

“She didn’t bat an eye”: Canadian same-sex wedding planning and support from the wedding industry

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Abstract

Guided by ecological systems theory, this qualitative study describes 28 individuals' experiences with the wedding industry, government agencies, and religious institutions as they planned their weddings. Participants (20 lesbians, 7 gay men, and 1 bisexual man—representing 14 couples) lived in Nova Scotia and had married within five years of same-sex marriage being legalized in Canada. They were 26 to 72 years old (average: 49 years) when interviewed and had been with their partners between 6 months to 19 years (average: 7.5 years) when they married. Exosystem-level support was experienced for the most part with various wedding-related businesses and services, with participants seldom experiencing overt homophobia or heterosexism. However, some complex examples of support and opposition occurred in churches, and vigilance was still present in how some couples planned parts of their weddings to avoid anticipated homophobia or heterosexism, with one couple actually leaving Canada to marry. Such behaviors are reflective of the minority stress lesbians, gay men, and bisexual individuals continue to experience even in a sociopolitical environment in which structural legal discrimination no longer exists.

Key words: Canada, ecological systems theory, heteronormativity, religion, same-sex marriage, weddings

“She Didn’t Bat an Eye”: Canadian Same-Sex Wedding Planning and Support from the Wedding Industry

Heterosexism is socially constructed in weddings and marriage (Ingraham, 1999; Oswald, 2000), as is heteronormativity, which is “the view that institutionalized heterosexuality constitutes the standard for legitimate and expected social and sexual relations” (Ingraham, p. 17). Despite the pervasive heterosexist and heteronormative nature of marriage, though, in recent years a small number of countries, including Canada, have legalized same-sex marriage (SSM). The national legalization of a behavior does not mean that it is accepted by everyone (Mulé, 2010), however. When this issue was being debated in Canada, reactions ranged from affirmations of Canadian values of diversity and equality to concerns about a fissure regarding what core values Canada stood for (Bannerman, 2011).

The relatively new existence of SSM allows for a unique context in which to examine whether or not and in what ways homophobia, heterosexism, and heteronormativity continue to be constructed. Not everyone will necessarily agree with its country’s legislated acceptance of SSM. Like other provinces, New Brunswick’s Human Rights Act states that businesses cannot deny their services to people on the basis of race, religion, or sexual orientation. Yet, almost six years after SSM became legal in Canada, a “born-again Christian” florist in that province rescinded her agreement to provide flowers for a wedding after realizing that the wedding was for a same-sex couple (CBC News, 2011). This points to the differences between structural discrimination and individual discrimination (Link & Phelan, 2001); even if the former is no longer present, the latter can still exist.

Using ecological systems theory, this qualitative study examines how legal support at the broader level plays out within the more immediate circumstances of wedding planning for 14 same-sex Canadian couples who married within five years of it becoming legal in Canada.

Results focus on the wedding industry and other wedding-related services, as little has been explored in this area, but support from families, friends, and communities are also briefly noted. Findings indicate significant support, although exceptions are noted.

Theoretical Framework

This research was guided by *ecological systems theory* (Bronfenbrenner, 1977), a theoretical framework useful for exploring the impact of heterosexism on lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals and their familial experiences (Coates & Sullivan, 2005; Kerr & Mathy, 2003). According to the ecological model, individuals are embedded within a variety of interdependent contexts that influence their development and experiences, which, in turn, individuals can also influence. These contexts are viewed as a “nested arrangement of structures, each contained within the next” (Bronfenbrenner, p. 514).

At the most proximal level, individuals interact in *microsystems*, which refers to any environment that they directly participate in, such as their family, group of friends, employment, church, and community. *Mesosystems* are linkages between microsystems. In the case of wedding planning, a mesosystem might consist of an interaction between one’s friends and one’s family as they discuss the wedding or collectively participate in a wedding shower. The *exosystem* consists of more distal contexts in which a person does not directly participate in, but which nonetheless affect that person. Examples of these are the mass media, major institutions such as local, provincial, and federal government agencies, and various businesses. The *macrosystem* refers to a country’s global, ideological culture, which influences the ways that various transactions at the other system levels are carried out on a daily basis. Bronfenbrenner (1977) defined a macrosystem as the “overarching institutional patterns of the culture or subculture, such as the economic, social, education, legal, and political systems, of which micro-,

meso-, and exosystems are the concrete manifestations” (p. 515). The final element of the ecological model is the *chronosystem* (Bronfenbrenner, 1986), which recognizes how personal and sociohistorical experiences over time impact family processes and individuals’ development.

Using an ecological systems framework allows for an examination of whether support at the micro-, meso-, and exosystem levels are congruent with the legal, political, and ideological support that has emerged in Canada at the macrosystem level. In Canada’s macrosystem, social norms related to homosexuality, same-sex relationships, and SSM have changed over the past several decades, reflecting chronosystem changes. Homosexuality was decriminalized in 1969, and increasing acceptance of same-sex relationships and marriage have been reflected in various legal rulings at provincial and national levels. For example, the province of Nova Scotia implemented a *Domestic Partnership Registry* in 2001, which allowed same-sex and heterosexual couples to officially register their common-law relationships. Nova Scotia allowed same-sex couples to marry in 2003, and several other provinces also determined that the denial of marriage to same-sex couples was unconstitutional. Finally, on July 20, 2005, Bill C-38, the *Civil Marriage Act*, was implemented, which legalized SSM across the country.

Experiencing noteworthy sociohistorical events over time (the chronosystem) related to sexual orientation can influence people’s behaviors and attitudes. By 2003, nationally representative data indicated that two in five Canadians (particularly younger adults) felt that there was no one ideal type of family (Bibby, 2004), and a 2006 survey indicated that 59% of Canadians supported SSM (EnviroNics Research Group, 2006, as cited in Woodford, Luke, Grogan-Kaylor, Fredriksen-Goldsen, & Gutierrez, 2012). Further, in response to Bill C-38, same-sex couples have increasingly been marrying. The percentage of married same-sex couples, as a proportion of all same-sex couples, increased from 16.5% to 32.5% between 2006 and 2011

(Statistics Canada, 2012).

Marrying couples will have a range of interactions with various parts of the *wedding industrial complex*, a term that Ingraham (1999) uses to describe the vast recession-proof conglomeration of entities directly or peripherally involved in weddings. This complex, which consists of the transnational wedding industry, state, religion, popular culture, and media, plays a central role in reinforcing heterosexuality and heteronormativity (Ingraham). In this study, I focus on individuals' interactions with the wedding industry and other related services connected to state and religion. The multibillion dollar wedding industry includes enterprises directly related to weddings, such as wedding gown stores, bridal magazines, and wedding planning websites. It also includes businesses peripherally connected to the wedding industry (i.e., participating in more events than just weddings), such as those involved in invitations, jewelry, hospitality and tourism, home furnishings, insurance, alcohol, and catering (Ingraham). Individuals will also have experiences with government agencies when they pick up their wedding licenses, and may have experiences with religious institutions should they decide to have a religious ceremony.

Literature Review

Two lines of research have looked at gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer (GLBTQ) individuals' experiences of weddings. First, Oswald's seminal work examined American gay men and lesbians' experiences of heterosexism at family-of-origin (heterosexual) weddings (Oswald, 2000, 2002b) and of inclusion and belonging at family-of-origin rituals in general (Oswald, 2002a). The "doing" of heterosexism at weddings was complex. For example, individuals could be invited by family members but their partners might not be included in that invitation. Attending weddings in rural areas was perceived as more difficult than attending

urban-situated weddings. Described as “transitioning into a potentially hostile environment” (p. 333), there could be additional pressure to hide one’s GLBTQ identity or even fear reactions from strangers (Oswald, 2002b). These studies, however, focused on GLBTQ individuals’ experiences at family-of-origin weddings rather than their own weddings—albeit, SSM was not legal in any American states when this research was carried out.

A second line of research mainly from Canada, the United States, and Great Britain has studied same-sex couples’ experiences of their own weddings (e.g., Alderson, 2004; Dalton & Bielby, 2000; Green, 2010; Lannutti, 2008a, 2008b, 2011; MacIntosh, Reissing, & Andruff, 2010; Porche & Purvin, 2008; Reczek, Elliott, & Umberson, 2009; Smart, 2007, 2008) or same-sex commitment ceremonies (e.g., McQueeney, 2003; Stiers, 1999). Topics have included perceptions of the effects of marriage on same-sex relationships (Lannutti, 2011; MacIntosh et al.) and family members’ and friends’ reactions to SSM (Lannuti, 2008b). Many couples described how marrying strengthened their commitment to each other (Green) or helped them to feel more a part of their GLBTQ community (Lannuti, 2008b). Smart (2007) distinguished between negative, ambivalent, and positive reactions from family members and friends. Views of and reasons for marriage (Alderson; Lannuti, 2008a) or commitment ceremonies (Stiers) have been explored. Stiers distinguished between commitment ceremonies that recognized more “recent” commitments (i.e., within the past year) versus those celebrating long-time relationships, and described how commitment ceremonies were important in building a sense of community. Other studies have examined the features of commitment ceremonies, such as whether or not cakes were included or rings were exchanged (Stiers). Smart (2008) differentiated between regular, minimalist, religious, and demonstrative weddings.

These studies have revealed important features of SSM, but have three limitations. First,

none have explored SSM within a context of *national* legalization. Regarding the three Canadian studies, two of them (Alderson, 2004; MacIntosh et al., 2010) collected their data prior to the national legalization of SSM, and most of the respondents in Green's (2010) appeared to have married prior to the Civil Marriage Act. To understand the impact of a country's SSM legalization and how it plays out at other ecosystem levels, it is important to only include participants who marry after SSM becomes legal at the national level. Second, none have focused on the actual experience of planning a wedding, though Stiers (1999) did include some data about commitment ceremony planning. Third, the studies have tended to focus on the immediate environment of family and friends.

Only Dalton and Bielby's (2000) study of lesbian mothers, which included a section on public commitment ceremonies, included any commentary about participants' experiences with the wedding industry. Same-sex couples' interactions within the retail and service industry deserve greater attention. No Canadian research was found on this topic, but American research, in general, suggests that GLBTQ individuals are subjected to discrimination within the sales industry (Walters & Moore, 2002). For example, gay men experience more hostility and neglect from sales people compared to heterosexual individuals and lesbians (Carrington, 1999; Walters & Curran, 1996; Walters & Moore). In a study of almost 400 older lesbians over the age of 50, 20% of the women reported discrimination on the basis of their sexual orientation while shopping or dining out (Averett, Yoon, & Jenkins, 2013). Internet shopping may be a strategy to minimize the social risks of being out while engaging in consumption activities (Poria & Taylor, 2001). Internet-based shopping, however, likely only entails one aspect of wedding preparation. Visiting potential ceremony and celebration sites, for example, are typically done in person. Moreover, the current chronosystem, in which SSM has recently been legalized in Canada, may

also—and rightly so—encourage same-sex couples to move beyond the confines of their computers. Whether or not legalization at the societal level translates into respectful, responsive, and non-heteronormative experiences at the interactional level with various retail and service providers remains to be explored.

Religious same-sex couples' beliefs may play an important part in their wedding planning, but little is known about how this plays out. Many GLBTQ individuals still claim a religious affiliation despite being raised in religions that do not support them or in fact explicitly condemn them (GLCensus, 2003, as cited in Rostosky, Otis, Riggle, Kelly, & Brodnicki, 2008). In general, however, very little research has explored the role of religiosity in same-sex couples (Rostosky et al., 2008). For those who are religious, what are their experiences with their religious leaders and communities as they plan their weddings? In the face of exclusion and/or rejection from one's religion, a variety of strategies can be used such as reinterpreting religious dogma in a more positive frame or focusing on private rituals of religious faith or spirituality rather than going to public church services (Rostosky et al.).

In sum, a broader ecological analysis of how same-sex couples experience the transition to legally sanctioned marriage is needed. Just because SSM is codified into Canada's legal system does not mean it is accepted by all people. Family and friend reactions play a critical role, but wedding planning experiences can reach far beyond this immediate microsystem. Thus, this study focuses on how macro level support is experienced in exosystem interactions with wedding-related industries and services.

Method

This qualitative study was guided by a social constructionism/interpretivism paradigm (Daly, 2007). Qualitative methodologies are helpful for studying the subjective experiences of a

diverse range of families (Daly), and also appropriate for studying the experiences of GLBTQ individuals (LaSala, 2005).

After receiving ethics approval from my university's Review Ethics Board, the study was promoted mainly through an article discussing the issue and study in a newspaper with the highest provincial circulation as well as ads in smaller newspapers around the province. Individuals were eligible to participate if they (a) were at least 19 years old, (b) lived in Nova Scotia, (c) had been married for at least two months, and (d) had married after July 20, 2005. Some couples could have married prior to this date, as SSM was legal in nine of the thirteen provinces prior to this, however, I was interested in the impact of national legalization.

Twenty eight people (represented 14 couples) were interviewed in 2010 and 2011. All individuals were interviewed separately from their spouses (but typically on the same day) so that they could respond to questions without any potential influence from their spouses.¹ Interviews lasted between one to two hours and took place in whatever location was most convenient for the person, which was usually their home. Questions asked participants to describe (a) how they decided to marry (who asked whom to marry, how it was carried out); (b) their wedding; and (c) how they planned their wedding. A short questionnaire was also completed at the end of each interview to provide demographic data (e.g., their age, how long they had been with their partner, their race/ethnicity). Interviews were transcribed verbatim, with pseudonyms used and any identifying information removed. Individuals were given the opportunity to review their transcripts. Eleven people took advantage of this offer, and two sent back minor edits. A few participants were contacted once or twice by email afterwards to clarify content in their transcripts. Their written responses as well as brief field notes were integrated into the transcripts for analysis.

Analysis

Interpretive description (Thorne, 2008; Thorn, Kirkham, & O’Flynn-Magee, 2004) guided the analysis. This methodology emerged out of the nursing field. It recognizes that there are many realities, and data is constructed through a researcher’s interpretation of the data rather than something that simply “emerges” out of the findings (Thorne et al.). Interpretive description’s design strategies are influenced by other methodologies such as grounded theory, phenomenology, and ethnography (Thorne et al.).

Given the epistemological assumption of multiple realities that underpins both the social constructionism/interpretivism paradigm and interpretive description, I present these findings as just one interpretation of the data. There are many realities “that can be articulated based on the values, standpoints, and positions of the author” (Daly, 2007, p. 33), and my standpoint is that I am a middle-aged, heterosexual, married woman who has carried out research in the past on heterosexual couples’ weddings (Author citation, 2008, 2009). This standpoint was communicated to all participants either directly or indirectly during interviews. An additional element of my standpoint is that I believe that marriage is a right that all couples should have, regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity. However, I do not believe that this is the only way that couples can be in long-term committed and loving relationships.

Data analysis started with reading the transcripts and then carrying out *topic coding* (Richards & Morse, 2007), which was guided by the *constant comparison process* (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Coding focused on a range of factors, such as the details of their weddings, their feelings about and reasons for marrying, how each spouse was involved in wedding preparation, and the kind of support they received. This analysis focuses specifically on experiences with retail and service providers.

MAXQDA software (version 11) was used to organize the data and assist with analysis; the interpretation, however, is ultimately the researcher's (Author citation, 2012). I used features such as (a) multiple ways of open coding, (b) lexical searches for words and phrases, (c) a log book to keep track of the research progress, (d) an activation process that retrieved segments to compare segments coded for the same code, and (e) memo writing. I also occasionally used the *Code Matrix Browser* tool, which helped me keep track of the presence and prevalence of various codes, and the *Data Editor*, in which I recorded *descriptive codes* (Richards & Morse, 2007)—demographic data from the questionnaires associated with each transcript.

Memos were important in the analysis and used in several ways. First, memos assigned to transcripts provided brief overviews of each person's interview as well as key points and quotes. Second, memos assigned to key codes consisted of definitions and included examples of the coded segments from transcripts. Third, various "free-standing" memos kept track of bigger picture analyses, abstract interpretations, and methodological issues.

Results

In this section, I first briefly describe the participants, their weddings, and the support they received from family members, friends, and communities. I then focus on describing their interactions with the wedding industry and other related services. Examples of support come mainly from the time in which they planned their weddings, but some experiences occurring at their weddings and immediately after are also included. Overall, support was quite common, but exceptions are noted. The first time a participant is quoted or referred to, the approximate amount of time that had passed between the date that SSM was legalized in Canada and when she or he married (ranging from one year or less to five years after July 2005) is noted in parentheses.

The Participants

Participants were 20 lesbians, 7 gay men, and 1 bisexual man (14 couples), aged 26 to 72 (average: 49 years), who lived in Nova Scotia and had married no more than five years after SSM became legal in Canada. One couple married within several months of SSM being legalized, three couples married approximately one year later, four two years, and the rest married between three to five years later. Prior to marrying, they had been with their partners between half a year to 19 years (average: 7.5 years), and all but one couple had cohabited prior to marrying. All were White, European. Three gay couples and one lesbian couple currently lived in rural areas; one other couple had married in a rural area but was now living in a city. Two women and four men (including two who were married to each other) had been previously married to someone of a different sex. Eight couples had children: of these, six had one or two children, one couple had three, another had five. Children ranged from 10 years to 43 years old.

A range of education, employment, and income statuses were present. The sample was highly educated, with more than 60% of individuals having a university degree or post-Bachelor degree, however one person had less than a high school diploma and two were high school educated. In terms of education, just over half were employed full time ($n = 14$). Four others were employed part-time, six retired, and three unemployed (one declined to answer). Those who were employed were in a variety of jobs, most commonly in managerial or professional positions, followed by school teachers. There was a range of personal incomes: three individuals earned less than \$20,000 in the previous year, and four made over \$100,000 annually.

The majority of individuals did not claim a religious affiliation ($n = 17$). Of those who did, seven identified as Episcopalian, one as Roman Catholic, one as Baptist, one as Anglican, and one identified their religion as “other.” In the year prior to being interviewed, two male

couples attended church weekly and four couples never attended. In each of the remaining couples, one person had never attended but their partner had attended once or twice.

Their Weddings

Different types of same-sex weddings occurred, similar to Smart's (2008) categorization of regular, minimalist, religious, and demonstrative weddings. Regardless of the type, participants' weddings were often described as very emotional and loving by the participants and their guests. For example, Anderson (two years) said, "Until that restaurant [where we married] closed last year, the waitresses and everybody was [sic] still talking about our wedding and they said it was the most fun, happiest, loving wedding they've ever seen there." Guests ranged from a few people to around 100, and weddings costs ranged from \$300 to \$25,000, with an average of just over \$7200. Most of the weddings occurred in homes, backyards, or hotels. Other places were on a beach and at a golf course clubhouse. Six couples were married by ministers, and two of these couples married in churches. Almost all couples, regardless of whether their ceremony was officiated by a minister or a Justice of the Peace, were married by a woman. Some couples had different guests invited to their ceremonies and receptions—in these cases, a smaller number of guests were invited to the ceremony, compared to the reception. Additionally, receptions were occasionally held on different dates than ceremonies, such as a week later. The amount of work needed to make their celebrations happen varied. One couple who married in their backyard planned their wedding in a month; for others, it took a year.

Wedding planning and details were approached carefully with an awareness of the tenuous nature of people's acceptance of SSM, despite the breadth and depth of support that will be described. For example, several talked about being nervous about kissing their spouse in front of others. Laura (five years) said, "Funny things run through your head, like, 'How many in this

room have seen two women kiss before?” Sharon (two years), said:

I wanted our families to look and be proud and not see anything like we see in the gay pride parades. Like I didn't want them to look and say, “Wow, look at them freaks getting married.” I've heard this comment, I've been around too many years, I know what that comment feels like. It's not nice.

All of the couples married in Nova Scotia, with the exception of one lesbian couple who married in New Brunswick and another lesbian couple who married in a gay friendly community in Maine. For this younger couple (in their early thirties), the legalization of SSM in Canada was not enough. Although they were proud of Canada's progressiveness and said they had experienced no outward disapproval in Nova Scotia, they did not feel they were fully treated as equals compared to their heterosexual counterparts. As a result, they chose to leave the country to marry in a place where they felt “100% about feeling comfortable” to show their love and affection for each other in public. Reflecting on the issue, Kelly (four years) said:

It's now legal in Canada, [but] I'm not sure I would use the word “acceptance.” . . . There was political pressure there, and it's not acceptance as a broad statement. There are so many people who don't accept it.

Family, Friends, and Communities

Family members and friends, in general, were very supportive, providing emotional encouragement for marrying, which, in turn, translated into tangible assistance with the wedding planning. However, similar to Smart (2007, 2008), there were a range of responses, and a few family members (typically men) had difficulties accepting the same-sex marriage. Communities were also receptive, even in rural areas. Individuals were delighted to be met with support when they instead had expected difficulties.

However, such community support in rural areas sometimes seems tied in with a certain expectations. To be accepted as an out same-sex couple in a rural community, the couple had to be seen as “normal,” which reinforces the concept of the *respectable same-sex couple* (Valverde, 2006) as well as heteronormativity. In describing how people in his rural community still talked positively about his wedding (as the wonderful “wedding,” not the wonderful “gay wedding”), Anderson noted:

The more, as gay couples, lesbian couples, whatever, that we can just normalize our life gets us further steps ahead than somebody sitting there with a big pride flag and slamming it in somebody’s face. I don’t think that gets us anywhere. I think the more we try to show the normalization of a couple living together in love, *that’s* what changes people’s views.

The Wedding Industry

Participants received support and acceptance from wedding businesses and wedding-associated services in a variety of ways, reporting very few negative experiences. However, occasional issues arose with regard to heterosexism and homophobia.

Officiants/religious communities. Those who were married by a Justice of the Peace found the person from available lists, with one exception of a couple who emailed a gay-friendly publication for recommendations. Justices of the Peace were very supportive. Angela (three years) and her partner found theirs from a list on the Internet, picking the first female Justice of the Peace on the list who had an email address. They sent the woman an email, and “She wrote back right away and was really wonderful and super excited and like very keen on the whole thing.”

In contrast, those married by ministers had varying experiences with religious leaders and

communities. In some cases, ministers could decline to participate; in other cases, they needed to get support from their congregations before they could agree to officiate at the wedding. The United Church was usually mentioned, as it was one of a few potentially supportive religions.

Penelope and Samantha (one year) approached nondenominational ministers because they did not belong to a church community. The first one they approached “flat out refused,” saying it was against his beliefs. Samantha described him as “One of those generic rent-a-ministers. He’s supposed to be the minister that you get when you don’t have a minister, when you don’t *have* affiliations to any particular church.” They felt that the man had been diplomatic in his email response, but in retrospect wished that he would have had something on his website so that they would not have contacted him in the first place. They found a woman who “was very, very happy to marry us and she even teared up during the ceremony.” However, the earlier incident left them with a changed perspective on wedding planning. They became more careful about how they approached people.

I think we felt a desire to—or at least I definitely [now] felt a desire to make sure it was clear, to make sure that there was [sic] going to be no issues and no surprises. I didn’t want anybody kind of showing up and making a look or having any type of negative feelings or associations or discomfort there. (Penelope)

Noelle and Becky (2 years), were married by a female United Church minister, who was “delighted” to participate. They deliberately sought someone from the United Church because they viewed it as a supportive religion. They did not realize, however, that in the United Church, individual congregations voted whether or not to accept SSM in their specific church. This minister had to receive permission from her congregation because it was potentially its first SSM, and the congregation overwhelmingly supported it. Additionally, the woman’s husband, a

minister from the Anglican church (which did not support SSM), asked and was allowed to attend the wedding. Both the United Church minister and her husband further showed their support by talking about the wonderful ceremony they had been to and quoting from the vows when they gave their sermons at their respective churches the following Sunday.

The two gay couples who regularly attended church had contrasting experiences with their religious communities. Anderson and Ray (two years) felt supported at their rural United church, which had approved same-sex wedding a year earlier. This acceptance existed because the congregation had come to know them over time and viewed them as “normal.”

We’ve had people come up to us that were still struggling when they passed that same-sex marriage law, that have come up to us now and say, “It’s amazing to see you and Ray together, to see you as a married couple, you’re just normal like everybody else, you just happen to [be gay].” (Anderson)

In contrast, Brad and Ryan (one year) had a different experience in their rural, religious communities. They were actually actively involved in two local churches when they decided to marry: Catholic and United. They applied to their United church to marry, but because they were the first same-sex couple in that congregation applying to marry, a vote had to be held.

[The church] hadn’t updated their membership rules and about 40 people came who they hadn’t seen in church for over three years. And in effect they voted it down. And even then it was close. We believe the regular membership, which might be about at that time 80 people, they voted, most of them voted in favor. (Brad)

They were instead married at a hotel by a minister from a nearby town, and their United Church minister attended the wedding as a guest. Following their wedding, they placed a marriage announcement in the provincial newspaper, which a Catholic Bishop saw and immediately

contacted their priest saying that they could continue to attend services but that they “cannot hold any position of authority and cannot receive communion.” Afterwards, the two men increased their involvement in the United Church, but still maintained some ties with their supportive Catholic congregation. Brad said, “I’ll always be Catholic and believing in everything except that the Pope has the authority, and the Archbishop to govern my life. And I *know*, in the Catholic tradition, that conscience supersedes even the Pope.”

Government services. Government workers in offices where marriage licenses were picked up were very affirmative, just acting like it was part of their job and sometimes showing genuine excitement. Noelle said, “You’re worried about that because it’s so relatively new. . . [but] everything was fine and dandy.” Denise (less than one year) said, “they’re very open and just kind of nonchalant about it, like they’ve done it every day and they really have.” Shauna (one year) felt that the clerk’s enthusiasm was indicative of a broader “growing excitement” from people in being involved in social change, and one man playfully joked to Sally (five years) that she “was making an honest woman” out of her partner, something she noted could easily have been said to a heterosexual couple. Interestingly, Dennis felt that picking up his marriage license was the only experience he had in planning his large wedding that was not heterosexist.

[The employee] never once said anything that assumed I was marrying a woman.

They’ve cleaned up everything. I don’t know if they’ve taken courses or if they’ve been trained. It was all “partner, partner, partner”, etc. and never asked if it was a her or a she.

Shauna mentioned that someone she knew who worked “high up” in the government had confirmed that when the law changed, all government workers received sensitivity training, and participants’ accounts clearly confirmed this.

Wedding-related businesses. Businesses such as card stores, reception sites, and flower

shops were very supportive. Participants used phrases such as “nobody batted an eyelid,” “they could have cared less,” “delighted to be involved,” “didn’t skip a beat,” “matter of fact,” and “very sincere” when describing these interactions. Most respondents said they encountered no negativity at all. Becky said, “I think the responses were genuine. I didn’t have the sense that there was a discomfort that they were trying very hard to cover up.” Encounters were also good in rural areas. Anderson said:

It’s supposed [to be] all the redneck hillbillies that live up in the woods and we went up there, talked to the lady, ordered our cupcakes and she never had an issue or a thing to say to us. It was a wonderful experience.

Businesses were almost always excellent, especially if privately owned. Some individuals were eager to work at their first SSM wedding, knowing that they could benefit from referrals. Samantha said, “I remember one person who definitely said, ‘It’s a shame. I would have loved to have photographed you. You would have been my first same-sex couple.’” Additionally, sometimes couples were given discounts, particularly when it was a tradesperson’s first SSM. This occurred with several photographers, including one who was interested in adding the couple’s photographs to his portfolio. A photograph of Dylan and Dennis’s (4 years) wedding rings was still prominently displayed in one small jewelry store’s window two years after their wedding.

Participants noted that the companies had a financial incentive for treating them well. Monica (less than one year) said, “They’re business people first and if they do have any prejudice or any kind of bias, well they keep it very well hidden because, you know, they still see you as a potential client or customer.” Erica (three years) noted, “They’re not stupid, they’re purveyors, they’re merchants, of course the idea of two lesbians getting engagement rings is one

more engagement ring than they would sell to a heterosexual couple.” Max (2 years), who was American, noted how it might have been different in the United States: “Back in some places in the south in the U.S., you’d still be standing in line.”

Many respondents noted that if anyone was uncomfortable working with them, they did a good job of hiding it.

If they did, they did a really good job because I can pretty well tell, you know, by a person and that would have made me feel uncomfortable, you know. And that’s when Dennis and I would had to have a good one-on-one—“Well, maybe this isn’t quite the person that we need to look after this, you know, if they’re not feeling comfortable with it”, but I never got that feeling with anybody. (Dylan)

In a few instances, employees briefly hesitated while they realized they were working with a same-sex couple, but then it was business as usual. Sally described a woman in her early 60s at a flower shop who “wasn’t rude or anything. . . she kind of hesitated for a bit and then kept on” and Samantha described the servers at her reception site, saying, “It took them a little while before they really could 100% feel comfortable saying, ‘Okay, that’s the other wife’ [laughing]. . . They’re trying to see where they can fit you.”

A few service providers couples hired were gay or lesbian themselves, or suspected as gay or lesbian. However, apart from the one lesbian couple who chose to marry in an overtly gay friendly town, it did not appear that participants deliberately sought out GLBTQ purveyors. In several cases, service providers mentioned that they had gay or lesbian family members: “We learned in the first conversation [with the woman who owned the hotel], either she had a brother or her husband’s brother was, had a friend who was gay” (Noelle). This may have helped couples feel more comfortable proceeding with the transaction.

Sometimes individuals immediately said to the industry workers that they were marrying each other or that they were gay, which they deliberately did to preempt any unintentional heterosexism or uncomfortable incidents. Ray, for example, said, “Since I came out I don’t pull any punches. . . So, when I went in that’s exactly what I did, I said, ‘Okay, I’m a gay man,’ I said, ‘We’re planning a wedding.’” Sally, who asked most people upfront if they were comfortable with a same-sex wedding, said “[SSM] was still relatively new. . . and I was kind of scared how they would react.” Those who married close to July 20, 2005 may have felt a bit more cautious in dealing with various businesses than those who married later. Yet even four years after SSM was legalized in Canada, Miranda and her partner, the couple who married in the U.S., sometimes chose carefully who they would talk to at stores in Nova Scotia, seldom chose a man to speak to, and often approached someone “with soft eyes.” As noted earlier, Samantha and Penelope became more cautious in how they approached individuals after their experience with the one minister.

Despite the high level of support that individuals reported, there were still some issues. For example, it was difficult to find wedding items specific to same-sex couples. Becky described the trouble that one of their friends went to, to get matching sand sculptures for them: “There was a male and a female, so they had to talk the shop owner into breaking up the set and putting the two women together in this set. . . . they had a *lot* of resistance.” Same-sex wedding cards were seldom found and rarely received. Some individuals stated they would have liked to have seen more gay content in wedding planning materials (e.g., books, magazines, and the Internet). Alex (two years) said that “Gay marriage here is legal, so it’s about time [the wedding industry] starts coming and catching up with the rest of the world.” Becky noted how she had seen a card with two women on it, but one woman was in a dress and the other in a tuxedo, “So

[the cards] are, sort of, perpetuating traditional costumes of marriage even as they're celebrating difference." Two lesbian couples expressed concern about a "butch-femme" image that could be forced onto women, with one having to be "the bride" and the other "the groom."

The wording on forms or wedding registries was occasionally still heterosexist. For example, Becky stated, "On the information you fill out to apply for your wedding license, it had bride and bride's residence or place of birth, groom's place of birth and so we had to make adjustments there" and such experiences irritated her partner "to no end." Given that it had been two years since SSM had been legalized in Canada, they felt that the paperwork should have been synchronized with the law by that point.

Several couples indicated that large jewelry stores sometimes assumed they were marrying someone of a different sex, and this occurred in a few other venues as well. Dennis, who turned to a small business for wedding rings after his experience shopping for engagement rings, said:

Every time I went into the jewelers I went into *all five* jewelers in the _____ Shopping Centre, and every time I went in, and of course, I'm in there with a suit and tie, they're running to help you, cause you look like you have money. This is how this works. And so a guy in a tie, they just assume you want to buy something for your girlfriend. So I said I'm looking for engagement rings, and they never asked who I was marrying. They always brought me down to the women's section.

Lesbians' partners were considered to be girlfriends, and one man's partner assumed to be his father. Angela noted how when she went into a store with her partner, a saleswoman said, "What has your man decided that he's going to wear?" When Angela turned to Erica and asked her what kind of ring she was going to wear, the woman just said "Ok," and they continued on. With one

exception of a jewelry maker in another province whose face apparently drained of color according to Ingrid (5 years), in all of these occasions the person quickly apologized and politely proceeded with the business transaction.

Penelope and Samantha chose their photographer because he seemed nice and he offered them a discount because it was going to be his first same-sex wedding, but they experienced a two issues with him. First, they felt he was intimidated by the fact that most of them were lesbians and that a couple of their friends were “very, very, very butchy” (Samantha).

There was a little bit of an introduction all around and there was kind of this little bit of a pause and then, kind of “I’ll be back,” but he kind of left and it was funny because we kind of looked and then (my friend’s), like, “Oh, we so scared him” [laughing]. Later, the photographer attempted to make a joke while taking pictures, saying “Two women together are hot.” Samantha responded by saying, “No, that’s so wrong,” mentioning that “This is my wedding day, like, do not, you know, get into that type of shit with me.” They felt that he may have been trying to lighten the mood, but the joke was clearly very inappropriate. Samantha later felt that she would have chosen a photographer more carefully.

Finally, Dennis had a unique experience in that he went to several wedding shows on his own, and he found the environment at the wedding shows both heterosexist and sexist. Often when he was standing by a woman, the salesperson automatically assumed he was the woman’s fiancé. Moreover, the salespeople would talk to him, rather than his presumed fiancée, which he found very sexist. When he corrected them on both accounts, “They’d apologize profusely every time, without fail.” Dennis noted that, “You can change a law but it takes a while to change practice. . . . Weddings are a traditional thing. If you’re going to find heterosexism and sexism, you’re going to find it in weddings.”

Discussion

At the macro level, support for SSM is implicit in Canada's marriage laws and through increasingly accepting societal opinions about it (Woodford et al., 2012). This study provides descriptive evidence of that support through the analysis of same-sex couples' wedding planning, a process requiring interactions with people beyond immediate friends and families. Macro level support, generally speaking, was experienced with the wedding industry and related services. Nevertheless, there were signs that same-sex couples tread carefully at times, wary of this newfound legal acceptance, reflecting the ongoing vigilance often enacted by individuals who belong to "stigmatized social categories" (Meyer, 2003, p. 675).

Individuals' experiences with various wedding-related businesses and services are positive for the most part, in contrast to American research (Walters & Curran, 1996; Walters & Moore, 2002) focusing more broadly on gay consumers' shopping experiences. In Canada, refusing to serve a person on the basis of their sexual orientation is against the law. Sexual orientation was added to anti-discrimination laws in 1996, so businesses and institutions working with same-sex couples may simply be following the law. Moreover, selling two engagement rings to a couple instead of one is also attractive to businesses. Same-sex marriage represents a huge financial potential for businesses, who claim they are motivated by profits rather than politics (Sender, 2004). However, purveyors assisting the participants in this study often seemed genuinely happy and excited for them, which may reflect the broader acceptance of family diversity in Canada in recent years (Bibby, 2004).

Same-sex couples have differing experiences with their churches and church communities. Immediate interactions can differ from official Church teachings. Religious communities support same-sex couples who appear "normal," and religious leaders find ways to

support couples even when they cannot perform the ceremonies. Acceptance of SSMs in the United Church is specific to individual congregations who vote whether or not to accept it. Thus, same-sex couples may still be limited in their options for religious ceremonies. Individuals also find ways to deal with various sexual orientation microaggressions they may encounter.

Microaggressions, are “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative slights and insults toward members of oppressed groups” and they have often been reported in religiously-related experiences (Nadal, Wong, Issa, Meterko, Leon, & Wideman, 2011, p. 22). Individuals such as Brad or couples may choose to interpret their church’s teachings in ways that positively fit their circumstances, a strategy used by GLBTQ individuals to deal with rejection or lack of affirmation from their religious traditions (Rostosky et al., 2008).

The most typical disappointing or frustrating experience reported relates to heterosexism, such as an employee assuming they were marrying someone of a different sex, finding heterosexist language in forms, and reading wedding-related planning information clearly geared only toward heterosexual couples. Since SSM became legal in Canada, married same-sex couples, as a proportion of all same-sex couples, have increased (Statistics Canada, 2012). A greater number of same-sex couples carrying out their wedding planning will likely mean various businesses, organizations, and consultants will have increased experiences working with them. LGBTQ individuals influence their ecosystems through this increased presence, hopefully leading to greater awareness of possible internalized heterosexism and heteronormativity by purveyors and better or “best practices.” Thus, as Canada moves further away from July 2005 and as SSM becomes more common, it is possible that fewer negative or disappointing experiences will be reported by same-sex couples. Individuals working in large urban centres

may also be better prepared to work with same-sex couples than those in rural areas, although this study found good interactions with vendors in rural areas.

Nevertheless, the ideology of heteronormativity in weddings is pervasive, and much of the Canadian wedding industry is affected by the United States, which has less accepting attitudes toward SSM than Canada (Woodford et al., 2012). A person reading content about wedding planning on the Internet will not necessarily distinguish between Canadian versus American content, and indeed much of it is American content. Greater awareness by all those involved in the wedding industry, in both countries and beyond, is needed. Until greater awareness is achieved, small but important features such as forms with heterosexist language may go unnoticed by heterosexual individuals until pointed out by someone with consciousness around sexual orientation issues. Various sexual orientation microaggressions may continue to be perpetuated as well, such as the photographer exoticizing Penelope and Samantha as they kissed.

The wedding industry has been historically geared toward White, middle-class women, as they are the ones most likely to consume wedding-related products, attend wedding-related events (e.g., wedding or bridal shows) and respond to marketing messages (Ingraham, 1999). Some wedding-related publications have implemented gay-focused initiatives, presenting SSM images and stories, and it is important that such initiatives not be marginalized. Moreover, such resources need to move beyond placing responsibility on couples themselves to locate good businesses (e.g., a section on “How do I find gay-friendly wedding vendors?”) and focus instead on making it the responsibility of businesses to be more inclusive.

Some individuals have recognized the need to educate businesses, such as Smith (2013), founder of *14 Stories* and the *Gay Wedding Institute*, who focuses on helping wedding-related businesses understand “the gay market.” Smith encourages people to think carefully about terms

and stereotypes, and distinguishes between different levels of cultural competency. Moving toward cultural proficiency, she argues, includes actions such as examining one's use of language and having Human Resource diversity training that includes GLBTQ issues. Understanding different types of microaggressions (see Nadal et al., 2011, for a taxonomy) and how they can be unintentionally carried out would also be important to include. In this study, no examples of heterosexism or microaggressions were found with government employees working in offices where individuals picked up their marriage licenses, which highlights the importance of sensitivity training. However, many individuals working with same-sex couples will be small business owners or individuals working on their own; they will not have the benefit of a Human Resources department to provide them with training or steer them toward thinking about such issues.

Finally, it is important to note that many of the participants, while describing the various facets of support they received, also provided a multitude of examples of how they planned their weddings carefully to potentially avoid any negative outcomes related to heterosexism and and/or homophobia. Smart (2007) notes how same-sex couples will be particularly attentive to the reactions of others, and this is indicative of the pressures and stress that emerge from being members of a sexual minority (Meyer, 2003). As a result of years of environmental and social discrimination, "LGB people learn to anticipate—indeed, expect—negative regard from members of the dominant culture. To ward off potential negative regard, discrimination, and violence they must remain vigilance" (Meyer, p. 680). Thus, same-sex couples consider features such as where they will hold their wedding, how they will kiss, and how long a ceremony will be so as not to push the goodwill of heterosexual guests. They want to put on a good show for others, while being mindful that SSM has only recently been legalized, engaging in a form of

intentionality specific to their same-sex weddings (Author citation, 2013). In the case of wedding industry personnel, they tell people upfront that they are gay or lesbian to avoid a salesperson refusing to work with them or making a heterosexist comment that ruins the moment. Or, in the case of the one lesbian couple in this study, they leave the country in which SSM is legal for a gay mecca in another country where SSM is actually not legal. Until couples such as this stay in Canada to have their weddings, ecological acceptance of SSM has not been fully integrated into Canadian society.

These kind of experiences draw attention to the challenges and systemic tensions same-sex couples experience living in a sociohistorical context in which they are now legally accepted as couples, but yet clearly not accepted by everyone. The experience of being part of a group that has experienced stigma for so long can lead individuals to engage in protective actions regardless of whether or not such events occur (Meyer, 2003); fear or expectations of rejection can be just as strong a driving force for action as actual rejection. Moreover, the wedding industrial complex, by virtue of its history and broad reaching tentacles, is a formidable enforcer in the construction of heterosexism and heteronormativity (Ingraham, 1999), which prevails despite some retailers and service providers' best intentions. Although most appear to be genuinely supportive, a minority of service providers working in the Canadian wedding industry and related areas occasionally engage in ways that cast a shadow over the joy of some same-sex married couples' wedding planning experiences. As Dennis had noted, if there was one place where heterosexism and sexism was going to be found, it was in weddings, and even though a law is changed, it takes time to change practices, particularly those connected to tradition.

Limitations

This qualitative study sought to understand meaning through the analysis of a small

number of individuals' narratives. Participants were from Nova Scotia, and all were White, European, thus their experiences cannot be generalized to all Canadians. They were also primarily lesbian or gay. Readers may want to consider how these results may be *transferable* (Miyata & Kai, 2009) to other same-sex wedding contexts. A strength of the sample characteristics, however, is that five couples married and/or lived in rural areas, which allows for an exploration of how rurality influenced their experiences.

Participants' experiences were overwhelmingly positive, but it may be that only couples who had mainly positive experiences responded to the study. The passage of time may also influence how people report their memories of weddings; as time goes by, they may minimize negative experiences at their weddings and describe them more as social events (Holmberg & Veroff, 1996). It is possible that different experiences might have been revealed had a non-heterosexual researcher (with "insider status") conducted the interviews and analyzed the data.

Future Research

Wedding industry practices can be further examined in both urban and rural areas for how they may or may not be changing with regard to heterosexism, homophobia, and heteronormativity. Religion's role in weddings, marrying, and overall in GLBTQ individuals' lives is also a topic requiring more analysis (Rostosky et al., 2008). Cross-cultural research such as this is needed to explore how GLBTQ individuals' and couples' wedding experiences in other countries may or may not be similar to American couples.

As SSM becomes more common and as the general public, in turn, becomes more accepting of it, negative experiences will hopefully become less common. However, studies could also examine any cohort differences in wedding planning experiences. Given different life course or chronosystems, younger cohorts may have different expectations than older cohorts

regarding the level of the support they expect to receive and the amount of vigilance they will feel the need to use. In this study, it seemed that those who married closer to July 20, 2005, were more cautious in their planning than those who married later, because SSM was still so new for many people. However, Penelope and Samantha, one of the younger couples in this study who married one year after SSM was legalized in Canada, was an exception. They began their wedding planning with very little vigilance, but developed it over time due to unexpected negative interactions with a minister and a photographer. It is possible that older individuals may demonstrate more examples of internalized stigma, another element of minority stress (Meyer, 2003).

Conclusion

This ecological analysis of same-sex wedding planning in Canada shows that macro-level support for SSM, implicit in Canada's marriage laws, filters down to other ecosystem levels. Much support was received from families, friends, and communities, even when it was not necessarily expected, such as in rural, conservative regions. Support was found in various elements of the wedding industrial complex. Government workers used non-heterosexist language and demonstrated sincere excitement for couples picking up their marriage licenses. Churches and religious leaders did show support, but not always—it depended on both the religion and the community in which one worshiped. Support was also demonstrated in the wedding industry. If there was resistance or homophobia, participants rarely experienced it. Notwithstanding, there were signs that the wedding industry still had to address issues such as heterosexism, and a few microaggressions occurred. These couples understood that legal acceptance did not necessarily change some individuals' views about homosexuality or SSM, and vigilance was present in many ways to combat perceived or anticipated homophobia or

heterosexism. Individuals engaged in a number of intentional practices that likely reflect the stress they experience as members of a sexual minority group, such as hiding one's sexuality and anticipating rejection (Meyer, 2003). As SSM becomes more common in Canada and in turn, heterosexual individuals become more comfortable with it, such vigilance may disappear as it becomes less necessary. By virtue of their increasing visibility, same-sex couples may positively impact their broader ecological environment. However, those working in the heavily heteronormative wedding industry and related businesses and services also need to take note of best practices in working with same-sex couples, and take initiatives to train and educate themselves.

¹Individuals were interviewed separately because of an additional research question (not addressed in this paper), which examined each person's contributions to the wedding planning.

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