

PHILIP N. COHEN *University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill*

Homogamy Unmodified

I propose that homogamy and heterogamy be used to signify same-sex and opposite-sex unions, respectively, including marriage and cohabitation. This is intended to address a terminology impasse that has given us marriage versus same-sex marriage in popular and academic usage. After a brief review of the word origins and scholarly uses of these terms, I conclude that the new uses for homogamy and heterogamy could be adopted relatively easily, with scientific benefits for categorization, and could remove a conservative bias in the current usage.

Studies of marriage have reached an uncomfortable terminological state. There is research on marriage (or other adult unions—hereafter all referred to as unions), which is assumed to refer to unions between men and women, and there are studies of same-sex marriage (e.g., Frisch & Bronnum-Hansen, 2009). Such a pattern, in which the normative or hegemonic case requires no specification while others carry a modifier, has been extensively critiqued in other areas—for example, with regard to the unmarked nature of Whiteness in race studies (Frankenberg, 1993)—and reflects an underlying heteronormativity (Danby, 2007) in the field. In addition, placing same-sex unions in opposition with those that are opposite-sex highlights the tendency to refer to men and women as

opposite sexes, which is also problematic (Ingram, 1994; Scott, 1988).¹

The larger categorical problem is that unions between partners of the same gender do not fit the lexicon of family systems in the social sciences. For example, marriage (or equivalent) systems may be patrilineal or matrilineal, patrilocal or matrilocal, hypergamous, polygamous, and so on—all traditionally referring to patterns in the relationships between husbands and wives. None of these terms, as they are generally employed, may be applied to same-sex systems. To nudge this framework forward, thus bringing scientific terminology closer to social reality, I suggest that two existing terms—*homogamy* and *heterogamy*—be repurposed to signify same-sex and opposite-sex unions respectively, thus permitting balanced labeling of union types.

At this writing, eight countries permit the legal marriage of same-sex couples—Argentina, Canada, Spain, South Africa, Sweden, Norway, The Netherlands and Belgium—as do some subnational units, such as Mexico City and Washington, D.C., and the U.S. states of Iowa, Massachusetts, Vermont, Connecticut, and New Hampshire. In addition, legal recognition, with rights approaching those of heterogamous couples, has been extended in a larger group of countries, and various laws are being debated in many others (“Same-Sex Marriage,” 2010).² With millions of legal unions attempted,

Department of Sociology, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, NC, 27599-3210 (pnc@unc.edu).

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¹The term *same-sex marriage* also goes against the preferred use of *gender* for social identification. *Same-gender marriage* has not caught on. In this article, I use *same sex* and *opposite sex* to conform to common usage.

²A list of jurisdictions and their relevant laws is maintained at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Status_of_same-sex_marriage.

accomplished, or coming down the pike worldwide, unions that involve partners of the same gender require categorical integration into the family systems schema of the social sciences.

HOMOGAMY AND HETEROGAMY

Homogamy and *heterogamy* descend from the Greek adjectives *homo* for “same” and *hetero* for “different” and *gamos* for “marriage,” according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford University Press, 1989). Perhaps their most logical application has been staring us in the face for 100 years but could not be realized until unions between same-sex partners began to be formally recognized in the past 20 years.³ Mirroring the uses of *homosexual* and *heterosexual*, *homogamy* becomes “union between people of the same sex”; *heterogamy* is “union between people of different sexes”; and *marriage*, *cohabitation*, or other union terms unmodified refer to the general cases.⁴

Homogamy was used initially for plants, then animals, and finally people. The *Oxford English Dictionary* records its first known use, in 1842, in reference to grasses that had florets all of the same sex; in 1854, it was used to mean hermaphrodite flowers with male and female organs. By 1874, homogamy was being used to refer to the condition in which “only individuals belonging to the same variety or kind are allowed to propagate,” and in a 1903 biology text: “preferential breeding between individuals similar in some characteristic.” The *OED* records the first use of heterogamy in a 1862 history of a Hawaiian king who had one wife “educated for him from a child,” but who also “may have had other heterogamous connections”—suggesting a contrasting lack of social status matching (according to the *OED*, this story appears in Hopkins, 1866, p. 165).

³Denmark legalized homogamous unions with the same rights and privileges as heterogamous marriages in 1989, which some cite as the first same-sex marriage law (Frisch & Bronnum-Hansen, 2008).

⁴There have been a few uses of *homogamy* in the debate on same-sex marriage (e.g., O’Donovan, 2004), at least one of which is an attempt to deny gay rights advocates use of the word *marriage* (Parr, 2004). This seems not only spiteful but also futile, as the writer acknowledges that the Greek origin includes the word for marriage. Another older use occurs in a legal argument in favor of rights to same-sex marriage in Hawaii (Morris, 1996).

The concept of homogamy has been of much greater interest to social scientists than heterogamy. The term’s first appearance in the JSTOR database (about humans) is an 1899 reference to “the influence of homogamy on fertility” as a “problem relating to the evolution of man” (Yule, 1899–1900). An early occurrence in the *American Journal of Sociology* treats similarities in intellectual ability, published near the zenith of eugenics (Jones, 1929). Jones (1929) defined *homogamy* as “husband-wife similarity in a specific trait” (p. 369). From his biological perspective, Jones (1929) wrote that homogamy, by “increas[ing] the average differences between subclasses of a population . . . deserves to be considered with problems of social stratification and as a possible agency in accelerating or confirming evolutionary changes” (p. 369)—the latter effect presumably resulting from the separate breeding of superior and inferior pairs.

In the past century, *homogamy* has been used to refer to similarity between married or mating partners in such characteristics as education (Schwartz & Mare, 2005), religion (Heaton, 1984), and race (Kalmijn, 1993), as well attitudes (Snyder, 1964), phenotypic traits (Bodenhorn, 2006), intellectual ability (Jones, 1929), and many others.⁵ It is usually modified with a variable that identifies the similarity in question (e.g., age homogamy, status homogamy).

Glaringly absent from this list is perhaps the most basic identity of all in modern society: sex or gender. Not that such usage was never considered. Burgess and Wallin (1943, p. 109), after exhaustively reviewing evidence for which theory is more powerful, homogamy (“like marries like”) or heterogamy, concluded, “On no trait except sex is there reliable evidence of predominance in marriage of dissimilars” (p. 109). In retrospect, they were being facetious—or naive—because all studies at the time compared only opposite-sex couples, which according to the binary tradition of gender are considered perfectly dissimilar.

The many other aspects of partner similarity and difference clearly are worthy of study,

⁵The Social Science Citation Index (as of March 2010) includes 131 articles with *homogamy* or *homogamous* in the title, the plurality of which (74) are in sociology journals, dating back to 1959.

and umbrella terms suggesting the tendency toward similarity or its absence are needed. I suggest the more logical *endogamy* for pairing within identity groups (e.g., ethnicities)—as used by Kalmijn (1998)—and *assortative mating* or *assortative unions* for qualities that do not indicate group identities, such as age or personality, as is commonly used in stratification research and economics (Schwartz & Mare, 2005). For preferences and attractions generally, of course, *homophily* remains central (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001).

An additional problem remains: The terms *homogamy* and *heterogamy*—just as *same sex* and *opposite sex*—may presume the existence of two and only two sexes or genders. The proposed shift in terms does not resolve the issue of transgender identity and legal marriage or adult unions, although the use of *hetero* (“different”) is at least preferable to *opposite* and may serve the purpose in some situations. However, as has been the case, the burden remains on those who identify outside the binary sex-gender system to name their relationships as they seek social or legal recognition (Robson, 2007).

RELATIONSHIP TYPES BEYOND MARRIAGE

I have included nonmarital unions in the discussion to this point, although most uses of homogamy have focused on marriage. The cohabitation of unmarried partners in intimate relationships itself has been through a (still incomplete) terminological grinder reminiscent of that for marriage. The subject has spawned such awkward terms as *POSSLQ*, for “partners of the opposite sex sharing living quarters” (Casper & Cohen, 2000, p. 237), now replaced by *unmarried partner* in U.S. Census terminology.⁶ Unlike marriage, which because of its legal status has safely implied opposite-sex status unless otherwise specified, cohabitation and dating seem more amenable to

same-sex connotations (although many studies on cohabitation and dating never specify their implicit opposite-sex definitions).

The terms homogamy and heterogamy have at times also been used for nonmarital relationships. In an early example, Kurdek and Schmitt (1987) described as homogamy the similarity between same-sex as well as married and unmarried opposite-sex couples (although they refer to same-sex couple similarities as partner homogamy). Extending further from marriage, Blackwell and Lichter (2004) referred to “homogamy and heterogamy along a continuum of commitment” (p. 19) from dating to marriage. In contrast, nongender similarity in many non-married couples has been studied without use of the term *homogamy*, including, for example, Jepsen and Jepsen (2002), who analyzed matching outcomes among same-sex unmarried and opposite-sex married and unmarried couples. In summary, using the terms *homogamy* and *heterogamy* for unions generally is reasonable, with specific modifiers for relationship type when needed.

CONCLUSION

In November 2008, California voters approved Proposition 8, which amended the state constitution to add a section reading, “Only marriage between a man and a woman is valid or recognized in California” (California Secretary of State, 2008). In contrast, Mexico City passed a law defining marriage simply as “the free uniting of two people” (Carroll, 2009, p. 19). The legal status of marriage and nonmarital unions remains unsettled in many areas, but among substantial populations, legal unions between same-sex partners are occurring, and informal unions are increasingly recognized socially. The common practice in the social sciences of referring to marriage without reference to its gender composition, in contrast to same-sex marriage, effectively imposes a sort of scientific Proposition 8, in which other forms of union are discussed only when demarcated as in a different category.

With the social and legal situation in flux, it may be unrealistic to attempt a terminological turn at this point. Of course, terminology reform among academics does not necessarily have broader social impacts. For example, *Journal of Marriage and the Family* changed its name

⁶The U.S. Census Bureau currently converts all homogamous couples who report themselves as married to “unmarried partners” to comply with the federal Defense of Marriage Act. This accounted for 43% of those reported as “unmarried partners” in 2000 (O’Connell & Lofquist, 2009). At the direction of the Obama administration, the Census Bureau has begun the multiyear process of integrating same-sex marriage into its surveys and tabulations.

to *Journal of Marriage and Family* in 2001, as some members of the National Council on Family Relations successfully argued that removing “the” would make the journal’s scope more inclusive.⁷ The journal published no explanation for the change, which might have drawn public attention. Still, the attention recent events have generated presents an opportunity to bring language reform into the conversation, among researchers and the public at large.

The current uses of *homogamy* and *heterogamy* no doubt will have their adherents, but there are reasonable replacements for these terms. Our science sorely suffers for a lack of gender-composition terminology with regard to adult unions. For continuity with past studies, *homogamy* and *heterogamy* may be used with modifiers, as in *educational homogamy*. But for same-sex unions, I believe *homogamy*, unmodified, is the better term.

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⁷This account comes from personal communication with Robert Milardo, then the editor of *Journal of Marriage and Family*, and Stephen Marks, who initiated the change.

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