



SCARR

Social Contexts
and Responses to Risk



Gay and Lesbian Marriage: An exploration of the meanings and significance of legitimating same sex relationships

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Getting married (or to use the correct but less colloquial terminology 'entering into a civil partnership') poses a number of important issues for same-sex couples. Being able to get married is, of course, a new legal entitlement and so there is an inevitable period of adjustment. We found that the reasons couples enter into a CP can vary according to their age, whether they have children, their need to access certain legal rights and their views on the institution of marriage itself. Little attention has been paid, however, to what getting married means for the couple's relationships with their family of origin or with their friends. We found that couples had to face some difficult emotional issues. With parents and siblings their reactions were obviously related to whether they already accepted their son's or daughter's (or brother or sister's) sexuality. In cases where families were relaxed about the question of sexuality we found that parents treated the event as a way of acknowledging the legitimacy of their son's or daughter's relationship. The new in-law was welcomed as a member of the family and this was a cause for celebration.

At the other extreme some gay men and lesbians experienced telling their families of their plans as like 'coming out' again. Although they may have told their parents years previously, it seemed that the parents had 'forgotten'. In other words the parents had shelved the issue and decided to ignore it which meant that an announcement about a ceremony or CP brought the issue back into the light. For some parents it meant that they could no longer assume that their son or daughter was going through a 'phase' that they would grow out of. The reaction of friends could also pose problems. While some could be entirely supportive, others saw it as a capitulation to heterosexual norms and to straight society.

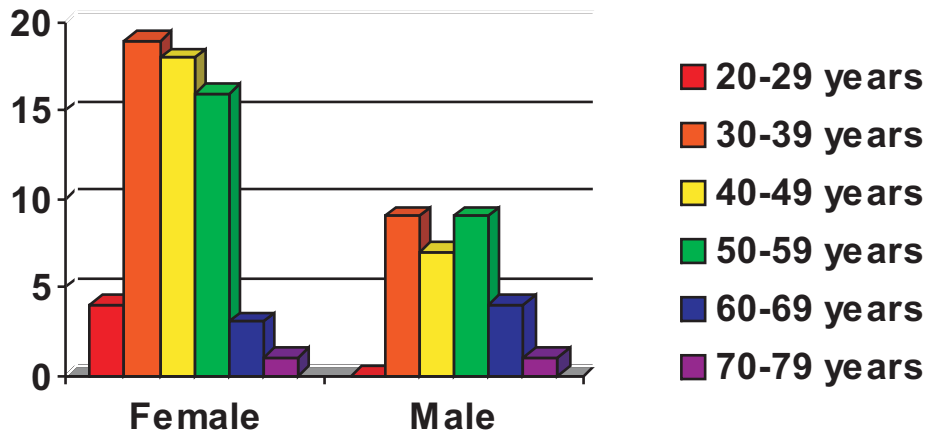
The study

This was a small scale qualitative study based on in-depth interviews carried out in England in 2004/5. There were 40 couples and 14 individual interviewees, a total of 61 women and 30 men. The age range was between 23 and 75, the majority falling between 30 and 60. All respondents, except one, described themselves as white (mainly White British, White English, White Scottish etc) and our sample was disproportionately 'middle class' (a ratio of 8:1) taking into account factors of education level, the nature of employment and housing tenure. Just over one third of our sample described themselves as having a faith or being part of a particular church congregation.

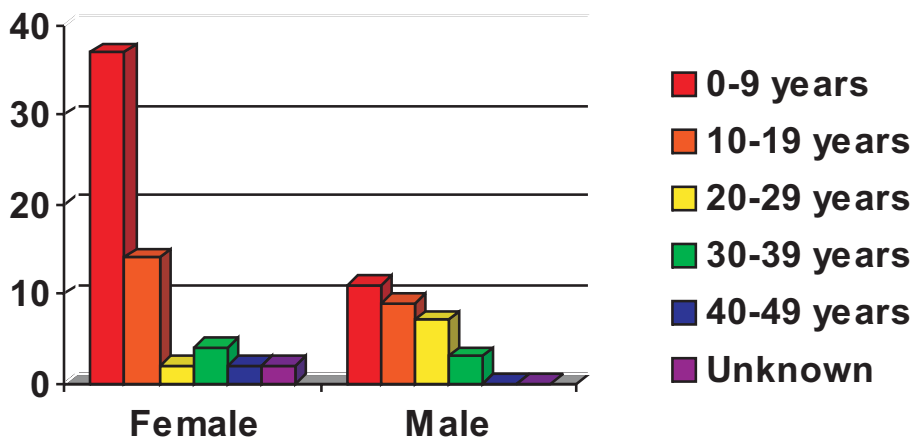
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It should be noted that when we started the research Civil Partnership had not been introduced and so these couples were ones who had registered their partnership or who had been through a non-legal ceremony of commitment. Many were planning a full CP as well.

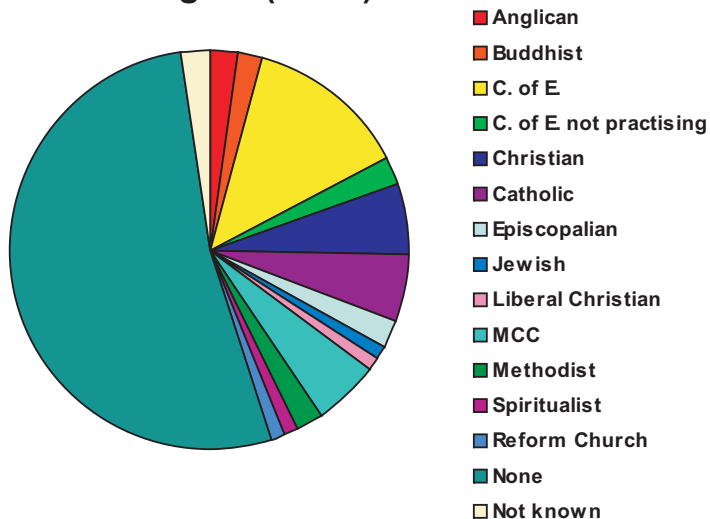
Age of Respondents



Length of Relationship



Religion (Total)





Risk and Intimate Relationships

Professor Jane Lewis, LSE (J.Lewis@lse.ac.uk) and Sophie Sarre, LSE (Sophie@sophiesarre.eclipse.co.uk), with assistance from Jenny Burton, University of Oxford, and Philip Noden, LSE

The Research Questions

The 'traditional family' has undergone huge and rapid change: there is more choice in terms of both partnering and the nature of the contributions (in terms of paid work and unpaid carework) that men and women make to households. However, these processes of 'individualisation' have also given rise to more uncertainty.

In these changed circumstances:

- Are people likely to make only contingent commitments, or might they be more anxious to achieve a relationship founded on trust and commitment?
- What implications do people's own understandings of their situations have for policymakers grappling with whether and how to regulate different partnership statuses in different ways?

We interviewed three groups: cohabiting and married people, re-partnered people and those Living-Apart-Together ('LATs'). Among the first group:

- Risk was perceived to attach more to making commitments in the form of house purchase, or having children, than to the particular status of cohabitation or marriage.
- Respondents recognised that they were taking a risk in entering a relationship and sought to minimise it, usually by trying to make sure that they had something to fall back on financially.
- We think that, for our interviewees, this approach to entering a relationship was not so much an expression of selfish individualism and the preparation of an 'exit strategy', as a precautionary measure that actually enabled them to take the risk of partnering.
- The arrival of children changed or threatened to change the nature of the bargains that respondents had made and to destabilise relationships.

Interviewees who had re-partnered might be expected to be more aware of risks:

- For these people, building trust was crucial and the nature of the relationship they chose to enter was part of this. Changes in the status of their relationship were often part of the process of building trust and of achieving the goal of a rather traditional relationship.

Interviews with people who were living-apart-together showed that the meanings attributed to this form of relationship were somewhat different:

- For the people we interviewed, 'LATing' represented a different kind of shared life
- This group did not reject co-residential relationships but expressed caution about the type of sharing that they required, for example in terms of financial resources as well as space.
- Never-married respondents had different reasons for 'LATing' from divorced respondents, who often felt that co-residence would be too

difficult for their dependent children from their first marriage.

Many of our respondents had changed their status between the time of survey and interview. Relationships are remarkably fluid, transitions between different statuses are commonly contemplated (and occur), and the notion of 'stages' in partnership is probably not very helpful. Yet the boundaries between different statuses still have meaning for those experiencing them, which means that the circumstances under which the law may begin to treat them the same must be carefully weighed.

The research

We drew samples for intensive qualitative interviewing using a semi-structured interview schedule from two representative ONS Omnibus sample surveys. The first and second groups interviewed (21 cohabiting and married men and women and 7 people who had re-partnered) were drawn from an inner London borough, an outer London borough and a West Midlands town in 2003. The 12 LAT interviewees and a further 23 re-partnered people who agreed to interview were drawn from the second survey in 2004.

In the case of our exploratory study of people 'living-apart-together' (LAT), the interviews have been set in the context of a quantitative survey, carried out by John Haskey, then at the Office of National Statistics, which has attempted to find out how important this new form of relationship is.

Our work is necessarily exploratory. Most work on family change is quantitative and tells us about aggregate changes: that marriage rates are falling; cohabitation increasing etc. But this tells us little about meanings, e.g. do people in LAT relationships see these as a new and radical departure? Are they seeking to avoid co-residential cohabitation? Interview projects are time-intensive and expensive. The samples are usually small. The results can never be definitive. But the findings may serve to make us more cautious about interpreting the significance of aggregate changes.

A second phase of this project will focus more on children and on parent/child relationships.

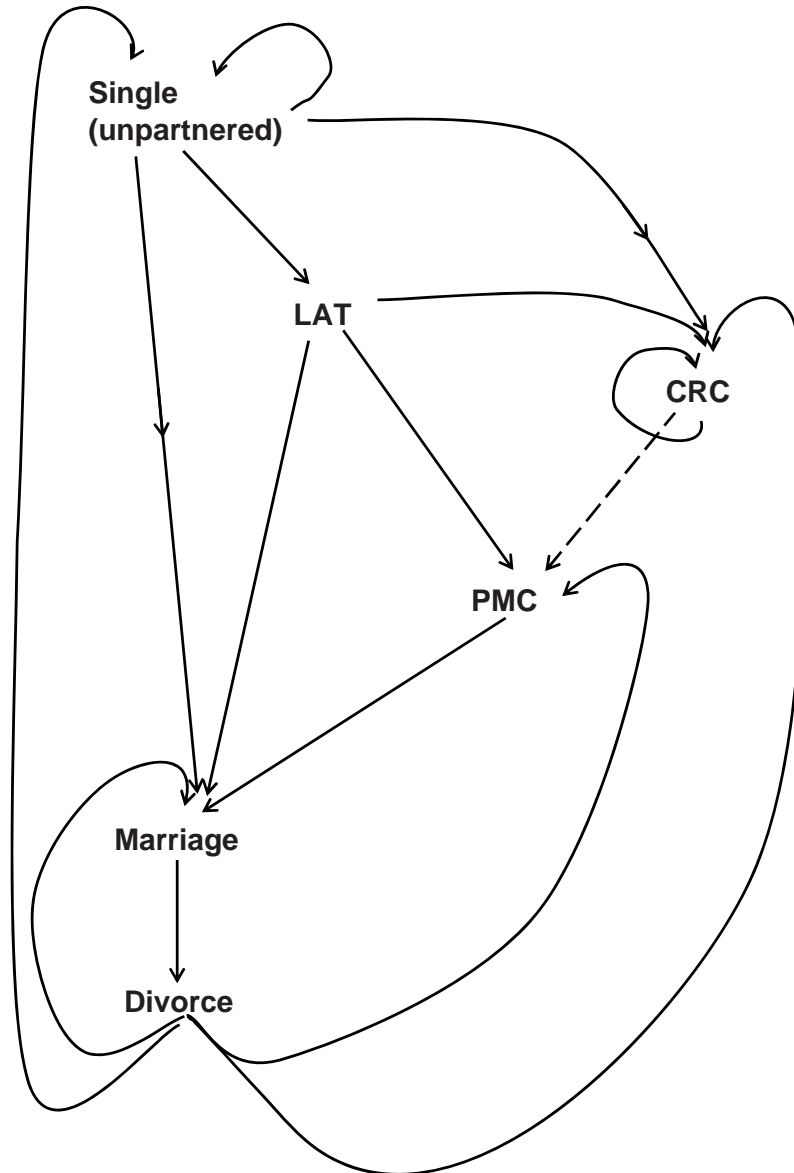
Publications

'Perceptions of Risk in Intimate Relationships' *Journal of Social Policy* (2006).

'Re-partnering and the Management of Risk' *International Journal of Law, Policy and the Family* (forthcoming).

'Living-apart-together' in Britain: Context and Meaning' *International Journal of Law in Context* (forthcoming).

Transitions between Different Forms of Partnership



LAT - Living apart together
CRC - Co-residential cohabitation
PMC - Pre-marital cohabitation (assumed co-residential)

An arrow circling a given state indicates a continuation in that state (rather than a transition out of it)
Some reverse transitions are also possible: from CRC to unpartnered, from CRC to LAT, and from LAT to unpartnered

The dotted line denotes the difficulty in distinguishing CRC and PMC as two separate stages