

The Pseudo-Science of Same-Sex Marriage Not what the doctor ordered:

Psychologists aren't helping by trying to turn a moral issue into a matter of mental health



Gay marriage is good for mental health -- well, if not yours, then at least for that of your gay friends and acquaintances. That's what the American Psychological Association, the world's largest association of psychologists, says. At their annual conference this summer, they passed a policy statement that same-sex couples should have the right to marry.

Their reasoning goes something like this: "If it can't hurt and it might help, we'll support it."

As for the "can't hurt" part, the APA calls on that good old incontestable word "research" to camouflage what would otherwise be recognized as mere opinion and wild speculation.

Since legalizing same-sex marriage is something new, none of us can honestly claim to know the short-term effects -- let alone the long-term ones -- on couples, their children or society. But, as the APA puts it, psychological research, "provides no evidence to justify discrimination against same-sex couples."

Or, in less formal language, if there is no "scientific" reason to be against it, then, hey, let's go for it.

As for the "might help" argument, APA president Diane Halpern puts it best. She says that denying gays the right to marry "puts a particular stress on them just because of their sexual orientation. It's a health issue and a mental-health issue."

In the psychologist's worldview, stress is ubiquitous. If a group that's in the majority experiences stress, it is called "life stress." If a minority group experiences it, it has another name: "minority stress." But whichever variety it is, psychologists believe stress is always bad. It's unhealthy and we must, according to current psychological wisdom, do whatever we can to eliminate it. So, if allowing gays to marry serves to reduce their stress level, it's good and we should all be saying "yes" to gay marriage.

The American Psychological Association is saying this at a time when U.S. President George W. Bush is stomping across America championing "family values." That, in his conservative thinking, means saying "no" to same-sex marriage. Last week, Missouri voters did just that when they overwhelmingly approved an amendment to the state constitution barring such marriages, thus becoming the first state to do so. A dozen other states are preparing to vote on similar amendments.

So why, I am wondering, would the APA take such a stance in this stormy political climate? Ms. Halpern herself acknowledged the riskiness of the move. "We're going out on a limb," she said.

The answer, I think, has nothing to do with mental health and everything to do with politics. Leading up to the last U.S. election, psychology clearly wanted Al Gore to win. While never officially endorsing the Democrats, they coached Gore around mental-health issues and they embraced his wife, Tipper, seeing her as the First Lady of Mental Health, someone sure to champion their causes whole-heartedly.

But the shoe dropped, the chads hung and psychology's plans were cast into disarray.

President Bush isn't psychology's ally. He openly favours faith-based initiatives over professional programs, arguing that faith can accomplish what secular programs can not. And he is undermining the control psychology has jealously held for decades over who can provide therapy and counselling. In *A Charge to Keep*, he writes that he "supports alternative licensing, so effective efforts aren't buried or compromised by government regulations."

None of this is good for psychology's business.

It seems that psychology, having no friend in the White House now and seeing that John Kerry has a chance of winning, has chosen to throw its lot with the Democratic challenger.

Like Ronald Reagan Jr., when he stopped just short of taking a partisan stance by ending his speech at last month's Democratic National Convention with the words "vote for stem-cell research," psychologists have spoken out on an issue that aligns them with the Democrats.

While Mr. Kerry doesn't personally approve of same-sex marriage, he doesn't oppose the notion of legalizing civil unions and he wants the issue to be decided by individual states. Ditto for the APA, which says it will work with "states and provinces to provide civil marriage and to recognize the parent rights of lesbians and gay men."

Since the Democrats have historically been more in line than the Republicans with psychology's interests and initiatives -- whether they were supporting greater access to psychological services, counselling for the poor or drug-abuse treatment -- John Kerry is its better bet.

The APA says its policy is in the public's best interest because legalizing same-sex marriage is good for the mental health of our society. But how can turning a moral and legal dilemma into a mental-health issue be genuinely helpful to anyone?

Sure, those lobbying for legalizing same-sex marriage can now draw on this APA-sanctified "scientific" argument in favour of their cause. They can use that to shoot down the equally unscientific arguments that the proponents of traditional marriage throw at them, all that bogus research that supposedly shows that gay marriage is unhealthy.

This "it's healthy versus it's unhealthy" bantering serves only to muddy the matter. Psychology could have done what it virtually never does -- point out that there is no real scientific evidence that favours either side and that psychologists should leave it to individuals and governments to struggle with the competing values of fairness and faith and with the social complexity that would come with adopting this new understanding of "marriage."