



Published in final edited form as:

*J Fam Issues*. 2009 June 1; 30(6): 738–756. doi:10.1177/0192513X09331574.

## Commitment Without Marriage: Union Formation Among Long-Term Same-Sex Couples

**Corinne Reczek,**

The University of Texas at Austin

**Sinikka Elliott,** and

North Carolina State University, Raleigh

**Debra Umberson**

The University of Texas at Austin

### Abstract

The majority of Americans will marry in their lifetimes, and for many, marriage symbolizes the transition into long-term commitment. However, many Americans cannot legally marry. This article analyzes in-depth interviews with gays and lesbians in long-term partnerships to examine union formation and commitment-making histories. Using a life course perspective that emphasizes historical and biographical contexts, the authors examine how couples conceptualize and form committed relationships despite being denied the right to marry. Although previous studies suggest that commitment ceremonies are a way to form same-sex unions, this study finds that because of their unique social, historical, and biographical relationship to marriage and ceremonies, long-term same-sex couples do not follow normative commitment-making trajectories. Instead, relationships can transition more ambiguously to committed formations without marriage, public ceremony, clear-cut act, or decision. Such an understanding of commitment making outside of marriage has implications for theorizing alternative forms of union making.

### Keywords

commitment; commitment ceremony; gay; lesbian; same-sex marriage

---

Despite rising rates of cohabitation, most Americans will legally marry at some point over the life course (Thornton & Young-Demarco, 2001). Marriage confers important legal rights and joint benefits such as health care, social security, and custody of children. In addition to bestowing legal rights, marriage remains a significant public symbol of commitment; the act of marriage validates and legitimizes relationships through a series of rituals including engagements, weddings, exchanging of rings, name changes, and alterations in legal and financial status. Legal marriage can provide individuals with a template of what to expect as they pass through various life stages (Slater, 1995). This remains true even as norms shift around age of marriage and cohabitation before marriage.

However, in the United States today, individuals in same-sex partnerships cannot legally marry except in the state of Massachusetts. Thus, gay and lesbian individuals in these couples are unable to participate in what is considered the most symbolically meaningful

form of commitment two individuals can make to one another. Because these couples are denied access to legal marriage, there is no clear life course model that guides their union formation. Based on in-depth interviews with 40 gays and lesbians in 20 long-term cohabiting couples (8 to 27 years), we examine how couples conceptualize and form committed relationships despite being denied the right to marry. Three research questions guide our analysis:

1. How do long-term same-sex couples retrospectively explain their transition to a committed relationship?
2. For couples who have had a commitment ceremony, what role do marriage and ceremonies play in commitment processes?
3. For couples who have not had a commitment ceremony, how do they view marriage and ceremonies in relation to their union?

Throughout our analysis, we work from a life course perspective to consider how sociohistorical context and life stage timing shape commitment transitions and trajectories for long-term same-sex couples.

## Background

### Life Course

We use three main aspects of the life course perspective, as delineated by Elder and Johnson (2002), to consider how historical context and biographical life stage timing influence agent-driven commitment making. First, a life course perspective highlights the interplay of social and historical influences in shaping individual development, experiences, decisions, and life trajectories over time (Elder, 1991; Elder & Johnson, 2002). Second, this perspective focuses on the way historical circumstances have divergent implications for individuals of different ages and life stages (Elder & Johnson, 2002). This component may be especially important to consider during times of rapid social change, as the experiences of individuals across ages, life stages, and biographical history may vary extensively (Elder & O'Rand, 1994).

Finally, we utilize the concept of individual agency. This concept focuses attention on the intersection of individual decision making within the constraints of historical and social contexts (Shanahan & Elder, 2002). A consideration of agency is noteworthy when attempting to understand individuals' decision-making processes. We highlight that agent-driven decisions always occur in context. Throughout this article, we consider how the intersection of historical and biographical timing has consequences for long-term same-sex couples' views of commitment ceremonies, marriage, and their relationships. Using this framework, we seek to understand how individuals construct their commitment-making stories and how these constructions reflect societal changes and life stage positioning.

### Marriage as Commitment

Despite declining marriage rates, getting married is still seen as valuable and important by Americans in all social groups (Lichter, Batson, & Brown, 2004). Scholars argue that the practical importance of marriage is overshadowed by its symbolic significance (Cherlin, 2004; Ingraham, 1999), and most still see marriage as a central life course event. Studies suggest that married couples are qualitatively different than other intimate couples, such as cohabiting couples, in a variety of ways (for a review, see Smock, 2000). For example, research shows that there is less commitment in cohabiting relationships (Stanley, Whitton, & Markman, 2004), and cohabiters are more likely to break up and are less likely to pool financial resources than married partners (Brines & Joyner, 1999; Bumpass & Lu, 2000). In

line with this research, Waite and Gallagher (2000) argue that “getting married doesn’t merely certify a preexisting love relationship. Marriage actually changes people’s goals and behavior[s]” (p. 17).

In contrast, other scholars caution against dichotomizing married versus cohabiting couples. This research stresses that not all cohabiting couples are the same, as the meaning of cohabitation depends on a variety of contextual factors (Seltzer, 2000). In agreement with Seltzer, recent studies have begun to delineate differences between types of cohabiting couples. Nonmarital cohabiters are defined as those who cohabit as an alternative to marriage, whereas premarital cohabiters are understood as those who cohabit as a precursor to marriage (Brown & Booth, 1996; Stanley et al., 2004). In line with this distinction, we further investigate differences in cohabitating couples by using a life course contextual perspective to analyze gay and lesbian cohabiters.

### Gay and Lesbian Commitment

Until recently, legal marriage and unions were not available to same-sex couples in the United States, and for most, these forms of legal bonds are still not available. Because the majority of gays and lesbians cannot participate in normative commitment making, researchers have begun to question what commitment means for this population. Although many commitment-making factors, such as moving in together and joining finances, are similar to heterosexual commitment making, in the context of a same-sex relationship these events may have alternative meaning and importance (Rostosky, Riggle, Dudley, & Wright, 2006).

Recent research has overwhelmingly highlighted one avenue of commitment making: a same-sex commitment ceremony or marriage (Hull, 2006; Lewin, 1998). For example, Hull (2006) interviewed same-sex couples who had been together for more than 2 years or who had a commitment ceremony. Her findings suggest that ceremonies are embraced by some same-sex couples as symbolic of legal marriage in that they are a way to bind the couple together in a profound marriage-like union. Hull further argues that those who have taken part in commitment ceremonies change their behaviors. They may work harder at the relationship and approach life decisions as a couple. In contrast, some longer term couples voiced no desire for a ceremony because they felt it was too late in the relationship.

Accounts of same-sex ceremonies are found as early as the 1970s, yet it was not until the mid- to late 1990s that such ceremonies became overtly visible in media (Lewin, 1998). We use a life course perspective to analyze the ways that sociohistorical and biographical contexts influence long-term couples’ commitment making. Conceptions of same-sex commitment making have been discussed previously (Rostosky et al., 2006; Slater, 1995), but our life course framework facilitates a more thorough examination of how gays and lesbians chart their union formation trajectory and articulate commitment making depending on historical context and life stage timing. We use data from in-depth interviews with long-term same-sex couples (8 to 27 years) who began their relationships prior to the mid-1990s or who were at a more mature life stage or age when commitment ceremonies become popular. We examine how the commitment process unfolds over time for these couples and direct particular attention to the role of commitment ceremonies in the commitment process.

## Method

### Data Collection and Recruitment

We recruited and interviewed 40 gays and lesbians in 20 long-term couples who had been together between 8 and 27 years. This included 20 gay men in 10 couples who had been together an average of 20 years, and 20 lesbians in 10 couples who had been together an

average of 11 years. The main purpose of these interviews was to obtain life course narratives that focused on how relationship quality changes over time, with a particular emphasis on periods of upturns and downturns in relationship quality. We conducted interviews separately in order to preserve individual perspective.

Interviews lasted an average of 1.5 hours each and were conducted in the respondents' homes and at the offices of the research team. Respondents were recruited through a variety of methods, including distribution of flyers in diverse socioeconomic areas, e-mail Listservs of local businesses and gay and lesbian groups, participation in local gay pride activities, and word-of-mouth snowball sampling. The interviews were conducted throughout 2005 and 2006 and were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The interviews were semistructured and consisted of questions on a variety of topics from the time the couple began to date to the present. To understand how individuals related to marriage, commitment, and commitment ceremonies, we asked a series of open-ended questions about these topics. Each respondent was assigned a pseudonym in order to protect his or her identity.

We emphasize that our findings are from a purposive and voluntary sample of gays and lesbians in long-term relationships. These are couples that have managed to stay together for at least 8 years and for as long as 27 years and are thus successful in terms of duration. However, our interviews revealed a wide range of relationship satisfaction, suggesting that these relationships are not equally successful in terms of quality and happiness for the individuals involved.

### Sample

Eighty percent (32) of this sample was White; 6 individuals defined themselves as Hispanic, Latino, or Latina; 1 identified as Native American/Hispanic; and 1 identified as South American. Total household income ranged from \$40,000 to more than \$80,000, with more than half in the latter category. Respondents fell within an age range of 29 to 72, with a mean age of 45 years (see the appendix). Despite sampling efforts, we were not successful in obtaining a more ethnically and economically diverse group of respondents. This is an important limitation of our study that we address in the discussion section. Eight couples had commitment ceremonies: Five of these couples were lesbian, and three were gay. The three gay couples had marriage ceremonies in Canada or Massachusetts.

### Retrospective Data

We first provided respondents with a blank graph marked by years of the relationship and asked them to chart important life events (e.g., births of children, major illnesses, or job changes) and stressful situations (e.g., periods of severe financial strain or illness) over the course of their relationship. Next, respondents were asked to chart the overall quality of their relationship (*extremely high, very high, a little high, a little low, very low, and extremely low*) from the beginning of their relationship to the present day. We then obtained individual life course narratives from both partners (interviewed separately) to describe their relationship experiences and changes in the overall quality of their relationship over time. This approach allowed us to view the relationship in terms of the changing contexts and underlying processes that characterize individual relationship trajectories. This aspect of our interviews complements our life course framework by situating the decision making and events of individuals' lives within a broader historical and biographical context. This long-term view of respondents' lives gives us a clearer understanding of the ways in which their life stage positions and personal histories influence commitment-making trajectories and transitions.

It is important to note that in constructing such a narrative, an individual may distort certain events in the past in order to construct a coherent story of the couple's relationship. Retrospective reports of relationship satisfaction tend to be patterned in that partners recall difficulties or low periods of relationship quality in the past but often end the report by describing recent improvements in relationship quality (Karney & Frye, 2002). Thus, our in-depth interview approach may introduce a kind of retrospective bias into reports about relationship change, but these narratives also reflect the lived experiences and perceptions of change in individuals' relationships over time.

## Analysis

Although we interviewed on a variety of topics, our goal in this study was to understand when, how, and why gay and lesbian individuals conceptualize their commitment to one another. We conducted a qualitative analysis using procedures developed by Charmaz (2006). Charmaz's methods build on Glaser and Strauss's (1967) now classic grounded theory approach, which emphasizes the construction of codes for the purpose of developing analytical, theoretical, and abstract interpretations of the data. Qualitative coding allows for the emergence of categories and subcategories to come from the participants' interviews, rather than predetermined categories. Thus, it is ideal for understanding meanings and processes behind individuals' everyday lives and decisions.

Following multiple intensive readings of each interview's verbatim transcription, we conducted initial line-by-line, data-driven categorization in order to summarize each piece of data. Next, we used what Charmaz (2006) terms "focused" coding, which spotlights the most significant initial codes that emerged related to our topic. This involved developing categories by connecting numerous initial codes together for conceptual purposes. During this stage, the following categories were identified: the transition to a committed relationship, the meaning of commitment, reasons for or for not having a commitment ceremony, the meaning of a commitment ceremony, and the meaning of marriage. Throughout the development of these main analytical categories, we placed each interviewee's biographical history in relation to his or her commitment-making history, paying particular attention to the popularity of commitment ceremonies and the legalization of same-sex marriage during different time periods.

In the final stage of analysis, we examined how our categories and subcategories related to one another on a conceptual level. For example, whether couples had a commitment ceremony is directly related to the meaning of commitment, the transition to a committed relationship, and the meaning of legal marriage. Thus, no category stands alone. This connectedness among categories is reflected in the structure of the headings in the results section below: lifelong commitment, commitment ceremonies and commitment, and the rejection of commitment ceremonies.

## Results

Public and legal marriage acts shape intimate relationships in distinct ways. Some scholars conceptualize marriage as the "transformative act that creates a relationship between two people" (Waite & Gallagher, 2000, p. 73). To investigate whether our sample of long-term same-sex couples experience this sort of "transformative act," we analyzed our respondents' feelings about, and experiences of, commitment, commitment ceremonies, and marriage. We first discuss some of our respondents' reflections on when they became committed to one another. Second, we focus on those respondents in our sample who have had commitment ceremonies (40%) and the role such ceremonies play in their commitment making. Last, we discuss those who have not had a commitment ceremony (60%), focusing on their reasons

for not having a ceremony. We use a life course perspective to call attention to the ways our respondents are embedded in, and shaped by, the historical time and life stage they inhabit.

### Lifelong Commitment

We begin by describing the processes through which respondents make long-term relationship commitments. During the interview, respondents were asked to differentiate between dating and long-term commitment. Many discuss the ambiguous nature of commitment in their relationships, and for some, this ambiguity relates to the absence of an institutional marker such as marriage. For example, Bobby (age 44), in a relationship for 17 years, discusses how long he and his partner dated:

A few months. It is hard to say in a nonconventional relationship because you know, you don't have these milestones like weddings and things like that. So, it really wasn't that long, but it was a few months.

Diana (age 43), partnered for 10 years, also has trouble distinguishing when her relationship with her partner got serious, stating, "Hum ... the first few years that we were together, obviously since we won't ever be married, I can't like tag it to like when we first got married." This type of uncertainty between dating and the committed relationship also came up for Megan (age 34), partnered for 12 years. She discusses figuring out when her union started: "It is hard for me to define between dating and our first year [as a committed couple]. So, I am not sure. ..." Like Megan, many individuals belabor the question of when they consider their committed relationship to have begun, pointing to a degree of uncertainty regarding the actual transition to commitment. Janet (age 40) exemplifies how some couples report their committed years together differently, depending on when each partner identifies the beginning of the relationship:

You know, for me I was smitten, from day one. Boom. [But Courtney] didn't come out as a lesbian until she was in her mid thirties. So, she tends to have these traditional heterosexual values. And even to this day, at church they recognize anniversaries and to me, our anniversary is from when we had our first conversation about, "I want to date you and you want to date me." From then until now, it has been fifteen plus years. But her definition of anniversary is from when we had our holy communion. So, it is like eleven or twelve now. I mean, she acknowledges this previous point, but to her, it made a big deal to have this ceremony. To her more than to me.

Because the sociohistorical context in which many of these couples began their relationships did not provide normative ways (i.e., marriage or commitment ceremonies) of forming committed unions, many had trouble discussing this transition. Gus (age 42) and Andrew (age 44), partnered for 23 years, have not had a commitment ceremony. Below Gus highlights how their life stage position and social context affect their commitment-making options:

It hasn't been that important to me or Andrew, because we both came out in the eighties, and at that time, the norm was that, oh, gay people wouldn't even be in a relationship. It's a lonely, depressing life. That, of course, is not true. But we kind of relished the idea that our lifestyle was not the norm and, you know, we could stand up for not being mainstream. It was more like in the nineties and stuff when the, "Oh, we can get married too"—that whole idea came about.

In this passage Gus illustrates the ways that social forces such as the acceptance of same-sex marriages and ceremonies shape the viability of marriage as a commitment-making option. The couples in this study acted within such an environment to form committed unions without partaking in marriage. To better understand the link between commitment

ceremonies and commitment for these couples, we next explore in depth how couples who have ceremonies view them in relation to commitment making.

### Commitment Ceremonies and Commitment

In this part of the analysis, we showcase the eight couples in our sample who have had commitment or marriage ceremonies (40%). Those who were married did so either in Canada or Massachusetts, where same-sex marriage is legal, even though these couples reside permanently in a state where their marriages are not recognized. Previous research suggests that same-sex couples who have ceremonies see them as relationship-altering events (Hull, 2006). We asked these long-term couples whether such ceremonies were commitment-making moments in their relationships.

We find that a majority of individuals do not conceptualize commitment ceremonies as a transformative moment in their relationship. Instead, many see ceremonies as a celebration of an already committed union. This is exemplified by Adam (age 50), who married Paul (age 48) in Canada (in 2003) 20 years into their relationship:

The legal marriage in Canada was ... more for the sake of saying, “We are married.” On paper, with a marriage license. We are married. That was more symbolic. The real commitment [was] twenty years ago.

Stanley (age 42), who married his partner of 16 years, David (age 41), in Massachusetts, also discusses the impact of getting married in 2003, 14 years into their relationship:

I always kind of thought we wouldn’t get married for any other [than legal] reason, because we are already married, you know. In every sense of the word, we already are. I don’t know if it has changed much. I don’t think [our relationship] would be in a different place, but it has meant a lot to us, if that makes sense.

Danielle (age 47) and Gretchen (age 46), together for 8 years, had a commitment ceremony in 2003, 6 years into their relationship. When asked if they knew early on that they wanted to have a commitment ceremony, Danielle replied, “Yes. We talked about it probably in the first year. And we talked about doing it around year five. Just to celebrate our longevity.” Danielle and Gretchen have the shortest relationship duration of our respondents and indicate a slightly different dynamic in that they discussed having a commitment ceremony early in their relationship and proceeded to have the ceremony relatively soon (compared to the other more long-term couples we interviewed). However, similar to other respondents, Danielle and Gretchen say they do not view their commitment ceremony as a transformative moment in their relationship. Similarly, Brett (age 49), partnered for 23 years, reiterates this point when discussing his marriage ceremony in Canada in 2005 (22 years into his relationship): “It was just another affirmation of how great the relationship has been.” Clarissa (age 34) has been with her partner for 12 years. She also discusses why they decided to have a ceremony in 2003 (10 years into the relationship):

We were already committed and we have always known that [we’re] together and we are not going to be with anybody else, so let’s kind of make that public. And I think we were at a bookstore. “You want to have a commitment ceremony?” “Sure, let’s go ahead.” So it was kind of just a ... almost a passing thing. “Okay, let’s do this.” “Okay.”

The above couples describe their commitment ceremonies as secondary to forming their committed unions, as they already felt a strong sense of commitment prior to having their ceremonies. Using the life course perspective, which emphasizes the importance of historical and biographical context and timing, we suggest that some long-term couples follow this pattern as a result of the timing of their relationship formation and life stage.

Couples who became committed before ceremonies or marriage became culturally available felt they did not have an option to utilize these normative events and thus have a different view of their own ceremonies and commitment making. Our couples decided to have ceremonies as little as 6 or as many as 22 years into their relationships. All had ceremonies much later in the life course (on average at age 42; 37 for women, 46 for men) than the national average for heterosexual couples (25.5 for women, 27 for men) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005). A life course perspective stresses that the age at which individuals experience a transition is likely to influence how they conceptualize that transition (Settersten, 1997). Thus, having a ceremony at this life and relationship stage changes the meaning of the ceremony; such ceremonies are not something that is necessary to the development of their union but instead are a way to celebrate their already committed relationship.

### **What's the Point? Why Couples Reject Commitment Ceremonies**

The previous section emphasizes that individuals in our sample had commitment ceremonies in order to celebrate an already existing bond, not to transition into a new form of a relationship. We now turn to an analysis of the 12 couples (60%) who opted not to have commitment ceremonies in order to investigate how they view marriage and ceremonies in relation to their unions.

We find that respondents typically reject ceremonies because they do not envision them as making a difference in their relationships. Specifically, these respondents say that if it is not legal, they do not see the point. Thirty-nine individuals (98%) in our sample stated that they would legally marry if they could, whereas only 16 individuals (40%) had commitment ceremonies. Previous research confirms the importance of legality for same-sex couples (Lannutti, 2005). Therefore, we provide a joint discussion of marriage and commitment ceremonies in relation to legality and ceremony, questioning why couples want legality more than they want a ceremony.

Marissa (age 45) has been with her partner for 10 years. In answer to the question about why legal marriage matters, Marissa responds:

I say that in the sense that it would be easier in the world. It would be easier for legal things to happen, because as it is now, we have to go outside to get medical power of attorney and the adoption was a huge ordeal and so for the legality of things, I would like to [marry]. What it means to us, in our hearts and in our heads, I don't think it would be any different.

Carol (age 29), partnered for 8 years, reiterates this point: "I would totally do it [get married]. I don't think that it would be any ... it wouldn't legitimize my relationship any more." Many interviewees discuss how they would have ceremonies, but only if there were legal benefits attached to their ceremonies. As Kristen (age 43), partnered for 10 years, states, "[we won't have a ceremony] if it is not legal, it really can't do anything for us." These couples view ceremonies as meaningless if they do not hold legal weight. Tim (age 58), who has been with his partner for 23 years, has a similar take:

If our marriage were legal in the United States, I would strongly consider doing that. If for no other reason than [for] advantages that heterosexual couples have. But a commitment ... you asked about a commitment ceremony too. Hum ... if it had some impact, legally, then I suppose, certainly yes. But just to do it for that sake. I don't think that the two of us need to do that.

Tim's partner of 23 years, Donald (age 72), reiterates Tim's point:



We have talked about it, but I don't think we have talked about it real, real seriously, because of the legal aspects of it and so forth. You can't get married in this state. It is not recognized. So, you can go do something in front of a church, or something like this, but it doesn't make it legal. It is just that you said, "Okay, I am going to commit myself to you." And we both sort of feel like we do that by our actions. We have committed ourselves to each other.

Along with committing through actions, other couples do not see ceremonies as important because they are already "open and out" to everyone as a couple. Andrew (age 44) and Gus (age 42) have been together for 23 years, and Andrew explains his position:

If the commitment ceremony carried legal weight, we would definitely do it, just for economic reasons. But as far as just a symbolic ceremony, that would almost be pointless at this point because we are totally open and out and everyone thinks of us as a couple. Sometimes they even get our names mixed up because they think of us almost as one unit. So, the symbolism is already there in people's minds. It doesn't need a ceremony.

Edwin (age 49) and Kevin (age 55), who have been together 13 years, both discuss why they have not had a ceremony. Edwin believes that a ceremony will not make a difference in their relationship:

We both would like to have the legal rights. And I don't care so much about a ceremony. I mean, it never crossed my mind. I think more of ceremonies for other things. I think more of ceremonies maybe for when we are celebrating fifteen years together or twenty-five years together. But for our relationship, I think, we—and I believe he is the same way too—we never thought about it or talked about.

Edwin's partner of 13 years, Kevin, similarly discusses why commitment ceremonies are not important, stating, "I don't think there would be any difference in the relationship. I don't think that we would feel that there was more commitment just because we had a ceremony." Raymond (age 35), committed to his partner for 14 years, has a similar response:

I guess, like the first year dating, whatever, I thought about it briefly. But then we were both just like ... we don't need it to feel committed to one another and it doesn't mean anything as far as the government is concerned or the rest of society is concerned, and so it just seems like a farce to us. We are not going to do that. It is not legal here. We are in the South for Christ's sake. It is like ... it is just ... to me it just seems like it is ... I don't know, foolish in a way.

In sum, having a commitment ceremony is not important to these long-term couples because they view themselves as already committed to one another without any formal ceremony. We suggest that because these couples were denied access to normative methods of forming commitment when their relationships began, they actively fashioned committed unions outside of the pervasive marriage ideal. Although trends have shifted regarding the acceptability of ceremonies, most of the couples in our sample inhabit a more mature midlife stage and find that at this point in their lives, ceremonies are not practical or substantial enough in legal and social meaning to warrant their participation.

## Discussion

Marriage has been understood as the transformative moment of commitment making for couples (Waite & Gallagher, 2000). However, same-sex couples in most U.S. states are not able to participate in this legally and socially sanctioned act and must create alternative ways to form committed unions. Although previous studies suggest that commitment ceremonies are a way to form marriage-like unions for gays and lesbians (Hull, 2006), we find that the

long-term couples in our sample do not follow such commitment-making trajectories. Using a life course framework to emphasize how individuals make decisions within historical and biographical contexts, our results suggest that couples create committed relationships outside of the normative marriage-based model. Long-term same-sex couples have unique biographical and historical contexts that shape the formation of unions. When the couples in our sample began their relationships, they lacked access to traditional modes of commitment making. Thus, they established committed unions without using the symbolism of marriage.

We are driven by three specific questions related to gay and lesbian commitment. First, we address how gay and lesbian individuals come to define their relationships as committed unions when they are not allowed to participate in normative, legal ceremonies. We find that alternative and ambiguous meanings of commitment are formed in the context of these long-term relationships. Respondents often had difficulty distinguishing when they became committed to their partners, illustrating the complex and vague ways commitment is made. Therefore, the transition to a committed union can occur without one formalized act, making this transition much more ambiguous and difficult to articulate.

Second, we address the role that commitment ceremonies play in commitment processes among those couples who have had such ceremonies. We find that couples in our sample who have had ceremonies do not envision them as *the* transitional moment of commitment but instead as a way of celebrating an already committed relationship. Couples had ceremonies multiple years into their relationships and during a later life stage (midlife) than normative U.S. heterosexual marriage patterns (early adulthood). As a result, these couples attribute alternative meanings and significance to ceremonies.

Third, we question why couples do not have commitment ceremonies and how they view ceremonies in relation to their own unions. We find that for those couples who have not had commitment ceremonies, such events are seen as pointless unless accompanied by legal rights. These couples see symbolic ceremonies as unimportant for their union because they have previously formed their committed relationships. If given the choice, however, all but one person in our sample would be legally married, highlighting the importance of practical and legal concerns for long-term couples. Thus, although we find that formal ceremonies were not generally perceived as necessary for commitment, the majority of the individuals we spoke with actually desire legal same-sex marriage.

The recent acceptance and utilization of commitment ceremonies by gays and lesbians is an important historical component of this study. The life stage or relationship stage an individual or couple occupies in relation to cultural acceptance of ceremonies influences subsequent decisions about commitment, ceremonies, and marriage. We specifically sought out long-term same-sex couples for this study; hence, most of our couples began their relationships in the mid-1980s and early-1990s, prior to the acceptability and visibility of ceremonies (Lewin, 1998). Because such ceremonies were not widely prevalent when many couples began their relationships, they developed alternative and complex forms of commitment that are outside of normative conceptions of commitment making. Even though some couples chose to have ceremonies, they did so later in their relationships (6 to 22 years) and at much older ages (an average age of 42) than the average age at first marriage (26 years old) in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005). Because of these factors, our couples give distinctive meanings to ceremonies that do not match pervasive conceptualizations. Due to a lack of normative legal and cultural resources, the couples in our sample exemplify how one way relationships can transition more ambiguously to committed formations without marriage, public ceremony, clear-cut act, or decision.

Although not the focus of our analysis, differences in the gender of the couples who had ceremonies and the types of ceremonies held are notable and an area for future study. Of those who had ceremonies, 62% were lesbian couples and 38% were gay couples. This is consistent with other research citing gay couples as less likely to have ceremonies (Hull, 2006), although we know of no research that addresses empirical reasons for this difference. All three of the gay couples who had ceremonies did so in Canada or Massachusetts and had an official, legal marriage ceremony, even though such legality does not hold in their state of residence. None of the lesbian couples had legal ceremonies. Furthermore, the lesbian couples in this sample have been together for a shorter average period of time than the gay couples (11 years compared to 20 years). However, despite this difference, both the gay and lesbian relationships in this study began before ceremony popularity. We remain cognizant that gay and lesbian relationships are not identical and plan to further explore gender differences in relation to ceremonies and marriage in future research.

Due to its relative racial and economic homogeneity, our sample does not allow for generalizability to all same-sex couples; however, the strength of this research is our ability to better understand the process of union formation and commitment making among long-term same-sex couples. Future research should further investigate commitment among a more ethnically and economically diverse sample, as research suggests that gays and lesbians of color have unique social and cultural contexts that may influence commitment making (Demo & Allen, 1996). Additionally, the present analysis is limited in its focus on same-sex long-term couples, a generally neglected study population. Future research should include a comparative analysis of commitment processes in different types of long-term relationships, including long-term heterosexual cohabiting and married couples.

## Conclusion

Our qualitative investigation, guided by a life course perspective, suggests that committed same-sex couples do not follow normative union formation and commitment models. According to our analysis, which emphasizes the influential consequences of sociohistorical and biographical factors, long-term same-sex couples create committed relationships without participating in legal marriage or other ceremonial events. These couples instead form relationships more ambiguously, so much so that they are often unable to articulate exactly how and when they committed to one another. Whereas previous research suggests that the visibility and growing acceptability of commitment ceremonies create a model for commitment making among same-sex couples that is similar to heterosexual marriage, this study highlights how some gays and lesbians, because of the timing of their relationships, form committed unions outside of this institutionalized model.

Conceptualizing commitment making outside of marriage has important implications for theorizing about all intimate relationships, as this type of commitment process is not easily superimposed on existing theoretical frameworks of union formation. As trends continue to transform the meaning of marriage and cohabitation (Casper & Bianchi, 2001), future work should not assume a monolithic meaning of commitment centered on marriage. Instead, research should creatively question what commitment and marriage mean for people in all social groups and relationship formations. Future research should strive to interrogate the view that there is one pivotal commitment-making act. Our study highlights how research based on a normative marriage-centered union formation model may incorrectly assume the meanings of marriage, cohabitation, and intimate union making. Research on marriage and intimate unions must unpack such assumptions in order to better understand and theorize about the way intimate relationships are formed and maintained.

## Acknowledgments

This research was supported by Grant R01 AG17455 from the National Institute on Aging.

## Appendix

### Descriptions of Participants

	Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Length of Relationship (Years)	Ethnicity	Had Ceremony
1	Sarah	Female	48	11	White	
	Jessica	Female	56		White	
2	Jeffrey	Male	55	27	White	
	Michael	Male	48		White	
3	Carol	Female	29	8	White	
	Angela	Female	34		Native American/Hispanic	
4	Marissa	Female	45	10	White	Yes
	Janice	Female	40		White	
5	Belinda	Female	48	13	Hispanic	
	Christina	Female	47		White	
6	Kirk	Male	53	23	White	Yes
	Brett	Male	49		White	
7	Adam	Male	50	23	White	Yes
	Paul	Male	48		White	
8	Amanda	Female	29	13	White	
	Julie	Female	31		White	
9	Bobby	Male	44	17	White	
	Terry	Male	48		Hispanic	
10	Edwin	Male	49	13	South American	
	Kevin	Male	55		White	
11	Gus	Male	42	23	Hispanic/White	
	Andrew	Male	44		White	
12	Melissa	Female	43	10	White	
	Kristen	Female	43		White	
13	Emilia	Female	42	10	White	Yes
	Diana	Female	43		White	
14	Gretchen	Female	46	8	White	Yes
	Danielle	Female	47		White	
15	Raymond	Male	35	14	White	
	Christopher	Male	42		White	
16	Janet	Female	40	15	White	Yes
	Courtney	Female	50		Latina	
17	Megan	Female	34	12	White	Yes
	Clarissa	Female	34		White	
18	Tim	Male	58	23	White	
	Donald	Male	72		White	

	Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Length of Relationship (Years)	Ethnicity	Had Ceremony
19	Stanley	Male	42	16	White	Yes
	David	Male	41		Latino	
20	Albert	Male	51	23	White	
	Larry	Male	51		Latina	

Note:  $N = 40$ .

## References

- Brown SL, Booth A. Cohabitation versus marriage: A comparison of relationship quality. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*. 1996; 58:668–678.
- Brines J, Joyner K. The ties that bind: Principles of cohesion in cohabitation and marriage. *American Sociological Review*. 1999; 64:333–355.
- Bumpass LL, Lu H. Trends in cohabitation and implications for children's family contexts in the United States. *Population Studies*. 2000; 54:29–41.
- Casper, L.; Bianchi, S. *Continuity and change in the American family*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage; 2001.
- Charmaz, K. *Constructing grounded theory*. London: Sage; 2006.
- Cherlin AJ. The deinstitutionalization of American marriage. *Journal of Marriage and Family*. 2004; 66:848–861.
- Demo DH, Allen KR. Diversity within lesbian and gay families: Challenges and implications for family theory and research. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*. 1996; 13:415–434.
- Elder, GH. Life course. In: Borgatta, EF.; Borgatta, ML., editors. *The encyclopedia of sociology*. New York: MacMillan; 1991. p. 281-311.
- Elder, GH.; Johnson, MK. Perspectives on human development. In: von Hofsten, C.; Backman, L., editors. *Social, developmental and clinical perspectives*. London: Psychology Press; 2002. p. 153-175.
- Elder, GH.; O'Rand, A. Adult lives in a changing society. In: Cook, KS.; Fine, GA.; House, JS., editors. *Sociological perspectives on social psychology*. Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon; 1994. p. 452-475.
- Glaser, BG.; Strauss, AL. *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Chicago: Aldine; 1967.
- Hull, KE. *Same-sex marriage: The cultural politics of love and law*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press; 2006.
- Ingraham, C. *White weddings: Romancing heterosexuality in popular culture*. New York: Routledge; 1999.
- Karney BR, Frye NE. "But we've been getting better lately": Comparing prospective and retrospective views of relationship development. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. 2002; 92:222–238. [PubMed: 11831412]
- Lannutti PJ. For better or worse: Exploring the meanings of same-sex marriage within the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered community. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*. 2005; 22:5–18.
- Lewin, E. *Recognizing ourselves: Ceremonies of lesbian and gay commitment*. New York: Columbia University Press; 1998.
- Lichter DT, Batson CD, Brown JB. Welfare reform and marriage promotion: The marital expectations and desires of single and cohabitating mothers. *Social Service Review*. 2004; 78:2–25.
- Rostovsky SS, Riggle EDB, Dudley MG, Wright MLC. Commitment in same-sex relationships: A qualitative analysis of couples' conversations. *Journal of Homosexuality*. 2006; 51:199–223. [PubMed: 17135121]

- Seltzer JA. Families formed outside of marriage. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*. 2000; 62:1247–1268.
- Settersten RA. The salience of age in the life course. *Human Development*. 1997; 40:257–280.
- Shanahan, MJ.; Elder, GH, Jr. History, agency, and the life course. In: Dienstbier, RA.; Crockett, LJ., editors. *The Nebraska Symposium on Motivation: Vol. 48. Agency, motivation, and the life course*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press; 2002. p. 145-186.
- Slater, S. *The lesbian family life cycle*. New York: Free Press; 1995.
- Smock PJ. Cohabitation in the United States: An appraisal of research themes, findings, and implications. *Annual Review of Sociology*. 2000; 26:1–20.
- Stanley SM, Whitton SW, Markman HJ. Maybe I do. *Journal of Family Issues*. 2004; 25:496–519.
- Thornton A, Young-DeMarco L. Four decades of trends in attitudes toward family issues in the United States: The 1960s through the 1990s. *Journal of Marriage and Family*. 2001; 63:1009–1037.
- Waite, LJ.; Gallagher, M. *The case for marriage: Why married people are happier, healthier, and better off financially*. New York: Doubleday; 2000.
- U.S. Census Bureau. [Retrieved July 1, 2007] Table 51: Marital status of the population by sex and age: 2004. 2005. from <http://www.census.gov/compendia/statab/2006/population>