

Study report: An interview study exploring understandings and perceptions of different-sex civil partnerships

Why did we do the study?

Civil partnerships have only been available as a form of legal recognition for different-sex couples since December 2019. This means that we do not know much about who is considering, or choosing to enter into, a civil partnership, nor what makes them appealing. Therefore, in this research, we wanted to know more about people's relationships, their overall perspectives on relationships and family, and their reasons for considering, or having already had, a civil partnership. For the people who have had a civil partnership, we wanted to know what planning and having the civil partnership was like, and their experiences since they formalised their relationship in this way. This was the first study in Britain to explore civil partnerships with people in different-sex couples and we would like to express our appreciation to the participants who so willingly discussed their relationships and civil partnerships with us.

Who were the researchers?

The research team were:

- Bethan Jones, a Research Assistant at UWE Bristol who was involved in data collection and reviewing the data.
- Nikki Hayfield, a Senior Lecturer in Social Psychology at UWE Bristol. Nikki's research interests focus on identities and relationships.
- Julia Carter, a Senior Lecturer in Sociology at UWE Bristol. Julia's research focuses on couples' relationships and what brings and keeps people together, including previous research on marriage, weddings, and couples who live apart.
- Adam Jowett, Associate Head of School of Psychological Sciences at Coventry University. Adam has been involved in research into civil partnerships since 2005.

We worked in collaboration with an organisation called Compassion in Politics, and both the Campaign for Equal Civil Partnerships and the Diversity Trust supported us to find participants by sharing recruitment advertisements. We are very appreciative of their support of our project and of the funding provided by UWE Bristol which enabled us to conduct this study.

How were participants recruited, and how did they take part?

We were looking for participants who were in a different-sex relationship and were either considering a civil partnership, or had already had a civil partnership, to take part in an interview. We did not have any requirements for length of relationship. We recruited during November 2020 in collaboration with the Equal Civil Partnership Campaign, Compassion in Politics, and the Diversity Trust. These organisations shared calls for participants with their members, including on their social media feeds. We had a fantastic response and lots of people expressed an interest in taking part within a short period of time.

We then met participants for an online interview using online video software to talk about their relationship and their thoughts on civil partnerships, marriage, families, and relationships. We asked participants lots of questions and we really appreciated the time they took to answer these and tell us all about their experiences.

Who took part?

In total, twenty-one participants took part. We conducted fifteen interviews (nine with individuals and six were couples). Participants had a range of experiences of civil partnerships. Some were planning a civil partnership, some had had one, and some were waiting for the law to approve civil partnerships in Scotland. The people we spoke to had been in their relationships for between six years to thirty years. All these relationships were monogamous, many had children, and most participants were heterosexual.

Fifteen participants described themselves as middle class in some way, one participant described themselves as both working and middle class, 2 described themselves as working class and one did not recognise class systems. All but two of the participants were in full- or part-time employment or education. On the whole, participants were mainly white British or white European, with five describing their race and ethnic background in a different way. The people we spoke to were aged between twenty-nine and sixty-two, with the majority in their thirties. Participants were also invited to provide five words to describe themselves and the most frequently used words were liberal, feminist, atheist, and left-wing.

What did we find?

In our preliminary reading of the data, we noticed some key commonalities across the interviews. However, these are broad patterns which do not necessarily capture all the detail or the unique experiences of all our participants. Therefore, we cannot capture everything from the interviews in this summary.

We summarise some of these participants' experiences below.

In brief:

- Participants often did not want to get married because they felt it was patriarchal and outdated as an idea. They also did not want to have a traditional wedding as these often had patriarchal and problematic traditions. Some participants reported that their

feminist beliefs meant that both marriage and weddings were not an option they would choose.

- In comparison to marriage, participants often saw civil partnership as more equal in the way it was discussed (e.g., with partners, rather than husbands and wives) - but with the same legal standing as marriage. There was a sense that civil partnerships were rooted in equality, as opposed to marriage which was exclusive for a long time and not available to everyone.
- Participants reported that it was a positive thing for them that civil partnerships often brought fewer expectations on ceremonies and how these might look. There were no specific civil partnership traditions and so people could decide what to reject from weddings and what to take but perhaps reshape. This led to a “pick and mix” form of ceremony and celebration that suited couples. Given that participants felt that weddings had become very commercialised and that expectations could be very high, this was a real benefit.
- People often opted for a civil partnership in light of changes to personal circumstances such as illness or the birth of a child. While people formalised their relationship legally in other ways, they wanted a civil partnership to provide ‘blanket coverage’ in the event of an emergency.
- Friends and family often viewed relationships with a different weight after civil partnership, with the idea of it being a shorthand for a “serious relationship”, even if they did not always know exactly what a civil partnership was. Other people often asked lots of questions as they did not always have preconceived ideas of what a civil partnership would look like and how to celebrate.

How will we share what we found?

Now that all the interviews have taken place and been typed up, we have been analysing the data and will be reporting these findings in a few different ways:

- At academic conferences on families, relationships, and feminism
- In academic papers to report our results in more depth and detail
- In summary reports to the Equal Civil Partnership Campaign and the Diversity Trust
- In summary leaflets to registrars at registry offices to help them support people considering and having different-sex civil partnerships

The findings from this project will help other researchers understand why people who had a civil partnership chose to do so, what makes it appealing and whether or how they celebrated. It will also form the basis for future research looking at other aspects of civil partnerships with different participant groups.