

Marriage and the Civilizing of Male Sexual Nature, Part II: A final rejoinder to Herek (2007)

In September of 2006, in the American Psychological Association's (APA) flagship journal, the American Psychologist, Gregory Herek, Ph.D., published a summary of the psychological evidence utilized in APA's amicus curiae briefs in 2004 and 2005 challenging the constitutionality of state laws that denied marriage rights to same sex couples in several states (Herek, 2006). Subsequent to this publication, NARTH Scientific Advisory Committee Co-chair Christopher H. Rosik, Ph.D., and current NARTH President, A. Dean Byrd, Ph.D., submitted a critique of some of this evidence that was published in the October, 2007, issue of the American Psychologist, and followed by a response from Herek. What follows here is Drs. Rosik & Byrd's final rejoinder to Herek.

It was painfully evident from his response that Herek (2007) was unwilling to give any credence to our concerns (Rosik & Byrd, 2007) about how the redefinition of marriage to eliminate gender complementarity might impact the institution as well as our society. In this rejoinder, we hope to address Herek's main points of contention with us and, ultimately, reaffirm the importance of understanding the marriage ideal as a sexually monogamous, life-long commitment between one man and one woman.

Research limitations are not invalidations

We first need to acknowledge an oversight in our response that Herek was correct to observe. As he noted, the research by Michael, Gagnon, Laumann, and Kolata (1994), did not provide data on the prevalence of sexual nonexclusivity among male cohabiting couples. A misattribution on our part gave the mistaken impression that evidence for higher nonexclusivity among this group compared to heterosexual couples came from the Michael, et al., research. Michael, et al., did report that 75% of cohabiting couples had one partner in the past year. They

also indicated that, "...once married, people tend to have one and only one partner, and those who are unmarried and living together are almost as likely to be faithful" (p. 101). The statistics on sexual exclusivity among coupled gay men came from McWhirter and Mattison's (1984) research, who reported that among 156 male couples in relationships lasting 1 to 37 years, only 7 had been able to maintain sexual fidelity, and of these seven couples, none had been together for more than 5 years.

McWhirter and Mattison's (1984) sample is clearly inferior to that of Michael, et al. (1994), and thus caution has to be made in generalizing the apparent differences in sexual nonexclusivity among couples in these studies. However, as will be summarized below, this limitation is significantly offset by the plethora of published studies with somewhat less robust sampling methodology that suggest such differences are likely to exist. Moreover, while Michael, et al., reached no conclusions about non-exclusivity among homosexual couples, they did observe the nonmonogamy among homosexual males, commenting, "It is extremely rare for a heterosexual who is not a prostitute to have 1,100 lifetime sex partners, as the average gay man infected with HIV had in the beginning of the epidemic" (p. 214).

We certainly agree with Herek that the Schmitt (2003) study indicating universal gender differences in sociosexuality (the tendency to seek multiple sexual partners) is limited by its primary focus on college students. It is worth observing, however, that Schmitt grounds his findings in evolutionary theory involving biological sex and mating pools, which he believes generally overwhelm other effects—such as the impact of age cohorts—on sociosexuality. The implication is that gender differences in the degree of interest in sexual nonmonogamy have a significant biological basis that should not be expected to completely vanish with increasing age.

Research using samples from other demographic categories could therefore be expected to exhibit similar trends in sociosexuality.

Schmitt (2007) later examined his data with a focus on sexual orientation. He concluded that unrestricted sociosexual attitudes are psychologically sex-specific (expressed by men) and it did not matter whether women or men were the targets of men's unrestricted desires. While gay men, bisexual men, and heterosexual men were generally similar in their sociosexual *attitudes*, Schmitt reported marked differences in sociosexual *behaviors*. Gay men expressed the highest scores on sociosexual behavior, followed by bisexual men, followed last by heterosexual men.

Schmitt alludes to the important role of female sexual nature for these findings in his conclusion:

In summary, men of all sexual orientations tend to possess the same sociosexual attitudes wherever they live, whether in America, Africa, Asia, or Europe. Even after controlling for differences in gender role orientation and openness to experience, most men possess relatively unrestricted sociosexual attitudes (i.e., compared to women). The sociosexual behaviors of men are differentially related to sexual orientation, but only inasmuch as the pool of potential mates for gay men consists of other men and their sociosexual attitudes, and is not impacted by the relatively restricted attitudes of women.

To argue that men tend toward sociosexuality more than women and that coupled homosexual men, without the restraints expressed in female sexual nature, likewise express more sociosexual behavior than coupled heterosexual men is by no means to suggest that all gay men seek nonmonogamy. However, in the aggregate these trends have clear implications for eroding our understanding of marriage as a binary (i.e., male and female) and sexually exclusive institution. It seems disingenuous for Herek not to be more forthcoming about this subcultural element within the gay community and instead only implicitly refer to it in his commendation of the primacy of honesty over sexual fidelity. Shernoff's (2006) summary of the literature in this regard, which he largely attributes to gender differences, seems more candid (p. 408):

One of the biggest differences between male couples and mixed-sex couples is that many, but by no means all, within the gay community have an easier acceptance of sexual nonexclusivity than does heterosexual society in general. As Johnson and Keren (1996) noted, “Monogamy seems to be hardwired into spoken and culturally sanctioned norms for heterosexual relationships. The gay community’s normative acceptance of casual sex, anonymous sex and nonmonogamy in couple relationships represents a dramatic departure from heterocentric norms and values” (pp. 238-239).

We reiterate our lack of confidence here that access to legally sanctioned marriage will significantly reshape the norms of the gay community toward a more sexually restricted understanding of this institution. With gender differences in sexual attitudes and practices well established, even at the level of implicit attitudes (Geer & Robertson, 2005), and same-sex marriage advocates focused more on individual freedom rather than social obligation, the deinstitutionalization of marriage seems the more probable outcome. We thus remain concerned that the advent of same-sex marriage will serve to further weaken this already fragile social pillar.

Herek’s (2007) comments in this regard lauding honest extra-marital gay sex over dishonest heterosexual nonmonogamy in marriage display what appears to be an unwillingness to engage the fundamental question: What understanding of marriage should be the social ideal? We would much rather prefer to endorse a value framework that upholds the ideal of sexual exclusivity in marriage at the cost of knowing some people will choose to be dishonest. Herek’s discussion suggests an ideal that posits honesty over sexual exclusivity as the overarching value within marriage. But is it not possible that sexual exclusivity is preferable to non-exclusivity in relationships whether homosexual or heterosexual? Indeed, Karasu (2007) observed that sexual monogamy between a man and a woman has been seen as a stabilizing force for society in Western

Europe since the 12th Century. We fail to see how the fundamental differences in our perspectives can be reconciled and by implication how the current ideal of sexual fidelity can survive in a social environment where same sex marriage is widely sanctioned. Rather, gay marriage will plausibly be another cultural force working against the longings of female sexual nature among heterosexually married women.

Among the several straw man arguments that Herek (2007) offers is his suggestion we should support lesbian marriages as they appear to be more sexually exclusive. Conversely, he also believes our logic leads to prohibiting marriage for subgroups of heterosexuals (e.g., lower SES, nonreligious, and African-American persons). The problem with these contentions is that from the beginning of our response we indicated there are many problems with same-sex marriage and we simply did not have space to address more than the gender complementarity issue as it likely relates to sexual exclusivity. Were our concerns with same sex marriage solely based on this issue, Herek's arguments might carry some weight. However, as we discuss in more depth below, other difficulties with gay marriage, such as those concerning what is best for children, are equally applicable to lesbian couples.

Individual rights vs. social responsibilities

We also would point out that Herek (2007) couched his arguments for same-sex marriage within the moral framework of rights, particularly the individual rights of adults. Yet legitimizing same-sex marriage through this lens represents a fundamental betrayal of marriage as an institution. Marriage historically understood as a social institution is not about individual rights but rather about individuals obligating themselves to rules and structures inherent to the institution that meet the needs of the

larger society (Blankenhorn, 2007; Karasu, 2007). It is much more than a private relationship. Marriage is foremost a public act that establishes certain norms and expectations for behavior. To approach marriage primarily as a private relationship created by individuals who have the right to determine what constitutes their ideal family is to deinstitutionalize marriage and move it toward extinction. Thus, while the occurrence of divorce is a failure to meet the norm of marriage as an institution, same-sex marriage is nothing short of a new norm antithetical to the traditional binary and sexually exclusive definition. Blankenhorn (2007) keenly observed in this regard that, “People who professionally dislike marriage almost always favor gay marriage” and, “Ideas that have long been used to attack marriage are now commonly used to support same-sex marriage” (p. 128).

Data examining the number of gay or lesbian couples who seek marriage where it is available further bring into question the wisdom of sacrificing the heterosexual framework of the institution. Studies so far are consistent in suggesting that, even after an initial spike in marriages, only a small percentage (1% to 5%) of gay men and lesbians pursue marriage for their relationships when it is available (Andersson, Noack, Seierstad, & Weedon-Fekjaer, 2006; Kurtz, 2006). Moreover, it appears that many of these couples seek marriage primarily as a means to gain legal benefits, not to uphold the institution. These trends certainly bring the “conservative” case for gay marriage into question. We do not believe those who question the wisdom of fundamentally altering the definition of marriage should be slandered with the label of extremists or hatemongers. Rather, given the impact of the deinstitutionalization of marriage for all heterosexual couples and their

children, a socially responsible position might assist this small number of homosexual couples to have their relationships formally recognized through other avenues.

Herek (2007) relies heavily on a study by Badgett (2004) to assert the notion that the advent of same-sex marriage has not undermined heterosexual marriage in the five European countries that allow for gay men and lesbians to marry. We agree with Blankenhorn (2007) that one must place the weakening of heterosexual marriage in the broader context of trends toward increasing cohabitation, nonmarital births, and divorce that predated the advent of same-sex marriage. Thus, those concerned with the weakening of heterosexual marriage must address these trends in order to critique same-sex marriage with credibility. Nonetheless, we would contend that Blodgett's data is too premature to conclude that gay marriage is simply a neutral epi-phenomenon of these trends rather than a development that supports and is likely to further facilitate the demise of institutional marriage.

We would point out that Badgett utilizes comparison data mostly from the mid-1990s to 2002, as legalized gay marriage did not exist prior to this period. There remains the reasonable possibility of a cohort effect, since the early data on impact of same-sex marriage involves the cohort of heterosexuals who were raised with the traditional heterosexual marriage ideal. Before seriously considering Badgett's conclusions, we would need to see extensive longitudinal data that assesses trends for heterosexual marriage among the cohort of heterosexuals who grew up educated to view same-sex marriage as socially ideal. This would mean holding off a final judgment on Badgett's data for another 10-15 years, which, unfortunately, we would not anticipate advocates for expanding same-sex marriage being willing to do. More recent research also raises

questions for Badgett's conclusions. For example, longitudinal data from population registers in Sweden and Norway found divorce risks considerably higher in same-sex partnerships than in opposite-sex marriages (Andersson, et al., 2006). In light of Herek's (2007) arguments for lesbian marriage on the basis of sexual exclusivity rates, it is also of interest that Andersson and colleagues found the divorce risk in female partnerships to be practically double that of the risk in male partnerships.

Same-sex marriage and the rights of children

As we noted, Herek (2007) frames the access to marriage by gay men and lesbians as an issue of basic rights. Certainly people of goodwill recognize that legal recognition of same-sex marriage can benefit its participants in terms of the positive impact such acceptance, recognition, and legitimization are likely to have on psychological well being. Yet this must be balanced against the rights of children to have a mother and a father, a right that Herek glaringly fails to mention. A primary function of institution of marriage historically has been to strengthen the weaker father-child bond, since fatherhood is a phenomenon born of culture whereas motherhood is biologically anchored (Karasu, 2007). Removing the gender complementarity and binary nature of marriage will plausibly weaken fatherhood as a social role for men and increase the number of children growing up without fathers (Blankenhorn, 2007).

While we concur with Herek that sometimes conservative activists misrepresent the data on same-sex parenting, we would add that proponents of gay marriage too often seem unwilling to admit the serious limitations and questions that remain about this parenting literature. To their credit, gay marriage proponents Meezan and Rauch (2005) at least acknowledge that the evidence so far does not indicate if the children of gay

parents being studied are similar to the general population of children raised by gay couples. Thus we do not know how the normative child in a same-sex family compares to other children and sweeping conclusions in support of gay parenting equivalency should not be made.

There is an almost unspoken dichotomy in the general parenting and gay parenting literature that Herek (2006; 2007) neglected to note but needs to be mentioned. Gay marriage by definition eliminates gender roles and the implication that there is something special or optimal about children growing up with two biological parents. Were this accurate, we would expect to see no differential effects of mothers and fathers on their children in the literature on heterosexual parenting. However, this literature is in fact replete with the discovery of important differences (e.g., Ang, 2006; Byrd & Byrd, 2007; Dalton, Frick-Horbury, & Kitzman, 2006; Neiderhiser, Reiss, Lichtenstein, Spotts, & Ganiban, 2007; Sheeber, Davis, Leve, Hops, & Tildesley, 2007; Stolz, Barber, & Olsen, 2005). We are unaware of any theory that explains how the absence of consequential gender-based parenting benefits found for children from heterosexual unions should not be expected to result in certain psychological disadvantages in the children of gay couples, perhaps most noticeably in the area of gender identity (Mandara, Murray, & Joyner, 2005).

We also want to point out there are two decades of research dating back to the seminal work of Erik Erikson that support the value of gender complementarity. Research has demonstrated that not all family forms are as equally helpful or healthful for children, and that marriage with a mother and a father offers the greatest protection for children (Manning & Lamb, 2003; Rekers & Kilgus, 2001-2002). The existence of

matched comparison data suggesting children of married couples offer the best environment for a child's social and educational development compared to cohabiting heterosexual and homosexual couples (Sarantakos, 1996) also suggest developmental equivalency arguments are premature. And while many gay men may be able to incorporate infidelity into their relationships, there is no evidence that children of such couples may be as flexible (Stefanowicz, 2007).

Finally, we strongly disagree with Herek's (2007) contention that all the criteria of the Leona Tyler principle (that guides APA decision making regarding public policy pronouncements) have been met as pertains to same-sex marriage, particular criteria (c). This criteria clearly states that APA's advocacy should be based on scientific data and demonstrable professional experience (Wright & Cummings, 2005). The dearth of scientific data on same-sex marriage suggests that the APA should remain silent on this matter until such data have been completed and subjected to rigorous scientific review. Anything less is activism masquerading as science.

We can only conclude that at the present time activism and agenda-driven science are fueling the drive for same-sex marriage and parenting among social scientists in general and the APA in particular. A more purely science oriented approach to these issues would be far more circumspect, wait for a much larger body of relevant research, and demand a much higher standard of evidence over a prolonged period given the immense changes to the institution of marriage and consequently to parenting that are being advocated. Thus, while the current scientific data suggest that a measured approach to same-sex marriage be employed, the best interests of children demand that such an approach be taken.

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