

Study shows gay couples want legal rights, regardless of marriage

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New research from North Carolina State University shows that gay and lesbian couples are forming long-term, committed relationships, even in the absence of the right to marry. However, couples surveyed for the study overwhelmingly said they would get married if they could in order to secure legal rights - such as retirement and healthcare benefits.

"Our study indicates that marriage is both more and less important to gay and lesbian couples in long-term relationships than was perhaps previously understood - more important in terms of the legal rights it conveys, but less important as a symbol of commitment," says study co-author Dr. Sinikka Elliott, an assistant professor of sociology and anthropology at NC State. "This research underscores the need for legal protections and rights for all couples."

The study found that, because these gay and lesbian couples could not marry in their state, there was no defining moment demarcating when they became "committed" in their own eyes or in the eyes of others. Instead, their commitment revealed itself over time, with different people having different ideas as to when a relationship became "committed." Elliott explains that this shows there are multiple ways that couples can form lasting, committed relationships outside the institution of marriage.

"The majority of the couples in the study said they would get married in order to gain legal rights," Elliott says, "but downplayed the symbolic value of marriage, because they were already in stable, committed

relationships." One respondent in the study said, "What [our [relationship](#)] means to us, in our hearts and in our heads, I don't think it would be any different" if we got married.

However, the same respondent added that getting married would make life easier, explaining, "as it is now, we have to go outside to get medical power of attorney...and so for the legality of things, I would like to marry."

The study also notes that societal trends continue to transform the meaning of marriage and cohabitation, for straight and gay couples, and calls for additional research to be done to evaluate what commitment and marriage mean for people in all social groups, including heterosexual couples.

More information: The study, "Commitment Without [Marriage](#): Union Formation Among Long-Term Same-Sex Couples," was co-authored by Elliott, and researchers Corinne Reczek and Debra Umberson of the University of Texas at Austin. The study was published in the June issue of the *Journal of Family Issues*.

Source: North Carolina State University ([news](#) : [web](#))

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