Just a piece of paper? A qualitative exploration of same-sex couples' multiple conceptions of civil partnership and marriage

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This paper explores 22 same-sex couples' views on civil partnership and marriage. The data are drawn from the qualitative phase of a larger study of money management and relational practices in same-sex relationships. Twenty-seven participants indicated that they were more or less likely to register their relationship as a civil partnership, 10 described themselves as undecided about partnership recognition, and six signalled a lack of interest in civil partnership (and one provided no codeable data). This summary necessarily glosses over the complexity of the data and the ways in which they are underpinned by ambivalence, contradiction, and different ways of conceptualising civil partnership, marriage, relationship recognition and celebration. We explore this complexity by presenting six themes running through the participants' talk about civil partnership and marriage. The paper concludes with a discussion of these findings in relation to the (limited) existing empirical literature on same-sex marriage and relationship recognition.

Keywords: civil partnership, lesbian and gay, marriage, qualitative, same-sex, sameness, difference.

Same-sex relationship recognition: No longer a fairy tale?

In this paper we report findings from an interview-based study of the ways in which same-sex couples conceptualise and make meaning of civil partnership, marriage and relationship recognition. The provisions of the UK Civil Partnership Act (2004) became a reality in December 2005. This legislation, which was initially proposed by the Government in the form of a consultation document in June 2003, offers same-sex relationships most of the rights and responsibilities of marriage, and represents a path to equality (of sorts) for same-sex couples in the UK (see Peel & Harding, 2004a, 2004b). The successful passage of the civil partnership legislation formed a backdrop to the research reported in this paper: the interviews were started about two months after the consultation document was published and were completed around three months after the Bill was passed into law.

The UK is one of a growing number of jurisdictions that offer some kind of recognition to same-sex partnerships (at the time of writing countries/jurisdictions that permit same-sex marriages include Belgium, the Netherlands, Spain, Canada and the US state of Massachusetts).

There are numerous popular polls examining the views of the LGB communities on same-sex marriage and a significant body of (mainly sociological) research on lesbian and gay relationships (for examples of the latter see Dunne, 1997; Kurdek, 1993). However, there is a dearth of empirical research on the meaning of marriage and partnership recognition for the non-heterosexual community (Harding & Peel, this issue). The little research there is consists of a handful of (mostly sociological and social anthropological) studies exploring the multiple meanings of lesbian and gay relationship celebrations (e.g. Clarke et al., 2006a, Lewin, 1996, 1998, 1999, Liddle &
Liddle, 2004; McQueeney, 2003; Steirs, 1999) and an equally small handful of studies exploring non-heterosexuals’ perspectives on partnership recognition (e.g. Clarke et al., 2006b; Harding, 2006; Lannutti, 2005; Solomon et al., 2005; Weeks et al., 2001; Yip, 2004; see also Harding & Peel, this issue).

Studies exploring non-heterosexuals’ perspectives on relationship recognition highlight the multiple (and often contradictory) meanings that marriage and other forms of recognition hold and the interplay of accommodation and resistance to heteronormative relationship norms and wider cultural values in respondents’ accounts. Lannutti (2005) conducted a web-based survey of 288 LGBT persons in order to assess the impact of same-sex marriage on the LGBT community. The data were collected in the US after the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court ruled that the ban on same-sex marriage in the state should be lifted. Nearly every participant mentioned that the legal recognition of same sex marriage represented an element of legal equality for LGBT people, affecting the LGBT community for the better. The theme of legal recognition had three sub-themes: first class citizenship (same-sex marriage marks the end of different legal treatment); financial benefits; and increased security for families in crisis and families with children. Lannutti noted that same-sex marriage is widely promoted as a means to ending the discrimination experienced by LGBT people, and expressions of legal equality by participants were similar to those put forth in the public domain. Lannutti described legal equality as a surface theme that was underpinned by deeper dialectical tensions. These tensions highlighted the potential for same-sex marriage to strengthen and weaken same-sex relationships, to create unity and division within the LGBT community, and to improve and worsen the relationship between the LGBT community and mainstream America, and to reduce and increase homophobia. This study thus stresses the multiplicity of meanings attached to legal recognition for members of LGBT communities in the US.

Yip (2004) surveyed 565 LGB christians’ views on partnership recognition. Although Yip’s research focused on the views of a specific group of non-heterosexuals, his findings are similar to those of Weeks et al. (2001), based on interviews with 98 non-heterosexuals. Most participants in both studies wanted equal treatment and recognition for their relationships, and supported the individual’s right to choose whether or not to take up legal recognition. Most participants in both studies were also critical of marriage, arguing that it is heteronormative and oppressive, and a restrictive and dysfunctional institution. These participants viewed heterosexual and same-sex relationships as qualitatively different and thought that marriage would assimilate lesbians and gay men into the mainstream. A small number of participants in both studies expressed a desire for marriage (in Weeks et al.’s study, a few participants also argued against any kind of legal recognition). In Yip’s study, participants who supported marriage did not see it as heterosexist and their support for marriage was based on religious and practical considerations.

Harding (2006) provided an analysis of qualitative data from an international online survey of 1538 LGBT and heterosexual people’s views on legal recognition of same-sex relationships, focused on the views of a subset of 173 lesbians and 144 gay men. She identified five themes related to perceptions of legal recognition: formal equality (and an emphasis on the similarities between LGB and heterosexual people), the relationship between legal and social change (the law produces or is a reflection of social change), the naming of legally recognised same-sex relationships (civil partnership is not enough), human rights, and citizenship claims.

Solomon et al. (2005) documented the main reasons why lesbians and gay men reported entering into a civil union in the
US State of Vermont (using a range of forced choice options). A majority (93.7 per cent) of the 336 participants (212 lesbians and 123 gay men) listed love and commitment as a reason for having a civil union, legal relationship status was the second most popular reason (91.6 per cent), followed by a desire for society to know about lesbian and gay relationships (59.7 per cent) and factors related to children (10.4 per cent). Other factors that were mentioned by less than 10 per cent of participants included property, finances, health benefits and inheritance.

Elsewhere we have explored five dimensions of civil partnership and marriage – romance rights, recognition, responsibilities and radicalism – in our qualitative data (Clarke et al., 2006b). The current paper is intended to complement this analysis by providing an overview of the participants’ views on civil partnership and by unpacking some of the complexity underpinning those views.

The aims of the current study
Our qualitative interview study is different from Yip’s (2004) and Weeks et al.’s (2001) because – like Harding (2006), Lanutti (2005) and Solomon et al. (2005) – we conducted our interviews at a time when some form of legal recognition was either a genuine prospect or a concrete (future) reality for the participants. This means that ours is one of the first UK studies to explore same-sex couples’ views on a specific piece of relationship legislation and their understandings of marriage at a time when legal recognition of same-sex relationships was firmly on the Government’s agenda. We were interested in whether and why the participants supported the legislation and the general principle of legal recognition (and what form they thought this should ideally take). When analysing the data it quickly became apparent that the participants conceived of marriage, civil partnership, equality and same-sex relationships in multiple (and often competing) ways. For instance, of the participants who said yes (more or less) to civil partnership, some viewed it as a better option than marriage, others as a lesser option and others still were ideologically opposed to but pragmatically in favour of civil partnership. As a result, we became interested in what information is concealed by yes/no questions and either/or debates. Can an open-ended qualitative exploration of same-sex couples’ views move the discussion ‘beyond pro and anti’ (Peel & Harding, 2004b) and ask more complex questions like ‘What form should legal recognition (ideally) take? ’ ‘Under what circumstances would you consider entering into a civil partnership?’ ‘What terminology should we use to talk about legally recognised relationships?’ ‘What does equality mean?’ Before presenting our analysis we outline the method of the study.

The broader study
The data are drawn from the qualitative phase of a larger study of money management and relational practices in same-sex partnerships (see also Clarke et al., 2005, 2006a, 2006b, 2006c). There is virtually no research on the economic practices of same-sex partners (see Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Carrington, 1999; Dunne, 1997; see also Clarke et al., 2005, for an overview). In the majority of heterosexual relationships, the hierarchical organisation of gender difference is reproduced in money management practices that tend to disadvantage women (Burgoyne, 1990; Burgoyne, 2004; Pahl, 1995). Our project was guided by the broad question: how are relational practices – such as money management and naming practices – conceptualised and negotiated in relationships that are not conducted against a background of hierarchical gender-difference?

Legislation and policy – like the Civil Partnership Act 2004 – that seeks simply to fit same-sex relationships into existing (dominant) heterosexual models – is founded on the assumption that heterosexual relationships represent the ideal or norm and that there are more similarities than differences
between same-sex and heterosexual relationships. However, there is evidence of important differences between same-sex and heterosexual relationships – for instance, same-sex couples tend to value and achieve equality in their relationships more than do heterosexuals (Dunne, 1997; Kurdek, 1993). From a political standpoint, some authors have highlighted ideological flaws in liberal/sameness models of same-sex relationships and identities (e.g., Clarke, 2002; Kitzinger, 1987). These – mostly radical feminist theorists – are critical both of attempts to normalise/mainstream lesbians and gay men and of the patriarchal and oppressive underpinnings of social institutions such as heterosexuality and marriage. Our aim in this study is not to compare same-sex and heterosexual relationships (although in some senses implicit comparisons are inevitable), but to start from and understand the meaning making practices and experiences of same-sex couples.

**The interview study**

**The participants**

The only recruitment criterion for participation was that informants were involved in a long-term/committed same-sex relationship – it did not matter whether partners lived together, were monogamous or had children. Our primary concern was to speak to couples who had (or could have had) some kind of a financial relationship, but we also aimed to recruit as diverse a sample as possible. The difficulties of recruiting ‘hidden’ populations such as non-heterosexuals are well-documented (Fish, 1999, Steirs, 1999). Seeking a specific sub-group of this population (i.e. long-term/committed couples) and a heterogeneous sample only adds to these difficulties. In order to attempt to achieve a diverse (convenience) sample we used a range of recruitment techniques (with varied rates of success), many of which are commonly used in LGBTQ research. We recruited through advertisements in the regional and national gay press, local LGB groups/organisations and venues, adverts on community notice boards in local ‘alternative’ bookshops and other stores, local universities, Mardi Gras/Pride events, and snowball sampling. Participants were recruited mainly in the south west of England (some were recruited in the Midlands).

The final sample consisted of 22 couples: 12 lesbian couples and 10 gay male couples. With one exception (M20a who described himself as bisexual), all of the participants identified as lesbian or gay, and most were white, middle-class, able-bodied and childless/childfree. Most of the couples cohabited and were monogamous or primary partners (some of the gay male couples had other ‘casual’ sexual partners). See Table 1 for further details of the sample. The sample is then a relatively homogenous and privileged one, that is unfortunately rather typical of research in LGBTQ psychology.

**The interviews**

A team of four female (three heterosexual, one non-heterosexual) researchers conducted the interviews: partners were interviewed separately, most concurrently, and most in their homes. Each interview lasted between 40 and 70 minutes. The interview schedule was developed on the basis of a review of the relevant literature and the schedule was revised and refined after the first eight interviews to take account of some of the unanticipated issues that emerged. Participants were asked to discuss a range of topics including civil partnership and marriage, weddings and relationship celebration, money management and financial decision-making. Our approach to conducting the interviews was to address each of the major areas of interest, but not to conform rigidly to the schedule, to allow both scope for participants to discuss what was important to them, and for comparison across the data. The precise questions asked were both responsive to the participants’
individual narratives and to the context in which they were interviewed (as noted above, participants were interviewed before and after the Civil Partnership Act 2004 was passed). In general, participants were asked for their views on legal recognition, civil partnership and marriage, and whether they had any plans to enter into a civil partnership. They were probed about the meaning and significance of legal recognition and what form they thought such recognition should ideally take. They were also asked to consider whether they were willing to meet the requirement for financial dependency embedded in the civil partnership legislation and whether entering into a civil partnership would change their relationship in any way. In outlining the aims and purpose of the research to the participants, we discussed with them the (proposed) civil partnership legislation, and all of them had at least some awareness of it.

### Analysing the data

The interviews were audio tape recorded and transcribed verbatim by Maree Burns and by a research assistant. Identifying information was modified or removed and the participants were given pseudonyms. The transcripts were searched to identify all of the data relevant to marriage and partnership recognition, which were compiled into a separate file and then read and re-read to identify recurring themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Our analytical approach is inductive thematic analysis focusing on the participants’ views and conceptualisations of civil partnership, marriage and legal recognition and the aim of the analysis is to present and describe the participants’ accounts. The analysis is organised in two seconds: first, we provide an overview of the participants’ views on civil partnership, and next we highlight the multiple ways in which they conceived of civil partnership, marriage, equality and same-sex relationships. Intersecting these themes are criticisms of and

### Table 1: Characteristics of the sample (N=44).

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

Analysis

Views on partnership recognition

In this section, we have summarised the main patterns in the data to provide a broad overview of the different positions the participants adopted in relation to partnership recognition. Table 2 (below) outlines the basic views of the participants.

As Table 2 shows, 27 participants said they might consider registering their relationship as a civil partnership if/when that became available, though the strength of this expectation varied a great deal. (Two of the last couples to be interviewed were planning civil partnership celebrations for the following year.) Ten participants described themselves as undecided or ambivalent about, or ‘not ready’ for, relationship recognition. Six participants said a more or less firm ‘no’ to the principle of relationship recognition in general and to civil partnership in particular (and one participant provided no codeable data). Partners in 14 of the couples gave similar responses and their responses were categorised under the same heading, and partners in eight couples gave responses that were categorised under different headings. Two-thirds of the participants were in some way critical of marriage (as we discuss in greater detail below), however, there was a high level of support for legal recognition and for the right to choose whether or not to access legal recognition (see Harding & Peel, this issue, Weeks et al., 2001; Yip, 2004). The participants’ responses will now be explored in more detail.

Some of the participants who indicated they were more or less likely to register their relationship, were quite definite: ‘We will certainly register’ (Bruce M18b), ‘Oh yes we will’ (Marcus M05a), ‘That’s all booked’ (Jake M19a). But most were less so: ‘I suspect if it was available to us we probably would get civil partnerised’ (Martha F12b). We have

Table 2: Views on legal recognition.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>View on CP/legal recognition</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Sample views</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes to civil partnership (more or less)</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Laurel F01b, Fran F02a, Sally F04a, Debra F04b, Marcus M05a, Steve M05b, Bert M06a, Ernie M06b, Kate F07a, Wilma F11a, Betty F11a, Una F12a, Martha F12b, Jen F13b, Stef F14a, Andi F14b, Di F15a, Janet F15b, Matt M16a, Elton M17a, David M17b, Wayne M18a, Bruce M18b, Jake M19a, Heath M19b, Pete M21a, Paul M21b</td>
<td>‘I suspect if it was available to us we probably would get civil partnerised’ (Martha F12b)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undecided, ambivalent about, not ready for civil partnership/legal recognition</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Marnie F01a, Erica F03a, Paula F03b, Alice F07b, Thelma F08a, Lou F08b, Chris F10b, Luke M16b, Dec M20b, Dan M22a</td>
<td>‘I’m a little bit hesitant’ (Marnie F01a) ‘I don’t feel ready for that’ (Luke M16b)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No to civil partnership (and legal recognition)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Ellen F02b, Ben M09a, Jerry M09b, Martina F10a, Sarah F13a, Rick M22b</td>
<td>‘I just feel personally that it’s not for me’ (Ben M09a)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No codeable data</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Ant M20a</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
identified talk about rights as predominant in the participants’ accounts of civil partnership (Clarke et al., 2006b), and for some of the participants who were less definite, their decisions were contingent on the rights and financial benefits attached to the legislation and their particular material circumstances. Although Wilma (F11a) described her and her partner as ‘Very welcoming of the idea of civil partnership’, she wasn’t sure about whether they would register their relationship: ‘It all depends on how the tax pans out’. Similarly, Ernie (M06b) commented: ‘We have discussed it and would almost certainly go ahead with doing civil partnership, that does depend on what the legislation says, if it’s got, if there’s no material benefit I wouldn’t be bothered’. Jen (F13b) would only enter into a civil partnership if it was ‘Framed as a kind of civil thing’. Kate (F07a) indicated that ‘I think it’s something we will do’, however, she would ‘wanna know before I say yes definitely what I’ve signed up for’.

Like many of the participants categorised as more or less likely to register, some of the participants categorised as undecided, wanted a clearer understanding of what entering into a civil partnership would involve. Lou (F08b) commented that: ‘we haven’t really decided, initially we kind of thought ‘Ooh yes definitely’, but I think it would need closer analysis of what the whole package entails’. One reason for being undecided about civil partnership was that there were (as Erica [F03a] said) ‘Pros and cons for that’. Seeing both advantages and disadvantages, these participants would have to ‘really look at what that meant’ (Erica F03a). Thelma (F08a) had ‘mixed feelings about it really and I haven’t quite figured out what I do think about it really’. Chris (F10b) indicated earlier in her interview that civil partnership is ‘not even on my list’, but she later softened this: ‘It’s not on my list of priorities at the moment at all, but I wouldn’t rule it out that in the future I might feel differently’. For Dan (M22a) – whose partner Rick was ‘very not keen’ – ‘It’s the old romantic in me that says I would like it’ but registering his relationship was not ‘a deal breaker’ (in terms of deciding whether or not to continue his partnership with Rick). Dec (M20b) was interested in civil partnership, but we have categorised him under this heading because he and his partner had no plans to register their relationship: ‘We don’t have any plans as such, I’d like to, but we haven’t really discussed it’. Marnie (F10a) was not prepared to consider making a formal commitment to her partner: ‘I’m a little bit hesitant, I don’t know, I’m not sure of what my opinion is on that type of thing, and I’d like to leave it a while longer anyway, I’d like us to live together before I consider something like that’. Similarly, Matt (M16a) described himself as ‘not ready’: ‘I wouldn’t enter into a marriage yet with Luke ‘cos I don’t feel ready for that’. In sum, some participants conceptualised their hesitancy in practical terms (identifying pragmatic ‘pros and cons’ to civil partnership), whereas others deployed heteronormative discourses of love and romance and positioned themselves as not ready to complete their romantic journey by taking the ‘final step’ of formal commitment.

The participants who said no to legal recognition were probably the most certain of their views. For Ben (M09a) legal recognition was ‘not important’ and ‘not an issue’. Similarly, Ben’s partner, Jerry (M09b), was very clear that he ‘would not be interested in any kind of partnership rights or anything like that per se’ Martina (F10a) indicated that: ‘It’s nothing that we’re interested in really, I don’t think we need to do it’. Rick (M22b) was ‘Not really big on the whole civil partnership thing’.

Multiple conceptions of civil partnership,
It was challenging to organise the data into the three categories discussed above for a number of reasons: first, participants used different terminology; second, they expressed ambivalence and competing views; and third, they conceptualised marriage and civil partnership in multiple ways, such that the data had a dialectical quality, akin to that identified by Lannutti (2005). In this section we identify six themes that highlight the different ways in which participants conceived of civil partnership, marriage, same-sex relationships and equality. These themes, which underpin the views documented above, are: (i) eliding marriage, civil partnership and commitment ceremonies; (ii) civil partnership is pretend marriage; (iii) marriage is a church thing; (iv) marriage and civil partnership: just a piece of paper?; (v) equality, sameness and difference; and (vi) taking a more global view.

(i) Eliding marriage, civil partnership and commitment ceremonies

As will become apparent, some participants made clear distinctions between marriage, civil partnership and commitment ceremonies, and between civil and religious marriage. Others elided together marriage, civil partnership, weddings and commitment ceremonies, or presented marriage as a specifically religious form of relationship commitment/recognition. For instance, some participants talked as if marriage between same-sex partners was currently a possibility: ‘we do disagree because I’d love to get married but she’s too scared because she thinks her parents won’t come…’ (Janet F15b). Here, Janet conceptualises marriage in terms of participating in some kind of public (but not legally recognised) relationship commitment ceremony. Consider this example from Ellen’s (F02b) interview:

Interviewer: ... if civil partnership became a possibility would you – can you – imagine that that would be something that you would want?

Ellen: To – getting married?

This example shows that for a number of participants civil partnership is, in essence, gay marriage. It is perhaps not surprising that some participants talked about civil partnership as ‘gay marriage’, because this is how it is presented in the media (both gay and mainstream). For Ellen, the distinction between civil partnership and marriage was not important, whereas it was for others: ‘We certainly don’t want anything in the terms of marriage […] if the registered partnership legislation goes through, I think we’ll go for that’ (Steve M05b).

(ii) Civil partnership is pretend marriage

For some participants marriage was the criterion for equality and they were critical of the civil partnership legislation for failing to deliver full equality (see also Harding, 2006). Stef (F14a) thought civil partnership offered lesser rights and was a ‘pretend version of marriage’. She referred to the way the media talked about gay marriage and divorce as ‘all in quotes, like it’s not real’. Rick (M22b) was critical of the government:

Civil partnerships are just a bit of a ruse by the government to basically not give us equality with heterosexuals, just to pass it off with a smaller, just like marriage-lite for us to try and keep us happy […] and everyone seems to be going on about gay marriage, there’s no such thing, it’s not the same as marriage and I wouldn’t support civil partnerships at all, I think it’s disgusting what the government’s doing at the moment.

Matt (M16a) held a similar view of civil partnership, it is:

Pandering to The Daily Mail and The Torygraph rather than actually giving people what they want, which is full equal

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3 ‘ […] ’ is used to indicate the deletion of a clause or sentence. We have kept editing to a minimum and excluded only material not directly relevant and some of the ‘messiness’ of speech.
rights of marriage. I think the kind of civil ceremony just seems a bit of a whitewash, really, so I think we should have full marriage, just like everybody else.

It is not completely clear what Matt means by ‘full marriage’, however, it does seem that he equates this with marriage in a church, the ‘big thing’. Matt presented civil partnership as ‘a second class service’ that did not capture or provide the significance of marriage. He felt that couples would enter into civil partnerships (and that couples do enter into register office marriages) too lightly: ‘what worries me about it is that you enter into it and think ‘oh I’m bored of this now, I’ll move onto the next one’’. Whereas ‘real’ marriage (for heterosexuals) is a ‘big massive occasion in their lives’, civil forms of recognition are ‘a bit like ‘well what are we doing on Saturday? Let’s go and get married’ and, you know, ‘I’m bored with it now’’ (see Lannutti, 2005, for a discussion of the ways in which legal recognition has the potential to render same-sex relationships more fanciful). We can see that Matt conceives of a significant difference between civil and religious marriage (it seems that register office marriages, are for Matt, not ‘real’ or ‘full’ marriages). Janet (F15b) expressed other concerns: ‘you should do it because you want to do it with the person you love, not because it’s suddenly become legal’. Janet was concerned that some lesbians and gay men would ‘suddenly go and get married because they can’, and through their actions diminish the seriousness and importance of marriage. She thought this sent the wrong message about the gay community’s approach to marriage: ‘that’s saying that you’re just doing it for the sake of doing it, not because you really want to do it’. Whereas most participants emphasised the rights attached to marriage and conceived of marriage as a pathway to equal rights, some participants – like Janet – de-emphasised the legal/rights dimension of marriage, and emphasised instead the romantic/relational (and, arguably, heteronormative) dimension. For instance, Janet commented: ‘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’.

According to Marcus (M05a) ‘the legislation being considered – is marriage in all but name’. So, for some participants civil partnership was, in essence, marriage, whereas for others, it was a second-class or pretend version of marriage. Again, these positions reflect broader debates and discussions in the media, in LGBT communities, and in the scholarly literature (see, for example, Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 2004, Peel & Jowett, 2006).

1 Civil partnership: Tailor-made and better than marriage?

Some participants presented a distinction between civil partnership and marriage as, in many ways, positive because they did not support what they termed ‘gay marriage’. Wayne (M18a) ‘had always been very anti gay marriages, I’d always felt that they were about aping heterosexual relationships’. Sally (L04a) was supportive of civil partnership: ‘for me definitely [civil partnership] […] but I don’t see it as a gay marriage’. Jake (M19a) did not ‘believe in marriage for gay people’. Steve (M05b), who supported civil partnership, indicated that he and his partner ‘certainly don’t want anything in the terms of marriage’. Thelma (F08a) hoped the legislation is not ‘presented as marriage because for me that’s not necessary, and I’m not even sure I want that kind of recognition if it’s termed marriage’. Some participants offered broader criticisms of marriage as an institution. For instance, Martha (F12b) said ‘I don’t agree with marriage at all, I don’t agree with marriage for anybody’. Similarly, Jen (F13b) commented: ‘I’m quite against same-sex marriage because I am just too feminist about it’. Jen was also critical of the way in which same-sex marriage had come to dominate the LGB rights/political agenda: ‘this whole marriage thing argument has completely hijacked the sort of equal civil rights issues, very normalising’.

Civil partnership was seen by some as
superior to marriage. For example, Paul (M21b) thought that civil partnership modelled a relationship based on equality, whereas marriage modelled a relationship based on inequality. Marcus (M05a) did not like the term marriage: ‘personally I think the word marriage carries with it so much baggage that I am quite happy not to (laughs) not to use it, so I wouldn’t put it in those terms at all’. Lou (F08b) was supportive of the general principle of legal recognition but was not sure about what form it should take: ‘I think definitely there should be the option for some legal recognition, I’m not myself – I’m not a hundred per cent sure on what that should be’.

1 Semantics: Getting civilly partnered
Some participants (including those critical of marriage and supportive of civil partnership) were ambivalent about the term ‘civil partnership’:

‘I’m not sure what the alternatives are, I guess if you’re not comfortable calling it marriage then I’m not sure what it would be called, but civil partnership just doesn’t have the same ring to it as you know I’m getting married or I’m – ’ there’s no way of putting it.’ (Stef F14a)

According to Heath (M19b) civil partnership is an ‘an ugly word’. Pete (M21a) thought that registering a civil partnership ‘does sound very much like you’re setting up a company […] whereas getting married has that sort of cosy sound to it’. Una (F12a) did not ‘really care what it’s called, I’m perfectly happy with it not being marriage’. However, like Stef, Una raised the question of describing the process of entering into a civil partnership (and the lack of a simple/recog-
nisable phrase like ‘getting married’):

‘What do you call a civil partnership, ‘oh we’re getting civil partnerised’, you know, that’s that’s not something you can easily sort of explain to people, so the word marriage could be useful in terms of that, but it doesn’t have to be especially called that she won’t suddenly be transmographeized into my spouse or wife (laughs).’

For Bruce (M18b) marriage was ‘an odd term’, a term that ‘means something quite distinct for me, it’s about a man and a woman’. However, Bruce and his partner found this term quite useful when they had a commitment ceremony:

‘We had to talk about to get our parents, to whom this was new, and Wayne’s grandmother who’s like 96, erm, you know, we had to talk about the fact that we were getting married and we were having a wedding […] for them it was a frame of reference […] if you tell people you’re getting committed that sounds slightly different.’

Similarly, Jake (M19a), who was planning a civil partnership, said that he would be ‘having a wedding in inverted commas’ but he felt ‘much more comfortable in speaking about Heath as my civil partner not my wife or husband or spouse’. Lou (F08b) struggled with terminology and the dominance of marriage: ‘I’m not saying I want it to be like a marriage, but that it has- oh I don’t know, equal legal standing makes it sound like a marriage I guess’. Wilma (F11a) felt that ‘marriage’ had ‘bourgeois heterosexual over-
tones’ but ‘civil registration, civil partnership sounds a bit sort of, you know, horrible, so I don’t know what the right word is for it’.

Other participants attached less significance to terminology. Andi (F14b) didn’t ‘really care what it’s called or anything’. Luke (M16b) didn’t ‘think marriage has to be the word, it can be partnership or – I think it means the same thing at the end of the day’.

(iii) Marriage is a church thing
Some of these participants were critical of marriage and did not want same-sex marriage (for themselves) because they were not religious: ‘I would object because marriage has a religious connotation and […] I’m a rationalist I believe that religious faith borders on irrationalism’. Similarly, for Steve, who described himself as ‘not church’, ‘the problem’ with same-sex marriage was:

‘Marriage is a church thing, and I think
it’s very questionable that heterosexual people getting married in a registry office should call that marriage, I think that people ought to register their relationship no matter what it is, and that marriage is a church thing.’
Kate (F07a) articulated a similar view:
‘I think we’ve managed to get muddled up between the religious ceremony and the civil ceremony and if we can disentangle that then we’re off and running, ‘cos I’m quite happy to have a civil marriage […] I don’t want all the religious connotations associated with it, so civil is key.’
Martha (F12b), like Kate, supported civil partnership precisely because it is a form of civil recognition: ‘I personally would like civil partnership I mean I like the fact that it’s civil for a start and there’s not a kind of religious connotations to it, which is great for me personally’. Jake (M19a) distinguished between civil and Christian marriage – he saw civil partnership as akin to civil marriage but ‘marriage in the Christian sense of the word is between a man and a woman’. Chris (F10b) saw the decline of religious marriage as a reason for permitting gay marriages: ‘I think that now marriages so often aren’t based on religion, you know, they’re not churches, more people get married in other places, you know, hotels or a cliff or whatever, then there’s no reason why gay couples shouldn’t be able to do that’. Here Chris implicitly refers to Christianity and homosexuality as opposing forces. Alice (F07a) was supportive of legal recognition ‘but not marriage I mean I’m not heavily religious, so I’d never be interested in the really religious side of it, just something like they do over in France with the pact agreement’. Chris and Alice’s comments reveal the ways in which many participants implicitly elided the wedding ceremony and the marriage contract. Despite personal objections to religious recognition/celebration, Alice supported the right of people who are ‘deeply religious’ to choose a church wedding: ‘If you’re deeply religious […] and say if it’s important to you to be, you know, seen in the light of god and all that, then fair enough, then there should be sort of recognition if you want to go all the way and have a church ceremony’. Note that Alice conceptualises church weddings as the ultimate form of celebration and recognition, such weddings are ‘going all the way’. Likewise, Heath (M19b) endorsed the right to a Christian marriage: ‘absolutely if people want to’. Paul (M21b) thought the full menu of relationship options should be available to all ‘then heterosexual couples could say ‘Well, I don’t want marriage because of the religious association, I’ll just go for civil partnership”.
Other participants offered a more thoroughgoing critique of religion and did not support others’ right to choose a church wedding. Bruce (M18b) commented ‘I think actually if they banned religious ceremonies more generally the world might be a better place’. Marcus (M05a) pointed to the negative associations between marriage and (christian) conservatism: ‘coming from a church background it’s got the aura of happy families and a lot of […] right wing prejudice’. Betty (F11b) talked about ‘deprivileging marriage’ and downgrading church weddings to something akin to a blessing:
‘Politically what I think should happen is that everybody should have to have a civil partnership and then they can have a marriage as a matter of choice, do you see what I mean? So the standard would be no matter whether you’re straight or queer, the standard would be if you want to combine your lives in this particular way you have a civil partnership. For those for whom the ceremony is important you know religious or whatever terms, that’s an additional option.’
David (M17b), who identified as a Christian, saw marriage as a ‘religious institution’ and could see no (valid) argument against religious marriages for lesbians and gay men, at the same time, his over-riding concern was...
with ‘the legal package of stuff’. He also commented ‘I don’t care what the religious bigots say, I know what my god believes about my relationship’. Janet (F15b) took a different view, for her marriage was a commitment between two people: ‘I think that a marriage is about two people, it’s not saying it in front of God.’ Likewise, Heath (M19b) highlighted the ‘whole religious connotation’ of marriage but felt that the ‘real’ meaning of marriage superseded this history; he was ‘as much married to Jake as my sister is married to my brother-in-law.’

By contrast, Ernie (M06b) took the view that marriage is more than a religious practice. He felt that marriage could ultimately be redeemed:

‘The only problem with marriage per se as it currently stands, I don’t think most people getting married know what they’re letting themselves in for, you know, it’s not spelt out what the legislation that underpins that marital relationship, because it is heavily underpinned by all sorts of legal frames […] so I think only if marriage itself will reform would I then say wholeheartedly I think yes anyone should, could, should be able to choose to marry in the same kind of way.’

In sum, the participants adopted a variety of positions on the relationship between marriage and the church. Some saw marriage as inevitably tied to religion and others saw marriage as commitment between two people that superseded religious practices. Some thought marriage could be recuperated and others thought it should be downgraded, and some supported the right of others to a church wedding and others thought church weddings should be banned.

(iv) Marriage and civil partnership: Just a piece of paper?

Some participants dismissed marriage (and other forms of legal recognition), divesting the legal contract of any real significance:

‘It’s just a piece of a paper, I don’t have to write that on a piece of paper to say, so personally that’s the only reason I don’t want to get married, I think we’re living like a married couple like one to be honest, and so just a piece of paper is not going to make any difference.’ (Ellen F02b)

Here, Ellen conceptualises the crux of marriage as a particular kind of (private) commitment, a way of living and relating, not reducible to a legal document. This account contrasts with one that emphasises the rights (and responsibilities) attached to marriage, and marriage as a legal (and therefore somewhat public) contract (between partners, and between the couple and the state). For Ellen, she is essentially (if not legally) ‘married’ as a result of the way in which she conducts her relationship. Likewise, for Debra (F04a), she and her partner are in essence married, because they had made a particular commitment to each other, symbolised by an exchange of rings: ‘sh*t, it’s happened, we’ve done it’. Pete (M21a) thought he and his partner should have the rights associated with civil partnership because ‘we do live as if we were married’. For Rick (M22b) ‘love is a bit more special than a piece of paper’. Matt (M16a) viewed marriage in more heteronormative terms than as a legal contract: ‘marriage is about a relationship that’s a long-term commitment for life’. Ben (M09a) explicitly opposed rights and marriage: he felt that having next of kin rights (the right to make medical decisions on his partner’s behalf and the right to visit him in hospital) ‘is very much more important than a piece of paper saying we’re married’. For Martina (F10a) the (at the time of her interview) proposed civil partnership legislation was ‘just another document’, and not relevant or important to her life. Because ‘marriage is just a piece of paper that says two people are committed’, Dec (M20b) thought terminology and the precise form of recognition on offer to same-sex couples was not important.

Stef (F14a) viewed marriage as an impor-
tant life event, something not equalled/captured by the process of entering into a civil partnership: ‘the real big part of somebody’s life is getting married and making that commitment, I think if I were to go along with the civil partnership bit, it just does feel like signing a bit of paper and that’s it’. However, Paula (F03b) emphasised the status of civil partnership and marriage as legal documents (and forms of state regulation): ‘I’m a bit wary about those sort of legal institutions because of the fact that once you’ve signed a piece of paper, and the state knows you’re a couple, you’re probably penalised in other ways’. By contrast, Sally (F04a) would ‘be pleased to have that bit of paper’ precisely because of the legal dimension of, and rights attached to, civil partnership. Likewise, for Heath (M19b) the main reason for registering his relationship was ‘that formalisation of having that bit of paper to prove’ the status of his relationship and to secure rights.

(v) Equality, sameness and difference
There was a great deal of support for the principle of equality and for same-sex couples having the same rights and access to legal recognition (and the same form of recognition) as heterosexual couples. Many participants saw no need for tailoring rights in order to provide same-sex couples with full equality. Ben (M09a) commented: ‘I do feel people should have exactly the same rights, there shouldn’t be discrimination in any form for anyone’. David (M17b) talked about the importance of a ‘single standard’: ‘I think there just needs to be a single standard for recognising relationships’. For him, terminology was not important, the single standard adhered to the rights attached to the recognition (not to the name): ‘I don’t care what it’s called, however, what I’m bothered about is what legally comes with it and the status that it gives’. Similarly, Luke (M16b) attached no (symbolic) significance to terminology: ‘I don’t think marriage has to be the word, it can be partnership, I think it means the same thing at the end of the day’. Wayne (M18b) was not concerned about different forms of recognition, as long as the associated rights were similar: ‘it doesn’t matter to me that […] it seems to work in different ways for gay and straight couples as long as it can happen for both that it makes them legally entitled to similar things’. For him, civil partnership represented ‘gay people just getting their own, getting a way of doing it’.

Matt (M16a) explicitly positioned himself and his partner as fitting into the norms and expectations of heterosexual life – noting that ‘my best friends are all straight’ - ‘we don’t have an open relationship, you know, I think that we’re quite (laughs) probably quite straight in our way […] so I think in that perspective we have no problem with marriage in the sense that it’s a lifetime commitment’. Similarly, Dan (M22a) ‘hate[d] the idea that there’s a distinction between homosexual and heterosexual couples’ and could see no difference between homosexual relationships and marriage. For his partner, Rick (M22b), any difference in rights was ‘completely unacceptable’ and ‘just one marriage for everyone is probably the best solution, if not in a perfect world’. Although Rick thought that lesbians and gay men were essentially ‘not different from straight people’, the experience of belonging to a marginalised community had taught them the importance of ‘not following the crowd’. However, lesbians and gay men ‘have started to follow the crowd and normalise themselves […] it’s kind of like giving in’.

By contrast, some participants highlighted the importance of tailoring rights to meet the needs of same-sex couples, claiming that some same-sex couples lead different lives and ‘have different approaches to things’ (Una F12a) from heterosexual couples. The legislation includes a ‘pregnancy clause’, which dictates that a civil partnership is potentially rendered void if one of the parties is pregnant by somebody else when the relationship is registered. Una (F12a) felt that this aspect
of the legislation should be changed:
‘So it actually suits same-sex relationships because that sort of thing [the pregnancy clause] to me opens up the possibility of someone, you know, of co-parenting not working out and then the partner who’s left could be left with the child and no maintenance for that child and things like that.’

For Una, civil partnership was an example of ‘taking a [heteronormative] model and trying to make it fit to a situation that doesn’t work, that is different’. Martha (F12b), Una’s partner, articulated similar views: ‘you have to tailor and think through the implications of being in a same-sex relationship, which is different to being in an opposite-sex relationship’. Thus, using marriage as the basis for civil partnership is inappropriate. Di (F15a) commented that:
‘The thing is we are always going to be different because we’re not a man and a woman, whether or not that’s right or wrong or whatever, we’re not we’re not the same, so I don’t know if we should have exactly the same, or if we should have something different to replicate our needs.’

Marcus (M05a) said ‘I just want to say ‘well we are doing something else which is similar but not marriage”’. In legal terms, these participants were making a distinction between formal and substantive equality. Simply put, formal equality bestows identical rights (which may lead to different outcomes for different groups), whereas substantive equality confers different rights in order to ensure an equal outcome for different groups (see Harding & Peel, this issue; Peel & Harding, 2004b). This talk relates to wider debates and dilemmas about sameness and difference and the goals of LGB politics in LGBT communities (see Weeks et al., 2001).

(vi) Taking a more global view
As in Weeks et al.’s (2001) study, some of our participants distinguished between their own personal desires in relation to partnership recognition and their political views. In other words, most supported the notion of choice, even when they did not personally aspire to legally recognised relationships. Jerry (M09b) is a good example of this: ‘I like to take the more global view of I feel very passionately and very strongly about gay rights … ironically for myself I would not be interested in any kind of partnership rights or anything like that’. Jerry’s partner, Ben (M09a) also felt that choice should be available:
‘We have talked about it and we’ve both brought up the register and we both feel pretty much the same way I think, we’re not bothered by it, the fact it’s there, it’s there, and I think it’s important for other people if they wanna make that choice but for us, it’s just not an issue.’

Thelma (F08a) indicated that:
‘My initial reaction was great, was really enthusiastic um I think almost as a sort of public … not on a personal level but on a public recognition at last there’s some proper recognition here in the 21st century at least, but applying that to me just feels slightly different and I s’pose that’s where my sense of ambiguity came in.’

As noted earlier, Rick (M22b) was critical of both marriage and civil partnership ‘but if other people want to do it, that’s fine, and I’ll fight for their right to get married properly, and not to get civilly partnered’. As we have seen, some participants expressed strong views about marriage and some argued that marriage should be overturned between assimilation and difference – of becoming assimilated into the dominant heterosexual culture so that same-sex families ‘look like’ heterosexual ones or retaining choice and creativity and challenging traditional conceptions of family and identity (Weeks et al., 2001).
or downgraded. By contrast, others were less concerned about terminology and the precise form that legal recognition took: ‘I don’t have a problem with the wording of it, I mean I just think if it’s that what people choose to do and what they want, I mean it’s fine’ (Ben M09a). Martina (F10a) commented that:

‘I think they should be allowed to call it what they want really (laughs), if they want to call it marriage then let them call it marriage, if they wanna call it something else, then whatever they’re happy with.’

These participants (especially those like Rick, Ben, and Martina who said no to legal recognition) clearly had no personal interest or stake in discussions and debates about same-sex marriage and legal recognition. Note that their use of the word ‘they’, positions themselves firmly outside of the community of lesbians and gay who desire rights and recognition for their own relationships. Some participants who were critical of marriage were happy for others to marry: ‘Oh yes I am yes quite happy for people to do that if that’s what they want’ (Marcus M05a). Whereas others – like Sarah (F13a), who said no to legal recognition - were supportive of equal rights but not keen on the term marriage: ‘I think they should definitely have the same rights personally I wouldn’t like it to be called marriage ‘cos it’s too heterosexual, it’s got too many negative connotations to me, that just celebration ceremony or something like that’. In general, there was strong support for choice (particularly from those participants who said no to legal recognition) and strong support for equality. Martina (F10a) commented that: ‘I think it should be equal for everyone and anybody […] just because you’ve got a disabled badge on your car doesn’t mean that you should be allowed to drive any faster in set speed limits does it (laughs).’

**Discussion**

In this paper we have mapped out some of the different ways in which our participants talked about civil partnership, marriage, same-sex relationships and equality. An initial coding of the interview data revealed that 27 participants were more or less likely to enter into a civil partnership if/when it became available, 10 were undecided, ambivalent about, or not ready for, civil partnership, and six said ‘no’ to civil partnership. Underlying this straightforward summary is a more complex picture. Participants’ views were far less polarised and more ‘messy’ than scholarly debates about same-sex marriage often suggest. Few participants were unambiguously pro or anti marriage or civil partnership. This said most participants – like those in previous research – supported the general principle of legal recognition of same-sex relationships.

One of the features of the data that made it difficult to code was that while many participants made clear distinctions between marriage and civil partnership (and between religious and civil marriage, and relationship recognition and celebration), some elided marriage, civil partnership, weddings and commitment ceremonies. To our knowledge, this is not something that has been commented on before. It is possible that the flexible and open-ended nature of the interviews in this study allowed participants more freedom to talk about relationships in their own language, and revealed important information about the ways in which the participants conceptualised relationship recognition and celebration. Some participants attached no significance to distinctions between commitment ceremonies and marriage, whereas for others, such differentiation was vital. According to a few participants, marriage was in essence a type of relational commitment, one that could be just as well made through a commitment ceremony as through a legally mandated marriage ceremony (or by signing a civil partnership register). Most others, who emphasised the rights (and responsibilities)
attached to legal recognition, pointed to what they perceived as obvious differences between commitment ceremonies, marriage and civil partnership. Divisions were also highlighted by participants who held particular ideological positions on relationship recognition. To further complicate matters, multiple meanings were attached to these different forms of recognition, both across the data set and within individual participants’ accounts.

In relation to manifold conceptions of civil partnership: according to a number of participants, it was a second class version of marriage, but for others it was marriage in all but name (participants also differed on whether the name held any significance – for some it held no import, for others terminology was crucial). A minority wanted ‘full marriage’, whereas others welcomed civil partnership precisely because – in their view – it was different from marriage. Some also welcomed civil partnership exactly because it was a form of civil recognition. Marriage was viewed as inextricably tied to religion by a significant segment of the participants, whereas the rest thought marriage had acquired legal and relational significance beyond its religious origins. The phrase ‘a piece of paper’ often appeared in participants’ talk. A minority used this cultural commonplace to divest marriage of any broader social or legal significance; most saw the marriage contract and the rights attached to it as vitally important for their relationships and for the LGBT community.

Equality was another common trope in the data; however the participants offered competing accounts of equality. As indicated by a number of participants, it meant having exactly the same rights and recognition as heterosexuals, which implies fundamental similarities between heterosexuals and non-heterosexuals. Others indicated that it meant acquiring different rights (or tailoring) in order to ensure an equality of outcome, because same-sex relationships are different from heterosexual ones. Some participants advocated a ‘third way’ – arguing for civil partnership (or marriage) from a pragmatic rights stance, but resisting civil partnership becoming the pinnacle and norm for same-sex relationships from a ‘difference’ stance. Furthermore, individual participants often held varied, and competing, views on civil partnership and marriage, and their personal and political views were at times at odds. In those cases, very often participants emphasised their support for the general principle of legal recognition.

What this analysis suggests is that polarised debates about same-sex marriage and tick box responses to simple yes/no, either/or questions in popular polls and in (some) quantitative research (although important for a number of reasons) possibly conceal a great deal of complexity. It is not, however, the case that participants who were critical of marriage, conceptualised same-sex lives and relationship as fundamentally different from heterosexual ones, and emphasised the importance of equality of outcomes (as opposed to formal equality) were, on the whole, less likely to indicate an intention to enter into a civil partnership (or to desire marriage rights). And, those who valued marriage and emphasised sameness were, on the whole, more likely to indicate an intention to enter into a civil partnership (or to want access to marriage). There was often no clear relationship between these different positions and participants’ choices in relation to civil partnership. One possible explanation for this is the intersections between pragmatics, ideology and understandings of relationships in the participants’ accounts. Many participants clearly held multiple positions on legal recognition and felt it possible both to oppose civil partnership on ideological grounds and support (and indeed enter into a) civil partnership on pragmatic grounds. For those participants, the day-to-day ‘realities’ of life meant that civil partnership represented the best option for protecting their finances and/or their families (in an imperfect world). They felt that even though civil partnership repre-
presented a significant step forward, their choices and decisions were still significantly curtailed and constrained. The general criteria for participation in the study was that people were involved in (what they defined as) a ‘committed’ or ‘long-term’ relationship – for some this was six months, for others, more than three decades. Another intersecting factor that may have shaped participants’ (personal) decisions was whether or not they were ‘ready’ for legal recognition. Many had clearly and carefully worked out positions on this issue with their partner, others were only just beginning to have such discussions.

The multiple accounts of civil partnership and marriage evident in our data might also reflect the speculative nature of discussions about legal recognition. As Lannutti’s (2005) study demonstrates, we can only wonder (from the vantage point of particular ideological positions) what effects legal recognition might have on LGB communities and society in general. Furthermore, the effects might not run solely in one direction, as previous watershed moments in LGB politics have shown (for example, the institution of Section 28 of the Local Government Act 1988 in the UK), such moments can produce dialectical effects, creating greater visibility for LGB people, but also greater backlash from some sections of the mainstream (Stacey, 1991). It is possible that civil partnership and same-sex marriage might have all the effects predicted by Lannutti’s (2005) respondents, and more. In many ways, only ‘time will tell’ what civil partnership ‘really’ means for LGB communities.

Across the small number of empirical studies (including the current study) that explore non-heterosexuals’ views on partnership recognition, some patterns emerge. There is, as noted above, a great deal of support for choice and the general principle of access to legal recognition, although disagreement about what form recognition should ideally take (Harding, 2006; Harding & Peel, this issue; Lanutti, 2005; Weeks et al., 2004; Yip, 2004). Views on the latter in part seem to hinge on how marriage and same-sex relationships are viewed (although this is far from clear cut). It seems that people are more likely to support same-sex marriage as the ultimate option if they view marriage as the gold standard of relationship recognition and path to equality for non-heterosexuals and same-sex relationships as largely the same as heterosexual ones. Those who are more likely to endorse alternative forms of recognition as their ideal tend to view marriage as a conventional (heteronormative, religious) and flawed institution and emphasise the differences between same-sex and heterosexual relationships, cultures and communities (see Yip, 2004; Weeks et al., 2001). It is likely that existing studies have identified similar views because the same arguments are endlessly recycled in public debates (and discussions within LGBT communities) (Harding, 2006; Lannutti, 2005; see also Smith & Windes, 2000). Certainly, many of the positions adopted by the participants in this study echo those found in public discussions. The predominance of formal/liberal equality arguments in public debate might explain why most participants in this and other studies conceived of equality in this way (see Harding & Peel, this issue).

It is important to note that this study (and LGBT research more generally) is limited by the use of a homogeneous and privileged sample of lesbians and gay men. As Dunne (1997) observed, informal recruitment techniques, such as those used in this study, tend to generate samples that mirror the (relative) privilege of the researchers. An important issue for future research is exploring what motivates people to participate (or not) in LGBT research and developing strategies for recruiting harder-to-reach and less privileged members of the population. There is also a broader issue of limited engagement with methodological issues in LGBT research (perhaps because those issues have been seen as secondary to generating and disseminating politically meaningful findings), compared to, for
instance, the debates and discussions that occur under the banner of feminist research and feminist methodologies. It could be that the views reported in research to date are not reflective of the views of LGBT communities in toto, and further research is needed before we can claim to speak for these communities on matters of same-sex marriage and partnership recognition.

We hope to address some of the limitations of our qualitative sample in a national survey of over 500 non-heterosexuals. The survey was conducted as part of the broader study on same-sex relationships and covers a range of issues, including respondents’ views about relationship recognition and celebration, and incorporates both quantitative and qualitative measures. The sample is far more diverse than the qualitative sample, thus analyses of the survey data should provide a more inclusive account of the perceptions of LGB communities on legal recognition.

Some of the complexity and ambivalence in our participants’ accounts is perhaps indicative of their attempts to navigate through the polarised, ‘either/or’ nature of the discursive field surrounding (and constituting) same-sex marriage. A number sought to carve out a ‘both/and’ position on civil partnership and legal recognition. Following Peel and Harding (2004), we argue for the importance of getting beyond ‘pro/anti’ and ‘either/or’ debates and appreciating the ways in which different discourses both diverge and intersect to produce multiple accounts of the meaning of legal recognition. As we highlighted in the introduction, it is time to begin to ask other more complex questions about legal recognition. Our data certainly suggest a need to supersede taken-for-granted conceptions of what legal recognition might mean and why non-heterosexuals might want to participate in it. We should further probe the political aspirations of non-heterosexuals and the ideological frames that underpin those aspirations. Research on civil partnership must consider people’s reasons for entering into such an arrangement and the circumstances under which they do so, the effects legal recognition has on their lives and relationship(s) and the language they use (and create) to talk about and ‘do’ family.

With the advent of civil partnership, new challenges await LGB communities and politics in the UK – perhaps seeking marriage rights or attempting to resist the (potentially) normalising effects of civil partnership. The latter path could be achieved by living civil partnership in transgressive ways, thereby troubling the assumptions on which the legislation is based, or by refusing to enter into the institution. Whichever path (or paths) are travelled, these are truly exciting times both for LGB communities and politics and for LGBTQ psychological theory, research and practice on same-sex relationships.

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