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Mixed-sex civil partnerships: Developing a morality of love

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Abstract
Civil partnerships (CPs) were extended to mixed-sex couples in England and Wales at the end of 2019, shortly followed by Northern Ireland (in 2020) and Scotland (in 2021). Since then thousands of mixed-sex couples have entered a civil partnership. While CPs were favoured by politicians as an alternative to legal rights for cohabitants, we know little about why mixed-sex couples would choose a civil partnership. In 2020-21 we interviewed individuals and couples who had entered or were planning a mixed-sex civil partnership (MSCP) to explore this further. We find that MSCPs are constructed in opposition to the 'traditional' image of marriage/weddings and yet symbolic elements including dress, form, and structure are necessarily relied upon in constructing something new, via a process of bricolage. Moreover, through CP motivation talk, mixed-sex couples are constructing an individual morality that is centred on: resisting cultural norms, advocating equality and justice, and pragmatics of love.

Keywords: bricolage, civil partnerships, love, morality, weddings

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Introduction

Civil partnerships (CPs) were extended to mixed-sex couples in England and Wales in 2019, Northern Ireland in 2020, and Scotland in 2021. Previously mixed-sex couples were only able to marry to gain legal recognition of their relationship, while same-sex couples had access to both marriage and civil partnerships due to the slow and uneven introduction of equal marriage for same-sex couples in the UK (Jowett and Peel 2017). This legal inequality for mixed-sex couples led to a campaign for equal civil partnerships, spearheaded by Rebecca Steinfeld and Charles Keidan, and the successful expansion of CP law to mixed-sex couples. According to government statistics, more than 7,000 couples have since entered a mixed-sex civil partnership (MSCP) in England and Wales (ONS 2021)[i]. The legislative status of CPs is similar to marriage, although civil partners may not legally refer to themselves as married, their relationship may not necessarily be recognised internationally, and there are some differences in pension provision. There are also differences in how relationships are legally registered - in contrast to marriage, civil partners can simply sign the register with no requirement for vows. Finally, while mixed-sex married couples can annul their relationship based on non-consummation, and those in both different-sex and same-sex marriages can divorce on the grounds of adultery, neither is the case for same-sex or different-sex couples in a civil partnership (Government Equalities Office, 2019).

Providing legal rights for cohabitants was frequently used as justification for introducing MSCPs in parliamentary debates and existing MSCP literature is almost entirely comprised of theoretical discussions by law scholars concerning the legal aspects, debates, and the campaign (e.g. Hayward 2019; 2021; Shúilleabháin 2019). Miles and Probert (2019) are an exception, arguing that that civil partnerships are as unlikely to appeal to cohabitants as marriage. For them, the introduction of CPs for mixed-sex couples: detracts from the legal case for providing rights and protections for cohabitants; will not provide the equality couples are striving for; and will mirror the 'marriage gap' so that civil partnering couples will be the most socially advantaged, leaving the most disadvantaged cohabitants still without rights. Overall, they question why anyone rejecting marriage would choose CPs, instead of seeing the adaptation and reformation that marriage is undergoing with very recent changes in divorce law and the expansion of marriage law to include same-sex couples.

The provision of civil partnership alongside marriage, as well as the continued lack of legal rights for cohabitants places the UK in a unique position globally (Miles and Probert 2019). Politically it seems the law is attempting to capture and contain a growing plurality of relationship forms, while still not recognising one of the most common relationships (cohabitation). It also raises questions for the sociology of coupledom: does the expansion of CP law reflect an ongoing desire for legalised coupledom other than marriage, or is it a misguided attempt to save the 'disintegrating' family? Do MSCPs capture the queering and fluidity of contemporary family life or are they another conservative attempt to contain difference? One of the aims of this research was to understand better what MSCPs tell us about the state of coupledom in the UK: how and why are these enduring social bonds sought after in an increasingly pluralist society where relationship formalisation is no longer required socially or legally? Below we provide some context for the research and outline our research process.

The context: Contemporary intimacy and morality

The expansion of civil partnership law to mixed-sex couples arrived at a time when social policy has long-considered the family a fragile and precarious institution, in need of support and external reinforcements (Gabb and Fink 2017). In this context, it is perhaps not surprising that a Conservative government would introduce an additional means for mixed-sex couples to access external legal protections (having previously introduced same-sex marriage without repealing civil partnership law). Given changes such as growing rates of cohabitation (often pre-marital) and childbirth outside of marriage, and later ages at marriage coupled with high divorce rates, these policy initiatives were, at least in part, in response to a general belief that the stable ('nuclear') family was in decline, leading to a disintegration of social values, morals and structures. These same changes were observed by social commentators and social theorists, leading to debates within family sociology over the impact of individualism, transitory ties, fleeting emotional bonds, and declining morality of coupling and family life (Carter and Duncan 2018).

Among these debates, a cynical position on love emerged, with Bauman (2003) perhaps the most pessimistic, viewing love as a part of the liquefaction of modern society, characterised by instability, a disembedding from social structure and order (marriage), and fleeting and superficial liaisons. For Bauman, changes in attitudes towards couple relationships in modern Western societies represented moral irresponsibility disguised as sexual liberation. There have, inevitably, been many critiques of this theory and approach (see Dawson 2012). In addition, more recent research has pointed to the continued importance of relationality and our bonds with others in making important life decisions, regardless of legal relationship (Roseneil and Ketokivi 2016; Philip 2013). Long-term coupledom continues to have value- both individually and socially- and mundane practices of intimacy enable a relationship to endure (Gabb and Fink 2017). This latter research points not towards a loosening of social bonds but rather a change in the way these are expressed and experienced. Greater choice in form does not correlate with a decreased desire for meaningful bonds with others, long-term loving relationships, and enduring family life (Heaphy et al. 2013). Indeed Seebach (2016) suggests that enduring couple relationships are the basis for a contemporary 'morality of love'- a moral code guiding all social relations. In this paper we map out some of the contours of this morality.

Mixed-sex marriage in contemporary Britain occupies an awkward position, combining a legacy of oppressive gender relations where women were confined- legally and socially- to rigid roles, with a means of expressing personal freedom and agency in its choosing today (Carter and Duncan 2018). Research suggests that for many, marriage remains an important part of their lives, even if this is now rationalised through a personal desire rather than social imperative (Carter and Duncan 2018). Moreover, this extends beyond the heterosexual norm. Heaphy et al. (2013) suggest that their same-sex couples deployed the language and traditions of marriage in describing their civil partnerships in order to make their relationships intelligible to themselves and others, despite the historical connections between marriage and heterosexuality. In this way, these civil partnerships were 'seen and lived as a form of marriage in everyday lives' (2013: 45).

The appeal of marriage, or married-like relationships, in everyday lives remains strong. This can be seen, at least in part, as a desire to end seemingly endless choice in a society characterised by individualism (Carter and Smith 2019). In this choosing, marriage reflects an individual morality to live by, one that applies personally and uniquely to each individual: an ethics of authentic individuality (Lee and Silver 2012). By using Simmel's 'law of the

individual' (an ethics of individuality predicated on actualising moral 'oughts' for each individual to live a life that is uniquely theirs; Simmel 2015 [1913]), we can begin to understand how and why couples might choose marriage or civil partnerships, in order to provide meaning and moral accountability in their lives.

In this paper we aim to position individuals' accounts of MSCP decisions within such a framework of morality, to understand better how decisions about family life are constructed and informed in a way that foregrounds moral decision-making. We suggest that MSCPs offer couples an alternative means to end seemingly endless choice, and in so doing, they construct- and reflect- a moral code of love that is predicated on: resisting cultural norms, justice and equality, and pragmatic love. In the next section we outline our methodological approach.

Researching civil partnerships (during a global pandemic)

This research is concerned with the lived practices of individuals' lives. We are interested in how people tell stories and through these stories develop an understanding of their own desires and drives (Gilman 2022). We therefore selected a qualitative approach which involved directly speaking to participants to ask them about their motivations and practices. Having conceived the project in late 2019, once interviewing began during 2020-21, we found ourselves in the midst of a global pandemic. In light of this, all interviews were conducted online and recruitment occurred via social media. This approach allowed us to recruit and interview participants from a wide geographical spread across England, Wales and Scotland.

Conducted online using Microsoft Teams or Zoom, interviews were semi-structured, allowing the participant some discretion in directing the course of discussion. All participants were asked questions about: their relationship trajectory, how they came to choose a civil partnership, what their plans were (or had been) for the ceremony, and what their attitudes were in general towards CPs and marriage. Working with the Equal Civil Partnership Campaign and Compassion in Politics (an organisation also involved in the campaign), we recruited through calls for participants on Twitter and retweets from our partners. The only limit placed on the sample was that they should have had, or were actively planning to have, an MSCP. Some participants volunteered individually, and some volunteered as a couple and so the resulting interviews were a mix of individual and couple interviews. As we were interested in stories about CP ceremonies and reasonings behind the decision to have an MSCP, both forms of interview provided useful data. Interviews lasted around one hour and we spoke to 21 individuals representing 15 civil partnerships.

Demographic information was collected via a short survey. In total, we interviewed 15 women and six men. Participants ranged in age from 27 to 62 years old (one declined to record their age); all reported being heterosexual except for one who was pansexual. Nine participants had children (two had four children), and four had a disability. The majority of participants were in full-time employment (12), three were part-time employed, three self-employed, two unemployed, and one did not respond. All participants identified as white, except one who identified as 'mixed white/Asian'. The majority (15) self-identified as middle-class. The length of time participants had been in their current relationship ranged from 5 years at the shortest to 30 years at the longest. Their mean age was 40 years old and the mean relationship length was 14 years. In general, this is a relatively homogenous sample in terms of sexuality, race, and class, in part a product of the recruitment methods. We also

asked participants to provide five words that described themselves and this, combined with the interview data, shows participants converged in their general political worldviews, tending to veer towards more left-wing and liberal views on identity, gender and sexuality.

All interviews were transcribed verbatim and punctuation was kept to a minimum to avoid altering semantic meaning. Data were coded in NVivo using codes for common themes, bearing in mind existing debates from the literature (Mason 2018). Interview data was anonymised during transcription and all names presented here are pseudonyms selected by participants in their chosen format. Identifying information from quotes presented below has been removed or changed (while attempting to retain important contextual detail). Full ethical approval for the research was granted by the University of the West of England.

As with research on marriage and weddings, there is no one type or way of doing a civil partnership ceremony, and there are no clear-cut reasons given by all participants for why they have chosen a CP. For a few, a CP was just like marriage but had some small element that suited them better. For others, CP was fundamentally different to marriage, almost its opposite. The same with their ceremonies- some were similar to weddings, and a few referred to their ceremony as a wedding. Others strongly rejected any such association. As with cohabitants or couples 'living apart together' , there is no one or clear archetype of an MSCP relationship or ceremony. There were however, some commonalities in how participants presented their motivations for MSCPs, and therefore their individual approaches to morality, and the themes outlined below were apparent to a greater or lesser degree in most interviews.

A discussion of the key findings follows organised thematically In the final section we suggest that these themes can be understood as a construction of a morality of love consisting of individual moral codes that organise behaviour and govern social relations in a way that produces moral consistency (Seebach 2016; Simmel 2015).

Resisting the cultural and commercial norms: 'I assume quite a lot of people do wedding ceremonies based on that's what people do' (Colin, 32)

Much literature on weddings points to the consumerism of the event and the commercialisation of its associated traditions and norms (Boden 2003; Ingraham 1999; Otnes and Pleck 2003). This has previously been characterised as creating 'individualised conformity' where individuals create unique wedding events that end up looking alike (Carter and Duncan 2018). For participants in this study, a key reason for choosing an MSCP was the rejection of and resistance to these cultural commercial expectations and perceived intimate standardisation. This was expressed most clearly in their repudiation of weddings (and by extension marriage) and manifested in three broad themes: a rejection of the costs and commercialisation of weddings; a rejection of the wedding fantasy and wedding traditions often promoted by the wedding industry; and an assertion that their own CP ceremonies are reflective of personal authenticity.

Costs and commercialisation

Although marriage does not require a costly white wedding (or a wedding at all), the coexistence of marriage and large, expensive, weddings was ubiquitous in accounts. A civil partnership negates the prerequisites of a wedding, including the perceived (and real) excessive costs. There are many examples of this in participants' talk:

> 'The money that you spent on the wedding you could pay for a deposit on a bloody house! Things are just so expensive' (INK1402).

> 'I never really wanted a big big wedding I always thought the expense was quite vulgar when there's lots of really good things that could be, the money could be spent on instead or invested in' (Ursula, 27).

> 'But it is the day isn't it it's not about what comes after the day it's all about the day and you know you see it and you think I wouldn't want to spend that much money on a day […] it's a waste. I think I could go on an amazing holiday for that much money' (Jemma, 39).

The perceived costs of a wedding are not a problem per se, rather the expense is seen as a) excessive (beyond what is 'reasonable') and b) superfluous- better spent elsewhere (on a house, holiday, or invested). For many participants, wedding costs are driven by a greedy and commercialised wedding industry:

> 'I heavily disagree with the wedding industry ramping up money and ramping up expectations I think that's morally wrong. Um and people are going hugely into financial debt for one day' (Eliza, 49).

And family and friends are seen to put the pressure onto couples to have a big wedding, which a CP avoids:

> '[A wedding is] a massive hassle yeah and to be quite honest it's a lot of money and there's a certain part of us that was like "well do we just have a civil wedding and have a really small deal" but part of it is like well if we're [civil] partners then aunties and uncles aren't like why aren't you having a party? Why aren't I invited? Because it's so new' (Delilah, 32).

Civil partnerships offer participants a (new) way to formalise their relationship that does not necessitate the expenditure, commercialisation, and family pressures associated with mixed-sex weddings. They offer a simple, legal alternative to the seemingly costly, frivolous, stressful, and morally questionable traditional white consumerist wedding (Ingraham 1999). And CPs allow participants to reject the pressure and cynicism of a commercialised wedding industry and instead create something new that is more suited to them (Carter and Duncan 2018).

The wedding fantasy

Beyond a rejection of costs, commercial, and family pressures, CPs offered women in particular, a route to reject the perceived 'wedding fantasy' propagated by the wedding industry and heteropatriarchal culture (Otnes and Pleck 2003; Arend 2016). Casey (39) says:

> 'I've never been one of these people who want to walk down an aisle in a ridiculous dress that you'll never wear again and stand up in front of a group of people to proclaim my love. I have absolutely zero desire to do that'

And Holly (37) similarly says:

> 'a wedding sort of often becomes very sort of googly eyed and romantic and about sort of love and stuff whereas […] our relationship has felt kind of we do love each-other but we've not had the sort of fairy-tale story tale so it's nice to do something that isn't fairy-tale wedding'

And for Flora (57):

> 'Now that [a wedding] would be my idea of a nightmare I would not want to be the centre of attention um anyway um so this whole, you know supposed to be- every little girl dreams of being a Princess and you know planning her wedding day for years that would you know, I would hate it'

For these women, it is important that they are rejecting the idea that weddings are a fantasy or fairy-tale for women and girls. While this particular repudiation ties in with themes discussed later around values of equality and the pragmatics of love, this moment where they choose a CP is also a chance for them to directly challenge the limits imposed by an unequal society on the dreams, desires, and fantasies of little girls. It is a rejection of heteropatriarchal social norms.

Personal authenticity

A key defining feature of contemporary weddings is the degree of adaptation couples apply to wedding traditions. As previous research has noted, couples often employ a bricolage approach- piecing together old traditions with new ideas or innovations- to create something legitimately recognisable as a 'wedding' and yet also personal to, and reflective of the couple (Carter and Duncan 2018). Thus couples will often utilise 'traditions' in their weddings (such as being 'given away' by the father-of-the-bride) but these are chosen (actively or passively) rather than required.

We saw similar processes of bricolage among participants in this study although in a more exaggerated form: often weddings were rejected altogether and instead a bricolage or piecing together of alternative practices took place to construct a relationship and ceremony that suited their ethic. An ethic of authenticity (Taylor 1992) in a late modern culture of individualism holds being authentic and 'true to yourself' as a higher ethical good than achieving respectability through social norms such as marriage. For Simmel, ethical existence is based on 'authentic individuality' rather than universal norms; rather than being sourced in universal demands, morality is rooted within individuals and each of our actions: we live with the abiding pressure 'to live in reference to the sort of person we aspire to be' (Lee and Silver 2012: 133; see also Smith 2021). Our lives are characterised by a tension between how we live and how we ought to live- when the ought and actual are closely aligned we are living a life that is vital and uniquely ours. For the participants in this study, their 'oughts' or ways of achieving authentic individuality are bound up with rejecting sexism and resisting the commercialisation (and romanticisation) of relationships. Their action of choosing a CP, therefore, can be interpreted as a way for them to experience a 'vital moment' of 'ought' aligning with 'actuality' (2012: 135). This aspiration towards vital moments can be found in other accounts of motives. Gilman (2022) for example, discovered that giving an authentic account of motives was more important that being perceived as 'doing good' in her discussions with sperm and egg donors; in this case, the ought of giving a 'true' account was more important than appearing to be acting with 'good' motives.

Accounts of CPs representing an ethic of authentic individuality were common, although this was often expressed as a common 'we' rather than individual 'I' (authentic coupledom?). Flora (57) states that weddings are 'not really our world' and for Marina (31) 'we're just we're not the kind of people that would want to have a big party and have everyone we know'. Similarly for Thomas (31):

> 'Some people have a very traditional wedding and do whatever they want to do and that's fine, but for us it's simply the option of civil partnership that's more fitting for us and we'd like to celebrate that in our way'.

The big white wedding just does not suit who they are (or their individual law). Civil partnerships more closely reflect them, their individual ethics, and therefore their relationships. As Ursula (27) explained, when asked how her CP ceremony will be different from a wedding:

> 'Uh in that there will, or should be next to no stress, um and I think it'll feel much more grounded and […] And a lot more grounded, more real, more- less- yeah less embellished, down to earthish but that's not really it um. Yeah natural, wholesome, legitimate, not for show'.

For these participants, CP ceremonies- in their paired back simplicity, devoid of traditions, expectations, pressures, and stress- presented a more legitimate representation of their selves and their relationships than weddings could offer. In resisting the wedding fantasy and rejecting commercialisation, participants are positioning MSCPs as an option offering a more 'grounded' and 'wholesome' route to couple formalisation that allows them to actualise their individual (but shared) 'oughts'.

Belief in justice and equality: 'a more equal future for people who are opposite sex, that don't have to be constrained by the traditions of the past' (Eryn, 51)

In rejecting wedding costs, commercialisation, and the wedding fantasy, participants were at the same time asserting their beliefs in justice and equality. Most frequently, these values were expressed as beliefs in sexuality equality, and feminism and gender equality, and the latter involved discussions around naming practices and wedding traditions.

Sexuality equality

Participants expressed both a concern that mixed-sex couples should have access to the same options as same-sex couples (mixed-sex couple rights), and a more complex argument that centred the rights of same-sex couples (same-sex couple rights). The argument for mixed-sex couple rights was more straightforward: it was unjust that same-sex couples could civil partner when mixed-sex couples could not. Jowett and Peel (2017) have described the response of same-sex couples to the campaign by mixed-sex couples for 'equal rights', finding an ambivalent response- some support the fight for equality, some see this as 'insulting', ignoring the context of the same-sex campaign for equality, and an exercise in 'heterosexual privilege' (2017: 7). Some participants in this study, however, saw MSCP access as a straightforward 'equality issue', obfuscating any existing privilege:

> 'So there's something around if it's currently available for same-sex relationships therefore there should be equality around um mixed-sex, different-sex relationships too. I think having that choice is really good' (Casey, 39).

> 'well it just felt fair. It felt fair that if there was such a thing as civil partnerships then it should be open to um different-sex couples as well as same-sex couples in the same way that marriage should be open to everybody' (Flora, 52).

In the first quote equality is related to 'choice' and in the second to fairness, notions in line with a contemporary understanding of 'emancipatory politics' (eliminating inequality and oppression, guided by an ethics of justice, equality and participation) and a development of personal 'life politics' of choice (Giddens 1991: 215).

We may also see this as a desire for 'parity of participation' (Fraser 2000), where all individuals within a society are able to act as full partners in social life and interact with one another as peers rather than subordinate members. This argument was particularly evident when participants came to MSCPs from a 'same-sex couple rights' perspective. For example, both Eryn (51) and Vanessa (57) reported not marrying when they were younger because of the lack of access to equal marriage for same-sex couples: 'it's not equality is it if straight couples can get married and gay couples can't and all the rest of it' (Eryn).

For Eliza (49), the progression in equality she saw for her gay and lesbian friends she wanted extended both to women and mixed-sex couples; she wanted:

> 'to see progression in our society and I want to see equality in our society. I desperately wanted to see my gay friends be able to call it a wedding, a marriage, to choose actually down to them. Equally if I don't want a religious wedding or I don't want a wedding with Mr and Mrs being forced upon me or the terminology that was being used, I should not have to have that'.

For these participants, choosing a MSCP was a way of expressing their support for same-sex couples' rights of parity of participation as full members and peers within social life. Marina (31) alone acknowledged the potential for mixed-sex couples' 'cultural appropriation' of civil partnerships and the ambivalent response of LGBT+ individuals to the campaign for MSCPs:

> 'when I first became aware of the campaign it did cross my mind um anecdotally whether it was kind of taking away from or disrespectable to same-sex couples to be campaigning for civil partnerships for different-sex couples but actually because of the whole it being rooted in equality I think it is important that that is available across the board'.

Ultimately, for all these participants equality, justice, and fairness were particularly important in their reasoning for choosing an MSCP, whether this was simply equality for mixed-sex couples, or an argument based on equal sexual citizenship primarily for same-sex couples and secondarily for mixed-sex couples.

Gender equality

While sexuality equality was important for those who discussed it, gender equality and the opportunity afforded by MSCPs to reset gendered expectations of coupledom, was a primary consideration for the majority. For example, the terminology was appealing: 'as you say it's a partnership. It's not something where there's an obvious male head of the household and a female being passed from parent to hus-spouse' (Richard, 39). Similarly for Tamara (36) 'it's the language and you know the term partner means that someone's equal to you and it also

doesn't identify that person as being male or female'. Not only are CPs seen as equal and representing equality, marriage is seen as inherently unequal: 'I don't feel that marriage is an equal thing' (Jemma, 39) and for Flora (57) a civil partnership 'feels like an equal partnership whereas marriage does not feel like that'. Five of the women interviewed (Eryn, 51; Tamara, 36; Robyn, 33; INK1402; and Vanessa, 57) identified as feminist and stated that these feminist values had impacted their views on marriage and CPs.

As a statement of her feminist values, Eryn (51) says: 'I mean, all of my life I've just never entertained this concept of wanting to be a bride wanting to take a man's name none of it ever made any sense, ever.' Many other participants raised the issue of naming. As with the expectations that are associated with weddings, the idea that a woman changes her surname on marriage, although not at all compulsory, is deep-rooted in Britain and elsewhere (Carter and Duncan 2018; Duncan et al. 2019). Thwaites (2013) notes that the 'name-changing norm organises women into gendered, heterosexual units, specifically designating them as married women' (2013: 13), and thus gender and gender identity is reproduced through name-changing practices. Many of the women in this sample very clearly wanted to reject this status-conferring operation of gender.

Many discussed what to do with their surnames once civil partnered, and every woman who mentioned it expressed a desire to keep her surname (men assumed they would keep their names). Some discussed a portmanteau name, double-barrelling, or taking an entirely new name, but often these were rejected because a) there were no 'good' options and b) the idea of explaining the new name to others became burdensome. There were exceptions though and Ursula (27) provides a lengthy justification for how they came to double-barrel their surnames, concluding: 'I don't think either of us are 100% happy with it but it's the best we could come up with, we couldn't think of a better alternative'. Often this difficulty arose for younger couples (women) who were thinking ahead to having families or who already had young children. In these cases, the idea of 'being a family unit' (Ursula) and thus the desire for sharing a common name came into opposition with the desire to retain their surnames. As traditional naming practices in majority British culture do not currently support two surnames, and double-barrelled names are viewed with (class-based) suspicion, these participants struggled to find a satisfactory solution. This difficulty is not associated with mixed-sex marriage since married women are still socially expected to change their surnames to their husband's (Thwaites 2016).

Together with naming practices, many participants expressed difficulties with gendered wedding traditions. Carter (2022) has explored the importance of tradition to those undertaking a white wedding, and the work that 'tradition' does in obscuring inequalities. Tradition remains important for many who marry because it connects them to a history (real or invented), a family, and a community. While traditions can be adapted and altered, when accepted uncritically they can also work to reinforce and reproduce inequalities in gender, class, and race (Carter 2022). The 'tradition' of male speeches at weddings continues to silence brides, for example. Among these MSCP participants, we see a very active engagement with 'traditions', most often a total rejection of these but in some cases, they are modified and adapted to suit new purposes. Traditions are often associated with the aspects of marriage and weddings that participants hope to escape through having a civil partnership: patriarchy, inequality, consumerism. Eryn (51) was a good example of this:

> 'we've taken a step politically, towards envisaging a more equal future for [couples] who are opposite-sex, that don't have to be constrained by the traditions of the past, which are traditions of ownership'.

For Richard (39), the appeal of CPs was that there were no traditions associated with them 'so we can do what we like and there's no questions asked'. But for Mo (29) it is specifically the gendering of the traditions that she objected to:

> 'It's that for me the kind of gendered stuff about marriage and weddings I'm not really into. Like if people want to that's fine but I'm not going to have a hen party or whatever. I don't like how there's a lot of separation between genders in the traditions'.

For others, however, the traditions serve a purpose of making something recognisable, of giving the event a structure. Thus, for Eliza (49):

> 'I kind of like the idea of adding some of the traditional wedding elements like an aisle, like a ceremony it would give it a sense of occasion to give it, to give it a sense of occasion rather than just a party for everybody'.

Likewise, for Holly, there are some elements of weddings that she will use to minimise the effort required to create something entirely new:

> 'neither of us are particularly creative so the idea of it, you know it's an opportunity to do something from scratch really isn't it? Neither of us are particularly good at that we're not- neither of us are particularly good party planners. You have to have some sort of vague structure that people would recognise would be quite happy with that and to keep the bits we think are important and chuck the bits we don't'.

We can see here evidence of very purposeful bricolage (Carter and Duncan 2018): picking and choosing and piecing together elements of weddings to give the ceremonies structure, meaning, and legitimacy in the eyes of others, combined with new ideas associated with civil partnerships: equality, authenticity, practicality. An important aspect of bricolage is that, in choosing aspects of tradition, it frees individuals from the burden of creating something entirely new, and yet also allows them the freedom to fill new social practices as they would wish, according to their own authentic individuality. For this group then, we can add equality and justice to their moral 'oughts' which guide their individual actions in creating a vital life and individual authenticity.

The pragmatics of love: 'who knows what would happen so let's formalise things so at least it's clear in terms of the law and where our children stand' (INK1402).

Another major consideration for participants was practicality and pragmatics, both in terms of their practical reasons for having a CP, and the pragmatic nature of their CP ceremonies. When asked why they had chosen to have a CP, interviewees often discussed practical matters such as providing care for their partner, legal rights, protecting children, and securing finances (mirroring reasons given to marry, Carter 2017). Providing care and the kinship status offered by CPs was of particular concern for older participants, for those who had existing health conditions, or for those who had recently lost someone. Mo (29) says for

example: 'I think especially since your mum died that idea of having like that security is becoming more appealing', and for Flora (57):

> 'I suppose that you can find other ways around it, I don't know you can write wills and you can have legal documents and things like that but one thing that is particularly difficult is if one of you is ill and decisions need to be made about your care, if you're not married [or] doing a civil partnership'.

For participants with young children, CPs were important for providing legal stability for the children, although what this stability entails is never fully elaborated: 'I think it was being pregnant with [child] and wanting to have some sort of legal stability' (Delilah, 32) and for Robyn (33): 'I knew I wanted to have children and I wanted some, the legal recognition and the kind of marking of our commitment in some way shape or form before we did that'.

Even for those who do not have or plan to have children, the legal protections were very important. For Ursula (27) who does not want children, CP offers various legal benefits:

> 'to be legally recognised as each other's other halves so for any hospital visits or next of kin notifications or yeah heaven forbid one of us dies or something like that. It's sort of then going actually- the person that I want my life's work to go to is this person not my family necessarily, or his family'.

Every participant mentioned the legal protection and benefits afforded by MSCPs, whether this was simply the signing of a legal contract ('the legal bit is purely a legal contract that is between the two of us' Eliza, 49), or next of kin considerations (especially in terms of hospital decisions and visitation rights- of particular concern to people during the height of a pandemic), parental rights, inheritance and pensions, tax and benefits, financial security, regulations for relationship breakdown, or more vaguely 'legal security' (Tamara, 36). Clearly for these participants, at least, some sort of legal and state recognition of their relationships is important. In contrast to Miles and Probert (2019), a rejection of marriage does not necessarily imply a desire to reject the involvement of the state or a desire to avoid legal obligations. It can be quite the opposite. It is also interesting to note the lack of belief in a 'common-law marriage myth' (Barlow et al. 2005) among these participants. Indeed, they all seemed very knowledgeable about what legal rights they did not have as cohabitants.

In addition to providing very practical reasons for having a CP, participants also described their planned ceremonies in very pragmatic ways. For Eryn (51) this was an obligation for those pioneering MSCPs to 'set a certain tone':

> '…you want to be, or at least I think it ought to be, a little bit minimalistic, a little bit no fuss, a little bit you can do this on a really tight budget, because actually the most important part about this is the protection of women's position, financially. So I think that was really important to me as well that, to set a tone, or not to set a tone that overeggs it a bit y'know, to be part of a tone-setting around you know, getting rid of a few of those expectations of big spending and you know impossible dreams that don't get realised because it's all too much'.

Eryn saw this 'pragmatic sensible approach' as well as her concern for financial control as part of her feminist values and beliefs. She strongly believed that MSCPs should be set apart

from marriage/weddings, stripped of the excessive expenditure and baggage, and make a statement about (gender) equality.

This pragmatism came through in many instances in participants' accounts. Casey (39), for example, says of CP: 'it's kind of not that different to signing your mortgage deeds or a will or anything like that, it's a piece paper we're going to sign'. For Jemma (39) and Andy (41):

> 'there was nothing romantic about it […] We both went in jeans and jumpers so I mean I understand people make it into an event but it just wasn't a big deal really for us it was more about the- like Andy said, putting it on paper'.

For Vanessa (57), the ceremony was not 'momentous' but rather 'we just sort of ticked it off and it's done now'. And Ursula was 'thinking more about what seeds and planting in the garden veg plot rather than the civil partnership'. Although not all the participants took quite such a pragmatic approach, there was a general agreement that CPs allowed a more practical approach than a marriage/wedding would have done. This gave participants the freedom to choose the degree of pragmatism that suited their needs. This is another dimension to the moral 'oughts' of importance to these participants: in rejecting the wedding fantasy and commercialisation, in promoting values of equality and justice, participants are promoting an ethic of 'pragmatic love' that can be achieved through the lived practice of a civil partnership.

Discussion and conclusion: A morality of love

Many of Heaphy et al.'s same-sex couples saw the distinction between marriage and CP as insignificant, allowing them to make claims to 'ordinary' coupledom- an important claim given their historical (and contemporary) exclusion from 'ordinary' couple and family life (Heaphy et al. 2013). In contrast, our mixed-sex civil partnering couples often went to great lengths to emphasise the distinction between marriage and CP. Clearly, civil partnership works differently for these groups, not least because for same-sex couples CP law provided legal recognition and formalising of their relationships from a position of no legal rights, whereas for mixed-sex couples, formal, legal, and social recognition had always been available through marriage. While for same-sex couples, CPs allowed them to both follow (heterosexual) convention and trouble dominant heterosexual codes, for mixed-sex couples, the decision to choose a CP rather than marriage seems to entail a troubling of marriage and traditional gender norms, reinforcing ideas of equal access to relationship formalising (for both same- and mixed-sex couples), and setting certain standards for the everyday realities of their lives and relationships.

Thus, in telling their stories of civil partnership motivations, participants were working to construct a morally meaningful context in which this decision was situated. As mentioned earlier, these participants shared liberal views on gender and sexuality- many described themselves as feminist and strongly supported LGBTQ+ rights- and the decision to undertake an MSCP played a part in affirming these beliefs and values. All individuals are striving to achieve an ethic of authentic individuality which is derived from individual 'oughts'. What we can see from these accounts is a construction of a morality of love, founded in individual 'oughts' such as these political beliefs, but also drawn from and around the couple form.

For Seebach, this morality of love is an extension of Simmel's 'law of the individual': Seebach suggests couples- individuals in love- construct a moral code by which they can live

and, in the absence of wider moral laws, this couple code extends beyond the couple to structure and guide a wider sense of morality. In discussing CPs, participants are revealing their personal ethics, their own sense of morality by which they aspire to live their lives. For many, this personal ethics involves resisting social norms, believing in justice and equality, and emphasising pragmatism rather than romanticisation of love. But it is not incidental that these values are revealed when outlining civil partnership motivations. For it is in this very context- of romantic relationships- that the individual moral law is discerned.

According to Seebach (2016: 194) intimacy provides us with the capacity for developing wider moral values and individually authentic behaviours in contemporary societies. Intimate morality can:

> 'protect the couple from non-intimate others, as they protect the world from an excess of intimacy. By creating a moral difference between those inside and those outside the intimate circle, they contribute to a strengthening of the bond of the lovers, binding them closer together, and in the same move, they force the lovers to make a difference in their behaviour, habits and performance outside the intimate circle'.

We can see this facet of intimate morality demonstrated in participants talk, in their desire to construct an authentic version of relationship formalising – something that suits just them – while others are subject to the routinised white wedding. While there is an understanding between the couple of what their CP means to them (even if this is muddled and complex), others are rarely let in on the secret, for relationships are increasingly privatised (Bergström 2022). But this is not a limitation of intimate morality, for this moral code creates a wider sense of right and wrong: 'Love establishes a form of looking at the world that sets the criteria for right and wrong on the basis of that special singular bond that is between the lovers and that cannot be shared' (Seebach 2016: 194). In the case of CP motivation talk, couples come to a sense of right and wrong on the basis of their bond and through thinking about how to formalise that bond in a way that allows them to align with their individual moral 'oughts'. Thus, their personal ethic of authentic individuality- derived individually and through the couple form- extends outwards to guide and shape their behaviours and relationships with others and the wider world.

While the exact constituents of intimate morality depend on each individual, Seebach notes certain common aspects such a demand for trust through disclosure, the sacrifice of the self for the common 'we', and punishing lies and unfaithfulness. We suggest that the themes discussed above can be added into the intimate moral code for these participants: resisting social norms and rejecting artifice; a belief in justice and equality; and a pragmatic approach to love. For example, an individual may take a pragmatic approach to love, which becomes cemented as a couple value: 'I think we've had quite a practical pragmatic sort of relationship' (Holly, 37). This then becomes a way of viewing the world, that it is *right* to take a practical rather than overly romanticised approach to love and relationships. This value is then taken as a touchstone for living in accordance with 'the sort of person we aspire to be' (Simmel 2015). This is applied to varying strengths throughout their social circle- perhaps in a vague way to the generalised other but much more of an expectation of behaviour for close intimates. And it is lived through choosing a civil partnership.

While originating from within individuals and created in reference to their intimate relationships, a morality of love is society-organising, extending far beyond the confines of intimacy (Seebach 2016). This is important since much contemporary theorising demotes the

role of morality or has it resting on the shaky foundations of unanchored individual preference (e.g. Illouz 2012). In line with Seebach, we suggest that these individuals demonstrate a very clear sense of morality applicable to their own behaviours and extending beyond the intimate sphere. By focusing on enduring love and the couple form, rather than temporary relationships and suffering, we end up with a different image of society: one where individuals are constructing a moral life for themselves, in the context of loving relationships, producing an authentic individuality and a set of principles to live a life that is uniquely theirs.

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[i] For a more detailed discussion of the progress of civil partnership law in Britain see Hayfield et al. (forthcoming).