

# For Better or For Worse? Questioning Marriage From a Queer Perspective

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## *Introduction: Variations within the Queer Community and the Heteronormative Paradigm*

The queer community is a rainbow of diversity. However, within this community exists contrasting colors. One segment of the queer community adopts heteronormative patterns in their ways of life, and they advocate for same-sex marriage under the guise of “equal rights”. In contrast, another segment of the queer community rejects marriage as a heteronormative paradigm; a social construction that values monogamous and heterosexual relationships and sexualities over all other relational patterns. Those rejecting marriage believe that heteronormative practices push them to assimilate towards “straight” ideology. Queer individuals who resist a heteronormative paradigm see marriage as a function that serves those who choose to conform to heterosexual norms. As one segment fights for equal rights and marriage equality, another adopts a more radical political stance. Both sides strive for equal rights: one side sees marriage as a pathway to equality; whereas the other side sees the heterocentrism and heteronormativity in marriage as counter-productive to queer equality because it forces couples to assimilate into the “mainstream”. In this essay I will address both sides of the queer community and their connection to the meaning of marriage. I will define and investigate *heteronormativity*, as well as define and contrast the terms *homophobia* and *heterocentrism* as they affect not just queer individuals but also heterosexual individuals as well. The meanings attached to marriage carry several negative consequences for the segment of the queer community that rejects heteronormative ideology, which I will discuss in detail. As an individual who questions the practicality of marriage as a social institution and as a member of the queer community, I have personal interest in investigating how heteronormativity affects my daily life. In addition, I am interested in how heteronormativity affects both queer and straight communities and how it quietly, but forcefully, carries negative connotations for heterosexual individuals by way of sexism and patriarchy.

The pervasive nature of heteronormativity is a key motivating factor in one segment of the community's rejection of marriage. What, you may be asking yourself, does a heteronormative paradigm look like? Heteronormativity is a term which theorists use to express the naturalization and categorization of sexuality and gender roles in our society. It can be thought of as making heterosexuality the norm. This structure is pervasive; meaning it manifests itself in every societal institution. Our society is comprised of institutions that glorify a specific type of relational pattern while devaluing other less-traditional forms. As a result, heteronormativity accounts for the acquisition of both symbolic and material resources. Institutionalized prejudice and discrimination affects social stratification, thereby impacting such things as shared social meaning and legal rights; and furthermore marginalizing individuals or couples who do not possess the same resources needed for social stratification. Marriage, an institution, exists to serve the needs and desires of a heterosexual relational pattern. Elia claims, "The term family has been synonymous not just with heterosexuality broadly defined, but with a very specific brand of heterosexuality, which ideally involves marriage..." (Elia, 2003). In the heteronormative paradigm, in order to create a family a couple must first marry; because our society assumes that a person is a) straight, b) wishes to marry a partner of the opposite sex, and c) wishes to procreate and start a family with their partner. These are norms and ways of thinking that our society values. Within the queer community, partners may adopt relational patterns that look just like heterosexual ones; but the couple is same-sex. However, queer theorists argue that adopting heterosexual patterns in their relationships and ways of life are not actually "queer" relationships at all, since "queer" relationships break the mold of heteronormative ideology. Elia goes on to assert that, "*Queer* resists and ruptures the kinds of containment, complacency, and privilege those in culturally sanctioned relationships have enjoyed. It calls for individuals to be the architects of their own relationship construction," (Elia, 2003). This more radical segment existing within the queer community who rejects heteronormative ideology is aware of its oppressive and pervasive nature. The queer subculture creates its own norms and sanctions specifically appropriate for it, and also rejects conforming to dominant norms surrounding appropriate or inappropriate relational patterns from an ideological and political stance. It is for this main reason as to why this segment of the queer community is motivated to reject marriage.

## **The Dilemma Facing Queerness**

Same-sex couples seeking marriage are, in effect, erasing their own “queerness”. By assimilating into a dominant heteronormative society, they attach to a set of constrained social norms that regulate sexuality; and as they detach from “queerness” they put distance between their intimate relationship and the sexual fluidity that exists in non-heteronormative and “truly queer” relationships. “Sexuality neither subscribes to biological derivation nor metaphysical ontology... sexuality is in an unremitting process, continually tentative on the interplay and praxis between external sociological forces and internal psychology,” (Prasad, 2007). Prasad’s assertion goes against the fixed-characteristics viewpoint of essentialism, which holds that determined aspects of what it means to be “human” are more “essential” to humanity than are social constructs. In an essentialist ideology, gender and sexuality are neither fluid nor constructed; but rather rigid and inherent. In the case of marriage, monogamy between differing sexes in a spiritual and physical commitment becomes one of the essential roles of being “human”. There are few concessions when it comes to the queering of sexuality and relational forms in our heteronormative society. The monogamous and committed relationship is the most important relational form, and all other types of intimate relationships are viewed as less-than or perverted. Therefore, the same-sex married couple maintains homeostasis with essentialism by viewing their relationship as a functioning cog in the wheel: they maintain monogamy, they raise a family, and they are productive members of society. As same-sex couples move into “normalcy”, queer individuals and queer relational patterns (non-monogamy, for example) are further marginalized in the heteronormative paradigm.

## **The Dilemma Facing Everyone**

Barriers are created for both heterosexual and non-heterosexual people when expected to behave and participate in social norms that conflict with personal preferences or ideologies; and those of us who go against the “status-quo” are essentially excluded. Major institutions such as education, religion, healthcare, the military, and specifically for the sake of this essay, the family and marriage are greatly affected by a heteronormative paradigm. So much of our social foundations are built upon the idea that the ideal, traditional relational pattern is monogamous, heterosexual, long-term, consecrated by a god, and legally recognized. It is no wonder, then, why so many same-sex couples want to get married. They are acting out a “normal” relational pattern that has been a long-standing social norm. Same-sex marriage is the ultimate relational form on

both spiritual and physical realms because it brings the relationship to a level playing field with heterosexual marriages. “Marriage is contrived within culture to meet various ideological ends. Because this institution affirms ontological sexual difference and heteronormativity, it is not surprising that the challenge posed by same-sex marriage is organized around the fallacious assumption of *a priori*<sup>1</sup> sexuality,” (Prasad, 2007). Although same-sex marriage may attain the respect of a heterosexual marriage, it does not change the fact that the institution was not created with same-sex couples in mind; nor do stakeholders make much effort to morph the institution into other possible legal forms. The crux of the situation is to find a way to recognize same-sex couples who seek this ultimate commitment in a legal and non-discriminatory way, and to make it available in every place that heterosexual marriage is available; not just in a limited amount of areas as it currently is. When the dominant ideology invests in one sexual orientation above all others and views this sexuality as *innate* or *assumed* it causes a myriad of problems for those who are not of that sexuality. These barriers exist for heterosexual individuals who engage in queered sexualities and lifestyles as well (such as non-monogamy, bisexuality, or non-procreative sex, amongst many others).

### **An Allegory Anyone Could Relate To**

Are you affected by heteronormativity as a *heterosexual* person? I will give you an example. Let’s say you are a male and you exist in our patriarchal, male-dominated society. Your guy friends are sexually harassing a young woman, perhaps whistling at her or objectifying her in some other sexist way. You, being the decent person that you are, call your friends out on their inappropriate and disgusting behavior. You tell them to leave her alone, and your friends laugh at you and call you derogatory slurs that a homophobic person would call a gay individual. The homophobic comment, born out of fear and lack of understanding of homosexual people and by a patriarchal and hetero-dominant society that chides males for deviating from traditional and “straight” gender roles and excuses their sexist behavior as normal, grows into an oppressive culture of heteronormativity. What is *right* is the norm, and what is *wrong* is overlooked or ridiculed. Heterosexuals are negatively affected by heteronormativity because they, too, live in a society that is patriarchal and tends to be resistant to non-traditional behavioral or relational patterns. Let’s say you are a female, and let’s go even further to say you were the female being

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<sup>1</sup> A priori here meaning innate, assumed, and justified.

harassed by those guys. You may feel oppressed because not only are you being objectified as a woman, but also because you might have to deal with situations like this often. You may think to yourself that situations like these are normal because you are faced with them so frequently and because our society is structured in such a way that excuses or overlooks sexist and homophobic language and behavior. Conversely, what if I told you all of the genders in this example were reversed and it was a group of females harassing a male. You might have to think about that a little harder than the previous example; since this example may not fit in with your idea of traditional gender roles. Females are constructed to be the weaker and passive gender; while males are assumed to be the strong and assertive dominant gender. This patriarchal view of gender roles is a prime example of how deeply our society is rooted in these heterosexist ideals. As you can see, heteronormativity isn't just a concern for queer individuals. (*The Accused*, 1988).

### **What Marriage Can Do (Con)**

Now that heteronormativity has been defined and explored, we may gain a better understanding of how it feeds off of and produces heterocentrism and homophobia; and how these terms apply to the institution of marriage. Marriage was created to “organize the division of labor and power by gender and age, confirming men’s authority over women and determining if a child had any claim on the property of the parents,” (Coontz, 2005). This social system was formed for purely political reasons, and upheld sexist laws such as allowing husbands to beat and rape their wives for thousands of years. Same-sex couples were only very recently (in the overarching time-space continuum) and in limited places afforded marriage rights, unlike heterosexual couples who always were afforded this right. Our society regulates norms and rejects behaviors deemed as “deviant”. Throughout the history of our society, queer lifestyles and relational patterns have been ostracized, hidden, or ignored as unequal, deviant, or unnatural for mainly religious reasons. Much of marriage is closely tied to religion; which is why so much animosity exists towards queer individuals from religious extremists. All of these factors contribute to a hostile environment for queer individuals and couples. Heterocentric and homophobic thoughts, feelings, and actions cause people to have a deep hatred, fear, and stigma against queer relationships. *Heterocentrism* is defined as “discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, practiced by heterosexuals against homosexuals,” whereas *homophobia* is defined as “fear of or apprehension about homosexuality”. Fear leads to hatred, hatred leads to prejudice,

and prejudice leads to discrimination. A heteronormative society strives to keep the heterosexual relational pattern at the top of the hierarchy; and intimate relationships that differ from this pattern are devalued. Queer couples who resist heteronormativity recognize the institutionalized heterocentrism, homophobia, and even sexism that marriage has created, even promoted! Needless to say, that segment of more “radicalized” queers don’t believe that marriage is the answer. (TheFreeDictionary.com; Coontz, 2005).

### **What Can Marriage Do? (Pro)**

Consider the benefits that marriage brings to couples in the United States: “Heterosexual marriage still has a privileged legal status...It confers more than a thousand legal and tax benefits unavailable to single people,” (Coontz, 2005). Although Coontz mentions *single people* as the main type of familial household unable to receive tax breaks, deductions, and other legalities; unmarried cohabiting same-sex couples receive much less, if any, of these privileges. With greater access to rights, privileges, and legalities, married couples are “generally happier, healthier, and better protected against economic setbacks and psychological depression than people in any other living arrangement,” (Coontz, 2005). The institution of marriage rewards couples who participate in the system with higher levels of emotional and financial well-being. The actual relationship of married couples is seen as more important and more valuable to society. The rewards for married couples affect all aspects of emotional and physical well-being: “There are some sociocultural and material benefits afforded to those who have this type of relationship. Examples of socio-cultural perks include: being treated respectfully, assumed to have good mental health, and social mobility,” (Elia, 2003). These “perks” of married life contribute to economic and emotional stability; and the fact that these benefits are offered to legally married couples reinforces the idea that this institution is normal, productive, and integral to society. It makes sense, then, that same-sex couples would desire the same perks and economic and emotional stability that heterosexual married couples receive.

Why do same-sex couples want to get married? Is it because they want the same rights that heterosexual couples are afforded? The right to a legally recognized marriage “assures the sharing of Social Security benefits, certain pension survivor’s rights and the option to file joint income taxes,” (Hunt, 2009). Alongside these, estate planning benefits (inheritance, trusts), insurance benefits through a spouse’s employer, visiting rights at hospitals and making medical

decisions for your spouse, leave of absences when your spouse falls ill or dies, planning for funeral or other after-death arrangements for your spouse, consumer benefits (family rates for insurances, tuition discounts), and many more benefits like these are available to married couples (*Nolo.com*). Although these legalities may contribute to the appeal of marriage for queer couples, does it go deeper than that? The marriage equality debate has staunchly advocated for “equal rights” and “equal protection” -- the same equalities for same-sex couples that heterosexual couples receive. What does this “equality” in attaining legalized marriage do for same-sex couples? “It is not surprising that some lesbians and gay men... would look to legal marriage for self-affirmation... those who marry can be instantaneously transformed from “outsiders” to “insiders,” and we have a desperate need to become insiders,” (Ettelbrick, 1997). Ettelbrick’s quote (although slightly sarcastic) makes an excellent point for how heteronormativity is so powerful -- it poses as a natural and correct way of life. Queer individuals already live a life of stigma and perhaps guilt and shame; so when the courthouse opens up the door ever so slightly to same-sex couples looking for a marriage contract, of course these individuals are looking for a way to become “normal” and be included in the mainstream. Assimilation is the wedge separating “conformist” queers from queers who reject heteronormativity. Radicalized queers see marriage posing as a way that gay individuals can be accepted as “equal” in a heterocentric society. However, they know it is only an illusion; because the “conforming” queer individuals are playing into the heteronormative game. They are assimilating into a dominant culture that viewed them in a negative light for so long; and they are participating in an institution that was created without them in mind.

Having this “right” to equality may allow couples to feel secure, but at what cost? Although they may be free to marry whomever they want, they are chained with the weight of participating in a paradigm that forces them to become like everyone else. To radical queers who oppose marriage, having the ability to attach to a dominant culture does not mean that they want to capitalize on the ability. That does not contribute to queer socio-political ideology. Although marriage is within their capacity, just participating in something that a dominant group has complete freedom and access to does not mean that it should be done under the pretense of a “right” -- but rather because the minority group believes the action will ultimately help them in some fundamental way. There is no reason why marriage, as it exists in its current state for same-sex couples, should be advocated for if it will only suffocate queerness.

## **A Symbolic Interactionist Reading of Marriage**

In order to have a greater understanding of the consequences that marriage creates for queer couples, we must analyze the meanings, definitions, and symbols of marriage. The Symbolic Interactionist perspective of sociology allows us to investigate how our construction of reality is shaped by these patterns of representation. “People act based on symbolic meanings they find within any given situation. We thus interact with the symbols, forming relationships around them. The goals of our interactions with one another are to create shared meaning,” (*ChangingMinds.org*). As we try making sense of our world, we are constantly flooded with representations of what our society values and devalues. Marriage is the ultimate display of intimate commitment between partners, and the pinnacle of “appropriate” and “legitimate” relational patterns. In order for a relationship to be accepted and respected, it must first pass through the physical and spiritual realms of consecration. The value placed on married couples versus any other relational pattern in our society is noticeably different. “Marriage symbolizes equality for some subpopulations [within the queer community]... which itself may represent a kind of deep valuing of the person and of the relationship that would be nonexistent short of state recognition of some kind,” (Yarhouse; Nowacki, 2007). Same-sex couples who advocate for marriage equality are assessing their relationship on the basis of what our society deems as the most appropriate act to officialize a relationship. The acceptance gained by the greater part of society pushes this segment of the queer community to change what it means to be *queer* and conform to a traditional practice that was created in (and has existed as) heterocentrism.

Marriage history sheds light on the deeply-rooted patriarchy that keeps wives subordinate to their husbands. Religion plays a major role in how marriages have been consecrated (past and present); and religion and patriarchy go hand-in-hand. Religion upholds marriage as a covenant between the couple and their god. The place of worship (church, ect) is the spiritual realm that attains consecration when combined with the legal aspect of the physical realm (courthouse, ect). However, because of the opposition that religious extremists have shown towards queer intimate relationships, the spiritual and physical fusion has been met with hostility for centuries. For many religious groups, marriage is a holy institution ordained by a god. The monogamous, heterosexual relational pattern is upheld as righteous and natural; although this idealized relational pattern is a myth. Symbolic Interactionism uses shared meanings and definitions through representations and symbolism in order to ensure a cohesive and consistently



functioning society. Marriage, as a symbol, is strengthened when same-sex couples are legally permitted to do so; and this legitimizes its social meaning. However, legitimizing it feeds it; and there is no point in feeding something that will only bite your hand.

Although the meaning and history of marriage carries several negative consequences for queer couples resisting heteronormativity, the benefits that marriage extends cannot be overlooked. The fact that many specific benefits are only offered to legally married couples, and the fact that same-sex couples can only legally marry in specific areas, attests to the discrimination and heterosexism that is rampant in our society. In order to combat these injustices and allow an even playing field, I recommend that marriage be reconsidered as the institution that it currently is. Certain human rights, regardless of marriage status, must be upheld if we are to consider ourselves an equitable nation. There should be no privileges to a select group of people or laws allowing institutionalized prejudice or discrimination. Such rights as access to healthcare, affordable housing, fair taxation, and revised conditions of what is constituted as a “family” for immigration and other reasons must all be taken into account in a fair and non-prejudicial manner. One relational pattern should not receive preferential treatment or be rewarded because it differs from another. “Conceding that it will remain a strong institution, not to be eradicated in the near future at least, the pragmatic short-term objective should be, in my opinion, the dislodging of marriage from its fixed reference points of heterosexuality and patriarchy,” (Prasad, 2007). Marriage isn’t going anywhere; it is an institution deeply rooted in our social structure and history. However, it could use some updating in our ever-evolving society. Same-sex couples who advocate for marriage equality are merely trying to obtain what their heterosexual counterparts are: a legally recognized commitment that allows certain privileges otherwise unattainable if not married. This segment of the queer community (although to some not really *queer* in the sense of the word) sees nothing wrong with assimilating into a mainstream ideology in order to attain “equal rights”. However, a more radical contrasting queer ideology resists the current heteronormative, heterocentric, and patriarchal overtones of traditional marriage. This segment, too, demands “equal rights” -- but instead of focusing on marriage equality, what about turning the attention to universal equality? Now that’s something I can say “I do” to!

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