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Counselors Get at the Heart of Issues for Same-Sex Couples

By ELLEN MCCARTHY
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It was a strange summer of heartbreak for Salvatore Garanzini and his partner, Alapaki Yee. They were happy together, but three of the same-sex couples they were closest to underwent painful breakups in quick succession.

His friends' romantic distress reinforced something Garanzini, a San Francisco counselor, had already begun to suspect about his addiction therapy practice: that he was largely treating a symptom of a much bigger problem.

"A big source of what led [clients] to their habit was a . . . kind of a self-hatred," says Garanzini, 32. "And I started to say, 'I wonder what would happen if we were able to create something that taught gay and lesbian folks that their relationship was normal and empowered them with skills they could rely on to keep the relationship together -- if they would start feeling less illegitimized and more validated.'"

At the end of that 2007 summer, Yee, also a therapist, took Garanzini on a surprise trip to Seattle to attend a weekend workshop hosted by John Gottman, a psychologist and relationship expert they both admired.

"So we're sitting in the Gottman workshop and I'm listening to this stuff and the research behind it, which is basically 35 years of just watching couples interact," Garanzini recalls. "And I looked over at my partner, Alapaki, and I said, 'Why don't we do this, but for gay and lesbian couples?'"

Within months the two had co-founded the Gay Couples Institute, which Garanzini says is the "only gay and lesbian relationship counseling center in the world, serving only same-sex relationships." Today they work with 200 gay and lesbian couples a year and hold weekend workshops every other month.

Before setting up shop, Garanzini and Yee, 36, received training and certifications from the Gottman Institute, which they believe offers a more practical, effective method of couples counseling than traditional relationship therapy. Executives from the Gottman Institute, which has a mostly straight clientele, were "enormously supportive" of the venture, Garanzini says.

"What we've learned is that couples need education and skills. They don't always need to talk about family issues and childhood trauma," Garanzini explains. The Gottman method, he continues, is "borrowed from couples who've already lasted 35 years or more. These are the things we see them do, so we're just teaching other couples how to do it."

There are two main relationship skills Garanzini and Yee try to impart to their clients: continually nurturing their friendships and managing conflict.

"That curiosity you have on a first date? There are ways to keep that going," Garanzini says. And while all couples have disagreements, he adds, those with proven staying power avoid certain kinds of conflict. "They're not criticizing each other. They never get contemptuous -- name calling and talking down to each other -- and they do things to soothe each other so defensiveness doesn't get in the way."

Although their practice is devoted to gay and lesbian couples, Garanzini says the problems their clientele bring to therapy differ little



Gay Couples Institute founders Alapaki Yee and Salvatore Garanzini help couples perpetuate that thoughtfulness "you have on a first date."

from those of straight couples.

"By and large it's the same. . . . It's issues around trust, it's issues around cheating, there are affairs. And people usually approach us in one of two places: either in a lot of conflict or tremendously disengaged," he says.

There are, however, some "little permutations" that come up in counseling gay and lesbian couples, which Garanzini and Yee say make it advantageous to have a center focused on same-sex relationships.

"One is around sexuality -- lesbian or gay couples want to have a place to talk about their dissatisfaction with their sex life, and know that they're not going to surprise anyone with what they have to say," Garanzini explains. "Another big one is blended family issues, where one has a child from a previous heterosexual marriage, or they're trying to decide if they're going to have a biological child or adopt and there's either conflict or they just need to think some things through together."

There is some evidence, Garanzini adds, that same-sex couples are, on average, kinder to each other during arguments than their straight counterparts. "I tell that to gay couples and they're like, 'Are you kidding? We're awful,'" he says. "But by and large if you look at tapes of a straight couple sitting there and carrying on about something -- versus a gay couple -- the straight couple will much more quickly become contemptuous or start criticizing each other."

Though romantic relationships have been rich territory for academic researchers in the past half a century, most of the studies were limited to heterosexual couples. The Gay Couples Institute has created a research arm to add to the now growing body of knowledge about same-sex couples, Garanzini says, and they're hoping to set up counseling centers in New York and Los Angeles in the next few years.

The goal, he says, is to create a network of centers where gay and lesbian couples can work with counselors "who are practicing something you can really trust. Where you're getting good care, but you also feel safe to emotionally go where you need to go."



Couples Rediscover Each Other at Gay Date Night

by Matt Baume

Bay Area Reporter July 22, 2010

The secret to a successful relationship isn't a secret at all, according to therapists Salvatore Garanzini and Alapaki Yee. It's as simple as finding opportunities to focus on each other.

And to that end, they've created Gay Date Night, a recurring event that provides a low-pressure, lighthearted way for LGBTs to connect with their partners in an informal group setting at a restaurant or bar. Fifteen couples mingled and chatted at the inaugural date night on March 22, enjoying complementary appetizers, drinks, and the company of fellow "relationship-minded" folks.

An even larger crowd is expected for the second date night, happening Saturday, May 22, from 5 to 6:30 p.m. at Pisco Latin Lounge, located at 1815 Market Street. Interested couples can sign up at [http://gaydatenight.eventbrite.com/..](http://gaydatenight.eventbrite.com/)

Although Gay Date Night is social and fun, it has strong scientific underpinnings. Garanzini and Alapaki are the founders of the Gay Couples Institute, a counseling center on Market Street that sees about 200 couples a year. Together, they have a decade and a half of experience with clients.



Their techniques are based on the research of the celebrated Gottman Institute, which has monitored 10,000 couples over the last 35 years to identify the traits of successful relationships.

Garanzini, 33, and Yee, 36, are currently collaborating with the Gottman Institute to enhance scientific understanding of LGBT couples. And they don't have to look far for a close case study: after having met several years ago on Friendster, they're a couple themselves.

Their research into long-lasting couples provide a strong foundation for Gay Date Night.

"Couples that last decades or more know more about each other," explained Garanzini. "They ask, 'what does he like to do? And how can I incorporate that into our own activities?'"

So far, the event has proven popular. Jeff Masitoff, a friend of Yee and Garanzini, attended the first one with his boyfriend of 10 months.

"Meeting and talking with other couples in a safe (without the pressure a normal bar presents), yet pressure-free (not in an office somewhere) environment sounded really great," he wrote in an e-mail.

He added, "Since the date night, my boyfriend and I have begun a major challenge – long distance dating. Attending the date night and meeting so many other couples – all with a different story – first gave me a vision into the idea that there is no 'normal' for couples. ... It helped me feel comfortable reaching out to couples ... to talk about relationship dynamics, get advice, and learn long-distance tactics."

"We have a lot of healthy couples come to us who just want to learn skills," said Yee, and Garanzini added, "Most couples need education more than therapy."

They're happy to have an opportunity to teach what they consider vital skills, such as maintaining close friendship, managing tension, and establishing shared experiences.

From the start, Gay Date Night has been designed to bolster a couple's sense of friendship.

"It's not therapy," said Yee. "It's a fun time to reconnect."

The Science Behind the Prop 8 Ruling

Posted on 20 August 2010



Ted Olson and David Boies following their closing arguments in *Perry v. Schwarzenegger* June 16, 2010. Photo via Daylife.

Gay Couples and Straight Couples are Fundamentally the Same — but How Can we be Sure?

by Matt Baume; published in conjunction with Spot.Us

For all the emotion surrounding gay couples' freedom to marry, there's a remarkable dispassion to Judge Vaughn Walker's landmark ruling that Proposition 8 is fundamentally unconstitutional. In his sweeping decision, Walker went one-by-one through the arguments of the Prop 8 proponents, shooting down each one in turn. His only ammunition? Facts, data, and empiricism.

"The evidence shows conclusively that moral and religious views form the only basis for a belief that same-sex couples are different from opposite-sex couples," Walker wrote. "The evidence fatally undermines any purported state interest in treating couples differently."

It's the kind of ruling a scientist would love.

And that's no mere accident: while the case for Prop 8 is predicated on hypotheses and symbols, the LGBT plaintiffs, led by judicial heavy-hitters Ted Olson and David Boies, built their case on science. When Olson and Boies argue that marriage needs gays as much as gays need marriage, the backbone of their case is an ever-growing body of cutting-edge research.

And as luck would have it, the tip of that cutting edge can be found just minutes away from Judge Walker's office, at the downtown San Francisco office of the Gay Couples Institute.

It's all in Your Head

On a recent afternoon, Gay Couples Institute Executive Director Salvatore Garanzini gave me a Locke-Wallis test. The variably-weighted questions touched on how much time my husband and I spend together, our physical satisfaction, and whether one of us is overly acquiescent when we argue.

My score, I'm pleased to learn, is 118, which puts me 3 points above the standard deviation of average relationship satisfaction. Like a blood-pressure test, Garanzini explained, the number on its own provides a valuable baseline. And when monitored over the course of treatment, it becomes even more useful.

Garanzini co-founded GCI in 2007 with Alapaki Yee to provide couples' counseling and to conduct research. The two men are partners — in business and in life — and as psychotherapists, they were troubled by shortcomings that they perceived in therapy for gay couples.

The problem, they believed, was that most couples therapy opts for subjective evaluations. Of what little treatment favors data collection and analysis, even less had been proven effective for gay couples — only for heterosexuals.

But Garanzini and Yee were about to get a lucky break. As it happens, the undisputed master of the hard science of relationships is Dr. John Gottman, who for over thirty years studied moment-by-moment

heterosexual interactions to compile an exacting catalog of healthy and unhealthy behaviors. In a Seattle laboratory, Dr. Gottman points video cameras at couples, watches them interact, and encodes every single element of their communication down to the subtlest change in tone and smallest tensing of a muscle.

Armed with a massive library of data, Gottman has developed specific techniques for diagnosing and treating troubled relationships. And in 2007, after decades of working with heterosexuals, he was ready to test his findings with gays.

So as luck would have it, the Gay Couples Institute approached Dr. Gottman at just the right time. With his blessing, Garanzini and Yee adapted Gottman's methods and began to collect exhaustive data on clients, treatment, and results as applied to LGBT clients. No one else had ever attempted anything like it.

These days, GCI sees about two hundred couples a year. Because clients re-evaluate themselves on the Locke-Wallis test at each visit — again, just like a blood pressure test at a doctor's office — Garanzini estimates he scores about fifty tests every week.

But GCI is more than just a giant Gottman-for-gays laboratory.

Garanzini and Yee are devoted to improving the success of relationships, from the happiest to the most troubled. In addition to their regular practice, they also host date nights — fun, informal get-togethers where a half dozen LGBT couples socialize over drinks and hors d'oeuvres — and more intensive weekend-long workshops.

Garanzini points to my Locke-Wallis results. The good news is that my husband and I both enjoy spending time at home together. But I also indicated a few small red flags, such as a difference of opinion when it comes to in-laws. "There's always more you can do," Garanzini says. "And I can tell you the specific things you can work on."

"A lot of couples counseling is a lot of fluff," said Yee. "Our method has a high success rate, because it's based on empirical data."

So far, their work has yielded encouraging results. Employing Gottman's therapeutic methods, GCI's LGBT clients tend to experience the same increase in Locke-Wallace scores over time that heterosexual couples do.

It's not a huge surprise: Gottman's guidelines make intuitive good sense. Among them are knowing your partner's interests and goals, listening to each other, and compromising.

"The things that improve relationships in gay couples are the same as the things we do for straight couples," Garanzini says.

Defining Success

The ability to quantify an improvement in a relationship is a relatively modern innovation. But Gottman's techniques aren't all that different from basic marital skills passed down from generation to generation. The only difference is that now we've started to peel back the covers and learn why exactly those skills work.

The techniques developed by Gottman and adopted by GCI involve creating what Garanzini calls "cognitive room" for your partner. Or in other words, setting aside a chunk of your brain for your significant other's biographical background. Knowing each others' likes and dislikes, goals, fears, and values is a powerful indicator of relationship success.

Ultimately, the couples that successfully weather conflict are those that function as a team. Our interactions are radically different depending on whether we're speaking to a friend or to an adversary. Another key aspect of healthy relationships is the creation of "shared meaning" — that is, creating symbols of mutual experiences and commitment like a marriage, vacation photos, a pet, or a song you both love.



Alapaki Yee and Salvatore Garanzini of the Gay Couples Institute. Photo: Steven Underhill Photography.

“It doesn’t need to cost money,” said Yee. “It’s in the small things: every time he sends me a text, I answer it.”

It’s a similar approach to the “broken window” theory of crime prevention, Garanzini said. Address the minor issues, and bigger problems won’t have a chance to gain a foothold.

And those big problems, when they do arise, can be show-stoppers. Garanzini and Yee identified the six most common areas in which they observe couples fighting: sex, money, family, parenting, free time, and tidiness. Those are pressure-points for any relationship, but LGBTs have the added burden of having to fight for social acceptance.

For example, a straight couple’s argument about public affection might hinge on individual preferences. But an LGBT couple’s argument is tinged with complications: a simple hug could prematurely out someone to their family, or even precipitate a homophobic assault.

Whereas a straight couple might argue over their preferred vacation destinations, a gay couple must also consider the possibility, should there be an accident, that the hospitals in that locale may refuse to let them see each other.

These stresses take their toll, and there’s no arguing that lesbians, gay men, transgenders and bisexuals experience being couples in ways that are different from heterosexuals. But what exactly are those differences, and what effects do they have?

It’s a line of inquiry that came to a head on January 13, 2010, in the U.S. District Courtroom of Judge Vaughn Walker.

Data gets its Day in Court

What do you get when you combine the *Bush v. Gore* election recount saga, a nudge from Meathead, and a hush-hush legal filing? The study in unlikelihood that is *Perry v. Schwarzenegger*.

In late 2008, after a brief period of recognition, California’s Proposition 8 had closed the window for gay couples seeking to marry. In the span of just a few months, the LGBT community suffered a disastrous election campaign, a failed appeal to the State Supreme Court, and a debate over strategy that threatened to become toxic.



Rob Reiner

It was in this setting that law firm Gibson, Dunn & Crutcher quietly filed their case. *Perry v. Schwarzenegger* caught the world by surprise, and the surprises kept coming: the lead attorneys were Ted Olson and David Boies, who had opposed each other years earlier in *Bush v. Gore*. The major players were introduced through Hollywood power players that included Rob Reiner. And they planned to take the case all the way to the United State Supreme Court — a move that LGBT advocates had long avoided, fearing a damaging defeat.

Initially, longtime civil rights campaigners were scared stiff by the case. In a 2008 document entitled “Make Change, Not Lawsuits” [PDF] organizations including the ACLU and the National Center for Lesbian Rights urged, “don’t go suing right away. Most lawsuits will likely set us all back. There are other ways to fight that are more likely to win.”

But over the next year, that hesitancy was called into question. Olson and Boies brought an iron-clad case, and finally, in August of 2010, Judge Walker found in their favor, ruling that Proposition 8 violates the United States Constitution. It was a vindication of their strategy



— or at least, an initial vindication, as the case now moves to appeals with the U.S. Ninth Circuit Court and very likely to the U.S. Supreme Court.

Crucially, Walker’s decision directly addresses the question of differences between gay and straight couples. “Proponents argue that Proposition 8 advances a state interest in treating same-sex couples differently,” he wrote, quoting the proponents’ claim that California needed to use “different names for different things” and “address the needs of different types of relationships.”

Walker took a dim view of those arguments. “Proponents assume a premise that the evidence thoroughly rebutted,” he wrote. “Rather than being different, same-sex and opposite-sex unions are, for all purposes relevant to California law, exactly the same.”

Of course, the Ninth Circuit may reverse Walker’s ruling. But they’re unlikely to throw out his entire decision and start from scratch: though they may disagree with his legal conclusions, appellate courts almost never revisit findings of fact.

And Walker’s facts are extensive. An itemized, thoroughly-sourced list of 80 key findings, they touch upon historical definitions of marriage, the nature of sexual orientation, and the harm done by discrimination.

More Alike than Different

As a professor of psychology and Vice Chair for Graduate Studies in Psychology at UCLA, Dr. Letitia Anne Peplau was called to the stand by the *Perry* plaintiffs to discuss her research on couples and sexuality, which spans more than three decades.

“One of the striking things about this research,” she said on the stand, “is the consistency of findings across different studies conducted by different researchers, using somewhat different methodologies. And the consistent finding is one of great similarity across couples, both same-sex and heterosexual.”

On examination, Christopher Dusseault, an attorney for the plaintiffs, asked, “Is it also one of the findings, Dr. Peplau, that the factors that predict relationship satisfaction, relationship commitment, and relationship stability are remarkably similar for both same-sex cohabiting couples and heterosexual married couples?” Peplau’s answer was a single word: “Yes.”

Dusseault continued, “is there a consensus in the research as to whether these factors are similar between same-sex and opposite-sex couples?”

“Yes,” Peplau said. “The overwhelming finding and the consensus of professionals in the field is of similarity across these two types of couples.”



U.S. District Court Judge
Vaughn Walker

Walker frequently cites Peplau’s testimony in his decision. “Married same-sex couples in Massachusetts have reported various benefits from marriage,” he quotes her as saying, “including greater commitment to the relationship, more acceptance from extended family, less worry over legal problems, greater access to health benefits and benefits for their children.”

He also cites a 2005 position statement from the American Psychiatric Association: “The American Psychiatric Association supports the legal recognition of same-sex civil marriage with all rights, benefits, and responsibilities conferred by civil marriage, and opposes restrictions to those same rights, benefits, and responsibilities.”

Ultimately, Walker writes, “Same-sex couples are identical to opposite-sex couples in the characteristics relevant to the ability to form successful marital unions.”

The Monogamy Distraction

During Peplau's cross-examination, Proposition 8 attorney Nicole Moss broached the topic of monogamy. "Would you agree that the practice of monogamy in gay male relationships is quite different from the practice of monogamy in married heterosexual or lesbian relationships?" she asked.

The implication was clear: promiscuous LGBT couples are fundamentally different from heterosexual couples.

But does it matter?

Peplau responded, "one of the ways in which gay men's relationships differ, on average — some of them do; not all of them, by any means — is that a higher percentage of gay men say that they do not value monogamy; it's not important in their relationship. They may have an agreement that their relationship does not need to be sexually exclusive. And, correspondingly, somewhat more gay men than other groups report that they or their partner have had sex with someone else since their relationship began. So it's important to put it in that context, because we sometimes think of non-monogamy in terms of infidelity, a breach of faith. But if a couple has an agreement, an understanding, that sex with other people is acceptable, then acting on that agreement is not a breach of trust."

In other words, monogamy means different things to different couples. To some, it's a deal-breaker; to others, it's an integral component of their relationship.

Garanzini explained that the Gay Couples Institute considers monogamy with their clients on a case-by-case basis. "We're not pro or against," he said. "Our mission is to create healthy relationships... Monogamy or not, that's not the issue." The issue, he explained, is keeping focus on those fundamentals as laid out by Gottman's research, such as shared meaning, friendship, and paying attention to each other.

As an example, Garanzini described a non-monogamous couple whose rules stipulated that they both be present while playing with newcomers. When one of the partners broke that rule with an independent hookup, issues of distrust threatened to end the relationship. "The answer for that couple is not to have an open relationship," Garanzini said. "That's just fixing a problem with a problem."

In contrast, he said, another couple might use their non-monogamy to create shared meaning. "They might say, 'Oh, remember how messy that guy's place was,' or 'wasn't that fun,'" he explained. "They've found a way to weave non-monogamy into their friendship."

He added, "Monogamy challenges your relationships. It's going to test your conflict-management skills." But just like any challenge, like traveling or buying a house or having children, "that's not a reason not to do it."

What Marriage Does

The wording of Walker's ruling demonstrates an understanding of unions that is compatible with the approach taken by the Gay Couples Institute.

Although every relationship is unique, both Walker and GCI agree that the act of formalizing a marriage conveys specific benefits.

"Marriage goes in the 'shared meaning' pot," Garanzini explained. It's a bond that strengthens a couple's emotional investment in each other — and crucially, sustains them through difficult times. "That's the stuff you're going to lean on when things look terrible," Garanzini said.

Using a camping metaphor, Garanzini explained that a marriage can be compared to a backup generator, or a deposit on a campsite. When faced with difficulties, it might be tempting to abandon a campsite and settle elsewhere. But the threat of losing your deposit may induce a momentary reconsideration, and

when the backup generator kicks in, that small power boost could be enough to help you work through the difficulty.

It's an effect that extends to all couples, gay or straight.

And that's more than just a theory: as the number of governments that recognize same-sex couples has increased, available data has increased as well. It was ten years ago that Vermont established a Civil Union registry, and since then, research has shown that even Civil Unions, despite falling far short of marriage, are correlated with a significant increase in relationship longevity.

According to one such study, "same-sex couples not in civil unions were more likely to have ended their relationships than same-sex civil union or heterosexual married couples." Or in other words, a marriage is a marriage, whether you're gay or straight.

Predictions

So, Prop 8's been found unconstitutional. Now what?



U.S. Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals
Building in San Francisco

The book is far from closed on *Perry v. Schwarzenegger*. Years of appeals are likely to lie ahead. Meanwhile, organizations like [Equality California](#) are working hard on building a campaign to overturn Prop 8 at the ballot box, most likely in 2012.

But however the marriage ban comes to an end, Garanzini predicts that equality will have a profound impact on couples. He recalled 2008, when for a brief time gay couples were allowed to marry. The looming threat of Prop 8's passage forced many couples to prematurely wed.

"We got a lot of calls from couples who said 'hey wouldn't it be something if we got married,'" he said. Then, once they realized that they really didn't know each other that well, "there wasn't that much incentive to rebuild." The average time before those couples began seeking help was about three months, he said.

But having the option to marry is still fundamentally positive. When Prop 8 eventually falls, Garanzini said, couples will have an opportunity to create shared meaning in their relationship that wasn't previously available to them.

"The real advantage," he said, "is it's finally getting gay people to talk about what they mean to one another."