



*It Ain't Over:
Marriage (in-)equality and queer assimilation*

AUTHOR
BARBARA BAUMGARTNER

Barbara Baumgartner is a counsellor and practitioner of narrative ideas. She is the author of the paper, 'A multiplicity of desire: Polyamory and relationship counselling' (International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work, 2009, 2, pp. 59–63). Barbara can be contacted by email: barb.baumgartner@gmail.com

As the same-sex marriage debate pushes into the mainstream in Australia and the United States, the author asks us to deconstruct the institution of marriage and examine its classist, patriarchal and consumerism-driven motives which serve to add further privilege to an already privileged group, while obscuring the intersections of oppression experienced by the queer¹ community. Is this community being assimilated into a mainstream or is the right to marry a needed step in the journey to equality? What do we in the community of narrative therapy need to consider in our work for social justice, and how do we ensure that the call for equal rights in all countries continues to be heard after Western governments endorse same-sex marriage rights?

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Gay assimilationists have created the ultimate genetically modified organism, combining virulent strains of nationalism, patriotism, consumerism, and patriarchy and delivering them in one deadly product: state-sanctioned matrimony. (Bernstein Sycamore, 2008, p. 2)

Years ago when I worked at a radical feminist women's service, I noticed a flyer on the bathroom wall advertising an upcoming rally for same-sex marriage rights. Next to the flyer, someone had scrawled, 'Why should I fight to be included in a patriarchal institution that oppresses women and children?' This question blew my mind, confounding my usual assumption of the importance of 'equal rights'. It is from this place that I was drawn to read more about the same-sex marriage debate and to think about impacts of who is included and excluded when the boundary of marriage is redefined.

In recent months, as my American and Australian neighbours review and revise their laws on same-sex marriage, the issue re-enters Canadian media and social media. I've noticed on my Facebook account that many friends in the United States and Australia changed their avatars to one that represents a variation of the Human Rights Campaign (HRC) Equality symbol with two matching wedding rings. While well intentioned as a sign of solidarity, many of those same supporters of 'equality' are unfamiliar with the critique of HRC strategic mission to not address the root causes of systemic discrimination, which Clifton (2013) summarises in his article on the Huffington Post. HRC is seen by many as an organization serving the gay (read mostly male) elite while purposely 'throwing transgendered people under the bus' to push forward is neo-liberal agenda (Roberts, 2007).

To situate myself, I have the privilege of Canadian and Australian citizenships and I've the experience of being married to a man (as a cisgendered woman) and now am in a relationship with a woman. In Canada there is a sense of pride in the privileged LGBT (and allied) community that Canada federally recognised same-sex marriage with the Civil Marriage ACT in 2005 (Dimera, 2013). For many in Canada, same-sex marriage can feel like an old debate. It is this sense of *passé* that has fuelled my own frustration that as a Western society we believe equal rights for queers have been achieved. There are multiple components to the marriage equality and gay assimilation conversation that I will attempt to summarise in this paper, although others have done so previously (see Spade, 2011; Winnubst, 2006; Bernstein Sycamore, 2008).

First, it requires review, that not everyone in the queer community supports same-sex marriage and 'there is the erroneous and arrogant belief amongst white LGBT folks that same-sex marriage is a final barrier between their community and having full citizenship rights in society' (Richardson, 2008, p. 118). Just as people in heterosexual relationships are not a homogeneous group, so is the queer community a diverse group of individuals. For some, the opposition to same-sex marriage is an acknowledgement that marriage is a patriarchal institution – it originated as a way for men to maintain control over their children and their property, as my colleague pointed out to me years ago. Here, the question begs, why join an institution that some consider to be antiquated and seek the State to rubber stamp one's relationship as 'acceptable'?

Second, while Canadians continue to delay marriage, opting out of marriage and monogamy continues to be an exception to the rule. Today, weddings have become large, consumerism-driven affairs. Spending money and receiving a lot of 'stuff' has become part societal celebration of two people's love for one another. The expectations of couples choosing to marry seem to be quite ridiculous, ranging from the fancy clothes one is expected to wear to the decorations that are needed according to the dominant cultural script. Weddings represent the height of heteronormativity. Heteronormativity is the body of lifestyle norms that hold that people fall into distinct and complementary genders (man and woman) with natural roles in life. It presumes that heterosexuality is the normal sexual orientation, and states that sexual and marital relations are most (or only) fitting between a man and a woman (Heteronormativity, n.d.). Not only does a wedding cost a great deal of money, so does a divorce, leaving many who cannot afford the process of divorce, legally trapped, impacting future relationships, hospital visitation rights, inheritance, and health care benefits.

Third, being 'out' to one's family, friends, and place of employment as a queer person is a Western concept not relevant or appropriate to some cultural groups. Hammoud-Beckett (2007) speaks to the idea of 'coming in' to people's lives in her work with Arab-Muslim Australians, and contrasts this to the dominant (White) notion that being 'out' is a necessary step in self-acceptance and happiness. By extension, same-sex marriage is a cultural privilege that is not universally wanted by all cultural groups. Bailey (2008) also refers to

the structural inequalities that are obscured in presuming a Western/White perspective on this debate:

I do not want or need the U.S. state to ratify or legitimate my intimate relationships to merely prove that I am human. I am not heterosexual, nor do I want to be heterosexual; therefore, personally, I have no use for a heterosexual institution like marriage. Yet, I see this forum as a very important opportunity to begin to grapple with some of the complexities of same-sex marriage, especially when we begin to see it in the context of race, class, gender, and sexuality. Not everybody's relationship to the state is the same; therefore, people's different investments in same-sex marriage or lack thereof should be discussed. (p. 114)

We can argue that state has no business in legitimating relationships, let alone only one specific type of relationship (between two people). When relationships end, those involved experience a socially constructed sense of failure, rather than the recognition that relationship dissolution is an expected part of life and love is not a government tick-box. Kandaswamy (2008) summarises:

Ultimately, whether people love each other and whether people get married are two very different questions. The state recognizes a very particular kind of relationship in its recognition of marriage, a relationship that is structured by the idiom of property. However, this is not the only kind of love relationship that exists, nor is it the kind of love relationship to which we as queer people ought to aspire. For me, radical queer politics has always been about challenging the boundaries of what counts as 'love'. One doesn't have to be in a monogamous, long-term, same-sex relationship to love other people. One of the things that I think is most unfortunate about the gay marriage movement is that its implicit message seems to be that framing our relationships in ways that the state might recognize is more important than defining our practices of love on our own terms. (p. 119)

My present concern is the collective assumption that this is now the end of the social justice movement for LGBT rights, when in fact it is just another privilege for us, in very privileged countries, to have. What we really need to be doing, is continue the push for LGBT rights in all countries, and ensure that housing, employment practices, health care, and legal rights are truly equally afforded to a person, regardless of their culture/ethnic background, class, age, physical ability, gender or gender

expression, and sexual orientation. A kind of 'justice-doing' (Reynolds & Polanco, 2012) is called for when we advocate for rights. Spade (2011) however argues the contrary, that equal rights campaigns miss the mark and serve to perpetuate violence, and he calls for a broader reformation of existing legal systems:

The framing of marriage as the most essential legal need of queer people, and as the method through which queer people can obtain key benefits in many realms, ignores how race, class, ability, indigeneity, and immigration status determine access to those benefits and reduces the gay rights agenda to a project of restoring race, class, ability and immigration status privilege to the most privileged gays and lesbians. (Spade, 2011, p. 62)

Another critique of same-sex marriage is that it serves as a convenient distraction to the already disenfranchised of the systemic oppression they experience. This is analogous to Noam Chomsky's argument that the role of sports in popular culture is to divert the poor and working class's attention from issues that matter (Chomsky, 2002). Genderqueer author and queer anti-assimilation activist, Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore also opposes the push among the LGBT movement for gay marriage, arguing that it distracts from more pressing issues like the securing of universal health care and housing security for all. Additionally, she asserts that gay liberation has just afforded straights more rights and gets gay people to 'salivate over state-sanctioned Tiffany wedding bands and participatory patriarchy' (Bernstein Sycamore, 2008). In the context of neoliberalism, the LGBT agenda to legally marry, 'provides little redress for the growing numbers of people confronting reduced life chances in the face of an increasing wealth divide, growing criminalization and immigration enforcement an endless war' (Spade, 2011, pp. 34–35).

In essence, these authors and others, resist same-sex marriage not only on the basis of it being an oppressive institution, but also because it smacks of homonormativity. Homonormativity is the assimilation of heteronormative ideals and constructs into LGBTQ culture and individual identity (Homonormativity, n.d.). According to Griffin (2007), homonormativity upholds neoliberalism rather than critiquing monogamy, procreation, and binary gender roles as heterosexist and racist.

Adding to the confusion is how the same-sex marriage debate has been fashioned into a binary, helping to obscure the wider experienced oppression and lack of access to housing, health care, and a society free of all

forms of discrimination. Rather than being a simple 'pro versus con' debate, the right to marry is a rich topic requiring thoughtful discussion. Instead, identity politics and all its divisiveness, polarises the discussion within the queer community while obscuring the domination of the White, patriarchal, Christian middle class and giving further power to the State to survey queer and trans lives (Winnubst, 2006).

The gay elite has hijacked queer struggle and positioned their desires as everyone's needs – the dominant signs of straight conformity have become the ultimate measures of gay success. Even when the gay rights agenda does include important issues, it does it in a way that consistently prioritizes the most privileged while fucking over everyone else. (Bernstein Sycamore 2008, p. 2)

As the dialogue narrows, the nuances and complexities of different voices of the diverse group are under-told and silenced.

While on one hand I am pleased that the right to marry anyone of your choosing exists in Canada, I worry that the privileged gay elite and their straight allies now assume the work to achieve equality is over when really the work for social justice continues. It serves as a further disrespect to our trans, queer, and genderqueer community members who continue to be denied the most basic rights to safe health care, government ID, and housing when we lay these issues to rest after being afforded same-sex marriage. It is especially painful given the irony that it is on the backs of black, working class, and transgendered activists and sex workers that the lesbian/gay community members have the rights they do. This is where we as queer community members and allies, but also counsellors, social workers, and narrative therapists, need to continue to work to address existing oppression, as a point of social justice here in Canada, but also around the world. In light that in some countries people continue to be murdered, jailed and forced to separate from their families as a result of their sexuality and gender identity, wanting and having the right to a wedding seems to be an out-of-touch and middle-class example of unacknowledged privilege.

At the same time, we need to examine the homonormative influence of the same-sex marriage campaign, and how homonormativity (as well as heteronormativity) impact our lives. By educating ourselves on this discussion, we will improve our ability to ask thoughtful, deconstructive narrative therapy

questions and discover further avenues of resistance and under-told counter-stories. As well, in these conversations we can deconstruct the impact of the images of loving same-sex couples that are circulated in the media and consider whose representations are missing from this diverse group of people.

I live in a grey zone in this debate. I support my queer family and allies in the United States and Australia in their push for their right to get married and be afforded the protection and benefits of marriage, which straights have always had. At the same time, I stand in critique of the institution of marriage, and questioning the need of queers to get married. How can I be excited that people can now access a historically misogynist and oppressive institution that is flaunted in wasteful and consumerist forms of celebration while injustice, violence, and death thrive? How can I support a monogamous institution that discriminates against other forms of love and relationships?

I frequently am asked if my same-sex partner and I will marry. To me, it is a complicated question requiring a thoughtful answer that doesn't reflect the light and conversational tone of enquiry. What does it mean to get married as a queer person? After reading more about the same-sex marriage discussion, I am better informed and I hope others will also resist seeing this as a simple binary debate. The problems of same-sex marriage: that marriage is an antiquated, racist, classist institution not relevant to queers but one that reifies homonormativity; and that it gives further privilege to those who already have jobs, health care, housing, and education while diverting energy and attention away from the critical and life-saving work still needed for queers everywhere.

I'm left with some residual worry that, if I were to marry, I have to toss aside my queer identity. Part of me recognises that I didn't undergo my own personal journey of 'coming out' just to jump back into a normalising box and be assimilated into a society that disenfranchises so many. Part of being queer has meant for me to embrace non-normative ideas of relationship (such as polyamory), sexual identity (such as bisexuality), and to play with gender expression. Personally, I see these as opportunities of heteronormative resistance, around which many of us can unite. Whether to marry is a choice in need of critique and discussion. Let's remember that for our queer and trans family, the fight for safety from interpersonal and institutional violence is far from over – let's especially not forget this while eating our wedding cakes.

NOTE

There exists a multiplicity of words/acronyms for people who do not identify with the label of heterosexual or straight, woman or man. Using the term “same-sex marriage” is problematic as it reinforces a gender binary and assumes cisgender privilege. For simplicity of writing, I will use the terms of LGBT, queer community, and same-sex relationships, but a critique of the meanings and usage of these terms would be well warranted, and outside the scope of this paper.

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