

Federal same-sex marriage ruling improved life satisfaction for individuals, study shows

February 27 2019

Until the U.S. Supreme Court's Obergefell v. Hodges decision in 2015 provided federal recognition of same-sex marriage in the United States, individual state laws varied. Some states were clear on whether or not they would recognize the marriages of same-sex couples, and others were in an uncertain flux, in some instances legalizing, then backpedaling on the decision days later. Some married couples thus faced uncertainty about whether their union would continue to be legally valid.

Even since the ruling, recent news headlines have shown that several states continue to challenge [marriage](#) equality.

Researchers in the Department of Human Development and Family Studies at the University of Illinois, led by associate professor Brian Ogolsky, initially wanted to understand how variation in state-level legislation and local community climate regarding same-sex marriage impacts the well-being and life satisfaction of same-sex couples across the U.S.

When the U.S. Supreme Court announced they would be ruling on same-sex marriage, the researchers expanded their project so they could evaluate the impact of the Obergefell vs. Hodges decision.

"Our key question was, does federal recognition improve the well-being of individuals in same-sex relationships?" Ogolsky says.

To understand the impact of the federal ruling, the researchers looked at levels of psychological distress, such as anxiety and depression, and life-satisfaction under the framework of minority stress—negative experiences made possible by stigma in the social environment. They collected survey data from individuals in committed, [romantic relationships](#) four months before the Obergefell vs. Hodges ruling, and then two weeks, three months, and one year after. Half of the sample surveyed included individuals in same-sex relationships (279), and half included individuals in different-sex relationships (266), the latter of which, in principle, should not have been affected by the ruling, Ogolsky explains.

Their first paper focuses specifically on the experience of individuals in same-sex relationships. The researchers traced how changes in the legal context of same-sex marriage in the U.S. affected the well-being of the individuals in these relationships. Looking at stressors unique to individuals in same-sex relationships, and taking into account that the social climate toward LGBTQ people across communities may vary, the researchers found that psychological distress dropped, and life satisfaction increased after the U.S. Supreme Court ruling. The findings held regardless of marital status. In other words, the positive effects of Obergefell were felt by individuals in same-sex relationships whether married or unmarried.

Further, Ogolsky and his colleagues found that those who were more distressed before the Obergefell decision experienced more improvement after the ruling.

"The most pronounced improvement was for those who were worse off in the beginning," Ogolsky explains. "If you experienced higher levels of stigma related to sexual orientation before Obergefell, then you had a larger reduction in minority stress, and larger gain in psychological well-being, after the decision.

"We don't want to overstate the findings and say that legalizing same-sex marriage made everybody in this country supportive. Levels of psychological distress dropped, but symptoms are still there. Just because a person goes from highly traumatized to less traumatized is not necessarily reason to celebrate, but it is a reason to feel that there is something to be said for public acceptance. It makes it easier for individuals in same-sex relationships to feel okay in their relationships."

In their second paper, the researchers compared the effects of Obergefell on individuals in same-sex to different-sex (i.e., heterosexual) relationships. Findings show no evidence that legalizing same-sex marriage had any negative consequences on the individuals in heterosexual relationships. However, in discussing support needs in the paper, the researchers report higher levels of family support for those in same-sex relationships after the federal ruling.

"As family support increased, friend support decreased," Ogolsky explains. "That is, if one's support needs are being met by others, then needs in other domains decrease. It's also possible that family support increased because marriage equality allowed heterosexual kin to see their LGBTQ family members as fitting into cultural norms of marriage."

Ogolsky adds that it may be valuable to continue looking at the effects years after the ruling. "We need more time to understand how people are going to react and enforce these laws. We need more time to understand if they have lasting consequences. Now that we have national consistency, does it matter more what happens at the state or local level?"

More information: Brian G. Ogolsky et al, As the states turned: Implications of the changing legal context of same-sex marriage on well-being, *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* (2018). [DOI: 10.1177/0265407518816883](https://doi.org/10.1177/0265407518816883)

Provided by University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Citation: Federal same-sex marriage ruling improved life satisfaction for individuals, study shows (2019, February 27) retrieved 21 June 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2019-02-federal-same-sex-marriage-life-satisfaction.html>

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