

Was It Worth It?

Evaluative Multiplicity and the Chronic Unsettledness of Movement Victory

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Background

Does Time Put Everything Into Perspective?

We might expect that time provides evaluative closure for movement outcomes, at least on the level of an individual activist. Eventually, a verdict forms — it was worth it, or it wasn't.

However, some outcomes resist closure. A decade out, LGBTQ activists are chronically unable to definitively say whether marriage equality worth it.

This is not because activists are ambivalent or confused, but due to an **unresolvable evaluative multiplicity** that underpins retrospective evaluations.



Does Time Put Everything Into Perspective?



- **Collective memory and movements**

- Memory as strategic resource for mobilization
- Movements as mnemonic communities
- Commemorative struggles between movement factions and with counter-movements

- **Post-victory evaluation**

- Success/failure as an organizing question
- Focus on demobilization, goal displacement, and organizational survival
- Unsettledness of victory demonstrated but mechanism remains undertheorized

Chronic Unsettledness of Victory

Whereas existing work has mostly located evaluative division **between** activists, a fundamental tension exists **within** activists as well, which gives rise to the unsettled nature of retrospective evaluation.

Retrospective evaluative questions are inherently multidimensional, and dimensions do not resolve into a single verdict, contributing to the **chronic** nature of unsettledness.

This Study

45

semi-structured interviews

2023–2024

interview period

400,468

words in corpus

Respondents were recruited via snowball sampling, reflecting variation in four states: California, Massachusetts, Michigan, and North Carolina.

A small national sample supplemented data collection.

Sample Characteristics

State	N (%)
California	10 (22.2%)
Massachusetts	12 (26.7%)
Michigan	10 (22.2%)
North Carolina	10 (22.2%)
National	3 (6.7%)
Total	45 (100%)

Sample Characteristics

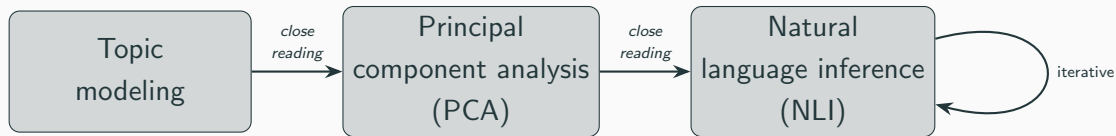
Age Group	N (%)
25–34	8 (18.2%)
35–44	17 (38.6%)
45–54	7 (15.9%)
55–64	8 (18.2%)
65–74	4 (9.1%)
Total	44 (100%)

Gender	N (%)
Man	10 (23.3%)
Woman	21 (48.8%)
Non-binary/GNC	12 (27.9%)
Total	43 (100%)

Racial Identity	N (%)
White	28 (62.2%)
Black	11 (24.4%)
Hispanic	8 (17.8%)
Other	7 (15.6%)
Total	45 (100%)

- 33.3% ($N = 15$) identified as **transgender**.
- 75.6% ($N = 34$) active, while the rest were retired or semi-retired.

Analytic Approach



A mixed-methods approach combining qualitative close reading with computational text analysis was used to group and classify response-level interview excerpt and to develop themes.

Evaluative Axes

“The day the decision came down, there was a big celebration in [Hotel]. And I went there in the ballroom with everybody else. And everyone was clinking glasses of champagne, **it was all revelatory [...]** And I was crying. And I was not crying tears of joy. I was crying tears of sadness. So I was sort of in a very different place than everybody else. [...] I was always troubled that [we were doing the wrong thing]. At the end of the day, I don’t know, I think we did the right thing. I do, I do. [...]. I don’t know. **On balance, I think we did the right thing.** But if I were trans? I don’t know, I might think differently.”

— Beth, Massachusetts (2024)

Naomi: I was a little vocal in thinking that our energy shouldn't go to [marriage equality]. [...] But I might have been wrong in that, I think.

Interviewer: Do you think you were wrong?

Naomi: I don't know. I think [marriage] changed the world more than I thought it was going to. [...] you know, the goal is that everybody is treated fairly and equitably. And I think that's what all of our goals are. [...] And I think that's important. [...] But it does, marriage leaves people out. [...] So I think [people] did fulfill something. [...] But I don't think marriage [equality] is much of a thing. [...] I didn't bring people along. [...] And again, I think we can, I know we can do better. [...] So it's not like I'm not connected to this thing. I happen to be married now.

— Naomi, Massachusetts (2024)

Four Evaluative Axis, Four Logics, Four Questions

Axis	Logic	Question
Outcomes	Consequentialist	What did victory produce , and for whom ?
Moral	Principled	Was pursuing it the right thing to do ?
Strategic	Instrumental	Was it a wise use of movement resources?
Affective	Experiential	What did living through it feel like ?

Outcomes and Moral Axes

Outcomes

“You know, it benefits the community. It benefits the community to be able to have your marriage be legal, you know, have **access to healthcare**, have access to **all the benefits** that anyone else would have access to.”

— Monica, Massachusetts (2024)

Moral

“The way that marriage equality was presented was that **we just want to be like y’all**. We want the same rights as y’all, we deserve the same rights as y’all. Which is true, but also LGBTQ people aren’t aspiring to be cis-hets [cisgender heterosexuals]. Like, **cis-het marriage is not, should never be the aspiration of anybody**, because it should be whatever you want your long term relationships to look like.”

— Penny, North Carolina (2024) 11

Strategic and Affective Axes

Strategic

“Here I am standing alone, and truly trying to not only survive myself, but also understanding that others would benefit from [combating anti-trans discrimination], too. [...] But [...] when I reached out to the gay and lesbian organizations, I didn’t get any help. [...] And let me clarify that [was] because most of those organization felt that gender identity was not a gay issue.”

— Gloria, California (2023)

Affective

“We were in Arkansas, we didn’t have anywhere to celebrate. They had a tiny little Pride in the town that we were at. [...] So we went and walked around the four booths that they had at their local Pride. And you could see everyone was celebrating. We were scared to death, because there was still a bunch of threats against the community and stuff like that. Everybody was very nervous looking over their shoulders. But we were able to be in community, and it was amazing and brilliant and wonderful.”

— Travis, North Carolina (2024) ¹²

Multiplicity and Unsettledness

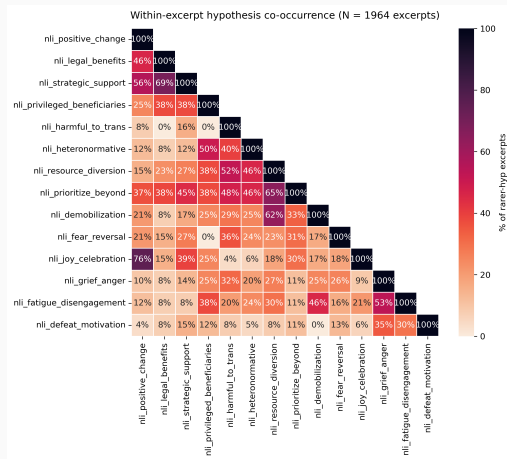


Figure 1: Within-excerpt hypothesis co-occurrence (N = 1,964 premises). Each cell reports, for a pair of hypotheses, the share of the rarer hypothesis's above-threshold excerpts that also clear threshold on the other.

Multiplicity and Unsettledness

	N	Mixed	Uniform	Neither/Not engaged
Four-axis ^a	37	83%	17%	22%
Two-sided valence ^b	44	43–66%	29%	5%

^a Restricted to interviewees confidently engaged on ≥ 2 of 4 axes.

^b Uniform combines 2% positive-only, 27% negative-only.

- 83% express contradicting verdicts on different axes, while only 17% are uniform.
- 43–66% express both critical and positive valances;
only 2% are uniform support, 27% uniform criticism.

Conclusion

Evaluative Multiplicity

Activists are not merely ambivalent.

Every activists that reaches a conclusion on a particular axis reaches it with confidence. Those confident verdicts do not align or resolve because there is **no meta-criterion** to force them into resolution.

The result is **evaluative multiplicity**, leading to **chronic unsettledness**.

Activists are unable to say whether marriage equality was good or bad, beneficial or harmful, worth it or not, because for many of them it is all of those things at the same time, **along different axes**.



Social Movements and Memory, Revisited



Activists must resolve **for themselves** what movement outcomes and history mean before these can be contested between groups.

It is inside the same person, who remembers history in several ways at once, through several evaluative logics that are each coherent on their own terms — that collectively refuse to resolve.

Chronic unsettledness, on this account, is not a property of a movement community divided against itself.

It is a property of the evaluative question itself, and it lives, first and most fully, in the individual activist.

Does the persistence of unresolved multiplicity itself vary systematically?

Local context

state-level differences

Cohort

generational position in the
movement

Position

gender, racial, and sexual
identity

Thank You

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Contextual Proximity

State	Pattern	Features
California	Critical reflection	Security of victory enables low-risk critical reflection
Massachusetts	Institutionalized memory	Prolonged engagement builds evaluative depth over time
Michigan	Detachment	Top-down victory creates affective and topical distance
North Carolina	Ongoing threat	Insecurity of victory sustains fear, anger, and fatigue

Temporal proximity

Older activists have the benefit of **having been there**. For them, marriage equality is **lived experience**, providing more evaluative resources and contributing to richer, more detailed, more engaged evaluations.

For younger activists, marriage equality is **collective rather than personal history**. Their engagement with it is thinner, less detailed. For the most part, younger activists use marriage equality as **infrastructure** and a **backdrop** against which to narrate criticism with the *contemporary* movement, or as a **source** for or **symptom** of many of its ills.

Positional proximity

Positionality and identity have an impact on both available evaluative resources and orientation.

- **Trans activists** engage with marriage equality thinly, and almost excusably through the moral or outcomes axes, a symptom of broader trans alienation from the movement.
- **National activists** prefer strategic questions over other evaluative logics.
- **Cisgender gay men** do not engage with criticism of marriage equality, not even to oppose it.
- Those closer to movement power centres, particularly **White activists**, express critique in more structural terms. The further away activists get from those centres, the more critique is mediated through personal and affective registers.

Sample Demographics

Sexual Identity	
Bi- /pansexual	5 (11.4%)
Gay/lesbian	20 (45.5%)
Queer	20 (45.5%)
Straight	7 (15.9%)
Other	1 (2.2%)
Total	44 (100%)

Education	
Master's or above	20 (47.6%)
Bachelor's degree	15 (35.7%)
Professional diploma	6 (14.2%)
High school diploma	1 (2.4%)
Total	42 (100%)

Income	
Above average	22 (56.4%)
Average	9 (23.1%)
Below average	8 (20.5%)
Total	39 (100%)

Sampling & Recruitment

- Purposive/snowball recruitment via email and in-person and Creating Change, an annual LGBTQ activist conference.
- Activists approached for recruitment: 121; Recruited: 45; Yield: 37.2%.
- Semi-structured interview.
 - Average length: 57 minutes.
 - Interview period: April 2023 to May 2024.
- Four states selected to allow for geographical and topical variation and to facilitate comparisons.
- National sample recruited to provide additional context.

Analytic Pipeline (1/2)

1. **Segmentation & preprocessing**

Transcripts segmented into statement-level units; interviewer questions excluded, retaining only respondent speech ($N = 1,964$)

2. **Topic modeling**

BERTopic applied across the full corpus of segmented statements

3. **Focus on marriage-relevant topics**

Statements filtered to those loading on the marriage equality topic ($N = 236$)

4. **Dimensionality reduction (PCA)**

First four components retained ($\sim 20\%$ of variance); subsequent components showed marginal gains in explained variance with no substantive interpretive value

5. **Close reading & axis definition**

Components examined qualitatively to define the four substantive evaluative axes

Analytic Pipeline (2/2)

6. **NLI hypothesis development**

Qualitative axis findings translated into candidate entailment hypotheses for zero-shot classification

7. **NLI classification**

Statements scored against each hypothesis

8. **Iterative refinement**

Hypotheses revised and re-run based on close reading of classified output

9. **Granular close reading**

Final classified statements subjected to detailed qualitative analysis to develop the substantive findings

Steps 6–8 were iterative rather than linear. Hypothesis refinement and classification were repeated across several cycles before finalizing definitions.

Anticipated Questions

- **“Isn’t this just retrospective memory decay, not genuine multiplicity?”**

Activists evaluate confidently, without signs of memory lapse. These evaluations track debates within the movement during and immediately after marriage equality. The inability to resolve whether marriage equality was “worth it” reflects multidimensional evaluation inherent to movements, not something that emerged only in retrospect.

- **“Is this an artifact of the method?”**

In-depth interviews invite multiplicity more than other forms of speech, and NLI is more sensitive to multiplicity than other classification methods. In both cases, this is a feature, not a bug. Methods reveal multiplicity, not create it.

- **“Isn’t 45 interviews too small to generalize?”**

Future work triangulates these findings against an original dataset of 600K+ social media posts.

- **“Could this be selection bias?”**

Respondents range from more to less critical, and discussions mirror broader movement debates. Still, more critical activists may have self-selected into the project. Future work will triangulate with additional data to address this.