Unscripted and improvised: Public and private celebrations of same-sex relationships

Victoria Clarke[1]
Carole Burgoyne[2]
Maree Burns[3]

1 Associate Professor in Sexuality Studies, Department of Psychology, University of the West of England, Bristol, UK

2 Research Fellow, Department of Psychology, University of Exeter, UK

3 Co-ordinator, Eating Difficulties Education Network, Auckland, Aotearoa/New Zealand

Contact:

Victoria Clarke

Associate Professor in Sexuality Studies

Department of Psychology

Faculty of Health and Life Sciences

University of the West of England

Frenchay Campus

Coldharbour Lane

Bristol BS16 1QY

UK

Tel: +44 (0)117 3282176

Email: Victoria.Clarke@uwe.ac.uk

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Abstract

This paper explores how 22 British same-sex couples define and make meaning of the notion of relationship celebrations. Drawing on interview data from a wider study of same-sex relational practices, we explore the participants' varied experiences of celebrating their relationship. Some had created public or private rituals (one-off and recurrent) that were both intensely personally meaningful and had a strong political dimension. Many highlighted the lack of a script for such celebrations; for some this was problematic, for others this enabled them the freedom and creativity to 'spin it' for themselves. Much ambivalence was expressed about public relationship celebrations, particularly the social display element of such events, and for some both familial recognition and legal rights were vital in confirming the legitimacy of their relationships.

Key words: Anniversaries, commitment ceremonies, gay, lesbian, same-sex couples, weddings

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Introduction

Although individual brides and grooms may not identify as heterosexual, heterosexual weddings are a key site for the production of normative heterosexuality. The ideological script of heterosexual weddings produces and polices traditional gender norms (Kimport, 2012). Wedding scholars have analysed the social construction of gender and the extent to which gendered expectations are perpetuated or resisted in the performance of 'wedding work'. This research indicates that it is mostly women who assume responsibility for wedding work (Currie, 1993; Humble, Zvonkovic & Walker, 2008; Sniezek, 2005). As such, the wedding ritual aligns individual behaviour with social norms that promote conventional gendered expectations (Oswald, 2000).

Until relatively recently, few wedding scholars questioned the heteronormative underpinnings of weddings and explored the interrelationships between gender conformity and heterosexism (Kimport, 2012; Oswald, 2000). Anti-gay rhetoric often defines lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) people in opposition to family and marriage (Oswald, 2002) and the social assumption of heterosexuality is never more apparent than in the so-called 'white wedding' (Ingraham, 1999; Kimport, 2012). Oswald's (2000) research on lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people's experiences of attending family weddings provides one of the few explorations of the ways in which the social meanings and practices of heterosexual weddings marginalise LGBT people. Her LGBT participants reported discomfort with the heterosexist rules underpinning wedding rituals such as dancing and catching the bouquet, and the promotion of heterosexuality as a religious imperative in wedding ceremonies. Many felt their identities and relationships were devalued when heterosexual family members refused to

acknowledge their sexuality or their partner by not inviting them, or their partner, to the wedding, by excluding them from wedding photographs or by instructing them to conform to gendered dress codes. Conversely, acknowledgement of their sexuality and inclusion of their partner was experienced as greatly affirming and validating. Oswald found that her participants both colluded in heterosexism (feeling coerced by other's homophobia, the inherent heterosexism of weddings or their own internalised feelings of homophobia) and quietly or noisily resisted it. Furthermore, many were critical of the emphasis on gifts and money, at the expense of commitment, and the lack of comparable help from their families when setting up their households or entering committed relationships.

A number of wedding scholars have noted the increasing visibility of same-sex commitment ceremonies in the wider culture from the 1990s onwards (Lewin, 1998; Stiers, 1999). The lack of a specific script or 'role models' for such rituals (Oswald, 2002; Reczek, Elliott & Umberson, 2009; Stiers, 1999) has prompted a handful of (mostly US) scholars to explore the ways in which such ceremonies contest or conform to the heteronormative conventions of heterosexual weddings (Hull, 2006; Kimport, 2012; Lewin, 1998; Manodori, 1998; McQueeney, 2003; Reczek et al., 2009; Stiers, 1999; Suter et al., 2006). Such research echoes debates about the meanings of same-sex marriage (Kimport, 2012). Lewin (1998, 1998a, 1998b) in her groundbreaking ethnographic study of (predominantly spiritual/religious) same-sex commitment ceremonies in the US argued that these ceremonies are simultaneously conservative and subversive. Many of her participants emphasised the freedom they had to play with the details of the commitment ritual because of the lack of legal recognition for same-sex relationships. Moreover, their ceremonies communicated a desire for public acceptance and legitimacy while making visible what marked the couple as different. The incongruities between

same-sex couples and the symbols of normative heterosexuality (white wedding dresses, diamond rings, and multi-layered cakes) were often fore grounded in the ceremonies. In addition, elements of queer culture were often incorporated to highlight the differences between a same-sex commitment ceremony and a heterosexual wedding. Although Lewin did not systematically categorise different types of ceremonies, she noted that some participants wanted to avoid mimicking a heterosexual wedding, whereas others placed greater emphasis on resembling a heterosexual wedding. The public nature of the event was viewed by many as important for conferring validation, and the involvement of family, particularly family of origin, confirmed that their commitment ceremonies were viewed as equivalent to the weddings of their heterosexual siblings.

Subsequent US research on commitment ceremonies has supported Lewin's argument that wedding-type celebrations combine conformity and resistance to heterosexual norms and values (Hull, 2006; Manodori, 1998; McQueeney, 2003; Stiers, 1999; Suter et al., 2006). For example, Kimport (2012) – in one of the few studies to focus on legally recognised weddings (see also Smart, 2007) – analysed gender presentation in wedding photographs from the 2004 same-sex weddings in San Francisco and identified a persistence of normative conventions in same-sex couples' wedding practices. She found that most photographs depicted 'gender normativity' (men and women dressed according to normative gender expectations – men as grooms, and women as brides), and the rest 'wedding normativity' (the heteronormative wedding standard of one bride and one groom). However, Kimport argued that it is precisely by citing traditional wedding conventions that same-sex couples disrupt normative assumptions: either by questioning the heteronormative linking of gender and the biological body (wedding

normative images of a lesbian bride and a lesbian 'groom'), or by making non-normative sexuality visible (gender normative images of two gay male grooms) (see also Lewin, 1998).

Smart (2007, 2008; Shipman & Smart, 2007), the author of the only British study focused specifically on same-sex commitment ceremonies/weddings, notes that whereas US authors such as Lewin (1998) have read political meaning into their participants' commitment ceremonies (the participants didn't frame their ceremonies as political), her (predominantly middle class) participants explicitly acknowledged the political implications of their choices. Heterosexual weddings were the reference point for all of Smart's participants in planning their weddings, but all wanted to avoid simply copying heterosexuality. The participants' wedding *style* often reflected compromises between partners and a balancing of personal desires, political views and attentiveness to the feelings of family members. Smart constructed a typology of four different styles of same-sex wedding:

1) Regular weddings were the most common style, a secular ceremony (incorporating union rituals such as ring and vow exchanges) was followed by a modest party, involving a mixture of family and friends; the heterosexual script provided a starting point for planning the wedding, but lesbian and gay meanings were incorporated. For the couple, the benefits of recognition outweighed the costs of perceived conformity to heterosexual norms.

2) Minimalist weddings were chosen by couples who had been together for many years and were simply seeking the legal protections of Civil Partnership (the wedding acknowledged a *pre-existing* commitment rather than symbolised *making* a commitment); these couples rejected the social display element of heterosexual weddings because making the private public was perceived as distasteful. Other (US)

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research suggests that life-stage shapes same-sex couples' approaches to commitment ritual. Reczek et al. (2009) similarly found that some of their participants viewed their commitment ceremonies as a celebration of a pre-existing and sometimes long-standing commitment, rather than marking the making of a commitment.

3) Religious (and spiritual) weddings imported elements of lesbian and gay culture into fairly conventional weddings.

4) Demonstrative weddings were 'full-on' public ceremonies, which were perceived as a political tool for the public display and validation of same-sex relationships.

Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan (2001) briefly discuss 'affirming commitment' in their in-depth study of British same-sex relationships; theirs is one of the few studies to examine union rituals other than commitment ceremonies/weddings (see also Steirs, 1999; Suter et al., 2006). They distinguished between private 'couple rituals' and more public celebrations such as commitment ceremonies. Their participants felt ambivalent about traditional models of relationships. Like Smart's (2007) participants, they were reluctant to do anything 'too heterosexual' (p. 129) when creating couple rituals and traditions. Many played with traditional models or like some of Lewin's (1998) participants used irony and a camp aesthetic to signal their ambivalence about such models, and balance seriousness with playfulness. Some celebrated conventional couple rituals such as Valentine's Day and used normative symbolism such as ring exchanges, whereas others rejected such rituals and symbolism as 'too heterosexual'. Some celebrated anniversaries, but in the absence of a wedding date improvised and create their own anniversary date (first meeting, first sex, moving in together or making a commitment) (see also Steirs, 1999; Suter et al., 2006). Friends' recognition of partnership rites

was important, especially when relationships with families of origin were strained or non-existent. Most participants viewed couple rituals as important but there was more ambivalence about commitment ceremonies because of their perceived similarities to heterosexual marriage.

Ninety per cent of Suter et al.'s (2006) sample of lesbian couples celebrated (improvised) anniversaries; only half of the participants who had had commitment ceremonies celebrated these as their anniversary date. Most couples celebrated events that strongly marked the symbolic start of their relationship, which – as in Weeks et al.'s study – included events such as when they first met or moved in together. Some celebrated their anniversaries in private, others revealed their celebration to friends and family, but did not include them, and some included friends and family in some or all of their anniversary celebrations. Celebrating with others, or revealing the celebration to others, was perceived as important for securing external validation and providing 'role models' (of enduring commitments) for other lesbian couples.

Only a few same-sex wedding scholars have explored reasons for *not* having a commitment ceremony. Reasons identified include: a lack of need for public validation (Stiers, 1999); negative experiences of heterosexual marriage (Stiers, 1999); life stage and social context – older participants who came out at the height of gay liberation and lesbian feminism valued their differences from the heterosexual norm (Reczek et al., 2009; Stiers, 1999); and the fact that such ceremonies have no legal status (Reczek et al., 2009; Suter et al., 2006).

Overview of the Present Study

In this paper, we discuss one of the first British studies to examine the personal and political meanings associated with same-sex relationship celebrations. Our focus is broader than existing research on commitment ceremonies/weddings because we are interested in all kinds of

relationship rituals, not just wedding-type celebrations. With the exception of Week's et al.'s (2001) very brief (4 pages in a 245 page book) discussion of 'affirming commitment', existing research defines for participants what counts as a relationship celebration (most often a commitment ceremony/wedding, occasionally an anniversary) and as such is limited by heterosexual relationship norms. In contrast, we are interested in how LGB people define relationship celebrations. Furthermore, like Reczek et al. (2009), Suter et al. (2006) and Weeks et al. (2001), our sample is not limited to couples that have chosen to have a commitment ceremony/wedding, so we are also interested in reasons for not performing a commitment ceremony/wedding or other union rituals.

The successful passage of the Civil Partnership Act in the UK formed a backdrop to this research. Data collection started about two months after the Labour Government published a consultation document on Civil Partnership and was completed about three months after Civil Partnership passed into law. Civil Partnership offers same-sex couples most of the rights and responsibilities of marriage (there are differences in pension rights, international recognition and grounds for divorce/dissolution among other things). Civil Partnership is most often described as same-sex marriage in the British media (Jowett & Peel, 2010). Furthermore, research shows that same-sex couples in the UK often equate Civil Partnership with same-sex marriage and appropriate the language of marriage when talking about Civil Partnership (Clarke, Burgoyne & Burns, 2006). However, Civil Partnership is also criticised as 'pretend' or 'not-quite' marriage (Clarke, Burgoyne & Burns, 2006; Jowett & Peel, 2010), and there are currently campaigns for marriage equality for same-sex couples (and for granting Civil Partnership to heterosexual couples) in the UK. With regard to weddings, after giving notice of an intention to register a Civil Partnership, all that is legally required to enter into a Civil Partnership is for

both partners and two witnesses to sign the Civil Partnership schedule at an 'approved venue'; there is no requirement for taking vows. Initially Civil Partnership was an entirely secular institution; the Civil Partnership Act expressively forbade the registration process having any religious content or connection. These restrictions were overturned in England and Wales in 2011 (but religious premises are not obliged to offer Civil Partnership registration). The Civil Partnership Act also does not provide for any kind of ceremony; however most registration authorities offer various ceremony packages alongside signing the Civil Partnership schedule.

Method

The data are drawn from the interview phase of a larger study of same-sex couples' relational practices including money management (see Burgoyne, Clarke & Burns, 2011; Burns, Burgoyne & Clarke, 2008; Clarke, Burgoyne & Burns, 2006, 2007; Clarke, Burns & Burgoyne, 2008). Both partners in 22 same-sex couples – 12 female, 10 male – participated in qualitative interviews.

Participants and Recruitment

The only recruitment criterion was that participants identified themselves as partners in a long-term or 'committed' same-sex relationship. The sample was a convenience one recruited (mainly in the South West of England) through adverts in the regional and national gay press, local GLBT groups and venues, adverts on community notice boards in local 'alternative' bookshops and other stores, local universities, and snowball sampling. All participants identified as lesbian or gay, with the exception of one male participant (participant code: M20a) who identified as bisexual. Most identified as white and able-bodied, and indicated education

levels, occupations and political affiliations typical of middle class British people. See Table 1 for a summary of participant demographics.

[Insert Table 1 about here]

Interviews

Four researchers conducted the interviews (the three authors and a research assistant – Katherine Ashby), mostly in the participants' homes, in the second half of 2004 and the first half of 2005. Partners were interviewed separately to prevent the production of 'seamless' couple accounts (Carrington, 1999), and most were interviewed simultaneously by a team of two researchers (a minority were interviewed consecutively by one researcher). Interview duration was between 40 and 70 minutes. The precise wording of the questions about relationship celebrations varied from interview to interview and was responsive to the participants' individual narratives and the legal context in which the interviews were conducted (before or after Civil Partnership passed into law). However, participants were generally asked about whether (and if so, how) they celebrate their relationship. We thought carefully about the language we used to talk about the topic, and chose the term 'relationship celebration' because we felt it included more formal/public celebrations like commitment ceremonies, blessings and 'weddings' as well as more informal/private ring exchanges and anniversary celebrations. We were interested in how the participants made meaning of the notion of relationship celebration, rather than imposing our definition on their accounts, and we did not want the data collection to be guided by an implicit set of assumptions about same-sex relationships.

Transcription and Data Analysis

The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed by the third author and a research assistant (Eileen Goodall). The data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2013) approach to thematic analysis (TA), which is comprised of 6 phases of coding and theme development. Because TA is theoretically flexible, Braun and Clarke (2006) recommend that researchers clearly specify the theoretical assumptions underpinning their analysis. Our aim was to explore *individual* participant's subjective experiences and sense-making, while recognising that these are always situated within social meanings or 'discourses' (Willig, 1999). As such our analysis loosely conforms to Ussher's (2000: 221) definition of critical realism as one that: 'affirms the existence of ''reality'', both physical and environmental, but at the same time recognizes that its representations are characterized and mediated by culture, language and political interests rooted in factors such as race, gender or social class'. After an initial process of data familiarisation, the first author (VC) identified all the data relevant to relationship celebrations in each interview transcript and collated these in a separate document. VC then read and re-read this data-set making a note of any initial analytic observations (TA phase 1). She then engaged in a process of systematic data coding, identifying features of the data relevant to the broad research question of 'how do partners in same-sex relationships celebrate their relationships and make sense of such celebrations?' (phase 2). The codes were then examined for broader patterns of meaning or 'candidate themes' (phase 3); after a process of review and refinement (phases 4 and 5), 3 themes and 1 sub-theme were generated. The writing of this paper constituted the final phase (6) of analysis and involved selecting illustrative data extracts and the weaving together of theme definitions (5) and other analytic notes into a coherent analytic narrative. When quoting

data extracts, each participant is allocated a code that signals their gender (F/M), their couple number (1-22), and their partner letter (a or b). We do not provide frequency counts when reporting our findings but as a general rule, 'few' refers to less than a quarter of the participants/couples, 'some' to less than a half, and 'most' to around two thirds or more.

Findings

Our open question about relationship celebrations prompted a wide-ranging discussion from the participants. Overall there were no stark contradictions between partners' accounts: some partners had different perspectives, but they generally acknowledged their differences. Before outlining and reporting our themes, we briefly discuss the participants' relationship celebration practices. Table 2 provides an overview of their past and planned celebrations, including their plans with regard to Civil Partnership registration. Where participants' responses were readily categorised as following, reworking or rejecting the traditional (heterosexual) wedding script (see 'Unscripted and Improvised' below), this information is also included.

[Insert Table 2 about here]

The Participants' Relationship Celebration Practices

Most of the participants spoke about celebrating their relationship and marking their commitment to their partner in some way (Weeks et al., 2001). Key to all of their accounts was a desire to be authentic – for their celebrations to communicate their innermost selves and desires, whether those desires were queerly normal or just plain queer (Lewin, 1998; Manodori, 1998). Only a very few indicated that they had not had and were definitely not planning any kind of relationship celebration. One couple had had a commitment ceremony and others were

planning a commitment ceremony or wedding-like celebration alongside Civil Partnership registration. Many felt that celebrations, particularly in relation to registering a Civil Partnership, were important. Even though Wayne (M18a) and his partner Bruce had had an intensely meaningful commitment ceremony, he felt it would be distinctly 'odd' to register a Civil Partnership and not have some kind of celebration. Most of the participants who had celebrated their relationship reported relatively informal or private markers of commitment such as exchanging rings, celebrating the anniversary of their relationship, throwing a party for friends and family after being together for so many years, and obtaining a joint mortgage on their home. For some participants, such as Liv and her partner Thelma, their private 'couple rituals' (Weeks et al., 2001) were intensely meaningful – both personally, in terms of marking their commitment to each other, and politically, in terms of valuing relational commitments that are perceived as less meaningful (than heterosexual ones) in the larger socio-cultural context (Rucker, Freitas & Huidor, 1996):

> It's [our annual gift giving ritual] an acknowledgement of the relationship and of our valuing of the relationship and the work that we put into it. It's just, I think within the society that we live kind of gay and lesbian relationships are poorly acknowledged, that we do our own acknowledgements if you like… we're kind of saying 'well, look it's important to us, to both of us, we are together and this is how we want it to be and it's good' (Liv F08b).

Liv and Thelma take it in turns to give each other a gift with a message (pertaining to the last year of their relationship) on their anniversary. They have kept all the gifts and messages. Liv and Thelma both commented on the ways in which heterosexuals 'flaunt' their anniversaries and other relationship rituals and they felt that public rituals have less personal

significance than the way in which they chose to mark their on-going commitment to each other; 'mak[ing] a big show… doesn't seem to be necessary' (Thelma F08a). At the same time, 'when colleagues or friends… say 'what are you doing' and we'll say 'it's our anniversary, so we're going out'… and people are quite congratulatory generally speaking, so that's the kind of celebration that they think it's okay… is quite sort of confirming' (Thelma F08a). Consistent with her critique of 'making a big show', Thelma is careful to say that she and Liv only tell other people about their anniversary in response to a direct question about it. Thelma also indicates that the recognition of others is welcome if not actively sought.

For other participants, things that might be treated as markers of commitment were less meaningful. Alice and her partner had exchanged rings (a recognisable symbol of commitment; Rucker et al., 1996), but Alice's description of leaving her ring 'lying around' and *trying* to wear it indicates that this symbol does not hold particular significance for her:

> We have rings, there you go that one [shows interviewer the ring], we got that after a few months… when I do the washing up… I just sort of leave them lying round and then they kind of get left, but apart from that, then I try to wear it (Alice F07b).

These two contrasting accounts highlight the three main themes evident in the data – first, the notion that there are no 'role models' for same-sex relationship celebrations, they are 'unscripted and improvised'. For some couples – like Thelma and Liv – this allowed them to create their own unique and meaningful relational rituals; for others the lack of role models was perceived as problematic. A particular aspect of the 'unscripted' nature of same-sex relationship celebrations was the lack of language for talking about relationship rituals and symbols. Second, many participants – like Thelma – expressed ambivalence about a 'big show' or – like Alice – downplayed the significance of any union rituals they had participated in. Third, although many

participants were ambivalent about a 'big show' in front of family, most accounts were underpinned by a directly or indirectly expressed need for familial recognition. Furthermore, some participants argued that partnership rituals were ultimately meaningless without legal recognition.

Unscripted and improvised: Problem or Possibility?

> 'would we both wear dresses?' and then just looking at that [two women in bridal gowns] and you're thinking 'that looks weird' because it's not something that's very common but we wouldn't wanna have one wear a dress, one wear trousers because it [our relationship] doesn't work like that… you don't see gay people getting married very often (Janet F15b).

> we were able to create our own ceremony and whilst we retained executive control, we invited people we wanted there to play the roles that they wanted to play… there was something nice about getting people to contribute, to make sense of the event in the way that they wanted to make sense of it… and I guess my fear about it being a registrar and feeling like we're in a queue amongst other people who are going in for a half hour slot is that potentially that stuff might interfere with us coming to our own understanding about our relationship, so having the freedom was good. I had always been very anti gay marriages, I'd always felt that they were about aping heterosexual relationships… [but] I was saying something very personal about myself and my relationship and the people around me, it wasn't about trying to be like any other couple, it was about trying to be true to my own relationship and I have a slight fear that that might get lost if there is a format provided, so there was something fun about spinning it for ourselves (Will M18a).

Janet neatly captures the challenges some of the participants felt they would have, or had, had, to negotiate in participating in a public celebration of their relationship. They were acutely aware of the lack of a distinctly queer socio-cultural script from which to plan such a celebration (Lannutti, 2008a; Oswald, 2002; Reczek, Elliott & Umberson, 2009). Heteronormative conventions provided a script of sorts – for some, this was something that could be reconfigured or resisted, for a few, it was *the* template; either way these conventions formed a backdrop to all of the participants' accounts (Smart, 2008). Some participants (like Janet) viewed the lack of a specifically queer template as a problem (we dub this small group of participants 'heterosexual wedding script followers'). Janet felt caught in a queer dilemma between her and her partner appearing to be weird 'chicks in white satin' or a butch/femme dyad. Neither option felt authentic to Janet, but she couldn't imagine what the alternative might be. Her partner was concerned that a queer wedding might be a 'farce', a pale and humorous imitation of a straight wedding, and their straight family and friends would laugh at the queer manifestation before them (Smart, 2008). Deep down Janet would 'love to wear a white dress', but she was willing to forego her white wedding fantasy for her partner (who harboured no such desires), and settle for a 'party' with her family and friends (Smart, 2008). A few participants – like Janet – positioned themselves very firmly within heteronormative discourses and showed little investment in being a queer revolutionary. Janet was very keen to 'get married' and conceived of marriage and weddings in heteronormative, romantic terms: 'I just think a marriage is about telling all your friends and family this is the person you love and you want to spend the rest of your life with, and you want to share everything with, and that's what I see a marriage as'. Similarly, Dan's (M22a) partner, Rick, did not 'feel the need to have it [their

relationship] ratified in front of anyone', but for Dan 'the old romantic in me' wants to 'let everyone else know the feelings that I've got for Rick'.

Other participants welcomed the freedom and control granted by the lack of a script for same-sex relationships (this group – the largest – are 'script reworkers'). Will contrasts the creativity and control he and Bruce had with the conveyer belt wedding. Note the powerful contrast between being 'in a queue… for a half hour slot' and having a 'format', versus having 'freedom', 'coming to our own understanding', 'saying something very personal', 'being true to my own relationship', and 'spinning it for ourselves'. This suggests that while commitment ceremonies might not be meaningful in political and legal terms, they are deeply personally meaningful (Liddle & Liddle, 2004). What heterosexuals gain in rights, they lose out in personal significance when they conform to cultural prescriptions for weddings (Currie, 1993). It is precisely the absence of legal recognition that grants Will and Bruce the freedom to be 'authentic', to reflect their innermost feelings and desires in their commitment ceremony (Lewin, 1998; Smart, 2008). In this regard, Will and Bruce conform to another set of normative impulses – neo-liberal expectations around authentic individuality (Gill, Henwood & McLean, 2005).

Will, like many other participants, oriented to the politically contentious nature of same-sex weddings. He voices a potential criticism ('I had always been very anti gay weddings [because] they were about aping heterosexuality'), but then shows how his celebration defied such critique. Bruce (M18b) wryly commented on the potential for 'aping' heterosexuality when he noted that he has 'seen lesbian couples doing frightening things like [one wearing a suit and one wearing a dress]' (Weeks et al., 2001). Interestingly, some participants attempted to resist the traditional heterosexual formula model of 'marriage + reception = wedding' by

separating out the different elements of their Civil Partnership registration and celebration. Some were planning to register their Civil Partnership on one day (perhaps followed by a private celebration as a couple and/or with their two witnesses) and then have a 'party' a few days or months later (and this was couched as a party, rather than a reception).

Some participants were concerned to point out that their ring exchanges did not connote the same meanings as heterosexual engagement and wedding rings, which they framed as sexual 'ownership' or 'possession' of your partner and monogamy. Although Pete's (M21a) ring exchange with his partner Paul on their second anniversary 'adds to the closeness of their relationship', they chose to wear their rings on their right hands because 'we're not sort of trying to let people know that you're married or, you know, unavailable'. For some participants, wearing rings was a way of symbolising the nature of their commitment to and for each other, rather than a way of communicating their relationship status to others.

Some participants were 'script rejectors' because of a desire to resist heteronormative expectations:

> it's just not that important to us, it feels a bit like imitating heterosexuals, you know, that's what you're expected to do (Sarah F13a).

> I don't want to follow the traditional heterosexual lifestyle (Ben M09a).

These participants positioned themselves outside of heterosexual norms and offered an implicitly or explicitly feminist and/or queer informed critique of the institution and practice of heterosexuality. Thelma (F08), one of a small number of the female participants who was previously heterosexually married before coming out as lesbian, felt that heterosexual marriage vows were oppressive: 'I felt terribly constrained by being married, I felt obliged to fit into the

role, to fit into a norm, I felt that my marriage vows weighed very heavily and the idea of trying to honour those vows felt terribly restrictive and made me feel quite uncomfortable'. Thelma contrasted her more 'free' and 'fluid' commitment to her partner Liv with the 'forever and ever' vows of heterosexual marriage (Stiers, 1999). Thelma didn't want to bring 'the heterosexual norms of marriage' into her relationship with Liv and was concerned about people reading butch/femme roles into their relationship. She felt restricted by heterosexual friends' attempts to understand their relationship through their 'own pattern' – a 'heterosexual matrix' (Butler, 2002) – and thought that having a wedding-like celebration would only fuel such attempts.

Lack of language. The lack of language available to participants for talking about *same-sex* relationship celebrations was strongly apparent in the data. Many participants expressed a great deal of discomfort around using words like 'marriage', 'wedding', 'reception' and 'honeymoon' (Stiers, 1999). At the same time, some participants had mixed feelings about alternative terminology such as 'civil partnership', 'commitment ceremony', 'party' and 'holiday'. There were different reasons for this. For many participants, the language of marriage was deeply heteronormative (Stiers, 1999), and the language of Civil Partnership was simply a pale imitation of this. Some felt that the language of Civil Partnership was just plain 'ugly' – Stef (F14a) poetically noted that it 'doesn't have the same ring to it' – and there was no meaningful alternative to 'getting married'. Some participants experimented with and stumbled over terms like 'civilly partnered', 'partnerised' or 'committed' and many jokes were made about the rather unfortunate connotations of such terms (Steirs, 1999). Such terms were also felt by some to not convey the significance of the event (as something on a par with, but not necessarily the same as, marriage) (Shipman & Smart, 2007). It may also be the case that these

participants felt uncomfortable using terms like 'marriage' and 'wedding' to describe a legal institution (Civil Partnership) that is not-quite-marriage.

Participants often repaired their use of language or used more than one term to clarify their meaning, for instance: 'we're having a party, a reception' (John M19a); 'maybe we will do a sort of celebration, wedding' (Brenda F11b). The use of 'a party, a reception' and 'a sort of celebration, wedding' perhaps signals that the event being described is neither and both at the same time. It is also possible that our attempt to use 'neutral' (but non-heteronormative) language simply didn't work. We may have (unintentionally) communicated to the participants a set of assumptions about queer politics, and they attended to this by actively displaying ambivalence about using, what might be perceived as, 'politically incorrect' terminology (Weeks et al., 2001). Some participants found ways to signal a lack of personal investment in and critical distance from such words: 'we're having a wedding in inverted commas' (John M19a); 'the, in inverted commas, honeymoon' (Pete M21a).

Some thought heteronormative language was pragmatically useful (if ideologically suspect), or was literally the only language available. For instance, John (M19a) commented that: 'I use the word wedding and marriage because those words are common because, it's not how I feel about it in terms of how I relate to the ceremony and the day and the event, that's the nearest equivalent' (John M19a). Bruce (M18b) talked about the fact that he and his partner Will: 'had to talk about to our parents to whom this was new, and Will's grandmother, who's like 96, we had to talk about the fact that we were getting married and we were having a wedding … only for them it was a frame of reference' (Bruce M18b). Bruce and Will did not want their relationship and their celebration of it to be (viewed as) a poor copy of a wedding, an inferior imitation of heterosexuality (rather than an authentic expression of their individuality). However,

the language of marriage provided a bridge between the straight world of their family and the queer world of same-sex weddings – a way of making their queer celebration meaningful for their straight family (Shipman & Smart, 2007; Stiers, 1999). Other participants were very concerned to avoid the language of marriage and to signal their difference: 'we will have a celebration with friends and family, don't really want to use the word wedding, 'cos I'm not really sure if that's appropriate, it's a celebration' (Pete M21a). Some thought that 'union rituals' such as ring exchanges did not signal the degree or type of relational commitment associated with a heterosexual engagement. Mike (M16b) was concerned to distinguish his ring exchange with his partner Luke from a formal engagement because it did not signal that magnitude of commitment; in his view they were 'not ready' for that type of commitment (Stiers, 1999). Note that even though Mike emphasises the differences between his ring exchange and a heterosexual engagement, heterosexual marriage nonetheless provides *the* yardstick for judging the degree or type of a relational commitment.

Ambivalence about a 'Big Show'

Many of the participants downplayed the significance of any relationship celebrations they had had: 'we did sort of have a little commitment… a sort of little private ceremony' (Erica F03b); 'we have exchanged rings but not for formal reasons… just a token really, nothing not like a formal engagement' (Mike M16a); 'we just go out for a meal on our anniversary' (Luke M16a). The same kind of language was used to describe potential and planned future celebrations: 'the minimum amount of people needed… maybe a little party afterwards' (Debra F04a); 'I see it as a fairly low key almost bureaucratic thing' (Jen F13b); 'it's not a huge family affair, it's something that's quite sort of small and discreet' (Stef F14a). One thing that is striking about these (and many other) examples is the participants' use of minimising language

('a *little* party', 'a *little* commitment', '*just* a token really', 'we *just* go out for a meal'). Through their use of such language, the participants played down the significance of celebrations, and also their degree of formality or size. There is an implicit contrast between their 'low key' celebrations and the 'big show' and 'huge family affair' perceived to be typical of heterosexual weddings (Currie, 1993). Participants appeared to orient to the normative status of *public* (and 'huge') relationship celebrations by indicating that their 'little', 'token', 'low key' and often private partnership rituals did not count as authentic celebrations of commitment. Reczek et al. (2009) also commented on the minimising language used by their participants ('just a... almost passing thing', p. 7). They argued that such language reflected the fact that their participants' commitment ceremonies celebrated a pre-existing and often long-standing commitment, rather than symbolised the *making* of a commitment.

Participants may have also wanted to distance their relational celebrations from the spectacular nature of heterosexual relationship rituals (an interesting reversal of the usual criticism of the public 'flaunting' of queer sexuality) (Weeks et al., 2001). Only a few participants expressed a desire for a big celebration, and even for those participants, most wanted 'just basically a big party' (Janet F15b) rather than a formal wedding-like celebration. Many wanted something akin to what Smart (2008: 767) has dubbed 'minimalist' (rather than 'demonstrative') weddings; the purpose of which is 'certainly not to go 'whoo hoo hoo, look at us'' (Martha F12b). As Chris (F10b) noted: 'a private gesture between two of us is more likely to happen than some big party for hundreds of people where we're 'hey everybody look at us''. Some felt that public celebrations were unnecessary and found heterosexual's desire for social display (Finch, 2007), and their entitlement to public space, rather mystifying (Wise & Stanley, 2004). Rick (M22b) commented 'I just don't see public recognition to be important at all,

people should recognise my relationship with Dan just in everyday interaction, they shouldn't have to all come together and buy you stuff (laughs)'. Like Oswald's (2000) participants, some of our participants were also critical of the materialism of the 'big show' heterosexual wedding – note Rick's rather dismissive phrasing: 'buy you stuff' (and see also Martha's 'buy all this guff' below).

A few participants were uncertain about participating in a public celebration of their relationship because of the level of 'outness' required (Suter et al., 2006). A few were also uncomfortable about being out or 'flaunting' their sexuality in front of their family, and particularly their parents. They didn't want to put their family's tolerance to the test:

> I'm a little apprehensive about going and doing something which is very very public... I don't think I'd feel comfortable… it would be a public statement (Marnie F01a).

> I get a bit scared about showing that we're together just to any old people, whereas she's like couldn't give a shit, you know, she's gay and she's proud of it (Di F15a).

Di felt she had achieved an equilibrium of sorts with her family and she wanted to maintain that for now. She would have a wedding:

> if I didn't have to invite my family, because my family know I'm gay and they're fine with it, and they love Janet, but I don't think they'd appreciate me kissing her in front of them or being all over her around them… I just don't know if it's accepted within my family, and I'm not prepared to start trying to make them accept (Di F15a).

Di indicates her uncertainly about her family's feelings about her sexuality by initially claiming that her family is 'fine' with her being gay and then downgrading this to not knowing for certain whether her sexuality and her relationship are 'accepted' by her family. Public

relationship celebrations provide some LGB people with uncomfortable opportunities for reflecting on their family's true feelings about their sexuality (Smart, 2007). By assuming family involvement in wedding-like celebrations, these participants clearly oriented to the normative status of (heterosexual) weddings as 'huge family affairs'.

Some participants perceived very close connections between weddings/marriage and religious beliefs (our sample mainly referred to christianity when discussing religion), and did not want a 'church' or a big public celebration for this reason:

I don't want all the religious connotations associated with it (Kate F07a).

with regard to the churchy ceremonial side… I can't see why people should want to do that you just celebrate with the other person, you don't need to have a formal celebration (Bert M06a).

Although some participants identified as religious/spiritual, this was by-and-large a secular sample. By contrast roughly one quarter of Smart's (2008) sample opted for a religious wedding, and most of the commitment ceremonies Lewin (1998) discussed included religious or spiritual elements. There was a strong emphasis on civil celebrations (and recognition) in our the data, but most participants were keen to defend other people's right to choose how to celebrate their relationship. As Alice (F07b) noted, 'if you're deeply religious… you want to go all the way and have a church ceremony'. Some participants suggested that when Civil Partnership became available, it should be extended to everyone (replacing civil weddings/marriage for heterosexual couples), and church weddings should become an optional 'extra' for religious couples, something akin to a church blessing.

The Ultimate Importance of Public (Familial and Legal) Recognition

it [our commitment ceremony] was about publicly testifying to our relationship and encouraging people around is to acknowledge it as on a par with their own relationships (Will M18a).

…there's also a bit of me that would very much like to get my straight family and friends in particular to come and celebrate our relationship, particularly because everybody seems to be getting married at the moment and it causes me a lot of stress… it's not reciprocal… it'd be like a balancing out of kind of historical inequity (Martha F12b).

Many participants viewed external, and particularly familial, affirmation as an important motivation 'to stand up and be counted in public' (John M19a) (Oswald, 2000). Some participants noted that they had been to lots of heterosexual friends and family member's weddings and they had often been subject to heterosexism at these events (Oswald, 2000). There was also the not inconsiderable expense of attending a wedding. As Martha (F12b) noted in relation to a family wedding she and her partner Una attended recently 'it cost hundreds of pounds to get there, you buy a present, you make all this effort, you have to buy all this guff to go and say 'there you've got a relationship''. Spending lots of money and enduring heterosexism was particularly grating for Martha in the context of celebrating a relationship that receives far more social validation than her own. For these reasons, it was especially important to some participants for family and friends to celebrate their relationships and in so doing provide, as Martha suggests, reciprocal affirmation. Mike (M16a) thought that a relationship celebration might change his family's perception of his relationship as:

a phase I'm going through and, you know, probably still kind of hoping that one day I will meet the woman of my dreams and have a couple of screaming brats (laughs)… I

think if we entered into a commitment ceremony, I think that would demonstrate to them how serious our relationship is.

Mike (M16a) observed that because of (fears and anxieties about) familial homophobia, same-sex weddings are not necessarily joyful family occasions. The fear and sadness around (potentially) negative family responses expressed by some participants suggests that deep-down securing family recognition was crucial for them (Shipman & Smart, 2007). It is important to note that our (predominantly middle class) participants were by-and-large not dependent on their families of origin for material and practical support. All of the participants who were planning commitment ceremonies or Civil Partnership celebrations indicated that they were footing the bill for these events. But even for this group, familial approval of, and inclusion in, relationship celebrations was very important (Shipman & Smart, 2007, Weeks et al., 2001).

Andi (F14b) felt that her and her partner Stef's commitment ceremony would be 'an official way of… recognising our relationship' in the absence of legal recognition (Liddle & Liddle, 2004). However, for some participants, public celebrations had little meaning when they were not legally recognised (Reczek et al., 2009; Suter et al., 2006):

I did have a commitment ceremony with a previous partner… and I think when the relationship split up I realised that for me having any kind of commitment ceremony without any kind of legal status or social status is actually fairly meaningless (Martha F12b).

with civil partnerships becoming recognised that might actually be the prompt when we get something practical out of it (Evan M17a).

Some participants thought that gaining access to rights was ultimately more important than public and familial recognition and celebration of their relationships. David (M17b) was a christian minister and even though he had performed lots of blessings and encouraged other same-sex couples to have a blessing or a commitment ceremony, he and his partner Evan had never had a blessing because of the lack of legal rights attached to such ceremonies. As noted above, even those participants who had had or were planning a commitment ceremony felt that the best option would be combining this ceremony with registering a Civil Partnership. Some participants, like Martha, felt that commitment ceremonies did not bind couples together in the same way that a Civil Partnership/marriage would do (Stiers, 1999).

Discussion

By exploring the meanings of what can broadly be defined as same-sex relational practices – those everyday activities through which 'family' comes into being (Morgan, 1999) – we can understand something about how same-sex relationships are constituted and how LGB people (re)negotiate the boundaries of family by incorporating, resisting, and re-working the rituals and symbols of heterosexual union in their own relationship celebrations. In their work on 'families of choice', Weeks et al. (2001, p. 191) ask an either/or question: 'is the general goal one of wanting to be included in a society still dominated by a strong heterosexual assumption; or is it to seek a recognition of different ways of life?' In other words, a choice between becoming assimilated into the dominant heterosexual culture so that same-sex relationships 'look like' heterosexual ones or retaining choice and creativity and challenging traditional conceptions of family (Weeks et al., 2001). Like Lewin (1998), we seek to move beyond this dualistic framing. Our interpretation of the meanings of same-sex relationship celebrations is underpinned by an understanding of family as a mundane social accomplishment

within which such celebrations might achieve both assimilation and subversion in multiple ways, and have both deeply personal (private) and profoundly political (public) meanings.

A same-sex wedding can be at once a public affirmation of a same-sex relationship, of life outside of heterosexuality, and collusion in heteronormativity (Lewin, 1998; Smart, 2007; Weeks et al., 2001). There were multiple stories of relationship celebrations in our data, and within individual participants' accounts. However, many of our participants valued the freedom and creativity that comes from living outside the heterosexual norm and many sought ways to affirm their relationship without adhering to traditional heterosexual standards. Like Weeks et al.'s (2001: 129) participants, many of our participants were 'reluctant to do anything that seem[ed] 'too heterosexual''; many simultaneously felt ambivalent about and heavily emotionally invested in their relationships rituals. Private celebrations were often perceived as more personally meaningful that public celebrations; however, responses from family members were crucial in affirming the validity of same-sex relationships (Shipman & Smart, 2007; Suter et al., 2006; Weeks et al., 2001).

As noted in the introduction, the Civil Partnership Act passed into law during data collection. This meant that for our interview participants, legal recognition of their relationships was either a growing possibility or a concrete (if future) reality. This study, then, like that of Smart (2007, 2008; Shipman & Smart, 2007), captures a particular moment in history: our participants had forged their relationships when the legal recognition of same-sex relationships seemed like a fairy tale. All same-sex couples in the UK coming together after December 2005 will always be forming relationships in the context of Civil Partnership. There may therefore grow up new and normative expectations for same-sex relationships, but our sample of interview participants was free

of such expectations. For this reason they are the group most likely to experience the potential reconfiguration of intimacy prompted by this legal change. As one of our participants commented – the LGB community will have to adjust to forming relationships in the context of Civil Partnership and the possibility of having Civil Partnership as the final step in their relational journey (Clarke, Burgoyne & Burns, 2007). This participant (Janet) was concerned that members of the LGB community would treat Civil Partnership too lightly. She discussed friends who were getting 'engaged' and planning to have a Civil Partnership 'because they could' (in her view, the wrong reason). Other participants felt that many same-sex couples do not conceptualise their relationships as a lifetime commitment because they haven't had access to marriage. One (Martha) commented that marriage (or a marriage-like celebration) was not a yardstick for same-sex couples, by which they assessed, and indicated to each other or to others, the nature or strength of their commitment (Reczek et al., 2009). This may change in years to come, and couples may use the Civil Partnership celebrations they have attended as a template for organising their own celebration, but even then such celebrations will inevitably nod to heterosexual weddings.

Same-sex weddings, commitment ceremonies and other union rituals such as anniversaries and ring exchanges are not denuded of their gendered meanings when performed in a same-sex context (which is not to say that the meanings of these events are fixed) (Oerton, 1997). Although same-sex couples are not brides and grooms, same-sex weddings and other relationship celebrations, are framed by heteronormative expectations. Expectations that fall even more heavily on heterosexual couples, which they are compelling to negotiate when participating in engagement parties, weddings,

Valentine's day celebrations, wedding anniversaries and so on. Although there is huge variation in the wedding as text and cultural production (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2002), the 'white wedding' occupies a particularly hegemonic position in the western cultural imagination (Ingraham, 1999), and for many forms the basis of the conventional wedding script. Public relationship celebrations such as weddings are social productions. Although the couple (and their queer family) may intend to resist or rework (or somehow get beyond) heteronormative conventions, these intentions may be lost on their heterosexual family and friends who read the queer event through a heterosexual lens and in relation to the conventional wedding script. Furthermore, the relational dynamics of power and resistance mean that, as Peel and Harding (2004: 45; see also Smart, 2008) observed, 'any public validation of our relationships is always in reference to the framework of heterosexual marriage. You are either resisting it, or you are colluding with it. Even by resisting it, you are acknowledging it.' What this discussion shows is the lack of cultural validation for queer formations – although LGB people now register Civil Partnerships every day, the (initial) discursive formation of Civil Partnership is still being negotiated ('is it same-sex marriage? 'Is it something else entirely?'). This reveals the complexity of achieving equality – queers can slip into the heteronormative gaps between legal and cultural recognition.

It is important to note that this study has only captured the views of a relatively privileged (largely white, highly educated, middle class, professional), financially independent, secular, group of LGB people, most of whom lived life 'out of the closet'. Although many of our participants expressed a desire for their families of origin to be involved in, or to acknowledge, their relationship celebrations, none were especially reliant on their wider family

to cover the costs of wedding-type celebrations. It may be that less privileged (and more religious) LGB people have rather different stories to tell; for example, cultural, familial and religious obligations (Yip, 2004) may prevent public celebrations. Furthermore, although we aimed to be inclusive of bisexual people in same-sex relationships, only 1 (male) participant identified as bisexual. As Lannutti (2008b) notes, most research on same-sex marriage has focused on lesbians and gay men and neglected the experiences of same-sex couples in which one or both partners identifies as bisexual. Future research on relationship celebrations should aim to capture some of these other stories. The legal context of same-sex relationships has changed significantly in the UK with the introduction of Civil Partnership, the removal of the restrictions around the religious content and location of Civil Partnership ceremonies, and the potential introduction of same-sex marriage. The UK is one of an increasing number of countries offering some form of legal recognition to same-sex relationships. Such changes create exciting opportunities for exploring the meanings attached to relationship recognition and celebration for individual LGB people and for the wider LGB community

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Table 1: Participant Demographics (N = 44) (Adapted from Clarke, Burgoyne & Burns, 2006)

Sexuality	Lesbian: 24 participants Gay male: 19 participants Bisexual male: 1 participant
Race/ethnicity	White UK: 37 participants White Other: 5 participants Pakistani: 2 participants
Disabled/able-bodied	Able-bodied: 43 participants Disabled: 1 participant
Age (range)	22-62 (mean: 36)
Qualifications	No legible data: 1 participant No qualifications: 2 participants Secondary level qualifications: 6 participants Tertiary level qualifications: 35 participants
Children	Children: 4 participants Foster Children: 2 couples
Length of relationship (range)	6 months–33 years (15 couples 1-9 years; 7 couples 10+ years)
Cohabiting	Cohabiting full time: 20 couples Cohabiting part time: 1 couple Not cohabiting: 1 couple
Rented/owned home	Renting: 4 couples Owner-occupiers: 16 couples One partner rents/one partner owns: 2 couples
Employment	Full time: 33 participants: £10,000-£63,000 (mean approx. £29,000) Part-time: 10 participants: £2,000-£18,000 (mean approx. £9,000) No data: 1 participant

Table 2: Overview of Participants' Past and Planned Relationship Celebrations (Adapted from Clarke, Burgoyne & Burns, 2006)

Couple (a/b)	Relationship Length	Relationship celebration(s) to date and concrete future plans	Plans regarding registering a Civil Partnership (CP)
1 Marnie/Laurel	2 years	No (formal) celebrations reported	Undecided/not agreed about CP registration/a public celebration
2 Salma/Yasmin	1 year	No (formal) celebrations reported	Undecided/not agreed about CP registration
3 Erica/Paula	10 years	Ring exchange; private commitment ritual (when started cohabiting)	Undecided/ambivalent/not ready for CP registration/a wedding (traditional wedding script rejected)
4 Sally/Debra	5 years	Ring exchange	Yes to CP registration and a 'low key' celebration (traditional wedding script rejected)
5 Marcus/Steve	29 years	Marcus gave Steve a ring; joint mortgage	Yes to CP registration, no to a celebration (traditional wedding script rejected)
6 Bert/Eddie	33 years 6 months	Anniversary party; signing wills and joint mortgage	Yes to CP registration, no to a celebration (traditional wedding script rejected)
7 Kate/Alice	6 years	Ring exchange (Alice wears on right hand)	Undecided/not agreed about CP registration (any celebration would be 'low key')
8 Thelma/Liv	22 years	Ring exchange; anniversary celebrations (including private couple ritual); attending Stonewall Equality Show	Undecided/ambivalent about CP registration and a celebration
9 Ben/James	4 years	No (formal) celebrations reported	No to CP registration (traditional wedding script rejected)
10 Mandy/Chris	3 years 3 months	No (formal) celebrations reported	Undecided/not agreed about CP registration (any celebration would be 'low key'/private; traditional wedding script rejected)
11 Wilma/Brenda	5 years 6 months	No (formal) celebrations reported	Yes to CP registration, ambivalent about a wedding/public celebration (traditional wedding script reworked)
12 Una/Martha	1 years 9 months	No (formal) celebrations reported	Yes to CP registration, undecided about a wedding/public celebration (traditional wedding script reworked)
13 Sarah/Jen	3 years 9 months	No (formal) celebrations reported	Undecided/not agreed about CP registration and a celebration (traditional wedding script rejected)

14 Steph/Andi	5 years 3 months	'Engaged' (ring exchange); planning a humanist/Pagan commitment ceremony (traditional wedding script reworked)	Yes to CP registration, no to (another) celebration
15 Di/Janet	2 years 3 months	Ring exchange	Yes to CP registration, undecided/not agreed about a public celebration (traditional wedding script followed/reworked)
16 Mike/Luke	2 years 6 months	Ring exchange; anniversary celebration (private or with friends)	Undecided/not agreed about CP registration/a wedding (traditional wedding script followed)
17 Evan/David	11 years	Ring exchange; joint mortgage	Yes to CP registration (any celebration would be low key; traditional wedding script reworked)
18 Will/Bruce	8 years 6 months	Commitment ceremony (traditional wedding script reworked)	Yes to CP registration, undecided about another celebration
19 John/Heath	22 years	Celebration of significant anniversaries including a ring exchange on 5 and 16 year anniversary, holiday on 10 year anniversary; party for friends; party/reception for friends and family and holiday to celebrate CP registration planned	Yes to CP registration, party/reception for friends and family and holiday to celebrate CP registration planned (traditional wedding script reworked)
20 Aron/Dec	10 years	Party planned for 10 year anniversary	Undecided/not agreed about CP registration
21 Pete/Paul	4 years	Ring exchange on 2 year anniversary (worn on right hand)	Yes to CP, party with friends and family and holiday to celebrate CP registration planned
22 Dan/Rick	6 months	No (formal) celebrations reported	Undecided/not agreed about CP registration and a public celebration