

Previous research indicates that women have more accepting attitudes toward lesbian and gay individuals than do men (Aberson, Swan, & Emerson, 1999; Finlay & Walther, 2003; Herek & Glunt, 1993; Kane & Schippers, 1996; Larsen, Reed, & Hoffman, 1980; LaMar & Kite, 1998; Lottes & Kuriloff, 1992; Louderback & Whitley, 1997; Marsiglio, 1993; Steffens & Wagner, 2004; Wills & Crawford, 2000). However, little research has addressed potential explanations for this gender gap in attitudes. Moreover, virtually no research has explored gender differences in attitudes toward gay marriage in particular. This study examines the relationship between gender and attitudes toward gay marriage from a feminist demographic perspective grounded in recent research about the deinstitutionalization of marriage and heterosexual marriage promotion policies (Amato 2005; Bogenschneider, 2000; Cherlin 2005). We use covenant marriage as a very specific instance of law reform intended as a marriage promotion policy in order to explore gendered variation in attitudes about gay marriage among heterosexual newlywed couples. Legally, covenant marriage simply places stricter entry and exit requirements on the marital contract, but symbolically the “covenant” option has served a useful signaling device for couples to express their profound traditionalism and opposition to the declining significance of the marriage institution (Sanchez, Nock, Wright, & Gager, 2002). Thus, our unique couple-level sample of covenant and standard married wives and husbands provides insight into the relationships between gender willingness to embrace marriage reinstitutionalization policy reforms, religiosity, and opposition to gay marriage. We frame our research questions around a larger “perceived threat model” in which those who may feel more threatened by what is perceived as a cultural weakening of heterosexual marriage may be more likely to oppose gay marriage.

Covenant marriage law was first passed in Louisiana in 1997 and embodies most of the marriage promotion and strengthening efforts of federal and state legislatures (Sanchez et al., 2002). Covenant marriage requires pre-marital counseling and a longer divorce waiting period, during which time the couple must receive marital counseling. By examining gender differences in attitudes toward gay marriage among both standard and covenant married couples, we can compare the gay marriage attitudes of couples, who not only vary in their support of traditional marriage values, but also vary in their personal and legal commitment to a more traditional form of marriage. Covenant marriage provides couples who are concerned about the deinstitutionalization of marriage and decline in traditional marriage values an opportunity to forge a more traditional marriage for themselves and symbolically declare this traditional form of marriage a more ideal institution.

Covenant marriage is particularly attractive to evangelical Christian couples, who tend to hold more traditional marriage values, as it affords them a symbolic device to signal their beliefs in the sacred meanings of marriage as a traditional and heterosexual institution to wider society. Thus, this study examines religious motivations behind heterosexual marriage promotion and gay marriage opposition, addressing whether covenants are more likely to oppose gay marriage, simply because of the selection effect of their greater religiosity. We also examine the relationship the potential mediation of religiosity between gender and attitudes toward gay marriage. Our data contains numerous measures of religiosity and indicators of traditional marriage values and marriage promotion attitudes and is thus ideal for exploring differences in tolerance toward gay marriage between more religious, more family policy reformist couples and more secular couples.

### *A Feminist-Demographic Framework*

We base our perceived threat model on perspectives which encompass research on cultural anxieties about the deinstitutionalization of marriage and feminist theories of patriarchal marriage. Demographers note that marriage increasingly has carried less normative force or “institutional” power over American individuals and families (Cherlin, 2004). Some scholars argue that sub-populations of

families are concerned about the declining significance of marriage as a normative legal and symbolic structure for intimate relationships and feel threatened by the increase of non-traditional family structures (Popenoe, 1993; Whitehead, 1996). However, in recent decades, Americans have also become more supportive of civil rights and individual choice in intimate relationships (Frank & Mceneany, 1999). This upswing in individualism fueled women's and gay rights' movements and liberalism about marriage and divorce reforms and alternative relationships, such as cohabitation. However, despite the growing majority who are unwilling to restrict the rights of lesbian and gay individuals, most Americans continue to view homosexuality as morally wrong and therefore oppose gay marriage (Loftus, 2001; Peplau & Fingerhut, 2007). Amato (2004) suggests that this ambivalence is due to a basic conflict in our cultural values concerning marriage as both a private experience tailored by individual choice and a public institution undergirded by normative expectations and social sanctions.

Thus, the contemporary social context faces deeply-rooted public ambivalence about the individual rights of lesbian and gay couples to marry. Some feminist perspectives also note a public ambivalence about changes in the institution of marriage, but for a very different set of conflicting values. Some feminist theorists argue that marriage continues to be a patriarchal institution and so they are hesitant to support either heterosexual or gay marriage, while at the same time they are hesitant to deny lesbian and gay couples marriage rights and privileges routinely afforded to straight couples (Ferguson, 2007; Robson, 1994). Based on this perspective, that marriage historically benefits men more than women, we argue that women may be less threatened by gay marriage as a potential contributor to the further deinstitutionalization of marriage. In fact, women may appreciate the breakdown of traditional norms in marriage that gay marriage may provide or at the very least they may resonate more with lesbians' and gays' civil rights claims about the perceived right to marry.

### *Research Questions*

Three main research questions drive our analyses. First, we examine whether wives are more approving than husbands among both covenant and standard married couples. We document whether the gender gap in attitudes about gay marriage noted in the literature persists even in newly formed marriages. Additionally, we explore whether this gender gap is evident even among couples who have selected into covenant marriage.

Second, we examine the effects of childhood and adult family history, and attitudes about marriage and family on wives' and husbands' attitudes toward gay marriage. We explore whether these demographic and social-psychological factors account for gender differences in couples' attitudes toward gay marriage, and whether these factors affect wives' and husbands' attitudes differently.

Third, we examine the effect of covenant marriage on attitudes toward gay marriage for both wives and husbands. We specifically address whether covenants may hold more negative attitudes toward gay marriage largely because of the selection of more religious couples into covenant marriage. We account for various forms of religiosity and explore whether distal and proximal forms of religiosity affect wives' and husbands' attitudes differently. Though we still do not know exactly why women are more religious than men (Kroll & Louise, 2007), we do know that women attribute greater importance to religion and exhibit greater religious commitment (Stark, 2002; Walter & Davie, 1998). We also know that religiosity has a negative influence on attitudes toward gay marriage (Olson, Cadge, & Harrison, 2006; Waugh, Plake, & Rienzi, 2000). Thus, we examine whether the relationship between gender and attitudes toward gay marriage is mediated by type of religiosity. For example, Allport and Ross (1967) found that extrinsic religiosity (religiosity as a means to an end), but not intrinsic religiosity (religiosity

as an end in itself) is related positively to prejudice. We also examine whether the negative effect of religiosity on gay marriage attitudes is stronger for men.

### *Data*

The data in this study were drawn from the Marriage Matters Project, funded by the National Science Foundation. We use the first wave of this three-wave longitudinal study of couples married in Louisiana, which took place during the five years following the passage of covenant marriage law in 1997. The first wave of the study was administered in 1998-2000, approximately three to six months after the participants' weddings. Participants were identified randomly within seventeen parishes proportionate to size. From these parishes, the sampling frame was gathered from filed covenant marriage licenses and standard licenses filed next to the covenant licenses. The response rate for this wave was 69%, resulting in 707 couples. (For a more detailed description of the data see Sanchez et al., 2003.)

### *Methodology*

First, we examine bivariate relationships, including a dependent-sample t-test to establish the significant difference between husbands' and wives' attitudes toward gay marriage. In our multivariate analyses we use seemingly unrelated regression models. This method is particularly useful for dependent household samples as it both accounts for the correlated error structures in the dependent sample and allows for the restrictions of coefficients across equations (Sanchez, 1994). In these analyses we use a two-equation system of husbands' and wives' attitudes toward gay marriage. We use tests of constraint to determine significant differences in coefficients between the husbands' and wives' models, which indicate differences in the size of the effect of each predictor on husbands' and wives' attitudes toward gay marriage. We also use constraint tests to compare the size of the gender gaps between covenants and standards.

To address our second main research question, we examine a series of predictors that may increase or decrease willingness to uphold traditional heterosexual marriage as an ideal institution. These predictors include covenant marriage, religiosity, political orientation, attitudes toward marriage and divorce, divorce, parenthood, and cohabitation histories, childhood familial conditions such as conflict and violence between parents, and predictors tapping the degree of traditional heterosexual marriage values during courtship such as monogamy during dating, religiously-structured courtship, and traditionality of the wedding ceremony.

We also examine a variety of religiosity measures to capture differences between distal and proximal forms of religiosity, including frequency of prayer and church attendance, the importance of faith, fundamentalist identification, denomination, and proximal and distal forms of religiosity (Mahoney, Pargament, Jewell, Swank, Scott, Emery, & Rye, 1999). We examine gender differences in effect size for these various religious indicators and we use nested models to determine possible mediating effects between gender and attitudes toward gay marriage by religious type. Last, we control for the effects of race, age, income, and education, which have been established as significant predictors of attitudes toward gay marriage in previous research (Lewis, 2003; Negy & Eisenman, 2005). In our final nested models, we then perform constraints tests to explore gender differences in effects between the wife and husband models.

## Preliminary Results

Table 1. *Attitudes toward Gay Marriage Sample Distribution for All Wives and Husbands (N=561)*

Strength of Agreement	Wives	Husbands
Strongly Disagree	55.4%	64.9%
Disagree	8.9%	11.1%
Neither Agree nor Disagree	19.3%	13.9%
Agree	10.2%	7.1%
Strongly Agree	6.2%	3.0%

*Note:* Attitudes toward Gay Marriage measured by strength of agreement with the statement “Homosexuals Should be Allowed to Marry” (1=Strongly Disagree, 5=Strongly Agree).

Table 1 presents the distribution of both wives’ and husbands’ gay marriage attitudes for couples with non-missing values for the dependent variable and type of marriage license (n=561). Nearly 65% of wives disagree or strongly disagree that “homosexuals should be allowed to marry” compared to 75% of husbands. Only 10% of husbands, but 16% of wives agree or strongly agree with gay marriage. Wives are also more likely to report that they neither agree nor disagree with gay marriage (19% of wives compared to 14% of husbands). In total, wives are more approving. Their mean on attitudes toward gay marriage is 2.03, which still falls into the “disagree” category, but is significantly greater than the husbands’ mean of 1.72, which indicates more “strongly disagree” tendencies ( $p < .001$ , two-tailed).

Table 2. *Attitudes toward Gay Marriage Distribution for Standards (n=307) and Covenants (n=254)*

Strength of Agreement	Wives		Husbands	
	Standard	Covenant	Standard	Covenant
Strongly Disagree	37.5%	77.2%	50.2%	82.7%
Disagree	10.1%	7.5%	15.3%	5.9%
Neither	26.7%	10.2%	18.6%	8.3%
Agree	16.3%	2.8%	11.4%	2.0%
Strongly Agree	9.4%	2.4%	4.6%	1.2%

*Note:* Attitudes toward Gay Marriage measured by strength of agreement with the statement “Homosexuals Should be Allowed to Marry” (1=Strongly Disagree, 5=Strongly Agree).

Table 2 presents the distribution of gay marriage attitudes for wives and husbands according to their type of marriage (standard n = 307, covenant n = 254). As expected, covenant wives and covenant husbands are more opposed to gay marriage than their standard married counterparts. Nearly 48% of standard married wives report disagreement with gay marriage, compared to 85% of covenant married wives. Similarly, 66% of standard husbands disagree or strongly disagree with gay marriage compared to 89% of covenant husbands. Notably, wives’ greater acceptance of gay marriage is present across marriage types. Among standards, the mean attitudes for husbands and wives are 2.05 and 2.50, respectively ( $p < .001$ , two-tailed). Among covenants the mean gay marriage attitudes for husbands and wives and are 1.33 and 1.46, respectively ( $p < .05$ , two-tailed). Thus, husbands and wives are mismatched on their attitudes toward gay marriage even among couples who selected a covenant marriage license.

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