

# Morgan Centre

for the Study of Relationships and Personal Life

## Gay and Lesbian 'Marriage':

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An exploration of the meanings and  
significance of legitimating  
same-sex relationships

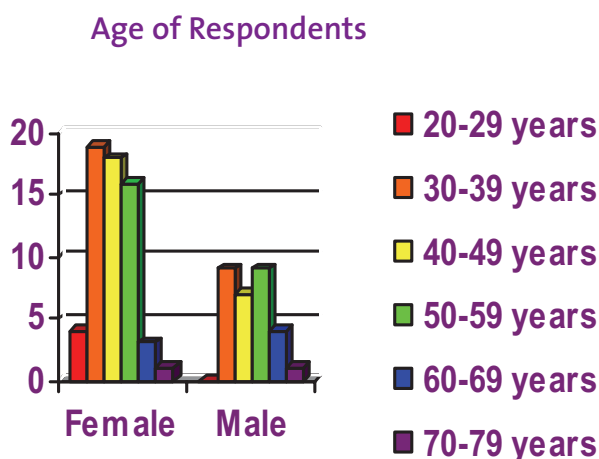
# Core Research Findings

- ◆ Couples in our study were divided on whether it was preferable to have a special category of Civil Partnership or whether the existing legal form of marriage should be expanded to include same-sex couples;
- ◆ It was very important to the majority of our participants to involve their parents or other close kin in their commitment ceremonies;
- ◆ All the couples also invited friends (except two couples who held an entirely private ceremony)
- ◆ It was often difficult for couples to mix their families of origin with friends, but they worked hard to sustain relationships even in the face of difficulties;
- ◆ Couples were aware they could be criticised for adopting the values of heterosexual couples, but this concern was outweighed by a desire to celebrate their commitment to each other;
- ◆ Few couples met with hostility but some found that either friends or family could be reserved in their enthusiasm about ceremonies or planned CPs when told of the event;
- ◆ Couples welcomed the legal protections that CP would provide, but 80% had already made wills to safeguard their partner in the event of death;
- ◆ New forms of kinship may be developing as same-sex partners are embraced by family as sons – rather than sons-in-law or as sisters – rather than sisters-in-law.

## The Study

The study was based on in-depth qualitative interviews with same-sex couples and we also held two focus groups with parents of gay men and lesbians. We conducted 54 interviews and so have information on 54 relationships but we asked participants if they wished to be interviewed together or alone and so in practice we met with 37 couples and 17 individuals. Of these 61 were women and 30 were men. The study was carried out before Civil Partnership (CP) was legally available (it was introduced in December 2005) and so the couples we interviewed (with the exception of 4 who had married abroad) were devising their own commitment ceremonies, or registering their relationships with Local Authorities. Once Civil Partnership was introduced we were able to ask participants if they planned to do this as well and they all intended to do so.

We recruited our respondents through a number of different sources, the lesbian and gay press, lesbian and gay organisations, and leafleting at gay venues and events. The majority of our respondents were part of local networks. Some belonged to local or national lesbian and gay organisations. However, most were not strongly political



## Ceremonies

The couples interviewed had held a wide variety of ceremonies. These included shamanic, Pagan, Christian and Humanist ceremonies. Couples often combined traditional rituals with elements of personal significance to create a new style of ceremony.

Couples sought recognition of their relationships from friends, family and wider communities through their ceremonies.

*you say to your world this is the one that I am going to end up being old with and the world will say to you yes we accept that and she will be your partner forever in our hearts.*

This recognition was as, or more, important for many couples as legal recognition.

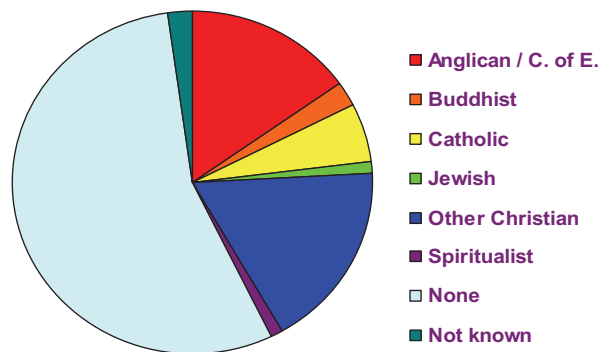
## 'Marriage' and other terms

Many couples, their friends and families referred to their ceremonies as weddings and as entering into marriage despite the lack of state or religious recognition at the time. A few also used the terminology of 'becoming engaged' to recognise the period of stated commitment prior to the ceremony. But others wished to avoid using such terminology because they felt it symbolised a heterosexual institution which did not reflect their practices or views.

## Civil Partnerships

The vast majority of respondents (over 80%) were pleased with the introduction of the new legislation. However, nearly half of these had hoped marriage would be made available to same-sex couples. Some still hoped marriage would, in the future, be available to same-sex couples. For some, this reflected a desire for full equality with opposite-sex couples, for others this reflected a desire to hold a legally recognised religious ceremony.

## Religion



## Families

When planning a ceremony all our participants inevitably had to think about whether to invite their parents, sibling and, in some cases, children. 40% of individuals invited a parent or parents with only 22% deciding against invitations. Sometimes this was because parents had never accepted their son or daughter's sexuality and so were unlikely to welcome an invitation. But in other cases individuals did not want to risk homophobic relatives being unpleasant to their other guests at the ceremony. There were also cases where relationships with parents were cordial, but it was feared that an invitation to a ceremony would be 'too challenging' and would upset the equilibrium that had been established.

*Obviously they love us but they do not agree with homosexuality. They take the Bible's stance on it but they are not hyper religious or anything.*

The individuals who reported inviting parents also stated that this had enhanced their sense of closeness and had put their partners on a new footing with their families of origin. Partners were absorbed into the wider family and 'in-laws' could come together to form extended families too.

*Yes it has sort of brought Sarah's family and my family more sort of like knitted together over the last couple of years; since we have been married we are really close.*

### Parents Invited To Ceremony

35 individuals invited both parents

1 invited her mother only

20 did not invite parents at all

20 had parents who were deceased

6 were still undecided

9 No information

Twenty-one respondents had responsibility for children, mostly from previous heterosexual relationships or through some form of guardianship. The vast majority of parents wanted their children to attend the ceremony, and many involved them as witnesses or other roles within the ceremony. For one respondent the suggestion to hold a ceremony came from her daughter, who then gave a reading at the ceremony.

## Friends

Friends were very important to our participants and even where actual ceremonies were private or very small, everyone invited their friends to the celebrations afterwards. For 22% of our respondents friends were more significant than family, and a further 6 individuals were still undecided about whether to invite friends only.

*It was just our friends ... about 40 people crammed into someone's lounge and with a large conservatory.*

Not all friends were unreservedly enthusiastic about these commitment ceremonies or plans for CP. Although few friends were reported as refusing to come, some friends responded with a degree of indifference – at least at first – and some did not respond to invitations even though they turned up on the day.

This suggests that both ceremonies and CPs can put a strain on some friendships, just as they can on relationships with family.

## Heteronormativity

Our participants were aware that some might see them as 'selling out' to heterosexual norms and values by deciding to get married. However, this argument was not accepted by our respondents either because they felt they had very important reasons to marry which would outweigh the criticism, or because they did not agree that by getting married their values would suddenly change. For example Phil stated:

*We do not have a monogamous relationship and now, when we tell [people] that we are engaged, it is a bit strange. "Oh, so you are going to become monogamous then?" "No, why?" "But you are getting married – you should be". "No, why should I change?" And that is where gay people seem to be a bit confused, why should I change?*

For couples who had lived together (probably monogamously) for years, even decades, it was more important for them to marry either to celebrate their relationship in a public or semi-public context, or to acquire the legal protections associated with CP. For couples who were in shorter relationships, the ceremony or planned CP was seen as a form of mutual promise to stay partners rather than 'selling out'.

## Commitment

Commitment was a vital part of what these couples were acknowledging when they married. But because our couples had relationships of different duration and, perhaps because some were older than others and therefore had different sets of concerns, this commitment took different forms.

We identified three sorts of commitment:

- i) commitment as a promise for the future
- ii) commitment as an ongoing sedimenting process (over years)
- iii) commitment as potentially fragile and as requiring external supports.

Most of our couples fell into the second category because they had lived together a long time and had demonstrated their commitment in many and varied ways over time. They did not think their ceremony would or had made any difference to their level of commitment.

*I think that because we have been together for twenty two years, there have been enormously important moments of committing ourselves to each other when there have been sort of life crises and bereavement and things like that, [so] a gesture like exchanging rings does not seem as important.*

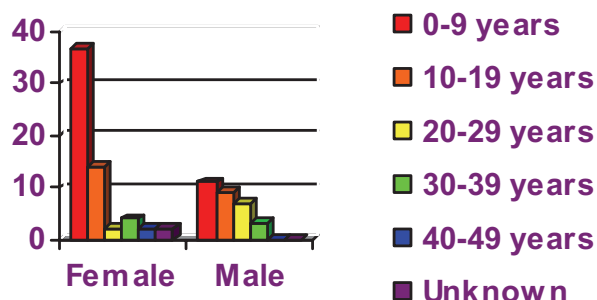
In the first category there were couples whose relationship was relatively short lived but who wanted a kind of rite of passage into acknowledged commitment.

*And now I realise that Colin is my man, he is the man of my life, and I want to share my life with him and I tell him that regularly. And it just does not feel enough at the moment and I just want to show it in front of everyone.*

The final category were those who either felt they needed more than private promises (e.g. because they lived apart) or who felt that their own marriage had actually changed their sense of commitment, making it stronger because it was more readily recognised and acknowledged.

*Yes I think we have made our commitment in the eyes of God.*

### Length of Relationship



### Legal Rights

Legal recognition of same-sex partnerships was extremely important to our respondents. Most couples wanted equal rights with opposite-sex couples. Respondents felt these rights would enable them to look after each other, even in the event of their death.

Some couples did not wish the state to intervene in their relationship. However, others felt legal recognition would help avoid unwanted interventions from family members, hospital staff, immigration officials and the Inland Revenue (especially in relation to inheritance tax).

### Wills and Legal Protection

Prior to the introduction of Civil Partnerships, lesbian and gay couples sought to ensure their relationships were legally recognised using a number of private legal arrangements.

*We were protecting ourselves. That was some of it because the law was not going to do it.*

A large proportion of couples had written wills that recognised each other as their inheritors. Some couples had also established enduring powers of attorney (EPA) that would enable a partner to act on their behalf should anything happen to them.

#### Wills / EPA

41 couples had wills (+2 couples where only 1 partner had a will)

10 couples did not have wills

3 information unavailable

13 couples had also arranged Enduring Powers of Attorney

### Finances

Couples chose a variety of ways of managing their separate and shared finances. For some a great amount of independence was important whilst others shared everything. When salaries varied considerably between partners couples often worked hard to ensure both partners were financially secure for the future. This also meant ensuring those with higher salaries retained their fair share should the relationship end.

#### Joint / Separate Finances

16 couples had only joint accounts share everything (no info about accounts)

3 information unavailable

16 couples had both separate and joint accounts

12 couples had separate accounts but share to varying degrees

2 couples had separate accounts now but will join them at later date

5 no information

## Acknowledgements

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## Publications

“It’s made a huge difference”: Recognition, Rights and the Personal Significance of Civil Partnership’, Shipman, B. and Smart, C. *Sociological Research Online* (2006) forthcoming

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