

Civil Unions among Homosexual Couples in France:
Assimilation and Stigmatization Perspectives among Gay and Lesbian Couples
and their Perceived Social Support from the LGBT Community

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While some lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) individuals campaign for marriage rights, others hold qualms about the institution of marriage. In France, the government has taken steps to accommodate same-sex relationships by passing legislation for civil unions. These unions, originally proposed as an alternative to marriage for unmarried parents, became available to both heterosexual and homosexual couples in 1999 (“France allows...”). Because of this legislation, same-sex couples may enter into a “civil solidarity pact,” or a “Parte Civil de Solidarité” (abbreviated as “Pacs”; Graff). In doing so, they become eligible to file joint tax returns, form property agreements, and share certain welfare and employment benefits (Frum). Although many couples benefit from these new laws, the implications of same-sex unions are still debated within the LGBT community.

Some researchers have studied this controversy, attempting to tease apart the attitudes found among LGBT individuals. Much of this research has focused on the implications of same-sex marriages, rather than civil unions. Yep, Lovass, and Elia (2003) asked gay and lesbian participants to state their opinions on same-sex marriage. Their research suggested that many individuals belong to one of two opposing camps: either the pro-marriage camp or the anti-marriage camp. The researchers labeled the pro-marriage camp as the *assimilationist*, or *normalizing*, agenda and the anti-marriage camp as the *radical*, or *separatist*, agenda. Other researchers studying this type of discourse coined slightly different terms: *assimilation* and *stigmatization* perspectives (Lannutti, 2005). These viewpoints, as they apply to same-sex marriage, are outlined below, and they will later be applied to viewpoints on civil unions.

Some individuals, belonging to the assimilationist or normalizing camps, believe that homosexuals should also have the option to be officially married. Perhaps a marriage is more appealing because it is more widely understood, in terms of legal and social implications, than a

civil union. Some gay and lesbian individuals believe that marriage restrictions infringe upon their fundamental human rights (Alderson, 2004). In relation, researchers have found that married couples enjoy certain benefits that unmarried couples do not. For example, research suggests that the institution of marriage solidifies relationships and prevents their swift dissolution (Kurdek, 1998). Blumstein and Schwartz (1983) proposed that although relationships of cohabiting homosexual couples do not dissolve more frequently than do those of cohabiting heterosexual couples, they do dissolve more frequently than those of married heterosexual couples. Thus, marriage seems to encourage longer lasting commitments. Because mainstream society is familiar with the commitment of marriage, married homosexual couples may be viewed as less deviant from the “norm” and thus encounter less stigmatization (Lannutti, 2005).

Conversely, some LGBT individuals, belonging to the stigmatization or radical camps, have cited potential negative consequences of gay marriage. For example, some members of the LGBT community worry that if homosexual couples get married, they will disappear into mainstream society, and thus lose touch with their LGBT social networks (Lannutti, 2005). Some gay and lesbian individuals feel that the institution of marriage, as well as society in general, is “heterosexist,” or biased toward heterosexuals (Lannutti, 2005). To them, getting married would be “selling out” to mainstream society in order to gain acceptance. In addition, others worry that married couples will gain status in society, while unmarried couples and singles will be subjected to criticism, by both heterosexuals and homosexuals, for failing to make solid commitments (Lannutti, 2005). Thus, a rift will arise between married couples and their unmarried counterparts. Yet other critics of same-sex marriage cite that couples will gain visibility in society and thus encounter more scrutiny (Lannutti, 2005).

Much of the aforementioned research has focused on the anticipated outcomes of marriage rights, rather than present day outcomes of civil union legislation. Researchers have studied the differences between cohabitating couples and those in civil unions, specifically in the domains of familial relations and friendships (Patterson, 2004). Solomon, Rothblum, and Balsum (2004) examined similar themes, as well as relationship dynamics and couple visibility.

The present study will examine the attitudes of cohabitating homosexual couples and couples who have entered into civil unions. I will explore how these individuals view civil unions and how they perceive the viewpoints of other individuals in the LGBT community. I will document how these perspectives on civil unions relate to those outlined on same-sex marriages by Yep, Lovass, and Elia (2003) and Lannutti (2005). More specifically, I will explore the accuracy of the *assimilation* and *stigmatization* labels, and perhaps I will add more categories to this classification system, such as a group for “middle of the road” attitudes. I will examine couples’ accounts of their involvement in the LGBT community both before and after entering into a civil union.

Overall, this research relates to the adjustment of gay and lesbian couples within the LGBT community. As a minority group, these individuals encounter prejudices and must deal with a variety of stressors (Meyer, 2003). For many, the LGBT community offers needed support in coping with this stress (Meyer, 2003). If LGBT couples encounter stigmatization from individuals in the LGBT community, then they may draw less support from this community. If individuals lack a support system, then they may have an increased risk of mental distress (Meyer, 2003). Thus, studying the social integration of dyads within the LGBT community may lead to far-reaching implications.

To carry out this study, I will recruit two groups of participants through advertisements in local newspapers. These participants will be either cohabiting couples or those who have entered into a civil union. In either case, I will request the participation of couples who have been committed for a certain number of years and are living together. I will form two focus groups: one of legally bound couples and the other of cohabiting couples. I will ask members of these focus groups to fill out a written questionnaire with background information about their relationship and an assessment of the social support they receive from the LGBT community. During the discussion portion, these groups will answer a series of questions related to the inaction of civil union legislation and the resulting responses within the LGBT community and society, at large. These questions will address couples' attitudes toward civil unions, their perceptions of other LGBT individuals' attitudes, and their perceived social support from the LGBT community.

Sample questions include: "What are the benefits of entering a civil union?"; "What are the drawbacks of entering a civil union?"; "Do you feel that your views are similar to those of other individuals in the LGBT community?" Each of these discussions will last about 1 hour or 1 ½ hours, and they will be audiotaped. This portion of the study will be conducted during the semester that I am in Nantes. Later, I will transcribe the conversations, develop a coding system, and conduct an analysis of reoccurring viewpoints and themes.

Prior to designing this research study, I worked as a research assistant on a study of *The Molecular Genetics of Sexual Orientation*. In doing so, I spoke to many homosexual men over the phone about their life experiences. I have taken courses in Research Methods, Human Sexuality, and Social Psychology. I have also spent this quarter working with Chris Skidmore, as an independent study student, to learn more about the relationships between gender non-

conformity, stigmatization, and mental health outcomes. In addition, we have had various discussions on the topics presented in this proposal. I have met with Professor Jane Winston, from the Gender Studies and French departments, and she has directed me to a Northwestern graduate student who is currently studying similar topics in Paris. Professor Winston has also informed me of the possibility of getting in contact with Eric Fassin, a well-known sociologist and researcher of LGBT issues in France.

Budget:

Assistance in translating IRB documents: \$50

Advertisements for participants in Local Newspapers: \$35

Compensation for participation: \$5 x 15 people = \$75

Phone cards to use for correspondence with participants: \$30

Tape Recorder and Microphone: \$50

Tapes: \$20

Miscellaneous Supplies (pens, photocopies, etc.): \$20

Renting a conference room for the focus group discussions: ?

Total = \$280+

I have emailed my program about this project, and they have forwarded my proposal to the IES Nantes staff in order to identify an on-site advisor. Although I may work with an on-site advisor, I will be conducting this research as an independent project.

I have been working on the IRB forms for the project, and I would like to have them ready for the July submission date. In the meantime, I will also be reading additional French magazines and finding additional French contacts.

In the future, I would like to apply for an undergraduate research grant to expand upon this project. I may also continue to pursue this project, or a similar project, through the psychology honors program.

The Study Abroad Office has permission to post my proposal on their Web site and to use it in future SARP programs or other programs or courses related to study abroad.

Michelle Rheinschmidt 6/13/05

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Possible Sources Abroad

Centre gay et Lesbien de Nantes. <<http://clgn.free.fr>>

Gay and Lesbian Association affiliated with the Ecole Centrale de Nantes. <http://clgn.free.fr>.