

The project referred to is the ESRC-funded 'Gay and lesbian 'marriage'' (Ref: R000-23-0418)

6,500 couples opt for civil partnerships but ceremony creates new problems

Concerns over 'selling out' and etiquette

22% decided not to invite parents to ceremony

Hugh Muir

It was an act hailed by ministers and activists alike, sweeping aside decades of inequality. The latest figures reveal that 6,516 same sex couples have opted to cement their relationships by entering into civil partnerships since the legislation came into force last December. The famous ones, such as Elton John and his partner David Furnish, have captured headlines.

But new academic research into the issue of civil partnerships shows that the revised arrangement, while bringing much needed clarity, has quietly thrown up new problems. Some are political, such as the need to face friends who believe opting for a civil partnership represents "selling out" to heterosexual norms or succumbing to "heteronormativity".

Others involve matters of etiquette. Should a couple who have reached an accommodation with their parents about their sexuality risk that accord by inviting close family to the ceremony? And what about wider family? Is it sensible to have one's friends – who approve of a same sex relationship – at the same reception as that tipsy, slightly reactionary uncle – who probably does not.

Professor Carol Smart, who led the research involving 54 couples, said: "We found that the reasons couples enter into a civil partnership can vary according to their age, whether they have children, their need to access certain legal rights, and their views on the institution of marriage itself. We found an overall level of acceptance from families. However, at the other extreme some gay men and lesbians experienced telling their families of their plans to be like 'coming out' again. For some parents it meant that they could no



Civil partnerships ensure same rights as heterosexuals Photograph: Linda Nyland

longer assume that their son or daughter was going through a 'phase' that they would grow out of." She said friends could also pose problems. "While some could be entirely supportive, others saw it as a capitulation to heterosexual norms and to straight society."

Couples, who were interviewed before and after the legislation came into effect, have chosen a variety of ceremonies including Shamanic, Pagan, Christian and humanist. Most involved parents or other close relatives in their ceremonies but 22% decided against inviting parents. "Some-

times 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," the report says.

Those who did invite parents said this appeared to have "enhanced their sense of closeness" and put their partners on a new footing with their families.

Those couples who proceeded despite the "heteronormativity" issue did so "either because they felt they had important reasons to marry which would outweigh the criticism, or because they did not agree that by getting married their values would suddenly change".

Most welcomed the financial safeguards achieved by entering into a civil partnership but 80% said they had made wills to safeguard their partner prior to the legislation taking effect.

Love and equality

Liz Kay, a professor of dental health services, and her partner Stella Tinsley, 40, an equestrian business-woman, decided after 14 years together to have a civil partnership. They were keen to secure the practical advantages but also determined to keep the essential tenets of their relationship. "We actively didn't want to be seen as a lesbian couple wanting to be like a heterosexual couple," said Professor Kay. "We didn't want it to be a case of one of the women pretending to be a man really. We are not. We are a lesbian couple." The proceedings, in April, were deliberately understated. "We didn't want a white wedding with lots of fuss. ... We wanted rights that heterosexual married couples enjoy, such as the right to be each other's next of kin. After 14 years together I think that's the least we could expect."

The issue of how same sex couples choose to live together remains a contentious one despite the introduction of civil partnerships.

Last week, Mr Justice Potter, the most senior family court judge, dismissed an application from two university professors to have the marriage they entered into in Canada recognised in this country. The judge ruled that the civil partnership status they enjoyed here gave them all the practical benefits. But his controversial ruling said marriage is a state reserved for heterosexuals.

Most civil partnerships have occurred in the south.

By March 31, 238 had taken place in Westminster, 236 in Brighton and Hove and 194 in Kensington and Chelsea. There were 36 in Newcastle but just five in Neath, South Wales.

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