



## Commitment Ceremonies

by Andrew Matzner

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A commitment ceremony is a couple's public declaration, through ritualized activity, of their devotion to one another. As the consecration of a union of two people that is witnessed by family and friends, commitment ceremonies are similar to weddings. However, while the commitment ceremonies of same-sex partnerships are legally recognized in some countries (Canada, Belgium, the Netherlands, Norway, Denmark, and Sweden, for example), such is not the case in most of the United States, where there is a heated struggle regarding the extension of civil marriage equality to gay men and lesbians.

Although the commitment ceremonies of same-sex couples in the United States do not yet necessarily have legal significance (except in certain jurisdictions that recognize domestic partnerships or civil union), these rituals nevertheless have deeply personal, spiritual, social, and familial meanings for their participants.

As researcher Ellen Lewin recounts, commitment ceremonies between same-sex couples, as well as those involving transgendered partners, have a long history. This is to be expected of any glbtq subculture, regardless of geographical location, in which relationships are conceived of in kinship terms. Historian John Boswell argued, for example, that same-sex unions among early Christians in medieval Europe were officially sanctioned within a religious framework. Up through modern times in the Thai countryside, it apparently was not unusual for gender-normative males to have public ceremonies marking their relationships with *kathoey*, or transgendered males.

Other scholars have noted that in the United States there is much documentation for various types of commitment ceremonies between gay men and between butch/femme lesbian couples in both metropolitan and rural areas during the early part of the twentieth century.

If there is anything about commitment ceremonies that is novel to the twenty-first century, it is the vast amount of resources currently available in our consumer-oriented society to those in the glbtq community who are interested in publicly announcing and marking their partnerships. Commitment ceremonies may be small, informal affairs, celebrated in a couple's home, or large, black-tie events staged in a church, followed by a reception in a country club. They may be secular or religious, and they may use the original words of the couples or follow a liturgy that is similar to a marriage ceremony.

Politically, commitment ceremonies that take place in the glbtq community are imbued with an interesting paradox, as they may be viewed as either symbols of conformity, rebellion, or both.

On the one hand, a vital aspect of such unions is their ritualistic quality. As a formal procedure, rich in symbolism and marked by seriousness of purpose, the commitment ceremony represents a couple's dedication to shared values and beliefs about family, kinship, and community. In this sense, some might view such a formalization of a couple's relationship as a conservative, mainstreaming act, in that it follows a pattern associated with heterosexual marriage ceremonies.

Indeed, for some couples in the glbtq community, carrying out a commitment ceremony represents a form

of inclusion in "conventional" society, particularly when they take place in churches, are presided over by members of the clergy, are attended by family members, and are announced in the society pages of newspapers.

On the other hand, some couples see their commitment ceremonies as subversive acts that challenge societal regulations governing who are permitted to sanctify their unions and how they may go about it. A pair may conceptualize their commitment ceremony as a theatrical rite of resistance to heterosexist norms, and, use, for example, play and humor to draw attention to power imbalances regarding glbtq relationships and their regard in our society.

Because of their symbolic qualities, commitment ceremonies may thus convey multiple, contested meanings and may have different significance for the various parties involved, from the couple to the guests, from the officiant to the catering staff.

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