

Ugly Truth: The Effects of Positive Attitudes Toward Same-Sex Marriage on Ego Depletion and Psychological Distress

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Took advantage of Taiwan's same-sex marriage referendum in 2018, this study explored how the voters' attitudes toward this gender equality issue played a role in their psychological process and psychological distress after the results settled down. Data were collected in two time points, one week prior to and after the referendum, respectively. Analysis of the total 205 participants indicated that voters' positive attitudes toward same-sex marriage prior to the referendum had a significant positive correlation with their psychological distress after the referendum, although only on the interpersonal-oriented psychological distress (loneliness). In addition, the relationship of positive attitudes toward same-sex marriage and loneliness is fully mediated by ego depletion. Furthermore, this study examined the psychological processes and distresses experienced by groups with different sexual orientations in this gender equality social event, which provided more valuable information in predicting the psychological consequences of such gender equality social event. It was found that the positive attitudes of the heterosexual group toward same-sex marriage were significantly related to both depression and loneliness, while the psychological process was fully mediated by ego depletion. In conclusion, this study explored the research scope of the referendum as a social event and provided preliminary evidence for the voters' psychological process and outcomes from a psychological perspective, providing a reference for the academia and practice.

Keywords: same-sex marriage referendum, attitudes toward same-sex marriage, ego depletion, depression, loneliness

Extended Abstract

Since the Taiwan Alliance to Promote Civil Partnership Rights (TAPCPR) proposed a draft bill on marriage equality in 2013, discussions on same-sex marriage have gradually begun to take place in Taiwanese society. In 2018, the Coalition for the Happiness of our Next Generation successfully proposed holding several referendums, including one on the definition of marriage to be restricted between two people of the opposite sex, and same-sex marriage has been a controversial issue in Taiwan ever since. The passing of the referendum against same-sex marriage was undoubtedly a major blow to the supporters of same-sex marriage. Therefore, the first purpose of this study was to explore the psychological effects of the referendum result on individuals who strongly support same-sex marriage.

The referendum result caused devastating feelings

for those who support same-sex marriage. "Post-election trauma" (PET) has been coined to describe the powerful, adverse psychological impact of a lost election, a defeated referendum, or the failure of other large-scale political and social events on their supporters (Carmack & DeGroot, 2018; DeGroot & Carmack, 2018; Martin, 2016). It entails a process of grief (Gregoire, 2016; Martin, 2016; Waters, 2016). Therefore, the second purpose of this study was to build on previous PET research and examine the two most common forms of psychological distress in the process of loss or grief, namely, emotional distress (specifically, depression) and interpersonal distress (specifically, loneliness), in the aftermath of the Taiwanese referendum among individuals who support same-sex marriage.

PET also involves ego depletion (Bonanno et al.,

2005). Individuals who support same-sex marriage had to spend psychological resources handling the distress as well as the controversies engendered by the referendum result. Given this double consumption of resources, we expected the individuals to experience ego depletion. Therefore, the third purpose of this study was to test the mediating effect of ego depletion on the relationship between positive attitudes toward same-sex marriage and psychological distress after the referendum.

Drawing on previous research on large-scale political or social events, this study collected data one week before and after the 2018 Taiwanese referendum to examine the influence of electors' attitudes toward same-sex marriage before the referendum on their psychological and emotional states after the referendum.

Methods

Participants and Procedure

The participants in this study were adults over 20 years of age who had the right to vote on the referendum. When collecting the data, we attempted to include people of different genders, sexual orientations, ages, backgrounds, and attitudes toward same-sex marriage. Two sets of questionnaires were respectively distributed one week before and one week after the referendum, which was held on November 24, 2018. The first questionnaire asked about the participants' positive attitudes toward same-sex marriage and their demographic characteristics. The second questionnaire collected data on their ego depletion, loneliness, and depression.

This study used two waves of self-report surveys to collect data. We obtained 314 and 248 returned questionnaires in the first and second waves, respectively. After excluding the participants whose first-stage questionnaire could not be matched to a second-stage questionnaire, those who did not complete the questionnaires, and those who were suspected of answering randomly, we obtained 205 valid responses (a 53% valid response rate). Of the participants in our final sample, 58.5% were physiologically women, the average age was 30.54 years ($SD = 6.27$), the main education level

was university education (52.7%), and the predominant sexual orientation was heterosexuality (68.3%).

Measures

Except for the demographic variables and positive attitudes toward same-sex marriage, we used existing measures with good reliability and validity that were measured on 5-point Likert scales.

Dependent Variables

Positive Attitudes Toward Same-Sex Marriage. We developed a 2-item measure to assess this variable with reference to the main text of the 2018 referendum. The items were as follows: "I believe that marriage in civil law should be limited to the union of a man and a woman (R)" and "I think same-sex couples should have the right to marry in accordance with civil law." The participants indicated their degree of agreement on a scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The correlation coefficient r between the two questions was 0.94.

Ego depletion. We adopted the revised 5-item scale developed by Deng et al. (2016) to measure this variable. The original scale was developed by Twenge et al. (2004) and verified by Ciarocco et al. (2007). Cronbach's α was 0.85.

Loneliness. We used the Mandarin Chinese version of the 8-item short-form UCLA Loneliness scale (ULS-8) adapted by Wu and Yao (2008) to measure this variable. Cronbach's α was 0.85.

Depression. We used the 5-item Brief Symptom Rating Scale (BSRS-5) developed and verified by Lee et al. (2003) to measure this variable. Cronbach's α was 0.85.

Control Variables

We controlled for *demographic variables* (gender, sexual orientation, and age) and *negative emotions* (six items, including four items from Wu and Hu (2009) and two items from Watson et al. (1988); Cronbach's α was 0.81). The results of a confirmatory factor analysis revealed a good fit between the data and the model

involving loneliness, depression, and negative emotions ($\chi^2_{62} = 137.28$, CFI = 0.94, NNFI = 0.92, SRMR = 0.06, RMSEA = 0.08; Hu & Bentler, 1995).

Results

The results of the confirmatory factor analysis revealed that the three-factor model of ego depletion, loneliness, and depression fit the data well and was distinguishable from other models ($\chi^2_{132} = 331.1$, CFI = 0.90, NNFI = 0.88, SRMR = 0.07, RMSEA = 0.09; Hu & Bentler, 1995). We then employed Model 4 of the SPSS Process macro (Hayes, 2013) to analyze the mediating effect of ego depletion. The results revealed that positive attitudes toward same-sex marriage before the referendum had significant positive effects on post-referendum ego depletion ($\beta = 0.13$, $p = 0.06$) and loneliness ($\beta = 0.12$, $p = 0.08$), but not on depression ($\beta = 0.03$, $n.s.$). Based on 5000 bootstrap samples, the results also revealed significant positive indirect effects of positive attitudes toward same-sex marriage on depression [effect = 0.0521, bootstrapped $SE = 0.0264$, 95% bootstrapped CI = (0.0019, 0.1249)] and loneliness [effect = 0.0404, bootstrapped $SE = 0.0203$, 95% bootstrapped CI = (0.0007, 0.0804)]. Both of the direct effects were non-significant. Thus, the hypotheses were mostly supported.

This study further examined the psychological processes and distress experienced by groups with different sexual orientations in the context of the referendum. The independent-samples t -test results revealed that compared with heterosexual participants, non-heterosexual participants had significantly higher levels of positive attitudes toward same-sex marriage before the referendum ($t = -9.43$, $p < 0.001$). A moderated mediation model was also tested to investigate the moderating effect of sexual orientation on the proposed mediating effect of ego depletion. The model indexes were significant for both forms of psychological distress examined [depression = 0.4648, bootstrapped $SE = 0.1452$, 95% bootstrapped CI = (0.2499, 0.7306); loneliness = 0.3630, bootstrapped $SE = 0.1136$, 95% bootstrapped CI = (0.1975, 0.5911)]. Specifically, we found that the mediating effects of ego depletion were

different for participants of different sexual orientations. For the heterosexual participants, the stronger the positive attitudes toward same-sex marriage before the referendum, the greater the ego depletion as well as loneliness and depression after the referendum, which was consistent with our hypotheses. This result suggests that although the referendum had low relevance to their own rights and interests, heterosexual participants who supported same-sex marriage were also affected adversely by the referendum result. However, considering the small sample size of the non-heterosexual group in this study, there may have been errors in the mediation analysis (Fritz & MacKinnon, 2007; LeBlanc et al., 2009). More data is needed to confirm the reliability and validity of our analysis. More in-depth research could also be conducted with groups of different sexual orientations in the future.

Conclusion

This study was conducted in the weeks before and after the holding of the 2018 Taiwanese referendum on same-sex marriage. It explored the effects of voters' attitudes toward this equality issue on their psychological processes and distress after the passing of the referendum against same-sex marriage. We found that the more the voters supported same-sex marriage, the higher the possibility that they suffered from loneliness post-referendum, but not depression. In addition, we found that ego depletion fully mediated the relationship between positive attitudes toward same-sex marriage and loneliness. This study also examined whether individuals of different sexual orientations reacted differently to the referendum result. We found that heterosexual participants who held positive attitudes toward same-sex marriage were more likely to experience both depression and loneliness after the referendum, and that this psychological process was fully mediated by ego depletion. To conclude, this study explored and provided preliminary evidence on the impact of the referendum on voters' psychological processes and distress, thus providing a reference for future academic research and practice.

