

Belief in God, parenthood prompt gay partners to make commitment

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Which gay and lesbian couples are more likely to legalize their relationship and hold a commitment ceremony? Those with children and strong religious beliefs, says a new University of Illinois study.

"Opponents of relationship recognition for same-sex couples often say that we have to protect children, or that same-sex relationships are against God. But this study suggests that lesbians and gay men who seek relationship recognition may be acting to protect their children and enact their own religious beliefs," said Ramona Faith Oswald, a U of I associate professor of family studies.

In the study, 190 persons who were cohabiting with a same-sex partner were surveyed to gather a broad range of information about lesbian and gay persons living in downstate Illinois. Within this group, a subsample of those who had legalized their same-sex relationship by making a will or granting power of attorney to their partner was identified.

Length of relationship was the strongest predictor that a couple would legalize their relationship. Legalizers in this sample were more likely to belong to a supportive religious congregation than non-legalizing cohabiters, Oswald said.

"Faith communities may be important sources of legal education and advocacy for same-sex couples," she noted.

From the legalizers, Oswald identified a still narrower group she called

ritualizers, couples who had both legalized and participated in a commitment ceremony.

Having children and identifying religious beliefs as being very important in their daily life were the strongest predictors that a legalized couple would ritualize their relationship.

In fact, mothers and fathers in this study were 3.5 times more likely to have had a commitment ceremony than lesbians or gay men who lived together and had legalized their relationship but had not been part of a commitment ritual, she said.

Most children in this study were from partners' previous relationships, she noted.

"Couples may be using commitment rituals to build cohesion within stepfamilies as the role of gay and lesbian stepparents is often vague. Such ceremonies may help couples validate their sense of belonging and obligation to each other while also demonstrating to friends and relatives that they are a family unit," she said.

Most children in the study were teenagers at the time of the commitment ceremony, Oswald noted.

"It's interesting that couples were motivated to have a commitment ceremony when their children were at this developmental stage, just starting their own romantic explorations.

There may be an element of parenting going on here, with couples wanting to give their children an example of commitment by formalizing their own. It's an interesting question for future research," she said.

With the Religious Freedom and Protections Civil Unions Act under consideration in the Illinois House of Representatives, Oswald hopes this study will help to explain the motivations of gay and lesbian couples who wish to obtain civil unions.

"This study is an important contribution because it separates the legal and ritualistic aspects of solidifying a relationship. Not all same-sex couples want legal protection or ritual recognition. However, those who do appear to take these steps for the same reasons straight people often do—parenthood and religious commitment," she said.

"This common ground should be part of our policy debates," she added.

Source: University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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