

Are Conservative Voices Still Welcome in CAMFT?

Bringing Sense and Civility to the Same-Sex Marriage Debate

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*The California Association of Marriage and Family Therapists (CAMFT) dedicated the May/June 2009 issue of their association magazine, The Therapist, to the issue of same-sex marriage. The editors solicited articles from both sides of the spectrum in an attempt to display a degree of balance that honored the diverse perspectives that exist within the association. However, the resulting fallout from the publication of this issue raises questions as to whether CAMFT remains committed to respecting diversity on the issue of same-sex marriage. The following article was submitted to The Therapist in an effort to assist CAMFT members in understanding what animates professional opinions on controversial social issues and encourage the association to reconsider the nature of its response to the controversy. As such, this article may also assist other clinicians to comprehend the response of their mental health associations to subjects such as same-sex marriage and the therapeutic treatment of unwanted same-sex attractions. In the end, CAMFT declined to publish the article. Readers can judge for themselves the wisdom of this decision.*

Recently CAMFT addressed the volatile subject of same-sex marriage in their association magazine, *The Therapist*. The special issue attempted to provide a forum for both pro and con perspectives to offer arguments for their positions. Unfortunately, this discussion lacked any attempt to create a larger context for understanding why this issue is so polarizing and, in doing so, assist LMFTs in their ethical obligation to be aware of how their values and beliefs affect their work. In this article, I will attempt to clarify what I believe to be a crucial factor that animates the debate on same-sex marriage, one which appears to have been missed in the CAMFT response to the fallout from the special issue to date.

#### Moral Foundations Theory

My analysis will borrow heavily from the important work in moral psychology being conducted by Jonathan Haidt and his colleagues at the University of Virginia, particularly what they have deemed Moral Foundations Theory (Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009; Haidt & Graham, 2007; Haidt & Hersh, 2001; Haidt & Joseph, 2004), I would strongly encourage CAMFT members to examine this literature directly. These researchers examined moral concerns in an evolutionary and cross cultural context and observed that people in all cultures seem born with the capacity to find virtue and regulate behavior through five foundations of morality. They identified these foundations as:

1. Harm/care: Concerns for the suffering of others
2. Fairness/reciprocity: Concerns about unfair treatment, inequality, and justice.
3. Ingroup/loyalty: Concerns related to obligations of group membership.
4. Authority/respect: Concerns related to the social order and the obligations of hierarchical relationships.

5. Purity/sanctity: Concerns about physical and spiritual contagion, often though not exclusively related to the sacred.

The first two moral foundations (referred to as *individualizing* foundations) focus on the individual as the center of moral value, with an aim of protecting the individual directly and teaching respect for individual rights. The other three foundations (referred to as *binding* foundations) emphasize the value of groups and institutions, attempting to bind individuals into roles and duties for the good of society. Haidt and colleagues reported that cultures historically have relied on all of these foundations and even today many cultures and peoples continue this approach to virtue and behavioral regulation. However, they further note that as a society becomes more modern, secular, and individualistic, the first two foundations grow increasingly significant. In addition, the psychological disciplines, having been both a cause of and response to these trends in the West, have generally limited their moral domain to the first two foundations.

#### The Moral Foundations of the Left and Right

Haidt and his colleagues have found consistent empirical support for the tendency of individuals who self-identify as liberal to place a strong emphasis on the harm and fairness individualizing foundations. Liberals therefore tend to justify moral rules in terms of their consequences for individuals. They tend to support the use of government programs or changing social institutions to extend individual rights as widely and equally as possible. The language of rights, equality, and social justice tends to be the dominant parlance of moral argumentation among those on the left. These tendencies were markedly evident in the articles and subsequent letters promoting same-sex marriage in *The Therapist*. Statements similar to these are grounded firmly in the individualizing foundations: “The denial of civil marriage rights to same-sex

couples constitutes discrimination and prejudice,” “Religious homophobia is a form of oppression by individuals and institutions that seek to prevent marriage equality,” and “Our sexuality should be celebrated through honest, loving, consensual, and appropriate behavior and marriage should be lawful for all who desire it.”

Conservative persons, on the other hand, extend their moral domain beyond harm and fairness to give relatively equal weight to the binding moral foundations of ingroup loyalty, respect for authority and tradition, and purity/sanctity. Haidt and colleagues have found that conservatives build their moral sentiment equally on all five foundations, having less focus on the first two foundations than liberals but more emphasis on the other three. Thus conservatives have to balance their concern for harm and fairness with social cohesion, institutional integrity, and divinity concerns. They generally believe the institutions, norms, and traditions that have helped build civilizations contain the accumulated wisdom of human experience and should not be tinkered with apart from immense reflection and caution. These concerns were also present in the articles and letters of *The Therapist*. They might be represented by such statements as, “Marriage should not deprive a child of a mother or a father by design,” “Same-sex marriage goes against the natural order of creation,” and “A life-long, sexually exclusive marriage between one man and one women is the best social ideal as it promotes the bonds between a man and his wife and children.”

#### Blinded by the Moral Divide

The unfortunate consequence of these differences in moral foundations is the difficulty people have in being able to see outside their own moral thinking. This may particularly be the case for individuals who are more liberal in their perspective, since their conservative counterparts will express moral concerns that they may not recognize as such. This is most

noticeable when arguments deriving from conservative attention to group loyalty, respect for traditional authority, and sacredness come into conflict with liberal concerns over harm and fairness. There is a serious risk that liberals may see practices motivated by the binding foundations as immoral and deserving of ethical and legal sanction, since these practices may place limits upon the degree to which individuals as individuals are protected or helped. Thus, a practice perceived to constrain individuals may be denounced by liberals as immoral, unjust and discriminatory but may simultaneously appear to conservatives as quite moral due to its presumed effect in supporting the institutional structures that have historically sustained social cohesiveness and brought order, value, and meaning to life.

Taken to extremes, I suspect that either of these perspectives can have deleterious consequences. Societies that do not sufficiently value harm and fairness considerations may risk becoming genuinely repressive in their efforts to control individuals. Conversely, societies that place little emphasis on the binding foundations may be in danger of losing cohesiveness and moving toward some degree of social disintegration. There is no final answer as to the optimal balance between the individualizing and binding moral foundations for civilization, and it appears that our culture is in a state of dynamic evolution concerning where this line will be drawn. As CAMFT apparently discovered in tackling the subject, same-sex marriage is currently one of the primary battlegrounds for determining where the location of this line is to be located in American society.

#### Moral Foundations and the Same-Sex Marriage Debate

Applying moral foundations theory to the subject of same-sex marriage can clarify where the difficulties lies in promoting understanding between liberal and conservative LMFTs. While there certainly is a fringe element on the conservative side that may be unable to recognize and

affirm the dignity and humanity of gay, lesbian, and bisexual (GLB) persons, I suspect these individuals are a relatively small number of LMFTs who operate outside the mainstream of their conservative peers. The larger danger, in my judgment, is that conservative LMFTs who know and value their GLB friends and colleagues but nevertheless express moral intuitions that include the binding foundations will have their beliefs and practices at marginalized. Since the liberal moral orientation may not see the moral basis for conservative apprehension about same-sex marriage, it is free to assume the worst of motives, e.g., hate, homophobia, theocracy, callous disregard for the rights of oppressed people, etc. Yet if Haidt's research is any indication, conservative LMFTs typically do care about personal rights and fairness for GLB persons, but the difficulty lies in their equal concern about ingroup loyalty, traditional family structures, and spiritual purity. These concerns may not be recognized as valid moral foundations by their liberal LMFT colleagues.

An implication from this analysis I want to make clear is that LMFTs must affirm the existence of many good people on both sides of the same-sex marriage debate. Both sides are operating from valid, though not always recognized, moral concerns. LMFTs may not agree in the conclusions that flow from their differently weighted moral foundations, but they can understand that these divergent beliefs about same-sex marriage are reasonable within their own moral contexts. Only a hardened refusal to step outside one's ideological commitments and a preference for agenda driven rhetoric over principled disagreement can prevent the acknowledgement of this truth. This alone can go far in promoting civility, empathy, and mutual respect as CAMFT continues to address the status of same-sex marriage and its impact on marriage and family therapists.

### CAMFT's Response and Subsequent Dilemma

While I hope I am wrong on this, it appears that the CAMFT response to the controversy is weighted heavily toward the individualizing moral intuitions of harm and fairness. Mary Riemersma, CAMFT Executive Director, apologized profusely for the articles that questioned the wisdom of same-sex marriage, simply dismissing the binding moral sentiments they expressed (sometimes poorly) as homophobia. CAMFT later released a statement on “Marriage and Family Inclusion” that similarly gave a blanket endorsement to marriage equality without so much as an acknowledgment of the binding moral concerns of more conservative LMFTs. It seems ironic that the authors of this statement, who call LMFTs to be aware of how their values and beliefs impact their work, were apparently unable to recognize that many conservative LMFTs hold reasonable moral intuitions that might cause them to perceive value in preserving the traditional binary (male/female) definition of marriage. A more reflective response from CAMFT could still have disagreed with conservative moral concerns while simultaneously affirming they are not innately the product of animus toward GLB persons and are deserving of respect in a professional association that values diversity.

I should note that I am no stranger to such controversies, having written an article that created a similar stir for AAMFT (Rosik, 2003). However, unlike the CAMFT response, the association's journal editor of the time courageously defended her decision against strong pressure to repudiate my work (Wampler, 2004). Be that as it may, experiences such as these make it clear to sympathetic journal editors and association leaders that giving allowance to conservative scholarly writing on controversial topics, even when it passes the blind peer review process, will be met with vociferous opposition from some that can jeopardize one's professional identity and service. The dilemma CAMFT now appears to be facing is how it can continue to

value and attract LMFTs who may sense the association does not comprehend or value the entirety of their moral outlook.

### A Way Forward for CAMFT

The state of affairs suggested by my analysis leads to the following question: What can CAMFT do at this point to help conservative LMFTs feel that the association still values their viewpoint and respects their concerns regarding the future of marriage. By way of conclusion, I would like to offer a few recommendations.

1. I would encourage the CAMFT membership (especially its leaders) to go to <http://www.yourmorals.org/> and complete Haidt's Moral Foundations Questionnaire to gain insight on how you weigh the five moral foundations. This will increase your self-awareness on this important dimension and may assist you in understanding your reaction to the concerns of liberal and conservative LMFTs in the same-sex marriage debate.
2. I would recommend that CAMFT pronouncements related to same-sex marriage be very circumspect and limited in their use of terminology that by implication disparages the binding moral intuitions of conservative LMFTs. Language that implies a blanket dismissal of their values, such as homophobia, or equates their viewpoint to racial bigotry should be avoided. A more nuanced approach to disagreement is possible (Rosik, 2007, Rosik, Griffith, & Cruz, 2007). For example, LMFTs across the moral spectrum, because of their shared values on harm and fairness, would likely accept the term homophobia when applied to those who engage in physically or verbally aggressive and derogatory acts toward GLB persons. By contrast, conservative LMFTs questioning of same-sex marriage on the basis of religious tradition or the cultural function of marriage historically (Blankenhorn, 2008) should not be labeled as homophobic unless CAMFT

intends to further alienate those who place a comparatively higher emphasis on the binding moral foundations.

3. CAMFT can recognize that empirical science, while important in this debate, cannot be the basis for a dismissive attitude toward the binding foundations of conservative LMFTs. Science informs but cannot determine values (the is/ought distinction). In fact, the empirical methods of psychology contain their own “innate” values and are also influenced by the value assumptions of researchers (Slife, 2008; Fife & Whiting, 2007). The utilization of these methods cannot take place without the application of interpretive biases of some sort, particularly when investigating value-laden subjects such as same-sex marriage. Moreover, the literature pertaining to same-sex marriage is in its infancy and complicated by sociopolitical agendas. The long term impact of the widespread legalization of same-sex marriage on society is unknown and difficult to disentangle from other aspects of cultural evolution. Since the binding foundations are presumed to be based on wisdom distilled from centuries of human experience, conservative LMFTs are likely for the foreseeable future to maintain a cautious stance regarding the revision of these foundations to accommodate same-sex marriage, even with the implicit encouragement from CAMFT to do so.
4. Finally, and perhaps of most practical importance, CAMFT can begin immediately to address the issue of “personal conscience” in advance of the possible future legalization of same-sex marriage in California. That is, CAMFT should support the proactive development of robust conscience exemptions for conservative LMFTs who by virtue of their moral commitments may need to refer GLB couples in certain situations. The parameters of such an exemption and the conditions under which it might ethically occur

can be delineated by a task force comprised of CAMFT members who, among other attributes, possess a diversity of moral intuitions on the subject. CAMFT's supportive attention to this issue will undoubtedly provide reassurance to conservative LMFTs that they remain welcome in an association that may nevertheless strongly disagree with them about marriage equality.

I am hopeful that CAMFT members on all sides of the same-sex marriage issue can value one another and appreciate the legitimate moral concerns that animate the perspectives of those with whom they may disagree. CAMFT officials will have to take the initiative to realize this vision, however, particularly as concerns conservative LMFTs who may now feel marginalized in light of the recent controversy regarding *The Therapist*. I contend a professional association that lends some credence to the binding moral foundations, even and especially in relation to controversial social issues, is a more healthy and representative organization than one that builds its values and policies exclusively on the individualizing foundations of harm and fairness.

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