ‘modern’ movement because, as the work of the deceased classics scholar, John Boswell (1995) showed, same-sex marriage ceremonies and unions had a long history in Europe before the fourteenth century. It was among this group also that the argument was most strongly put in favour of civil union or partnership and not gay marriage.

The young men who argued in favour of gay marriage were more likely to engage in narratives around the ‘white wedding’ and saw gay marriage as part of a wider movement for social change. In doing so, they revealed a less sophisticated understanding of the history of gay liberation, the AIDS crisis, and the connection between these signal events and the present movement for marriage equality in the gay world. Underlining these men’s arguments on marriage equality was a determination not to be denied the same property rights and privileges their heterosexual brothers, sisters or cousins enjoyed and to emulate the same wedding ceremonies and marriage rites that their heterosexual friends expected. In other words, they were intent that their sexuality would not affect their class or relational privileges.

It is clear that gay men are not interested in the heteronormative form of marriage that historically provided men with ownership and property rights over women. They are interested, however, in securing rights to the property they own when in couple relationships—even though in Australia, for example, these rights are guaranteed under state jurisdictions where same-sex couples have equivalent rights in law as de
facto heterosexual couples. Gay men are interested also in formally marking their relationships by the same means that have been available to heterosexual couples, that is, by marriage and wedding ceremonies. The relational equality they seek is in regard to property rights and formal, public recognition of their relationships and as this paper argues the push in this direction is strongest among men aged 31 and younger.

References


