SUMMARY OF PROPOSED RESEARCH
In June of 2003, the Court of Appeal for Ontario issued a landmark legal decision granting same-sex couples the right to marry. Within two years, seven other Canadian provinces and one territory followed suit, and in July of 2005, the Civil Marriage Act extended civil marriage to same-sex couples nationwide. An historical watershed, same-sex civil marriage marks a new era in Canadian history, reshaping Canadian law, but also the lives of gay men and lesbians who may now build intimate relationships, families, sexual lives, and work relations against the structural backdrop of civil marriage. Given the recency of these decisions and the novelty of same-sex marriage, we know very little about this new matrimonial form. Debates on same-sex marriage theorize its consequences in forecasts that range from optimistic to apocalyptic, but do little to shed light on same-sex marriage as an empirical phenomenon. Left unanswered are a host of questions regarding the comparability of homosexual and heterosexual marriages, the motivations and life pathways that lead some same-sex couples to remain common-law spouses but others to choose marriage, the meaning of marriage for same-sex couples, the role of gender in same-sex marriage, the effects of marital status on the lesbian and gay dyad, on the family, on work relations, on social support, on sexual practice, and on health and well-being.

This research project follows on the heels of an exploratory study of same-sex marriage conducted in 2004 – 2006 with the support of a York University Faculty of Arts Research Grant. The current proposal is shaped by emerging findings from the pilot study and is designed to engage the larger empirical and theoretical literature on same-sex relationships and the changing character of marriage and family. As such, four empirically and theoretically informed themes guide this study: 1) to understand how same-sex married spouses speak about and build meanings around marriage, including its symbolic, economic, political and emotional dimensions, and how these constructions compare with heterosexual married and same-sex common-law partners; 2) to map the processes, contexts and motivations that lead some same-sex couples to choose civil marriage, but others common-law status, including issues concerning privilege, sexual citizenship, finances, legal protections, family and childrearing, gender, emotional and social support; 3) to understand how the social, cultural and economic contexts associated with sexual and gender identity work to shape the experience of marriage and the development of the conjugal unit; and 4) to understand how different dyadic configurations affect sexual practice, sexual risk-taking, and sexual health, with a focus on HIV/AIDS and safer sex practices.

Given the paucity of empirical information available on same-sex marriage in Canada, the proposed research will make original contributions to the empirical and theoretical literatures on same-sex intimacy, marriage, family, social support and health practices, and will have direct relevance for family and health policy. Firstly, as one of the first in-depth and systematic qualitative comparisons of homosexual and heterosexual marriage in Canada, the study is uniquely situated to contribute to both the Canadian literature on the changing face of matrimony, and growing international debates about the substance of same-sex marriage and its impact on same-sex couples. Secondly, by comparing same-sex and heterosexual marriage, this research will offer an extraordinary window into understanding if and how sexual orientation and gender affect the ways spouses think about, construct, uphold and transform the institution of marriage. While there is already some literature on the role of sexual orientation and gender in intimate relations, including the conjugal unit, the present study promises to put in high relief how sexual and gender identity, and the social, political and economic contexts in which they arise and are embedded, work to shape the experience of marriage. Finally, by comparing structures of social support, feelings of happiness and well-being, and sexual risk-taking across dyadic forms, the study will contribute to a growing health and policy literature that anchors health outcomes to social institutions.