Article

Exploring Civil Partnership From the Perspective of Those in Mixed-Sex Relationships: Embracing a Clean Slate of Equality

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Abstract

Civil partnerships first became available to mixed-sex couples in England and Wales in December 2019. To date, there has been no research exploring the perspectives of mixed-sex couples who choose to become civil partners. We interviewed 21 people, as individuals or in couples, who were considering, planning, or had already entered into a civil partnership. Our thematic analysis resulted in two themes. In *Free from the patriarchal baggage of marriage: Civil partnership as a clean slate of equality*, we discuss how participants portrayed marriage as imbued with problematic traditions. In contrast, civil partnerships were portrayed as a contemporary form of relationship recognition that was in fitting for them and their relationships. In the second theme, *Doing thing differently? Rejecting or reimagining weddings* we discuss how participants critiqued traditions to navigate whether and how to reject them entirely, or attempt to creatively reimagine them. We consider the implications of our results.

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Introduction

On New Year's Eve 2019, Rebecca Steinfeld and Charles Keidan became one of the first mixed-sex couples to register a civil partnership (CP), at Chelsea Town Hall, London (Quinn, 2019). They had previously tried to register a CP in 2014, but were refused on the grounds that they were not of the same sex (Fenwick & Hayward, 2018; Hayward, 2019; Quinn, 2019). Following the refusal, they both played key roles in successfully campaigning for mixed-sex couples to be able to become civil partners. Given how recently CPs have become available to mixed-sex couples, it is unsurprising that social science researchers have yet to explore this nuanced form of legal relationship recognition. In this paper, we set the cultural context before introducing our study, in which we sought to explore the perspectives and practices of mixed-sex couples who were considering, planning, or had already entered into, a CP.

Legal Relationship Recognition in England and Wales

When first introduced in England and Wales,[1] in 2005, CPs were only available to same-sex couples. At the time, they offered a politically pragmatic compromise through providing largely similar legal rights to marriage, without actually permitting same-sex partners to marry (Hayward, 2019; MacBride-Stewart et al., 2016). In 2018, the Supreme Court came to the decision that to deny different-sex[2] partners the option of CPs 'was incompatible with […] the European Convention on Human Rights' (Hayward, 2019, p. 923), but preceding this the UK had a complex history regarding legal relationship recognition.

The Status of Marriage

Marriage is a long-held institution, traditionally an almost unequivocal expectation of heterosexual coupledom and representative of a 'gold standard' of couple relationships (Carter & Duncan, 2017; Maine, 2022). Despite perhaps no longer retaining its status as a taken-for-granted requirement of adult relationships, nonetheless, entering a marital relationship remains desirable and an aspiration for many couples, with marriage often conceived to be part of a normative relationship trajectory (Barlow et al., 2005; Carter & Duncan, 2017; 2018). Indeed, figures indicate that most people do marry; 88% of women and 82% of men have been married by age 50 (although this is

declining for younger birth cohorts) (Office for National Statistics, 2021). The significance of marriage as the 'dominant paradigm' for relationships was also reflected in the successful campaign for same-sex marriage, which relied heavily on the foundation of marriage as meaningful and worthy (Jowett & Peel, 2017). However, in 2018, the number of marriages between opposite-sex[3] couples followed the trend of previous years in being the lowest ever recorded; 3.3% lower than the previous year (Office for National Statistics, 2021). Whilst marriage may to some extent remain somewhat normative, the number of people marrying in England and Wales is at an historical low (Carter & Duncan, 2017).

In/Equal Legal Relationship Recognition: Marriage and Civil Partnerships

Marriage and civil partnership have historically been sites of inequality, including in relation to who has had access to different forms of legal relationship recognition (e.g. MacBride et al., 2016). Traditionally, a two-tier system of legal relationship recognition existed, with marriage exclusive to mixed-sex couples. The *Civil Partnership Act* (2004) was the first legislation through which same-sex couples could have their relationships legally recognised (Hayward, 2019; MacBride-Stewart et al., 2016). While some lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and queer (LGBTQ+) people were in favour of the legal recognition that CPs offered, others were somewhat ambivalent. Discussions around the introduction of CPs – and to some extent equal marriage some years later – focused on what forms legal relationship recognition should take to achieve equal rights, with some debating whether they should be resisted as potential parodies of patriarchal and hetero-normative heterosexual relationships (see, Clarke, 2003; Clarke & Finlay, 2004; Donovan, 2004; Harding, 2008; Heaphy, 2018; Jowett & Peel, 2010; 2017; Maine, 2021). CPs were based on the template of marriage and there were few legal differences between the two, such that they were often described as marriage in all but name (Carter & Duncan, 2018; Jowett & Peel, 2017). Indeed, many same-sex couples treated their CPs as marriage and referred to them as such – despite the UK government's framing of them as 'not marriage' and regardless of some discrepancies between the two in legal and social status (Heaphy, 2015; Jowett & Peel, 2017; MacBride-Stewart et al., 2016). While some may have positioned CPs as *the same* as marriage, conceivably to emphasise their legitimacy, competing representations were of CPs as *inferior* to marriage, perhaps as an effect of efforts to bring about fully equal relationship status for same-sex partners (Jowett & Peel, 2010). It was argued that a more radical position could be to understand CPs as *different but equal* to marriage, and to 'advocate that they be open to all' (Jowett & Peel, 2010, p. 212).

The Two-Tier System of Equal Marriage and Civil Partnership

The introduction of equal marriage in 2014 (Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act: A factsheet, 2014) unintentionally resulted in another in/equal and two-tier system of legislation. CP, as noted above, had been introduced to provide same-sex couples legal relationship rights while excluding them from marriage (Hayward, 2019; MacBride-Stewart et al., 2016). When equal marriage was introduced, CPs were arguably only retained to avoid same-sex couples being forced to change their status (e.g. annul their CP, and enter a marriage). The result was that same-sex couples could effectively 'choose' to enter a CP *or* a marriage, whereas those in mixed-sex relationships could only marry. This disparity formed part of the argument put forward by campaigners for making CPs available to mixed-sex couples (Equal Civil Partnerships Campaign, 2018; Hayward, 2021). One rarely considered point is another disparity, in relation to bisexual people, who if in a mixed-sex relationships could only marry, but if in a same-sex relationship could choose marriage or CPs.

The question of whether CPs should become available to mixed-sex couples was a topic of public debate. Following equal marriage legislation, two public consultations sought views on the future of CP. Of approximately 37,000 respondents who completed *The Equal Civil Marriage Consultation*, 61% 'thought civil partnerships should be made available for opposite-sex couples' (Government Equalities Office, Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport, 2012, p. 42). However, in the *Department for Digital Culture, Media and Sport's* consultation, in which fewer people participated[4] (10,634), only 22% were in favour (Civil Partnership Review (England and Wales) - report on conclusions, 2014). Indeed, we note that not everyone unequivocally supported the notion of CPs for mixed-sex couples. After the introduction of equal marriage, some had suggested that for those in mixed-sex relationships to claim relationship inequality lacked a recognition of heterosexual privilege (Jowett & Peel, 2017).

The consultations also extended to asking about other possibilities for the future of CP, including phasing them out. LGBT and human rights charities *Stonewall* and *The Peter Tatchell Foundation* opposed the eradication of CPs (Stonewall, 2018; Equal Civil Partnerships, 2018; see also, Hayward, 2019). Their objections may seem surprising, given that marriage was now accessible to same-sex couples. However, there were two key reasons for their support of extending CPs. First, whilst numbers of CPs had declined since the introduction of same-sex marriage, nonetheless, some same-sex couples were still entering CPs (Jowett & Peel, 2017). In 2017, 994 CPs were formed, compared to ~7000 same-sex marriages, hence ~14% of same-sex couples were electing for a CP as their preferred form of relationship recognition (Office for National Statistics, 2020a; 2020b). Second, very few same-sex civil partners had

elected to convert their CPs to marriage, despite this being an option – in 2018, only around 800 couples converted their CP to a marriage, compared to ~7000 new same-sex marriages being formed (Office for National Statistics, 2021). Any proposition to phase out CPs was therefore considered potentially detrimental to same-sex couples and to the broader status and value of CPs (see, Hayward, 2019; Stonewall, 2018). We note here the variety of reasons why civil partners might not convert their CP. Research participants have suggested that to convert their CP to marriage would be to devalue their CP, while others have reported that they understand CPs as having little or no significance beyond being 'just a piece of paper'. Some have reported wanting to avoid difficulties with families, while others had resisted marriage based on its connotations as a patriarchal and heteronormative institution (Jowett & Peel, 2019). Indeed, before the advent of equal marriage some had argued that marriage should be abolished, and that CP would be sufficient legal recognition (Beresford & Falkus, 2009).

The Equal Civil Partnerships Campaign

Critically, a wider population started campaigning for CPs to become available to all, particularly Rebecca Steinfeld and Charles Keidan, who raised the profile of CPs for mixed-sex couples and started the *Equal Civil Partnerships Campaign* (ECPC). The ECPC group was established[5] to campaign, through parliament and the law courts, with the aim of CPs becoming accessible to everyone. This was successfully achieved through fundraising, awareness-raising, campaigning, lobbying, and a legal case. The *Civil Partnerships, Marriages and Deaths (Registration etc) Act* (2019) paved the way for CPs becoming available to mixed-sex couples from 31 December 2019. Hayward (2021) highlights that the ECPC was underpinned by resistance to marriage on the basis that it remains a patriarchal institution of structurally unequal partnerships. Campaigners argued that CPs could offer an alternative form of legal recognition for couples who objected to traditional marriage values. Marriage was built on the premise of traditional gender roles, sexist traditions, ceremonial rites, the subordination of women, and the language of husband and wife. In contrast, CPs were theorised as symbolic of egalitarian relationships, in which partners could have equal status, without pre-existing social scripts, and where the terminology of 'equal partners' reflected these values. CPs were positioned as based on an ideology of equality and as representative of contemporary relationships. They were argued to be particularly important for cohabiting couples with children, who may not want to marry, but would particularly benefit from the legal protections that CPs could potentially offer (Hayward, 2021).

However, whilst equality was at the heart of ECPC, it was human rights that were the defining factor in the Supreme Court Case, because the disparity in

who had access to which forms of legal relationship was considered discriminatory. As noted, solutions other than making CPs available to mixed-sex couples were proposed, including phasing out CPs (also see, Hayward, 2021). Nonetheless, the decision was in favour of CPs being retained and their availability being extended to mixed-sex couples. This successful outcome was celebrated by many and reported in mainstream press, with Rebecca Steinfeld and Charles Keidan noting the legal and financial benefits, (Coleman, 2018; McCahill, 2018; Quinn, 2019; also see Miles & Probert, 2019).

In December 2019 marriage and CPs became available to all, regardless of their sexuality or their partner's gender. In terms of equality, this new legislation was considered the final piece of the jigsaw for legal relationship recognition.[6] On the first day CPs became available to mixed-sex partners, 167 couples formed their CPs in England and Wales (ONS, 2020b). It was suggested that many would welcome the decision and be likely to take advantage of this new option for formalising relationships (Miles & Probert, 2019). Despite such proclamations, to date there has been no research exploring the experiences and perspectives of those in mixed-sex couples considering, planning, or having had a CP – nor any knowledge of whether or how CPs might be marked in terms of celebration or registration ceremonies. Therefore, our research question was *how do those considering, planning, or who have already had a mixed-sex civil partnership, experience and understand civil partnership*?

Methods

Research Design

Qualitative interviews are particularly suited to exploring previously under and unresearched areas in depth and detail. Individual and couple interviews have been an effective form of data collection, particularly in relationships research (Edwards & Holland, 2013; Smart, 2007). We aimed to collect data from 20 participants in mixed-sex relationships, who were considering, planning, or had already entered a CP, via individual or couple interviews. An open-ended interview schedule was developed, informed by existing literature on marriage, and CPs between same-sex couples, as well as our own interests in the topic. We collaborated with *Compassion in Politics* who reviewed interview questions and supported recruitment. The final interview schedule began with easing participants in, asking about their relationship, and how they came to consider CPs. Later questions focused on their own – and their perceptions of other people's – understandings of mixed-sex CPs. We also asked about whether or how they planned to, or how they had already, undertaken their civil partnership registrations. Ethics were approved by our college's Research Ethics Committee at the University of the West of England.

Procedure

To recruit participants, we posted a call on social media pages (e.g. *Facebook* and *Twitter*) with the support of *Compassion in Politics*, *Equal Civil Partnerships Campaign*, and *The Diversity Trust*, who shared the post widely. Most participants saw the study via the *Equal Civil Partnerships Campaign*. Respondents who expressed an interest were emailed an information sheet that fully informed them about the study, including that participation was voluntary, their right to withdraw, and how data would be managed. Participants received no incentive for taking part. Our data consisted of audio recordings from synchronous interviews conducted using video conferencing software (*Microsoft Teams*). Online interviews were particularly suitable given the recency of CPs for mixed-sex couples, because they offered the possibility of reaching potentially hard-to-find participants from geographically dispersed locations. Online interviews also give participants greater flexibility and convenience than meeting in person, while offering many of the benefits of in person research (e.g. being visible; opportunities to build rapport; ability to ask follow-up questions) (Hanna, 2012; Oates, 2015).

Participants

We conducted 15 interviews (6 couple and 9 individual) with a total of 21 participants, aged between 27–62 years (M = 40), with most in their mid-to-late 30s. Ten participants had already entered a CP, eight were planning, and three were considering (these three participants were in Scotland where CPs for mixed-sex couples were not yet available, but now are). Participants were 15 women, and six men (all men who took part participated in a couple interview). Most couples were cohabiting and in relationships of between 5–30 years (M = 15). The majority were heterosexual (1 pansexual participant), white, middle class, with no disabilities.

Researchers

The research team comprised of researchers with a range of sexual identities (bisexual, gay and heterosexual) and relationship statuses (cohabiting or married). Their combined research interests include health, sexualities, and relationships. Our areas of expertise and our positionality (e.g. our sexualities, relationship status, and so on) informed design and data analysis.

Data Analysis

Reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) was chosen to enable us to develop meaningful patterns from the data that offered insight into the topic (Braun &

Clarke, 2006; Terry & Hayfield, 2021). Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim to capture both spoken words and other features of participants' talk (e.g. pauses, emphases, laughter, and so on). We took a critical realist approach to analysing the data, where we understood participants' talk as reflecting their real worlds, whilst also exploring and interpreting data within the wider cultural context (Willig, 2022). We took both an empathic outlook, seeking to understand participants' narratives as they presented them to us, whilst exploring their talk from a more interpretative perspective to consider why and how they may have said what they did (Willig, 2022).

The analysis progressed iteratively. Initially, to familiarise ourselves with the data, we read and re-read transcripts, and met as a research team on multiple occasions to discuss what was of interest, what stood out, and what was arguably 'absent' from their narratives. We then coded the dataset, developing codes on hard copy transcripts, with the aim of considering what was interesting and meaningful within small chunks of text. This enabled us to immerse ourselves in the data and fully engage with participants' talk. During initial theme generation we collated codes and developed candidate themes through the interpretation of our codes and coded data. We reviewed these as a research team and agreed that they represented meaningful patterns across the dataset. When we were confident that our themes satisfactorily told an overall story of the data, we defined and named them. We reflected further on our analysis through presenting at conferences which led to further theme review and development, before making final refinements while writing our results. Data extracts have been edited for ease of reading (e.g. removing some terms, repeated words, and stumbles). We include participant numbers/pseudonyms, and a letter if they were part of a couple interview.

Results

Free From the Patriarchal Baggage of Marriage: Civil Partnership as a Clean Slate of Equality

The dominant picture in these accounts was of participants positioning marriage and weddings as patriarchal and a poor fit for them and their relationships. In direct contrast, CPs were portrayed as far more fitting due to their being representative of equality. The notion of marriage as problematically patriarchal dominated. When CPs were first being discussed for mixed-sex couples, Ursula had thought that 'it would be really nice if anybody that wanted to stick two fingers up to the patriarchal system could have an option that wasn't anything linked to it' (P15). The patriarchal values that

participants objected to were located in the past, but as so deeply rooted that they remained inextricably bound up with marriage:

> I believe that marriage is a deeply patriarchal institution […] I cannot countenance undertaking the patriarchal institution of marriage […] the history of patriarchy and religion, primarily are the issue, and the traditions that continue to be associated with marriage (P01, Eryn).

> I can't get over the very very historical roots of marriage, that's rooted in the idea of women being passed over from their dad [Stephen: mmm] to their husband […] and that's just not something that I want to be associated with at all, so that's the primary reason (P11a, Marina).

The predominant image was of marriage bearing a weight of patriarchal baggage that they did not want to carry into their relationships. They emphasised the extent of their discomfort through their emotionally evocative talk. Eryn was '*real*ly passionate' (P01) in her objections, and neither she nor Marina can 'get over' the history of marriage. Tamara used extreme case formulation (e.g. Pomerantz, 1986; Wiggins, 2017) to position marriage as '*never* really an option for either of us' because 'we just didn't like *everything* that went along with it' (P04, Tamara, emphasis added), as did Ink in her statement about her and her partner:

> We always said neither of us wanted to go down that route, we were quite happy as we were [..] we don't want to get married, it's very patriarchal, it's very old fashioned, it doesn't suit us y'know, we are people of the 21st century (P09, Ink).

Ink was not alone in the suggestion that marriage was not a comfortable option and others noted a lack of fit between marriage and their contemporary relationships. Their narratives often resonated with feminist perspectives (e.g. Crawford, 2004; VanEvery, 1995), and some explicitly drew links between their feminism and the in appropriateness of marriage:

> [M]arriage was never really an option for either of us […] that sort of patriarchal, the idea of my dad giving me away to another man, I'm very feminist so, didn't really like the idea of being someone's property and then handed over to someone else (P04, Tamara).

Tamara, like others in individual interviews, indicated that these issues mattered not only to them, but also to their partner. The use of 'we' and 'us', gave a sense of shared perspectives, before the turn to 'me' and 'I' position her as the one who would be subjugated. In couple interviews, women were often

first to raise patriarchy, but men seemingly endorsed similar objections, through both vocal agreement, and their narratives:

> Jemma: I don't feel that a marriage is an equal thing, y'know, you change your title, you change name, and there's all that patriarchal baggage that comes with it, so it was just something I didn't want to do […]
>
> Andy: There's a lot of archaic thinking behind things […] like, the father gives the bride away (P06a and P06b, Jemma and Andy).

Their narratives sometimes positioned marriage as inevitably imbued with these traditions without always acknowledging that some who marry may negotiate or reject these (Carter & Duncan, 2018; VanEvery, 1995). Their portrayals were therefore of (weddings and) marriage as symbolic purely of an outdated patriarchal and sexist institution that subjugated women (Crawford, 2004). However, despite their own objections to marriage, they often emphasised that they were not critical of *others* marrying. They were able to do so by framing marriage as not fitting for *them*, while stressing that it was an acceptable and even a celebrated option for *others*:

> [T]here's so much of this stuff that's just so horrendously offensive to me, y'know, I love it when friends of mine get married, but I just couldn't do it myself (P01, Eryn).
>
> I really want to make the point that I'm not bashing people who want to do the traditional thing […] some people think by opting for civil partnership you're saying there's something wrong with marriage but I really see it as just our choice (P03a, Mo).

Their emphasising their reluctance to be critical of those who marry may represent a hesitance to criticise friends and family. It could also reflect the sanctity of marriage. They negotiated how to be able to critique marriage without criticising individuals who *choose* to marry by engaging in neoliberal choice narratives (Thwaites, 2017). The result is a dichotomy of individual marriage as acceptable, versus the *institution* of marriage as open to critique and as politically *un*acceptable.

Individual choice was also deployed to rationalise the disjunct when some participants did acknowledge that not everyone who married necessarily embraced tradition or religiosity (Carter & Duncan, 2018). Ursula spoke about managing the tensions of seemingly having to defend her decision to have a CP, without being seen to attack others' choosing to marry. To ensure her response was 'appropriate' seemingly required emotional labour (e.g. Hochschild, 1979):

We have friends of ours who are married and they feel it is a personal attack that we don't want to do what they did …. and so it's really difficult to say "I don't want to get married because I think it's sexist, and I think it's, y'know, outdated, and I don't know why you would want to be given away by your dad" […] we've definitely had the awkward conversations […] multiple times, yeah (P15, Ursula).

While marriage and CP have sometimes been described as legally the same in all but name (Jowett & Peel, 2010; 2017), this was seemingly not *socially* the case for our participants who portrayed CPs as different from marriage – and as a preferable contemporary option:

I said, "I don't want to get married" […] Then we sort of looked at each other and said "maybe we could have a civil partnership instead" and he said "well that sounds a bit more modern" (P14, Emma).

Perhaps partly due to its normative status, marriage was often the referent drawn upon to talk about CPs (Peel & Harding, 2004). This was evident when they were asked what they liked about CPs, with responses often premised on, or quickly moving to, what they *dis*liked about marriage:

Beth: And what is it about civil partnership that makes them appealing?

Flora: It feels like an equal partnership, whereas marriage does not feel like that. If you want to have some kind of legal recognition of your partnership and you have the two options, well for me marriage wasn't one of those […] a civil partnership for both parties as equal partners, it was something new, and didn't have all of that background, all the baggage that marriage has got (P12a).

Participants embraced CPs partly on the basis of what they were not, hence while marriage was bound up with a burdensome weight, CPs were a clean slate of equality, free from such baggage. For Robyn, marriage was representative of the 'subjugation of women' and 'to give people an option that is freed from some of the baggage of that is only right and proper' (P08, Robyn). Baggage was a term also used by others:

I think the word I've thought about quite a lot is, like, baggage. There's no baggage […] there's no, kind of, the weight of history, of what role wives have been expected to play and what role husbands have been expected to play [Colin: yeah] so it's kind of a bit of a fresh, I don't know it's quite clean (Delilah, P07a).

The data were heavily dominated then, by representations of CPs as a rejection of the institution of marriage and its inescapable roots of inequality. In direct contrast, CPs were repeatedly positioned as representative of equality and therefore offered relationship recognition within a framework of an equal partnership:

> We are partners, we are equals and nothing's gonna change that […] y'know, people don't want to be married, we want to have civil partnerships, it's not about belonging to someone, it's about being respected and being equal, that's what I feel a civil partnership is (P09, Ink).

Notions of equality dominated narratives of CP, including through terminology, and 'the idea that you are partners, that it's the same word on both sides' (P07a, Delilah). The 'partnership' in 'civil partnership' put both partners symbolically on an equal footing. CPs were 'framed around a partnership' (P02a, Casey), and partner Richard agreed, highlighting that it's 'not something where, y'know, there's an obvious male head of the household, or a female being passed from parent to spouse' (P02b, Richard). The gender-neutral term 'partner' was fully embraced, whereas 'Mr and Mrs' or' husband and wife' were strongly disliked. Eryn commented that she 'just can't stand the idea that people would call me Mrs X, and that people would y'know talk to me about my husband or god-forbid, my hubby' (P01). Others shared a similar disdain for such terms:

> I've got a lot of antipathy towards the term wife. And husband. […] And I've had friends go get married and be like "my husband" or worse, "hubby" or "wife" and I've just been a bit like, that feels like I'd be wearing some clothes that weren't mine. They didn't fit and they didn't fit us (P08, Robyn).

Once again, the notion of what 'fits' arises. For Thomas, CPs 'just sort of felt more like our type of, how we want to define our relationship' (P03b). The representation of CPs as a clean slate implied a tabular rasa to be filled with meanings that fitted them and their relationships. In contrast the gendered traditions and terminology of marriage were inescapable and left participants reporting discomfort and a lack of fit for them. In sum, CP was positioned apart from marriage and as something suited to them and their partners' egalitarian values.

Doing Things Differently? Rejecting or Reimagining Wedding Traditions

In this theme, we report how CP registrations were seen to represent relationship recognition being done differently. Some conceptualised registering

CPs as entirely free of constraints. However, for most, weddings were an inevitable frame of reference. Participants deliberated over whether to reject or reimagine wedding practices, and often actively negotiated which elements to incorporate while aiming to ensure that their CP looked different from a traditional wedding.

In some of the narratives, particularly of those still in the planning stages, CPs were positioned as offering participants free reign which provided the potential for doing things differently. For the moment at least, 'no one knows what it is yet, so you can do whatever you want 'cause there are no expectations' (P15, Ursula). For Eliza, this lack of expectation resulted in 'having so much choice, we're actually thoroughly confused (laughs). So, yeah, we have got so many different ideas going on, about how we're going to do it' (P13, Eliza). However, this conceptualisation of CPs may be liminal and liable to change, both as these participants progress their planning, and as mixed-sex CPs become better established. While some positioned CP registrations as free of expectations, they are nonetheless social and cultural products to which meanings will become attributed.

Just as marriage was a referent for discussions of CP, so too were weddings seemingly an inevitable frame of reference for discussing legally registering their relationship. Indeed, participants often spoke of marriage and weddings somewhat interchangeably. To at least some extent, CP registrations may inevitably mirror weddings in their broad structure – the legal registration of a relationship, that must be conducted by registrars (albeit without any requirement for vows), at approved venues, and requiring witnesses. Many participants seemingly faced an unavoidable dilemma of either accepting or rejecting marriage and wedding practices:

Everything we did [on the day of registration] would either have to be an implicit, y'know, copycatting of a marriage [mm hm] or it would have to be an explicit rejection of marriage, and actually all we wanted to do was … cement our legal relationship (P01, Eryn).

I think we would not want to be … sort of mimicking a wedding, 'cause it is a bit different, so I want it to seem a bit different (P12a, Flora).

Their resistance to 'copycatting' or 'mimicking' demonstrates a requirement for their relationship registration to differ from a wedding. Weddings and marriage are intertwined, hence, perhaps to reflect the differences between CP and marriage, their relationship registration must differ from a wedding. Some participants rejected *any* form of ceremony and planned to simply sign the register:

For us it is the equivalent of going to sign mortgage deeds in which you don't invite people along to have a party afterwards [Casey: Maybe people should]. Well, perhaps people should, but I mean … we're just going to sign a piece of paper, we're not gonna say anything, we're not gonna do anything (P02b, Richard).

Weddings are typically a celebration of marriage, a significant event in a couple's relationship trajectory, and even a 'major life accomplishment' (Fetner & Heath, 2016, p. 726). In contrast, Casey and Richard positioned their CP registration as markedly different from a marriage. Their rejection of vows or any form of celebratory event serves to downplay the registration of their CP as relatively insignificant and representative only of a legal process.

However, most participants spoke of some form of celebration, despite most rejecting a ceremony that *fully* mirrored a wedding. Eliza spoke of 'adding some of the traditional wedding elements' to 'give it a *sense* of occasion […] but I think in comparison to a traditional wedding it will be different' (P13). The dominant picture in the data was of participants debating which aspects of weddings they wanted to reject and which held some appeal. They then negotiated how to reimagine any aspects of a wedding that either appealed or were unavoidable:

Your dad walking you down the aisle, I mean really, come on, [mm] y'know I'm a woman from the 70s, we don't need that kind of shit (laughs) […] so we walked in together and for me [mm] that is really what it's about [mm], we walked in together, we held hands, and we couldn't stop smiling (laughing), it was just like, yeah! Here we are! And it was just a really casual event, everyone was laughing (P09, Ink).

Ink rejected the tradition of being given away by her father, while the idea of guests appealed. Entering the building was inescapable, hence 'walking down the aisle' was reconceptualised. The picture Ink painted was of a joyful, relaxed, and informal event. Indeed, participants commonly planned celebrations that represented a rejection of the formality sometimes associated with traditional weddings (Carter & Duncan, 2018; Fetner & Heath, 2016). This included rejecting the language of 'wedding' or 'ceremony'. For Thomas and Mo, 'we've described it as a party for like 80 people basically' (P03b, Thomas), with others also referring to a 'party' (P06a, Jemma, P13, Eliza).

Another common way for participants to envisage their relationship registrations as different from an imagined wedding was in relation to size and scale. Weddings may traditionally be envisaged as extravagant and large events, with lots of guests, that require extensive planning (Carter & Duncan, 2018). These relationship registrations were spoken of as far more low-key. Eryn emphasised that her and her partner had opted for 'really really really

small and really really quick as well' (P01, Eryn). Tamara was hesitant to invite anyone, due to her (and her partner's) concerns that if they did so it would 'just start spiralling until all of a sudden you've got 100 people need to come and we both just didn't just didn't wanna do that' (P04, Tamara). Nonetheless, some spoke of how their initial plans had escalated. For Ink, 'in*it*ially I wanted two witnesses, I didn't wanna have any event, *any*thing at all, I just wanted two good friends of ours, to be our witnesses, *that* was it'. However, ownership of the registration was not hers alone, and discussions with her partner informed a change of plan:

> Ben decided he wanted to invite our two younger children [hm mm] and I was like "hang on a minute, what about the two older ones", so then there's four of them [yeah] they've got husbands and partners, and I said to him "y'know what this is ridiculous, let's just have a little gathering, I can invite some friends, invite your mum and your brother, and let's just do that" so we agreed that's what we would do, and that's what we did (P09, Ink).

While Ink's starting point was 'I didn't want the shebang' eventually she 'wanted the shebang, I wanted y'know, family to be there […] I wanted to make it a bit of a do (P09, Ink). Participants often spoke of weddings as inevitably informed by others' expectations about who would be invited, particularly extended family (Castren & Maillochon, 2009): '"oh you have to ask great aunt Ethel"' (P15, Ursula). They (re)imagined their CP registrations as (somewhat) free of external expectations, and spoke of the appeal of taking ownership:

> Avoiding other people's expectations was an big element for me, I think, 'cause this was a bit leftfield, people couldn't wade in as quickly with their "well of course your great aunt Maude is going to be able to come" or "well of course you'll be doing this, this, and this" because it slightly wrong footed people […] there's a readymade version of a wedding in everyone's mind, and I think, one of the things that appealed was that they couldn't start laying on their "well pink taffeta is lovely isn't it" (P08, Robyn).

When they did accommodate others, this was usually portrayed as on their own terms, rather than as bowing to others' expectations. Their intentions were often to only invite immediate family, and this was also understood as setting their CP registrations apart from weddings:

> [W]e trimmed it down to just the immediate family, but it was really important, and for him it was very small and low key and no fuss, so, that's where we kind of ended up with this, very not wedding-y type event (P08, Robyn).

The women in our study had seemingly driven the decision to instigate having a CP. However, while it is common for women to lead on planning mixed-sex weddings (Carter & Duncan 2017; Fetner & Heath, 2016), there was a thread of couples collaboratively planning.

However, it was notable their CPs were not entirely free from external pressures. This was often in relation to what women wore. Which was under considerable scrutiny. Most participants rejected the 'meringue dress' (P01, Eryn) that might typically be associated with traditional weddings (Peel & Harding, 2004). Ursula refused to spend an extravagant amount on a dress that she perceived would be worn for only 1 day. She 'wanted to be able to wear it again […] it took me a little while to find it [the dress], but it was £40 quid from some dodgy website' (P15, Ursula). However, some reported how others had intervened and stymied participants' initial choice of alternative attire. Eryn 'was going to wear trousers until my sons told me they thought I ought to wear a dress' (P01). Similarly, Emma 'wasn't planning to wear a white dress at all, until my friends got quite upset, and my mother got really angry about it and said I looked horrible in the dress that I bought' (P14). Despite Emma eventually wearing a white dress which she felt '*really* uncomfortable with', she positioned herself as rejecting tradition by insisting on 'not wearing a veil' (P14). Despite others' input, participants often framed any final choice as a carefully negotiated compromise that appeased others while enabling them to maintain a sense of difference.

While some reported a lack of constraint, for most weddings were an inescapable comparator that any registration ceremony or celebration was carefully considered in relation to. Overall, these participants rejected or reimagined aspects of traditional weddings to create relationship registrations that were framed as, and embraced for, their difference.

Discussion

This study is, to our knowledge, the first to explore the perspectives of people who are considering, planning, or have already registered a mixed-sex civil partnership. Our results offer new insights into how mixed-sex couples planning or undertaking CPs understand this form of relationship recognition. Marriage was positioned as patriarchally problematic, and participants almost invariably saw marriage as built on foundations of sexism (and for some, heterosexism) (Crawford, 2004; Fetner & Heath, 2016). They portrayed marriage as inevitably and inextricably bound up with these roots and therefore as outdated, uncomfortable and a poor fit for them and their relationships. In stark contrast, these couples clearly constructed CPs as free of the baggage of marriage and as a contemporary clean slate of equality that suited them and their relationships.

CP was understood to be representative of a new form of relationship recognition, hence these participants did not see this form of legal relationship recognition as 'marriage-by-another-name' (Jowett & Peel, 2010; 2017, p. 74). Participants presented themselves as highly invested in equality and saw CPs as unequivocally egalitarian. This was perhaps not surprising given the discourse around equality that was deployed through ECPC's ethos when campaigning for CPs to become available for mixed-sex couples (Hayward, 2021). Our participants' narratives of resisting marriage and embracing CP on the basis of equality likely reflect that we recruited via the social media pages of ECPC, and indicate that the values of the campaign resonated for them. Therefore, our participants' perspectives mirrored theoretical discussions of CP that preceded its introduction (Fenwick & Hayward, 2018; Hayward, 2021; Miles & Probert, 2019).

Notably, marriage and weddings were often conflated and spoken of somewhat interchangeably as though seemingly inseparable. Further, specific wedding practices were understood as representative of the broader institution of marriage. Indeed, the patriarchal aspects attributed as reasons for disregarding marriage were often those associated with weddings and what these ceremonial traditions represented to them more broadly – such as fathers giving away the bride and the ownership of women (Carter & Duncan, 2018; Miles and Probert, 2019). Participants clearly and consistently framed both marriage and weddings as patriarchal and imbued with gender inequalities (Crawford, 2004; Fetner & Heath, 2016). It is interesting to note that they are not alone in doing so; many who marry also negotiate how to formalise their relationship while resisting tradition and inequality (Carter & Duncan, 2018; Fetner & Heath, 2016).

Our research brings novel insight about how couples conceive of registering their civil partnerships. We evidenced how participants positioned their relationship registrations as different from a wedding ceremony. It was important to them that their CP registrations did not mimic a wedding, perhaps to capture that their relationship was not a marriage. However, they seemingly inevitably drew on weddings as a frame of reference. Their planning for relationship registration looked both the same as, and different from, the (social expectation) of organising a wedding, and any registration ceremony or celebration was often carefully considered, both practically and emotionally. We discussed how participants critiqued traditional weddings to decide whether to reject them entirely or creatively navigate ways of reimagining them. This mirrors the practice of bricolage where contemporary couples 'piece together' their weddings on the basis of reinventing or reinterpreting tradition in order to create a personalised wedding that partially adapts the conventions of the traditional white wedding (Carter & Duncan, 2018, p. 89). However, these participants certainly did not recognise their relationships as marriage despite them legally being seen as the same as CPs (Miles & Probert, 2019).

Strengths, Limitations and Recommendations

Our decision to use interviews was particularly effective and enabled us to gather detailed and in-depth data. We offered potential participants the option of participating alone, or in couples. It may be that this flexibility meant more participants agreed to take part than if we had conducted only couple interviews. During couple interviews we encouraged both partners to participate, but one partner often led the discussion. While we gained an impression of how they appeared to have a shared approach to relationships, marriage, CPs, and relationship registration, separate interviews with both partners could potentially have offered additional insights. Notably, no men volunteered to be interviewed individually, and future research could focus on men's outlook to enable more nuanced understandings of their perspectives, particularly within the wider context of marriage and weddings often being seen as women's domain (Carter & Duncan 2017; Fetner & Heath, 2016).

Our inclusion criteria were for participants who were considering, or had already entered into, CPs. Participants who had already had a CP discussed how their plans for their registering their CP had evolved. Many anticipated that being civil partners would have little impact on their relationships. However, due to them having yet to have had, or only recently had, their CP, this was speculative. Those who marry vary in their perspectives on whether marriage changes them and their relationship, with some reporting notable differences, and others none (Baker & Elizabeth, 2013). Future researchers could interview couples when their CPs are more established to enable them to consider the impact of relationship recognition on them and their relationships in more depth.

Some participants noted that cohabiting couples who do not wish to legally register their partnership remain disadvantaged in relation to relationship rights (Barlow et al., 2005). This arises largely due to the lack of rights for those in 'common law' relationships who have no legal benefits but often mistakenly believe they do – the common law marriage myth (Miles & Probert, 2019; Barlow et al., 2005). Many of our participants reported having to explain CPs to others, including friends and family. One participant recommended a Frequently Asked Questions list for those considering a CP, to ease the burden of educating others. This implies a potential lack of awareness of CPs within wider society – perhaps including those in mixed-sex relationships who may otherwise opt for a CP, were they aware of their eligibility. It would be beneficial to educate and raise awareness of CPs, their availability to mixed-sex couples, and the legal rights and responsibilities they offer. Researchers could also conduct further research with cohabiting partners to explore their awareness of, and perspectives on CPs.

During the planning process, some participants struggled to navigate their council's websites due to their not always have clear information about

booking CPs. Couples brought their understandings of what was legally required, and these sometimes differed from registry office staff – whose expectations were often based on marriage ceremonies. Some participants reported that registry offices and officers were seemingly not entirely prepared for mixed-sex couples having a CP. While participants generally saw these small hindrances as understandable, nonetheless they were a hassle. We recommend that registry offices and registrars review their paperwork and ensure that their processes, practices and phrasing on paperwork are appropriately adapted and clearly and consistently presented.

Conclusion

What is evident from this tracking of different forms of relationship recognition since the early 2000s is the theme of in/equalities. While civil partnerships were first introduced for those in same-sex couples, these represented what some saw as an inferior option, or a stepping-stone to the full equality that same-sex marriage might offer. What followed was the introduction of equal marriage and of civil partnership becoming available to mixed-sex couples. Our research demonstrates how our participants' accounts were driven by a narrative of in/equality. They rejected marriage and wedding practices on the basis of their being outdated and representative of inequality. In contrast, they embraced civil partnership as representative of egalitarianism and equality in a way that fitted them and their contemporary relationships.

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Notes

1. Marriage and civil partnership legislation and subsequent changes often relate to England and Wales. Civil partnerships became available to mixed-sex couples in Scotland in June 2021.
2. We use the term 'different-sex' to mirror the language of the reports we draw on in parts of this paper. As authors we prefer to use 'mixed-sex', not least to recognise gender beyond a binary model of 'opposites'.
3. We use the term 'opposite-sex' to mirror the language of the reports we draw on in parts of this paper, but as noted, we prefer to use 'mixed-sex'.
4. The Department for Culture, Media and Sport announced their consultation in the Houses of Parliament and on the Culture, Media and Sports web pages, and via the Women's Engagement Newsletter. They also contacted relevant organisations and stakeholders, and emailed organisations and individuals who had previously 'registered an interest in receiving updates on equal marriage or related issues' (Civil Partnership Review (England and Wales) - report on conclusions, 2014, p. 6).
5. At time of writing, the core campaign group remains in existence. It consists of Rebecca Steinfeld and Charles Keidan (the first mixed-sex couple to seek a civil partnership, who subsequently took the British government to court and won their case in 2018), Martin Loat (campaign chair), Fiona Millar (journalist and campaigner), and from 2020, Amy Grant (campaign lead). The group has also had support from others, including Peter Tatchell (human rights activist), Professor Robert Wintemute (legal expert) and Elsie Owusu (founding member of Society of Black Architects) (see, http://equalcivilpartnerships.org.uk/supporters/).
6. However, it is notable that in other ways, neither mixed-sex nor same-sex marriage can be deemed representative of social and/or legal equality (see, for example, Maine, 2021; MacBride-Stewart et al., 2016, on exceptions to equality between marriage and same-sex marriage, and Fetner & Heath, 2016 on gender inequalities in marriage).

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