UK Data Archive

Study Number 5900

Gay and Lesbian 'Marriage': an Exploration of the Meanings and Significance of Legitimating Same Sex Relationships, 2003-2006

USER GUIDE
How did you get here?
Narratives of lived experience

• How did you get together?

• When did you first think about having a ceremony?

• What are the advantages and disadvantages of the option you’ve chosen? (link to standpoint)

• What made you decide to have some kind of ceremony?

• Are you both of the same mind?
Tell me about the ceremony

• Did you have a ceremony? If not, why not?
• How did it happen?
• Vows
• Rings
• Readings
• Photos / Videos - outfits
• Order of service
• Who was involved?
• Who played what role in the ceremony?
Nature of the relationship

- Did either of you propose?
- Romance / love
- Commitment
- Is your ceremony about love and romance?
- Security
- So, how would you describe your relationship?
- Do you hold hands in public?
- Does this depend on where you are? Why?
- How open are you about your relationship in your local area?
Finance and Legal

• How do you organise your finances?
• Were your finances a factor in deciding to register your partnership?
• Have you made any legal provisions of any sort?
• Have you considered what would happen if you separate? (CP would require a legal separation)
• Looking far into the future, have you talked about / do you talk about what will happen when one of you dies?
• Wills, guardianship, ownership of property, pension, living wills
Recognition

- Do you think the ceremony offers recognition?
- Family
- Social
- Going into hospital
- Do you have any examples of where your partnership wasn’t recognised?
- Was this a factor in registering?
- After you had the ceremony, did this change things?
Family of origin

- How did you explain your decision to your family?
- How did members of your family respond to the news?
- Who did you invite?
- If people were against the ceremony were they still invited?
- Anyone you chose not to invite / refuse to come?
- Are you changing your names?
- Parents, siblings, children – don’t forget to ask about them all
Friends / Family of choice

• How did you explain your decision to your friends / family?
• Were your friends happy for you?
• Did they help you out with the ceremony?
• Were any of your friends involved in the actual ceremony? (bridesmaids? Etc)
• Have your friends been as supportive as your family? (less / more than)
Narratives

• How did you tell your friends / colleagues?

• Can you talk about it in the same way to different people?

• Do you talk about it in different ways? – why?
Children

• Are your children a reason for some formal recognition of relationship?
• Have you been under pressure from them to have a ceremony? – eventually to marry?
• Are you children from this relationship, or previous one / not any?
• Names?
• How do you organise parental responsibilities?
• Does going through a ceremony change any of that?
• Did the children have a role in the ceremony?
• What do the children call each of you?

• While we’re on the subject of children, have you had any thoughts about whether birth certs should be changed? (to reflect same-sex parenting arrangements)
Religion

- Do you subscribe to any particular religion / faith?
- Is it an issue in your relationship?
- Is it important for your family?
- Has it affected your decisions about the ceremony?
Continuum of ceremonies

• It seems there are 4 options, what do you think?
• Commitment ceremony
  an announcement of the relationship
• Partnership register (Local Authority)
  public announcement, with some possible council recognition of couple
• Individual legal agreement
• Civil Partnership
  new Govt. proposal, same rights and responsibilities as marriage
• Marriage
  union between 2 people, not man and woman

• where are you placed on it now and where do you want to be placed on it?
What do you think about civil partnership?
Standpoint / opinions

• Political
• Equality for lesbians and gay men
• Equality within relationship
• Are you comfortable with the idea of civil partnership?
• If CP became available would you want to do it?
• If all this was called “marriage”, would you feel the same?
In this study we are also interested in talking to relatives about their experience of your ceremony, and their thoughts on gay marriage. Would you consider putting us in touch with *****? We’re not following this up in every case, so it’s really not a problem if you’d rather not.
Contact Details

What to do if you are interested in helping:
If you have held a commitment ceremony, or registered your partnership, then we would like to hear from you. If you think you could help us, or would like more information about the project before deciding, please get in touch.
You can send the tear off slip back to us, or phone / email:

Beccy Shipman
Tel: 0113 3434903
Email: r.shipman@leeds.ac.uk

Carol Smart
Tel: 0113 3434431
Email: c.c.smart@leeds.ac.uk

Jennifer Mason
Tel: 0113 3434442
Email: j.mason.leeds.ac.uk

Partnership Recognition

A project exploring the meanings and significance of partnership recognition for lesbians and gay men.
We are interested in the meaning and significance of partnership recognition to same-sex couples. If you have held a commitment ceremony, or registered your partnership, and live in the West Yorkshire or Brighton area, we would like to interview you.

What is the Research About?
The issue of partnership recognition is in the news at the moment, and lots of competing views are being discussed. But we know very little about what lesbians and gay men, who are contemplating a ceremony / registration, really think. Through this project, we are hoping to fill this gap in our knowledge.

We are interested in the type of ceremony you held. What rituals or traditions were important to you? Or did you create your own rituals? How did you organise everything? What type of recognition do you want for your relationship? Are you seeking legal recognition, or is a more personal commitment more important? What did your friends and family think when you told them you were holding a ceremony?

What to expect from the interview
The interview will be fairly informal. It should last about an hour, depending on how much you have to say. It is best to hold the interview somewhere fairly quiet, so perhaps your home or our office, or somewhere else if you prefer. We would like to tape-record the interview, if this is acceptable to you. However, you can turn the tape off at any point if you wish, or terminate the interview at any time.

Confidentiality
Your personal details will be kept in complete confidence. All names will be anonymised in transcripts of the interviews. We will use quotations from the interviews in our writings, but they will not contain anything that can easily identify you.

Outcomes
The findings from the project will be written up into several articles about same-sex marriage in the UK. It is intended these will add to current debates about relationships and families.
Ethical Statement – Same-Sex Partnership Recognition Project

Background

This project is carried out by a team of researchers from the University of Leeds. It is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, which is independent of government. The project itself is guided by an experienced and independent Advisory Committee.

Process

We are inviting people to be interviewed and in some cases to participate in a focus group. Focus groups will consist of around 6 volunteers. With both interviews and focus groups, we hope to tape record what is said if you give your consent. During the interview, if at any time you wish to turn off the tape, or terminate the interview we will be happy to do so. Your personal details will be kept in complete confidence. All names will be anonymised in transcripts of the interviews.

Interviews with Parents

We hope to be able to interview a small number of parents to find out what an older generation might feel about same-sex marriage and your ceremony. We realise that not everyone will want to put us in touch with a parent and this is absolutely fine. However, if you are willing for us to speak to a parent, and if they themselves agree to this, we will ensure that no information from the first interview is mentioned in the interview with the parent.

Outcomes

We will use quotations from the interviews in our published work, but they will not contain any names or details that can easily identify you. The Economic and Social Research Council may want us to archive the project data with them. This means other researchers may read your anonymised interviews. We will discuss this with you at the interview, but there is absolutely no obligation on your part to agree to this.
Reports

This section contains the following documents:

- Project website
- Core research findings
- ESRC End of Award Report
- ESRC End of Award Non-technical summary
- ESRC End of Award Plain English findings

Page numbers:
- Project website: 20
- Core research findings: 22
- ESRC End of Award Report: 29
- ESRC End of Award Non-technical summary: 52
- ESRC End of Award Plain English findings: 55
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 civil partnerships when told of the event.
- Couples welcomed the legal protections that civil partnership 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.

Complete research findings [docs/gay-marriage-findings.pdf] (pdf, 212 kb)

Printed copies of these findings (or a large print version) are available from morgancentre@manchester.ac.uk [mailto:morgancentre@manchester.ac.uk].

Publications

"'It's made a huge difference': Recognition, Rights and the Personal Significance of Civil Partnership', Shipman, B, and Smart, C, Sociological Research Online (2007) 12 (1) View article online [new window] [http://www.socresonline.org.uk/12/1/shipman.html].

Press articles and interviews (all links open in new window)


6,500 couples opt for civil partnerships but ceremony creates new problems' [docs/gay-marriage-guardian-8aug06.pdf], Muir, H, The Guardian, 8 August 2006 (pdf). Or view article online. [http://www.guardian.co.uk/gayrights/story/0,,1839533,00.html]

'Happy Ever After' [docs/gay-marriage-new-humanist-jul06.pdf], Smart, C, New Humanist, July/August 2006 (pdf, 308 kb).

Carol Smart interviewed by Laurie Taylor about the project on 'Thinking Allowed' [docs/thinking-allowed-carol-smart-3-may-06.mp3], BBC Radio 4, 3 May 2006 (mp3, 9MB).

Also reported in 'Families show acceptance of gay marriage' [http://www.manchestereveningnews.co.uk/news/219/219846_families_show_acceptance_of_gay_marriage_.html], Manchester Evening News, 4 August 2006.

Research Team

Carol Smart, Jennifer Mason and Beccy Shipman.

For enquiries about this project, please contact Carol Smart on 0161 275 0262 or email carol.smart@manchester.ac.uk [mailto:carol.smart@manchester.ac.uk]

Funding

This project is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (Ref: R000-23-0418).

Top of page [#pagetop]
Morgan Centre
for the Study of Relationships and Personal Life

Gay and Lesbian ‘Marriage’:
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, siblings 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 sort of like knitted together over the last couple of years; since we have been married we are really close.

Parents Invited To Ceremony

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>35 individuals invited both parents</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 invited her mother only</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 did not invite parents at all</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 had parents who were deceased</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 were still undecided</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 No information</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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.*
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

We wish to acknowledge the help of all the participants in our study, including the parents involved in the focus groups. All of the names used in this report are, of course, fictional.

We are also grateful to Diva, Gay Times, Pink Weddings, Civil Ceremonies Ltd, Kenric as well as individuals and local groups we cannot identify for assisting us in making contact with our participants.

In particular we want to thank the following who served on our Advisory Committee or who encouraged and helped us in various ways:

- Dr Mark Bell, University of Leicester
- Professor Richard Collier, University of Newcastle
- Dr Gillian Dunne, University of Plymouth
- Dr Brian Heaphy, University of Manchester
- Professor Fiona Raitt, University of Dundee
- Penny Mansfield, One Plus One
- Professor Jeffrey Weeks, South Bank University
- Dr Matthew Weait, University of Keele

Finally, our thanks to the Economic and Social Research Council for funding the project. (Ref: R000-23-0418)

Publications


We are:

- Professor Carol Smart carol.smart@manchester.ac.uk
- Professor Jennifer Mason jennifer.mason@manchester.ac.uk
- Beccy Shipman rebecca.shipman@manchester.ac.uk

For more information contact:

Morgan Centre for the Study of Relationships and Personal Life
School of Social Sciences
Roscoe Building
University of Manchester
Oxford Road
Manchester M13 9PL

Tel: +44 (0) 161 275 0265
Fax: +44 (0) 161 275 2514

www.manchester.ac.uk/morgancentre
This is the ESRC End of Award Report Form. The form should be completed and returned to: The Evaluation Reports Officer, Communications & Information Directorate at the ESRC on or before the due date. Please note that the Report can only be accepted if all sections have been completed in full, and all award-holders have signed declaration one.

Award holders should also submit seven additional copies of this Form, and eight copies of the research report and any nominated outputs to be evaluated along with the Report.

A copy of the complete Report, comprising this form and the research report, should be formatted as a single document and sent as an email attachment to reportsofficer@esrc.ac.uk. Please enter the Award Reference Number as the email subject.
REPORTING REQUIREMENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The ESRC End of Award Report is a single document comprising the following sections:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>End of Award Report Form</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Research Report</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Nominated Outputs (Optional)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Eight copies of the End of Award Report document and any Outputs must be submitted to ESRC.</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Award Holders should note that:**

1. The final instalment of the award will not be paid until an acceptable End of Award Report is received.

2. Award holders whose reports are overdue or incomplete will not be eligible for further ESRC funding until the reports are accepted.

ESRC reserves the right to take action to reclaim up to 25% of the value of awards issued after November 1999 in cases where submission of an acceptable End of Award Report is more than six months overdue.
DECLARATION ONE: CONDUCT OF THE RESEARCH

This Report is an accurate statement of the objectives, conduct, results and outputs (to date) of the research project funded by the ESRC.

1. Award Holder(s) Signature

NB. This must include anyone named as a co-applicant in the research proposal.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TITLE</th>
<th>INITIALS</th>
<th>SURNAME</th>
<th>SIGNATURE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Professor</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>Smart</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professor</td>
<td>J</td>
<td>Mason</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2. Administrative Authority Signature

DATE:

3. Head of Department, School or Faculty Signature

DATE:

Photocopies of this page are acceptable in the seven additional printed copies of the report. This page should be left blank in the email copy.
DECLARATION TWO: ESRC "SOCIETY TODAY"

"Society Today" is the ESRC’s publicly available research database on the WWW, containing summary details of all ESRC research projects and their associated publications and outputs. From Feb 2005, the texts of Summary and Full reports from End of Award Reports will also be available. Society Today will provide an excellent opportunity for researchers to publicise their work; the database will potentially have a large user base, drawn not only from Higher Education, but increasingly from government, voluntary agencies, business and the media.

Summary details of publications and/or other outputs of research conducted under ESRC funded awards must be submitted to the Society Today database.

Please contact: ESRC Communications (Info Centre), Economic and Social Research Council, Polaris House, North Star Avenue, Swindon, SN2 1UJ.
Tel: 01793 413122; e-mail: infocentre@esrc.ac.uk (general queries)
Tel: 0870 609 1748; e-mail: infocentresupport@esrc.ac.uk (technical queries, e.g. uploading outputs)

Please sign at either A or B below.

A. Details of relevant outputs of this award have been submitted to Society Today and details of any ensuing outputs will be submitted in due course.

Signature of Principal Award Holder

B. This award has not yet produced any relevant outputs, but details of any future publications will be submitted to Society Today as soon as they become available?

Signature of Principal Award Holder

Award holders should note that the end of award report cannot be accepted, and the final claim cannot be paid, until either ESRC has received confirmation that details of relevant outputs have been submitted to Society Today or the award holder has declared that the award has not so far produced any relevant outputs.

Photocopies of this page are acceptable in the seven additional printed copies of the report. This page should be left blank in the email copy.
DECLARATION THREE: DATA ARCHIVE

A machine-readable copy of any dataset arising from the research must be offered for deposit with the ESRC Data Archive within three months of the end of the award. All enquiries should be addressed to: The Director, ESRC Data Archive, University of Essex, Wivenhoe Park, Colchester CO4 3SQ. The Data Archive maintains an informative website at:
http://www.data-archive.ac.uk/

Award Holders submitting qualitative data should refer to the Qualidata website at
www.essex.ac.uk/qualidata

Please sign at either A or B below.

A. Machine-readable copies of datasets arising from this award have been, or are in the process of being, offered for deposit with the ESRC Data Archive.

Signature of Principal Award Holder

DATE:

B. There are no relevant datasets arising from this award to date.

Signature of Principal Award Holder

DATE:

Award holders should note that the ESRC will withhold the final payment of an award if a dataset has not been deposited to the required standard within three months of the end of award, except where a modification or waiver of deposit requirements has been agreed in advance.

Photocopies of this page are acceptable in the seven additional printed copies of the report. This page should be left blank in the email copy
**PROJECT DETAILS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AWARD NUMBER:</th>
<th>R000-23-0418</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AWARD TITLE:</td>
<td>Gay and Lesbian ‘Marriage’: An exploration of the meanings and significance of legitimating same sex relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AWARD START DATE</td>
<td>1st November 2003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AWARD END DATE</td>
<td>30th July 2006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL AMOUNT EXPENDED:</td>
<td>£ 85,677.63</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**AWARD HOLDER(S):**

NB. This must include anyone named as a co-applicant, as originally listed in the research proposal.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TITLE</th>
<th>INITIALS</th>
<th>SURNAME</th>
<th>DATE OF BIRTH</th>
<th>% HOURS PER WEEK / % TIME ON PROJECT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prof</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>Smart</td>
<td>20.12.48</td>
<td>0.06% for 26 m + 100% for 4 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prof</td>
<td>J</td>
<td>Mason</td>
<td>24.04.58</td>
<td>0.06% (2 hours per week)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**PRINCIPAL AWARD HOLDER'S FULL OFFICIAL ADDRESS:**

The Morgan Centre for the Study of Relationships and Personal Life
School of Social Sciences
University of Manchester
Roscoe Building
Oxford Road
Manchester M13 9PL

**E-MAIL:**

carol.smart@manchester.ac.uk

**FAX NUMBER:**

0161 275 2514

**TELEPHONE NUMBER:**

0161 2750262
1. **Non-Technical Summary**
A 1000 word (maximum) summary of the main research results, in non-technical language, should be provided below. The summary might be used by ESRC to publicise the research. It should cover the aims and objectives of the project, main research results and significant academic achievements, dissemination activities and potential or actual impacts on policy and practice.

**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 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.

**Aims**
1. To establish why lesbians and gay men may want to register their partnerships or have commitment ceremonies
2. To ascertain how full marriage is regarded
3. To identify the kinds of ceremonies that are/will be chosen to celebrate commitment
4. To explore what meanings are given to such rituals
5. To explore how wider kin respond to the marriage/registration
6. To consider how embeddedness (or otherwise) in wider kin networks is influenced by these legitimiation ceremonies.
7. To explore understandings of the legal implications of both partnership registration and of ‘real’ marriage

**Findings**

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

**‘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, values or views.

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

**Families**
When planning a ceremony all our participants inevitably had to think about whether to invite their parents, sibling and, in some cases, children. Forty per cent 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.

21 respondents had responsibility for children, mostly from previous heterosexual relationships or through some form of guardianship. The vast majority of these 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.

**Friends**
Friends were very important to all 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. 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 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’.

**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. Although some couples did not wish the state to intervene in their relationship, 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. Eighty per cent of couples had written wills that recognised each other as their inheritors. A few couples (13) had also established enduring powers of attorney that would enable a partner to act on their behalf should anything happen to them.
Dissemination and impact
We have presented papers at 8 different conferences or seminars (including two BSA Conferences), one peer reviewed article in Sociological Research Online will be published in December 2006, one is under review, and a further paper will appear as a chapter in Smart’s forthcoming book entitled Personal Life, Intimacy and Families: New Directions in Sociological Thinking, Cambridge: Polity

Smart appeared on Thinking Allowed in May 2006 and this resulted in a short publication in the New Humanist. We hosted a dissemination seminar at the close of the project at the University of Manchester in April 2006.

The project findings have also been published in The Gay Times, The Pink Paper and The Guardian.

2. Dissemination

A. Please outline any specific plans you have for further publication and/or other means of dissemination of the outcomes and results of the research.

Ms Beccy Shipman is writing a paper for a peer reviewed journal on the couples’ choice of ceremonies and the meaning of new styles of same sex commitment rituals. Professor Mason will be writing a peer reviewed article on same-sex unions and kinship. Smart is publishing a sole authored book contracted with Polity in which data from this project will form a substantial part. We will continue to give papers from the project at conferences and seminars.

B. Please provide names and contact details of any non-academic research users with whom the research has been discussed and/or to whom results have been disseminated.

One Plus One,
The Wells, 7-15 Rosebery Avenue,
London EC1R 4SP
020 7841 3660

Manchester Parents' Group
PO Box 554, Stockport, Cheshire SK4 2WH

Leicester Parents' Group
c/o Betty 01162 359774

Diva Magazine, Pink Paper and Gay Times
In addition we had printed a leaflet containing our main findings which we distributed to all respondents in the project.

3. **Nominated Outputs (see Guidelines 1.4)**

Please give full details of the two nominated outputs which should be assessed along with this report. Please provide **one** printed copy of publicly available web-based resources, **eight** copies of any nominated outputs **must** be submitted with the End of Award Report.


‘Same Sex Couples and Marriage: Negotiating new relational landscapes with families and friends’, C. Smart

4. **Staffing**

Please detail appointments and departures below for ALL staff recruited for this award. Where possible, please note each person's name, age, grade; and for departing staff, destination type on leaving.

(Destination types: Academic post, Commercial, Public Sector, Personal, Other).

**NB. This section must not include anyone who is an award holder.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Initials</th>
<th>Surname</th>
<th>Date Of Birth</th>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Appointment Date</th>
<th>Departure Date</th>
<th>Destination Type &amp; Post</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ms</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>Shipman</td>
<td>03/05/76</td>
<td>6 (point 29)</td>
<td>01/11/03</td>
<td>30/06/06</td>
<td>MSc Information Studies, Leeds Metropolitan University</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5. Virements

Since 1st April 1996 investigators may vire between grant headings without reference to Council, except where major capital items are being provided for. Please detail below any changed use of resources and the benefits or problems this brought.

Administrative staff costs have mainly been incurred as Staff Academic Related rather than Staff Other because of the contract type of the member of staff providing administrative support to the project in Manchester.

A slight saving on administrative staff costs allowed us to increase the proportion of staff costs for academic staff and extend the contract of the project researcher. This meant that we could meet the project targets notwithstanding the slight disruption caused by the transfer.

Although it was originally planned that administrative staff costed to the project would transcribe the interview tapes it proved to be more cost-effective to send these to an external agency, hence the cost incurred against Agency/Non-staff Fees.

Expenditure for consumables was higher than in the award and expenditure for travel and subsistence was lower than expected. This allowed us to transfer some funds allocated for travel and subsistence to consumables, for example, to print a ‘Findings’ leaflet for the project which we sent to participants, researchers and media contacts to support dissemination.

6. Major difficulties

Please detail below any major difficulties, scientific or administrative/logistical, encountered during your research and comment on any consequent impact on the project. Further details should be included in the main report, including any advice you might have for resolving such problems in future projects.

The research team moved from the University of Leeds to the University of Manchester in September 2005. This caused a degree of upheaval while new offices and computers etc were set up. A considerable delay was caused by email difficulties. However, it was possible within the funds available in the project budget to extend Ms Shipman’s contract in order to catch up with coding and analysis of the data.

7. Other issues and unexpected outcomes
Please describe any outcomes of your research, beneficial or otherwise that were not expected at the outset or other issues which were important to the research, where these are not addressed above. Further details should be included in the main report.

When we started the project in November 2003 our aim was to research ‘informal’ commitment ceremonies and also Partnership Registration which had become available in some local authority areas. We were intending to ask respondents about their views on the extension of marriage to same-sex couples as well because this legal reform was happening in countries like Canada and the Netherlands. We did not expect there to be a reform to the law in England and Wales in the life-time of the project. However, during 2004 the Government issued a discussion paper and legislation to introduce Civil Partnership was approved incredibly quickly with an implementation date of December 2005. Our project was therefore overtaken in a way we could not have anticipated. We had finished our interviews by the time CP was available so none of our respondents had ‘civilly partnered’ but we were able to ask them about their plans to have a CP once it became available so we have data on this.

The introduction of CP changed our project to a degree because when we started it the people we were interviewing were in a kind of vanguard and were devising their own ceremonies without the benefit of state or legal approval. Even partnership registration did not bring many ‘legal’ rights so these couples were going ahead with their ceremonies quite independently of those kinds of considerations. There are both disadvantages and advantages to this turn of events. The disadvantages are that we could not ignore the arrival of CP and although our couples planned to have a CP once it became available we have not actually interviewed couples who are now legally ‘married’. But the advantage is that we have captured a sample of couples at a unique (and fleeting) moment in history between the time when same-sex couples started to devise their own ceremonies and make their own rituals of recognition, and a time when the state provided formally for same-sex ‘marriage’. There will obviously need to be further studies of Civil Partnership per se, but this study will provide a foundation stone and point of comparison for what it to come.

8. Contributions to ESRC Programmes

If your project was part of an ESRC Research Programme, please describe your contributions to the Programme’s overall objectives, and note any impacts on your project resulting from your involvement.

N/A

9. Nominated Rapporteur

Please suggest the name of one person who would be suitable to act as an independent rapporteur for your project. Please state full address and telephone number.

Professor Lynn Jamieson,
10. **Nominated User Rapporteur (Optional)**

Please suggest the name of one non-academic user who would be suitable to act as an independent rapporteur for your project. Please state full address and telephone number.
Research Report

Gay and Lesbian ‘Marriage’: An exploration of the meanings and significance of legitimating same sex relationships
R000-23-0418

Background

There has been a longstanding debate in gay and lesbian literature on the meaning and value of ‘marriage’ (Cherry and Sherwood, 1995; Warner, 1999; Eskridge, 1996; Norrie, 2000) It is sometimes seen as a quintessentially heterosexual activity, as well as a state sanctioned mode of conformity, such that to many gays and lesbians it is profoundly unattractive. But some gay and lesbian activists have argued that it is a denial of basic civil rights to be refused such a fundamental legal recognition and that, practically, gays and lesbians need the protections that marriage can offer just as much as heterosexual couples. Clearly the nature of marriage as a legal contract has changed in recent decades and the distinction between marriage and (long term) cohabitation - especially where there are children - is now more blurred. But still marriage confers more rights and protections than cohabitation (Barlow et al, 2001; Smart and Stevens, 2000) and although it brings certain enforceable obligations, in Western democracies it is increasingly deemed to be contrary to human rights to deny homosexual citizens the chance to marry or to have access to a form of legal contract which is very similar to marriage.

The importance of legal recognition cannot be underestimated but a concentration on the legal and practical aspects of marriage alone fails to give sufficient weight to the symbolic and cultural meanings of marriage (and the marriage ceremony). Where gay and lesbian marriage is more common anthropological approaches have stressed the importance of the event and of bringing together families and friends in recognition of a legitimate life style. For example Lewin’s study (1998) suggests that gay and lesbian marriage can be seen as a way of redefining homosexual relationships, as well as a personal rite of passage. But she also suggests that this can be transformative in that the process of redefining the self also gives rise to changing practices (Elliott 2001). There are now several studies of gay and lesbian marriage in the USA (Baird and Rosenbaum, 1997; Eskridge, 1996; Lehmann, 2001; Lewin, 1998) but in the UK the focus of recent research has been more on the nature and shape of interpersonal relationships. Studies by Dunne (1996), Stevens (1999), and Weeks et al (2001) have explored relationships in terms of the extent to which they break the mould of heterosexual divisions of labour and in terms of the nature of commitment. Dunne for example concentrates on the issue of how lesbian relationships are more equal because the division of labour within households is negotiated outside the heterosexual hierarchical sex-role paradigm. She refers to ‘intimate friendships’ as a way of capturing new kinds of relationships which combine equality with emotional and sexual closeness. Weeks et al explore closely the nature of gay and lesbian commitment and reveal the complexity of intimate relationships being created outside traditional expectations of heterosexual coupledom. They point out that there is a difference between US and UK non-heterosexuals in the mode of expressions used (especially about love) but also in relation to the marriage question. They suggest that in the UK anything beyond a private partnership rite (such as a quiet exchange of
rings) caused anxiety. Commitment ceremonies and ‘full’ marriage were frowned upon by many of their respondents.

This study was designed to build on these foundations in order to explore how newly available legitimising events (such as commitment ceremonies and later Civil Partnership) alter the expectations and practices of couples and of their immediate kin. It was expected that in the time since Weeks et al carried out their fieldwork that attitudes towards ‘marriage’ might have changed and so this was also a focus of exploration. The study also had a different emphasis to previous research in its particular focus on families of origin (Bengtson et al, 2002). In other words it was designed to investigate the importance (or otherwise) of close biological kin and to study the kinds of negotiations that couples went through with their parents and/or siblings. In addition to exploring the significance of the kinship context, the study explored the socio-legal implications of the move towards legalising gay and lesbian unions. Thus we explored whether commitment ceremonies were understood in terms of romance and love (Evans, 2003) or more in terms of practicalities and protections, or indeed both.

This study was conceived and started before the Labour Government published its consultation document on Civil Partnership and our fieldwork was completed before it was possible for same sex couples to enter into a CP (from December 2005). But the research team anticipated the likelihood of legislative change and the original project was designed to explore why some same sex couples were already having their own ceremonies of commitment and why some were registering their partnerships with local authorities albeit that these registrations were mostly symbolic and without legal effects. Once the Government announced that CP would be available, we were also able to ask couples whether they planned to enter into a CP as well. Although the timing of our project might seem less than ideal, our research questions were not affected by the legal changes that overtook us. However there were some advantages because we were carrying out the research at a time of important social and legal change and this means that we have captured a unique ‘moment’ in the history of same-sex relationships.

**Objectives**

The original objectives of the project were:

8. To establish why lesbians and gay men may want to register their partnerships or have commitment ceremonies,
9. To ascertain how full marriage is regarded,
10. To explore understandings of the legal implications of both partnership registration and of ‘real’ marriage,
11. To identify the kinds of ceremonies that are/will be chosen to celebrate commitment and to explore what meanings are given to such rituals,
12. To explore how wider kin respond to the marriage/registration,
13. To consider how embeddedness (or otherwise) in wider kin networks is influenced by these legitimation ceremonies.

The research was successful in addressing the majority of these objectives although we did experience some problems with accessing the views of parents. In the original proposal we stated that we hoped to interview a subset of parents to gain their
perspectives on how ‘marriage’ had changed their relationships with their children and also how other kin members had responded. However, we acknowledged in the proposal that this might be difficult because previous experience had shown that interviewees were not always happy with involving close kin in research projects that they were participating in, especially where there might be sensitivities or negative emotions. We therefore had an alternative plan which was to hold focus groups with parents. This strategy entailed contacting established parents’ groups and asking if we could hold meetings with them. Two groups agreed and the meetings proved to be extremely useful in gaining insights into some of the issues from the perspectives of parents. However it was not possible to hold highly organised sessions because both of the groups we visited were essentially support groups for parents at different stages of coming to terms with their children’s homosexuality. This meant that we had to fit into the rhythm of the meetings and for ethical reasons we felt we could not re-direct the sessions (even if this had been permitted). We were able to address a core set of issues with them and this alerted us to a number of advantages and disadvantages to CP which had not been previously apparent. However, we do not have sufficient data from parents to present a dedicated analysis of their views. This means that perceptions about embeddedness in kin networks or about how kin responded to ceremonies came only from our interviewees.

Methods

The study was based on in-depth qualitative interviews with same-sex couples (and to a lesser extent from the meetings with parents groups discussed above). We conducted 54 interviews, 37 with couples and 17 with individuals (91 interviewees in total). Of these, 61 were women and 30 were men. We recruited participants through notices in the gay media, through gay and lesbian organisations (including religious groups) and by leafleting at venues and events. Our original plan had been to focus interviews in two different locations in order to sample interviewees from both a known gay community and from a less diverse town/region. However, because it proved slow to recruit from outside ‘gay community’ areas, we spread our catchment area to ensure that we still sampled from relatively isolated places. Once we had contacted people we gave them the choice of whether to be interviewed together or separately and in the main we saw them together. Obviously interviewing couples together can create a different dynamic to separate interviews but we felt that it was proper to give people a choice, and we were also interested in how our interviewees presented themselves as ‘couples’. The interview schedule was open-ended (except for gathering information on basic data like date of birth or occupation) and covered topics from how the couple originally met, the type of ceremony they had organised or were planning, and how their friends and families of origin had reacted to the knowledge of their ceremony. We taped the interviews which were anonymised, transcribed and then entered them into the qualitative software NVivo to assist with data management and early stages of data analysis. We organised the interviews into broad thematic categories at first, and then refined these categories as further themes emerged. This provided us with cross sectional data, but this was also supplemented by the identification of key case studies and whole narrative analysis.

We do not claim that our sample is statistically representative and it is clear that we were interviewing only those who were in favour of ‘marriage’ or CP. However, we regard this as such a new and under-researched area that this project can offer new insights which can be pursued in subsequent research. The majority of our
interviewees were between 30 and 49 and some couples had been together as long as thirty years or more. All except one respondent described him or herself as white (mainly White British, White English etc) and our sample was disproportionately ‘middle class’ (a ratio of 8:1) taking into account factors of education level, the nature of employment and housing tenure. Just under a half (45%) of our sample described themselves as having a faith or being part of a particular church congregation. All the respondents had already held some form of commitment ceremony/partnership registration or were planning one in the near future, although later in the project we found that they were planning a Civil Partnership rather than an informal registration.

Ethical considerations
Asides from the sensitive issues involved in making contact with parents discussed above, this project did not give rise to more than the normal range of ethical considerations. All interviews were anonymised at the point of transcription and contact details kept separately. All participants were sent a copy of the findings at the end of the project.

Results

Why lesbians and gay men want to marry
Our interviews allowed us to focus attention on why same-sex couples might feel so strongly about their relationships that they would want to marry. Unlike the situation for heterosexual couples whereby marriage could be seen simply as an automatic step in the process of gaining adulthood, or in moving a steady relationship on to the next stage, (Mansfield and Collard, 1988) there has been no ‘natural progression’ for same sex couples. This means that getting married required a process of reflection because it was not an easy or ‘natural’ thing for our respondents to do. We found that although the couples spoke of celebrating their commitment to each other as a vital part of their decision to marry, commitment could have different complexions depending on their specific situation. Our analysis therefore led us to identify three main types of commitment:

i) commitment as a promise for the future,
ii) commitment as an ongoing process (over years) and
iii) commitment as potentially fragile and as therefore requiring external support

This third category can overlap with either the first or the second, and the first type can, in time, merge into the second, so these are not rigidly bounded categories. However, they each throw a different light on how couples achieve commitment and security in their relationships.

i) Future oriented commitment
This is where a couple promised to be committed to one another in the future and that promise was based upon the experience of falling in love and feeling the other person to be ‘the one’.

Richard: She put the rings on first and then the binding of the hands and then we had to drink from the goblet and break bread and eat just a little bit of bread

1 We used this terminology with many of our respondents because they chose to use it themselves. For simplicity we keep the term here, except where it is essential to differentiate between different forms of ceremony.
and then that was passed around everybody present. And then the end of the ceremony you have to jump over a broomstick. What happened just before that was she actually swept away our old lives symbolically and then we stepped over the broomstick to symbolise our new lives together and that was the ceremony.

Richard and Will had been together for 16 months when we interviewed them and they both spoke within the terms of a romantic narrative; having fallen in love at first sight. Their ceremony borrowed extensively from much older forms of informal marriage and clearly carried the symbolism of making a new life together and embarking together on a new journey of intimacy and love. Out of the 54 stories that we collected, approximately 12 fell into this category, namely where commitment was seen as a promise for the future based on love, but where the intensity of this feeling was enhanced by having gone through the ceremony itself. The idea that a ritual or ceremony could be itself transformative is an important element in these accounts. The power of saying vows out loud and in the presence of others (or even just a deity) created a difference. In sociological terms this is perhaps the power of ‘naming’ which gives an almost tangible reality to things previously felt or intuited or known in a rather ill-defined way. Even some couples who had been together for some years and who fell into the second ‘commitment as process’ category, noted that the ceremony had made a difference to them.

ii) Commitment as a process

For the couples in this category (37 of the 54 accounts) commitment was seen as something they had clearly achieved over time; that had really grown by stealth and had often been arrived at a long time before their actual marriage. The majority of these couples had been living together a considerable time, nearly all over 5 years, some as long as 30 years and in one case more than 40 years. Their accounts were very different to those of the first group because they could draw upon a shared history of events and decisions, all of which could be compiled to provide empirical weight to their claim to be already fully committed. While the couples who were essentially promising commitment for the future relied upon stories about the strength of their love, these established couples emphasised the depth of their relationships and the importance of a shared history both of problems and pleasures. For them the marriage itself was rarely seen as transformative or as something that could give greater intensity to their existing relationship. They rarely spoke in a romantic register, at least not a conventionally romantic one.

Stella: I certainly did not feel the need to have sort of tangible evidence really. It did not matter to me in that sense. What is nice is having the certificate though.

Denise: Yes that is very nice.

Stella: That is nice; that means far more to me than any rings or necklaces or whatever else you give. It is nice to have the certificate and the photographs; that is far more important. (Did you feel differently after the ceremony about your relationship? Has it changed things?)

Denise: I don’t know, I suppose because we have been together so long anyway.

Stella: You know I am like an old shirt, yes

Denise: An old shoe!

Commitment and love expressed in this way is not ‘transcendent’ (Langford 1999:17) in the sense that it is experienced as removing the lovers from the mundane or everyday into a special place, rather it appears to be measured in ordinary, everyday things and through the passage of time and through understatement.
iii) Commitment in need of external support

Only three of the couples fell squarely into this category, although 14 combined elements of this approach in their accounts. In this category couples would talk about the need for external or articulated reinforcement to secure their commitment or as having a ceremony in order to give their relationship an added dimension of security. This meant that for couples encountering difficulties in their relationships, getting married was seen as a way of helping them to weather the storm or heal a rift:

**Hanna:** And it was at a time when we were going through a lot of difficulties weren’t we? It was quite shaky actually - over issues of parenting and health issues. So Alice … suggested just a private thing, just the two of us to get these rings on our fingers, before we escaped from each other (laughing) and although I wanted … my day with a kind of dress on and things, I thought “Yes, alright, let’s do it” and then we could have a ceremony later sometime in the future so we could have a second marriage with friends and family. So we did, we had a private marriage ceremony and that was two years ago.

Basically the idea of allowing commitment to emerge over years was seen as too risky because without some kind of external support their relationship might not survive. For this group marriage was a kind of additional glue which could help them achieve the long term relationship they wanted. And for some there was a sense that they wanted others to witness their vows not simply as a statement of love or of politics, but in order to make real or tangible what had hitherto been private promises. It was as if making public their commitment meant that there would be an external check on impulses to abandon the relationship during the hard times.

Finally for some a deity was also part of the process of establishing commitment:

**Sam:** After a bit more than a year of living together we were engaged […] because of the Christian thing and because of all the numerous issues that came up with that, and we talked about being committed to each other and in the eyes of God quite early. …Yes I think we have made our commitment in the eyes of God.

### How the concept of marriage was regarded

Our participants were aware that some of their friends might see them as conforming to heterosexual norms and values by deciding to get married. However, this argument was not accepted by any of the respondents because either they felt they had very important reasons to marry which would outweigh the broader political argument, or because they did not agree that by getting married their values would suddenly change and start to conform. For couples who had lived together 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 than it was to stay ‘outside’ the system. For couples who were in shorter relationships, marriage was seen as a form of mutual promise to stay in their relationship and this was more important in personal terms than the political/public norm of avoiding heteronormativity.

We found that many couples 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. For example a lesbian couple in their 60s (both who had previously been in heterosexual marriages) argued strongly that the term marriage should be preserved for relationships which would produce children.

Just over 80% of respondents were pleased with the introduction of the new legislation on civil partnership. However, nearly half of these had hoped that the legislation would simply extend the full panoply of heterosexual marriage to same-sex couples. There were two elements to this position. Some felt that civil partnership sounded like second best and as if same-sex couples would still be seen as second class citizens. But others wanted to be able to have the right to marry in church (or synagogue) and they resented the fact that, as people of faith, they could not have a recognised religious ceremony.

**Understandings of the legal and financial implications of both partnership registration and of ‘real’ marriage**

Legal recognition of same-sex partnerships was extremely important to our respondents and all wanted equal rights with opposite-sex couples. But in addition they felt these rights would enable them to look after each other, even in the event of a death. Although some couples did not wish the state to intervene in their relationship, others felt legal recognition would help avoid unwanted interventions from the state (e.g. immigration officials and the Inland Revenue) from family members (in relation to illness and inheritance) and civil society (e.g. hospital staff). Eighty per cent of couples had written wills that recognised each other as their inheritors. Thirteen couples had also established enduring powers of attorney (EPA) that would enable a partner to act on their behalf should anything happen to them. This suggests that same-sex couples were quite aware of the steps they needed to take to safeguard themselves legally and financially.

When it came to financial arrangements between the couples we found that the most common model was the joint pool combined with separate accounts for personal spending. However, the meaning of this model could vary greatly as some individuals gave over completely the actual running and monitoring of accounts to their partner.

**The kinds of ceremonies that were chosen to celebrate commitment and the meanings given to such rituals**

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. Just over 20% elected to have ceremonies which were traditional in the sense of conforming quite closely to typical heterosexual models, and this was particularly the case with those wanting religious or quasi religious ceremonies. However, half of our sample wanted to subvert what they perceived to be the heterosexual model, sometimes with irony (e.g. having men dressed as nuns presiding over events). However, all of the ceremonies were accompanied by very serious elements because of the centrality of the issue of vows of commitment.
How wider kin responded to the marriage/registration and how kinship networks were affected

In our sample of 91 individuals, 35 invited both parents to their ceremonies, 1 invited just their mother, 6 were undecided, in 20 cases parents were deceased, and in 9 cases we had no information. This left only 20 individuals who decided definitely not to invite their parents. Sometimes this was because parents had never accepted their son’s 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. 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.

Chris 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.

Twenty-one respondents had responsibility for children, mostly from previous heterosexual relationships or through some form of guardianship. The vast majority of these 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.

Although our data from the parents’ support groups is tentative it may be worth noting here that the majority of parents were absolutely delighted about the changes to the law and were looking forward to their son or daughter’s CP. But they did raise a few problems. One was that the ‘announcement’ of a CP would inevitably mean that wider kin would come to learn about a son or daughter’s sexuality when previously it could be avoided. So some parents were not looking forward to this next ‘round’ of outing so to speak. Some parents were also less happy with the terminology of ‘marriage’ because they felt that colleagues or distant kin would assume that it was going to be a heterosexual ceremony and this would then mean that they had to explain the situation again or possibly to people who might be homophobic. Others were worried that with the posting of banns that couples could be exposed to prejudice by neighbours and others.

The significance of friendship

Friends were also 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 in many ways replaced the family of origin. However, 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.

Phil: We do not have a monogamous relationship and now when we tell [people] that we are engaged that 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.

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

Activities

Seminar/ Conference papers presented:

1. Beccy Shipman and Carol Smart: ‘Gay and Lesbian Marriage: An Exploration of the Meanings and Significance of Legitimating Same-Sex Relationships’ presented at Regulating/ Celebrating Intimate Relationships Seminar, School of Law, University of Keele, 2 February 2005

2. Beccy Shipman: ‘Same-Sex Marriage: Ideas from an Empirical Study’ presented at Centre for Interdisciplinary Gender Studies, University of Leeds, 16 February 2005


4. Beccy Shipman and Carol Smart: ‘Same-Sex Partnership: What’s love got to do with it?” Socio-Legal Studies Association Annual Conference, University of Liverpool, 30 March – 1 April 2005

5. Beccy Shipman: “To be honest, if it was not for the rights you get I would not be bothered”: An Exploration of the Meanings of Marriage to Same-Sex Couples, CRFR New Researchers Conference, University of Edinburgh, 25 October 2005

6. Beccy Shipman: “To be honest, if it was not for the rights you get I would not be bothered”: An Exploration of the Meanings of Marriage to Lesbian Couples, Lesbian Lives XIII Conference, WERRC, University College Dublin, 10-12 February 2006


8. Carol Smart, Beccy Shipman and Jennifer Mason: “Your friends sort of jibed about you being married”: Complexities of exclusion and inclusion for same-sex couples, BSA Annual Conference, Harrogate, 21-23 April 2006

Project Dissemination Seminar, held at the University of Manchester,
27th April 2006
The event was attended by the Project Advisory Group, academics from a range of universities, and also representatives from Manchester Parents’ Group. Smart presented a paper from the project and Dr Brian Heaphy also presented a paper.

**Outputs**

**Publications**


Smart, C. ‘Same Sex Couples and Marriage: Negotiating new relational landscapes with families and friends’, (being revised for resubmission)


**Impacts**

1. Interview on BBC Radio 4 Thinking Allowed on ‘Same Sex Marriage’ 3rd May 2006
5. Publication of a short ‘Findings’ document for distribution to people who participated in the project, parents’ groups media and web.

Articles and interviews are available online at http://www.manchester.ac.uk/morgancentre/research/gay-lesbian-marriage/

**Future Research Priorities**

The timing of this study means that we were able to capture a unique cultural and legal moment and creates an important baseline study which gives rise to themes which can now be pursued with couples who are ‘legally’ partnered. It will be possible to compare this study’s findings on commitment and attitudes to marriage with later samples who can take CP more for granted. Issues of financial management would benefit from a closer study and the issue of wider kinship relationships and the ‘normalisation’ of same-sex relationships through CP remain to be further investigated. It also raises interesting questions about same-sex couples who reject CP and continue to partner outside a legal framework.
ACTIVITIES AND ACHIEVEMENTS QUESTIONNAIRE

1. Non-Technical Summary
A 1000 word (maximum) summary of the main research results, in non-technical language, should be provided below. The summary might be used by ESRC to publicise the research. It should cover the aims and objectives of the project, main research results and significant academic achievements, dissemination activities and potential or actual impacts on policy and practice.

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 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.

Aims
1. To establish why lesbians and gay men may want to register their partnerships or have commitment ceremonies
2. To ascertain how full marriage is regarded
3. To identify the kinds of ceremonies that are/will be chosen to celebrate commitment
4. To explore what meanings are given to such rituals
5. To explore how wider kin respond to the marriage/registration
6. To consider how embeddedness (or otherwise) in wider kin networks is influenced by these legitimation ceremonies.
7. To explore understandings of the legal implications of both partnership registration and of ‘real’ marriage

Findings

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

‘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, values or views.

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

**Families**
When planning a ceremony all our participants inevitably had to think about whether to invite their parents, sibling and, in some cases, children. Forty per cent 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.

21 respondents had responsibility for children, mostly from previous heterosexual relationships or through some form of guardianship. The vast majority of these 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.

**Friends**
Friends were very important to all 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. 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 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’.

**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. Although some couples did not wish the state to intervene in their relationship, 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. Eighty per cent of couples had written wills that recognised each other as their inheritors. A few couples (13) had also established enduring powers of attorney that would enable a partner to act on their behalf should anything happen to them.
**Dissemination and impact**

We have presented papers at 8 different conferences or seminars (including two BSA Conferences), one peer reviewed article in *Sociological Research Online* will published in December 2006, one is under review, and a further paper will appear as a chapter in Smart’s forthcoming book entitled *Personal Life, Intimacy and Families: New Directions in Sociological Thinking*, Cambridge: Polity.

Smart appeared on Thinking Allowed in May 2006 and this resulted in a short publication in the *New Humanist*. We hosted a dissemination seminar at the close of the project at the University of Manchester in April 2006.

The project findings have also been published in The Gay Times, The Pink Paper and The Guardian.

Background

This research explored the importance for same-sex couples of the legal recognition of their relationships, not only in terms of the financial and practical security such arrangements offer but also in the symbolic and cultural significance of ceremonies which bring together families and friends in celebration of their lifestyle. Although the study was started before Civil Partnership became legally available in December 2005, the research team had anticipated the likelihood of change, enabling the study to capture a unique moment in the history of same-sex relationships.

Key Findings

Over 80 per cent of the gay men and lesbians interviewed were pleased with the introduction of the new legislation on Civil Partnership.

However, nearly 40 per cent had hoped that marriage would also be made available. For some people this reflected a desire for full equality with heterosexual couples and for others a desire for a legally recognised religious ceremony.

Many couples and their friends and family members referred to their ceremonies as ‘weddings’ and spoke of ‘becoming engaged’, whilst others rejected this terminology believing it suggested a heterosexual model which did not reflect their practices, values and views.

Ceremonies were varied and included shamanic, Pagan, Christian and Humanist rituals. Many combined the traditional with personal elements. For many couples recognition of their relationship by family, friends and the wider community was at least as important as legal recognition.

40 per cent of individuals invited a parent or parents to the ceremony. Reasons for not inviting parents included cases where parents had never accepted their child’s sexuality so were unlikely to welcome an invitation and others where there was felt to be a risk that they might express homophobic attitudes to other guests. There were also cases where people felt that, although they had cordial relationships with their parents who accepted their sexuality, an invitation to the ceremony might be ‘too challenging’ and could jeopardise the established relationship.

The attendance of friends was seen as very important to the participants, with 22 per cent stating that friends were more significant than family. Responses from friends to invitations to the ceremonies, however, were not always enthusiastic, indicating that the ceremony could put a strain on friendships just as they did on family relationships. However, even when friends had not responded to the
invitation, most turned up on the day.

Participants were aware that they might be seen to be ‘selling out’ to heterosexual values. However, they rejected that position, stating that they had very important reasons for their choice: those who had been in relationships for a long time cited the importance of celebrating their relationship in a public context or acquiring legal protection; those who had been together for a shorter time saw the ceremony as a form of mutual promise which would strengthen their relationship.

Legal recognition of same-sex partnerships was extremely important to the participants. Most wanted equal rights with same-sex couples and felt legal recognition of the relationship would help avoid interference from family members, hospital staff and from the Inland Revenue - particularly regards to inheritance tax.

About the Study

Professor Carol Smart of the University of Manchester led the study, which was based on 54 in-depth qualitative interviews with same-sex couples and two focus groups with parents of gay men and lesbians.

Key Words

Civil Partnership, same-sex relationships, gay and lesbian marriage, equal rights
Media coverage

This section contains press coverage of the research findings.
Happy ever after

When a couple announces their engagement, it's usually a moment of joy and celebration. Champagne corks fly, fathers cry, mothers start making out seating plans and thinking about flowers. But the old cliche about gaining a son or daughter rather than losing one doesn't always work quite so well when the happy couple are the same sex.

That was one of the main findings of our study which set out to discover what kind of considerations face those contemplating entering into a civil partnership. We interviewed 54 same sex couples in 2005, shortly before the law changed. All of them had already held a commitment ceremony of some sort or had in other ways formalised their partnership. So in a sense they were on the vanguard, having already clearly demonstrated their commitment to each other.

And yet even among these very settled couples, telling family and friends of their decision to marry was difficult and sometimes very painful. For some, it was a reagonizing of old scores - like having to "come out" all over again. Some families simply wouldn't accept homosexuality at all. More frequently, though, they would tolerate it as long as it wasn't really mentioned, passing it off as a phase, or thinking of the live-in lover merely as a flatmate. The fact of a legal partnership and a marriage ceremony shattered the pretence.

So some didn't even invite their families to the wedding, either to avoid confrontation or because they did not want to cause distress.

Ella: The reason I didn't invite [parents] was because we were actually getting on quite well, moving forward. All our hard work and they'd moved a long way within their world and we'd moved a long way within our world. I thought if I invite them now it will actually be a slap in the face and it's because things were going well that I knew that it was not the right time to present them with this particular issue.

For others, though, parents were truly overjoyed:

Louise: I just said "Mum, we have decided we are going to get married". I used the word marriage as well and she was like over the moon.

Gillian: Oh yes she's gone out and bought shoes for your dad hasn't she? (smirks)

And for some couples their marriage meant that they entered into a wider extended family, just as heterosexual couples do.

Sally: And I said to your dad "Shall I call you father now?" and he said in all seriousness "Oh yes you should do." I don't know whether they see us as any differently or whether your mum and he both in this acknowledge us more.

Where friends were concerned, the couples often faced a rather different kind of disapproval. It wasn't their sexuality that was being questioned - but their political choices. Like the radical feminists who dismiss marriage as a patriarchal institution, some sections of the gay community regard it as similarly oppressive - a dilution of the separateness of gay identity.

From people with these sensibilities, our couples tended to encounter a wary ambivalence rather than outright hostility. Friends would be silent on hearing the news, or would find words to excuse not to come to the ceremony.

Frank: Funny enough [friend] was not able to come because he was out of the city at the time. But he did say he was in the city, he would have refused to have come. And another friend made a slightly pointed remark. As in, "Oh, what are you taking heterosexual values for?"

Mostly, though, friends did attend the ceremonies - and everyone we spoke to regarded the occasion with very deep emotions and with the utmost seriousness. Few had gone for flamboyant, camp or ironic weddings because the idea of sending up the ceremony itself was simply inappropriate. Rather like Elton John, who arrived in a sombre suit rather than looking like a latter day Marie Antoinette, our respondents wanted their ceremonies to have gravitas and meaning.

Jackie: Yes, I wore a dress and she wore a suit.

Alex: You are not getting me in a dress, no way!

Jackie: [It was] the quickest shopping for a dress I have ever done in my life. Wasn't it? I walked into the first shop and they had the dress I had in mind. I did not have a problem with that. I can't be doing with that!

Alex: No, there were rumours going round the gay scene that we had a horse and carriage and she had a marquee dress and all that crap.

Alex's scorn of the "marquee dress" sums up the way in which these couples were breaching with tradition, yet retaining the symbolic importance and seriousness of their vows. Interestingly, it was the removal of any religious requirement that paved the way for this legislation - yet 45% of our interviewees claimed some degree of religious faith and wanted to include a religious or spiritual dimension in their ceremony.

And even those who were atheist or agnostic adhered to the idea of a moral commitment.

Lynn: It was just the moral aspect of it that we vowed to each other, didn't we?

Jill: Yes, but it was not religious at all.

Lynn: ... not in a religious ceremony way.

Jill: ... morally, because that could be humanistic couldn't it?

The availability of marriage for same sex couples is not only a huge advance for human rights - it has also, perhaps unpredictably, begun to change how they relate to each other and to those around them.

But clearly, the most important impact for those we spoke to was that their relationships would at last receive the social and legal recognition they deserved.

Carol Smart is Professor of Sociology at the University of Manchester. For more information about this ESRC funded research project contact: carol.smart@manchester.ac.uk

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 lashed 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 reason 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 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. “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,” 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.

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 234 in Kennington and Chelsea. There were 36 in Newcastle but just five in North, South Wales.
Pink Paper, 5 October 2006

Carol Smart interviewed about ESRC Gay and Lesbian ‘Marriage’ project
Up to a quarter of gay couples who have opted for a civil partnership didn't invite their families for fear of how they would react.

The study by the University of Manchester also found that many gay couples faced a distinct lack of enthusiasm from friends and family when they announced their intentions.

Despite an overall acceptance from families, some gay men and lesbians said that their experience of announcing their plans was like a "second coming out".

"For some parents it meant that they could no longer assume that their son or daughter was going through a 'phase' that they would grow out of," said Professor Carol Smart who led the research, based on interviews with 91 gay men and lesbians who are either planning or have had a civil partnership.

The report also found that 22 per cent of individuals decided against inviting family members to the ceremony.

Although few couples met with hostility, some found that either friends or family could be reserved in their enthusiasm. The findings back a similar study taking place at Aston University.

Research assistant Adam Jowett - who is working with Dr Elizabeth Peel on the nature of same sex civil partnerships - said some couples had been disappointed by the way their families took the news.

"Most couples said their parents were supportive but some who had married siblings said they reacted differently to the civil partnership," Mr Jowett said.

"Parents tended to be pragmatic, looking at the legal benefits, rather than being excited.

"I think one of the problems is that a lot of people do not know how to react to civil partnerships."

Mr Jowett added that parents could feel civil partnerships challenged their attitude towards their son or daughter's relationship.

"Parents may have accepted that their child is lesbian or gay, but to go to a ceremony may seem to them to be actively supporting the couple when before they were passively accepting them," he said.

The University of Manchester research also found that although couples welcomed the civil partnership's legal protections, 80 per cent had already made wills to safeguard their partner.

"It's quite varied why people choose to take up civil partnerships," Mr Jowett said.

"For many, they see it as the same as marriage and that it is about commitment."
"A few of them have already had commitment ceremonies before and feel they are already married, but want legal recognition from Government."

There have been 385 civil partnerships in the West Midlands since they were introduced at the end of last year, representing six per cent of the 6,516 civil partnerships that took place nationally.

By March 31, 238 had taken place in Westminster, 236 in Brighton and Hove and 194 in Kensington and Chelsea.

In the Midlands, 89 couples chose a civil partnership in Birmingham, 62 in Staffordshire, 56 in Worcestershire and 40 in Warwickshire.

Only 39 couples chose civil partnership in Shropshire.

Get Involved

We want your local stories, videos & pics.

- Send your stories
- Send your pics
- Send your videos
Families show acceptance of gay marriage

Yakub Qureshi
4/8/2006

MORE than 80 per cent of couples who tie the knot in a gay "wedding" invite their families to the ceremony.

And only a small minority have experienced hostility from relatives or friends when announcing they were getting hitched to a partner of the same sex.

According to the first major study into the ceremonies, gay civil unions have already won widespread acceptance just eight months after they were made legal.

Academics at Manchester University found the majority of gays and lesbians invite their parents to witness their big day and found they are generally welcomed into their new families.

Many said that they were embraced by their new in-laws and urged to call them Mum and Dad.

Legally-recognised civil unions were established in December last year, giving gay and lesbian couples who entered into them the same inheritance and tax rights as married couples.

The research at Manchester University involved interviews with 90 people who have taken part in a civil partnership ceremony or planned to in the near future.

A large number of couples and their families referred to their ceremonies as "weddings" and half of those questioned hoped that religious marriage would one day be available to them.

Less than a fifth of those surveyed decided against inviting family members to the ceremony.

Professor Carol Smart, who headed the two-year study, said couples entered into partnerships for different reasons, varying from accessing new legal rights to wanting to cement their relationship.

She said: "We found an overall level of acceptance of civil partnerships from families. The new in-law was welcomed as a member of the family and this was a cause for celebration."

"However, some gay men and lesbians experienced telling their families of their plans like coming out again. For some parents it meant that they could no longer assume that their son or daughter was going through a `phase' that they would grow out of."

One participant in the survey was university colleague Liz Kay, a 47-year-old dental health professor. She tied the knot with her partner, businesswoman Stella Tinsley, 40, four months after the new partnerships came into force.

Explaining the reaction to their union, Liz said: "We were immensely touched by the excitement and pleasure all our heterosexual friends seemed to feel for us.

"If anything happened to me, Stella would previously have been liable for inheritance tax.

"We also wanted other 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."

"But it's not about wanting to ape heterosexual couples and for that reason we didn't want a white wedding with lots of fuss."