

SAME OL' SHIFT

However defined, "marriage" looks the same for homosexuals and straights by Timothy Krause

At first, it seems simple. When dating, people feel more intimate with someone who flatters them with positive feedback. Once married, however, they feel even more intimate with a partner who affirms their own beliefs.

In other words, dating couples feel close when they feel liked, and married couples feel close when they also feel known. This, in a nutshell, is the "marriage shift" documented by several scientific studies of, until now, straight couples.

But Vanessa Carlisle, a recent graduate of Reed College, thought this research was too quick and too vague in hailing traditional marriage as the catalyst for greater intimacy. She postulated that it is not the act of marriage but rather the presence of a lifetime commitment. To support this theory, her study statistically separated the commitment aspect of marriage by replicating the "marriage shift" within an understudied population that makes lifetime commitments without marriage: same-sex couples.

"There is today a real push to study intimate relationships among same-sex couples—to identify where they look the same and where they look different from heterosexual couples," Carlisle explains. "The study of the 'marriage shift' shows there is something important psychologically to making a lifetime commitment."

Carlisle polled 81 same-sex couples (19 male, 62 female) primarily from Portland, Eugene and San Francisco. She asked questions that defined relationships, levels of intimacy and the respondents' evaluations of their partners and themselves.

Carlisle was not surprised to see the same trend appear when she analyzed the information she collected. Her study, she suggests, questions earlier evidence that the formal act of marriage is the pivot between what academics call the "self-enhancement" of dating and the "self-verification" of marriage.

Another outcome Carlisle observed was that each queer couple defined its relationship in traditionally heterosexual terms. The choices were either "dating" or "marriage." Carlisle thinks no matter their opinion of the term "marriage," the underlying concept of long-term commitment is universal.

She notes 64 couples considered themselves married. Another 17 reported that they considered themselves dating. Four couples were excluded from all analyses because they disagreed about the nature of their relationship.

Only about one-third of the couples who said they were married had held a public ceremony.

Yet, the reported levels of intimacy among all participants were high. Dating couples sought positive reinforcement; married couples sought confirmation of their ideas.

The trend was obvious. Carlisle's data support the assertion that a ceremony often isn't necessary for partners to understand they are in a committed relationship.

Documenting this trend among same-sex relationships might seem to some a confirmation of the obvious, but it begins to fill what Carlisle sees as a "glaring deficit" in social behavior research among gays and lesbians. "If we can show that committed same-sex couples are basically similar to married heterosexual couples, then the distinction becomes sort of an artifact of our legal system, not a reflection of reality," she comments.

So why have a marriage ceremony at all? "Marriage is still this very important tradition," Carlisle remarks, "and it is unlikely that the gay community is going to come up with some alternative."

Although not addressed by her study, she acknowledges marriage's longevity. She suggests its various incarnations throughout history and across cultures only serve to illustrate its adaptability and potential for evolution.

For example, the legal definition of marriage might become simply a contract representing

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—Vanessa Carlisle

the lowest common denominator upon which other traditions are built, whether ethnic, religious or otherwise. Including sexual minorities in the evolution of marriage could be the future of today's domestic partnerships and civil unions.

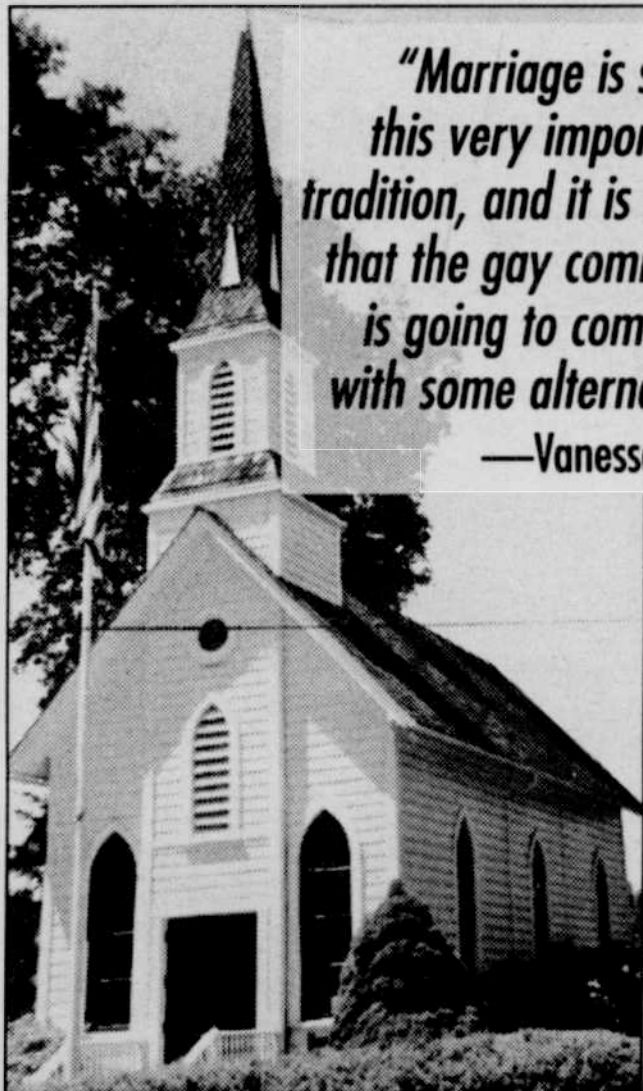
"The important part," Carlisle proposes, "is that the more evidence there is of the same process, the more reason we have to include same-sex couples in all the external trappings of society."

Scientific inquiry might not be a common form of activism, but 21-year-old Carlisle thinks her research is one way she can contribute personally to social change. She calls Berkeley, Calif., home but is considering a return to Portland to conduct an expanded version of the survey for publication.

She also hopes other students or faculty of Reed College will take her work to the next level. For example, a long-term study following people from dating into committed relationships would help document the shift in both heterosexuals and homosexuals, whether married or not.

"It's a hopeful message," Carlisle notes. "A very teeny, tiny door has been opened. This is another little piece saying there is no big difference between heterosexual and same-sex couples." ■

For details about Vanessa Carlisle's study, KNOW ME AND I'LL LOVE YOU BACK: LOOKING AT THE "MARRIAGE SHIFT" IN SAME-SEX COUPLES, send e-mail to carlislv@hotmail.com.



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