After the Act: Narratives of Display and the Significance of Civil Partnership

A thesis submitted to the University of Manchester for the degree of PhD Sociology in the Faculty of Humanities, School of Social Sciences, Department of Sociology.

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## Abstract

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Abstract

After the Act: Narratives of Display and the Significance of Civil Partnership

Civil Partnership is significant because its availability indicates that social attitudes about sexual minorities have altered dramatically over the past two decades (Weeks 2007: 3, Shipman and Smart 2007). At one time, social attitudes labelled people’s attractions to persons of the same sex as ‘abnormal’, and resulting same-sex relationships were expected to be invisible and conducted in private (Plummer 1975, Weeks 1977, Rich 1980). These expectations have changed, to such an extent, that it is now rather common to view same-sex and opposite-sex relationships as the ‘same’ and equally worthy of recognition and rights (Weeks 2007, Heaphy et al. 2013).

This project explored what (if any) impact inhabiting this contemporary socio-cultural and historical climate is having on the everyday lives of sexual minorities. Finch’s (2007) concept of ‘display’ was employed as a conceptual lens to explore the ‘narratives’ that 42 civil partners aged 30 to 65 told about displaying their non-heterosexual orientation and same-sex relationship in encounters with others. I argued that if these more liberal attitudes had impacted on their lives it should be discernible from the personal stories they told about the interactions they had with one of six different audiences (e.g. self, couple, family, friends, acquaintances and strangers).

Three main findings and arguments were formed from my analysis of these civil partners’ narratives. First, despite the remarkable changes in social attitudes towards sexual minorities, the stories my interviewees told illustrated that there is a generational difference in terms of the impact that these more liberal attitudes have been able to have on the ways that they display their non-heterosexual orientation and relationship. Essentially, these social attitudes have noticeably influenced the lives that younger generations are able to lead. Second, my use of ‘display’ as a conceptual lens to examine interviewees’ narratives has illuminated how the stigmatizing spotlight attached to non-heterosexual orientation and same-sex relationships has diminished over time. This was signalled by how narrators approached the display of their non-heterosexual orientation and their same-sex relationship. Third, ‘display’ as a conceptual lens has been significant for illuminating the challenges and negotiations involved in displaying a civil partnership and, I argued, is able to offer a more nuanced understanding of the continuing salience of the heterosexual assumption in an ‘era of equality’.

Emmajane Temple-Malt, University of Manchester, PhD. Sociology. 15th December 2014.
Declaration of Authenticity

No portion of the work referred to in the thesis has been submitted in support of any application for another degree or qualification of this or any other university or other institute of learning.

Signed…………………………………………………

Date…………………………………………………..
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Chapter 1 Introduction

Introduction

The availability of civil partnership and, more recently same-sex marriage, is significant because it symbolises that British societal attitudes towards sexual minorities have altered profoundly (Weeks 2007: 3, Shipman and Smart 2007). Traditionally, same-sex relationships were seen as illegitimate and were expected to be invisible and different from heterosexual relationships (Weeks and Porter 1998 [1991]). Transformations have occurred where nowadays it is commonplace to view same-sex and opposite-sex partners as the ‘same’ and equally worthy of recognition and rights (Heaphy, Smart and Einarsdottir 2013).

From December 2005, couples in same-sex relationships that were ‘intended to be permanent’ were able to register their partnership (Women and Equality Unit 2003: 13). Becoming civil partners means the couple are given much the same package of legal rights, responsibilities and social protections that are given to opposite-sex couples who marry. The legal rights associated with civil partnership include the ‘right to be viewed as next-of-kin’, allows partners to be considered a ‘spouse for immigration and nationality purposes’, clarifies civil partners’ legal position with respect to family law (that is, civil partners can apply for parental responsibility for a civil partners’ child), and has a legal ‘duty to provide reasonable maintenance for [their] civil partner and any children of the family’ (Knights 2006: 49). However, some of these rights, such as tenancy succession, joint adoption and next-of-kin status, that the civil partnership registration scheme purports to offer to same-sex couples, were in fact already available, but needed extra effort from the couple to put in place (see Auchmuty 2004: 103). Registering a partnership also grants same-sex partners access to material and financial benefits (e.g. contributory and non-contributory benefits like retirement pension, carer’s allowance and incapacity benefit) (Knights 2006: 49). If a civil partner dies the surviving partner can claim ‘bereavement allowance’ or ‘widowed parent’s allowance’ (Knights 2006: 49).
In light of the above changes, this thesis employs Finch’s (2007) concept of ‘display’ to investigate whether and how more liberal attitudes are impacting on the daily lives of civil partners. Display was designed as a tool to explore the impact that the greater diversity of family forms is having on the daily lives of families. Finch (2007) suggests that family members are required to convey to others, and have others confirm, the ‘family-like’ nature of their relationships. Display is a particularly suitable tool for examining the effect that the liberalisation of attitudes towards sexual minorities is having on the everyday lives of civil partners because the same processes of social change in patterns of intimacy in western societies (Giddens 2008 [1992], Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995, Jamieson 1999, Weeks et al. 2001, Smart and Shipman 2004, Smart 2007b) that contributed to the diversification of family forms are also responsible for the emergence of the increasingly liberal societal attitudes towards sexual minorities (Weeks et al. 1996, Weeks 2007: 9, Roseneil 2002). In this thesis, I use the concept of display to explore the narrative resources that civil partners (and quite likely those who are now married) draw on to explain their relationship in encounters with different others (e.g. selves, couple, family members, friends, acquaintances and strangers).

The thesis is based on a qualitative empirical study, that explored the personal stories that 42 individuals and couples aged 30 to 65 told about their relational lives and encounters with others collected through 30 narrative interviews. The relational experiences of lesbians and gay men aged 35 to 60 when they were becoming civil partners was the focus of questions about whether and how their daily lives have been influenced by increasingly tolerant attitudes to sexual minorities. This focus was appropriate because women and men who were aged 35 to 60 when they became civil partners had a range of ‘biographical experiences’ of the liberalisation of social attitudes to sexual minorities and had, of course experienced much less tolerant times. Indeed, their sense of identity, stories told and ways of relating will have been subtly shaped by these contradictory historic-cultural influences.
The remainder of this introduction outlines the personal and academic encounters that shaped the study and encouraged the adoption of particular theoretical lenses. Following this, I present the aims and questions that framed the project. The chapter then discusses the key arguments and themes that are woven through chapters 2 to 8.

**A series of significant encounters: motivations**

Looking back over the past decade, I now recognise the important interplay of socio-cultural contexts I inhabited and of encounters with people and ideas for informing the scope and shape of this project. In October 2004, I had just become a 24-year-old single mother who had fled an abusive husband and was sheltering in a women’s refuge with two small children. Ten days later I became a widow when my first husband ended his life. While these experiences were incredibly traumatic, I perceived myself as very lucky because most women who flee abuse are perpetually living in fear, looking over their shoulder for threats from an abusive husband. I escaped such a fate. I viewed it as an opportunity for me to start rebuilding and shaping my own life and decided that education was key to this.

I studied for an Access to HE in 2005, in 2006 I began a BSc Sociology and Psychology degree at Bath Spa University. It was during the second year of my undergraduate degree that I took two modules, one on the life-course and one in debates in sociology, both of which introduced me to the ‘transformation of intimacy’ debates. This was the moment I discovered that there was a world beyond the confines of heterosexuality. A world of lesbians, gay men and same-sex partners, and where sexual orientation, identities and partnerships could be fluid and exist on a spectrum. Finally I had access to language and labels that I could attach to my attraction to women; ‘lesbian’. Prior to this, growing up in the 1980s-1990s in a very parochial, close-knit town in Somerset, I did not know that these desires for women were permissible. I had assumed that it was deviant, wrong and not to be talked about. Having discovered this world beyond heterosexuality I encountered a bit of a problem, I had re-partnered and married another man being convinced that my
children had been through enough upheaval and needed stability and security. Inevitably learning that women could be partners meant undergoing very painful discussions and renegotiating our marriage. I have been very fortunate to come out of the marital relationship with a friend. These events led me to become interested in studying transitions in identities and the daily lives of same-sex partners.

My interest in exploring the significance that civil partnership has on same-sex partners’ everyday lives was particularly galvanized by an encounter with an article by Rosie Harding (2008) who argued that same-sex couple’s fluid relational practices would be ‘fixed’ by entering a civil partnership. The original PhD proposal aimed to examine civil partners’ division of housework to assess whether becoming civil partners altered their relational practices. The lens of ‘housework’ was used because I was looking to extend my undergraduate dissertation project which had explored the strategies that same-sex partners use to divide housework and engage more deeply with the narrative that same-sex couples perceive themselves as being able to have more egalitarian relationships than heterosexual partners (Weston 1997, Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan 2001, Dunne 1999). In 2009 I studied for a Masters Degree at the University of Bath (2009), where I undertook two small projects. One study was a pilot of the PhD project which would inform and sharpen the PhD proposal. This project examined the life-histories of same-sex partners and the impact that becoming civil partners had on relationships with others. The ‘timing’ of people’s lives seemed key to shaping their experiences of having a civil partnership. These participants were in their 40s and early 50s, and told tales of coming out in the 1970s and sustaining partnerships in the 1980s, living through the HIV/AIDS epidemic and campaigning against Section 28. They were all adamant that becoming civil partners had not affected the couple’s relationship but expressed that others (family members and so forth) did treat them differently since registering their partnership. The second project, was the dissertation component of the Masters, and was where the notion of changing societal
representations of same-sex relationships emerged more strongly as a theme. In this study I explored the transition of representations of lesbian and gay family relationships as they appeared in discourses used in 1986-88 to introduce Section 28 of the Local Government Act, and how different notions of same-sex partners were presented in arguments for its repeal in 2003. Through this study I saw that while public representations of sexual minorities and same-sex relationships ebb and flow over time and in different contexts, people went about living everyday lives before, during and after such legislative measures. I wondered whether and how these representations influence people’s everyday lives as will be seen in the research questions and much of the thesis.

Aims and Research questions
The aims of this study are to:

- Explore the significance of civil partnership for civil partners’ relational lives
- Examine whether and how civil partners display their relationship in different contexts and in encounters with different audiences

The four research questions below allow for a more focused investigation of the overarching aims:

**RQ1.** What is the personal (biographical) significance of civil partnership?

**RQ2.** What is the significance of civil partnership for the couple’s relationship?

**RQ3.** What do participants’ choices about disclosure of their decision to have a civil partnership tell us about the significance of their relationships with significant others (kin and friends)?

**RQ4.** What influence do non-familial audiences (i.e. acquaintances and strangers) have on whether and how civil partners display their relationship (in different settings)?

Through these questions, I focus on the personal stories that civil partners tell about whether and how they display their sexual orientation/same-sex relationship in encounters
with these six different audiences (self, couple, kin, friends, acquaintances and strangers). Participants’ narratives concerning display of their sexual orientation and relationship in encounters with others are examined because people are embedded in, and routinely interact with different others during the course of their daily lives (Burkitt 2008: 3). Therefore, studying the displays and meanings that narrators attach to their relationships and convey to these audiences about their sexual orientation and relationship becomes a way of examining whether and how these tolerant attitudes about sexual minorities are influencing their relational lives.

**Arguments**

Three main arguments are formed in the process of addressing these research questions.

1. **Civil partnership is significant because it serves as a cultural marker that social attitudes about sexual minorities have changed profoundly** (Weeks 2007: 3, Shipman and Smart 2007). Despite these remarkable changes the stories my research participants told, illustrate that the impact these more liberal attitudes have on the way that they display their sexual orientation and relationship is uneven. For example, I suggest that these liberal attitudes have had a more prominent influence on the kinds of everyday lives younger generations are able to lead (addressed in chapter 4 and 7).

My older civil partners (those aged in their 40s, 50s and 60s) recognised social attitudes had changed about sexual minorities, but this had not influenced how they displayed their sexual orientation. This is because they had come of age and learned to display their sexual orientation in the socio-cultural and historical climate of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s where dominant social attitudes operating at the time meant they learned that their attraction to members of the same sex, and their resulting relationships, should be conducted in private and not displayed in public (McIntosh 1968, Weeks 1989).
I contrast this with my younger civil partners (those aged in their 30s and 40s), who have been most influenced by these liberal social attitudes. This is because they came of age in, and learned to display their sexual orientation in, an ‘era of equality’ in the 1990s, when same-sex and opposite-sex partners were viewed as the ‘same’ and equally worthy of recognition. Consequently these participants have developed a sense that their non-heterosexual orientation is relatively ‘ordinary’, and have therefore been able to display this (see also Heaphy et al. 2013).

2. Using display as a conceptual lens to examine interviewees’ narratives has illuminated how the stigma attached to sexual minorities and same-sex relationships has diminished over time. This was signalled by participants’ approaches to how they display their sexual orientation and their same-sex relationship (addressed in chapter 4 and 5).

Older narrators (in their 40s, 50s, 60s) developed one of two approaches for displaying their sexual orientation and relationship, which were designed to manage and avoid the stigmatising spotlight of homosexuality being cast upon this aspect of their life. An approach employed by some participants in their mid-40s, 50s and 60s was to develop ‘discrete’ ways of displaying their sexual orientation (Rosenfeld 1999). Participants also ‘delayed’ coming out. Interviewees who were in their 40s and 50s and had joined supportive critical communities (e.g. socialist, sexual or feminist) were able to gain access to ideas about sexual orientation which encouraged them to affirm their ‘difference’ from opposite-sex relationships. They formed an ‘unapologetic’ approach to the display of their sexual identity (Weeks 1977).

In contrast, younger narrators (in their 30s and 40s) who had inhabited a socio-cultural and historical climate came to develop a sense of themselves as ‘ordinary’. Therefore, they had not felt compelled to censor their sexual orientation and relationship. Developing an
approach that is not incumbent on these participants avoiding the display of their non-heterosexual sexual orientation/relationship conveyed that the threat of attracting the stigmatising spotlight of homosexuality had diminished appreciably.

3. Display as a conceptual lens is significant for illuminating the challenges and negotiations involved in displaying a formalised same-sex relationship and, I argue, is able to offer a nuanced understanding of the continuing salience of heteronormativity in an ‘era of equality’ (addressed in chapter 6 and 7).

To understand the challenges and negotiations involved in displaying, it is necessary to examine the interactions between the displayer, identify the intended audience for any mode of display and the relational history with this audience. These factors play a crucial role in the form the display takes and what meanings are conveyed. It does not necessarily follow a generational divide.

Younger civil partners’ decision to announce their intention to have a civil partnership to their kin demonstrated that they could disrupt heteronormativity by unsettling the assumption that only opposite-sex partners can marry. However, the opportunity to unsettle such assumptions by displaying their intention to become civil partners was not evenly available to all younger study participants. In cases where the relational history (Finch and Mason 1993) with kin was particularly strained because of the interviewee’s non-heterosexual orientation, these participants recognised a ‘responsibility’ to respect their family members’ feelings and did not invite them to participate in the public display of their civil partnership.

Encounters with acquaintances and strangers presented the most significant challenges and negotiations with respect to displaying a formalised same-sex relationship. In some contexts, this was where the heterosexual assumption was most difficult to challenge. Older and younger narrators conveyed that in encounters with acquaintances (for example,
co-workers in the workplace) they were routinely able to display their same-sex relationship by engaging in conversations about their home life. Similarly, encounters with medical professionals were the one context where all narrators mentioned using their status as ‘civil partners’ actively to display their partnership.

Meetings with strangers in public spaces stood out because they showed how uneven the opportunities were to challenge and disrupt the heterosexual assumption and express their relationship more freely. The ability to display a relationship in the presence of strangers (e.g. gestures such as kissing, holding hands and hugging) was dependent on previous encounters with homophobia.

Having outlined my arguments, I now introduce the reader to the literature, methodology and research findings chapters of the thesis where I discuss the background and develop the detail of my argument.

Chapter 2 The Significance of Civil Partnership and Display

This chapter reviews two bodies of scholarship. It begins with a review of debates that span over two decades which endeavour to predict the impact legal recognition will have on people’s daily lives. The way that scholars and activists anticipated that legal recognition would impact on people’s lives has altered quite significantly over the last two decades. I suggest that this shift in concerns about the impact that legal recognition might have indicates that the everyday lives of sexual minorities have transformed profoundly. I then examine empirical studies which have explored the impact that becoming civil partners has on the daily lives of sexual minorities. This second body of literature documents how the change in the couple’s circumstances (their registering their civil partnership) affected the couple’s relational life, in particular noting the impact on three ‘groups’ of others (Morgan 2009: 3): couple’s relationships, significant others (family and friends) and strangers. Taken together this body of literature offers insights which suggest that the current socio-cultural
and historical climate has significantly informed the ways that lesbians and gay men can live their daily lives. Finch’s (2007) concept of ‘display’ is outlined and I justify why it is used to explore the various ways that registering a civil partnership impacts on the couple’s relationship, their relationships with others and whether civil partners feel able to make the nature of their relationship visible in encounters with acquaintances and strangers. Examining these encounters with others are ways that I suggest allow an exploration of whether and how liberal attitudes towards sexual minorities are impacting on how civil partners perform their relational lives.

Chapter 3 Generating Narratives of Display: Research Design, Methods and Methodology

This chapter offers an account of the design and conduct of a qualitative project that employs Finch’s (2007) concept of ‘display’ to investigate whether and how liberal attitudes towards sexual minorities are impacting on how civil partners perform their relational lives. I explain how and why I sampled for age and gender and discuss the merits, limitations and practicalities of relying on self-selection recruitment methods. I discuss the methods that were employed to generate 30 narrative interviews with individuals and couples, and address how ethical dilemmas (such as negotiating power and sensitive issues) were managed during the interviews. Finally, I describe my analytical approach. The analytical strategy employed personal narrative analysis and used research questions and key topics from the interview schedule to inform the thematic coding framework that was designed to analyse the data. A key focus of my analysis was to illuminate the types of display and what these displays looked like when civil partners conveyed meaning about their non-heterosexual orientation/relationship to different audiences.

Chapter 4 Displaying Sexual Orientation and Responses to Civil Partnership

This chapter is the first of the empirical chapters and acts as a bridge between narrators’ past and present experiences. I make the case for exploring and contextualising narrators’
responses to civil partnership generationally and biographically which is achieved by examining their narrated relational time-lines. Examining the links between key biographical experiences that took place before civil partnership was available helps to understand why participants initially responded to the introduction of civil partnership in 2005 in the way they did. This facilitates an appreciation of the personal significance that the introduction of civil partnership had on the narrators’ sense of self. Such an analysis also begins to address scholars’ (Clarke et al. 2006, Harding 2008) concerns about the ‘recycling’ of certain reactions to legal recognition. Giele’s (2002, 2004) work on ‘biographical experiences’ was developed into an analytical tool to understand the link between participants’ biographical experiences and their initial responses to civil partnership. I drew on her ideas of the importance of inhabiting a specific socio-cultural and historical context (Giele 2002: 72, 75) and the significance of ‘membership in various communities’ (Giele 2002: 72, 81) which were key biographical experiences that informed how respondents managed and displayed their sexual orientation. In turn, this informed one of three reactions to civil partnership, which are ‘detached’, ‘dissident’ and ‘embracing’.

Chapter 5 ‘Private’ Decisions, ‘Public’ Stories

This chapter shifts the spotlight away from discussions of the self and instead examines the overlap between the boundaries of the personal and the public. This is achieved by exploring the repertoires that participants employ to make ‘private’ relational stories about decisions for registering a civil partnership ready for ‘public’ display. This allows me to demonstrate the significance that the availability of civil partnership has on a couple’s relationship. Focusing on the reasons that same-sex couples give for having a civil partnership contributes to an under-researched area and complements the few existing studies (Shipman and Smart 2007, Smart 2008, Heaphy et al. 2013, Einarsdóttir 2013) that
have looked at couple’s explanations and motivations for having a civil partnership. These existing insights are extended further by using the lens of ‘display’ to examine people’s decisions for entering into a civil partnership. This is because Finch (2007) claims that ‘narratives’ could be used as tools for display and conveying meaning. By drawing on the work of narrative analysts such as Riessman (1993, 2008), Lawler (2008), Holstein and Gubrium (2000), I refine and develop Finch’s notion that ‘narratives’ can be used as tools for display, which allows me to analyse personal stories about motivations for having a civil partnership in more depth. Narrators used one of three different repertoires: ‘romantic’, ‘practical’, ‘protective’, to display the couple’s personal decisions for formalising their relationship to ensure that this decision appeared coherent and intelligible to generalised others.

Chapter 6 Displaying to family and friends

Discussions about the relational significance of civil partnership are developed further in this chapter by exploring the significance of who interviewees prioritised and selected to be the recipient of the couple’s news of their decision to become civil partners (e.g. family and/or friends). Pahl and Spencer’s (2004) concept of ‘specialised roles’ and Finch and Mason’s (1993) concept of ‘relational histories’ and ‘family responsibilities’ were used as conceptual lenses to analyse the significance of who was the intended recipient of the couple’s display. Examining why friends or family were prioritised in their thoughts about who should be the recipient of the couple’s news complements and extends findings from existing studies. The analysis presented in this chapter complements observations from recent studies (Lewin 1998, Smart 2007a, Ellis 2007, Jowett and Peel 2007, Peel 2009, Goodwin and Butler 2009, Heaphy et al. 2013) that have explored the experiences of those who become civil partners by illustrating why kin are important audiences for the couples’ display. Additionally, the analysis extends these insights by demonstrating the continuing
importance of friends in sexual minorities’ lives (Weeks et al. 2001, Weston 1997), which with a few exceptions (Smart 2007a, Heaphy et al. 2013) has been overlooked in these studies. There was a distinctive generational divide in terms of who narrators prioritised as the recipient of their display. The first group of stories were narrated by older interviewees (in their mid-40s to mid-60s) who had been partners for over a decade. These interviewees tended to view becoming civil partners as ‘practical’ and prioritised friends as audiences because they were conceived as capable of interpreting and supporting the meaning participants were intending to convey about the ‘practical’ civil partnership ceremony. In such cases, avoiding announcing to kin was a way of managing responsibilities to family and side-stepping obligations to accommodate kin’s expectations that the ceremony should look like a wedding. In contrast, the second and third group of stories were narrated by younger narrators (in their 30s and 40s) who perceived their decision to become civil partners in terms of participating in the ‘rite of passage’ (Heaphy and Einarsdottir 2012: 5) of getting married, which ordinarily involved family members being present to witness their display of commitment. Thus kin were prioritised in their thoughts as the audience who should be the recipient of their news that they plan to marry. Their narratives however, conveyed that displaying to this audience was not an option evenly available to all of them, and whether family or friends were finally chosen as the audience for the couple’s news depended on the previous relational histories with kin and how well or badly relatives had coped with their child’s/siblings’ non-heterosexual orientation.

Chapter 7 Displaying to acquaintances and strangers

This chapter moves away from discussions about interactions with family and friendship audiences and instead focuses on whether and how civil partners display their same-sex relationship in face-to-face encounters with acquaintances and strangers. Examining
participants’ stories about whether and how they display their relationship while in
counters with acquaintances and strangers enables me to contribute to literature that
suggests there is ‘an end to the closet’ (Einarsdottir 2011: 54, Mitchell et al. 2009, Goodwin
and Butler 2009) for some sexual minorities. The work of Goffman (1963, 1971) and
Morgan (2009) on ‘unwritten’ rules that govern people’s conduct in face-to-face
interactions with acquaintances and strangers was adopted to help explore the processes
that are involved in displaying a same-sex relationship in encounters with these others. The
prospect that some lesbian and gay men may be open about their relationship in public
also invites a reassessment of former claims that sexual minorities tend to avoid displaying
their relationship in public spaces (Johnston and Valentine 1995, Donovan et al. 1999,

Chapter 8 Conclusion: After the Act

This chapter serves as a concluding chapter to the study. The first half of the chapter
provides the reader with selective summaries of chapters 2 through to 7. These summaries
demonstrate the theoretical and methodological originality of my study. Each summary
offers an outline of the main themes and conclusions that were reached in each of these
chapters and discusses how the study complements and extends Finch’s concept of
‘display’ and existing scholarship. Following this, the chapter reflects on the specific
limitations of the study (e.g. sample and omissions in analytical content) and points up the
ways that the study could be extended (e.g. sample) and how the data could be analysed
differently in the future.

Having outlined the threads of the study I turn to an examination of the literature which
has provided a theoretical framework to guide the study.
Chapter 2 The Significance of Civil Partnership and Display

Introduction

In the space of two decades, the social, political and legislative landscape regarding recognition for same-sex relationships has shifted dramatically. As of 13th March 2014, Civil Marriage is now available for same-sex couples. Nine years earlier, in 2005, same-sex partners were able to register their partnership which entitled them to a package of legal and social protections for their relationship. Civil partnership and, more recently, marriage is significant, because their availability indicates that societal attitudes about sexual minorities have altered profoundly (Weeks 2007: 3, Shipman and Smart 2007). This project explores whether and how these more tolerant attitudes are impacting on the daily lives of civil partners by exploring the stories that civil partners tell about displaying their lesbian or gay sexual orientation and/or same-sex relationship in encounters with different others. Substantively, this chapter critically reviews existing literature on same-sex relationship formalisation in order to yield insights into whether and how legal recognition has impacted on the daily lives of sexual minorities.

The chapter begins by reviewing debates that span the last two decades or so. A common thread running through these debates is that they all attempt to predict the impact that legal recognition would have on people’s daily lives. Scholars and activists perceive that legal recognition will affect people’s lives in different ways. The work of Giele (2002, 2004) on ‘biographical experiences’ is used to situate people’s perceptions of legal recognition within their socio-cultural and historical climate, which offers an appreciation of the formation of particular kinds of responses (e.g. how people anticipated that legal recognition would improve or hinder their everyday lives). Viewing debates about legal recognition in this way illuminates the continuities of certain concerns about legal recognition, and also demonstrates the significant changes in the socio-cultural and
historical climate which tentatively indicates that the ways that sexual minorities live their everyday lives has transformed profoundly.

Next, the chapter addresses the small (but steadily growing) body of empirical studies which have explored the impact that registering a same-sex relationship has on lesbian and gay people’s everyday lives. In a variety of ways these studies have demonstrated how formalising a same-sex relationship has the potential to impact on the partners’ relationships with various others. For example, the couple’s relationship may be impacted upon because deciding to formalise a relationship encourages the couple to evaluate how civil partnership might meet the current needs of their relationship. Breaking the news of the couple’s changing circumstances to family and friends will inevitably have an impact on these relationships. Lastly, liberal social attitudes towards sexual minorities might persuade same-sex partners to be more confident and open about how they present their relationship to strangers in public. Taken together these bodies of literature suggest that the current socio-cultural and historical climate has significantly informed the ways that lesbians and gay men can live their daily lives.

Finally, the chapter introduces Finch’s (2007) concept of ‘display’ as a conceptual lens with which I propose to investigate whether and how civil partners display their sexual orientation and relationship in encounters with various others, and whether this has altered. Using Finch’s concept, I suggest, facilitates an exploration of whether and how liberal attitudes about sexual minorities are informing the possibilities for how same-sex partners display (convey meaning about) their lesbian and gay sexual orientation/same-sex relationship.

**Legal recognition: predicting the impact on everyday lives**

For over twenty years, scholars and activists have attempted to predict the impact that legal recognition schemes would have on people’s everyday lives. Although they anticipated that
legal recognition would affect people’s lives in different ways. Giele’s (2002, 2004) work on ‘biographical experiences’ and how the socio-cultural, historical context potentially informs how people’s lives unfold was used to situate and explore how and why academics and activists came to respond to legal recognition in distinctive ways. Giele (2002: 72, 75, 2004: 303-304) emphasises that the socio-cultural and historical context a person inhabits presents them with a series of opportunities, expectations and barriers which the individual negotiates. How the individual responds to these opportunities and barriers that their socio-cultural and historical climate presents them with, Giele (2002: 74) explains, depends on the resources available to them at the time. By ‘resources’, Giele (2002: 72, 81) means the ‘social networks’ or ‘membership in various communities and social groups’ that a person belongs to. I will illustrate how inhabiting certain types of social climate (in terms of the discourses or attitudes society held about sexual minorities) and encountering various social networks or ‘ideas’ influences the sorts of predictions scholars and activists made about how legal recognition would impact on their daily lives. This can help us to understand the formation of particular conceptions of legal recognition schemes.

Scholars who supported the introduction of legal recognition in the late 1980s and 1990s tended to do so because they anticipated that the availability of gay marriage would help improve sexual minorities’ and others’ everyday lives. Reasons for arguing ‘for’ legal recognition were because same-sex partners would be able to gain access to legal, economic and social protections (Stoddard 1997 [1989]) and would indicate that same-sex relationships were perceived to be equally valuable and as legitimate as heterosexual relationships (Stoddard 1997 [1989], Sullivan 1995). The discussions that were taking place in the late 1980s and 1990s about the need for same-sex partners to have access to relational rights were framed by a particular socio-cultural and historical context. Prevailing social attitudes labelled sexual minorities’ attraction to persons of the same sex as deviant and abnormal, and decreed that these relationships should be conducted in private
(McIntosh 1968, Weeks 1989). The view that same-sex relations should be conducted in private in part came from the passing of the 1967 Sexual Offences Act, which on recommendations from the Wolfenden report in 1957, advocated the decriminalisation of sexual relations between two men aged 21 and over (see Weeks 1977, Weeks and Porter 1998 [1991]: vii, Bedell 2007). Social attitudes that same-sex relationships should be invisible were further cemented in the phrasing used in Section 28 of the Local Government Act passed in 1988 that described homosexual relationships as ‘pretended family relationships’ (Cooper 1989). Certain circumstances that involved children such as a breakdown of a heterosexual relationship because one of the members of the marital relationship ‘came out’ as gay or lesbian or ill-health or death of one of the members of the same-sex partnership revealed just how vulnerable same-sex relationships were when rendered visible to legal practitioners and other authoritative bodies (Smart 1984, Sanders and Spraggs 1989: 121-122, Weeks 2007: 185). Weeks (2007) describes how dealing with the HIV/AIDS epidemic without legal and social protections, had tragic consequences for those involved:

Same-sex partners found themselves bypassed by medical authorities as their lovers fell ill or lay dying ... surviving partners often lost their homes when partners died, and were denied inheritance rights. In extreme cases they even found themselves excluded from funeral services by legal next-of-kin (Weeks 2007: 186).

Inhabiting such a climate may explain why some scholars and people involved in lesbian and gay political organisations emphasised the importance of legitimacy and of same-sex relationships being viewed as of equal worth as heterosexual relationships, and perceived that legal recognition might be one route to gain access to economic, legal and social protections which might improve their daily lives.

Another reason for supporting the introduction of legal recognition was proposed by Sullivan (1995) and Eskridge Jr (2002). Both postulated that legal recognition could bring an end to discrimination against sexual minorities and would help strengthen relationships
with members of families-of-origin. Eskridge Jr (2002) envisioned (rather optimistically) that relationships with kin would be strengthened because every same-sex marriage could stimulate a dialogue among relatives, co-workers and communities, and could result in these others viewing lesbian and gay relationships as normal rather than deviant. ‘Families-of-choice’ was a concept that emerged in academic literature in the late 1980s and 1990s (Shilts 1988, Weston 1997, Weeks et al. 1996, 1999a, 1999b, 2001) to describe families that were formed to replace blood ties lost because of homophobic reactions from members of families-of-origin (Weston 1997: 397). This body of research illustrated the diverse ways in which friends came to play a significant role in the lives of some lesbians and gay men who were estranged from their families-of-origin. The occurrence of relatives rejecting people because of a stigmatised lesbian or gay sexual orientation, and the consequent estrangement from families-of-origin, may explain why legal recognition was viewed as a route to strengthen relationships with families-of-origin.

Some academics and activists anticipated that pursuing legitimacy and social approval could have dire consequences for social groups that would be economically and socially disadvantaged by making legal recognition of couples available to sexual minorities. Ettelbrick (1997 [1989]) predicted that the introduction of legal recognition for same-sex relationships would bring about economic hardships for people reliant on the welfare state. Recent studies (Knights 2006, Harding 2008, Browne 2011) have found that the introduction of civil partnership in 2005 did have a detrimental economic impact on same-sex partners who were in receipt of state benefits (e.g. reducing the household income). This is because, as Knights (2006: 49-50) pointed out, those claimants on:

- means tested benefits (IS, JSA (income-based), housing benefit, council tax benefit, pension credit, and tax credit who are living as part of a same-sex couple registered or not, will have to declare themselves to the relevant agency, have their benefits reassessed, and will in the majority of cases be significantly worse off.
Before civil partnership was made available in 2005, same-sex couples were recognised as two individuals living in a shared residence (Browne 2011). Their status as a couple was not recognised and so each could claim state benefits as an individual and their partner’s income was disregarded (Knights 2006).

Both Ettelbrick (1997 [1989]) and Warner (1999) were critical of encouraging same-sex couples to marry because these couples did not fully comprehend the consequences of gaining such legitimacy; namely that this would only serve to invalidate, delegitimize, or stigmatise ‘other relations, needs and desires’ (Warner 1999: 133). In particular, Ettelbrick (1997 [1989]) and Warner (1999) warned that new social divisions would emerge where distinctions were made among sexual minorities; ‘good gays’ (those who married) and ‘bad gays’ (those who did not model their relationship on the norm of a monogamous interdependent couple relationship). Echoing these earlier concerns, Kandaswamy (2008: 721) challenges the way that advocates of same-sex marriage have framed their entitlement to gay marriage which include emphasising their respectability as a way of justifying why they should be given access to full-citizenship and the package of legal rights and social protections that come with citizenship. Kandaswamy (2008: 721) points out that this unintentionally means comparing themselves against an ‘other’, in this case ‘black women’ and ‘welfare recipients’ who are cast as unrespectable and thus undeserving of state protections.

The concerns about social groups that would be unfairly disadvantaged by the introduction of gay marriage in the earlier arguments against legal recognition were also being articulated in other general academic debates in the 1980s and 1990s. These debates critiqued the heterosexual institution of marriage and the consequences of privileging the marital relationship (Foucault 1998 [1979], Donzelot 1980, Smart 1984, Delphy and Leonard 1992, Dunne 1997). It is worth briefly revisiting some of these arguments in
order to draw attention to the similarity in both sets of arguments for and against legal recognition in order to understand why gaining access to marriage is seen by some as desirable but also conversely something to be resisted.

Foucault (1998 [1979]: 3) and Donzelot (1980: 92) both described how the state invested in the heterosexual marital relationship in the nineteenth century as a mechanism for maintaining the social order, by rewarding particular kinds of couplings and stigmatising others. The marital relationship that was procreative and able to sustain and financially provide for its members was rewarded (Donzelot 1980: 90) by granting this type of relationship certain privileges and legal (Smart 1984), social (Warner 1999:143) and adult (Dunne 1997: 16, 19) status. In contrast, certain relationships that the state perceived as less desirable, such as ‘lesbians, homosexuals’ (Foucault 1998 [1979], Rich 1980, Delph and Leonard 1992, Dunne 1997), ‘the unmarried’ (Smart 1984: xiii) or relationships that were dependent on financial help from the state were stigmatised (Donzelot 1980: 93) by denying these kinds of relationships access to the same status and privileges. Dunne (1997) has argued that constituting ‘other’ relationships differently eventually becomes the norm by influencing the way that people perceive certain relationships as right and proper and others as deviant. This is an issue that Kandaswamy (2008: 721) identifies as still pertinent to the way society views certain relationships.

The perception that same-sex partners could potentially transform the institution of marriage meant some academics advocated the introduction of couple-based legal recognition for same-sex relationships. Stoddard (1997 [1989]) and Hunter (1991: 9) claimed that opening up the institution of marriage to same-sex partners could be beneficial for heterosexuals because it would promote ‘gender equality’. The patriarchal institution of marriage could be ‘transformed’ because same-sex marriage ‘would radically denaturalise the social construction of male/female differentness, once expressed as
authority/dependence relationships, that [American] courts have deemed essential to the
definition of marriage’ (Hunter 1991: 9). The perception that same-sex partners were
capable of transforming the institution of marriage probably emerged because of the
circulation of constructions in the 1990s which characterised same-sex partnerships as
having more fluid relational practices. The notion that same-sex couples’ relational
practices were ‘fluid’ emerged in the findings of empirical studies which established how
an absence of pre-ordained ‘gender roles’ (Dunne 1997, 1999) meant that same-sex
relationships were capable of more equal forms of relating because there were no a-priori
assumptions about how the relationships should operate. Moreover, all aspects of the
relationship needed to be continually negotiated (Weeks et al. 1999a, 1999b). Conversely,
the main reason why same-sex partners were able to develop creative relational practices
and escape expectations placed on the marital relationship (Weeks et al. 1999a: 113, Dunne
1999: 73) was because they had been denied access to institutional structures such as

Others vehemently disagreed that gaining the right to legally formalise a same-sex
relationship would lead to the institution of marriage being transformed. In fact, some
academics argued the reverse, that gaining access to legal recognition would bring an end
to same-sex partners’ creativity and the capacity for fluid relational practices that made
them unique. Scholars such as Ettelbrick (1997 [1989]), Warner (1999), Auchmuty (2004),
Peel and Harding (2008) and Harding (2008) were opposed to the introduction of legal
recognition because they anticipated that same-sex partners would be required to copy the
relational practices of the heterosexual marital couples in order to qualify for legal
recognition (Ettelbrick 1997 [1989]: 759). Emulating the heterosexual marital couple (or
assimilating) in order to gain access to the protections of marriage, some argued, would
result in the ‘loss of distinctively non-heterosexual cultural and relational practices’ (Peel
and Harding 2008: 660) and the ‘loss of distinctive identities that lesbians and gays have
been able to evolve out of pejorative discourses and exclusionary treatment’ (Auchmuty 2004: 10).

The distinctive identities and cultural and relational practices to which Auchmuty (2004) and Peel and Harding (2008) refer, emerged in the 1960s and 1970s as a way of managing the challenges of a socio-cultural climate and social attitudes that obliged sexual minorities to be apologetic (about their non-heterosexual identity) and conduct their relations in private (see also Weeks 1985: 186, Foucault 1998 [1979]: 101, Heaphy 1996: 141). Participating in new social movements in the 1960s and 1970s, such as feminist movements (Sanders and Spraggs 1989, Healey 1994) and gay rights movements such as GLF (Gay Liberation Front), gave members access to alternative ideas of how they might perform their gay identities (Weeks 1977: 185, 191, Rosenfeld 1999). GLF, for instance, was credited with creating a ‘public’ gay identity and encouraged members to ‘affirm their difference’ and challenge prevailing societal attitudes by being unapologetic about their sexual identity and avoid hiding their relationships (Woods 1995: 7, Plummer 1975: 171-172). This was achieved by rejecting normative (heterosexual) relational practices which were characterised as oppressive (Jeffery-Poulter 1991: 103). The introduction of legal recognition has been blamed for the potential ‘loss’ of distinctive identities and relational practices. However, this ‘loss’ might in fact be better explained by the increasing liberalisation of social attitudes towards sexual minorities. The scholars mentioned above had access to ideas that were developed into strategies that affirmed their non-heterosexual sexual orientation and helped manage a social world that was hostile to sexual minorities. This hostile climate no longer exists and so therefore these identities have become outdated.

Using aspects of Giele’s (2002: 72, 75) work to situate academics’ and activists’ responses to legal recognition within a particular socio-cultural and historical context has facilitated an appreciation of why legal recognition was regarded as capable of improving or
damaging the lives of sexual minorities. Thus far I have not given sufficient consideration to the other notion put forward by Giele (2002: 72, 81) which is how access to ‘resources’ (e.g. social networks or membership to various communities) informs how an individual responds to the opportunities and barriers that the socio-cultural and historical climate presents them with. This idea sensitised me to the homogeneity of the backgrounds of those academics and activists whose views have been articulated in responses to legal recognition. So far, these perspectives have come from scholars and people involved in lesbian and gay organisations who were confident about being publicly ‘out’. These people also had access to various ‘resources’ (e.g. membership to various sexual, feminist and political communities, education and occupations) which has meant they have been able to articulate their opinions about the potential impact that legal recognition would have on people’s daily lives. Consequently, there may be LGBT people who inhabited the same socio-cultural and historical climate as the academics and activists, but because they have not had access to the same kinds of ‘resources’ and were not publicly ‘out’ (see for example Heaphy 2009) their views are unlikely to have been articulated in legal recognition debates (this issue is developed further in chapter 4). The next set of perspectives about legal recognition emerged when some form of legal recognition was a ‘concrete future reality’ (Clarke et al. 2007: 178) and I move on now to examine responses to the passing of the Civil Partnership Act in the UK in 2004.

**Changing possibilities for living everyday lives**

By the mid-2000s, some form of legal recognition was a ‘concrete future reality’ (Clarke et al. 2007: 178) in many Western democracies. The tangibility of legal recognition is a dominant theme reflected in a variety of discussions about the impact that legal recognition is having on the daily lives of sexual minorities. These include, for example, analyses of the rights and protections that have been made available to same-sex couples who become civil partners (Auchmuty 2004, Stychin 2006a, 2006b), and reviews of the
impact that the availability of legal recognition is having on the lives of sexual minorities who choose not to formalise their relationship (Browne 2011, Rolfe and Peel 2011), surveys of ‘ordinary’ people’s attitudes to legal recognition (Harding and Peel 2006, Harding 2006, 2008) and qualitative interviews with same-sex couples about their perspectives on marriage and partnership recognition (Clarke et al. 2006, 2007). These ‘ordinary’ people’s reactions to legal recognition are worth further investigation because it is in their perspectives that the most significant shifts can be detected. Clarke et al. (2006: 55) noted that their respondents’ attitudes, when compared with views expressed in the older scholarly debates, were more ambivalent (i.e. participants were not entirely for or against the availability of gay marriage). While both Clarke et al. (2007: 188) and Harding (2008) interviewed people who remained critical of marriage and suspicious of state regulation, the majority of their respondents expressed that same-sex relationships should be treated in the same way and therefore deserved the ‘same rights’ as heterosexual couples (Clarke et al. 2006: 148, Harding and Peel 2006, Harding 2006: 520). These respondents also showed support for ‘formal equality’ and rights (Harding 2006: 520, Clarke et al. 2007: 188, Harding 2008). The emphasis on, and claims that same and opposite-sex relationships are the ‘same’ is a remarkable shift, one which can be explained by a series of social changes that have contributed to opposite and same-sex intimate relationships being viewed as similar (Heaphy et al. 2013).

Sociologists have attempted to predict the implications of significant changes in patterns of intimacy in Western societies over the past 50 years (Giddens (2008 [1992], Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995, Jamieson 1999, Weeks et al. 2001, Smart and Shipman 2004, Smart 2007b). The restructuring of heterosexual relational practices over time has culminated in greater societal acknowledgement and tolerance of diverse relational practices and a plurality of family forms. These shifts are worthy of further consideration because they have produced the conditions that have resulted in the destabilisation of the homo/hetero
binary (Weeks et al. 1996, Weeks 2007: 9, Roseneil 2002) and have led to heterosexual and same-sex relational practices being increasingly viewed as similar (Heaphy et al. 2013, Shipman and Smart 2007, Weeks 2007). Changes that have contributed to the restructuring of heterosexual relationships have been traced to a series of ‘permissive’ legislative reforms in the 1960s and the Women’s Liberation movement in the 1960s and 1970s which gave some women access to powerful ideas about women’s autonomy and sexual emancipation (see Evans 1993: 70-71, Giddens 2008 [1992]: 61). Feminist movements inspired campaigns for changes in divorce law such as the Divorce Reform Act 1969 (Evans 1993, Smart 1984) and advocated the use of contraception.

Divorce was made more accessible in the 1970s, and so divorce rates rose sharply. In the late 1980s and 1990s there were sections of society who were seriously alarmed by these rising divorce rates and argued that ‘the family’ was in crisis and ‘under attack’ (Reinhold 1994: 63) from campaigns to make ‘positive images’ of sexual minorities available to young people in secondary schools (Cooper 1989). In response to calls for action, the Conservative Government passed Section 28 of the Local Government Act in 1988, which seriously curtailed the visibility of and funding for lesbian and gay groups because the Government claimed that the activities of these organisations were associated with the ‘promotion of homosexuality’. Same-sex partners, if mentioned in schools, were to be referred to as ‘pretended family relationships’. The symbolic aim of this legislation (repealed in 2003) was to preserve and defend who and what constituted ‘family relationships’ (see Weeks 1991, Smith 1994: 183-239).

Nowadays, the pattern of couples separating, divorcing and re-partnering is far more accepted and has, according to Giddens (2008 [1992]: 61), transformed attitudes towards love and partnerships. These attitudes, aided by the accessibility of divorce, have shifted from ‘romantic love’ associated with ‘forever’ and the pursuit of the ‘one-and-only’ partner
to ‘confluent love’ which is more ‘active’ and ‘contingent’, and concerned with the pursuit of the ‘special relationship’ (Giddens 2008 [1992]: 61). This shift in perspectives on love is combined with partners’ expectations of democracy, ‘equality and emotional give and take’ (Giddens 2008 [1992]: 62) which is captured in Giddens’ (2008 [1992]: 58) model of the ‘pure relationship’ which:

refers to a situation where a social relation is entered into for its own sake, for what can be derived from a sustained association with another, and which is continued only in so far as it is thought by both parties to deliver enough satisfactions for each individual to stay within it.’ (Giddens 2008 [1992]: 58)

The pure relationship is Giddens’ attempt to theorise the characteristics of contemporary attitudes to partnership, where the traditional conventions that kept partners anchored to a relationship have dissolved. This means that partners can no longer ‘coast along’ in the relationship, they need to continually work at maintaining their partnership. Giddens (2008 [1992]: 135) refers to same-sex couples as ‘pioneers’ of the pure relationship, who for different reasons, have ‘experienced what is becoming more and more commonplace for heterosexual couples’. The expectation that heterosexual and same-sex relationships are thought of as needing constant negotiation and work is what contributes to the belief that same-sex and opposite-sex partners’ relational practices are the same.

Contraception has also contributed to the restructuring of heterosexual relationships because it ‘decentred sexuality from the needs of reproduction’ (Giddens 2008 [1992]: 2) and has resulted in marriage no longer being perceived as the ‘sine qua non of family formation and parenting’ (Weeks 2007: 104). Contemporary intimate relationships are as a consequence far more diverse; some marital unions remain childless and many heterosexual couples cohabit, raising children outside of the marital relationship (see also Silva and Smart 1999, Finch 2007, Dermott and Seymour 2011, Morgan 2011, Mckie and Callan 2012). These shifts have undermined ‘traditional’ ideals that marriage should be reserved for heterosexual couples for the purposes of reproduction and raising children. Instead the
purposes of marital unions are now seen as far more diverse, as argued in campaigns to give same-sex partners the right to marry (Sullivan 1995: 179).

The notion that heterosexual and same-sex relationships are largely the ‘same’ prompted the New Labour Government in 2002 to consider the ‘problems caused by a lack of legal recognition’ for same-sex partners and produced a willingness to evaluate the ‘potential benefits of introducing a same-sex partner recognition scheme’ (Conway and Fairbairn 2004: 9). Consider the phrasing in the speech made by Barbara Roche (the then Social Exclusion Minister) as she made the case for why legal recognition was needed for same-sex relationships:

There are many thousands of gay couples who have been together for many years, who look after each other, support each other, live their lives in exactly the same way as any other family. Yet the law - the state - does not recognise them as a partnership, as a family, while they are together or when one of them dies. Many gay people have been refused a hospital visit to see their seriously ill partner, or refused their rightful place at their partner's funeral or evicted from their home after their partner’s death, or forced to sell their home to pay inheritance tax duties (Roche 2002 cited in Conway and Fairbairn 2004: 9-10) [emphasis added].

By situating academics’ responses to legal recognition within their socio-cultural and historical context, I was able to develop a more nuanced appreciation of why legal recognition was predicted to help or disrupt people’s daily lives. I suggest that exploring lesbians’ and gay men’s responses to legal recognition offers an opportunity to examine whether and how liberal social attitudes have impacted on the way that sexual minorities make sense of their sexual orientation. Next, I turn to literature that illuminates the impact that registering a civil partnership has had on the everyday lives of sexual minorities.

**Becoming civil partners: the impact on everyday lives**

Three broad themes have been identified in studies that have addressed the impact that becoming civil partners has on same-sex couples’ everyday lives.
Deciding to have a civil partnership: impact on the couple’s relationship

Relatively little is known about the impact that becoming civil partners has on the couple’s relationship. Jowett and Peel (2010: 209) anticipated that facing particular circumstances such as the ‘threat of discrimination’ may encourage some couples to legally register their relationship in order to gain access to ‘rights’ and ‘protections’. In an autobiographical paper, Ellis (2007: 245) identified that she had been motivated to register her same-sex partnership after experiencing a particular situation. She recalled how her partner had been seriously ill and that medical professionals encountered at the time had failed to acknowledge her status as Michelle’s partner. As a result of this experience, she stated that having a civil partnership would allow her to secure next-of-kin status which gave her assurance that she would have recognition and status in similar future situations. This example, while based on one scholar’s personal experience, is valuable because it suggests that a link exists between the needs of the couple’s relationship and the type of decisions that encourage couples to initially consider formalising their relationship. This link has been substantiated in several studies.

Various forms of justification for civil partnership have been identified. For example, Shipman and Smart (2007), Smart (2008), Heaphy et al. (2013) and Einarsdóttir (2013) have explored the impact that deciding to have a civil partnership has on a same-sex couple’s relationship. Collectively, these scholars found a pattern between couples’ reasons for registering their partnership, the length of time these couples have been partners and the way that participants anticipated that civil partnership would complement and meet the current needs of their relationship. The following examples illustrate this point. Shipman and Smart (2007: 4.1) reported that interviewees who have been together for many years expressed their decision to have a civil partnership as motivated by ‘purely instrumental’ reasons. Some of these couples were approaching retirement and tended to emphasise the
pragmatic benefits of civil partnership (as opposed to romantic features). Civil partnership was conceived as a package of legal rights, financial and social protections which offered next-of-kin status and protected against financial hardship. For instance, becoming civil partners meant they became entitled to receive each other’s pensions (Shipman and Smart 2007: 4.13). Einarsdóttir’s (2013: 796) Icelandic lesbian couples mentioned that registering a civil partnership gave them some assurance that they could secure ‘financial assets from greedy relatives’. On several occasions, Shipman and Smart’s (2007) and Heaphy et al’s (2013) interviewees explained that they were motivated to become civil partners because it allowed the couple to ‘protect’ their relationship from interference by state authorities and relatives. Civil partnership was conceived in this way in cases where a partner was foreign and had uncertain citizenship status or where the couple were raising children (Shipman and Smart 2007, Heaphy et al. 2013).

Shipman and Smart (2007: 4.2), Einarsdóttir (2013) and Heaphy et al. (2013) found that in cases where couples had been together for a relatively short time they were more likely to say that they registered their partnership for ‘love’. Heaphy et al. (2013) noted that the majority of their younger civil partners told stories of how they had adopted a conventional marriage proposal which seemed to affirm their explanation that they married for ‘love’, because a proposal of marriage is commonly associated with ‘romance’, love and commitment (Ingraham 2008). While ‘love’ and ‘romance’ were explicitly identified in younger couples’ accounts of why they formalised their relationship, Heaphy et al. (2013: 94) pointed out that ‘pragmatism’ and ‘rationality’ was also evident in their stories of how they reached the decision to become civil partners. In many cases, couples reported how they had pragmatically and informally broached the subject of becoming civil partners which offered partners a space to reveal and work through ‘reservations, concerns and ambivalences’ that they might have about taking this next step (Heaphy et al. 2013: 94). After such discussions, a marriage proposal had followed. Other couples’ experiences
illustrated the important role that ‘pragmatism’ could play in reaching the decision to become civil partners. For example, partners who spontaneously proposed to the other partner, rather than discussing their desires with their partner first, left the recipient of the proposal in a difficult predicament, especially where the recipient of the proposal had not considered taking this next step prior to receiving the proposal. On such occasions, recipients of the proposal reported hesitating before agreeing to legally formalise their relationship. Their hesitant reaction caused by the surprise proposal was often interpreted by the other partner as rejection. The pattern found in these studies indicates that couples who are at different points in their relational lives (have been together for varying amounts of time) may have different relationship needs or encounter different situations which influence their motivation for having a civil partnership. It also appeared that the different relationship needs seemed to correspond with certain ‘types’ of reasons for registering a civil partnership.

A way of contributing to the literature on this topic and exploring further the impact that civil partnership has on a couple's relationship is to examine whether there are distinctive ways in how couples ‘story’ their decision to become civil partners. In efforts to explain their decisions to others there may be (as these studies suggest) particular types of reasons that are conventionally open to couples at certain points of their relational lives. For instance, newer couples may draw on cultural discourses of ‘romance’ and the marriage proposal as a way of presenting their decision to others. Whereas couples who have been together for many years, may portray their decision to register their civil partnership in terms of being ‘responsible’ or as a ‘caring’ partner who views becoming civil partners as ensuring financial security in old age. Next I outline the few studies that have addressed the impact that becoming civil partners can have on partners’ relationships with significant others (kin and friends).
Announcing civil partnership to kin and friends

Several empirical studies have illustrated how becoming civil partners can impact on the individual partners’ relationships with kin. Scholars such as Lewin (1998), Ellis (2007), Jowett and Peel (2007), Peel (2009), Goodwin and Butler (2009), Smart (2007a) and Heaphy et al. (2013) have observed that many of their respondents mentioned how they broke the news of their intention to become civil partners to their family members. Family members were reported to have reacted in a variety of ways to this news, ranging from ‘positive and welcoming’ responses (Peel 2009, Jowett and Peel 2007: 105, Ellis 2007: 247), reactions that were considerably more ‘apathetic or muted’ (Ellis 2007: 247, Peel 2009) and responses which were decisively ‘negative’ (Ellis 2007: 247, Goodwin and Butler 2009: 240, Jowett and Peel 2007, Peel 2009: 4). In a few of these studies (Goodwin and Butler 2009: 240, Ellis 2007: 247, Peel 2009: 4) there was some indication that how kin reacted matters. This is because couples anticipated that they would elicit a response similar to that given when a heterosexual couple announce an ‘engagement’. Where the couple did not receive a desired (positive) response they expressed disappointment (Goodwin and Butler 2009: 240, Ellis 2007: 247, Peel 2009: 4). The fact that some respondents reported being disappointed when family members reacted with indifference or negativity highlights that there is a continuing and sometimes unrealistic assumption that kin can be relied upon to be supportive around such events (Finch and Mason 1993: 164)

Scholars such as Lewin (1998), Shipman and Smart (2007), Smart (2007a) and Heaphy et al (2013) have given detailed attention to the complex interactions that are activated in the moment when couples break the news to their family and friends. These include: the impact that the couple’s announcement can have on familial relationships, the complex decisions and negotiations that ensue as the couple work out which guests to invite, and the extent to which families participate in commitment ceremonies, blessings, civil unions
and civil partnerships. In her analysis, for example, Smart (2007a) explored the impact on lesbian and gay people’s relationships with relatives when kin were invited to attend an event such as a civil partnership. Smart (2007a: 683) demonstrated how receiving an invitation to participate in the ceremony activated relatives’ ‘responsibilities’ as kin to participate in the event. The surfacing of these responsibilities encourages kin to engage more directly with the couple’s sexual orientation and the public display of their same-sex relationship. This may mean forcing relatives to confront uncomfortable feelings or prejudices that might ordinarily be glossed over (see also Almack's 2011 discussion about lesbian couples’ experiences of displaying parenthood). Many of the respondents in these studies told stories that appear to elevate the importance of interactions and the effect that announcing an intention to become civil partners has on relationships with kin. This means that less consideration has been given to the matter of who lesbians and gay men turn to when they cannot rely on family members for support.

The analyses of a few scholars such as Lewin (1998), Smart (2007a) and Heaphy et al. (2013) did feature the stories of participants whose relationships with kin are fractured because of their relatives’ inability to cope with their son’s/daughter’s or sibling’s sexual orientation. In such cases, they observe how ‘friends’ come to be the most significant relationships in their participants’ lives, and that it is to friends that they reveal their decision to formalise their relationship. Out of the various studies that have explored the experiences of couples who become civil partners, the fact that only three academics reported that their lesbian and gay male participants turned to friends because they could not break the news to their family is surprising. Stories of estrangement from families—of-origin who had rejected them because of their non-heterosexual identity were a prominent feature in empirical studies (Shilts 1998, Weston 1997, Weeks et al. 1996, 1999a, 1999b, 2001) that explored non-heterosexual people’s daily lives in the late 1980s and 1990s.
Consequently friendships were reported to have played a significant role in helping people in same-sex relationships maintain their daily lives in the absence of support from kin.

A puzzle raised by this body of literature concerns the apparent prioritisation of kin as recipients for the couple’s news, rather than friends. This issue conveys that same-sex couples prioritise family as people they can and want to turn to when revealing important changing circumstances. The analyses of Lewin (1998), Smart (2007a) and Heaphy et al. (2013) illuminate that being able to turn to kin was not an option that was evenly available to all respondents. In cases where familial bonds with kin had been ruptured, couples did not necessarily tell relatives of their decision to formalise their relationship. Instead, relationships with friends were identified as an important source of support for celebrating and affirming significant life-markers such as the couple getting married. This, however, begs the question: ‘do people universally turn to kin as the first point of call?’ Moreover, what factors or circumstances influence some couples to avoid or select particular audiences? With these questions in mind, a useful contribution to literature on this topic is to follow the process of who couples decide to inform when they become civil partners, through to its conclusion (e.g. who couples initially want to inform of their decision and who they actually end up telling). Such an exploration would be a useful contribution because it could investigate further the impact that becoming civil partners has on same-sex partners’ relationships with significant others (kin and friends) and who is significant in same-sex partners’ lives.

Presenting a same-sex relationship in public

The findings from two qualitative studies, one by NatCen (Mitchell et al. 2009 and Dickens et al. 2009) and the other by Goodwin and Butler (2009) indicate there may be an ‘end to the closet (whereby homosexuals were forced or expected to hide their sexuality)’ (Einarsdottir 2011: 54, 58). This is because some of their civilly partnered respondents
reported that, following their civil partnership, they had become more comfortable about being openly affectionate in public (Dickens et al. 2009: 240, Goodwin and Butler 2009) and some interviewees identified greater confidence in being ‘open’ about their relationship with specific groups of others, such as ‘public service providers’ (Mitchell et al. 2009). A few participants, however, stated that the availability of civil partnership had made little difference to how they presented their relationship in public. This was because these couples were confident ‘about being unreservedly open about their relationship’ (Mitchell et al. 2009). In contrast, for some of Mitchell et al.’s (2009) participants, ‘the closet’ still remains intact because they still feel the need to ‘pass’.

These studies were designed to provide a general analysis of the impact that legislative changes such as civil partnership are having on the lives of same-sex couples. Therefore the authors only record whether their respondents make their relationship ‘visible’ or whether they still ‘pass’. They do not provide the specific situational and contextual details that identify the factors that contribute to their participants being ‘open’ or remaining ‘closeted’ about their relationship. Paying attention to the situational and contextual details (such as social interactions with others, type of others (e.g. acquaintances and strangers), the type of public space they are in and whether they previously experienced others’ homophobia) would facilitate a more nuanced understanding of the social conditions which are contributing to sexual minorities being ‘open’ about their relationship or encouraging them to ‘pass’ as heterosexual.

An example of what this might look like is found in Simpson’s (2012) recent qualitative study of mid-life gay men’s experiences of ageing. He adopts a situational approach in his analysis of how his interviewees present their relationship in public. Simpson (2012: 2.2) notes how his interviewees use a variety of ‘strategies’ to move through ‘heterospace’, similar to the variations discussed in both the NatCen and Goodwin and Butler (2009)
studies. His analysis extends their insights by providing detailed accounts of how they present their identity/same-sex relationship in public. For instance, he describes how some interviewees ‘negotiate’ or ‘challenge’ the implicit rules of who could use public space. Similar to Mitchell et al. (2009), Simpson (2012: 4.1) also found that some of his participants continued to rely on the strategy of ‘passing’ or ‘de-gaying’ themselves while moving through ‘straight’ public spaces. Examining participants’ accounts, he argued that their reluctance to be ‘open’ about their relationship in public was because they were ‘haunted by former experiences of homophobia’ and wanted to avoid encountering others who they thought might be intolerant of same-sex relationships (Simpson 2012: 4.1).

The fact that some sexual minorities report being more ‘open’ and ‘affectionate’ in public indicates that the power of the heterosexual assumption and the compulsion for non-heterosexuals to ‘pass’ may be diminishing (Mitchell et al 2009, Dickens et al. 2009, Goodwin and Butler 2009 and Simpson 2012). The prospect of lesbians and gay men being more confident about making their relationship visible is a remarkable and relatively recent shift. Especially given the substantial body of scholarship in the 1990s and early 2000s which found that non-heterosexuals tended to disguise their sexual orientation or same-sex relationship while in public because they anticipated that strangers they encountered would be verbally or physically abusive (Johnston and Valentine 1995, Donovan et al. 1999, Johnson 2002).

Given the recent evidence where some non-heterosexuals report feeling able to be more demonstrative, it seems timely to explore in closer detail what, if any, impact social attitudes about sexual minorities and legislative changes (such as Civil Partnership Act, The Equality Act) are having on how lesbians and gay men present their relationship in encounters with different acquaintances (e.g. neighbours, work colleagues) and strangers (e.g. passers-by, hotel receptionists and medical professionals) in different situations. Such
an analysis would extend existing insights by specifying when, how and in which situations couples feel empowered to make their relationship visible, and whether there are particular occasions they perceive it is safer to ‘pass’.

These empirical studies alerted me to the fact that becoming civil partners affects different aspects of same-sex partners’ daily lives. I propose that examining the significance that registering a partnership has on: i) the couple’s relationship, ii) their relationships with kin and friends and, iii) whether civil partners feel able to present their relationship in public, will enable an exploration of whether and how liberal attitudes towards sexual minorities are impacting on how civil partners perform their relational lives. It is with these intentions in mind that I plan to use Finch’s (2007) concept of display as an analytical lens to investigate whether and how civil partners display their sexual orientation and relationship in encounters with others.

**Making the case for display**

I propose to use Finch’s (2007) concept of ‘display’ to explore whether and how more liberal social attitudes are impacting on how civil partners perform their relational lives. First it is prudent to introduce and define the concept and discuss how other academics have used it since its conception in 2007.

**Introduction, definition and use of the concept**

In making the case for display, Finch (2007: 65) proposed that the concept could be a necessary addition to the sociological toolbox for academics who are studying contemporary family relationships. Finch emphasised that it would prove to be a necessary accompaniment to Morgan’s (2011, 1996) concept of ‘family practices’ and his notion of ‘doing family’. Finch (2007) designed the concept of ‘display’ as an analytical lens which could be used to explore the impact that the greater diversity of family forms is having on the daily lives of families. She claimed that people nowadays
need to ‘display’ to others that their practices and particular sets of relationships are family. The need to display ‘family’ arises out of the increasing diversity of family forms and the varied ways that family is being done which means that people can no longer assume their relationships with particular groups of others will automatically be recognised as family (Finch 2007: 68-69). Consequently, family members are increasingly required to convey to others and have others confirm the ‘family-like’ nature of their relationships.

The concept is influenced by the theoretical tradition of social interactionism. As a consequence, Finch (2007: 74, 79) encourages researchers to examine the interactions that occur between an actor and their audience. Finch (2007: 74, 79) conceives that both actors and audiences have ‘active’ roles in these interactions and asserts that the ‘audience’ is invested with the power to accept or reject the meanings that social actors are attempting to convey about ‘family’. Finch (2007: 76) conceives the audience as an ‘active’ participant in the interactions, which distinguishes it from the ‘passive’ audience described in the earlier work of Goffman (1990 [1959]). Goffman (1990 [1959]: 15-17) theorised that social actors held a more active role in their exchanges with an audience, arguing that it is the social actor who defines the situation and shapes the meanings that their audience discern about the individual’s character.

In outlining ‘display’, Finch also identified ‘tools’ that social actors might draw on to ‘support’ and ‘reinforce’ the meanings that they are trying to convey about their family relationships. Examples included, ‘physical objects such as photographs or domestic artefacts’ and ‘narratives’ (Finch 2007: 77). Photographs that are displayed in people’s homes, for instance, could convey and reinforce meanings about relationships between the displayer and people featured in the photograph (Finch 2007: 77), whereas narratives, Finch (2007: 77-78) proposed, could be used to convey meaning
about family by situating the social actors’ personal experiences about family within generally ‘accepted repertoires of what family means’ (Finch 2007: 78). Drawing on ‘generalised patterns of social meanings about kinship’ is a way that social actors can ensure their displays are understood by their audiences (Finch 2007: 78). Finch (2007: 76) also distances her concept of display from Butler’s (1999 [1990]) concept of ‘performativity’, as it is unable to adequately draw out relational identities, instead focusing on ‘individual identities’.

In his recent engagement with ‘display’, Heaphy (2011) approaches the concept from a theoretical viewpoint. Heaphy (2011: 34) focuses on how the concept could be refined, for example, exploring how ‘display’ could be merged with the theoretical lens of ‘performativity’. He suggests that ‘display’, with its social interactionist underpinnings, has valuable qualities that should not be rejected in favour of the more established concept of ‘performativity’. Heaphy (2011: 19) advocates studying how ‘display’ is bound up with ‘performativity’ and the scripting of family and ‘other’ family relationships. Viewing the meanings people convey about family ‘performatively’, Heaphy (2011: 32) argues, would mean being able to identify and challenge how certain types of family (e.g. white, middle-class, heterosexual) are privileged in the societal imagination and in what way these family values and norms inform assumptions of how family ‘ought’ to be done. As a consequence, however, alternative families become stigmatised and ‘othered’. Heaphy (2011: 28) cites the example of how lesbian and gay families have become more ‘acceptable’ and respectable over the past few decades. The increase in respectability and becoming more acceptable has emerged because these families adopted and displayed white, middle-class, heterosexual norms. Heaphy (2011: 28) points out that emulating the values of ‘normative’ families emerges because LGBT families ‘are highly conscious of how they do and display family, especially where children are involved’. This suggests that the appearance of diverse family forms have been embraced over time but there is still some
way to go before the variety of values that ‘different’ families might have are accepted. One way of fostering greater understanding, and possibly tolerance of plural family values, would be for scholars of contemporary families to explore how display is significant in different ways across and within families (Heaphy 2011: 25) and disseminate this knowledge into the public domain.

Several scholars have combined the concept of ‘display’ with Morgan’s (1996) concept of ‘family practices’ to empirically explore the experiences of contemporary family relationships. James and Curtis (2010) used Finch’s (2007: 77) notion of ‘tools’ for displaying family in their recent study and identify how parents’ and children’s ‘narratives’ of family life and ‘eating’ practices could be drawn on as tools for display. Similarly, Davies (2011) examines children’s perspectives on ‘surnames’ (or naming) as a ‘family practice’ and as a way of displaying family and kinship. Jones and Hackett (2011) have also combined the concepts of ‘family practices’ and ‘display’ in order to study parents’ experiences of adopting children over a 24 year period. The recent study by Gabb (2013) employs ‘display’ as an analytical lens to explore how parents’ manage public-private aspects of father-child intimacy and illustrates how the dis-embodied male makes displaying ‘nudity’ in the family potentially risky.

A few academics have used the concept of display to explore lesbians’ and gay men’s accounts of parenthood. Applying the lens of display to these accounts has enabled these researchers to demonstrate that lesbian and gay male parents have to engage in more ‘intensive’ displays than heterosexual parent families, in order to ensure their relationships are recognized as family. Almack (2011), for example, analysed the stories that her lesbian-parent participants told about photographs which the interviewees’ parents had of the lesbian parent family. Examining these stories, Almack (2011) was able to demonstrate the varied ‘display work’ that her interviewees and their relatives were doing to maintain kin
relationships. Almack (2011: 210), for instance, noted the significance that her interviewees attributed to where photographs were displayed (e.g. prominent position or in a discrete place inaccessible to visitors) and what the images depicted (e.g. whether the image could convey that this is a lesbian family because both mothers and child were in the photograph). Where and what these images displayed influenced whether her participants thought their kin recognised or rejected the couple as a lesbian parent family. Almack’s (2011) analysis of her participants’ stories about photographs meant she was able to verify Finch’s (2007: 77) claim that photographs could be used as tools for display and that the display of photographs ‘in people’s homes could convey and reinforce meanings about relationships between the displayer and people featured in the photograph’. Conflicts of non-heterosexual identity and parenthood are singled out for discussion in Doucet’s (2011: 93-94) research on fathers’ narratives of parenting. Doucet (2011) observed how her gay fathers narrated the considerable efforts they had to undertake in order to display and be recognised as fathers. A key message embedded in Doucet’s (2011: 93-94) analysis is the important role of the audience, particularly who the audience is, as this can influence the meanings someone might seek recognition for (see also discussions in Haynes and Dermott 2011 ‘Displaying Mixedness’ in the same volume of Displaying Families). Doucet (2011: 94) described that some of her interviewees had ended their then existing heterosexual relationships because they ‘came out’. As a consequence, these fathers reported how they had been denied the opportunity to maintain relationships with their children. These same participants also felt the heightened glare of community scrutiny over their ability to parent and could not be certain that community members would recognise them as fathers. As a result of these experiences, these participants tended to avoid displaying their gay identity in particular contexts (e.g. their children’s schools, the wider community). In contrast, fathers who perceived they did not need to hide their gay identity were those who felt their wider communities were accepting of diversity.
The studies above which focus on contemporary family forms have demonstrated that Finch’s (2007) concept of ‘display’ is an effective analytical lens for exploring the impact that social change is having on the experiences of contemporary family relationships. Social actors, however, have multiple selves and identities and thus ‘carry on a whole series of different relationships to different people’ (Mead 1956: 219). I mentioned earlier in this chapter that the social changes which contributed to the greater diversity of family forms were also responsible for the shift in social attitudes towards sexual minorities. The literature outlined above, gives some indication of how diverse family forms have impacted on contemporary family relationships. It is not clear, however, what impact these liberal social attitudes are having on how sexual minorities do and perform their everyday lives. In what follows, I want to make the case for why and how the concept of ‘display’ could be refined as an analytical lens to explore the impact that liberal social attitudes are having on how sexual minorities do and perform their everyday lives.

Displaying sexual orientation/same-sex relationships and processes of display

Finch specifies that her concept is for exploring displays (conveying meaning about) family to a variety of audiences. I propose to use display as a conceptual lens to explore the meanings that lesbian and gay people convey about their non-heterosexual orientation and same-sex relationships. ‘Display’ is particularly suited to the task of examining the effect that the liberalisation of attitudes towards sexual minorities is having on the everyday lives of lesbian and gay men for two reasons. First, the same processes of social change in patterns of intimacy in Western societies (Giddens 2008 [1992]), Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995, Jamieson 1999, Weeks et al 2001, Smart and Shipman 2004, Smart 2007b) that encouraged greater diversity of family forms (which display was designed to explore) were also responsible for the emergence of increasingly tolerant social attitudes towards sexual minorities (Weeks et al. 1996, Weeks 2007: 9, Roseneil 2002) and, in relation, the availability
of civil partnership in 2005. Therefore, civil partnership can be seen as a marker of these transformed attitudes towards sexual minorities.

Second, ‘display’ focuses on the meanings that are conveyed during interactions between the actor and an audience. Mead’s (1956) interactionist account of the ‘development of the self’ encouraged me to recognise the value of focusing on interactions with others as a route to explore the impact that liberal social attitudes are having on members of sexual minorities’ daily lives. Mead (1956: 235) describes how the self is developed by organising ‘particular attitudes of other individuals towards himself’ during interactions with various others. May (2011: 368) also notes how ‘collectively held social norms, values and customs’ play an important role in influencing the self and its interactions with others. The attitudes of others become internalised and it is during this process that social actors come to see themselves as others see them, or as Crossley (2006: 89) aptly puts it, the ‘individual assumes the observational and judgemental position of others in relation to herself’. A consequence of adopting and ‘internalising’ (Athens 1994: 522) others’ attitudes can encourage someone to ‘censor’ and shape ‘the sort of expression that can take place’ (Mead 1956: 252). This theorising could be applied to the issue of developing a sense of one’s non-heterosexual orientation and forming same-sex relationships. The literature discussed earlier in the chapter highlighted how social norms and attitudes about sexual minorities and same-sex relationships have changed significantly over the past two decades. For instance, representations of sexual minorities had once been characterised as ‘deviant’, a ‘stigma’ (see for instance, Rosenfeld 1999, Weeks 2007), whereas it is now more commonplace for society to view sexual minorities as ‘relatively ordinary’ (Heaphy et al. 2013) and that their relationships are no different from heterosexual relationships. Therefore, if we explore the stories that people tell about their interactions with others we may expect to see differences in how people display (convey meaning about) their sexual orientation or same-sex relationship. Empirical studies (reviewed earlier in the chapter)
documented how the change in the couple’s circumstances (registering their civil partnership) affected the couple’s relational life, in particular noting the impact on three ‘groups’ of others (Morgan 2009: 3): the couple’s relationship, significant others (family and friends) and strangers. The observation that civil partnership affects the relational lives of couples is significant because it could provide the means for exploring what (if any) impact inhabiting the current socio-cultural and historical climate has for how sexual minorities do their daily lives. To clarify, studying these ‘narratives of display’ that individuals and couples tell about their interactions with a variety of different audiences offers an opportunity to examine whether and how liberal social attitudes are impacting on how they do and perform their everyday lives (these narratives are explored in chapters 4-7).

A more nuanced understanding of how ‘display’ works in practice in encounters with others was needed before it could be used as an analytical lens to explore whether and how liberal attitudes are affecting how sexual minorities lead their daily lives. Finch (2007: 73) acknowledges that her discussion about the processes involved in display, and how display works in practice, is more ‘tentative’. Finch (2007: 73) does indicate that social meanings are conveyed during interactions with others. In order to understand how display works in practice, I turned to Morgan’s (2009: 1) work, who has theorised that the people an individual might encounter in their everyday lives can be ‘crudely separated into’ three ‘sets’ of people: intimates, acquaintances and strangers. Morgan (2009: 3-5) specifies that we have varying amounts of knowledge of these others, and this influences the kinds of relationships that can be developed with them, and in turn shapes the kinds of interactions that can occur with them.

I borrowed Morgan’s (2009) conceptual idea of mapping the interactions that civil partners have with one of six different audiences (e.g. self, couple, family, friends, acquaintances and
strangers) as a way of illustrating how ‘display’ might work in practice. I thought that exploring the narratives that civil partners tell about their interactions with these others, was a way in which I could explore whether and how liberal social attitudes towards sexual minorities are impacting on their relational lives. In chapters 4 to 7, I illustrate that the ‘types’ of displays and how civil partners convey meaning about their non-heterosexual orientation and same-sex relationship are different in interactions with these groups of others. In the next chapter, I consider the practical issues of capturing and generating narratives of display.
Chapter 3 Generating narratives of display: Methods and Methodology

Introduction

After reviewing several bodies of literature, the previous chapter established that the current socio-cultural and historical climate has significantly informed the ways that sexual minorities can live their daily lives. I proposed that Finch’s (2007) concept of ‘display’ could be used to explore the various ways that registering a civil partnership impacts on the couple’s relationship, their relationship with others and whether civil partners felt able to display the nature of their relationship in encounters with acquaintances and strangers. I explained that such an investigation facilitates an examination of whether and how liberal attitudes towards sexual minorities are impacting on how civil partners perform their relational lives.

The chapter begins with an outline of the aims of the research project, the research design and the research questions which were employed to investigate the significance of the socio-cultural climate and encounters with others for informing the ways that sexual minorities can live their daily lives. It justifies decisions taken to sample for age and gender and discusses the merits, limitations and practicalities of relying on self-selection recruitment methods as I did. Following this I discuss and evaluate the methods that were employed to generate 30 narrative interviews with individuals and couples. Relational timelines (that mapped significant relationships and events over the life of each participant) and photo-elicitation using participants’ photographs were deployed as prompts to stimulate the production of the individual’s/couple’s relational narrative. I then address how ethical dilemmas (such as negotiating power and sensitive issues) were managed during the interviews. I do not discuss ethics separately; instead I prefer to address how ethical issues were managed as and when they arose at each stage of the project. Finally, I describe my analytical approach. An analytical strategy was designed that employed personal narrative analysis or ‘personal story’ analysis and used key topics from the interview schedule to
inform the thematic coding framework that was designed to analyse the data. A key focus of my analysis was to illuminate the types of display, and what these displays looked like when civil partners conveyed meaning about their sexual orientation/relationship to different audiences.

Aims, research design and questions
The aim of this project was to focus on the relational lives of people who were aged 35 to 60 when they registered their partnership. This meant I was broadly interested in gaining access to people’s relational experiences such as the continuities and shifts in displaying their selves (including perceptions of how their lesbian/gay sexual orientation was received by others), their intimate relationships with past and present partners, relationships with significant others (family members and friends) and their encounters with acquaintances and strangers. Exploring the stories that civil partners tell about their encounters with others over time is a way of examining if and how changing societal attitudes are impacting on how they perform their relational lives.

My research design was informed by a qualitative strategy because it can manage complexity, detail and context (Mason 1996: 4), which are qualities that are necessary for projects like mine which explore how the meanings and practices of relationships are constructed in encounters with others. An interactionist lens was employed because it is especially suited to understanding ‘change’ and is capable of producing the type of knowledge that could address the interplay between the ‘wider social order’ and people’s ‘actions and lives’ (Plummer 2000: 194).

The aims of the project were as follows:

- Explore the significance of the availability of civil partnership for civil partners’ relational lives
- Examine whether and how civil partners display their sexual orientation/relationship in different contexts and encounters with different audiences
The four research questions below allow for a more focused investigation of the overarching study aims:

**RQ1.** What is the personal (self/biographical) significance of the availability of civil partnership?

**RQ2.** What is the significance of the availability of civil partnership for the couple’s relationship?

**RQ3.** What does the participants’ choice of who they announce their decision to have a civil partnership to tell us about the significance of their relationships with significant others (kin and friends)?

**RQ4.** What influence do non-familial audiences (i.e. acquaintances and strangers) have on whether and how civil partners display their relationship (in different settings)?

Through these questions, I focussed on the personal stories that civil partners tell about whether and how they display their sexual orientation/same-sex relationship in encounters with these six different audiences (e.g. self, couple, kin, friends, acquaintances and strangers). Examining participants’ narratives of displaying their sexual orientation/relationship to others is relevant because people are embedded in relationships, and routinely interact with these different others during the course of their daily lives (Burkitt 2008: 3). Therefore, exploring the meanings that narrators convey to these audiences about their sexual orientation/relationship becomes a way of identifying whether and how these tolerant attitudes about sexual minorities are influencing their relational lives.

**Sampling and recruitment**

**Sampling strategy**

I designed a sample that would focus on the relational experiences of civil partners aged 35 to 60 which meant I could explore what civil partnership means to gay men and lesbians who had lived a significant portion of their adult lives without access to legal recognition. A primary motivation for constructing a sample that includes women and men who were aged 35 to 60 when they became civil partners was because they had a range of
‘biographical experiences’ of the liberalisation of societal attitudes towards sexual minorities. People aged 60 when they registered their partnership would have come of age in the socio-cultural environment (Giele 2002: 72) of the late 1960s when heterosexual relationships were viewed as the norm, even ‘compulsory’ (Rich 1980), and sexual minorities and intimate same-sex relationships were ‘tolerated’ provided they were conducted in private. In contrast, people aged 35 when they registered their partnership came of age in the 1990s at a time when same-sex relationships were being viewed as increasingly ordinary and as no different to heterosexual relationships, largely due to the social changes that were discussed in chapter 2 (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995, Jamieson 1999, Giddens 2008 [1992], Weeks 2007).

Additional reasons for constructing a sample that begins with people aged 35 and older was because it allowed me to complement and extend the insights of the recent study by Heaphy et al. (2013) who interviewed couples under the age of 35. Their examination of the experiences of civil partners who were aged 35 or younger led them to establish that younger same-sex couples believed that they had full citizenship rights for most of their adult lives, which enabled these partners to perceive they were living more ordinary lives. Additionally having a wide age range allows me to further investigate claims by academics (Solomon et al. 2004, Shipman and Smart 2007, Fingerhut and Maisel 2010) that the age of respondents (e.g. generation or position in the life-course) may influence their responses to legal recognition and the reasons why they had a civil partnership.

Putting age-limits (35-60) on whose stories I wanted to include in my sample created a considerable dilemma that I needed to negotiate. On several occasions, interviewees reported that because their partner was under 35 or over 60 when they registered their civil partnership, their partner felt they were too young/old to participate. This led to situations where narrators took part in single interviews by default, rather than by choice. I wondered
how many other people did not volunteer to be interviewed because of this restrictive age criterion. Once it became apparent that I might not meet my sample quota, on several occasions I relaxed the age constraints, by allowing a partner who was younger than 35 to participate in a joint interview (the other partner who took part in the interview was aged 35 or older).

Recruitment strategy

A quota system was developed to help me recruit the same number of men and women aged between 35 and 60. I aimed to conduct 30 interviews because this would be sufficient in number to capture a diverse range of relational experiences that would enable me to develop a meaningful analysis of the data. Additionally, setting this amount meant that the management and analysis of the rich narrative interview data was practical (Dunne 1997: 27). The main method of recruitment consisted of advertising the project locally and nationally in England and Wales to people with diverse experiences in terms of their social and cultural positioning (Heaphy et al. 1998: 450). I advertised in mainstream gay ‘scene’ spaces, for example, LGBT recreational and support groups, LGBT magazines and also in alternative ‘off scene’ spaces for instance, workplaces. Advertising in a variety of spaces acknowledged that not all potential participants were on ‘the scene’ or were able or willing to be ‘out’ in certain spheres of their public and personal life (Heaphy 2009).

The adverts consisted of a poster and leaflet (Appendix A) and were sent out to gatekeepers or pinned up in workplaces or other venues such as bars, libraries, LGBT meeting rooms where people could see them. In most cases though, the adverts were forwarded via email to potentially relevant parties. I designed the adverts to be complementary. Therefore, the poster had minimal information about the project while the leaflet offered prospective participants an explanation for why the experiences of people aged over 35 were being sought. I also developed an information sheet (Appendix B) for
those who had agreed to be interviewed that outlined the nature of the project and the
kinds of topics that would be broached in the interview such as people’s relational history
(relationships, family and sexuality).

Snowballing was employed as a second supplementary recruitment method. People who
had already been interviewed were asked to identify friends or acquaintances they knew
who fit the selection criteria (Ritchie et al. 2003: 94). I screened who the existing
interviewees nominated, preferring acquaintances rather than ‘close friends’ because I
wanted to ensure heterogeneity in the sample, and recruiting ‘friends’ of interviewees
might compromise the diversity of experiences (Ritchie et al. 2003: 94) because of
homophily; a phenomenon referred to by McPherson et al. (2001) where people tend to be
friends with others who are similar to them. Employing these methods of recruitment
enabled me to gather a range of different stories that can contribute to and stimulate
debates and discussion (Mason 1996: 153, 161) which will further understanding of the
significance of civil partnership and contemporary narratives of display.

Recruitment in practice

Recruitment was conducted in two phases in order to manage prospective participants’
enquiries and schedule/conduct interviews in a timely manner to ensure their participation
in the project. Additionally, conducting two recruitment drives allowed me to evaluate
which avenues of advertising were unsuccessful. A total of 177 potential contacts were
identified and asked to advertise the project. These contacts were grouped into local,
regional, and national clusters. The first phase of advertising the project began in July
2011. I contacted LGBT recreational, social, and support groups and workplace LGBT
groups and county/district councils in the Southwest (including Bath, Bristol, Somerset),
the Northwest (including Liverpool, Manchester, Lancashire) and London. I attended
Liverpool Pride in August 2011 (see Appendix A) which allowed me to advertise the
project in person. I positioned myself among other LGBT stalls at the Liverpool docks and distributed leaflets to interested parties, and people were able to approach me and ask questions about the project. I also asked personal contacts to advertise the project to people they thought might be interested in participating. By October 2011 I had completed nine interviews. In November 2011, I conducted my second recruitment drive. This time I contacted LGBT recreational, social and support groups, LGBT workplace groups, gay men’s health services, and county/district councils in the North East of England (including Newcastle, Sheffield and Leeds). I also advertised the project through the Gays the Word bookshop in London, and made concerted efforts to advertise the project nationally through LGBT media (e.g. radio, magazines, and newspapers) and 53 trade unions. Finally, I resorted to recruiting a few respondents through snowballing.

**Reflections on Recruitment**

I had over 60 initial enquiries about the research and conducted 30 interviews with 43 participants. The merits and limitations of recruiting participants using self-selection methods are worth discussing. Many of my interviewees reported that they had become aware of my project after a friend or work colleague had come across the advert and had passed the details of the project on to them. On several occasions, participants had so thoroughly enjoyed telling their story that they notified friends and acquaintances who fit the project criteria. Participants’ reports of how they heard about the project led me to conclude that ‘word of mouth’ and a familiar person ‘vouching’ (Almack 2008: 3.3) for my project appeared to be a crucial factor in recruiting participants to the project.

My ability to recruit a variety of people to the project was dependent on ‘gatekeepers’ who also needed to be convinced that my project was worth advertising. Most of these gatekeepers were contacted via email and a potential issue with this was that it is quite easy to ignore or delete an email from a stranger. I had anticipated that advertising the project
nationally through trade unions and LGBT media would enable my advert to reach a variety of people, but these avenues proved to be the least successful. LGBT media are likely to be inundated with similar requests to advertise research projects and therefore may be selective about which projects they help, and some magazines also seek payment to advertise research projects. An exception was the LGBT trade union *Spectrum*. Several of their members heard about the project which illustrated that someone in this trade union was willing to support my project and forwarded my advert to other members.

Raising interest in the project in the way I did places a significant responsibility on potential participants who are required to ascertain whether they fit the criteria of the project and to weigh up how they feel about talking to a ‘stranger’ about their relationship (Reinharz 1992: 27). An additional factor that was vital in encouraging interviewees to come forward and commit to the project was their belief that their stories could ‘help others’, ‘inform policy’ and ‘make a difference’. Throughout the research I attempted to meet these expectations by using the stories about civil partners’ everyday lives to stimulate a dialogue and raise awareness among interested parties. For instance, I presented findings to academic audiences at conferences, gave guest lectures to undergraduate students and at LGBT history days, and embedded the stories within Widening Participation workshops given to secondary school children and their teachers, and college students and tutors embarking on an Extended Project Qualification (EPQ). I have also been interviewed about the study on television with respect to the recent introduction of civil marriage in the UK. I have found that telling stories about civil partners’ everyday lives encourages others to reciprocate about same-sex couples they know (friends, relatives, co-workers) which like Eskridge Jr (2002) predicted may make subtle changes in how others interact with sexual minorities.
Interview sample characteristics

The sampling strategy was fairly successful in recruiting individuals and couples from various backgrounds (see Appendix C for pen portraits). Table 3 (below) presents the participants by age and gender.

Table 3 Participants by age group and gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>30s</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40s</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50s</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60s</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total participants</strong></td>
<td><strong>22</strong>¹</td>
<td><strong>21</strong></td>
<td><strong>43</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The sample is fairly balanced in terms of participants’ gender. I was able to recruit 22 women and 21 men who had registered their civil partnership. Gaining a balanced representation of ages, however, proved tricky. This was because I found that some of the age groups were easier to recruit than others. For instance, more women in their 30s showed interest, and were able to participate in the project. This accounts for the sample containing 10 women aged in their 30s. In contrast, while I received some interest from women in their 50s, it was more difficult to get them to agree to participate. Following their initial enquiries and learning what their involvement entailed, they reported they were too busy to participate in an interview. Similarly, I received far more enquiries from men in their 40s and 50s which explains why my sample contains more men in their 40s and 50s than men in their 30s and 60s. That people of certain ages volunteered reflects the problem of using self-selection recruitment methods. On reflection, if time had permitted it, I could have investigated how to gain access to civil partners in their 60s more.

These weaknesses aside, I am confident that the diverse backgrounds, varied biographical histories and complex relational experiences of the 43 participants will offer an appreciation of the continuities and shifts of displaying their selves (including perceptions of how their

¹ One participant withdrew their consent from the project
lesbian/gay sexual orientation was received by others), illuminate the significance that civil partnership has on the couple’s relationship and relationships with significant others, and the way they display their relationship in encounters with acquaintances and strangers.

The interviewees who took part were fairly homogeneous in terms of their race and ethnicity. For example, 37 narrators described themselves as White British, one respondent identified themselves as Latin American, one as White South African and two as Irish. Where interviews were conducted with one member of the civilly partnered couple, four interviewees reported that their partner was not white (and/or not British). Twelve of the interviewees described themselves as having some form of faith and three participants described themselves as having a physical disability. Most participants lived in Greater Manchester and the surrounding areas. I recruited interviewees from as far North as Newcastle and Leeds. Other respondents came from South West England, Wales, and Greater London.

All 21 female participants described themselves as ‘lesbian’ or ‘gay’ and all 21 male respondents described themselves as ‘gay’. Despite this apparent uniformity in how narrators identified their sexual orientation there were significant differences in how the 42 interviewees arrived at their current same-sex relationship. Most participants reported having always ‘known’ that they were ‘lesbian’ or ‘gay’ and some of these respondents had only experienced intimate relationships with a person of the same sex, while others reported feeling compelled to masquerade as heterosexual for many years and marry a person of the opposite sex because that was what they were ‘expected’ to do. Five of the participants had been married to, and one had cohabited with, a person of the opposite sex, and six had children aged 14 or older from their former heterosexual relationship. I explore the significance of this further in chapter 4, examining the role that particular biographical
experiences play in terms of shaping how people approach the display of their sexual orientation.

The length of time that couples had been in their relationship (with their civil partner) ranged from three years to 34 years, with the average length of the interviewees’ relationship being 12 years. How long a couple have been partners can inform diverse motivations for deciding to register a civil partnership (see chapter 5). The length of time since narrators had registered their civil partnership also varied, ranging from one year to seven years, though, most of the respondents had registered their civil partnership six years ago (at the time of the interview). That couples have held the status of civil partners for about six years becomes important for enabling people to recall whether there are occasions where they have used their status as civil partners to display their relationship in encounters with acquaintances and strangers (see chapter 7).

**Generating narratives of display**

Narrative interviews were thought to be the most suitable method for generating the core data for the study. Such a decision was partly informed by Finch (2007: 77) who proposed that ‘narratives’ that people tell about themselves and their relationships are a tool for ‘display’. The personal narrative interview was also chosen because in various ways it would produce data that was necessary to answer the research questions. For example, it is a method that encourages the production of biographical histories which are an important means for exploring whether the way that civil partners display (convey meaning about) their sexual orientation and relationship had remained the same or had altered. Storied accounts encourage narrators to recollect particular meaningful episodes (Ritchie 2003: 36, Roberts 2002: 5) which in this study was important for organising recollections about why the couple registered their partnership (see chapter 5). In addition, personal stories were likely to bring into focus the displays that couples were making to significant others (family and friends) when they announced their intention to become civil partners (see chapter 6).
Narrative interviews also encourage the research participant to highlight the situational details within a story (Riessman 2008: 2, Holstein and Gubrium 2000: 104) which I found helpful when people were recalling whether and how they display their relationship in encounters with acquaintances and strangers in different settings.

‘Activating’ memories

Having settled on the notion that personal stories were the most suitable method for generating narratives of display, I turned my attention to how to ‘activate’ (Gubrium and Holstein 2009: 42) interviewees’ recollections of their relational lives and generating narratives about displaying their sexual orientation/relationship to different others. Going into an interview armed with a list of questions and a request that interviewees tell me about their relational lives was not going to generate narratives of display (see discussions in Gubrium and Holstein 2009: 41-42, Roberts 2002: 149, Heaphy and Einarsdottir 2012: 4). This is because interviewees did not have a stock of ready-made, rehearsed narratives of displaying their relational lives that would answer my research questions. Instead, accounts of these experiences needed to be ‘activated’ and generated through a collaborative process of interactions that took place between myself (the interviewer and my specific line of questioning and agenda), and the interviewee (their willingness to engage with the interview process and their knowledge of ‘biographical particulars and recollections of specific life events’) (Gubrium and Holstein 2009: 42, Heaphy et al. 1998: 467, Heaphy and Einarsdottir 2012).

I developed an interview schedule comprised of prompts (Appendix D) which systematically covered all topics in each interview (Arthur and Nazroo 2003: 115, May 2002: 123). The schedule was designed to anticipate the kinds of details that participants might talk about (Dunne 1997: 29) and helped guide each interviewee’s narrative through the same sequence of topics; (i) their relational history (ii) life before civil partnership, (iii)
arrangements made for the civil partnership ceremony, including whether and how family or friends were told and invited to attend the ceremony (iv) how the couple presented themselves on the day of the ceremony, and finally (vi) whether and how the couple displayed their relationship in encounters with acquaintances and strangers in different settings, and the role that their civil partnership played in this. While the personal narrative interview was the main method for generating data, I developed additional tools including a relational time-line, photo-elicitation and five questions mounted on laminated cards about encounters with acquaintances and strangers. The purpose of these tools was to help activate people’s recollections of their relational lives and their experiences of displaying their same-sex relationship in encounters with others.

Each participant was sent a blank relational time-line (Appendix E) to complete prior to the interview. On this time-line they were to record significant relationships and significant experiences that they had across their life-time; from early years to the present time. Once completed, the time-line acted as a memory aid to guide the participant’s narration of significant relationships and events that the individual/couple had before, during and after their civil partnership. The time-line was particularly important for eliciting biographical experiences of displaying a sexual identity in a specific socio-cultural and historical context and responses to the availability of civil partnership* necessary for answering RQ1 (addressed in chapter 4). The time-line also prompted recollections of the reasons why couples decided to register their partnership, relevant to addressing RQ2 (addressed in chapter 5).

A form of photo-elicitation was the second tool developed to ‘activate’ participants’ narratives of display and relational experiences. Interviewees were invited to use photographs of the individual/couple on different occasions and some photographs of the couple at their civil partnership celebrations to tell stories. The kinds of narratives that
Photo-elicitation prompted included stories about announcing intentions to have a civil partnership to significant others (family and friends) and how these significant others reacted to this news (RQ3 and discussed in chapter 6). Photographs were also used to stimulate recollections of the celebrations and to elicit interviewees’ experiences of relationships with people captured within the image; usually family and friends (Tinkler 2013: 174, 179, Collier and Collier 1986: 99). My use of photo-elicitation as a ‘tool’ to generate narratives of displays was informed by Finch’s (2007: 77) point that photographs displayed in people’s homes could convey and reinforce meanings about relationships between the displayer and people featured in the photograph. Almack (2011: 210) developed Finch’s idea further when she analysed the stories her lesbian-parent participants’ told about photographs which the interviewee’s parents had of the lesbian parent family. Her findings were able to demonstrate the ‘display work’ that they and their relatives were doing to maintain kin relationships.

Photographs were used as a tool for stimulating discussion in the interview. I did not make copies of them or remove them from the interview setting. This was because I did not plan to use photographs in my analysis for several reasons. Personal photographs can contain an ‘intangible imprint’ (Mason 2008) of the past that is activated during the interview when participants use them to tell stories. The photograph beyond the interview setting, however, does not hold the same meaning. I did make field-notes following each interview about participants’ use of photographs and these formed an important part of my analysis (Pink 2001: 101, 103). This is because my notes allowed me to attend to how participants engaged with photos and what the photograph depicted. I also avoided using photographs in my analysis for ethical reasons such as preserving participants’ anonymity which I could not guarantee if copies of the images were printed in the thesis.
Interviewees were given several questions mounted on card that invited them to recall whether and how the couple display their relationship to acquaintances and strangers in different settings (e.g. the couple out and about in everyday situations, in a medical setting/visiting a GP and so forth) or for sets of audiences that the couple knew ‘less well’ (e.g. work colleagues). This third tool was designed to stimulate narratives of display.

**Relying on memories**

The core data of this project is based on people’s experiences, recollections, and ‘memories’. Memories should not be treated as ‘facts’ or a straightforward ‘mirror’ of the past (Dunne 1997: 32) but instead are better understood as ‘interpretations’ of the past (Widerberg 2011: 329, Lawler 2008: 17). The recollections that interviewees produce are dependent and influenced by the ‘social context’ (Lawler 2008: 18, Squire 2008: 44) linked to the purpose of the interview and where the interview takes place. They also involve the story-teller constructing, modifying and editing their story (Holstein and Gubrium 2000: 113). Therefore, memories needed to be treated carefully and cautiously in the study. However, my project is not reliant upon achieving historical accuracy or reliability in participants’ stories. Instead, people were asked to talk about their relational lives and encounters with others, which inevitably involved narrators being selective about significant relationships and events and invited an element of retrospective reconstruction. It is the reconstructive element involved in the production of these stories that meant I was able to gain recollections that are significant for the person in the present context (Dunne 1997: 324). I was careful to ensure the principles that underpin rigour were maintained. Systematic measures were built into my project that ensured the eventual findings can be judged as trustworthy and credible (Bryman 2004: 30). Decisions and alterations to the research design and interview schedule were documented and field-notes were recorded after each interview. I also ensured that each interview was audio-recorded.
and transcribed verbatim\(^2\) (Peräkylä 1997: 206) which created a full record of the narrators’ account.

**Single and joint interviews**

Interviewees were offered the option to participate in a ‘single’ (just one partner present in interview) or ‘joint’ interview (both partners interviewed together in the same interview). Having both single and joint interviews was valuable for ‘enhancing the diversity of perspectives’ that were told about people’s relational lives (Weeks et al. 2001: 204). Offering participants a choice of a single or joint interview helped ‘maximise participation’ (Heaphy and Einarsdottir 2012: 56) because it practically managed occasions where people were only willing to be interviewed if they told their story together with their partner, and other times where one partner was keen to tell their life-history (Atkinson 1998) but their partner did not want to participate. In other words, people could take part in a way that suited them.

The joint interview option was included for other reasons. The presence of both partners in the same interview is said to strengthen participants’ recall (Heaphy and Einarsdottir 2012: 53). I noticed having partners together in one interview made the narration of stories effective because partners possessed a familiarity with each other’s relational lives that I did not, and having this knowledge enabled them to push, probe, challenge and support each other’s stories in ways that would have been inappropriate had it just been myself and one participant. Having both partners together in one interview also made the production of stories especially active and dynamic. This was because partners took turns to recollect certain episodes of their lives which sometimes triggered further elaboration, or contrasting versions of these same events, which may not have been told if partners

\(^2\) Within this, steps have been taken to remove details that might lead to the identification of narrators; for instance names, places, employment and so forth.
took part in separate interviews (Heaphy and Einarsdottir 2012: 55). However, this familiarity and dynamism proved to be a constraint when transcribing, because some couples tended to interrupt and talk animatedly over each other.

Including couples in the sample raised ethical issues that I needed to negotiate. These issues included: potentially putting partners into conflict with each other over what was disclosed during the interview, one partner dominating the interview and so forth. I managed these potential ethical considerations by seeking advice from how other researchers arranged for couples to participate in their studies. For instance, Lee (1993: 111) explains that interviewing couples at the same time, rather than interviewing partners separately, helps to avoid situations where partners are suspicious or anxious about what was being revealed in the other’s absence. Therefore, interviewing partners at the same time meant they could monitor what was being said and could assure them that I had not breached their confidence (Heaphy and Einarsdottir 2012: 56). I also considered that when couples agreed to participate in a joint interview they had probably established in advance what issues were (not) allowed to be discussed (Lee 1993: 111). Finally, I reasoned that if partners could not agree over participation they would not volunteer.

Doing Interviews

The personal narrative interview approach was tested by conducting two pilot interviews. These stories were then analysed to assess whether this method was capable of generating narratives of display that were suitable for answering the research questions (Gillham 2000: 53, Arthur and Nazroo 2003: 135). Piloting the method enabled me to fine-tune my interview technique and interview schedule and meant simplifying the wording and delivery of questions designed to elicit narrators’ experiences of encounters with acquaintances and strangers.
Data collection involved me travelling around England and Wales alone and as a precautionary measure I adopted the buddy system (Appendix F) for safety throughout fieldwork (Lewis 2003: 65). Twenty-one interviews took place in participants’ homes and on seven occasions, interviews were conducted in narrators’ workplaces and one participant requested the interview take place at the University of Manchester. Sixteen single interviews were conducted with one member of the civilly partnered couple (eight interviews with men, and eight interviews with women). These usually lasted for an hour to an hour and a half. I conducted 14 joint interviews (seven with male couples and seven with female couples) and these usually lasted two to two and a half hours. One male participant took part in two interviews; once in a single interview and once in a joint interview with his partner.

Each interview followed a similar format. I began with introductions about myself and the project. I checked that the interviewee had read and understood the information sheet which outlined the nature of the project (Appendix G) that I had sent them. I reminded participants that certain questions would be broached that addressed people’s relational history, including relationships, family and sexuality. This sheet was important as part of the process of informed consent and allowed them to make an informed decision about whether to participate or not. I answered any questions they had about the project and talked them through the consent form (Appendix H). Their signing of this consent form gave me permission to audio-record the interview. These consent forms have been kept in a locked drawer and kept separately from transcripts. Pseudonyms were used during transcription and details that could result in identification of participants were removed which has helped me preserve participants’ anonymity. Transcription took place on an encrypted laptop and data has been kept in password protected files. I then asked them to

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3 While sixteen single interviews were carried out originally, one participant withdrew their consent from the study, which accounts for the inconsistency in the numbers recorded.
complete a sheet detailing demographic information such as age, ethnicity, year they registered their partnership and so on (Appendix I). Icebreakers were used to help set the tone and pace at the start of each interview and it was here that I established the kind of role that I was expected to take as their interviewer (Almack 2008: 4.7). For example, some interviewees were confident about narrating their experiences and only needed occasional steering towards certain topics. Others were more reticent and here I was happy to adopt the role of a more active turn-taking interviewer by asking them direct questions.

During the first part of the interview, participants talked through their completed time-line. Couples who participated in joint interviews tended to need more guidance about how to manage the narration of their time-lines. I suggested that they might like to take turns, so each partner was given space to focus and elaborate on significant relationships and events that had taken place in their lives prior to meeting their partner. Once the couple had reached the point on their time-lines when they met, they negotiated the remainder of their recollections, each offering personal reflections on how they reacted to the availability of civil partnership, recounting the factors that motivated them to have a civil partnership and so forth. Once they reached the point where Civil Partnership was introduced in 2005, which was a marker on each time-line (see Appendix E), I asked more direct questions, such as how they became aware of Civil Partnership. The interview schedule (Appendix D) had a more supplementary role at this point, and included prompts that would ensure that I achieved comparability in the types of experiences narrators were telling. If it was not provided I asked for more detail about the circumstances when couples first met in order to get a sense of the socio-cultural context and societal attitudes about same-sex relationships to which they were exposed.

The second part of the interview was where participants discussed arrangements for their civil partnership ceremonies stimulated by photo-elicitation. Using photographs to tell
stories was a clear highlight of the interview for some participants. Respondents were asked to describe what was important about the photograph for them because I would not have copies when I was analysing their stories. Photographs were generally used to talk about relationships with other people in the photographs: family and friends. Some photographs received more attention where the participant identified what the person meant to them or what was special about the event captured. Photographs were also used to recollect and evaluate their feelings when they registered their partnership and seemed to provoke a sense of being ‘back’ in the moment, or ‘being there when the photograph was taken’ (Tinkler 2011: 48, Pink 2006a: 54, Collier and Collier 1986: 106).

In the final part of the interview, interviewees contemplated questions that encouraged them to discuss whether and how they display their same-sex relationship in different situations where they encountered acquaintances and strangers. These topics provoked some detailed discussions and involved the narrators recognising feelings and strategies that they had developed, sometimes subconsciously, just to get on with their everyday lives.

To close the interview, I offered participants the opportunity to bring up things that they had expected to talk about but had not emerged during our discussion. Many participants said they had nothing further to add, and a few used this as an opportunity to talk about things that they were currently managing such as negotiating discussions of whether to embark on parenthood, the church’s opposition to (forthcoming) gay marriage⁴, and anxieties about ageing and how sexual minorities might be treated if they went into a care home. Participants were reminded at the start and close of the interview that they had the right to withdraw their participation during the interview and up until submission of the thesis which demonstrated that their consent was negotiable and ongoing.

⁴ At the time of the interviews, civil marriage was unavailable
Reflections on generating narratives of display

Using relational time-lines and photo-elicitation to ‘activate’ stories proved to be a successful method for generating narratives of display. Interviewees seemed fairly comfortable using time-lines to remember their particular experiences, although these were used in different ways. Narrators like Sheila (46), stated that the time-line helped her to recall experiences and notice how significant relational experiences had all clustered around her early twenties. For others, like Liz (36) and Carla (34), the completed time-line helped them overcome their nervousness about narrating their biographical experiences because I was able to encourage them to refer to their time-lines. In such cases, referring to the time-line helped elicit biographical particulars that only they knew and gave them confidence and authority to tell their stories. Some people welcomed the activity as an exercise for jogging their memory about significant relationships, key events, and were able to recall what they had recorded without looking at the time-line. Other interviewees were more selective about the events they wanted to discuss; accordingly, some relationships/events that appeared on the time-line were given more attention and elaboration than others. Several respondents mentioned how using the time-line to narrate significant relationships and events was difficult. This was because the time-line was based on the assumption that participants would narrate their experiences chronologically. Some participants felt they needed to explain that they preferred to link their experiences thematically.

The success of the photo-elicitation exercise for eliciting the kinds of experiences I was trying to ‘capture’ was dependent on the setting where the interview took place. The interview setting seemed to influence the type of photographs that were brought to the interview and participants’ willingness or ability to engage ‘deeply’ or critically with their photographs. Where people were interviewed in their workplace or at the university (n=8), they tended to show a selection of photographs on their laptop or iPod, or a series of
loose photographs that had been specially chosen for this interview. Interviews that took place in these environments were usually time-bound, taking place during the interviewee’s working day on their lunch break or in an allotted appointment. Consequently, these participants tended to offer relatively thin descriptions of their civil partnership photographs and appeared to view their engagement with their images as a formality or to satisfy my curiosity because I had requested that they bring photographs of their ceremony to the interview. On reflection such an environment was not conducive for provoking deep engagement with photographs.

In contrast, where interviews took place in the couple’s home (n=21), the time pressure was largely absent, which seemed to facilitate a more relaxed, leisurely pace at which the interviewees and I could explore their photographs together (Collier and Collier 1986). This enabled us to engage with ‘wedding albums’ and guest books produced for the occasion that contained photographs and guests’ written comments about their experience of the event. On some occasions I was invited to accompany the participant on a ‘tour’ of some parts of their home (Pink 2006b) where I could see images *in situ*, seeing some photographs featured prominently on mantelpieces (Peters and Mergen 1977: 295) or a selection of framed images of the civilly partnered couple and their guests nestled cosily among other snaps of the couple taken at different points in their relationship, on dining room dressers, or displayed on walls in their homes. Such a setting and environment appeared to allow respondents space and time to engage more thoroughly with their photographs and led to reconstructions of salient aspects of the event and also allowed them to savour specific recollections and moments of their day (Collier and Collier 1986: 106).

My request that interviewees use photographs of their civil partnership celebrations during the interview meant I assumed that they *would* have photographs of this occasion (Riessman 2008: 114). Subsequently I wondered whether this assumption ‘activated’
(Gubrium and Holstein 2009: 42) particular preoccupations in their stories. Some people apologised for not having good quality images while others seemed to take up a ‘stance’ in their attitude toward the genre of wedding photographs and how closely their civil partnership photographs conformed to heteronormative wedding portraits (Kimport 2012, Lewin 1998, Peters and Mergen 1977).

Overall, this combination of methods stimulated important recollections, the time-line gave sequence to the narrators’ stories, photo-elicitation prompted discussions about relationships with kin, friends and membership to different groups, and the interview schedule gave structure and consistency to topics discussed in each interview which was important for avoiding chaotic, idiosyncratic stories. Collectively, these methods helped generate systematic and detailed coverage of participants’ relational lives necessary for answering the research questions.

**Managing ethical dilemmas in the interview**

I have discussed ethical issues throughout this chapter, illustrating how these ethical considerations emerged and how they were negotiated and managed. I now discuss ethical issues that are particular to conducting interviews and how they were managed during the interview.

**Negotiating unequal power relations: knowledge and representation**

Employing an interview method to generate data for the study introduced unequal power relations between the interviewer and interviewee, linked to how knowledge is produced during the interview and after when participants’ stories are represented. As the interviewer, I had more power in terms of being able to define and control the situation by deciding in advance what topics and questions were to be discussed in the interview (Kvale 1996: 6, Dingwall 1997: 58-59 and Ellis and Berger 2003: 469). I tried to redistribute the ‘asymmetry of power’ (Mishler 1986: 117) in the interviews by using time-lines and
participants’ photographs as a way of ‘empowering’ interviewees to tell the stories they wanted to tell. I was also concerned that unequal power relations could limit the range of experiences that were narrated in the interview where the interviewee may actively shape, omit and edit their experiences of their relational lives so they closely conformed to the kinds of stories and experiences they thought I wanted to hear (Heaphy et al. 1998: 456).

My attempts to redistribute power reflected my assumption that narrators would always occupy a less powerful position in the interview and would need ‘empowering’. I have since revised my thinking on this by adopting Foucault’s (1998 [1979]) notion of power as ‘relational’. Power, according to Foucault (1998 [1979]), is something that is situational and not something that social actors can have or possess. Viewing power as relational and situational allowed me to explain occasions where I did not occupy the powerful role in the interview. Several instances demonstrate this. On two occasions factors that led to interviewees occupying a more powerful position included the location where the interview was conducted (e.g. in their workplace) and the fact that the interview had to be conducted within an hour. One participant was unwilling to engage with the participatory methods (time-line, photo-elicitation) and expected me to work through a list of questions. Such factors meant that in these interviewer-interviewee relationships, it was the interviewee who commanded more power because I had to improvise by altering the interview technique so that the interview could fit within an hour or less. Another factor that contributed to interviewees occupying a more powerful position in the interview was the age difference between me and the interviewees. With the exception of one interviewee, I was always younger or the same age as the interviewee, and this age similarity or difference seemed to empower respondents to feel a sense of authority. For example, during our interview, George (65) said he would tell me to ‘piss off’ if I asked him questions that he perceived as intrusive.
The representation of participants’ stories is another occasion that invites an ‘asymmetry of power’. This is because, while stories of narrators’ relational lives were generated through a collaborative process of interactions that took place between me and the interviewee (Heaphy et al. 1998), I act as final arbiter of interviewees’ stories, deciding how they are analysed and portrayed in the study. I have attempted to mitigate this inequality by asking all 43 respondents whether they would like to read chapters where extracts of their stories were discussed. Such an invitation allows narrators to comment on my interpretation of their story and check whether I have adequately disguised their identity. This request allowed participants to again consent to their stories being used (Mason 1996: 159, Riessman 2008: 197). Of the 43 participants who took part in the study, 17 interviewees have replied. Many participants expressed how they were pleased to have the opportunity to consult the chapters where they were quoted. A few remarked that my consulting them was ‘thorough’ and ‘ethical’, several used the opportunity to correct personal details in the pen portraits (Appendix C) or correct details within the chapter where their story was featured. One participant did not agree with the way that their relationship had been represented in an analytical chapter and so withdrew their consent from the project. Moreover, the subsequent analyses have been informed by an evolving dialogue with narrators and interested others (e.g. other academics at conferences and members of LGBT communities at talks) who have had the opportunity to comment on and influence my analytical ideas as they were developing.

Negotiating sensitive issues

As a sociologist I took my responsibility to be an ethical interviewer seriously. I therefore sought to ensure my participants were not adversely harmed by participating (Statement-13, British Sociological Association 2002: 2). However, the scope of the study asks interviewees for an account of their relational history which inevitably meant asking about relationships,
family and sexuality which are all considered ‘sensitive’ topics (Lewis 2003: 69). It was not possible to avoid these issues, and neither could I know whether participants would become distressed when talking about their relational lives. This presented an ethical dilemma that needed careful negotiation. Measures taken to manage discussion of these potentially sensitive topics were to clearly state in the information sheet (Appendix G) and in the consent form (Appendix H) that these subjects might be broached. I also reminded interviewees that they could decline to answer questions. Goode’s (1996: 14) approach of ‘situation ethics’ (where decisions on ethical issues such as discussing sensitive topics were negotiated on a ‘case-by-case basis’) was adopted to help manage occasions where participants became upset when they recalled painful memories or began to talk about obviously sensitive topics such as bereavement, a partner’s deteriorating health, or separation from their children or a partner. I concluded that terminating the interview could be more harmful and may display that I was uncomfortable with them talking about painful memories. Instead, I sought to convey that while these specific moments in a person’s story might be painful (perhaps producing silences, stoicism or tears), these experiences deserve equal airing because they were, and are, part of people’s relational journeys that narrators had come to make sense of, or were developing strategies to deal with. When it became apparent during the interview that the narrator had reached an emotionally tricky memory, I tried to make the space safe, intuitively accommodating their needs. For example, giving them space and time to cry, or to leave the room in order to make more tea which also afforded them the opportunity to regain composure. On occasion, I suggested that we could take a temporary break and also reminded them that they had the right to terminate the interview if they felt unable to continue.

On several occasions disclosures about the co-dependency and fragility of a loved one with alcoholism, becoming a widow(er), fleeing domestic abuse from a violent partner, being heterosexually married and having children within this relationship and coming to identify
as gay or lesbian later in life and the complex and painful negotiations that ensue triggered something akin to an emotional connection, and this was something I had not anticipated. This was because these were similar events that I had also experienced and survived. However, I often kept these experiences private because I was committed to the interview being about the participant’s relational experiences and was concerned that if I had said ‘that happened to me too’ the participant would not elaborate on the topic thinking I knew all about it. While these occasions were marked by me ‘holding back’ there were plenty of other occasions where I sensed that interviewees would welcome disclosure about personal details about myself (Reinharz 1992: 33) such as current marital status, personal views about legal recognition and the reassurance and affinity of finding oneself within books by authors such as Radclyffe Hall and Armistead Maupin (Plummer 2004 [1995]).

Analysis

Analytical strategy

An analytical strategy was devised to ensure that the analysis addressed the research questions and was able to carve out a coherent analytical pathway through the rich and ‘cumbersome’ data that 29 narrative interviews generated (Bryman 2004: 399). The strategy comprised narrative analysis, broadly defined as the main technique employed to interpret ‘storied’ texts (Riessman 2008: 11). Narrative analysis, or more accurately personal narrative analysis, was selected primarily because the interviewees’ personal stories constituted the data to be analysed and it is an approach that can hone in on the ‘temporal sequence’ embedded in the stories that people tell ‘about their lives or events around them’ (Bryman 2004: 541). This sensitivity to temporality was particularly desirable because it could detect whether (and how) narrators have noticed that possibilities for display (conveying meaning) to audiences about their identity/relationship has changed. Two main types of narrative analysis were used: ‘thematic’, allowing attention to be paid to what is said (Riessman 2008: 19, Bryman 2004: 412) and ‘structural’, which detects how a story is organised and
developed in a particular way (Riessman 1993: 61, 2008: 18, Bryman 2004: 412). Narrative analysis was useful for close analysis of individual cases (Riessman 2008: 12) which helped identify the processes involved in display. I also wanted to be in a position to make general statements about stories/experiences and instances of display. Therefore, I employed thematic coding. The research questions and topics from the interview schedule were combined into a framework suitable for ‘coding’ (Bryman 2004: 408) and ensured the analysis addressed the specific research questions (Spencer et al. 2003: 201).

Doing analysis

Analysis began with the first ten transcribed interviews. For a time, analysis and transcribing further interviews occurred in tandem, which ensured that any emerging ideas or the need to refine specific interview questions could inform the subsequent interviews (Bryman 2004: 408). From the outset analysis of transcripts was divided into portions where the content focused on specific topics and encounters with particular audiences. This allowed me to focus on emergent patterns and themes associated with research questions.

Three analytical stages were devised and piloted to ensure the analytical process was consistent and rigorous. The first stage began with an initial read through of eight transcripts which were divided evenly among participants’ age and gender (e.g. one transcript with a male aged in his 60s and one transcript with a female aged in her 60s and so on) and included an equal amount of joint/single interview transcripts to get a sense of whether the narration of stories differed. General notes about issues that seemed important were recorded in a research diary. Keeping research diaries that recorded decisions throughout the analysis was a way of keeping a record of the analytical process and ensuring transparency (Mason 1996: 145, Riessman 2008).
I employed narrative analysis in the second analytical stage working more intensively on these eight transcripts. Much of the analytical work conducted at this stage was the drawing out and identification of the processes involved in display, particularly how meanings were conveyed about sexual orientation/relationships in encounters with particular audiences. Finch’s (2007) concept of ‘display’ was a central analytical lens used to analyse the stories that civil partners told about their encounters with six different audiences as a way of examining if and how changing social attitudes are impacting on how they perform their relational lives. The concept was adapted and modified by combining it with other suitable analytical concepts that help illuminate what display looks like and how it was done in encounters with different audiences. As a result Chapter 4 (relevant to RQ1) draws from aspects of Giele’s (2002, 2004) work to highlight the importance of key ‘biographical experiences’, socio-cultural and historical contexts and the significance of communities that shape participants’ approach to displaying their sexual orientation and draws out the patterns between these displays and their responses to the availability of Civil Partnership. Chapter 5 (relevant to RQ2) adopts tools from narrative analysts (e.g. Riessman 1993, 2008, Lawler 2008, Holstein and Gubrium 2000) to refine and explore Finch’s claim that ‘narratives’ could be used as tools for display to deepen my engagement with people’s stories about their motivations for having a civil partnership. Chapter 6 (relevant to RQ3) conceptualises individuals’ stories about their announcement to significant others as types of ‘display’. Of particular salience in understanding these displays is Pahl and Spencer’s (2004) notion of ‘specialised roles’ and Finch and Mason’s (1993) concept of the importance of ‘relational histories’ and ‘family responsibilities’ which are useful in garnering an understanding of the choices in terms of who (can be) and is told about their intention to have a civil partnership (kin and/or friends). Chapter 7 (relevant to RQ4) explores participants’ narratives of displaying their relationship to acquaintances and strangers in different situations. The work of Goffman (1963, 1971) and
Morgan (2009) on conventions and implicit rules that govern people’s conduct in face-to-face interactions with acquaintances and strangers was adopted to help explore the processes that are involved in displaying a same-sex relationship in encounters with acquaintances and strangers.

The third analytical stage involved thematically coding the remaining 21 transcripts to identify number of cases of types of displays and highlighting recurrent themes or patterns that emerged regarding how/in what ways the sample characteristics (age, socio-cultural/historical climate and biographical experiences, length of relationship, relational histories) influenced the displays. Notes were recorded in Microsoft Excel which helped manage the bulk of the data, although because analysis was done in systematic stages, there was always a pathway back to the original data (Spencer et al. 2003). The final part of this stage was using the stories to develop theoretical/conceptual explanations and comparing the content of participants’ narratives with themes within the gay marriage debates and literature written about the everyday lives of civil partners (see chapter 2). The fruits of this analytical process are presented in the four following chapters (4-7).
Chapter 4 Displaying Sexual Orientation and Responses to Civil Partnership

Introduction

This chapter helps us to gain an understanding of narrators’ initial responses to the introduction of civil partnership in 2005 by examining the links between key biographical experiences that took place before civil partnership was available. Engaging in such an analysis secures an appreciation of the personal significance that the introduction of civil partnership had for the narrators’ sense of self, and additionally begins to address scholars’ (Clarke et al. 2006, Harding 2008) concerns about the apparent ‘recycling’ of certain reactions to legal recognition. The chapter begins by drawing on Giele’s (2002, 2004) work which was developed into an analytical tool to understand the link between biographical experiences and narrators’ initial responses to civil partnership. Key biographical experiences informed how respondents managed and displayed their sexual orientation, which in turn informed one of three different types of reaction to the availability of Civil Partnership: ‘detached’, ‘dissident’ and ‘embracing’.

The first and second types of response, ‘detached’ and ‘dissident’, came from interviewees in their 40s, 50s, and 60s, all of whom narrated previously inhabiting a socio-cultural historical climate where homosexuality and lesbianism were seen as ‘deviant’ and same-sex relationships were expected to remain invisible. A key factor in explaining why interviewees developed either ‘detached’ or ‘dissident’ initial reactions to civil partnership was the extent to which dominant discourses about sexual minorities were able to penetrate their understanding of, and the way they managed, the display of their sexual orientation (Rosenfeld 1999). More precisely, the kind of approach they developed to the display of their sexual orientation (‘discretion’ or ‘unapologetic’) was largely dependent upon their personal circumstances, the kinds of interactions they were able to have with others and whether they were (un)able to access cultural ‘resources’ (Giele 2002: 72, 75) such as supportive critical communities (for example socialist, sexual and/or feminist). I also show
how, on occasion, changing personal relational circumstances could disrupt the influence that these former biographical experiences had on a person’s response to civil partnership, thus indicating that these influences are not fixed.

The third group of initial reactions, ‘embracing’, came from interviewees in their 30s and 40s, who all narrated previously inhabiting a socio-cultural historical climate where sexual minorities were generally more visible and viewed the same as heterosexual relationships. Greater visibility and circulation of these views was one factor that allowed most of these interviewees to form an understanding of their sexual orientation as relatively ‘ordinary’ (see Heaphy et al. 2013). A second factor was encountering others who confirmed and conveyed to the participant their ordinariness. Such experiences seemed to discourage younger narrators from developing ‘discrete’ displays of their sexual orientation or relationship, neither did they need to relocate or join LGBT societies in order to affirm their sexual identity (as previous cohorts often did). It seemed that inhabiting such a context and encountering others who affirmed the perspective of the narrators’ identity and relationship as ordinary encouraged them to feel entitled to the same rights as opposite-sex couples and led to their ‘embracing’ the availability of civil partnership. Overall, I illustrate how participants’ reactions to civil partnership were not random or accidental but historically embedded and intimately woven with their biographies.

‘Recycled responses’
As discussed in the literature review (chapter 2), the impact that allowing same-sex partners to get married would have on the everyday lives of sexual minorities has been the subject of considerable and contentious debate for over twenty years. Early debates among academics and political activists about the prospect of legal recognition schemes in scholarly debates and lesbian and gay political campaigns (Stoddard 1997 [1989], Ettelbrick 1997 [1989], Sullivan 1995, Warner 1999) were characterised as ‘polarised’ and ‘intractable’ (Blaisus and Phelan 1997: 753). In the UK, Civil Partnership was made available in 2005,
therefore by way of contrast, more recent discussions about the impact of legal recognition schemes (literature published post 2004) has been able to illuminate the more concrete and tangible impacts of civil partnership on the daily lives of sexual minorities. For example, ‘ordinary’ people’s opinions and attitudes about legal recognition schemes have been studied and reported in international surveys (Harding and Peel 2006, Harding 2006, Harding 2008) and qualitative interviews (Clarke et al. 2006, 2007). Finally, same-sex partners who planned to (Smart 2007a, 2008, Shipman and Smart 2007) and have formalised their relationship (Jowett and Peel 2007, Peel 2009) have been interviewed about the impact legal recognition is having on their lives. A common thread running throughout these discussions is the tendency to view legal recognition as capable of improving or disrupting the daily lives of sexual minorities. Clarke et al. (2006: 157) and Peel and Harding (2008) have expressed concerns about the tendency of these discussions to ‘endlessly recycle’ the same types of ‘for’ or ‘against’ or ‘supportive’ or ‘resistant’ approaches to legal recognition schemes. Their main concern, something I am inclined to agree with, is that the frequent appearance of rehearsed responses reduces the opportunity for an injection of fresh and healthy appreciation and criticism of the way legal recognition is viewed. Additionally, the widespread reporting of the same views about legal recognition means that ‘weaker’ or more marginalised perspectives about civil partnership are harder to hear (Heaphy 2009, Plummer 2004 [1995]: 115).

While Clarke and colleagues (2006) and Harding and Peel (2008) have noted that popular responses keep re-appearing, they have not identified the reasons for why these views are reiterated. With the exception of Heaphy and colleagues (2013), researchers in this field have tended to concentrate on participants’ immediate responses to the event of civil partnership in isolation, and have neglected to consider how their respondents’ previous biographical experiences may come to influence their perspectives about legal recognition (Riessman 2008, Dunne 1997). I argue that paying attention to people’s biographical
experiences and circumstances could help academics appreciate why distinctive ‘embracing’ or ‘rejecting’ responses seem to keep appearing.

**Biographical experiences and responses to civil partnership**

Giele’s (2002, 2004) work on ‘biographical experiences’ was developed into a conceptual tool to aid my understanding of the link between particular biographical experiences that took place before civil partnership was available. This and narrators’ initial reactions to civil partnership helped me to understand the links between narrators’ biographical experiences and their initial reactions to the availability of civil partnership. Interviewees’ time-lines (see chapter 3) were an important tool for both the elicitation of biographical experiences (relationships and events) that had occurred before civil partnership was available, and their awareness of, and initial responses to, the introduction of civil partnership. To clarify, these experiences were narrated chronologically or sequentially (prior experiences first and reactions to civil partnership after). The Civil Partnership Act of 2005 was always a fixed marker on participants’ time-lines (see Appendix E). Although they were all introduced to the possibility of same-sex partners being able to register their relationship in 2005, their reactions to this event differed markedly. It was my intention to investigate what influenced these different views.

Aspects of Giele’s (2002, 2004) work on ‘biographical experiences’ were used as a way of understanding the patterns of similarity I detected between the way different narrators’ displayed their sexual orientation and the types of initial responses to civil partnership. Giele (2002: 72, 75, 2004: 303-304) emphasises that the socio-cultural and historical context that a person inhabits presents them with a series of opportunities, expectations and barriers which the individual negotiates. Using participants’ narrated time-lines I was able to identify how inhabiting certain types of socio-cultural and historical contexts when the interviewee ‘came out’ (to themselves and/or others) meant they were exposed to certain
kinds of discourses or societal attitudes, which were key influences in shaping the way they made sense of their sexual orientation (what it means to be lesbian or gay/in a same-sex relationship). How the individual responds to the opportunities and barriers that their socio-cultural and historical climate presents them with, Giele (2002: 74) explains, depends on the resources available to them at the time. By ‘resources’, Giele (2002: 72, 81) means the ‘social networks’ or ‘membership in various communities and social groups’ that a person belongs to. Thus the kind of people participants’ encountered and their membership to various communities made a significant difference in terms of whether interviewees were (un)able to counter dominant societal attitudes to sexual minorities and what sense they made of, and how they acted upon, their sexual orientation.

The remainder of the chapter is structured in the following way: for each section I outline key biographical experiences that narrators recall about the socio-cultural and historical climate they were inhabiting and the kinds of messages about sexual minorities they were exposed to when they were making sense of their sexual orientation. I then illustrate that how they approached the display of their sexual orientation was largely dependent on the kinds of communities they belonged to and participated in. Following this I explore the links between the approach interviewees took to the display of their sexual orientation and their initial reactions to the introduction of civil partnership.

**Negotiating expectations of heterosexual displays**

Interviewees who formed ‘discrete’ or ‘unapologetic’ approaches to displaying their sexual orientation were mostly aged in their 40s, 50s and 60s. Despite growing up in different parts of England and in different decades, all of them narrated initially inhabiting a socio-cultural historical climate where they were exposed to similar social attitudes about homosexuality and lesbianism in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. Their stories centred on how societal discourses labelled their attraction to persons of the same sex as ‘deviant’, ‘different’ and ‘wrong’, and on how any same-sex relationships should be conducted in
private and not displayed in public, thus rendering them invisible (McIntosh 1968: 183, Weeks 1989). These attitudes were evident in popular, prejudicial stereotypes. For many of my male participants in their 50s, like Simon (53), the ‘mincing’ or effeminate gestures of a gay man were the object of others’ scorn or ridicule, and these were mannerisms he wanted to avoid displaying or emulating (see also McIntosh 1968: 184, Weeks 2007: 50). For others, like Richard (53), the threat of encountering a ‘predatory paedophile’ coloured his expectations of meeting other gay men (see also Weeks 1985: 224, 228-229). Richard recalled being introduced to gay clubs in his early twenties by a bisexual male friend and remembered his initial anxieties about the ‘types’ of people he would meet:

I'd assumed that gays were monstrous, predatory and if you went to one of these evil gay places then I'd probably get raped on the spot.

Oliver (53), Richard’s partner of 21 years used to record programmes onto VHS that had been aired on the BBC, which depicted gay men's lives and relationships. One item in his collection was recorded in 1979. Frustration evident, he remembered how homosexuality and its dangers were presented:

The gay people who were depicted in it, were sort of, were in the arts [...] it was quite camp and bitchy dialogue [...] but these programmes about gay people living their lives basically or coming out and you used to have these dreadful warnings before the programme came on.

These ‘warnings’ that Oliver mentioned were ones that advised the viewer that they might be offended by the content of the programme. That programmes were accompanied by such warnings served to further marginalise and stigmatise non-heterosexual people who were trying to make sense of their sexual orientation and who were searching for information about what same-sex relationships were like. For others these stereotypes were not fictional but were embodied in the displays of sexuality of the people they knew. Sheila (46) grew up in a close-knit rural village in the North of England and described a family friend:
Sheila: The only lesbian in the village if you like was somebody who was a family friend. ... There was an affinity there without really understanding what it was about. What I didn’t understand though was that she was always dressed in, she was much older and she dressed in men’s clothes, and I didn’t understand that… kind of feeling, well is this me?

Sheila’s encounter with this family friend came at a time when she was trying to make sense of her desire for women and needed to know that there were others like her who could help validate her identity. The feelings she describes are a mixture of a partial connection, ‘an affinity’ that could not be articulated, but also confusion and dis-identification, because of the way this woman displayed her gender and sexual orientation through the wearing of men’s attire (see also Weeks, 2007: 50). These stereotypes helped ensure that heterosexual identities and relationships appeared to be the only acceptable and viable relational trajectory (McIntosh 1968: 183, Rich 1980, Weeks 2007: 67).

A common theme that these respondents narrated was encountering others’ expectations that they would form heterosexual relationships. Many narrators described trying to display to others that they were adhering to heterosexuality. Benjamin (61) grew up in the South East of England and described how, as a teenager, he felt under ‘normal pressures’ to display his own normality by forming heterosexual relationships with women. He recounted how he did try a relationship with a woman ‘but it didn’t work’ because it ‘felt forced’. Claire (43) ensured that she appeared to be adhering to this norm to others by engaging in ‘heterosexual’ displays. She recalled establishing a platonic friendship with a boy (who, years later, she discovered was also gay), with whom she had a common hobby in music and ‘went places together’. She noted how this friendship had fooled others around them who presumed they were dating. She had not corrected their assumptions because it ‘stopped people wondering and made life easier’. The existence of stigmatising discourses about homosexuality and lesbianism and the expectation of a heterosexual trajectory, while important factors, cannot fully explain why these narrators formed ‘discrete’ or ‘unapologetic’ approaches to displaying their sexual orientation. Instead, as I will illustrate
in the next two sections, personal circumstances and the (in)ability to access cultural resources such as active membership of various communities encouraged narrators to develop either ‘discrete’ or ‘unapologetic’ approaches to the display of their sexual orientation. In turn, these approaches to the display of sexual orientation informed their initial reactions to civil partnership.

‘Discretion’, delaying coming out and detached responses to civil partnership

A common biographical experience that nine narrators described was learning that their same-sex desires and relationships should not be publicly displayed. An example of this was provided by Benjamin who narrated how he and his late partner of 34 years, Bert (who he met in 1975), ‘didn’t feel it was the right thing to do to be open about it’. He also explained how he and Bert ‘were never people who were outspoken or demonstrative about our sexuality’. The only place where they were able to be ‘ourselves [was] in the house’. Two interrelated episodes were narrated of how he learned to exercise discretion in how he displayed his sexual orientation and same-sex relationship. The first episode concerned the personal costs he paid for displaying his homosexuality to his parents. He recounted how in his twenties he was living at home with his parents and had allowed a male partner to stay the night at his parents’ house. He dropped his partner off at the train station the following day, and on his return he was greeted by his mother, who had been ordered by Benjamin’s father to tell Benjamin he needed to see a ‘psychiatrist’. His father’s instruction no doubt reflected the common perception of homosexual inclinations as a ‘sickness’ that needed corrective treatment (McIntosh 1968: 182, Plummer 1975: 95). Faced with the order to see a psychiatrist, he moved out. He cited his parents’ rejection of his homosexuality as the reason for why he became estranged first from his father, and later his mother. The second contributing factor that he noted as shaping his inclinations towards regulating the display of his homosexuality was the socio-cultural and historical climate in which he developed his
sexual orientation. Benjamin described the social attitudes about homosexuality in the 1970s like this:

In some ways you are talking about the seventies and remember the law decriminalising homosexuality had only just changed in '68 [Sexual Offences Act, 1967]. So there was a good deal of prejudice and lack of understanding about it […] and we didn’t feel it was the right thing to do to be open about it.

Despite changes in the law (e.g. the passing of the Sexual Offences Act 1967 which decriminalised sexual acts between men aged 21 and over), Benjamin alludes to the fact that societal attitudes towards sexual minorities had not changed, which he implies as encouraging him and Bert to censor the display of their relationship.

Being under the potential scrutiny and eliciting the disapproval of religious or tight-knit communities was a common biographical experience that the remaining seven narrators shared. One interviewee talked of this being influential in encouraging him to employ a ‘discrete’ approach to how he managed the display of his sexual orientation in public. While Louis (65) had been a vicar he had prioritised his commitment to his parishioners over his personal life. For example, he and George (64) had kept separate residences in different towns until his retirement, because Louis did not feel it was appropriate to ‘flaunt’ his long term relationship with George. Six participants delayed forming a same-sex relationship and instead felt compelled to capitulate to significant others’ and acquaintances’ expectations of following heterosexual relational trajectories. They all married someone of the opposite sex. Rachel (64) suppressed her romantic feelings for women and sustained her 30 year marriage because she wanted to be a good Christian. Her religious faith had been a source of strength at difficult moments in her life (like the loss of her parents when she was young). She recollected how she had assumed that marriage was the only option for her and the only way to find a home (Heaphy 2009).

The remaining five interviewees recalled being motivated to marry someone of the opposite sex because they were intimidated by the potential scandal and risks that acting on
their same-sex attractions could lead to and the effect this would have on themselves and
their family members (Giele 2004: 303-304). The fact that these participants were not in a
position to relocate geographically (see also Binnie and Valentine 1999: 178-179) helps
explain why they were so concerned with how their local community would react to their
sexuality. Sally (60) was 23 when she married her husband. She put it this way:

I can’t say I didn’t have qualms and queries and I persuaded myself that it
would be alright. Had feelings for women from being very young. But I
think I was just a coward. It was a long time ago. I came from a small town.

Similarly, Sheila (46) narrated her experience of how the event of moving in with her male
friend, Ricky, resulted in a marriage proposition she could not refuse. Sheila remembered
that they had agreed to buy a flat together because they could not individually afford to buy
a place. Sheila recounted the moment when she and Ricky were about to announce to her
parents that she and Ricky were ‘moving into a flat together’. Ricky, however, insisted on
making a bigger deal out of this moment by gathering her parents and sisters together, and
then he proposed to her. Ricky’s public marriage proposal in front of her family members
made Sheila feel awkward and meant she felt she could not refuse. She described it like this:

I was still really clear that I was who I was in terms of my sexual identity.
But I was kind of married [laughs intonation raised on married] kind of you
know. Early 20s and that’s kind of it for the rest of your life. I’d ended up
being engaged when I thought we were just moving in!

Others, such as Alex (54) and Luke (53), also noted how a combination of factors, living in
small towns and not wanting to disappoint their parents had led them to display a ‘normal’
sexuality by marrying women and becoming fathers. During his interview, Luke commented
how his marital relationship had often been the subject of others’ praise because outwardly
he displayed the appearance of a happily married ‘family man’. Maintaining such displays
could involve deception, however, because he revealed that during his marriage that lasted
over 20 years, he had occasionally discreetly visited ‘cottages’ (see Plummer 1975) for sexual
encounters to sate his desire for male intimacy. He admitted that deceiving his wife had left
him ridden with guilt and that his actions had made him intensely vulnerable to exposure because if his homosexual activities had been revealed it could easily have ruined his family’s reputation. The experiences that Sally, Sheila, Alex and Luke narrated illustrate how belonging to a small community acted as a ‘lever of control’ (Crossley 2006: 89) which resulted in them suppressing their ‘personal agency’ (Giele 2002: 72). For example, being tied to close-knit communities resulted in them feeling obligated to display (at least outwardly) adherence to a conventional heteronormative trajectory (Plummer 2004 [1995]: 26). Next I want to outline the link between forming a ‘discrete’ approach to the display of their sexual orientation and reactions to the introduction of civil partnership.

These nine participants who had developed ‘discrete’ approaches to the display of their sexual orientation all expressed reactions to the introduction of civil partnership that were devoid of the politicised language or phrases of the sort that were frequently used in ‘for’ and ‘against’ arguments about legal recognition such as ‘equality’, ‘rights’ or ‘assimilation’. Benjamin and Sheila for example, recalled first encountering civil partnership through their occupations in local government (Benjamin in the South West, and Sheila in the North East). This was how Benjamin had known ‘it was coming up’. He went on to say that: ‘I just thought that was what gay people should do, to have it recognised as a formal relationship’. Sally remarked that the introduction of civil partnership was ‘really positive’. Other interviewees like Symone (45), Alex (54) and Evan (42) did not explicitly mention their views, instead they focused on their own civil partnership celebrations. Similarly, Louis, a retired vicar, and Rachel remembered being pleased that civil partnership was available and that they intended to formalise their respective relationships at the first available opportunity.

I have labelled these responses as ‘detached’. This is because the phrases and language that these nine narrators used to describe their views about legal recognition did not replicate the positions and themes that are easily identifiable in the gay marriage debates (i.e.
politically detached from political debates). As I will illustrate later, there are another two groups of interviewees who did use terms and politicised phrases that are found in these ‘for’ and ‘against’ legal recognition debates. That these nine narrators did not use familiar politicised terms can be attributed to the fact that they did not mention accessing cultural ‘resources’ (Giele 2002: 72, 75) such as participating in political groups where they could have encountered socialist, sexual and feminist ideas that might have encouraged them to adopt more visible approaches to the display of their sexual orientation. Instead, various personal circumstances encouraged three interviewees to develop ‘discrete’ approaches to the display of their sexual identity. The other six narrators suppressed their attraction for persons of the same sex and delayed coming out to later in life which explains why they had not keyed into radical (lesbian and gay) politics of the time. The next group of narrators were also exposed to the same socio-cultural climate and hostile discourses about sexual minorities, yet these participants were able to participate in physical, critical, sexual communities (see Plummer 2004 [1995], Weston 1997, Weeks et al. 2001) where they encountered ideas that enabled them to develop ‘unapologetic’ approaches to displaying their sexual minority identity.

The crucial role of critical communities and dissident responses to civil partnership

Five participants’ personal engagement with radical politics and participation within supportive ‘critical’ communities meant they gained ideas and knowledge which gave them the confidence to challenge the prevailing dominant discourse that homosexuality or lesbianism should not be openly displayed. By critical communities, I mean formal and informal groups that participants were members of and where they encountered ideas that encouraged them to critique and challenge the mainstream sexual order. Gerald (51) recollected how in his early 20s (in the late 1970s - early 1980s) he was into ‘alternative dressing; Punk, New Romantics and things like that’. He also mentioned how a lot of his
leisure time was spent participating in a political party whose politics were heavily influenced by Marxism. It was through this political party that he first met his partner Jack (70), 24 years ago.

The other four participants (Richard, Claire, Edith, Oliver) recorded similar events on their time-lines (such as ‘leaving home’, ‘going to university’, and ‘moving to London’). These events became significant because they allowed for geographical and social relocation (see Heaphy et al. 2013) which was important in enabling three of these participants (Richard, Claire, Edith) to access radical politics. It was at university in the North West in the 1970s that Richard had the confidence to ‘come out’, bolstered by meeting someone who was bisexual. He dropped out of university, and shortly after moved to London to ‘find the gay life’ and employment. Richard identified how meeting a variety of gay people on ‘the scene’ in London was important for understanding and affirming his gay identity. It was through his interactions with critical communities (Giele 2002, 2004) that he encountered language and labels such as ‘gay’ which he could attach to his feelings of difference. Such interactions helped him to access positive representations which were crucial for legitimating the formation of his confident gay identity and helped him to counter the negative societal stereotypes at the time about gay and lesbian people (Crossley 2006, Foucault 1998 [1979]: 100-101). He narrated growing tired of ‘the scene’ in his mid-20s and meeting a new group of people:

I actually went to a local area gay group, that might actually be a way of meeting people – apart from just going for sex – and then saying goodbye the next morning – because they’ve had you and they don’t want to know you sort of thing. And that was where I started to meet people who were… there was a kind of range of political opinion… It was that alternative view of the world. At the time was rather liberating.

This group was where he met ‘revolutionary gays’, who were ‘unapologetic’ about their sexuality (Plummer 1975) and highly politicised and interested in Marxist politics. During these meetings they discussed socialism, injustice and inequalities such as class and sexuality
to which he was able to relate his own experiences of discrimination. It was also around this time that he came to learn that it was possible to reject heterosexual relational practices (Weeks 1977: 185, Jeffery-Poulter 1991: 103) and he himself began to be involved in multi-partner relationships.

Claire (43) shared similar experiences of London, university and critical communities which strengthened her confidence in forming relationships and in her lesbian identity. In the mid-1980s, the main reason why Claire chose a university in London was so she could ‘find other lesbians’. It was while she was studying that she became politically active (campaigning against the ‘Anti-abortion Bill’ and Section 28). However, personal circumstances (the break-up of a relationship and family circumstances) meant she dropped out of university, but remained in London. For a time Claire lived in a lesbian feminist squat where communal living encouraged:

> lots of political meetings and a lot of it revolved around having a lesbian identity, and we were actually quite separatist which was a sort of political strand at the time which I don’t feel like that at all now… and there were a lot of very sophisticated conversations such as ‘whether you should speak to the male bus driver’.

Claire went on to say how being engaged in radical politics meant that she and other women were: ‘trying to live in a different way’. She recognised that, although her ‘life is more conventional now’, she still retains ‘a lot of those values and principles and being “out” and being visible and having a lesbian identity is extremely important’. Being embedded in radical politics had allowed her to develop a greater confidence and commitment to having a visible lesbian identity and displaying it, which had endured. I will now illustrate how forming an ‘unapologetic’ approach to the display of their sexual orientation shaped participants’ initial reactions to the forthcoming Civil Partnership.

The aspects of legal recognition that were singled out for criticism by participants discussed in this section were similar to the ones found on the critical ‘side’ of gay marriage debates.
Some initial responses to civil partnership were evidently informed by radical politics. For instance, Gerald said:

I’ve never believed in the concept of bourgeois marriage. You know as a Marxist - I’m not doing that, because it’s about dated property, control of women, control of children, you name it, so being queer – gay call it what you will [Interviewer: yeah] we could form our own relationships outside of that.

The introduction of civil partnership was greeted with scepticism by Claire (43) who remembered how she and her friends had been suspicious of it because it was assumed that qualifying for a civil partnership would involve assimilating into and emulating heterosexual relational practices. Others’ suspicion of civil partnership centred on the potential damage that legal recognition could inflict on their own or others’ relationships. An example of this came from Richard (53) who expressed reservations about the fact that civil partnership only recognises couples:

What about other forms of relationships, will they be de-legitimated? – What about people who don’t want that but still want their relationship to be recognised, but not in an official way? They still want some social recognition. So it was that – because we come from a generation where we kind of worry about ‘aping heterosexuals’. Well you have an ambivalent relationship with getting 'legitimated'.

Claire’s and Richard’s concerns about the detrimental impacts of civil partnership (emulating heterosexual practices and stigmatizing certain relationships) express well-rehearsed positions also voiced by radical feminist and queer scholars who oppose gay marriage. Claire’s concern that having a civil partnership meant being obliged to copy heterosexual relational practices echoes Ettelbrick’s (1997 [1989]: 759) prediction that same-sex couples who wished to qualify for marriage would need to structure and organise their relationships in the same way as those who are already protected by law. Richard’s fear about the consequences for multiple-partner relationships was also shared by those who opposed gay marriage, who claimed that gaining access to marriage would create moral hierarchies between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ gays by praising the monogamous gay couple

These participants’ ‘dissident’ views towards the availability of civil partnership could be traced back to the fact that they had all joined political parties or participated in Marxist or Socialist social movements, various strands of the feminist movement, and the emerging activist gay rights movement (for context see also Sanders and Spraggs 1989, Healey 1994, Weeks 1991: 104-105). The ideas Gerald encountered in the Socialist group he attended seemed to inform his criticism of gay marriage as a bourgeois concept. In Claire’s case it is likely that her encounter with radical separatist feminist ideas and discourses of ‘difference’ influenced her resistance towards civil partnership because it emulated heterosexual practices. Additionally, Richard’s past experience of experimenting with different forms of relating explains in part why one of the things that disturbed him about the introduction of civil partnership was that it offered legal and social protections only to couples.

From these experiences, we might conclude that being immersed in radical politics and critical communities several decades ago left a lasting impression on these participants, so much so that their ‘dissident’ reactions towards the approaching Civil Partnership Act were framed using the critical frameworks they had been exposed to. These ideas were instrumental in helping them to develop an ‘unapologetic’ approach to displaying their sexual orientation. This ‘unapologetic’ approach, as we have seen above, meant they came to affirm their difference from heterosexuals and reject heteronormative institutions such as marriage. This approach also helped them counter prejudicial stereotypes about a ‘discredited’ or stigmatised homosexuality and lesbianism that were circulating at the time (Goffman 1990 [1963]).

An alternative explanation for their ‘dissident’ responses to the availability of civil partnership may in fact be because the introduction of civil partnership several decades later was perceived as a threat. Civil partnerships popularised associations with heterosexual
marriage and its proposed mechanisms for legitimising and conferring recognition on gay relationships may have been perceived as capable of undermining identities that had been carved out of sexual difference (Auchmuty 2004). Their ‘unapologetic’ approach for displaying their non-heterosexual orientation and same-sex relationship was developed for managing a different social and historical context, and may no longer ‘fit’ (May 2011: 372-373) as easily in a society where societal attitudes towards sexual minorities have shifted. Nevertheless, their initial ‘dissident’ view about legal recognition of same-sex relationships was not strong enough to deter these participants from formalising their own relationships through civil partnership.

Edith’s (57) experience serves as a counterpoint to the responses to civil partnership above, because she, like Richard and Claire, described a background of radical politics and acknowledged that she would likely have formed a ‘dissident’ view towards the availability of civil partnership were it not for the timing of the introduction of civil partnership which coincided with her partner of 27 years having recently been diagnosed with dementia. Edith recollected:

So when this civil partnership came out, I mean I think we hadn’t fully talked about doing it. … but, I suddenly thought mmm, actually this would be really helpful for us you know. Because things like oh I don’t know, just everything, power of attorney, all those sorts of things and I realised as well that I needed to do a lot of things before Janet got too unwell to do them

Edith’s case helps us to see how her partner’s diagnosis of dementia disrupted an inclination to hold a ‘dissident’ view about the introduction of civil partnership. Her example illustrates how sometimes the ‘concrete demands’ (Giele 2004: 303-304) of current relational circumstances can disrupt biographical orientations that might have ordinarily influenced an inclination to oppose civil partnership. Next, I discuss the link between younger narrators’ biographical experiences and responses to the availability of civil partnership.

5 A criterion for recruitment was that participants should have had a civil partnership
Negotiating heterosexuality and ordinariness

Most interviewees who were in their 30s and 40s had formed a sense of their sexual orientation and same-sex relationship as relatively ‘ordinary’. I have borrowed the label ‘ordinary’ from Heaphy et al. (2013: 4) because of the similarities between their and my own younger participants who ‘have a stronger sense of the ordinariness of same-sex relationships’. Michelle (32) for instance stated, ‘I always knew that I preferred girls to boys…it just felt normal to me, I didn’t really say anything to anyone about it, because I didn’t think there was a need to’. Similarly, Jacob (46) described himself as a ‘normal bloke married to another bloke’. That Michelle and Jacob both characterise their non-heterosexual identity as ‘normal’ contrasts with the recollections of some older narrators who adopted ‘discrete’ approaches to the display of their identity because they intuitively sensed their attraction for the same sex ought to be hidden since it was perceived as an abnormality. I want to examine these younger participants’ stories more closely to identify what and who presented them with the opportunity to view themselves as ‘normal’ (Giele 2002: 72, 75, 2004: 303-304). These participants were beginning to make sense of their attraction to persons of the same sex in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Around the same time the effects of a series of significant changes in patterns of intimacy such as easier access to divorce (Smart 1984, Evans 1993, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995) and almost universal access to contraception (Giddens 2008 [1992], Weeks 2007) contributed to the restructuring of heterosexual relational practices. These changes among other things culminated in British society acknowledging the plurality of family forms which included in some academic circles, same-sex partners (see Silva and Smart’s 1999 edited collection, Jamieson 1999, Weeks et al. 2001, Smart 2007b, Dermott and Seymour 2011, Morgan 2011, Mckie and Callan 2012). This shift in societal attitudes towards same-sex relationships paved the way for the introduction of a raft of ‘equality’ legislative measures (notable examples include the Children and Adoption Act 2002, the Civil Partnership Act 2004 and
the Equality Act 2010) by the New Labour Government with the aim of reducing discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation. These legislative changes were implicitly identified by two couples as enabling them to participate in routine aspects of everyday life, such as parenting. Ken (43) and Will (38) casually mentioned their plans to enter the adoption process and Meg (36) and Laura (36) explained that their decision to double-barrel their surnames following their civil partnership was because they planned to have children in the near future. Such accounts indicated that younger gay couples’ plans to become parents and raise a family showed that they were participating in this fairly ordinary aspect of life (Nordqvist 2010) and did not feel any different from others making such plans.

Several interviewees in their 30s and 40s narrated encountering others’ expectations that they would follow a ‘heterosexual’ trajectory by having a relationship with someone of the opposite sex. Having to negotiate such expectations illustrates that while attitudes towards sexual minorities have become more liberal, this shift has not always been enough to disrupt the cultural norm of heterosexuality which to some extent remains strong. There was only one case where an interviewee narrated relocating so she could ‘come out’. Meg explained how:

I think it’s fairly significant that I’m from quite a small village that wouldn’t have been particularly tolerant of kind of … different sexuality. So I think university was quite an escape for me – a great chance to get away.

Four female participants explained briefly adhering to others’ expectations by forming relationships with men, albeit for different reasons. There was only one participant in this group who had heterosexually married. The strong Roman Catholic culture in her Latin American country was what Maria (39) identified as encouraging her to get married. However, she narrated moving to the UK with her husband, which presented her with the opportunity to act on her attraction for women. She divorced her husband and began dating women. Carla (34) and Gillian (36) both mentioned dating boys because they were
trying to ‘fit in’ with their peers. Gillian went on to become engaged. Amy (37) also described getting engaged in order to delay coming out because she did not want to upset her family members. Both women recounted that they ended their engagements when they realised their attraction for women was not a phase and they were not prepared to live a lie. Gillian recalled how ending the engagement meant she ‘came out’ to her parents. Gillian’s parents’ shocked reactions to this news displayed their inability to cope with her lesbian identity, and while it did ‘unsettle’ her relationship with her parents, unlike Benjamin’s experience, it did not lead to permanent estrangement. These experiences indicate that while heterosexuality is still expected, the fact that these women could end their ‘engagements’ to men more easily conveys that heterosexuality is less compulsory than it once was (Rich 1980). However, these participants also told other stories that demonstrated that how significant others (kin and friends) reacted to their ‘coming out’ was of equal importance for promoting a sense that their sexual identity was ordinary. Next I outline the link between developing a sense of their sexual orientation as ordinary and their attitudes that embraced the introduction of civil partnership.

Being considered ‘ordinary’ and ‘embracing’ responses to civil partnership

Many of these younger participants recollected experiences of verbally displaying their sexualities by ‘coming out’. A significant feature in these stories was how significant others (kin and friends) reacted to such news and displays. Other people’s reactions to our actions and identities are an important part of the process for developing a sense of self (Mead 1956: 214). This is because, as Burkitt (2008: 1) explains, ‘we look to other people to see the image of ourselves reflected back in their words, attitudes, expressions, or actions’. This explains why people’s attitudes or reactions when participants ‘came out’ was an important way that they could see themselves as ordinary. In ten cases, interviewees reported their parents had reacted positively or neutrally when they discovered their son or daughter was
gay. Sebastian (38) for example, stated that he and Anthony are ‘really lucky...it’s nice the way our two families have kind of fused to some degree, and I think it shows a level of acceptance of our relationship’. In contrast, I noticed in 14 cases that younger participants rarely highlighted instances where they had received purely negative reactions. Instead they tended to describe receiving a variety of different reactions (e.g. positive, neutral or devastated) from various significant others. Consider the reactions in the following ‘coming out’ experiences.

Michelle’s experience of telling her significant others:

At the age of 16 I came out, and told most of my friends and my mam and sister that I’m gay. And that was accepted really well by my sister and all me friends. Me mam took it quite badly.

Jacob’s account of ‘coming out’ to his friends:

We were all talking...like a truth or dare thing when we were all drunk. And they said “tell us something about you that nobody else knows”. I said “I’m gay”. I was expecting someone to go [feigns a shocked gasp] and they were like “tell us something we don’t know!”

And then his experience of ‘coming out’ to kin:

“I’ve got something to tell you”. She said “I think I know what it is, you’re going to tell me that you’re gay, aren’t you?” and I thought ‘oh wow, that’s brilliant’. But the reaction I got was just awful... she was basically screaming hysterically and I thought I was a drama queen! My sister came in and my mum said to her “he’s got something to tell you”. My sister said “I know, he’s gay, isn’t he?” My mum was shouting “how do you know?” And sister was like “we all know he is”. And my sister was going “does it really matter, mum?”

In all three of these experiences and verbal displays of sexuality through ‘coming out’, participants were met with a range of responses, but importantly, these responses included some strongly affirmative reactions, for instance where some friends and siblings did not react with hostility or shock when the interviewee ‘outed’ themselves. Receiving these positive reactions to the participants’ verbal displays seemed to counteract others’ negative responses and conveyed to the interviewee that there is nothing scandalous, shameful or shocking about this revelation. Having such encounters appears to affirm or reinforce the participants’ sense of ordinariness and may in part explain why Jacob and Michelle
(mentioned earlier) have come to view their gay sexual orientation as ‘normal’. Michelle’s and Jacob’s experiences where friends and siblings viewed their sexual orientation as ‘ordinary’ may have been a ‘resource’ that could be used to manage the barrier posed by their respective mothers’ distress at the news. Having a variety of others mirror attitudes that their gay identity is ordinary meant they could use these perspectives as a ‘dialogical’ tool (Crossley 2006: 89) to work out who was ‘at fault’ and who needed to work on their attitude regarding sexuality. Having outlined the importance of the socio-cultural climate and encounters with others for promoting a sense of ordinariness in these younger participants’ experiences, I am now able to explore the link between these biographical experiences and their initial reactions that ‘embraced’ the availability of civil partnership.

The third type of initial attitude to civil partnership was expressed by 24 respondents in their 30s and 40s. These participants’ responses indicated they fully ‘embraced’ the introduction of civil partnership. The reasons why participants ‘embraced’ the introduction of this legislation were quite varied and comparatively similar to the kinds of reasons expressed by scholars who had also supported legal recognition. Some participants like Carla (34), Amy (37) and Michelle (32) embraced the availability of civil partnership because it enabled them to participate in an important rite of passage which they felt offered them an opportunity to have a ‘normal life’. That these participants viewed civil partnership in this way resonates with the prediction made by Sullivan (1995: 183) who postulated that younger gay people who gained access to marriage would benefit from this marker of ‘adulthood’. Similarly Harding (2006: 520) also noted how some of her participants focused on the potential that civil partnership could have for ‘normalising same-sex relationships’.
Jacob (46), Anthony (42), Sebastian (38), Will (43) and Ken (38) framed their initial responses to civil partnership around the ideas of ‘fairness, rights and equality’. Sebastian (38) said:

I think it is only right and proper that there is a way of having the kind of equal rights with regards to your marital status... because you know we are as much a couple as next door who are married to each other.

The aspects of civil partnership that elicited Sebastian’s support were those that conveyed legitimacy to his relationship and sent out a strong message that his and Anthony’s relationship and commitment are as valuable and valid as their married neighbours’ (both Sebastian and Anthony’s parents had been very accepting of the couple’s relationship which may have encouraged them to view themselves as on a par with their next-door neighbours). Such a view concurs with Stoddard (1997 [1989]) and Sullivan (1995) who both proposed nearly two decades ago that gaining legal recognition for one’s same-sex relationship was a route to acceptance and enhanced social status, which they firmly believed would reduce discrimination against same-sex relationships. Other, mainly male participants aged 40-plus, fully embraced the introduction of civil partnership because it would ensure security (i.e. being recognised as next-of-kin) and enabled the fairer distribution of material benefits such as pensions. Jacob (46) met Hugh in 1987 and they have been together for 25 years. This is what he singled out as significant about the introduction of civil partnership:

I think the thing with the civil partnership law now – is that ... the bond between the two of you is now recognised that if one of you leaves or one of you dies ... so for example if Hugh dies, I would now get a pay-out for him, whereas before – it’s not legally recognised, your next-of-kin would get that – and I think to us it’s more about – the fact that we’re now recognised. At the end of the day, as I say to people “we both pay our taxes, we both pay national insurance, everything comes out of our money is put into schools, and this that and the other, and so why should it be any different for me – I’m not seeing any of the benefits of it – so I think it’s about time”.

Jacob’s comments are comparable to the attitudes reported by Harding (2006: 520), Clarke et al. (2006: 147, 153) and Heaphy et al. (2013: 5). Such attitudes are premised on the notion
that same and opposite-sex relationships are the same and therefore deserve the same rights. The socio-cultural historical context appears to have presented these younger lesbian and gay participants with the opportunity to form a sense of their sexual orientation as ‘ordinary’. Their sense of ordinariness has been further bolstered by encountering significant others who have, for the most part, affirmed this by not treating their sexual orientation as something ‘abnormal’ or ‘deviant’. This may explain why, in their initial reactions to civil partnership, younger participants did not feel compelled to define themselves in opposition to heterosexual relationships. Some of these participants ‘embrace’ the availability of civil partnership because it gives them a way of displaying their ordinariness to others by being able to participate in ‘ordinary’ rituals, such as getting married. This affirms their sense of ordinariness, and asserts that their relationship is much the same as heterosexual ones. Furthermore, viewing themselves as ordinary may explain the use of particular terms such as ‘equality’ and ‘rights’ and their views that they are no different from their straight neighbours, or that they pay the same taxes so deserve access to the same benefits.

It seems that younger narrators’ willingness to ‘embrace’ the introduction of civil partnership is because it enables them to participate in ‘normal’ rituals, such as getting married. Partaking in this event becomes an important route to further confirming their sense of ordinariness. This means that younger lesbians’ and gay men’s sense of ordinariness is not yet something that can be taken for granted. Instead it is something that needs to be accomplished. Relying on legal recognition as a way of achieving ordinariness is problematic. This is because it unintentionally permits the continuation of social divisions and inequalities. Legal recognition such as civil partnership and marriage is desirable because it confers legitimacy to the marital couple and offers a package of legal rights and social protections (Smart 1984, Warner 1999) which are denied to other social groups (see chapter 2). That most of these younger interviewees’ recollections of their initial reaction
to civil partnership was to embrace it, rather than criticise it, indicates that younger sexual minorities are unlikely to engage in critical dialogues about the limitations of legal recognition, or participate in discussions about alternative kinds of partnership recognition and may be disinclined to dismantle the very thing that confers them with ordinariness.

**Conclusion**

The aim of this chapter was to understand narrators’ initial responses to the introduction of civil partnership in 2005 by using aspects of Giele’s (2002, 2004) work on biographical experiences. I established how certain biographical experiences (socio-cultural and historical contexts the individual inhabits and membership to communities and social networks) influenced how respondents managed and displayed their sexual orientation (e.g. ‘discrete’, ‘delayed coming out’, ‘unapologetic’ and ‘ordinary’). The terms and language participants used to describe how they displayed their sexual orientation also corresponded with one of three types of reaction they gave to the availability of civil partnership: ‘detached’, ‘dissident’ and ‘embracing’.

Exploring the links between biographical experiences and interviewees’ initial responses to civil partnership allowed me to understand why certain distinctive ‘support’/‘opposition’ responses were being reiterated. Moreover, gaining this insight allowed me to address academics’ concerns (Clarke et al. 2006: 157, Peel and Harding 2008) that certain ‘for’ and ‘against’ legal recognition schemes were being ‘endlessly’ recycled in debates about gay marriage, and the analysis here attempts to provide an explanation for why certain positions are reiterated. The same types of terms and language used to construct the ‘for’ and ‘against’ positions in the gay marriage debates were also used by two groups of my narrators to describe their initial reactions to civil partnership (‘dissident’ and ‘embracing’). Applying Giele’s conceptual approach to these narratives allowed me to demonstrate how the choice of phrases used to construct their responses was related to the timing of when participants were making sense of their sexual orientation (i.e. the kinds of messages about
sexual minorities they were exposed to and the types of encounters they had with others). I was also able to illustrate how more recent ‘concrete’ (Giele 2004: 303-304) circumstances, such as the current needs of the couple’s relationship, could disrupt an inclination to oppose the introduction of legal recognition.

Situating narrators’ initial reactions to civil partnership within their biographical experiences meant that more marginalised (Heaphy 2009: 135) reactions, that so far have been excluded from discussions about how people make sense of legal recognition, could be heard. These responses came from interviewees who, for the most part, had been tied to tight-knit communities that were perceived as intolerant to sexual difference. While these participants’ responses welcome the availability of civil partnership, I applied the label ‘detached’ to these responses to illuminate how the language and terms used to construct their reactions to civil partnership appeared ‘detached’ from the more familiar terms used in the gay marriage debates literature. The ‘detached’ appearance of their responses can be explained by the fact that these participants had not participated in critical communities, so had not encountered radical sexual political ideas. Instead, narrators developed ‘discretion’ or ‘delayed coming out’ as a way of managing the display of their sexual orientation. These narrators were not on the scene politically or in everyday life, which may account for why their voices thus far have been excluded from debates about legal recognition.

The analysis presented here was also designed to examine the personal significance that the liberalisation of attitudes to sexual minorities has had on narrators’ sense of self. To reiterate, the availability of civil partnership is used as a marker of these changing social attitudes. A distinctive generational divide comes to the fore in the description of the socio-cultural and historical climates these participants narrated inhabiting when they ‘came out’. Their stories illustrate how inhabiting these contexts conveyed different messages to interviewees about their sexual orientation. In the 1960s through to the 1980s, exposure to dominant social attitudes meant some interviewees in their 40s, 50s and 60s learned that
their attraction to persons of the same sex were considered a stigma and therefore should be conducted in private and not displayed in public (McIntosh 1968, Weeks 1989). Consequently, these narrators developed one of two approaches to manage and avoid the glare of the stigmatising spotlight illuminating their sexual orientation and relationship (‘discrete’ or ‘unapologetic’).

In contrast, younger narrators’ (in their 30s and 40s) narratives convey the significance of coming to make sense of their attraction to persons of the same sex in the socio-cultural and historical climate of the late 1980s and 1990s where social attitudes displayed to them that opposite and same-sex relationships are similar. Inhabiting such a context has presented them with the opportunity to form a sense of their sexual orientation as relatively ‘ordinary’. The broader significance of viewing themselves as ‘ordinary’ has meant they have not felt compelled to censor the display of their sexual orientation which suggests that the fear of attracting the stigmatising spotlight of a homosexual identity has diminished over time.

The next chapter addresses the relational significance of the availability of civil partnership for the couple’s relationship. I do this by exploring couple’s narratives for why they decided to register their partnership.
Chapter 5 Private Decisions, Public Stories

Introduction
The previous chapter explored the personal significance that the availability of civil partnership had on the narrator’s sense of self. This was achieved by examining the similarities between biographical experiences (such as how participants learned to display their sexual orientation) and their initial responses to the introduction of civil partnership in 2005. This chapter shifts the spotlight away from discussions on the self and instead examines the overlap that exists between the boundaries of the personal and the public. I accomplish this by exploring the repertoires that narrators employ to make ‘private’ decisions for registering a civil partnership ready for public display through their stories. This allows me to examine the relational significance that the availability of civil partnership has on the couple’s relationship. Additionally, the analysis presented in this chapter focuses on the reasons that same-sex couples give for having a civil partnership, contributes to an under-researched area and complements the few studies (Shipman and Smart 2007, Smart 2008, Heaphy et al. 2013, Einarsdóttir, 2013) that have looked at couples’ explanations and motivations for having a civil partnership. These insights are extended further by looking at people’s narratives of their decisions for having a civil partnership through the lens of ‘display’.

Finch (2007) claimed that ‘narratives’ could be used as tools for display and conveying meaning. The chapter starts with an explanation of how this analytical tool was refined by drawing on the work of narrative analysts such as Riessman (1993, 2008), Lawler (2008), Holstein and Gubrium (2000), so that it could be applied to deepen my engagement with people’s stories about their motivations for having a civil partnership.
The remainder of this chapter illustrates how narrators used one of three different repertoires to display the couple’s personal decisions for formalising their relationship. Couples opted for repertoires that resembled the current needs of the couple’s relationship and these were used to ensure the couple’s decision appeared coherent and intelligible to generalised others. In the first and second narratives, couples described how their decisions were motivated by the current needs of their relationship which displayed a ‘practical’ approach to formalisation, or the aim of ‘protecting’ their partner from interference from significant others’ or intervention from authorities. In the third group of narratives, couples described conventional ‘romantic proposals’, and through this conveyed that they had married for ‘love’. Examining the cultural repertoires that interviewees used to display their decision for having a civil partnership opened a window onto the couple’s relational circumstances and the way that the couple conceived that having a civil partnership would meet their current needs of their relationship.

Decisions related to the needs of the relationship and preparing stories for public consumption

Scholars who have studied the daily lives of people who have formalised their relationship with a civil partnership have tended to prioritise the civil partnership ceremony and celebrations (see for instance Kimport 2012, Peel and Clarke 2007). In contrast, relatively little interest has been paid to the examination of couples’ motivations for registering their partnership. Thus couples’ reasons for having a civil partnership constitute an under-researched area. A few studies (Shipman and Smart 2007, Smart 2008, Heaphy et al. 2013, Einarsdóttir 2013) have explored in depth the explanations and motivations that some same-sex couples give for legally formalising their relationship. These studies have established that same-sex partners’ decisions to formalise their relationship are shaped by the way that couples think civil partnership will complement and meet the current needs of their relationship.
Similar to these studies’ findings, my participants’ decisions for having a civil partnership were related to the current needs of the couple’s relationship. However, I also observed that narrators who had formalised their relationship for different reasons tended to narrate their decisions in distinctive ways. Analysing the ways that decisions were storied, and thus displayed, complements existing studies by first situating couples’ decisions for having a civil partnership within their relational biographies, and second examining the ways that personal stories about decisions are made ready for public display (Holstein and Gubrium 2000: 113, Plummer 2004 [1995]: 21). Next I discuss the analytical tools that helped me to understand how narrators construct stories so they are coherent and intelligible for their audiences.

**Narratives of display: connecting personal experiences to societal discourses**

Finch (2007: 78) proposes that narratives or the personal stories that people tell about their family relationships could be used as a tool to display ‘family relationships’ to others through a process of connecting ‘personal experiences’ to more ‘generalised patterns of social meanings’. These connections between personal experiences and societal meanings are achieved through ‘telling stories to others about their own family relationships’ such that ‘these family relationships can be understood and situated as part of an accepted repertoire of what ‘family’ means’ (Finch 2007: 78). The process assumes that in order to ensure that ‘family stories’ are understood and accepted by others as stories *about family*, people must narrate their personal experiences so that they fit with ‘accepted repertoires’ associated with kinship.

This process of connecting personal experiences to more generalised patterns of meanings can be used to understand the variations in the stories that narrators told about why they decided to have a civil partnership. However, in the initial paper Finch (2007) only offered theoretical suggestions for how this process might work.
Consequently, the work of narrative analysts such as Riessman (1993, 2008), Lawler (2008) and Holstein and Gubrium (2000) were used in order to examine the ways that respondents’ stories about their decisions were constructed so they were intelligible to their audiences. Narrators fitted their personal experiences and reasons for legally formalising their relationship into ‘taken-for-granted discourses’ or ‘values’ (Riessman 2008: 3) about marriage and partnering. For instance, they drew from conventional repertoires that circulate in popular culture, such as ‘romance’, ‘love’ and ‘commitment’ (Ingraham 2008), invoked societal values about partnering, or presented themselves as responsible partners who took measures to look after each other in times of sickness. The use of such familiar terms in their stories illustrate that couples in same-sex relationships are not immune from being ‘subjected’ to popular discourses.

Narrative coherence was achieved by these storytellers ‘selecting’ and ‘tailoring particular discourses’ (Holstein and Gubrium 2000: 107) that aligned with their personal circumstances. For example, narrators ‘organized’ together (Lawler 2008: 11) or highlighted the significance of similar types of relational circumstances (episodes) which were used to support the story (plot) of how the couple came to decide to enter a civil partnership (see Riessman 2008: 3, Holstein and Gubrium 2000: 113). The decision for formalising a relationship generally corresponded with the way that civil partnership was thought to meet the couples’ current relationship needs. Additionally, the couple’s ‘decision’ was made coherent to their audience by giving one main reason and by downplaying or minimising the role of other factors that also appeared influential in helping the couple to reach a decision (Riessman 1993: 65). Taken together, all these features ensured that their stories about decisions to have a civil partnership were intelligible and recognisable to their listeners.
The remainder of this chapter is used to illustrate how participants displayed their decisions: practical, protective and romantic.

**Practical repertoires: ‘cementing’ existing relational arrangements**

Ten couples’ decisions to have a civil partnership were primarily motivated by practicalities. When civil partnership was introduced, most of these participants were aged 40 or over, seven of these couples had been together for several decades and the remaining three couples had been together for ten years or so. These participants’ explanations for why they registered their partnership included one or both of the following factors: the longevity of the couple’s relationship, having already made ‘commitments’ to the relationship, and/or a person’s state of health. Their decision to register their partnership was influenced by the knowledge that they would be offered a ‘package of legal rights’ and ‘social and financial protections’ (Shipman and Smart 2007, Einarsdóttir 2013). For some, these benefits were perceived as allowing them to ‘cement’ their existing relational commitments, while others imagined that these rights could help with the daily management of a partner’s deteriorating health.

I now want to examine the work that these practical repertoires do in representing or constructing the couple. Older narrators rarely used romantic narratives to describe why they had a civil partnership. While these participants also mentioned and talked about love for their partner, it was a ‘mature’ love, and ‘romantic’ love was not a primary motive for their decision to have a civil partnership. Instead, they were motivated to register their partnership for practical reasons. For example, Gerald (51) said: ‘20 years of a relationship is a big commitment: we’re in love, but it’s not all hearts and flowers’. Similarly Benjamin (61) described how he and (his now deceased partner) Bert had ‘been together for 32 years at that point anyway. It’s not as though we were in the first flush of a love affair or a romance’. The ‘longevity’ (Clarke et al. 2007: 181, Shipman and Smart 2007: 4.13) of these couples’ relationships meant that the love they had for each other was represented as a
more ‘enduring’ (Gabb et al. 2013) love that had survived the realities and tensions of caring for each other during difficult times (Ingraham 2008).

Older narrators were able to make their decision intelligible to their audiences by drawing on ‘values’ (Riessman 2008: 3) circulating in society about partners’ responsibilities to each other and to contextualise the circumstances of how they reached their decision. Some of these couples had formed their relationship several decades before legal recognition for same-sex partners was available (Shipman and Smart 2007: 1.1). In the meantime, they explained how they had taken steps to legally and financially secure their relationship by taking out joint mortgages, writing wills and so forth. Some of these participants had also held unofficial ceremonies or celebratory parties as a way of publicly marking their commitment in front of significant others. Three of these couples had organised someone to officiate a commitment ceremony or ‘blessing’. In 2004, Edith (57), held an anniversary party as an opportunity for the couple and significant others to celebrate and commemorate her relationship with Janet because Janet was beginning to succumb to the effects of dementia. George (64) and Louis (65) described how they had privately exchanged rings early on in their relationship as a way of displaying their dedication to each other. Drawing attention to relational commitments that the couple had made prior to the availability of civil partnership was a way of supporting the ‘practical’ aspect of their decision. Also, their narratives displayed that couples’ decisions to have a civil partnership would conserve rather than replace these former relational arrangements.

An illustration of civil partnership conserving rather than replacing the meaning of an earlier commitment ceremony was provided by Monica (54). Monica lives in Wales with her partner of 20 years, Nell. Monica described herself as an early adopter and was eager for the couple to be one of the ‘first’ couples to have a civil partnership. She described Nell’s reluctance, because of the media attention surrounding the forthcoming Civil
Partnership Act. Nell suggested that she and Monica compromise by having a commitment ceremony which they did in 2004. Once the media frenzy around civil partnerships had eased, Nell agreed to have a civil partnership. This is how Monica distinguished between the couple’s decisions to have a commitment ceremony and civil partnership:

Monica: what we decided Nell and I, was that we were going to treat it [civil partnership] as the absolute celebration of what it meant. So the first one [commitment ceremony] was about ‘us’ and a ‘commitment to each other’, and an emotional thing. The second one was almost more political for me. It was about because we can do this now; we’re going to do this. We’d already made a commitment to each other, and we’d been together all these years – so that bit is not in doubt.

Interviewer: yeah

Monica: The civil partnership for me was that point [where] we’re now formalising that commitment that we made to each other last year – and we’re doing it in that kind of legalistic way

Notice how Monica assigned different meanings to the commitment ceremony and their civil partnership. Emotion and commitment were meanings reserved for the first ceremony and their decision to have a civil partnership is described more rationally, which acts as a way of ‘formalising’ and preserving the earlier commitment ceremony. By allocating certain meanings to these two events, Monica is attempting to guide how listeners’ should interpret her decision to have a civil partnership (Riessman 2008: 3) and ensure that their decision to enter a civil partnership did not disrupt or replace the significance of the couple’s former demonstrations of commitment. Furthermore, by situating these two events within the couple’s relational history, Monica indicates that using repertoires of ‘romance’ is for her not the right ‘vehicle’ (Finch 2007: 77) to convey to others the meaning of their decision. Instead, by emphasising the ‘rational’ motivation underlying their decision to have a civil partnership the practical repertoire she uses to frame her decision becomes understandable for her audience.
Becoming civil partners to manage the end of a relational life

In the following four cases, managing ongoing health issues or experiencing a health scare had encouraged the couples to decide to have a civil partnership. Three of these narrators explained how their decision to register their partnership emerged because throughout their relationship they had been dealing with their own or their partner’s health issues. Each of these participants recollected situations, prior to the civil partnership, where a lack of rights and recognition for their same-sex relationship had made them feel vulnerable and anxious. This emotional uncertainty created by an absence of rights was captured by Sheila (46). Her partner of 8 years, Stef, was receiving ‘treatment’. Sheila recalled how:

I became much more aware for both of us that you know without a civil partnership – without that recognition actually – it was pretty much in the hands of the gods really, there wasn’t an automatic right that you know I would be listened to … in terms of treatment

In the account above Sheila displays to us the current needs of her and Stef’s relationship: managing ongoing health issues without access to rights and recognition. An absence of partnership recognition creates emotional uncertainty for the couple when they manage discussions with medical professionals. Explaining her personal experience encourages us to view civil partnership in the same way that she does. For example, we come to appreciate how having a civil partnership can ease the couple’s anxiety and practically alleviates such situations. Additionally her explanation enables the audience to understand how the couple reached a ‘practical’ decision.

These participants’ explanations for why they registered their partnership were similar to reasons found in previous studies. For example, entering a civil partnership gave couples access to practical benefits such as next-of-kin rights, and power of attorney (Shipman and Smart 2007, Clarke et al. 2007: 181, Knights 2006: 49, Goodwin and Butler 2009, Lewin 1998, Jowett and Peel 2007). Rachel (64) explained, just knowing that she and Jan (her partner of 19 years) had access to these rights ‘made a huge difference’ and made the
management of these situations ‘so much easier’. These participants’ conception of civil partnership in terms of the ‘practical’ rights and protections that meet the current needs of their relationships, confirm the predictions made by academics such as Stoddard (1997 [1989]) and Sullivan (1995) in the 1980s and 1990s who imagined that the introduction of legal recognition could improve sexual minorities’ daily lives. Certainly in the accounts here, having access to benefits, rights and protections by becoming civil partners was seen as meeting the current needs of the couple’s relationship.

Managing a partner’s chronic health problems had afforded these participants the opportunity to consider the detrimental effects that a lack of legal rights and social recognition for their relationship could have in such situations and the benefits that having access to such relational rights and recognition could bring. In contrast, Luke (53) and Robert (43) narrated that reaching a practical decision to register their partnership was more unplanned for them. Luke described how his interest in registering his partnership with Robert emerged after experiencing two events simultaneously: the sudden loss of a close friend and a personal ‘health scare’. Encountering the prospect of his own mortality attuned him to the practical and specifically financial benefits that registering their partnership could have for Robert. In particular, Luke noted how having a civil partnership would mean that Robert would be entitled to receive Luke’s pension, a material ‘advantage’ that would not have otherwise been available to the couple (Donovan et al. 1999: 701). We are invited to see how Luke is connecting his personal experiences with the societal value of being a responsible partner by providing for Robert’s future, and thus makes his ‘practical’ decision intelligible to his audience.

Embedding their decision to have a civil partnership within the couple’s relational circumstances allows the narrators to convey meaning to their audience and helps their audience to find their practical reasons for having a civil partnership understandable.
Interviewees invite us to appreciate the importance of having access to the rights and material benefits that are conferred to a civilly partnered couple. Access to these benefits can help the couple prepare for the challenges that situations like deteriorating health and/or death might have. Moreover, explaining these details ensures that their decision to have a civil partnership is not misconstrued as them being insensitive or greedy, and instead seemingly instrumental reasons are revealed as ‘gestures of love and care’ (Shipman and Smart 2007: 4.13). In the following section, narrators adopted similar strategies of contextualising their decision to register their partnership within their relational circumstances and drew on cultural repertoires of partners’ responsibilities to each other. A key difference between practical and protective repertoires was that these next participants viewed the practical benefits that came with civil partnership as a way of ‘protecting’ their relationship from others (members of family-of-origin and authorities) interfering in their relationship.

**Protective repertoires: persuasive narratives**

Eight couples narrated deciding to register their partnership because they imagined it could ‘protect’ their relationship. This group of interviewees were aged between 30 and 53 years, and the length of their relationships spanned from three years to over two decades. As I shall illustrate shortly, all of these interviewees narrated that they were motivated to have a civil partnership because of particular relational circumstances: difficult relationships with relatives, being parents or a partner’s citizenship status. All of these participants narrated how their having a civil partnership was a measure that could ‘protect’ their relationship from close and ‘official’ others interfering in their relationship.

I now turn to an examination of the construction of these ‘protective’ repertoires. I begin with an exploration of those cases where the interviewees were parents or had difficult

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6 One of these couples, Adrian and Todd separated in 2011
relationships with relatives. These participants all narrated their decisions to have a civil partnership in ways that lent ‘legitimacy’ (Heaphy et al. 2013: 98, 99) to their decision to register their partnership for protective reasons. An illustration of this was provided by Martha (53), whose partner Justine (43) had two adopted children. Martha began with conventional reasons for why she and Justine got married, namely in order to publicly display their commitment and love for each other. However, a more significant factor that spurred her into deciding to have a civil partnership was the implications that losing Justine could have on their family:

Martha: it gives public expression, doesn’t it, to the commitment and the love you bit but it also helps in a legal sense. I remember one day being in Northwest town both of us, and Justine had set off back here, ahead of me because I had to do something and I followed her and I was about 45 minutes behind her and there was a thing on the news that there’d been an accident on the M6 and I thought ‘oh crumbs’ if she was in that what would happen to the children? Would they let me keep the children? You know the idea that they would go back into care was like just more than I could handle – apart from the fact that something like that might happen to her … I did say ‘what would happen?’ and then you said ‘well they’d go into care’ and I was just like ‘would they let me have them sort of thing?’ and some of it was a practical solution securing their future and things.

Following Martha’s traumatic ordeal she learned that had Justine (the then legally adoptive parent) died, social services could have dismantled her family and taken her children back into care. By contextualising the circumstances of her decision she is able to convey to her audience that it was the thought of protecting her children’s future and her family that formed the basis of her decision to have a civil partnership (see also Clarke et al. 2007: 184). When the couple formalised their relationship they were offered a package of rights and legal protections (Knights 2006: 49) which acted as a ‘protective’ shield around their family, thereby protecting their children. Situating and contextualising the decision to formalise her relationship within her relational circumstances meant Martha was able to convey to her audience that her reason for having a civil partnership enabled her to protect her children and was borne out of love for her family and ensured that her audience would find her ‘protective’ reason intelligible.
A different example was provided by six people who decided to have a civil partnership because of the potential threat that relatives posed to their relationships. Each of these participants proceeded to narrate how their relationships with family members were ‘poor’ or fragile because one or both of the couple’s parents had not coped well with their child’s lesbian or gay identity. For example, Simon (53) described his and his partner’s relationships with family members as slightly ‘dysfunctional’ and expressed being worried about his family members making a claim on property. He explained that there was a consensus in that he and his partner both wanted to have a civil partnership to ‘protect’ the other partner's interests. As a result of the poor relationships with relatives, these individuals did not feel they could trust that these family members would respect their partnership in moments of crisis. To help their audience appreciate the ‘protective’ capacity of having a civil partnership most interviewees drew on two hypothetical scenarios. The first concerned a situation where one of the partners might be critically ill in hospital. An illustration of this was provided by Claire (43) who explained:

I have a very difficult relationship with my family. And I didn't want my sister to be my next-of-kin which is what would have happened so – I really wanted to have a civil partnership for that reason, I wanted to make absolutely certain that it was Alice

In such a situation, being civil partners would mean that the other partner would be entitled to make crucial medical decisions on behalf of the ill person. The second situation concerned couples who had jointly bought their home together. An example of civil partnership acting as a ‘protective’ deterrent was provided by Richard (53) who articulated how it could fend off unwanted interference from relatives:

We thought great the civil partnership is going to make it [their partnership] more concrete. And it could be less contestable in a court of law – or it will make any relatives who might think... it would provide an extra disincentive ... to stop them thinking ... that we are going to parachute in here and cause a whole load of other grief on top of bereavement

Having a civil partnership can thus provide reassurance and ensure that a partner was legally entitled to inherit property, and thus avoid the injustice of relatives ‘parachuting in’,

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insensitively evicting the surviving partner from the couple's home and helping themselves to property. This concern, however, was a matter of resources: not everyone had property to leave to their partner.

While these were situations that others only imagined, Leonard (43) had direct experience of significant others questioning his entitlement to inherit a deceased partner’s property. This experience was a significant contributing factor to why he was motivated to have a civil partnership with Oscar. Leonard put it like this:

Leonard: We decided [...] that we liked the idea of having a civil partnership. And because of the lawyer aspect of my life, I wanted to be quite clear that Oscar was never placed in a position - I made up my mind that I loved him, but I knew that I never wanted him to be in the position that I was in when my partner died.

Interviewer: right

Leonard: of being treated like – another beneficiary. My late partner left me quite a nice estate. But, I was made to feel like – you know – I was well down the food chain. Arthur [former partner] [...] was about 30 years older than I [...] he was a very efficient person [...] he actually left me the house [...] And family members of his turned up and [...] the first thing they asked was ‘what’s happening to the house?’ and I said, ‘I haven’t decided, because I knew what the contents of the will were at that point – I said I haven’t made up my mind of what I’m going to do with it yet’ [...] it just made me feel that I had no business, […] there were people who were more entitled than I was to be there. And I thought, knowing my family [coughs] I think their expectations would be exactly the same. So I wanted him [Oscar] to have that protection.

Leonard is trying to convey how he was motivated by both ‘love’ and ‘protective’ reasons to marry his partner Oscar. Proportionally more attention in this narrative is given to the contextualisation of the ‘protective’ element of his decision. Offering an outline of his professional knowledge of the legal system and its limitations (see Auchmuty 2004) and his previous personal experience was used as a way of conveying meaning and displaying the ‘protective’ element in Leonard’s decision to have a civil partnership with Oscar. Leonard informed us how his former partner, Arthur, had put legal arrangements in place, so that Leonard would inherit Arthur's house. However, because Arthur’s relatives did not recognise their relationship, these legal protections were almost undermined. Their ‘legal’
Informing us of his previous experience means that we come to understand his motivation for ensuring that Oscar had legal status because it would protect him from having to encounter similar experiences to those that Leonard had been through. This was something that he felt was a real threat because of his poor relationship with his relatives. Leonard suspected that they would refuse to recognise the legitimacy of his and Oscar’s relationship. Ensuring Oscar had a legal status meant that Leonard’s relatives would not be able to dispute Oscar’s right to inherit Leonard’s property.

**Keeping a relationship together: constructing defensive narratives**

Interviewees who had registered their partnership with a non-UK citizen tended to be quite defensive when they talked about their decision to have a civil partnership. There were four couples in my study where one of the partners was originally a non-UK citizen. Out of these four couples, only two narrators said that they registered their partnership to secure a ‘visa’ for their partner. Joseph (44) and Adrian (35) both described how they had registered their partnership because it was a way they could ‘protect’ their relationship from the immigration service intervening which could result in the break-up of their relationship (see Heaphy et al. 2013: 98). Three of the four participants who had registered their partnership to a non-UK citizen recounted how at one time they had encountered others’ harsh judgements about the couple’s relationship. I came to understand that my invitation for these participants to describe how they reached the decision to have a civil partnership triggered their expectations that I, like others they had encountered, would question the authenticity of their commitment. The displays these narrators mobilised to convey to their audience why they had a civil partnership were different from the narratives discussed above. These narrators did not attempt to connect their personal reasons to broader
cultural repertoires to help their audience understand their decision. Instead, interviewees tried to get their audience to see the couple’s situation and relationship and move beyond the constraints of cultural repertoires because of the negative connotations of ‘economic migrants’ which they felt had led to the authenticity of the couple’s commitment being questioned.

I want to explore two of these narratives of display. The first narrative is from Joseph who did register his partnership with Ali for ‘visa’ reasons. The following excerpt illustrates the tensions and difficulties he encountered as he attempted to explain the reason that he and Ali decided to have a civil partnership:

Joseph: I guess his desire was to get UK citizenship.
Interviewer: okay
Joseph: and my attitude was ‘what the heck?’ [Laughs] Most of my friends thought it was too quick. We’d only known each other for five months […] he had a visa for another year, eighteen months. So we weren’t doing it – there wasn’t any immediacy for it […] but I guess five years later
Interviewer: you’re still together
Joseph: and whereas friends of mine who were together for four years who then did it [got civil partnered] only survived a year
Interviewer: oh okay
Joseph: I didn’t tell my friends. I got so fed up with people asking “are you sure?” because people would say “are you sure” or “it’s a bit soon” we just went ahead and told people afterwards.

Joseph addresses how his partner Ali had raised the issue of wanting to have a civil partnership with Joseph so he could gain UK citizenship. He then explains that his response to Ali’s request was ‘what the heck?’ followed by laughter. Joseph’s story centres on the difficulties and tensions that arose because his friends questioned the authenticity of the couple’s commitment to each other. The timing of Joseph’s laughter is interesting in this narrative. It may signal that he is managing a tricky situation, specifically the need to manage the impressions his audience might form about his decision. It is at this point that Joseph seems to ‘step out of his narrative’ to monitor and guide the meanings and
interpretations his audience might form (Holstein and Gubrium 2000: 113). The display and meaning that Joseph attempts to convey to his audience (but primarily directed at his friends) was that they had been wrong to question his decision to register his partnership with Ali. The fact that Joseph emphasises that he and Ali are still together five years later, is an important detail, because it conveys to his audience that Ali was not an economic migrant who has tricked Joseph with false promises of love and romance to secure a visa. Moreover, no matter how well intentioned his audience’s concerns might have been about the authenticity of Ali’s commitment to Joseph (see also Heaphy et al. 2013: 98), their concerns were misplaced and unwelcome.

The second example highlights a ‘defensive’ narrative that was constructed because Christopher (42) anticipated encountering others’ negative judgements irrespective of the personal reasons the couple gave for legally formalising their relationship. Christopher narrated how he and José had moved in together and shortly after decided to get married. He described how having a civil partnership ‘seemed like the icing on the cake’ and ‘it was to galvanise the relationship really and make it feel like we were going on a journey together’. Immediately after disclosing his reasons for registering their partnership, he said this:

Christopher: because I suppose the other thing that goes on, is that because he is nationality, people think, ‘oh is that why you got married to keep him in the country’, sort of thing. But because of the time he’d been here, already – with different visas. He could have applied for a … what is it called? Like a ‘Right to remain’, like a residency, anyway.

Interviewer: okay

Christopher: so it didn’t make any difference. We did it through a fiancé visa, but it didn’t make any difference. He could have done that anyway. And I suppose, if José hadn’t been allowed to stay here then I would have moved to country.

The narrative above was used to defend the authenticity of his partner José’s commitment to their relationship. Christopher anticipated that others might be sceptical of José’s motivation to have a civil partnership because of his nationality. He explained to his
listeners that in order to secure citizenship, civil partnership was one amongst a number of
different options available to José. Pointing this out enables Christopher to demonstrate
that the couple’s commitment is genuine. Christopher is thus able to show that there was
incongruence between the personal decision to marry José and the interpretation that his
audience may form.

I have illustrated how some narrators felt that ‘protective’ reasons for formalising a
relationship could be made intelligible when they were contextualised. I have also
demonstrated how other protective reasons such as gaining citizenship status (which may
be necessary to keep a relationship together) were expected to evoke others’ suspicions,
evidenced by the fact that narrators felt they needed to build defensive narratives to
manage others’ potential misunderstanding. Such findings indicate the usefulness, limits
and barriers of the efficacy of using narratives as tools to display and convey meaning to
others. The next narratives are from couples who formalised their relationship for
‘romantic reasons’. By framing their decision to have a civil partnership within more
familiar tropes of cultural repertoires, such as ‘romance’ and ‘commitment’, these
participants were, I suggest, able to ensure their decision for having a civil partnership was
intelligible to their audience.

**Romantic repertoires**
The third group of decisions are those where the couples used ‘romantic’ repertoires
to convey their decision to their audience. Nine couples used popular terms such as
‘love’, ‘romance’ and ‘commitment’ to frame their decision to have a civil partnership.
Recollecting their reasons for why they wanted to have a civil partnership, Carla (34) and
Amy (37) both mentioned ‘love’, ‘commitment’ and expressed how they ‘wanted to be
together forever’. Explaining her motivations for having a civil partnership with Alison,
Kate (36) had this to say:
As soon as I met Alison, I just thought she was absolutely amazing, and I had this in my head that I really wanted to marry her. Even though I didn’t believe in marriage cause I just didn’t want to let her get away.

These couples were predominately aged in their early 30s to mid-40s and the length of their relationship ranged from three years to 13 years. Five of these couples had begun after civil partnership became available. All ten of these narrators had formed their sexual orientation and relationship in an era when they had access to citizenship rights (see chapter 3). These interviewees viewed having a civil partnership as an opportunity for the couple to publicly display their love and commitment to each other in the presence of significant others and unlike other narrators, these couples had not made prior public declarations of commitment. Many of these younger interviewees viewed getting married as a normative adult ‘rite of passage’ (Heaphy and Einarsdottir 2012: 5). For example, Michelle (34) put it like this:

I knew that what I wanted out of my life was to meet somebody. And when civil partnerships came around I was quite excited that — that the prospect was there for me to have a normal life if you like.

I now want to examine the construction of these narrators’ romantic narratives.

The role of the romantic proposal

The ‘marriage proposal’ featured prominently in all ten of these participants’ stories about how and why they reached the decision to have a civil partnership. Their use of the romantic proposal was a familiar ‘vehicle’ (Finch 2007: 77, Ingraham 2008: 123) that could be used to display to their audience that the couple married for love and commitment. I will illustrate shortly with two examples that the purpose of using the romantic repertoire, for example having or being able to tell a personal story about their experience of a marriage proposal, allows them to convey to their ‘reader’ that they are participating in an ordinary ‘rite of passage’ into adulthood, of getting married (Heaphy and Einarsdottir 2012: 5). However, using the romantic repertoire to display their decision for having a civil partnership was not easy for all narrators.
Out of the nine cases where a proposal story was used to display their decision, only one was comprised of all the components of what might be thought of as a conventional ‘marriage proposal’. Maria (39), narrated how she had planned a ‘surprise’ marriage proposal for her partner of 6 years, Selena. Maria recalled:

So I said ‘why don’t we get a piñata for new years eve’...what I had planned was apart from putting sweets inside the piñata – I put the ring ... I wrapped it as a sweet ... we were smashing the piñata … and it wouldn’t break and it was so funny. And it was midnight ... and we were outside and you could see all the fireworks – and then my dad goes with his big muscles and breaks the thing and then the sweets were jumping all over ... and suddenly this big thing jumps and she is very sweet, Selena ... sees this big box, and she thinks – ‘pappy deserves to have it’ because he’s been smashing the thing – and she was like ‘pappy’ and my dad and mom had been instructed to disappear as soon as the box jumped – they just went in the house and she was confused completely like – ‘where are they going?’, and I said ‘just open it’ and the paper said ‘Selena’ all over it, and so she opened the sweet and opened the box and the box said inside – ‘Will you be mine?’ or something in those words, and before I even asked – she was saying ‘yes’ and do you know – all this fireworks and it was beautiful, beautiful, beautiful

Maria’s story of her proposal to Selena is instantly identifiable to her audience as a marriage proposal (Lawler 2008: 11). Her narration of this event brings together a sequence of conventional romantic cues. For example, there was the element of ‘surprise’: an engagement ring disguised as a sweet hidden within the piñata, the special timing of the event: midnight, fireworks, the outcome where Selena exclaims ‘yes’ and agrees to marry Maria and Maria’s summation of the whole experience as ‘beautiful’. As this example demonstrates, some people’s personal experiences fit comfortably within conventional discourses or cultural repertoires and were therefore easily identifiable as a ‘marriage proposal’. However, this was not the case for all participants.

In the next account the couple engage in a lot of work to ensure that their audience understands that this was a story about a couple where one partner was trying to propose to the other. Will (38) and Ken (43) met online after civil partnership had become available. They narrated their two unsuccessful attempts at proposing. Will reflected how his first attempt at proposing had been ineffective:
Will: we were watching TV and I asked in a really roundabout, really light-hearted way.
Ken: that’s probably why I don’t remember then!
Will: although I was serious – you just laughed! So, I kind of went – ‘oh dear’. Yes, we were watching TV in the flat in South-East City and we must have been watching something with people getting married ... and I said: ‘do you fancy getting hitched then?’
Ken: [inaudible] 
Will: You just kind of ignored, blanked me!

In the first part of this exchange above Will explains why his attempt at proposing was not successful. He had not drawn on obvious romantic indicators or phrases that would alert Ken to the fact that Will was trying to propose to him; it was ‘roundabout’, ‘really light-hearted’ and he had proposed casually to Ken in front of the television. Even though the story focuses on an ‘unsuccessful’ attempt at proposing, it becomes apparent that this is a story about a marriage proposal. Ken then narrates how he had planned to propose while the couple were on a weekend break a couple of months later, and narrated waiting for the ‘right time’ to present itself:

Ken: Okay. We went away for a weekend ... And I was like I’m going to ask him [to marry me] this weekend and every time I tried to catch him somewhere to sit down and talk to him – he wandered off [Interviewer laughs] so eventually, it wasn’t the most romantic of engagements. And he stopped the car at the top of the hill and he said ‘what’s wrong with you?’ and I was like [hesitant] ‘will you marry me?’

In this second episode there are cues that indicate to the listener that we are being told a story about a marriage proposal. Ken himself acknowledges that his proposal did not quite adhere to a conventional romantic repertoire with the phrase ‘it wasn’t the most romantic of engagements’. The absence of imagined conventional markers that a marriage proposal was taking place appeared to be the cause of this couple’s difficulties to firstly propose to each other and secondly to make their personal story ‘understandable in broad terms’ (Holstein and Gubrium 2000: 107) and display to their audience that they were participating in a ‘rite of passage’. Another way of viewing the couples’ difficulties in articulating this marriage proposal to us is the fact that the generic cultural repertoires that
we rely upon to make ourselves intelligible are not necessarily suited to convey the complexities of people’s daily lives and personal experiences.

The narratives above demonstrate how younger couples were motivated to have a civil partnership because they wanted to publicly display their love and commitment for each other. With varying success, these narrators attempted to make their personal decisions intelligible to their audiences by using familiar romantic repertoires like the ‘marriage proposal’.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has used narratives as a tool to examine the ways that couples displayed their decision to have a civil partnership and how interviewees attempted to make sure their audience found their reasons intelligible. By drawing on the work of narrative analysts such as Riessman (1993, 2008), Lawler (2008), and Holstein and Gubrium (2000) I have demonstrated how Finch’s (2007) idea of narratives as a ‘tool’ for display could be developed into and used as an analytical tool. Interviewees displayed their ‘private’ relational stories of their decisions for formalising their relationship through one of three cultural repertoires (practical, protective and romantic). Using such shared narrative frameworks helped to ensure that these stories were ready for ‘public’ display, and that audiences found their reasons intelligible. However, the stories also illustrated that some repertoires needed modification or more contextualisation to ensure they conveyed the particularities of the couples’ decisions or to avoid them being misunderstood and to ensure they were interpreted in the ways they were intended to be heard.

Close examination of these displays has allowed me to demonstrate how having a civil partnership is intimately tied to the way it is thought to meet the needs of the couple’s relationship. This is important for assessing the relational significance that the availability of civil partnership has for the couple’s relationship. The participants in my study were in
their 30s through to their 60s when they registered their partnerships. Consequently, these same-sex partners were at different stages of their relational lives and were encountering and negotiating different concerns. Perhaps unsurprisingly, their motivations and reasons for having a civil partnership were different. Although every couple gains access to the same package of legal rights and social protections, these couples conceived of civil partnership in a variety of ways. For example, for more established couples who had already made previous relational commitments, civil partnership was imagined as ‘cementing’ existing relational commitments. Other couples who were managing their daily lives with long-term health issues expected that registering a partnership would give them access to a package of legal and social protections which they anticipated would offer practical support in making plans for the end of their relational lives. These practical legal and social protections were also conceived by some as a protective shield that would fend off unwanted interference in the couple’s relationship from relatives or authorities. Finally, having the opportunity to get married enabled younger couples to publicly celebrate their love and commitment to each other in front of significant others, and signalled the start of the couple going on a journey together.

The analysis of the reasons couples give for registering their same-sex partnership presented here has been used to contribute to a currently under-researched area. Employing the lens of ‘display’ has enabled me to examine people’s stories of their decisions for having a civil partnership. Such an analysis contributes to and complements the pioneering studies that have sought to appreciate why couples would want to formalise their relationship (Shipman and Smart 2007, Smart 2008, Heaphy et al. 2013, Einarsdóttir 2013) by exploring how these ‘private’ decisions are made intelligible and ready for public display. Furthermore, all of these couples’ desire to enter a civil partnership and willingness to display commitment in this way encourages us to rethink the adequacy of aspects of the ‘transformation of intimacy’ thesis (Giddens 2008 [1992]) for theorising intimacy and
couples' relationships in contemporary society. For example, such decisions undermine Giddens’s (2008 [1992]: 135) claim that same-sex relationships are especially fragile. Instead, the availability of civil partnership offers a tangible representation that some same-sex relationships are, and always have been, capable of being committed and enduring. Additionally, it shows how actors do not enter relationships with a calculating rationality whereby they view their relationship ‘as good till further notice’ (see also Weeks et al. 2001, Gabb et al. 2013).

The next chapter shifts in focus, moving away from the couple’s relationship to consider the significance of who the couple tell of their intention to have a civil partnership (e.g. kin and friends). Exploring who is told enables us to see which relationships are significant to the couple and individual partners in their lives.
Chapter 6 Displaying to Family and Friends

Introduction
The previous chapter established that ‘private’ decisions to register a civil partnership were based on the ways that civil partnership was conceived as meeting the current needs of the couple’s relationship. In the process of making these ‘private’ decisions ready for ‘public’ display, interviewees drew on particular repertoires that would make their decisions coherent and intelligible to their audience. The present chapter continues to explore the theme of the relational significance of the availability of civil partnership by focusing on the significance of who the couple selected as their audience to display their intention to become civil partners (e.g. family or friends).

Exploring why friends and/or family were prioritised in their thoughts about who should be the recipient of the couple’s news complements and extends findings from existing studies. The subsequent analysis complements the observations from recent studies that have explored the experiences of those who become civil partners (Lewin 1998, Smart 2007a, Ellis 2007, Jowett and Peel 2007, Peel 2009, Goodwin and Butler 2009, Heaphy et al. 2013) by illustrating why kin are important audiences for the couple’s display. Additionally, the analysis extends these insights by demonstrating the continuing importance of friends in members of sexual minorities’ lives (Weeks et al. 2001, Weston 1997), which with a few exceptions (Smart 2007a, Heaphy et al. 2013) has been overlooked in these studies. The chapter begins by outlining how Pahl and Spencer’s (2004) concept of ‘specialised roles’ and Finch and Mason’s (1993) concepts of ‘relational histories’ and ‘family responsibilities’ were used as conceptual lenses to analyse the significance of who was the intended recipient of the display.

Who participants prioritised as the recipient of their display was generationally distinctive. The first group of stories were narrated by older couples (in their mid-40s to mid-60s) who had been partners for over a decade and tended to view becoming civil partners as
‘practical’. Friends were prioritised as audiences because they were conceived as capable of interpreting and supporting the meaning participants were intending to convey about the ‘practical’ civil partnership ceremony. In such cases, avoiding announcing to kin was a way of bypassing ‘family responsibilities’ to accommodate kin’s expectations that the ceremony should look like a wedding.

Younger couples (in their 30s and early-40s) perceived their decision to become civil partners in terms of participating in the ‘rite of passage’ (Heaphy and Einarsdottir 2012: 5) of getting married. Conventionally these rituals require that family members are present to witness the couple’s display of commitment. Thus kin were prioritised in their thoughts as an audience who should receive this news. Interviewees’ narratives, however, conveyed that displaying to this audience was not an option evenly available to all these participants. The second group of narrators felt able to tell family of their news. I argue that kin were prioritised for the couple’s display because it made these younger narrators’ ordinariness a reality (Berger and Kellner 1964, Finch 2007: 79). Additionally, being able to display to family has broader significance because it illustrates how publicising the decision to become civil partners has the potential to unsettle their relatives’ heteronormative thinking.

The third group of narrators, for example, wanted to announce to relatives but acknowledged how asking kin to witness the couple publicly formalising their display of commitment would probably exacerbate tensions and disrupt fragile bonds with relatives who had not coped well with their child’s/siblings’ sexual orientation. In such cases, friends became important audiences to the news of the couple’s decision to become civil partners.

**Announcing to significant others (family and friends)**

‘Relationships with family members’ are a prominent theme in the arguments of scholars who advocated the introduction of legal recognition and in the findings of empirical studies that have explored same-sex couples’ experiences of becoming civil partners.
Sullivan (1995) and Eskridge Jr (2002) theorised that participating in the couple’s wedding ceremony would allow kin and acquaintances to witness the couple’s commitment and love for each other which could lead to these others viewing same-sex partners as ‘normal’ and not ‘deviant’. Holding such a perception might eventually bring an end to discrimination against sexual minorities. Respondents who took part in studies conducted by Lewin (1998), Ellis (2007), Jowett and Peel (2007), Smart (2007a), Goodwin and Butler (2009), Peel (2009) and Heaphy et al. (2013) reported that they had prioritised telling their relatives the news that they had decided to publicly formalise their relationship. Such an observation illustrates how formalising a same-sex relationship can impact on familial relationships which partially support Sullivan’s (1995) and Eskridge Jr’s (2002) theoretical claims that gay marriage could stimulate dialogue with kin. The findings from these studies however, demonstrate that people’s relationships with family are far more complex than Sullivan (1995) and Eskridge Jr (2002) originally assumed. Thus these studies do not support these theorists’ predictions that inviting kin to participate in the wedding would ‘strengthen’ these familial bonds. For instance, Peel (2009) and Goodwin and Butler (2009) noted that kin reacted in a variety of ways to the couples’ news. Participants’ recollections of relatives’ responses illustrated they were particularly invested and expected kin to react positively and were particularly upset or disappointed when they did not elicit a response that celebrated or affirmed their decision to get married (Ellis 2007, Jowett and Peel 2007).

Academics such as Lewin (1998), Shipman and Smart (2007), Smart (2007a) and Heaphy et al. (2013) have given detailed attention to the interactions that are activated in the moment when couples break the news to their family: highlighting for instance, the impact that the couple’s announcement can have on familial relationships, the complex decisions that are involved in inviting guests, and efforts to involve kin in commitment ceremonies, blessings, civil unions, and civil partnerships. Of these, Smart’s (2007a: 683) analysis is particularly noteworthy because she illuminates the complex dynamics and relational negotiations that
are activated by inviting relatives to participate in an event such as civil partnership. She explains that when family members receive such an invitation, it can trigger family members’ sense of duty and responsibility to each other (see also Finch and Mason 1993).

An invitation to a civil partnership calls upon kin to engage more directly with the couple’s sexual orientation and the public display of their same-sex relationship (see also Almack’s 2011 discussion on displaying lesbian parenthood). Kin, therefore, in their efforts to recognise their ‘family responsibilities’ (Finch and Mason 1993), may be required to confront prejudices that might ordinarily be glossed over in order that they might attend the couple’s ceremony (Smart 2007a: 683).

The prioritisation of family members as recipients for the couple’s announcement indicates that these respondents felt they could tell relatives of their changing circumstances. Consequently, relatively little attention has been given to the issue of who sexual minorities turn to at this moment in their lives when their familial relationships are damaged. Studies by scholars such as Lewin (1998), Smart (2007a) and Heaphy et al. (2013) included lesbians and gay men who reported that their familial relationships were particularly strained because their relatives demonstrated an inability to cope with their son’s/daughter’s or sibling’s sexual orientation. In such cases, their participants said they told friends of their decision to formalise their relationship. It was evident that ‘friends’ were significant relationships in their participants’ lives which echoed the findings from studies such as Weeks et al. (2001) and Weston (1997) conducted in the 1980s and mid-1990s that observed how friendship families came to be the most significant relationships in non-heterosexual people’s lives where they had become estranged from families-of-origin (see also chapter 2).

Similar to these findings, my participants also prioritised ‘friends’ or ‘family’ as the audiences for their displays (of formalising their relationship). The subsequent analysis
contributes to the existing scholarship by exploring the processes of who couples decide to inform when they become civil partners through to its conclusion (e.g. who couples plan to tell and who they eventually tell). Next, I discuss the conceptual tools I used to follow the couple’s decision-making process about who they selected as the audience for their display (decision to become civil partners).

‘Specialised roles’, ‘relational histories’ and ‘family responsibilities’

In their discussion of ‘personal communities’, Pahl and Spencer (2004: 215) identified that the roles family and friends assumed in their participants’ ‘personal communities’ could be plotted on a spectrum. At one end of the spectrum were ‘specialised’ personal communities where the roles that family and friends play were distinct and had clear boundaries. They noticed, for example, that their participants interacted ‘with friends and family in very different ways’ (Pahl and Spencer 2004: 215). They also described ‘very suffused communities’ occupying the other end of the spectrum, which comprised ‘some family and friends’ assuming ‘rather similar roles’ (Pahl and Spencer 2004: 215). This notion that family and friends might be assigned specialised roles, helped me to make sense of a generationally themed pattern that emerged from the data in terms of who narrators prioritised as the audiences for their display. For example, older participants (those in their mid-40s to mid-60s) tended to prioritise friends as recipients for the couple’s news, while younger couples (in their 30s and early 40s) planned to tell family first. Just as narrators viewed civil partnership as capable of meeting the couple’s current relationship needs that corresponded with where they were in the relational life-course (see chapter 5), it also seemed that they perceived different audiences (e.g. friends or family) as better suited for affirming the particular displays they were trying to convey about becoming civil partners.

While younger narrators indicated that they wanted to display their decision to become civil partners to family, this was not an option evenly available to them all. This constituted
a second pattern where some younger couples planned that the audience to receive their display would be family, and proceeded to narrate how they told certain relatives. In contrast, other younger narrators aspired to tell kin but proceeded to explain why friends were instead selected as the audience for the couple’s display. To make sense of this second pattern, I used Finch and Mason’s (1993) concepts of ‘relational histories’ and ‘family responsibilities’. Finch and Mason (1993: 164) argue that there is not a straightforward link between ‘genealogical relationships’ and ‘the kind of support’ that is given to an individual. Instead, they claim that relatives’ responsibilities towards one another and expectations over whether they should assist each other develop over time and are created through a series of reciprocal interactions between individuals (Finch and Mason 1993: 167). Their view challenges a common misconception that relatives adhere to fixed ‘rules of obligation’ (Finch and Mason 1993: 166). Nonetheless, they note the power of ‘the family’ in people’s imaginations, in that ‘people want to see themselves as part of a family that “works” at least at a minimal level and make some effort to ensure that it does’ (Finch and Mason, 1993: 171).

The notion of ‘family responsibility’ and the idea of being part of a family that “works” helped explain the experiences of the younger narrators who proceeded to display to family. These younger narrators on occasion spoke at considerable length about the negotiations and efforts that both the interviewee and their family members undertook. The interviewees recognised their responsibility to kin by displaying the news sensitively and, in turn, how their displaying to family resulted in the triggering of family members’ responsibilities to the participant to produce the right kind of response to the couple’s display, thereby showing they are a family that “works”. The concepts of ‘relational histories’ and ‘family responsibilities’ were also valuable for explaining cases where younger narrators avoided announcing to kin and instead displayed the news to their friends. In these stories, interviewees’ relationships with family members had been badly ruptured
because of relatives’ inability to cope with the interviewees’ sexual orientation. In some instances this meant participants did not feel it was appropriate to turn to kin to tell them of this news, especially given that it was their sexual orientation that had caused this disruption. Participants, therefore, by not announcing to family were exercising their responsibilities to kin to not disrupt or exacerbate tensions about publicly formalising their relationship.

The remainder of the chapter explores the stories that narrators told about selecting an audience for their display that they were about to become civil partners.

**Specialised roles of friends: avoiding displays to family**

The first group of stories about displaying the couple’s decision to become civil partners was told by 11 interviewees. These participants narrated how they had prioritised friends as the audience for the couple's display. In five cases, interviewees described how ‘close’ friends had been selected to fulfil ‘specialised roles’ (Pahl and Spencer 2004: 215) which predominately took the form of friends acting as witnesses at the couple’s civil partnership ceremonies. Rachel (64) for example, said ‘just a couple came, friends of mine from childhood and were our witnesses’. Similarly, Benjamin (61) mentioned that he had invited two friends to be the witnesses at his and his late partner Bert’s civil partnership. These 11 participants were in their mid-40s to their mid-60s, the length of their relationship ranged from around a decade to just over three decades and they had all decided to have a civil partnership for either ‘protective’ or ‘practical’ reasons (see chapter 5). They were of an age and at a point in their relationship where they did not feel it was necessary to mark their becoming civil partners with emotive and ‘demonstrative’ gestures in front of kin. The following extract from Simon (53) was fairly typical of such ‘protective’ decisions:

> I was worried that if anything happened to me – they [his relatives] might try and make a claim on what is rightfully Jeffery’s … I want this sewn up ... and the same with Jeffery. He just wanted everything to be water tight in terms of our life – and that’s why we did it. So it wasn’t out of an emotional
type of ‘we want to be married’. Because as far as we were concerned we’ve been married since we met.

Two cases are presented next which focus on narrators’ explanations of how and why friends came to be prioritised as the audience for the couple’s display. In both cases, narrators begin with a clear ‘demarcation’ of the roles that friends and family are to play in their forthcoming civil partnership ceremonies (Pahl and Spencer 2004: 215). Interacting with friends and family differently at this time was perceived as necessary in order to convey certain meanings about becoming civil partners and to differentiate it from a wedding.

In the first case, Gerald (51) explained how he and Jack, his partner of 24 years, had taken ‘a close friend of mine’ and his friend’s civil partner to the ‘Town hall in Northeast City’ to witness the couple’s civil partnership. In the extract below, Gerald recalls how he and Jack presented themselves at their civil partnership ceremony:

We didn’t really think about it until the day ... and [registrar] said we have got a few sentences that you can say. And we said ‘oh we can say those?’ And it was just ‘we’re doing this as a marker of our commitment today’ and I can’t remember the exact words, but it was something like that. So to me whilst it wasn’t a big emotional day. It was still quite emotional – ‘in yeah, that’s it’, we’ve got what we want and this is just us quietly, we live our lives together. We don’t need a big show…it’s the legals, it’s the protections.

The couple registered their partnership for ‘the legals’ and ‘the protections’. The decision to formalise their relationship corresponds with the couple’s display at their ceremony. The approach the couple took to becoming civil partners was understated, they ‘didn’t think about it till the day’, and the couple did not ‘need a big show’ to celebrate the formalisation of their relationship. Their perspective on the ceremony resembled the ‘minimalist’ type of ceremonies that some of Smart’s (2008) participants planned. Having two friends present and fulfilling the purpose of witnessing their ceremony allows the couple to achieve their display that they were becoming civil partners for ‘the legals’ and ‘the protections’ that civil partnership can offer their relationship.
This first couple appeared to have the kind of ceremony that suited their personal and relationship needs and as such avoided involving family in their ceremony. The next quote from Gerald focuses on informing his parents that the couple have registered their partnership and seems to read as an ‘account’ (Scott and Lyman 1968) where he ‘justifies’ his actions of not including family in their ceremony:

Then the next day and went to visit my parents. And ‘oh by the way, I’ve got something to tell you’. My mother looked at me. And I said ‘don’t worry it’s nothing bad’. And I said ‘yesterday me and Jack, we did our civil partnership’. And I said ‘I don’t want you to get upset, we didn’t want any do’s, no troubles, you know no four weddings and a funeral and a fight and all that’

In Gerald’s conversation with his mother, he makes reference to wanting to avoid the dramas that are depicted in the 1994 romantic comedy Four Weddings and a Funeral. Weddings and funerals among other key life events are conventionally considered to be events that require the participation of large gatherings of family and friends. Gerald hints that organising such events means the planner is expected to provide entertainment or put on a ‘do’ (party) which could be expensive, time intensive and emotionally time-consuming. Furthermore, the organiser of such events has the unenviable task of carefully bringing together a constellation of people from different kin networks and friendship groups (Oswald 2002: 328, Mason and Muir 2012: 2.3) who have potentially never met and may never see each other again. These types of situations require people to interact with others with whom they may be only vaguely acquainted, while close friends and relatives may feel coerced into making ‘small talk’ with others not in their social milieu. He also points out he wants to avoid ‘fights’, which may be ignited by the tense atmosphere of such social gatherings. It is implied that inviting family to be present at the ceremony would require the additional accoutrements that come with a wedding which would have been incompatible with their visions of a low-key ‘practical’ ceremony. As he stated earlier, the couple did ‘not need a big show’ and viewed becoming civil partners as about ‘the legals and the protections’. Nevertheless, the fact that Gerald felt he needed to ‘account’ for his
actions to his mother suggests that he is aware that his family might perceive the event of the couple formalising their relationship differently; as an occasion that family should have been present for. By justifying their exclusion perhaps implicitly he is acknowledging some ‘responsibilities’ to family members in managing any tensions that might arise among relatives.

In the second case, Luke (53) and Robert (43) also viewed their decision to become civil partners as ‘practical’. Luke’s experience of a health ‘scare’ meant he regarded having a civil partnership as a way of ensuring Robert had next-of-kin status and legal protections in case Luke’s health deteriorated in the future (see chapter 5). They had chosen their witnesses ‘who were some friends who lived in Northwest city; Robert’s friends from way back, Eric and Belinda’. Their ceremonial plans were also low-key and resembled their decision that civil partnership was meeting the couple’s ‘practical’ needs. Luke described how he displayed the couple’s intention to become civil partners to his grown-up kids:

I’d mentioned it to my kids …well I’d mentioned it in a nonchalant manner – that it was just going to be signing for a mortgage – it’s not going to be any big deal, we’re not having a party.

The display was delivered in a casual ‘nonchalant manner’: becoming civil partners, he had said, was like ‘signing for a mortgage’, was no ‘big deal’ and there were no plans for a ‘party’. The use of these phrases allow him to display that this is a ‘practical’ event and also works to ‘justify’ (Scott and Lyman 1968) the ‘demarcation of roles’ (Pahl and Spencer 2004: 215), where friends had been invited to be witnesses at the couple’s ceremony while family had not been invited. Luke then narrated how the couple travelled to Northwest city to ask Eric and Belinda to be the couple’s witnesses. This is how Eric and Belinda reacted to the couple’s display:

Luke: so we went up to Northwest city to see Eric and Belinda. Belinda virtually leapt on Robert and said “yes, yes, yes!” and we four of us got horrendously drunk. But during that conversation Eric suggested well “what about your family?” and we said “what about them?” [Eric replied] “Well are you not going to involve them?” and I said “no, why?” and we told them
we’d mentioned it to Becca [Luke’s daughter] … Eric convinced us that we needed to speak to our families.

Getting ‘horrendously drunk’ provides the conditions for an influential conversation where Eric questioned why Luke’s and Robert’s relatives did not have a role in the couple’s civil partnership. Such an enquiry suggests that Eric views the opportunity to have a civil partnership differently from Luke and Robert, envisaging it as an important celebration that should involve close family (Wolin and Bennett 1984 and Oswald 2002). Following this exchange, Luke and Robert are reminded of their ‘responsibilities’ to family (Finch and Mason 1993) and Luke explains that they were ‘convinced’ by Eric that they should involve family in formalising their relationship. Consequently, the couple revised their ‘practical’ ceremonial plans: family and close friends were invited to attend the ceremony. Following the registration of their partnership, they had a formal dinner and speeches which allowed both family and friends to celebrate the couple becoming civil partners. Eric’s interaction with the couple’s display is of particular note in Luke’s quote above. It nicely illustrates Finch’s (2007: 76) point that display is interactive and that a single actor is unable to exert exclusive control over how others’ interpret their display. The repercussions of the conversation with Eric find Luke and Robert revising their low-key ceremonial plans so that they include family and demonstrate that their initial display about becoming civil partners has been altered because of their friend’s interaction with their display.

Gerald’s and Luke’s experiences of having to negotiate family and their ceremonial plans, allow me to address some theoretical claims about the transformative potential of civil partnership ceremonies. Academics such as Warner (1999) and Kimport (2012) anticipated that same-sex partners as newcomers to state approved commitments would have the freedom and flexibility to depart from conventional heteronormative wedding scripts when organising their ceremonies. The challenges that these participants faced when they displayed their decision to become civil partners to family and friends illustrates how same-
sex partners are not immune from heteronormative wedding scripts when organising their ceremonies. It is by recognising or being reminded of their ‘responsibilities’ to family that these norms are able to embed themselves in their ceremonial plans. By prioritising their personal desires, and having the kind of ceremony that resembles their decision to become civil partners, this has the potential to place them in a position where they might be accused of neglecting their ‘responsibilities’ to family. This is because of deeply embedded norms that weddings are traditionally the domain of kin.

These 11 narrators ‘prioritised’ friends as the audiences for their display because they had decided to have a civil partnership for ‘practical’ or ‘protective’ reasons. The narratives they told about their ceremonial plans emphasised that kin were excluded from their ceremonial plans because their involvement had the potential to alter the meanings couples were trying to convey about becoming civil partners. Many of these narrators had ‘close’ bonds with their relatives and there was no suggestion that they avoided displaying their decision to relatives because they thought that the public formalisation of their same-sex relationship would upset their family members’ feelings. This was a reason that the third group of younger narrators gave for avoiding displaying to family, to be discussed later in the chapter. Next I turn to the second group of participants’ narratives and explore the significance of why they prioritised kin as the audience for the couple’s display.

**Specialised roles of family: the significance of kin involvement in this occasion**

Thirteen interviewees had prioritised family members as the audience to whom they would display that they were going to become civil partners. Maria’s (39) example exemplified this:

Maria: Selena was out since she was 17 but she never told her granddad she was gay...everyone knew. When she came back from country and we were engaged, her mum said to Selena “you need to tell your granddad because you are getting married”. And he came over. So we sat down and just having a chat. Then suddenly Selena stands up in the middle of the room... she said “granddad”, and everyone went absolutely quiet. And it was such a strange time. And he said “yes sweetheart”... “you know Maria?” [He replied] “yes, sweetheart”, [she said] “well, is not just my friend...she’s my
girlfriend, and she’s asked me to marry her, and I have said yes, and so we are engaged”.

Others proudly produced photographs during the interview that featured the couple and their parents taken at their civil partnership. These photographs were used to support stories that they had prioritised family as the audience for the couple’s display. The following examples demonstrate this:

Sebastian (38) ‘and this is us with our mums’
Maria (39) ‘this is a photo of us with both our sets of parents, with Selena’s mum and step-dad and my mum and dad’.

These 13 interviewees were aged in their early 30s through to their mid-40s. The length of their relationship ranged from three years to over two decades, although most participants (n=7) had been partners for eight years or less. I illustrated in previous chapters (4 and 5) that younger narrators have accrued a sense of themselves as ‘ordinary’ and as no different from heterosexual couples. For instance, in chapter 4 I discussed how the socio-cultural and historical climate that these participants have inhabited, and the kinds of messages they were exposed to when they came to make sense of their sexual orientation, meant they mostly viewed themselves as ‘ordinary’. In chapter 5 I pointed out how many of these interviewees had adopted ‘romantic repertoires’ to publicly display their decision for having a civil partnership.

My examination of these participants’ stories (where narrators gave considerable attention to how they displayed their decision to family members) led me to identify that these younger participants’ sense of ordinariness could not be accomplished by themselves (Finch 2007: 79). In order for younger interviewees’ perceptions of themselves as ‘ordinary’ to be a reality, they needed to display their ordinariness ‘successfully’ (Finch 2007: 79). A ‘successful’ display is where the audience, in this case family members, would verify and affirm the meanings the couples were trying to convey about becoming civil partners.
The role that these family members are required to play brings to mind Berger and Kellner’s (1964: 16) notion of the ‘supporting chorus’. Berger and Kellner (1964: 16) explained that the individuals who are involved in the couple’s wedding become the ‘supporting chorus for the central dramatic action. Children, friends, relatives and casual acquaintances all have their part in reinforcing the tenuous structure of the new reality’. Family and friends are conventional audiences at weddings who ordinarily accompany the couple as they participate in the ‘rite of passage’ of getting married (Heaphy and Einarsdottir 2012: 5). Being reliant on others to confirm their ordinariness helps explain why family members were called upon to assume ‘specialised roles’ (Pahl and Spencer 2004: 215) and were prioritised as the audience for the couple’s display.

A good example of how family members were called upon to verify the couple’s display is found in Alison’s (32) narrative. Her story focuses sharply on how her mum reacted to the news that she and her partner of eight years Kate (36) were to become civil partners in the autumn of 2007. Alison explains how becoming civil partners was perceived as meeting the couple’s current relationship needs:

Alison: I don’t know whether you’re going to get a job in the US and I don’t know if we are going to end up living apart for a year, and if we end up living apart for a year, will we stay together? Rather than saying I don’t know what’s going to happen, let’s say we do know what’s going to happen… that to me was the moment that I was like, ‘Yep, let’s get civil partnered’

In the autumn of 2007, neither Kate nor Alison enjoyed the security of permanent or secure employment. Alison had been ‘temping’ as a secretary and Kate was on a temporary contract at a university in the North of England. The fact that both partners were simultaneously trying to establish a career was exerting considerable strain on their relationship. Alison’s narrative above suggests that having a civil partnership brought some semblance of certainty into their lives and was a way that the couple could display their continued commitment to each other. Kate said that ‘planning’ their civil partnership for
the summer of 2008, gave the couple ‘something nice to focus on’ and alleviated the uncertainties and pressures of trying to secure work. The process of planning a wedding or a civil partnership ordinarily involves telling significant others of the change in the couple’s circumstances and, as Berger and Kellner (1964: 17) explain, involves various others ‘supporting’ the protagonists who are at the centre of the unfolding drama of getting married. Alison’s mother’s reaction to the couple’s display had quite a significant impact on the couple’s perception of their civil partnership:

Alison: I was going home to look after her for a week […] I thought this would be a good chance to tell her about the civil partnership and if she […] found it difficult, I could explain it to her and actually I thought it would just be a case of that, because at that stage she was just saying “yeah, yeah I’m over it, so it’s all fine. I love Kate, she’s brilliant. This is all good. I understand what’s going on”. Told her we were getting civil partnered and she went back into freak out mode, and said ‘I really don’t understand why you are doing this. I don’t understand why you need to do this’. ‘What this is for? What the point is? While my mum was still in that mood…we didn’t really tell many friends

Kate: I was feeling angry and upset as well because whenever we talked about it, Alison would get upset…and the one thing that should have been happy, the civil partnership that was a celebration of us…and whenever we talked about it Alison would get upset and cry rather than excited.

A significant feature of this narrative extract is how the couple both comment on how eliciting this response had the effect of distorting the couple’s perception that planning their civil partnership was something to look forward to, and for a time damaged the ‘reality’ of their display (see also discussion in Heaphy et al. 2013).

Embedded in the recollection of Alison’s mother’s reaction is an implicit expectation that Alison’s mother had a moral responsibility to be sensitive in her reaction to her daughter’s news and that her mother should be prioritising Alison’s feelings over her own. Had the couple’s display been ‘successfully’ interpreted by her mum, then Alison’s mother would have probably been pleased for the couple. A remark by Finch and Mason (1993: 168) is quite useful for making sense of the couple’s expectation. They have pointed out how there is a societal assumption (supported by policy and legislation) that commitments between parents and children will develop in such a way that parents should take
‘responsibility for the ... emotional welfare of their children’ (Finch and Mason 1993: 168). Earlier in Alison’s story, she had mentioned how her mother had reacted quite badly when Alison had told her she was a ‘lesbian’. The extract above indicates that Alison was under the impression that her mother had resolved her conflicting emotions about her daughter’s lesbian identity because her mum had appeared to display acceptance of the couple’s same-sex relationship. The couple’s announcement of commitment to each other, however, informs Alison’s mother that Alison’s non-heterosexual orientation is not a temporary phase she would grow out of (Oswald 2002, Shipman and Smart 2007, Smart 2007a). This produces the challenging reaction which indicates to the couple that she has not resolved her conflicting emotions about her daughter’s lesbian identity.

Alison’s mother did eventually form part of the ‘supporting chorus’ for the couple’s display (Berger and Kellner 1964: 16). Alison intimates that her mother had been given time and space to work through her emotions, and time to adjust and negotiate ‘conflicting feelings or principles’ (Smart 2007a: 768). The following narrative from Alison recalls a particularly ‘nice’ conversation she had with her mother in the lead up to the couple’s civil partnership:

Alison: I do remember one time when there was one very nice conversation with my mum where we kind of got to really sit down and actually talk about … what all of our plans were, because she did say … ‘she didn't know what was happening’. And so we sat down and told her all of what our plans were, and I said … ‘I've been thinking that we'd invite my aunts and my uncles' and a couple of my mum's best friends, and she said ‘ooh, that’s good, that's exactly who I've got on my list. Who I would like to come’

That Alison, Kate and Alison’s mother were able to sit down and discuss the couple’s plans for their civil partnership expresses that feelings of rejection and hurt caused by her mother’s unpleasant reaction had subsided. We learn that it is Alison’s mother who instigates the discussion about the couple’s plans because she ‘didn't know what was happening’. Alison’s mother’s request to ‘tell her their plans’, signals to Alison that her mother has now ‘worked through’ her initial shock at their news. Alison’s mother approves of the choice of guests by saying that she had these people on her ‘list’. This disclosure
that she had drawn up a list conveys to Alison that her mother ‘accepts’ the couple’s changing circumstances.

Alison expected her relatives to be supportive when she broke the news of her intention to register her partnership. Similar to the findings reported in Jowett and Peel (2007) and Ellis (2007), Alison expressed disappointment when she did not elicit a response that celebrated or affirmed her decision to get married. By examining Alison’s account of displaying to family in detail, I have been able to verify that how kin reacted to the couple’s announcement matters, and have simultaneously extended these insights by demonstrating why relatives’ reactions mattered. It transpired that relatives’ reactions could affirm, or disrupt, the reality of the meanings the couple were aiming to convey. With this case, I have illustrated that this second group of participants were of an age and point in their relationships where it was conventional to participate in the ‘rite of passage’ of getting married. In order to participate in this conventional marker of adulthood (Sullivan 1995, Warner 1999), however, Alison needed her relatives (who are conventional guests at weddings) to support the reality of the meanings they were aiming to convey.

Alison’s narrative of the impact that her announcement had on her relatives, and their experiences of negotiating and ‘working out’ their responsibilities to each other, is potentially important for addressing and evaluating the theoretical predictions made by Eskridge Jr (2002). Eskridge Jr (2002) postulated how attending a same-sex couple’s wedding ceremony would allow kin and the couple’s acquaintances to witness the partners’ love and commitment for each other, which could eventually lead to these others viewing same-sex partners as ‘normal’ and not ‘deviant’. He claimed that holding such a perception might eventually bring an end to discrimination against sexual minorities. Alison’s narrative of displaying to family, and how their relatives responded to the couple’s display, illuminated how their family members’ heteronormative thinking (i.e. that only opposite-
sex partners can marry) was challenged. This disruption to their thinking is potentially an important step towards ending discrimination against sexual minorities. The context in which the display occurred and the relationship with their audience is significant. Inviting kin to be the audience for the couple’s display activated a series of negotiations where relatives were reminded of their responsibilities and eventually, in these cases, relatives affirmed the meanings that Alison was aiming to display about becoming civil partners. Thus, relatives were being invited to affirm the reality of this participants’ display. This does not necessarily mean that Alison’s mother will from this point forward view all sexual minorities as ‘ordinary’ and as no different than opposite-sex couples. This therefore may not bring the end to discrimination that Eskridge Jr (2002) anticipated. Displaying to kin was not an opportunity that was evenly available for all of these younger participants. Therefore, the focus of the third group of display stories to be discussed next examines how friends played a significant role as the audience for the couples’ display.

**Specialised role of friends: when kin relationships don’t work**

There were a further five interviewees (aged in their mid-30s to early 40s) who had also prioritised family members in their thoughts as the audience to whom they wanted to display their decision because they viewed their civil partnership as a wedding. Unlike the previous group of narrators, this third group of interviewees had not felt able to display the couple’s decision to formalise their relationship to kin. The example provided by Gillian (36) exemplified this:

Gillian: it’s been six years of very difficult conversations. But we’re at the point now where we can sleep under the same roof and they recognise that we are married, and have joint surnames. You know they keep their opinions out of it because they know it’s more bother than it’s worth.
Michelle: it was a shame though that they didn’t come to the wedding
Gillian: I didn’t invite them because they would not have come
Michelle: yeah
Gillian: because they don’t approve
Similar to Gillian’s experience above, the reason these narrators gave for not displaying to family members was because they perceived their relational bond with their parents had been disrupted when the interviewee had ‘come out’. It was for this reason that narrators selected friends rather than family to fulfil the ‘specialised role’ (Pahl and Spencer 2004: 215) of the audience for the couple’s display.

Christopher (42) provided the following ‘account’ (Scott and Lyman 1968) which ‘justifies’ why his family were discounted as a suitable audience for his display:

Christopher: I could see them [his family] saying “well I thought I’d always be there on this day”. And with family members I said “this wasn’t the type of day you’d imagined anyway. I stand there and get married to a guy”.... And the reason I picked Toby [friend] for best man, because I’d known him for such a long time and he would value, because he is also gay and has done a lot of fighting for gay rights he would value the experience more... and I needed someone who was quite strong and who was very supportive about what I’d chosen and he was sort of an obvious choice.

Christopher justifies avoiding displaying to his family because he anticipates that his kin would not be entirely comfortable with the event. Such a disclosure makes Christopher’s decision to avoid inviting his parents intelligible to his reader (see Riessman 2008: 3, Holstein and Gubrium 2000: 113). We come to understand that Christopher’s family were not invited because he did not think they would be completely supportive of the couple’s display when getting married (see also discussion in Almack 2011: 110). The second part of Christopher’s narrative justifies why his friend Toby was selected to be the audience for the couple’s display. Toby would appreciate participating in the couple’s wedding, as a gay man, and someone who had fought for gay rights. He also states that Toby would be genuinely supportive of the couple’s decision to marry (Weeks et al. 2001: 59).

The second case from Laura (36) and Meg (36) illustrates how arriving at the decision where friends were selected for the couple’s display rather than family could be painful and difficult:

Laura: family has always been a sticking point
Meg: oh yeah
Laura: that’s the other thing to mention
Meg: yes, that’s always been a bit of a spanner in the works. When we’d talked about it previously, it had always been really difficult...that we’ve got all of our wonderfully supportive gay friends and our straight friends who’ve just been absolutely wonderful and have been our family, and the people we would go to with any problems and you know would be really pleased for us and share our successes...we couldn’t make it work with whether or not we’d invite your family, how they would be.
Laura: my family would have gone one of two ways. But I really didn’t know. It would either have been, my mum would have been devastated. Yeah, or they would have come and she would have been a pain in the arse [whispered]

This narrative illustrates the couple working out their responsibilities to kin (Finch and Mason 1993) and justifying why they did not display their decision to their relatives. Earlier in the couple’s story, they had explained that even though they have been partners for over 13 years, Laura’s mother has not accepted her daughter’s lesbian identity and relationship. When the couple are in the presence of Laura’s mum and dad for instance, they refer to Meg as Laura’s ‘friend’. Reaching the decision to not inform either partner’s parents of the couple’s changing circumstances had emerged because of the uncertainty surrounding how Laura’s mother would react to the couple’s display and how she would act on the day of their ceremony (Lewin 1998: 64, Smart 2007a: 677). They convey to their reader that not informing Laura’s mum demonstrates them acknowledging their responsibility and sensitivity towards their relatives’ feelings (Finch and Mason 1993). Not selecting kin as the audience for their display meant they avoided aggravating already fragile bonds with Laura’s mum. In addition, not displaying to her mum meant they could be assured of achieving a positive atmosphere at the couple’s wedding. Nevertheless, it was apparent that arriving at such a conclusion had not been easy; the tensions and emotional discomfort that these issues caused the couple were palpable in this story. These difficult negotiations are similarly echoed in other studies (see Smart 2007a) which also found that tough ‘choices’ are often made. These choices meant excluding people from attending the ceremony or celebrations out of consideration rather than maliciousness or spite, and came from a need to avoid exacerbating tense relationships (Smart 2007: 652).
I suggest that Laura’s anticipation of her mother’s reaction to the couple’s display is a significant observation as it encouraged them to select a different audience for their display. This is because it highlights how there is a modicum of ‘planning’ involved in displaying non-heterosexual orientations and relationships.

Another important part of Laura’s and Meg’s narrative concerns the important role of their friends as the audience for their display. Their narrative is constructed in such a way that it highlights how the couple’s relationships with friends present a stark contrast to the relationships that the couple have with Laura’s family. Meg’s description of how their gay and straight friends have, over time, undertaken the roles that their family-of-origin are ‘imagined’ to provide (Finch and Mason 1993: 171), resonates with the findings from an older body of scholarship (Weeks 2001, Weston 1997, see also chapter 2). Meg’s description of her supportive friends, who they are able to turn to with ‘problems’ and ‘successes’, echoes the stories that non-heterosexual people told about their friendship families nearly two decades ago in 1995 to Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan (2001: 59). The role that friends play at this time of members of sexual minorities’ lives was noticeably absent from most of the recent scholarship (with the exception of Smart 2007a, Heaphy et al. 2013) which has explored the impact of becoming civil partners (see chapter 2). There is an important message embedded in these narratives, which is that sometimes relationships with kin ‘don’t work’ evenly or equally, for everyone all of the time (Finch and Mason 1993) and they illustrate that transformations in social attitudes about sexual minorities over the past twenty years have not permeated into all interactions.

**Conclusion**

The aim of this chapter has been to explore the relational significance that the availability of civil partnership has on interviewees’ relationships with significant others. This was achieved by analysing the significance of who the couple selected as the audience (e.g. friends or family) to receive their display. This analysis has allowed me to delve deeper into
the processes of Finch’s (2007) concept of ‘display’. By analysing who narrators prioritised as the audience for the couple’s display, I have been able to highlight the important role that the audience takes in this process. For example, people ‘plan’ and tailor their displays (meanings they are conveying) to suit particular audiences. Additionally, whether an audience is actually selected for the display depends on how they are anticipated to react. I have also verified Finch’s (2007: 67) point that ‘audiences’ to the display are not ‘passive’.

In the case of Luke and Robert, we saw how their friends resisted and modified the meanings the couple were trying to convey about becoming civil partners. While Luke and Robert did not view their civil partnership as an event that warranted the involvement of kin, their friends did think family should be involved. As a consequence, their display was modified.

Pahl and Spencer’s (2004) concept of ‘specialised roles’ helped me to make sense of the generational distinction in the data, where for example, older couples (mid-40s through to mid-60s) tended to prioritise friends as the audience for their display, because they anticipated that this audience would support the meanings participants were aiming to convey about their ‘practical’ civil partnership ceremony. In contrast, younger interviewees’ (early 30s through to mid-40s) planned to direct their display at family because this audience could support the reality they were aiming to convey about participating in the ‘rite of passage’ of getting married. The deployment of Finch and Mason’s (1993) concepts of ‘relational histories’ and ‘family responsibilities’ was valuable for understanding who younger narrators eventually prioritised as the audience for their display. These tools aided the conceptualisation of the complex relational repercussions on relationships with kin that were activated by announcing their intention to have a civil partnership.
The analysis presented in this chapter complements and extends the existing scholarship in various ways. Eskridge Jr’s (2002) predictions that involving kin in wedding ceremonies could be a route to break down the barriers that contribute to sexual minorities being cast into the role as the ‘other’, and could transform social attitudes about lesbian and gay people, were both confirmed and challenged by the stories my participants told about their experiences of displaying their decision to kin. In cases where narrators’ displayed their decision to kin, we were able to see how certain relatives’ heteronormative thinking was disrupted. This was because the announcement encouraged kin on some level to engage with changing societal representations of sexual minorities and demonstrated that getting married is no longer something that only opposite sex partners do. Making such announcements to kin was far from straightforward, however, and involved considerable negotiations and reminders to kin of their responsibilities to each other.

Younger interviewees acknowledged their responsibility to kin by not informing relatives of their decision to marry. The reason for this was that displaying their decision to publicly formalise their same-sex relationship could possibly aggravate fragile bonds with relatives who had not coped well with their child’s/sibling’s sexual orientation. On these occasions when friends were prioritised as the audience for the couple’s display, the importance of friends was shown, as friends continue to have an important role in sexual minorities’ lives when familial bonds are strained. Such an observation resonates with, and shows that the findings from older scholarship (Weeks et al. 2001 and Weston 1997) are still relevant even though the socio-cultural and historical climate in which earlier research was conducted bears little resemblance to the contemporary context. This particular group of stories have broader significance in that they serve to highlight that liberalisation of attitudes to sexual minorities has not had an even impact on the everyday lives of these civil partners. Their experiences show how their family members are not willing to accept lesbian and gay
people as ‘ordinary’ and still consider sexual minorities as ‘different’ from heterosexual relationships.

The next chapter further develops the notion that audiences can influence displays. I expand this idea by examining civil partners’ narratives of whether and how they display their same-sex relationship in face-to-face encounters with acquaintances and strangers in different situations.
Chapter 7 Displaying to Acquaintances and Strangers

Introduction

The previous chapter explored the significance of who interviewees prioritised and selected to be the recipient of the couple’s display of their decision to become civil partners (e.g. family or friends). Chapter seven departs from discussions about interactions with family and friendship audiences and instead focuses on whether, when and how civil partners display their same-sex relationship in face-to-face encounters with non-familial audiences (acquaintances and strangers). The generational theme that has been an explicit feature of the analysis in the previous three data chapters is more subtle in this chapter. This is intentional because the discussion that is developed here explores the role that the audience has and the various factors that influenced whether and how interviewees’ displayed their same-sex relationship while in face-to-face encounters with acquaintances and strangers.

Examining civil partners’ stories about whether and how they display their same-sex relationship while in encounters with acquaintances and strangers offers the opportunity to contribute to literature that suggests there is ‘an end to the closet’ (Einarsdottir 2011: 54, Mitchell et al. 2009, Goodwin and Butler 2009) for some sexual minorities. The prospect that some lesbians and gay men may be open about their relationship in public also invites a reassessment of former claims that sexual minorities tend to avoid displaying their relationship in public spaces (Johnston and Valentine 1995, Donovan et al. 1999, Hubbard 2001, Johnson 2002).

The chapter begins by outlining the work of Goffman (1963, 1971) and Morgan (2009) that ‘unwritten’ rules govern people’s conduct in face-to-face interactions with acquaintances and strangers. Their approach was adopted to help explore the processes that are involved in displaying a same-sex relationship in encounters with acquaintances and strangers. I first explore the ways that narrators’ displayed their relationship in
encounters with work colleagues (acquaintances). Unwritten rules that guide how co-workers interact in the work place meant that some interviewees could gain familiarity with each other through the exchange of ‘bits of biographies’ over time (Morgan 2009). However, whether civil partners displayed their relationship often depended on the extent to which they believed Equality legislation protected their interactions with colleagues and on the kind of job they were in. Whether and how couples displayed their relationship in encounters with strangers in public places is examined next. The conventions of public space meant that some couples displayed their relationship non-verbally (e.g. holding hands, kissing on the lips). Whether couples displayed though, was dependent on whether the couple thought that their audience would accurately interpret the nature of their relationship and if so, whether their audience could be trusted to be civil. Finally, I explore civil partners’ stories of displaying their relationship in encounters with medical professionals. The conventions in this setting meant that it was legitimate for civil partners to be open to these strangers which may explain why the majority of participants reported being confident that using their status as civil partners would help them display their relationship.

**An end to the closet?**

Empirical evidence suggests that there may be an ‘end to the closet’ (Einarsdottir 2011: 54) where some sexual minorities may be becoming more comfortable about making their relationships visible in public. Mitchell et al. (2009) and Goodwin and Butler (2009) reported that some of their participants felt confident about displaying their same-sex relationship in public, despite negotiating ongoing feelings of risk. Simpson (2012: 2.2) noted how his mid-life gay male interviewees used a variety of strategies to move through ‘heterospace’, including negotiating or challenging the implicit rules of who could use this space. However, both Mitchell et al. (2009) and Simpson (2012: 4.1) described how other participants continued to rely on the strategy of ‘passing’ or ‘de-gaying’ themselves while
moving through ‘straight’ public spaces. Simpson (2012: 4.1) explains this was because they were ‘haunted by former experiences of homophobia’ where they wanted to avoid encountering others who they thought might be intolerant of same-sex relationships.

The fact that some lesbians and gay men perceive that they are able to be more open and affectionate in public is a significant shift and I will argue illustrates that the stigmatising spotlight that had once plagued sexual minorities’ lives appears to be diminishing in some situations. Examining lesbian and gay men’s accounts of displaying their relationship in encounters with acquaintances and strangers presents the opportunity to rethink insights from earlier bodies of scholarship conducted in the 1990s and early 2000s which found that lesbians and gay men expected others they encountered to be prejudiced and abusive towards sexual minorities. Consequently respondents in previous studies adopted strategies that disguised their sexual orientation or same-sex relationship while moving through public spaces (Johnston and Valentine 1995, Donovan et al. 1999, Johnson 2002). Taken together the literature indicates that the audience has the capacity to influence whether same-sex partners make the nature of their relationship visible in public. The work of Goffman (1963, 1971) and Morgan (2009) on the ‘unwritten’ rules that guide interactions is discussed next which will help explore the processes that are involved in displaying a same-sex relationship in encounters with acquaintances and strangers.

Processes of displaying a same-sex relationship to acquaintances and strangers

In order to analyse interviewees’ narratives of how they approached the display of their same-sex relationship in encounters with acquaintances and strangers, I turned to the work of Goffman (1963, 1971) and Morgan (2009). Morgan (2009) has outlined how people interact with various acquaintances, whereas Goffman (1963, 1971) has described the strategies people use to manage encounters with strangers in different situations. They have both, however, described in detail the ‘unwritten’ rules or norms that govern people’s
behaviour and how they ought to interact in face-to-face social encounters (Goffman 1963: 8, 12, 1971 and Morgan 2009). They have additionally pointed out that these rules are context/situation specific (e.g. each social situation is governed by different sets of rules). Their ideas were valuable for making sense of whether and how couples ‘display’ (convey meaning about) their same-sex relationship while in one of three specific encounters (e.g. work colleagues, strangers in public spaces and medical professionals).

What follows is my attempt to map these existing conventions that guide interactions with acquaintances (e.g. work colleagues) and strangers in different settings (e.g. members of general public and medical professionals) onto how civil partners might display their same-sex relationship while in encounters with these others. This aided the analysis of these narratives of display.

When interviewees had work colleagues whom they see on a daily basis over a period of time, it enabled colleagues to gain familiarity with each other. Morgan (2009: 8) explains that in these types of encounters guidelines are activated which make it usual for work colleagues to acquire knowledge of each other through the ‘mutual exchange of snippets of biographies’. Thus, the way that interviewees might display or convey meaning about their relationship is through the exchange of biographical information over time, by directly ‘identifying the nature of the couple’s relationship’ (Goffman 1971: 199) or more gradually through the use of the male/female pronoun or partners’ name slipped into conversation to describe their partner or contribute to conversations about their home-life. Some participants though were employed in certain professions where ‘reciprocity’ of personal biographical details was thought to be unprofessional and unnecessary (Morgan 2009: 53).

The ‘convention’ while in the company of strangers, or members of the general public ‘is to not interact with or share information with each other’ (Goffman 1963: 124). Instead, strangers are to treat each other with ‘respectful care’ which is achieved by practicing ‘civil
inattention’ (Goffman 1971: 385). Examples of civil inattention include maintaining socially acceptable proximity, not initiating conversations and brief, glancing eye contact. Zuckerman et al (1983: 578) explain that the ‘glance’ acknowledges the person and is then followed by gaze aversion which ‘serves to assure the other person that he is not the object of curiosity’ or the target of unwanted attention (Goffman 1971: 385). In such encounters, if couples display it is likely to be through the use of non-verbal gestures or ‘tie-signs’ such as use of ‘personal space’ (Goffman 1971:195) ‘eye contact’, ‘holding hands’, ‘hugging’ or ‘kissing on the lips’ (Morgan 2009: 2).

Medical professionals are ‘strangers’, but because interactions with such ‘strangers’ occurs in a particular setting, the guidelines for social interactions in this encounter are different from the kinds of interactions that interviewees might have with strangers in public space. The conventions that are activated in this setting entail that it is permissible for the social actor to approach the medical professional and the professional is ‘obliged to hold themselves to be approached by unacquainted others’ (Goffman 1963: 125). In encounters with medical professionals, the means that narrators may use to display or convey meaning about their relationship is likely to be more limited. For example they may ‘identify’ that they are civil partners (Goffman 1971: 199) and mentioning their status as civil partners should activate certain rights and protections that they are entitled to as each other’s civil partner. This notion that unwritten rules guide encounters with acquaintances and strangers was used to identify the processes involved in participants’ interactions with acquaintances and strangers and the type of display that could reveal their relationship to acquaintances and strangers.

I additionally noticed how former encounters with acquaintances and strangers could influence how a participant approached the display of their relationship in similar situations. Goffman (1971: 282-283) notes that people have an ability to read and ‘monitor’
situations they are in. This monitoring involves individuals scanning the mood of situations in microsecond-long ‘readings’, during which individuals can check if everything is ‘in order’ before returning to a prior activity. If something appears to be ‘wrong’, then individuals can ‘drop’ the prior activity and begin to mobilize coping strategies. This constant monitoring of situations allows individuals to be responsive if needed but not always anxious in social environments. Having an experience where others ‘target’ a person, or merely witnessing others being harassed or subjected to homophobia, has the potential to alert a person to be routinely sensitive and careful in how they ‘monitor’ or read the mood of particular situations. In the remainder of the chapter, I present participants’ accounts of displaying their relationship in encounters with acquaintances and strangers in different situations.

**Displaying a same-sex relationship to people at work**

Thirty two interviewees in their 30s through to their early 60s reported that they were ‘out’ to their work colleagues. Some participants then specified how their work colleagues knew that they were in a same-sex relationship. Meg (36) for instance, stated that ‘I just talk about my home circumstances and the fact that I’m with a woman’. Adrian (35) felt he could display his same-sex relationship through the experience of ‘being married’. He put it like this ‘I felt like I could talk to them on a level that was the same, even though mine was a gay relationship, you know I could talk to them about being married’. A different example of display was provided by Leonard (43) who said: ‘everybody asks about you, but particularly the admin staff I have noticed that they’re the ones who will say “how is Oscar’s job hunting going?”’ Leonard’s explanation conveys how he and his colleagues have reached a degree of familiarity with each other that allows them to enquire about the regular happenings in each other’s personal lives, such as a partner’s ‘job hunting’ (Morgan 2009: 8). A method that three participants said they used to display the fact that their partner was someone of the same sex, is by casually slipping the male or female pronoun
into conversations with colleagues. Gillian (36) said that this was how she corrected colleagues’ incorrect assumptions that her partner was a man. Next I want to discuss the factors that can open up or close down the ability to display one’s same-sex relationship in the workplace.

‘Opening up’ or ‘closing down’ displays in the workplace

The type of workplace was a significant factor that the following three participants identified as giving them the confidence to display their relationship in the workplace. Kate (36) said that she and Alison (32): ‘both work in University environments which are extremely open and liberal’. Being ‘open’ and ‘liberal’ to diversity (Williams, et al 2009: 29) are qualities that Kate identifies as allowing her to clearly display that she is in a same-sex relationship.

Christopher (42) and Monica (53) both stated that the sorts of people they encounter in their workplaces enables them to display their same-sex relationship in the workplace:

Christopher: I’ve always been fortunate to work in environments where sexuality is not such an issue. Retail, you know loads of gay people work in retail — academic environment, much easier than many others, and maybe if I worked on a building site it’d be different.

Monica: I think there is an education/class to it. …If I worked in a factory then I might get a different response…but I am working with very … professional … people … and you know if you’ve got any issues around diversity then you are not in [the civil service]

Academia, retail and the civil service are all professions that are characterised as tolerant of diversity by these interviewees. That retail is populated by ‘loads of gay people’ is what Christopher recognizes as fostering openness and means he does not need to conceal his same-sex relationship (Goffman 1971: 282-283). Similarly, Monica affirms that the fact that the civil service only recruits ‘professional’ people who are comfortable with ‘diversity’ enables her to display her relationship.

The use of juxtaposition is another way that Christopher and Monica demonstrate the important role that their work colleagues play in their ability to be ‘out’ in the workplace.
Both Christopher and Monica suggest that if they worked in other occupations such as on a building site or in a factory they might not be able to display their relationship so easily. In mentioning these places of work they imply that these occupations are likely to employ people, who because of their ‘class’ and ‘education,’ are unlikely to be connected to the liberalisation of attitudes towards sexual minorities (May 2013: 97-98, Taylor 2013: 23). Therefore, these workplaces are positioned as unsafe spaces to display a same-sex relationship (McDowell 1995: 84). Such juxtaposition works to further support their point that the types of people they encounter in the workplace are crucial to their willingness to display their relationship. I now want to consider another factor that was cited as opening up opportunities for displaying a same-sex relationship in a workplace.

The introduction of the Equality Act (2007, 2010) was cited by five narrators in their mid-40s and 50s as enabling them to display that they were in a same-sex relationship at work. Narrators suggested that the implementation of these measures in the workplace had made a ‘difference’ and improved encounters with colleagues. The legislation appeared to give participants a range of options to help them manage interactions with co-workers. Sheila (46) said ‘you might not choose to do anything about it, but just knowing that legal protection that wasn’t there before, does make a difference’. Gerald (51) gave an example where he reflected that the availability of this legislation had given him a new confidence to manage encounters with people at work. Gerald recalled an incident at work where a fellow employee asked him: ‘which one of you is … the female one?’ He reported dealing with it like this:

I think that’s a wee bit inappropriate to say which one’s the husband and which one’s the wife. So I challenged it in a nice friendly way. As I said I don’t think he was being nasty. If I perceived it as nasty then I would have gone in and…once we got more protection at work, I’ve challenged things at work as well. So there is the thing of the cloak of the law does make me feel more important and will challenge things, and present myself in a way where I’ve got nothing to hide.
The approach that Gerald adopted to manage this colleague’s attempt to understand his relationship with Jack is shaped by how he ‘monitors’ (Goffman 1971: 282-283) the tone or intention of colleagues’ remarks. On this occasion, his colleague’s comment was interpreted as not malicious or offensive; he was just uninformed about how couples in same-sex relationships organise their daily lives. Consequently, Gerald managed his colleague’s question in a ‘nice friendly way,’ which consisted of telling the colleague that voicing such an assumption was ‘inappropriate’. In contrast, he observed there have been occasions where he has needed to formally challenge colleagues’ behaviour. Gerald has incorporated the Equality legislation into a display strategy. The Equality legislation has Gerald suggests, opened up opportunities for him to display his relationship because he no longer needs to censor himself or ‘hide’ (Williams et al. 2009: 30). This is because the Equality legislation has provided him with a ‘cloak’ which is something he can wear that keeps him safe during interactions with colleagues in the workplace. Furthermore, this Equality legislation means that employees now have a legal responsibility to police themselves in interactions with others because ‘openly’ homophobic remarks could result in disciplinary action, potentially a powerful deterrent (Equality Act 2007: (30-1-4): 15).

Sheila and Gerald suggested that the implementation of the Equality Act has improved interactions in work and bolstered their confidence in displaying of their relationship at work.

In six cases, narrators mentioned factors that appeared to constrain or close down opportunities for displaying that they were in a same-sex relationship to work colleagues. Differences in the way civil partnership is conceived and talked about by Alison (32) compared to her fellow workers has the potential to constrain the way that she is able to display or convey meaning to others about her relationship:
Alison: I’ve had a few conversations where I say I don’t really do the ‘w’ word ... there are loads of gay people where I work, and one of my colleagues who is a lesbian, sometimes she refers to Kate as my ‘wifey’ and she knows that it winds me up, and I will immediately go, ‘I don’t use that word’. She’s like ‘I call my girlfriend that!’ and I’m like ‘I don’t care!’ [all said in mock joking tones] ... some of my colleagues got civil partnered last summer as well. There was such a kind of like ‘yes, let us show how totally on board we are with this’ and we will do all the wedding stuff. And we will buy the cards, and we will do this and do that.

Alison’s narrative points to two factors which possibly constrain her display. First, she describes several conversations with gay work colleagues which demonstrate that they joke over the finer technicalities of the language and terms that they each prefer to use to refer to their same-sex partners. One interpretation of this jesting is that it is good natured, one that indicates personal knowledge, for example of the fact that Alison rejects associations between civil partnership and heterosexual marriage, so avoids terms such as ‘wedding’ or phrases such as ‘wifey’ to refer to her partner Kate. This shows that these colleagues possess familiarity with each other’s personal relationships and political persuasions. This familiarity provides a secure foundation for them to joke with each other (Morgan 2009: 43).

The way her gay and heterosexual colleagues bond because they treat fellow workers’ forthcoming civil partnership as a ‘wedding’ (Morgan 2009: 43) is a way that Alison’s display is potentially constrained. This is revealed in her sardonic tone of voice when saying ‘let us show how totally on board we are with this’ which suggests that Alison detects that there is something false or insincere about her work colleagues’ reactions to hers and others’ forthcoming civil partnerships. Her frustration seems to be with the way her colleagues react and treat hers and others’ forthcoming civil partnership in exactly the same way they would a heterosexual wedding. She names the gestures of work colleagues’ recognition, such as celebratory cards and gifts which are used to show they understand that this is an important occasion. However, because Alison does not see her civil partnership as a wedding, their efforts to mark and recognise the occasion are ‘wrong’.
Taken together, assumptions over terms used to describe partners and treating a forthcoming civil partnership the same as a wedding illustrates that some sexual minorities’ relationships are being treated as ordinary and just the ‘same’ as opposite-sex relationships. Perhaps ironically, such acceptance can restrict the opportunity to display alternative meanings about relationships for those who do not wish to emulate such ordinariness.

In the next five cases the narrator’s occupation was named as a factor for closing down opportunities to display a same-sex relationship (see Donovan et al. 1999: 695, Orne 2011, Gibson and MacLeod 2012). Five interviewees in their mid-30s to their early 50s explained that occupying certain professional positions, such as a university lecturer, primary or secondary school teachers, doctor or nurse, social worker, probation officer, therapist or business consultant meant they routinely encountered people they had never met before which encouraged them to be cautious about displaying their relationship to these others.

Claire (43) and Luke (53) are both self-employed consultants who go out to people’s workplaces. Claire avoided displaying that she was in a same-sex relationship to the people she encounters in a professional capacity because ‘I hadn’t known them long enough to say we’re in a civil partnership’. Whereas Luke (53) put it like this: ‘I quite often work with people I’ve never met before… I don’t walk in and say, “I’m here to do some training; by the way I’m gay”’. It seems then that Claire’s and Luke’s cautious strategy for displaying their same-sex relationship was the result of a lack of familiarity with the people their jobs brought them into contact with. This potentially indicates that familiarity and time to get to know and trust each other is important for giving people the confidence to display their same-sex relationship.

Two interviewees, Laura (36) and Maria (39) identified that their jobs brought them into contact with two groups of people, ‘regular’ colleagues and clients or students. They explained that their regular colleagues knew they were in a same-sex relationship but
explained that for reasons of professionalism they avoided displaying their relationship to clients or students (Williams et al. 2009). Maria’s (39) narrative captured this separation of identities nicely. Maria works as an academic at a university in the North of England. She acknowledged that she has developed distinct strategies to manage to whom she is able to display that she is in a same-sex relationship at work. Members of staff in her department know she is in a same-sex relationship in part because she and her partner Selena regularly socialise with these colleagues. She provides the following reason to justify why she avoids displaying to her students.

I know that if I present myself as a gay woman to particular Muslim men, I might ruin that relationship between tutor and student … my job is to have the relationship and if [there is the slightest risk] that my personal life affects it then I’d rather not.

Her students’ religious and cultural beliefs are cited as a barrier which has led Maria to adopt a strategy that means avoiding displaying her relationship to her students. She anticipates that revealing information about her home-life may ‘ruin’ the tutor/student relationship. Students’ faith and engagement with religious teachings may encourage them to view heterosexuality as the only legitimate relationship, and on learning that she is a gay woman, students may lose respect for her, which would undermine her ability to do her job properly. The tutor/student relationship might ordinarily consist of Maria being consulted on her knowledge and skills and their relationship would be characterised by an absence of reciprocity of personal information (Morgan 2009: 53). She perceived there is a greater demand for her to avoid displaying anything about her sexual identity and same-sex relationship to these students because the conflict between faith and sexual minority would undermine her professionalism: a risk she is unwilling to take.

Interviewees’ narratives of displaying their relationship to work colleagues identified the complex factors that open up or close down opportunities for display. The different environments people work in and the various people they encounter in the workplace were
emphasised as integral to opening up, constraining or closing down display. A key message was the significance of the passage of time which allows familiarity and trust to be built so people know it is safe to ‘out’ themselves. In some cases familiarity and trust were supported by the implementation of the Equality Act which protects interactions between colleagues and provides some assurances that interviewees will not encounter ‘openly’ homophobic incidents at work. Some occupational positions have led to the development of more cautious display strategies, perhaps partly because of professional conventions and boundaries, but also lack of familiarity, which mean that interactions do not stray into personal terrain. For others where they see people on a daily basis, calculated assessments are required to work out to whom it is safe to divulge personal information and who it is advisable to keep this information from to maintain cordial working relationships. The ways that interviewees’ displayed their relationship while in the company of strangers is explored next.

**Displaying a same-sex relationship to strangers**

A variety of stories were told about how interviewees approached the display of their relationship while in the company of strangers in public places (such as the theatre, walking or shopping). If couples displayed their relationship while in the company of strangers it was primarily through a range of non-verbal gestures such as ‘linking’ and ‘walking arm-in-arm’ (mentioned by eight participants), or ‘hugging’ (six interviewees), ‘holding hands’ (14 interviewees) and ‘kissing each other’ (mentioned by 10 narrators). That participants used non-verbal gestures to convey to strangers that they are in a same-sex relationship is consistent with the conventions of public space, where strangers are not supposed to ‘interact’ with each other (Goffman 1963: 124) Some participants such as Oliver (53) specified that when he and Richard are ‘parting on the street we give each other a kiss on the lips’, whereas others such as George (65) clarified that he would give Louis a ‘peck on the cheek’. It is worth considering how a stranger might interpret these non-verbal tie-signs
(Goffman 1971: 195), because some of these displays of affection, such as ‘kissing on the lips’ and/or ‘holding hands’ could more readily convey to an audience that they are in the presence of an intimate same-sex relationship (Goffman 1971: 196, 212). Gestures such as ‘hugging’, however as Morgan, (2009: 2) explains, ‘demonstrate some kind of interpersonal bond exists between the two people involved’. The selection of a tie-sign such as a ‘hug’ is ‘ambiguous’ and does not necessarily tell the viewer what the relationship is between the pair. This ambiguity could lead to an audience mistaking the pair as ‘father and son’, ‘siblings’ or ‘friends’ (Goffman 1971: 196, 212).

Participants described other non-verbal ‘tie-signs’ that they thought displayed to strangers that they were in a same-sex relationship. Will (38), for example, said ‘it’s the things you say’, while Oscar (30) affirms that ‘if you were to look at us you could see that we are a couple’, as Oscar and his partner Leonard wear the same brand of boots when out walking their dogs. Monica (53) suggests that her ‘audience’ could pick up on ‘tie signs’ that she and Nell display as ‘we’re very clearly a couple because our language is all coupley, so if we do a shop it’s “we”’. Christopher (43) described how his audience could discern the nature of his relationship with José because of ‘proximity; how closely you walk together, how you look at each other, how you hand things to each other’. Such disclosures indicated that these participants are skilled at ‘monitoring’ (Goffman 1971: 282) who is around, and how their audience might identify they are a couple. Interviewees were asked to narrate how they approached the display of their relationship in different situations with acquaintances and strangers which meant they usually offered an explanation of whether and why they routinely (avoid) displaying their relationship. This means I am able to explore when participants do display and ‘when they don’t (when they might)’ (Goffman 1971: 228).
Routinely (avoiding) displaying affection in public

Certain factors such as whether the couple thought that strangers were able to accurately interpret the nature of their relationship and whether they thought these audiences would be abusive or practice ‘civil inattention’ (Goffman 1971) informed the development of particular display strategies. Some interviewees explained that they always felt able to be open and affectionate in public, able to kiss, walk arm-in-arm, hold hands while others said they never display their relationship because they wish to avoid conveying to strangers they are in a same-sex relationship.

Eighteen participants in their early 30s through to their mid-60s reported that they routinely displayed their relationship in public places. A factor that contributed to their ability to display their relationship in public was an absence of fear that strangers posed a risk to them. Fourteen participants, for example, indicated that they thought strangers were largely disinterested in what they are doing. Edith (53) said: ‘I always think a lot of the time that people don’t notice very much’. Similarly Laura (36) expressed that: ‘I don’t think most people pay much heed’. Sebastian put it like this: ‘I think sometimes that people assume that other people are going to be much more interested in what you’re doing, when they actually aren’t’. These narrators’ perception that strangers ‘don’t notice very much’ indicates that they conceive strangers as capable of ‘propriety’ and able to practice ‘civil inattention’ which seemed an important factor in enabling them to ‘hold hands’. These interviewees’ perceptions that ‘people don’t notice very much’ was in direct contrast to the views held by participants who habitually avoided displaying their relationship in public because it might arouse these others’ attention and make them a target for ‘attention’ or ‘aggression’.

Narrators formed the expectation that strangers would adhere to conventional interactions in public space by practicing ‘civil inattention’. The way these expectations were formed
varied. Edith (57) for instance, traced her ability to be ‘out’ in public to her involvement in the Gay Liberation Front (GLF) in the 1970s which taught her ‘the importance of coming out and if you present yourself positively then other people take a lead from that’ (see also Plummer 1975). Thirteen participants who were in their early 30s and 40s, had come out in an era where societal attitudes towards sexual minorities were more liberal which meant they were able to develop a strong sense of their selves and relationships as ‘ordinary’. This is exemplified by Gillian (36) who stated that: ‘we would act no differently to any other straight couple’. Oscar (30) stated ‘anybody hassles me, it’s their fault and not mine’. Similarly, Jacob (46) said: ‘If I meet Hugh at a train station, I will always give him a kiss and it doesn’t bother me if anybody takes offence to it, that’s their problem’. These remarks indicate that strangers are seen as responsible for managing any offence they might feel as a result of the couple’s displays. The participants did not feel it necessary to modify their display strategy, indicating that they felt there was nothing about them that should make them an ‘object of curiosity’ (Zuckerman et al. 1983: 578).

Two couples reported that their ability to habitually display their relationship while in the company of strangers was formed from the knowledge that their audience would misinterpret the nature of their relationship. This was why these interviewees had little reason to fear eliciting others’ hostile or homophobic reactions from strangers. George (64) explained how he and Louis (65):

benefit from the fact that I find walking difficult for long distances. And so routinely I would take his arm. But if you were looking at us you would say “he’s helping me”. And now actually that’s a mixture of he’s helping me and we are partners. But the viewer may not see it that way...how people interpret that is their business. So it could be a gay couple, it could be someone and their carer, they could be brothers. I mean we have been mistaken for brothers, and I can’t imagine why!

George suggests that he and Louis are able to display their relationship in public, by walking arm-in-arm, because he thinks strangers are unlikely to be able to correctly work out the nature of their relationship. Similarly, Kate (36) mentioned how she and Alison (32)
have come to ‘realise the privilege of having a conventional feminine presentation’. This means she and Alison think they have escaped being the target of others’ negative reactions because their physical appearance does not fit what their audience probably imagine a lesbian looks like (Kimport 2012).

In contrast, 11 interviewees aged in their mid-30s though to their early 60s said they habitually avoided public displays of affection such as handholding or kissing while in the company of strangers. Sally (60) for example avoided the display of her relationship as a matter of preference, admitting that she did not like ‘public displays of affection’. Several interviewees mentioned that little acts of affection such as holding hands had never been established as part of the couple’s repertoire. Adrian (35) said he and his ex-partner Todd ‘were never really big on holding hands’. Similarly Ken (43) affirmed that he and Will (38) are ‘not generally a couple that goes round holding hands’. The reason that Benjamin (61) and his late partner Bert ‘never had any public outward displays of affection’ was because of the social attitudes at the time when they ‘got together’ in the 1970s which labelled their homosexuality ‘deviant’ and encouraged same-sex relationships to be kept ‘invisible’ (see chapter 4). This meant the couple learned that displaying a same-sex relationship ‘was something you didn’t want to do unless you were looking for trouble’.

Seven narrators, aged in their late 30s through to their mid-50s all said they avoided displaying their relationship because they thought strangers would be homophobic. Amy (37), Luke (53) and Simon (53) for example all claimed that they did not display their relationship in public because of a ‘fear of’ potential incidents of homophobic violence and abuse (Skeggs 1999, Lupton 1998: 8). These participants however did not mention episodes where they had encountered homophobia. Amy had:
Amy: heard of people having incidents and they’ve happened in Northern city. Boy killed because he was gay. Another called a ‘poof’ and was ‘kicked’. And I heard about some girls who were shopping, and it was in the day. It was “dirty lesbians” and having rocks thrown at them ... I know I shouldn’t but I will try and hide it.

Her justification at the end ‘I know I shouldn’t but I will try and hide it’ implies that just hearing about homophobic incidents is powerful enough to make sure she and her partner Kirsty render their relationship invisible while in the company of strangers. Luke stated that he and his partner Robert (43) ‘won’t display affection at all’ and gave this explanation:

Luke: we’re conscious of the risk of abuse even if it's verbal abuse, we don’t want it so for the sake of walking down the street arm-in-arm...we’ve learnt to live with that, it’s a shame that we can’t do it, but we’re in a routine that we just don’t do it now.

Not displaying has become habitual for this couple. Luke indicates that their routine was formed to lessen the ‘risk of abuse’ that could be forthcoming if he and Robert were to convey meaning about the nature of their relationship by adopting the ‘tie-sign’ (Goffman 1971: 195) of ‘walking arm-in-arm’. Avoiding these types of tie-signs seemingly helps minimise feelings of anxiety when the couple are in the company of strangers.

Simon said he and his partner, Jeffery ‘can just blend in and that’s what I quite like to do’. ‘Blending in’ infers that he and Jeffery do not engage in any tie-signs that could display their relationship, because this could ‘draw attention to ourselves’. Engaging in gestures that draw attention to the couple could, he suggests, arouse strangers’ interest which could lead to a situation where: ‘you become an intrigue to them, “what are these two on about?” and then you can become a focus of their aggression or interest’. It is perhaps the case that ‘blending in’ and not displaying his same-sex relationship while in public spaces is likely to encourage strangers to adhere to the practice of ‘civil inattention’ and avoids the couple feeling like an ‘object of curiosity’ (Zuckerman et al. 1983: 578). The strategy of ‘passing’ seems to have been adopted to manage the perception that strangers are not going to adhere to conventional rules of practicing ‘respectful care’ (Goffman 1971) and minimises the risk of abuse these couples anticipate could be a repercussion of displaying their
relationship. Additionally, the use of such strategies suggests continuity with findings from an older body of scholarship (e.g. Hubbard 2001, Johnston and Valentine 1995, Donovan et al. 1999).

The next three participants’ aversion to displaying their relationship in public was because being affectionate with their partner in public had resulted in homophobic reactions from strangers. Several participants detailed how being ‘affectionate’ in public had been met with homophobic reactions from strangers, Will (38) for example, mentioned that he and Ken (43) had been jeered at by a group of lads and Symone (45) reported that she had been spat at on the street.

A different point is made by Claire (43) who evaluates the continuation of her display strategy. She recalled how many years ago she had received ‘reactions specifically in response to being demonstrative in public’ which has led her to be habitually ‘wary’ about displaying her relationship to Alice (51) while in the company of strangers. However, she admits that:

I don’t think I need to be as wary any more as I used to be … I think it is to do with how public attitudes have changed…and I think I am more cautious than I need to be. But there are things that happen…Ian Bane walking across Trafalgar square holding hands with his partner, he was verbally harassed and responded…that was an example of him thinking “no! I don’t need to take this”. And I think I would probably do the same thing. But then he was beaten to death.

In this narrative above Claire seems to be contemplating whether she needs to continue to be as risk averse as she is. Such reflection possibly illustrates that the liberalisation of attitudes towards sexual minorities is perhaps having some minor influence in her life. Nonetheless, while attitudes may have changed, the incident that resulted in the recent death of Ian Bane, killed for challenging others’ homophobia, undermines the perception that it is safe to display a same-sex relationship in public. Consequently, she realises that her habitual strategy of not displaying her relationship to avoid others’ hostility is still very much relevant.
Narratives of how couples display their relationship in public indicate that there are signs of both continuity and shift in terms of how interviewees display their relationship in encounters with strangers. The fact that some participants felt able to display their relationship in public tentatively supports findings from other studies (Mitchell et al. 2009, Simpson 2012, Goodwin and Butler 2009) that report a shift in how some sexual minorities are approaching the display of their relationship. However, the liberalisation of attitudes to sexual minorities is not evenly influencing couples who do display their relationship. A closer inspection reveals that younger interviewees are perhaps most influenced by these tolerant attitudes. It might be that encountering others’ homophobic reactions at a later stage might encourage them to consider modifying their display strategy. Also some narrators, who do display in the company of strangers, were empowered to do so because they knew that they did not fit what people thought gay people look like. The fact that some narrators continue to ‘pass’ or avoid displaying their relationship reveals continuity and is similar to the findings by Mitchell et al. (2009) and Simpson (2012), who found that prior experience, or the perception that strangers were unlikely to practice civil inattention, taught people to ‘de-gay’ themselves. While some of these narrators acknowledged that social attitudes to sexual minorities have changed they could not easily erase habitual strategies developed to avoid others’ hostility to their relationship.

Medical professionals’ responsibilities and civil partner status

A range of stories were told by participants about encounters they had with members of the medical profession (GPs, nurses and so forth). These encounters were distinctive because the majority of narrators said they confidently displayed their relationship to medical staff. Interviewees stated that the way they displayed their same-sex relationship was by verbally stating that the couple are ‘civil partners’. This following quote from Oscar (30) was typical of such displays:
Oscar: I wanted Leonard to come in with me because I’ve got a terrible fear of needles … I was absolutely scared to death. And I said “could Leonard come with me?” They looked at me. I said, “oh we are married you know, he is my civil partner” and they were like “oh, alright, that’s fine”

Oscar conveys to his reader how saying the couple are ‘civil partners’ resulted in the hospital staff agreeing to Oscar’s request. Oscar’s recollection however does not explain why or how identifying their status as ‘civil partners’ in these interactions produced this outcome. In fact, very few participants paused to consider or explain why displaying their status as civil partners was effective in these encounters. Five narrators identified the factors that were activated in these encounters that encouraged them to develop confident strategies for displaying their relationship in these settings. Thus, examining their narratives helps establish why display is effective in this setting.

Three interviewees in their 40s all commented that their confident approach to displaying their relationship in encounters with medical staff was influenced by their knowledge that their status carried weight in a hospital or GP practice. Ken (43) characterised civil partnerships as offering the couple more ‘legal backing’. In Sheila’s (46) opinion the ‘difference’ she thought ‘civil partnership has made (and now with the Equalities Act as well) is just that people in the backs of their minds…have these legal obligations’. Such remarks indicate that their confident approach to displaying their relationship was influenced by their knowledge that medical staff will have to adhere to certain codes of conduct that come with their professional role. This carries some assurances when participants ‘monitor’ these situations (Goffman 1971: 282) and assessing how they are likely to be treated. They have some assurances that medical professionals and others are obliged to treat them with respect because of the couple’s legal status and there is little risk of eliciting homophobic responses from these others.

The knowledge that next-of-kin status was a term that medical staff (doctors and nurses) could recognise, confirm and respect (Mitchell et al. 2009: 243) was a contributing factor
that two interviewees in their 40s and 60s identified as encouraging them to be far more assertive about displaying their relationship. Louis (65) put it like this:

All the times that we’ve had to deal with hospitals…And certainly know that the civil partnership has made a difference. I [emphasised] am the next-of-kin. So it’s on the form. And the staff know, that, I [emphasised] am the next-of-kin.

George, Louis’ partner of over two decades, had to have several serious operations before the couple were civilly partnered. Louis recalled feeling intensely vulnerable at the possibility that hospital staff could have refused to acknowledge that Louis is George’s partner. This uncertainty all went away once the couple became civil partners and contributed to his confident approach in managing encounters with hospital staff. His emphasis on ‘I’ coupled with the phrase ‘next-of-kin’ is significant because he knows that as George’s civil partner he has gained the legally recognised status as George’s next-of-kin (couples were able to nominate someone to act as their next-of-kin before civil partnership was available, but this was not widely known by couples) (Auchmuty 2004). Louis is therefore entitled to be treated with respect and informed of George’s health and there is no possibility that medical staff could deny his next-of-kin status. Louis has assurances that his display will be understood and accepted by hospital staff, irrespective of what their personal opinions on same-sex relationships might be.

This is how Claire (43) said she displays her relationship to medical professionals:

We just tend to be totally up front about being each other’s partners and next-of-kin. And they do ask about next-of-kin and I said “it’s me”. And “we’re in a CP” and they were perfectly fine. But it does feel relevant then.

Claire’s approach to displaying her relationship to Alice in these encounters was different from her cautious tendency to avoid displaying when the couple are in the company of strangers. The difference in this setting that opens up opportunities for Claire to feel confident about displaying her relationship is the absence of fear of others’ homophobia. Certain guidelines exist in encounters with professionals that she recognises as allowing her to be more assertive and gives her confidence in her displays. In particular, gaining the
knowledge that she and Alice (51) are entitled to be acknowledged as each other’s next-of-kin was what gave her confidence to display her relationship in encounters with medical staff.

Conclusion

This chapter has presented civil partners’ accounts of how they approached the display of their same-sex relationship in one of three specific encounters with acquaintances and strangers. Adopting Goffman’s (1963, 1971) and Morgan’s (2009) theoretical perspective has facilitated a more nuanced understanding of how ‘displaying’ a same-sex relationship works in practice (Finch 2007: 73), at least in encounters with acquaintances and strangers.

By mapping particular existing conventions that govern how people interact in context-specific situations, I was able to identify how these conventions encouraged civil partners to display their relationship in particular ways. This notion also helped explain why civil partners described modifying their display strategies in different encounters with acquaintances and strangers. For instance, some civil partners might routinely display their same-sex relationship in public spaces, but not reveal the nature of their relationship to others they encounter in their jobs. Employing this theoretical perspective additionally allowed me to understand and explain why some interviewees habitually avoided displaying their relationship in certain settings. I identified for instance, whether this aversion was related to prior biographical histories of traumatic incidents that encouraged them to perceive the particular encounter as ‘unsafe’ (Goffman 1963) or whether contextual factors meant conveying the nature of their relationship was thought to be inappropriate for the situation.

Examining civil partners’ stories about how they display their relationship in encounters with acquaintances and strangers gave me the opportunity to contribute to recent discussions that suggest a more liberal societal climate, as signalled by the introduction of
the Civil Partnership Act and the Equality Act, is contributing to the increased visibility of same-sex relationships (see Mitchell et al. 2009, Goodwin and Butler 2009, Simpson 2012, Sullivan 1995, Women and Equality Unit 2003, Johnston and Valentine 1995, Donovan et al. 1999) and whether this suggests that an ‘end to the closet’ is in sight (Einarsdottir 2011: 58).

The findings presented in this chapter illustrate that despite inhabiting an ‘era of equality’, the opportunities for displaying a same-sex relationship in encounters with others are uneven. In relation to work, for example, participants who felt empowered to display their relationship to colleagues by engaging in conversations about their home-life cited that their ability to be open was related to the profession they were in and the kinds of people such professions attracted. Others acknowledged that their confidence around displaying their relationship to their colleagues came from the implementation of Equality legislation, which effectively ‘protected’ their interactions with colleagues. Thus colleagues risked being subjected to disciplinary action if they were homophobic. This protection, while empowering for some, has the potential to constrain the ways that some interviewees want to display or convey meaning about their relationship to work colleagues. Another reason why some narrators developed habitual strategies which meant they kept boundaries in place between their professional persona and home-life emerged because of the nature of the work they do. They regularly came into contact with others who were effectively ‘strangers’ and assumed that displaying their same-sex relationship to these others might undermine their professionalism (Morgan 2009: 53).

Participants’ narratives of their encounters with strangers revealed that there are signs of both continuity and shift in terms of the visibility of same-sex relationships in public. I identified two factors that enabled couples to develop habitual strategies to display their same-sex relationship through non-verbal means. Younger narrators perhaps benefited the
most from the liberalisation of attitudes to sexual minorities which appeared to have influenced some to feel ‘ordinary’ and have no reason to ‘hide’. Others’ strategies for routinely displaying their relationship were predicated on the knowledge that they did not fit what their audience may expect a lesbian or gay person to look like. Lastly, most participants’ named encounters with medical professionals as the one setting where they confidently displayed their relationship. Their status as civil partners was used to convey meaning about the nature of their relationship. Displaying their status as civil partners meant that couples were entitled to receive recognition as each other’s partner and were able to access their legal rights. Interviewees’ confident displays with these others were influenced by their knowledge that these encounters were framed in terms of legal codes of professional conduct. The fact that some civil partners reported not being able to express the nature of their relationship more freely, leads me to conclude that heteronormativity continues to have particular salience in an ‘era of equality’. Narratives illustrate that the existence of legal equality had made some encounters safe for the display of a same-sex relationship. However, it is impossible to impose legislation on all social situations that would govern the kinds of expressions and interactions that are permitted. Therefore, for the foreseeable future in encounters, especially those that are not governed or protected by legislation, an ‘end to the closet’ (Einarsdottir 2011: 58) is not a realistic prospect, while there continues to be the very real risk of eliciting others’ homophobic behaviour.
Chapter 8 Conclusion: After the Act

Introduction

The introduction of civil partnership in 2005 is highly significant because it symbolises that social attitudes towards sexual minorities have been transformed (Weeks 2007: 3, Shipman and Smart 2007). Over the past two decades, social attitudes have changed profoundly; same-sex relationships had been viewed as inferior to heterosexual relationships but nowadays tend to be perceived as the ‘same’ as opposite-sex partners and as such are deserving of ‘equal’ recognition and rights (Heaphy, Smart and Einarsdottir 2013). It was unclear, however, what (if any) impact these more liberal attitudes were having on sexual minorities’ everyday lives. Addressing this omission was the objective of this thesis. The project had two aims: first, to explore the significance that civil partnership has on civil partners’ relational lives, and second, to examine whether and how civil partners’ display their non-heterosexual orientation/same-sex relationship in different contexts and in encounters with different audiences.

Finch’s (2007) concept of ‘display’ was employed as an analytical tool to examine whether (and how) these more tolerant social attitudes towards sexual minorities had impacted on the everyday lives of 42 civil partners who were aged 30 to 65. Studying ‘narratives of display’ that individuals and couples told about their interactions with one of six different audiences (e.g. self, couple, family, friends, acquaintances and strangers) was a way in which I could discern whether these liberal social attitudes had impacted on their lives (see chapters 2-7). Women and men who were aged 35 to 60 when they became civil partners were invited to talk about their encounters with others because they had a range of biographical experiences relating to these more tolerant social attitudes to sexual

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7 The sorts of meanings individuals and couples conveyed about their non-heterosexual orientation/same-sex relationship
minorities, and as illustrated, some recalled experiencing far less tolerant times (see chapters 2, 3 and 4).

This chapter begins by offering selective summaries of chapters 2-7. The purpose of these summaries is to highlight the ways in which my study is theoretically and methodologically original. Each summary includes main themes that were reached in each of these chapters and discusses how the study contributes to, and extends, existing scholarship and Finch’s concept of ‘display’. The chapter then addresses particular limitations of the study concerning the sample (e.g. the fixed age criteria and civil partners) which has implications for the scope and reach of the findings. I also address how having generational patterns as a focal point in most of the empirical chapters (4-6) inevitably meant that certain lines of enquiry were omitted. In light of these limitations, I also outline possible avenues for the ways in which the study might be extended and potential lines of analysis that could be explored in the future. I close by recapping the main findings from the study.

**Summation and statement of theoretical and methodological originality**

My original theoretical and methodological contribution can be found in the way I proposed to refine Finch’s (2007) concept of ‘display’. Finch’s concept was modified in order to explore displays (conveying meaning) about non-heterosexual orientation and same-sex relationships. I argued that ‘display’ could be a useful analytical tool for examining whether and how the liberalisation of social attitudes towards sexual minorities was affecting how civil partners do and perform their relational lives. A study was designed that was conducive for generating civil partners’ ‘narratives of display’. An analytical framework was also devised to illuminate ‘types’ of display and ‘what’ these displays looked like when civil partners conveyed meaning about their non-heterosexual orientation and relationship to different audiences. Analysing participants’ ‘narratives of display’ (chapters 4-7) has afforded me the opportunity to offer a more nuanced account of the processes of
display and the interactions that take place between actors and audiences. Theoretical originality is additionally demonstrated in the way data was analysed in order to complement and extend existing sociological scholarship.

The summaries that follow are devised in such a way as to demonstrate in more detail the ways in which my study is theoretically and methodologically original.

**The Significance of Civil Partnership and Display**

The aim of chapter 2 was to critically review several bodies of scholarship with the purpose of informing my study which was concerned to explore what (if any) impact liberal social attitudes have on the kinds of lives sexual minorities are able to lead. The first body of literature reviewed consisted of debates that span over two decades. In these debates, scholars and activists attempted to predict the impact that legal recognition schemes might have on people’s everyday lives. I noticed how the concerns that academics and activists had about legal recognition impacting on people’s lives changed considerably over the duration of the debates, and indicated how sexual minorities’ lives have altered profoundly over the past two decades. This shift in the types of concerns that scholars had alerted me to the importance of inhabiting a particular socio-cultural and historical climate, and how this context could shape perceptions about one’s sexual orientation and opportunities for living everyday lives.

The second body of literature reviewed consisted of empirical studies that provided an account of how legal recognition actually impacted on members of sexual minorities’ lives. These studies identified that registering a partnership affected couples’ relationships with three ‘groups’ of others. These included the couple’s relationship, their relationships with significant others (family and friends) and how civil partners were more ‘confident’ in terms of how they presented their relationship while in the company of strangers.
Weaving the insights from these two bodies of scholarship, I was able to identify the importance of inhabiting a socio-cultural and historical context for informing an understanding of one’s sexual orientation. Secondly, studying the way that becoming civil partners affects the couples’ personal relationships provided a route to explore what (if any) impact inhabiting this current socio-cultural and historical context was having on the kinds of lives these sexual minorities are able to lead.

The theoretical framework for the study was informed by my engagement with Finch’s (2007) concept of ‘displaying families’. Display was designed as a conceptual lens to examine the impact that the greater diversity of family forms is having on the daily lives of families. I proposed that ‘display’ could be used as an analytical lens to study the meanings that civil partners convey about their non-heterosexual orientation and same-sex relationship. ‘Display’ was suited to this task for two reasons. First, the same processes of social change that encouraged greater diversity of family forms (which display was designed to explore) were also responsible for the emergence of increasingly tolerant social attitudes towards sexual minorities and, in relation, the availability of civil partnership in 2005 (these cultural changes were discussed within the first body of scholarship). Second, ‘display’ focuses on the meanings that are conveyed during interactions between the actor and an audience. The main insight to emerge from the second body of scholarship was that the change in the couple’s circumstances (e.g. becoming civil partners) would invariably encourage them to display (convey meanings) to various others that their circumstances had changed. I postulated that studying ‘narratives of display’

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8 The sorts of meanings individuals and couples conveyed about their non-heterosexual orientation/same-sex relationship
The next chapter was where I considered the practical issues of capturing and generating civil partners’ narratives of display.

Generating narratives of display

Chapter 3 gives an account of how a qualitative project that employed Finch’s (2007) concept of ‘display’ was designed and carried out in order to investigate whether and how liberal attitudes towards sexual minorities are impacting on how civil partners perform their relational lives. It provides justifications for how and why I sampled for age and gender and discusses the merits, limitations and practicalities of relying on self-selection recruitment methods. The methodological originality of the study can be found in the development of research tools used in 30 narrative interviews to generate narratives of displaying meanings about non-heterosexual orientation and same-sex relationships. I decided that narrative interviews were the most suitable method for generating the core data for the study. Such a decision was partly informed by Finch (2007: 77) who proposed that ‘narratives’ that people tell about themselves and their relationships are a tool for display. However, deciding to use narrative interviews meant I encountered a practical issue of how to ‘activate’ (Gubrium and Holstein 2009: 42) interviewees’ recollections of their relational lives and generating personal stories about displaying their non-heterosexual orientation/same-sex relationship to different others. Three complementary tools in the form of an interview schedule, relational time-line (which mapped out significant relationships and events over the life-course of each interviewee) and photo-elicitation using participants’ photographs were deployed to elicit participants’ recollections of their relational lives and their experiences of displaying their same-sex relationship in encounters with others. The time-line was an important device for stimulating biographical experiences of displaying a non-heterosexual orientation in a specific socio-cultural historical climate. The use of photo-elicitation as a tool to generate narratives of display
about non-heterosexual orientation and same-sex relationships was informed by Finch’s (2007: 77) point that photos could convey and reinforce meanings about ‘family’ relationships between the displayer and people featured in the photograph. The third tool came in the form of questions taken from the interview schedule which were mounted on laminated cards that invited interviewees to recall whether and how the couple display their same-sex relationship to acquaintances and strangers. Following this, an account is provided of how ethical dilemmas (such as negotiating power and sensitive issues) were managed during the interviews. This chapter closes with a discussion of my analytical strategy which was designed to illuminate the types of display and what these displays looked like when civil partners conveyed meaning about their non-heterosexual orientation/same-sex relationship during interactions with different audiences. This analytical strategy is a second way that my study is methodologically original.

Displaying Sexual orientation and Responses to Civil Partnership

Chapter 4 is the first of the empirical chapters and analyses narrators’ initial responses to the availability of civil partnership in 2005. The analysis in this chapter makes an original contribution to Finch’s (2007) concept of ‘display’ by illustrating how people’s personal histories influence how they display their non-heterosexual orientation. Giele’s (2002, 2004) work on ‘biographical experiences’ was developed into an analytical tool in order to understand a pattern between participants’ biographical experiences and their initial responses to civil partnership. I observed how inhabiting a specific socio-cultural and historical context (Giele 2002: 72,75) and ‘membership in various communities’ (Giele 2002: 72, 81) meant participants came to have key biographical experiences that informed how they managed and displayed their sexual orientation.

Older interviewees (in their 40s, 50s and 60s) had, for instance, learnt to display their sexual orientation and relationships in the socio-cultural and historical climate of the
1960s, 1970s and 1980s where dominant social attitudes operating at the time meant they learnt that their attraction to members of the same-sex, and their relationships, should be conducted in private and not displayed in public (McIntosh 1968, Weeks 1989). Inhabiting this environment meant they developed one of two approaches for displaying their sexual orientation and relationship. One approach employed by some participants in their mid-40s, 50s and 60s was to develop ‘discrete’ ways of displaying their sexual orientation. Others in this group delayed ‘coming out’ and married someone of the opposite-sex and raised a family. The terms these narrators used to describe their initial reactions to civil partnership were ‘detached’. The second type of approach interviewees in their 40s and 50s formed to display their sexual orientation was ‘unapologetic’. These interviewees had joined supportive critical communities (e.g. socialist, sexual or feminist) which meant they had been able to access ideas about sexual orientation which encouraged them to affirm their ‘difference’ from opposite-sex relationships. The language these narrators used to describe their initial responses to civil partnership were ‘dissident’. I argued that these approaches to the display of their non-heterosexual orientation had been designed to manage and avoid the stigmatizing spotlight of homosexuality being cast upon this aspect of their life.

In contrast, my younger civil partners (those aged in their 30s and 40s) had learnt to display their sexual orientation in an ‘era of equality’ in the 1990s, when same-sex and opposite-sex partners were viewed as the same and equally worthy of recognition (Heaphy et al. 2013). Inhabiting this socio-cultural and historical climate meant these narrators came to develop a sense of themselves as relatively ‘ordinary’ (Heaphy et al 2013). These interviewees appeared to ‘embrace’ the availability of civil partnership. Unlike the older narrators, these younger participants had not felt compelled to censor their sexual orientation and same-sex relationships, which conveyed that the threat of attracting the stigmatizing spotlight of homosexuality on their lives had diminished appreciably.
This analysis offers an original contribution to scholarship because it addresses academics’ (Clarke et al. 2006, Harding 2008) concerns that particular responses to legal recognition are being ‘recycled’. I demonstrated that paying attention to people’s biographical experiences and current circumstances can help understand why distinctive ‘supportive’ or ‘rejecting’ responses seem to keep appearing. The introduction of civil marriage for same-sex partners in March 2014, and the fact that my younger participants tended to ‘embrace’ the availability of civil partnership because it reinforces their sense of ordinariness, may be perceived by some as a cause for concern. This is because it might signify that the opportunity to critically discuss alternatives to legal recognition schemes, and the possibilities for dismantling the bundle of protections and social legitimacy that is tied to marriage, has passed us by. Engaging with debates about legal recognition schemes that span over two decades (see chapter 2), I observed that a theme which has remained constant in the gay marriage debates is the problem of ‘legitimacy’ (Ettelbrick 1997 [1989], Warner 1999, Auchmuty 2004, Knights 2006, Kandaswamy 2008, Browne 2011 Rolfe and Peel 2011, Taylor 2013), specifically, material and social inequalities that arise from conferring legitimacy on some relationships and not others. I am not, therefore, convinced that the critics have given up and this issue will continue as a firm feature of academic conversation. Additionally, I still firmly believe there is scope that these conversations can influence policy-makers’ decisions.

Private Decisions, Public Stories

Chapter 5 examined the ways that participants used narratives as tools for displaying their decision to have a civil partnership. Same-sex partners were at different stages of their relational lives and were encountering and negotiating different concerns. Therefore, they conceived civil partnership as meeting the couple’s current relationship needs. By drawing on the work of narrative analysts such as Riessman (1993, 2008), Lawler (2008) and
Holstein and Gubrium (2000) I was able to turn Finch’s (2007) idea of ‘narratives’ as a tool for display into a conceptual tool which enabled me to engage more thoroughly with participants’ stories about having a civil partnership.

I illustrated how interviewees displayed the ‘private’ relational stories of their decisions for formalising their relationship through one of three cultural repertoires. Using such shared narrative frameworks helped to ensure that these stories were ready for ‘public’ display, and that audiences found their reasons intelligible. These repertoires were ‘practical’, ‘protective’ and ‘romantic’. The type of repertoire selected for displaying the decision was connected to the way civil partnership was thought to meet the needs of the couple’s relationship. Drawing on some general repertoires such as ‘practical’ or ‘protective’ could be problematic and these repertoires required modification, or more contextualisation, to ensure the particularities of the couple’s decisions were intelligible, and to ensure they were interpreted in the ways they were intended to be heard.

Employing the lens of ‘display’ has enabled me to analyse people’s stories of their decisions for having a civil partnership. Such an analysis contributes to and complements pioneering studies that have sought to understand couples’ explanations for why they would want to formalise their relationship (Shipman and Smart 2007, Smart 2008, Heaphy et al. 2013, Einarsdóttir 2013) by exploring how these ‘private’ decisions are made intelligible and made ready for public display. What is more, the fact that these partners registered their partnership challenges certain claims made by Giddens (2008 [1992]) in his ‘transformation of intimacy’ thesis. Couples’ willingness to have a civil partnership, for instance, undermines Giddens’ (2008 [1992]: 135) point that same-sex relationships are especially fragile or fluid and enables same-sex partners to publicly demonstrate that same-sex partnerships are, and always have been, capable of expressing commitment and endurance. Additionally, registering a civil partnership illustrates how actors do not enter
relationships with a calculating rationality whereby they view their relationship as ‘good till further notice’ (see Gabb et al. 2013, Weeks et al. 2001).

Displaying to family and friends

Chapter 6 examined the significance of who interviewees’ prioritised and selected to be the audience for the couple’s display when deciding to formalise their relationship. Analysis of interviewees’ narratives established that there was a great investment in who the couple had selected as the audience for the couple’s display. I established that whether friends and/or family were selected as the recipient for the display was related to the meanings they were aiming to convey about becoming civil partners. Pahl and Spencer’s (2004) notion of ‘specialised roles’ helped me to make sense of why couple’s selected particular audiences for their displays. Selection was distinctively generational in terms of who narrators’ prioritised as the audience for their display. For instance, older couples (mid-40s through to their mid-60s) tended to prioritise friends, while younger narrators tended to prioritise kin in their thoughts as the audience for the couple’s display. The opportunity to display to kin, however, was not an option that was evenly available to these younger narrators, who eventually received their display (e.g. family or friends), depended on prior ‘relational histories’ and how kin were perceived to have managed the interviewees’ non-heterosexual orientation. Finch and Mason’s (1993) concepts of ‘relational histories’ and ‘family responsibilities’ were useful for making sense of these patterns.

The analysis presented in this chapter allowed me to delve deeper into, and illuminate the processes involved in ‘display’ which is a useful contribution to Finch’s (2007: 73) concept. By exploring the motivations behind who narrators prioritised as the audience for the couple’s display, I have been able to highlight the ‘active’ role (unbeknownst to them) that the audience plays in this process. Thus providing support for Finch’s (2007: 67) point that audiences in interactions with the displayer are not ‘passive’ (see also Haynes and Dermott
2011). I have also identified how people ‘plan’ and tailor their displays (meanings they convey) to suit particular audiences, and whether an audience is actually selected as the recipient for the display, depends on how they are anticipated to react. This was demonstrated in the narratives of some younger narrators who anticipated that their display could cause their relatives distress. For this reason, they reported being unable to display the couple’s decision to their relatives.

Examining why friends or family were prioritised in these interviewees’ thoughts about who should be the recipient of the couple’s news, both complements and extends findings from existing studies (Lewin 1998, Smart 2007a, Ellis 2007, Jowett and Peel 2007, Peel 2009, Goodwin and Butler 2009, Heaphy et al. 2013). I have extended the insights from these studies by demonstrating why kin are significant audiences for the couples’ displays.

The analysis presented in this chapter also demonstrates the continuing importance of friends in sexual minorities’ lives (Weeks et al. 2001, Weston 1997) which, with a few exceptions (Smart 2007a, Heaphy et al. 2013) has been overlooked in studies that have explored the impact that becoming civil partners has on people’s everyday lives. For example, in some cases friends had been selected as the audience for the couple’s display because they were imagined to support the ‘practical’ meanings couples wished to convey about becoming civil partners. In other cases, friends were selected as the audience for the display because of strained relationships with kin, which complemented similar findings found in the studies conducted by Smart (2007a) and Heaphy et al. (2013). This observation also resonates with the findings from older scholarship (Weeks et al. 2001, Weston 1997) that friends continue to play an important role in sexual minorities lives, in an ‘era of equality’.
Displaying to Acquaintances and Strangers

Chapter 7 examined how ‘conventions’ governed how civil partners approached the display of their same-sex relationship in face-to-face encounters with work colleagues and strangers in different settings. Drawing from Goffman’s (1963, 1971) and Morgan’s (2009) work on context-specific ‘conventions’ meant I could demonstrate what these displays looked like, and how civil partners display their relationship in these encounters. This conceptual theorising became a valuable tool for generating a more nuanced appreciation of why civil partners display their same-sex relationship in particular ways, in specific encounters with acquaintances and strangers. This analytical mapping is a useful contribution to Finch’s concept (2007: 73) because it goes some way to developing an understanding of how display works in practice.

Examining participants’ narratives of displaying their relationship in encounters with acquaintances and strangers meant I was able to contribute to recent discussions that suggest a more liberal societal climate, as signalled by the introduction of the Civil Partnership Act and the Equality Act, is contributing to the increased visibility of same-sex relationships (see Mitchell et al. 2009, Goodwin and Butler 2009, Simpson 2012, Sullivan 1995, Women and Equality Unit 2003, Johnston and Valentine 1995, Donovan et al. 1999). There have even been some suggestions that an ‘end to the closet’ (Einarsdottir 2011: 58) is in sight. The prospect that some lesbian and gay men felt able to be open about their relationship in public also encouraged an evaluation of the relevance of an older body of scholarship that states that sexual minorities tend to avoid displaying their relationship in public spaces (Johnston and Valentine 1995, Donovan et al. 1999, Hubbard 2001, Johnson 2002). Participants’ stories indicated that encounters with acquaintances and strangers presented the most significant challenges and negotiations with respect to displaying a formalised same-sex relationship. Older and younger narrators conveyed that in encounters
with work colleagues they were able to display they are in a same-sex relationship by engaging in conversations about their home-life. Similarly encounters with medical professionals was the one setting where all narrators mentioned using their status as civil partners to actively display to their audience the fact that they are same-sex partners. Consequently being able to convey to their audiences they are same-sex partners was an occasion where they were able to unsettle the heterosexual assumption. Meetings with strangers in public stood out because they showed how uneven the opportunities were for challenging the heterosexual assumption and expressing their same-sex relationship more freely. The fact that some civil partners reported censoring the nature of their relationship, led me to argue that heteronormativity continues to be particularly salient in an ‘era of equality’. Therefore, for the foreseeable future in encounters that are not protected by legislation, an ‘end to the closet’ (Einarsdottir 2011: 58) is not a realistic prospect, while the risk of homophobia remains a clear threat.

**Reflections and future directions**

I now critically point up the limitations and gaps in the study regarding the scope and reach of the findings. This project was concerned to explore what impact (if any) liberal social attitudes about sexual minorities had on lesbian and gay people’s lives. Consequently, my sample (see chapter 3) and my analysis (chapters 4 through to 7) were devised in such a way that I could address these concerns.

**Limitations of the sample**

Following my review of the body of scholarship on this topic (see chapter 2), I devised a sample that included particular criterion. For example, the narratives presented in this thesis are from people who were aged 35 to 60 when they registered their partnership (see chapter 3 for a fuller discussion). The upper age range was fixed at 60 to coincide with when the social changes described in chapter 2 were set in motion, which eventually
encouraged more liberal social attitudes towards sexual minorities. The lower age limit was set at 35 in part, because younger sexual minorities’ experiences of civil partnership had recently been explored by Heaphy and colleagues (2013). This age range was justified on the grounds that people of this age, would likely have a variety of biographical experiences of these more tolerant social attitudes. I theorised that eliciting these experiences would enable me to explore whether and how these liberal attitudes were impacting on how they lead their everyday lives. As a result of my sampling choices, there are limitations in terms of the applicability of my findings beyond the criteria of the sample.

Inviting civil partners to participate in the study meant I only included the perspectives of people who were in favour of civil partnership (see also Shipman and Smart 2007). This means that the impact that these liberal social attitudes are having on sexual minorities who are ideologically opposed to legal recognition, and who have rejected civil partnership for various reasons, or civil partners who were aged over 60 when they had a civil partnership, are not discussed here. However, the perspectives of sexual minorities who are opposed to legal recognition have been included elsewhere (see for instance Harding 2006, 2008, Clarke et al. 2006, 2007, Rolfe and Peel 2011).

If this study were to be extended in some way, I would suggest that couples who were aged over 60 when they formalised their relationship could be invited to participate. This is because these lesbian and gay elders (Rosenfeld 1999, Weeks and Porter 1998 [1991]) lived in an era where homosexual relations between men were a criminal offence. These earlier biographical experiences may be significant for shaping how they make sense of the availability of civil partnership (see chapter 4).

**Omissions in the analysis**

A theme that emerged early in my analysis and framed most of the themes presented in the analytical chapters (4-7), was how inhabiting a particular socio-cultural context and
encounters with others (Giele 2002, 2004) influenced the meanings civil partners were conveying about their non-heterosexual orientation and same-sex relationships. Additionally each analytical chapter paid considerable attention to identifying the ‘types’ of displays and eliciting *how* displays (meanings) were being conveyed to different audiences. Consequently, it was not feasible to also analytically explore in-depth how various characteristics such as gender, ethnicity, class/education, disability and religious belief intersect and shape the types of displays interviewees conveyed to their audiences (see discussion in Heaphy 2011: 25). The sample characteristics of participants in this study were fairly diverse (see chapter 3). Therefore the existing data could be analysed in different ways. It would be possible to explore the role that participants’ characteristics such as gender, ethnicity, class/education, disability and religious belief intersect and shape the types of meanings sexual minorities’ display about their non-heterosexual orientation and same-sex relationship. One example could be to explore how civil partners ‘display’ their gender at their civil partnership ceremony, by analysing the accounts that men and women tell about the outfits that they wore to their civil partnership ceremony.

**The Significance of Civil Partnership, Display and Story-telling**

Three main findings and arguments were formed from my analysis of these civil partners’ narratives. First, despite the remarkable changes in social attitudes towards sexual minorities, the stories my interviewees told, illustrated that there is a generational difference in terms of the impact that these more liberal attitudes have been able to have on the ways that they display their non-heterosexual orientation and relationship. Essentially, these social attitudes have noticeably influenced the lives that younger generations are able to lead. Second, my use of ‘display’ as a conceptual lens to examine interviewees’ narratives has illuminated how the stigmatizing spotlight attached to non-heterosexual orientation and same-sex relationships has diminished over time. This was signalled by how narrators approached the display of their non-heterosexual orientation
and their same-sex relationship. Third, ‘display’ as a conceptual lens has been significant for illuminating the challenges and negotiations involved in displaying a civil partnership and, I argued, is able to offer a more nuanced understanding of the continuing salience of the heterosexual assumption in an ‘era of equality’.

Finally, this study has illustrated that telling stories can be a significant tool that can disrupt heteronormative thinking and facilitate greater awareness about sexual minorities’ everyday lives. Legislative measures such as the Civil Partnership Act (2004) and the Equality Act (2010) have provided the cultural and narrative frameworks that make communicating these civil partners’ stories possible. However, I have found that throughout the process of doing my PhD I have continually told stories about my study, and communicated small snippets about my civil partners’ everyday lives. Sometimes I have told these stories on the train to fellow travellers and on other occasions in lecture theatres to students. The act of telling stories seem to encourage others to reciprocate about same-sex couples they know (friends, relatives, co-workers and neighbours). These are small gestures, but eventually may make the subtle changes that Eskridge Jr (2002) predicted which may lead to more genuine and tangible acceptance of diversity.
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Appendix A: Recruitment Material

Everyone has a story
What's Yours?

Are you in a civil partnership?
were you aged 35-60 when you had your civil partnership?

Would you be willing to share your story with a lesbian researcher about your life before and after civil partnership?
Guaranteed anonymity and confidentiality

For more details about the project contact:
Em Temple-Malt
Mobile: 07543 464 338
Email: Emmajane.temple-Malt@postgrad.manchester.ac.uk

Everyone has a story
What’s yours?

Do you recall forming relationships with people you love, and for many decades being denied legal recognition for your relationship because you are in a relationship with a person of the same-sex.

Do you recall how you felt when Civil partnership was introduced and learnt that you could now gain legal protections and rights for your relationship by having a civil partnership.

At some point you decided to have a civil partnership for your relationship.

Were you aged 35-60 when you had a civil partnership?

Would you be willing to share your story with a lesbian researcher about your life before and after civil partnership?

Guaranteed anonymity and confidentiality!

For more details about the project contact:
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Appendix B: Prospective participant information sheet
University of Manchester
School of Social Sciences
Information Sheet

After the Act: Narratives of Display and the Significance of Civil Partnership

Introduction
This sheet has some important information that will explain why the research is being conducted and what it will involve. This information may help you to decide whether you would like to participate.

What is the aim of the research?
If you are in your mid-30s to early 60s you may recall forming relationships with people you love, and for many years being denied legal protections and recognition for your relationship because you are in a relationship with a person of the same-sex. In 2005 you may have become aware of the introduction of civil partnership, and that you can now gain legal protections and rights for your relationship by having a civil partnership. At some point you decided to have a civil partnership for your relationship. I am interested in how you made sense of these different experiences. Therefore, I am asking people who were aged 35-60 when they had their civil partnership to share their experiences of having a civil partnership. Having the opportunity to hear your story would be exceptionally beneficial for my project.

What do I have to do & where will the interview be conducted?
If you took part I would ask you to complete a timeline and choose some photographs of you and your partner on different occasions. The timeline and photographs would help you to share your story in a narrative interview. The interview should take about an hour to maybe an hour and a half. The interviews will most likely take place in your home. However, if you would prefer, we can negotiate an alternative venue where you feel more comfortable to share your story.

What happens to my story & how do you preserve my confidentiality?
Everything that is said within the interview will be kept confidential and only I will have access to your information. With your permission I will audio-record your account so that I can type up an accurate record of your story. As I type up your story I will anonymise and remove any identifying details from your account and use pseudonyms in place of real names and places. Some parts of your account may be used in the final write up of the thesis.

What happens if I do not want to take part or if I change my mind?
Participation in the interview is entirely voluntary. You are free to stop taking part at any time during the interview without giving a reason.

What benefit might this research be to me or other subjects of the research?
Researchers have not considered the significance and impact that civil partnership might have on the everyday lives of people who have one. I think stories like yours would be valuable for illustrating the significance and impact that civil partnership has on people's lives. I would especially like to share the findings that come from this research with interested parties who would benefit from such research; such as other people who are considering having a civil partnership, LGBT history groups, policy makers, service providers and others.

Would you like to share your story or find out more?
I am looking for people to share their stories with me during the months of August 2011 to March 2012. If you are interested in taking part or have questions &/or queries about the project please contact me:

Em Temple-Malt
Mobile: 07543 464 338
Email: emmajane.temple-malt@postgrad.manchester.ac.uk

Thank you for taking time to read this sheet
Appendix C: Biographies of Interviewees

22 women and 21 men were interviewed for this study. One participant withdrew their consent from the project shortly before submission\(^{10}\). In the following, I provide brief biographical notes for each of the 42 people. They are listed alphabetically, first the female narrators and then the male participants.

The Women

**Alice and Claire** took part in a joint interview. **Alice** is a 51-year-old white British lesbian. She is an academic. Her partner of 9 years, **Claire** is 43 and is self-employed. Claire is a white British lesbian. Claire and Alice have been partners for 9 years, and have lived together in a city in the North East of England for 7 years. Alice has one teenager and two adult children from her former heterosexual relationship who also live with the couple. They became civil partners in 2006.

**Alison** is 32 years old, white British and identifies as a lesbian. She is a trainer. Her partner **Kate** is 36 years old, white Irish and also identifies as a lesbian. Kate is employed as an academic. The couple have been together for 8 years, lived together for 6 years in a city in the North of England. They registered their partnership in 2008. They took part in a joint interview.

**Amy** is aged 37 years old, white British and identifies as ‘gay’. She works in the veterinary profession. Amy started dating her partner **Kirsty** (32) 7 years ago, and shortly after they moved in together in town North West England. They had their wedding in 2008. She took part in a single interview.

**Carla and Liz** took part in a joint interview. **Carla** is a 34-year-old white British lesbian. She is a support worker. **Liz** is 36 years old, white British and also identifies as a lesbian.

\(^{10}\) Therefore I do not include biographical details for this participant
Liz works in IT. She and her partner Liz have been together for over a decade. They have lived together for seven years in town North of England.

**Gillian and Michelle** took part in a joint interview. Gillian is aged 36, white British, lesbian, she works in an HR department. Her partner of 6 years, Michelle is 32, white British and a lesbian she is employed as a civil servant. The couple have lived together for 5 years in city North East England. The couple had their wedding in 2010.

**Edith** is a 57-year-old white British lesbian. Edith is employed as an academic. Her partner Janet (65) is currently in a care home with dementia. The couple have been together for 31 years and have lived together for 27 years in a village in the North East of England. The couple registered their partnership in 2006. Edith took part in a single interview.

**Justine and Martha** took part in a joint interview. Justine is 43 years old, white British, lesbian. Martha is a 53-year-old white, British lesbian. She gave up her post as a vicar when she decided to have her civil partnership with Justine. The couple started dating in 2007 and have lived together in the North West of England for 4 years. The couple had their civil partnership in 2008. Justine gave up her paid work as a teacher when she adopted her first child in the late 1990s. Justine and Martha are both full-time stay-at-home mum’s raising their two disabled children.

**Laura and Meg** took part in a joint interview. Laura is 36, white British, lesbian she is an educational professional. Meg is also 36, white British, lesbian who is studying in HE. They started dating 13 years ago, have lived together for 11 years in city in North England. They had their civil partnership in 2010.

**Maria** is a 39-year-old lesbian. She is of Mexican nationality, Catholic, she was previously heterosexually married. She is an academic. She met her partner Selena (35)
6 years ago and the couple have been living together in city in North East England for four years. She took part in a single interview

**Monica** is a 54 year old white British lesbian. She has worked for many years as a civil servant. She described her partner of over 20 years, **Nell** (53) as mixed race. The couple have lived together in a city in Wales for approximately 20 years. The couple registered their partnership in 2006. She took part in a single interview.

**Pat and Sally** took part in a joint interview. **Pat** is 48, white Irish lesbian. She works in administration for a university in Northwest. **Sally** is a 60 white British lesbian. She was formerly heterosexually married, and has 4 grown up children. She is an academic. The couple have been partners for 13 years and have lived together for 4 years in town North England. They had their civil partnership in 2011.

**Rachel** is aged 64 white British lesbian, Christian (C of E). Rachel was married for over thirty years and has 5 grown up children. She and her partner **Jan** are both retired. She met Jan in the 1990s and currently live in town in East of England. She took part in a single interview. The couple registered their civil partnership in 2006.

**Sheila** is aged 46, white British lesbian. She was formerly heterosexually married. She and her partner of 8 years, **Stef** (54), have lived together in town North East of England for four months. They had their civil partnership in 2009. She took part in a single interview.

**Symone** is aged 45 white British lesbian. She is a civil servant*. Both her and her ex-partner **Janine** had formerly been heterosexually married. Janine had three children with her husband and when Janine left her husband for Symone, Symone became a step-parent. She formalised her relationship with her partner of x years Janine in 2006, however, the couple separated in 2008 and subsequently dissolved their civil partnership
in 2010. She is currently dating a younger woman with two children. Took part in a single interview

**The Men**

Adrian is a 35-year-old white British gay man. He is currently studying for his PhD. He describes himself as a Pagan/Buddhist. He met his ex-partner Todd (30), five years ago. Todd is of American nationality. The couple lived together for four years in city North of England. The couple registered their partnership in 2008, but recently separated. Adrian took part in a single interview

Alex and Evan took part in a joint interview. Alex is a 54 year old white British gay man. He was formerly heterosexually married and has three young adult children from this relationship. Alex works in insurance and is an Anglican. Evan is a 41 year old white British gay man. Evan is Christian and a teacher. The couple have been together for four and a half years and have lived together for just over four years in the South East of England. They registered their civil partnership in 2010.

Anthony and Sebastian took part in a joint interview. Anthony is a 42 year old white British gay man. He is an engineer. His partner of 11 years, Sebastian, is a 38 year old white British gay man. He works as a ‘redeployment officer’. They have lived in a city in the Midlands for nine years with their female lodger Dorothy. The couple had their civil partnership in 2006.

Benjamin is a 61 year old white British gay man. He is employed as a civil servant. His partner of 34 years, Bert, died when he was 57. The couple lived together for 34 years. Benjamin now lives in a city in South West England. The couple registered their civil partnership in 2007. Benjamin took part in a single interview

Christopher is a 42 year old white British gay man and Works as a retail manager. His partner of seven years José (35) is of Brazilian nationality. The couple have lived
together for six years in city in the South West of England. The couple got married in 2007. Christopher took part in a single interview.

**Gerald** is a 51 year old white British gay man. He is employed as a civil servant. He and his partner of 24 years, **Jack** (70), have lived together for 18 years in a city in the North East of England. The couple registered their partnership in 2006. Gerald took part in a single interview.

**George and Louis, Louis** is a 65 year old white British gay man. He is a retired priest. His partner, **George**, is a 64 year old white British gay man, Christian (C of E). He is a retired academic. The couple have been partners for nearly 30 years, although for most of that time the couple lived separately until Louis retired from his position as a priest in 2006. The couple live in a city in the North East of England. The couple registered their partnership in 2005. They took part in a joint interview.

**Jacob** is a 46 year old white British gay man. He works as a civil servant. He and his partner of 25 years, **Hugh** (47), have lived together for 23 years live in London. The couple had their civil partnership in 2011. Jacob too took part in a single interview.

**Joseph** is a 44 year old white British gay man. He works as a civil servant. His partner of five years, **Ali** (31), is of Mauritian nationality. The couple have lived together for just over four years in London. The couple had their civil partnership in 2007. Joseph took part in a single interview.

**Ken and Will, Ken** is 43 and a white British gay man. He is an educational consultant. His partner **Will** is 38. Will works as a senior development officer. The couple have been together for five years and have lived together for 3.5 years in the North of England. They had their civil partnership in 2009. They took part in a joint interview.

**Leonard and Oscar, Leonard** is a 43 year old white British male, Protestant. He works as a lecturer/academic. His partner, **Oscar**, is white South African aged 30, and at the
time of the interview was unemployed. The couple have been together for 3 years and lived together for 2.5 years in Wales. They had their civil partnership in 2010. The couple took part in a joint interview

**Luke and Robert, Luke** is 53, white British gay male and works as an IT consultant he has two grown up children from his former heterosexual marriage. His partner **Robert** is 43 white British gay male, Catholic, and employed as a social worker. The couple have been together for 10 years and lived together for 9 years in the North East of England. They had their civil partnership in 2006. Took part in a joint interview

**Oliver and Richard, Oliver** is 53 a white British gay male and unemployed/househusband. His partner of 21 years, **Richard**, is also 53 is a white British gay male, employed as an academic. The couple have lived together for 11 years in the North of England. They had their civil partnership in 2006. The couple first took part in a joint interview and then Richard took part in a single interview

**Simon,** is 53 white British gay male and is employed as a lecturer. His partner of 20 years, **Jeffery,** is 45. The couple have lived together for 19.5 years in the North East of England. The couple had their civil partnership in 2006. Simon took part in a single interview
# Appendix D: Interview Schedule

| Introductions | • Introduce the project a little  
• Has participant had the opportunity to read the information sheet, answer any questions  
• Consent form(s) and indicate participant to read through it and either sign at the beginning or at the end of the interview.  
• Can I begin to audio-record the interview?  
• Participation is voluntary; do not have to answer any questions that make participant feel uncomfortable.  
• Can terminate the interview or opt out at any time up until 2013 – thesis submission |
|---|---|
| Demographic Info | **Would you mind taking a moment to fill in this form**  
(I’m asking everyone who shares their story to complete one, just in case some of the information doesn’t come up in your story) |
| Background information | **Introductions them:**  
• Can you tell me a little about yourself?  
For example: your age & partner’s age  
Who lives in your household? (Whether partner lives with you, are there any children? do they live here?)  
Do you work? Does your partner work? What do you do?  
I would like to make sure that I am using terms that you are familiar with so that my questions relate to your experiences. How would you describe your sexual identity: lesbian, gay, bisexual, other, or prefer not to say |
| Guide for using time-line | • **Time-line and photographs might be used as a guide to talk through some of the significant relationships that you have had, before and after your civil partnership.**  
• **Loose photographs into some kind of order. e.g. year that they were taken**  
• **Could you describe the photograph because I won’t have it when I am listening to your interview later, then I will know what was important about this photograph for you.** |
| (1.0) Using time-line: Early years - Early 20s | **Can you start talking me through your time-line?**  
• Which relationships were significant for you at the time?  
• When you reached your early 20s – what do you remember?  
• Have your relationships always been with a person of the same-sex?  
Prompt: If no, have you been married before? Heterosexually? |
| (2.0) Using time-line: Current relationship | **Can you describe when you met your current partner?**  
Prompt: For example, how long you have been together (And if applicable) when you moved in together? |
| (3.0) Using time-line: Before civil partnership | **What was it like living without civil partnership?**  
Prompt: What kinds of legal arrangements did you have in place before your civil partnership? |
| (3.1) Using time-line: Recollection of the introduction of civil partnership legislation | • **Do you (or your partner) remember the introduction of the Civil Partnership Act?**  
Prompt: Once you knew of it, can you describe what your (and your partners) initial views and feelings were?  
• When did you think about having a [civil partnership] for your relationship?  
Prompt: How did the decision to enter a [civil partnership] come about? |
| (4.0) How couple presented themselves on the day | • **Thinking now about you and your partner at the ceremony (and at the evening event)**  
• How did you present yourselves on the day? (for example; as getting married, or in love, or as a formality)  
Prompt: What did this look like?  
Prompt: How did people react? |
| (4.1) Using time-line & photos: Guests at the civil partnership | • **Could you describe the arrangements that you made for your [civil partnership]?**  
[Prompt: if participant not doing this already – you may like to use and describe the photographs as you are talking me through your plans for this day]  
• For some people, planning who to invite can be tricky, how did you manage this?  
Prompt: Did you (and your partner) informally tell people and then send out invites? [friends, family,
prompt: Did you have all your guests come to the ceremony (and evening event?) how did these people get on? Elicit the meanings & more detail for who was invited

● Now you’ve had the civil partnership, have you noticed any differences in the kinds of relationships that you and your partner have with your family members?
  Prompt: have you noticed any differences in how you and your partner are with them?
  Prompt: have you noticed whether being in a civil partnership makes a difference to how you personally and (as a couple) react with them?
  Prompt: Have you noticed any differences between how you (and your partner) are treated by different family members?
  Prompt: Have you noticed whether there are any differences between how your relationship/civil partnership is treated compared with how your siblings relationships are treated by family members?

(6.0) Using time-line & photos: After the civil partnership & how formalised relationship is viewed by the couple & by different people

● I am now going to give you some questions which will ask you to consider: whether having a civil partnership has made a difference to how you present your relationship in different situations & for different people?

(6.1) Thinking about different contexts & situations & how the couple present themselves

● How do you present your relationship, when you and your partner are out and about in public spaces? (examples of public spaces might be the theatre, out for a walk, or shopping)
  Prompt: ‘as a couple’, or as a ‘civilly partnered couple’
  Prompt: would you kiss or hold hands in these spaces? Why?
  Prompt: Thinking about these examples, how is this different or similar to how you presented yourselves on holiday before you entered a civil partnership?

● Are there places where you would self-consciously not present as a couple?
  Prompt: what kinds of reactions would prevent you from being open about your relationship?

(6.2) Presenting relationship whilst on holiday

● How do you present your relationship when on holiday?
  (you may like to use holiday photographs, if you have some with you to answer this)
  Prompt: How did you plan this holiday?
  Prompt: What kind of holiday accommodation did you book?
  Prompt: Did you book a double room in a hotel?
  Prompt: Would you be affectionate when you planned outings on this holiday?
  Prompt: How is this different or similar to how you presented yourselves on holiday before you entered a civil partnership?

(6.3) Presenting relationship on a medical occasion

● How do you present your relationship on a medical occasion?
  Have you ever had to make an appointment for your partner when they have been ill or have been with them when they had a medical consultation or were admitted to hospital?
  If yes, and if you feel you can, could you please describe to me what happened?
  Prompt: how is this different or similar to how you presented yourselves in other medical situations before you entered a civil partnership?

(6.4) Thinking about people who participant knows less well

● Do your neighbours and/or work colleagues know that you are in a civil partnership?
  Prompt: if yes, how do you let these people know that you are in a civil partnership?
  Prompt: how is this different or similar to how you presented yourselves to these people before you entered a civil partnership?

(7.0) Closing the interview

Please take a moment to think about some of the things that we have discussed and some of the questions that I have asked you:
● Was there anything that was included that surprised you?
● Is there anything you feel that we have missed and that should be included?

(7.1) End of the interview

I have enjoyed this interview, so thank you for sharing your account with me. I would like to confirm that the content of the interview will be treated with care and in strict confidentiality. Measures will be taken to remove identifying details and pseudonyms will be used in place of real names and places.
Appendix E: Relational time-line [not to scale]

For each significant relationship or experience that you jot down please think about what made this relationship/experience significant
Appendix F: Buddy system

Date of Interview:

Time of Interview:

Name:

Location of Interview:

Contact Number:

I will be travelling via train/car

Train journey details:

Arriving:

Departure:

The interview is expected to last approximately an hour to an hour and a half [If I am interviewing a couple it may be two hours-to two and a half hours]

Emergency Procedure:

Stage One:

I will contact my ‘buddy’ if I experience delays in getting to the interview

I will contact my ‘buddy’ if I anticipate that the interview will take longer than an hour and a half

I will ask ‘buddy’ to text me after an hour and a half if they have not heard from me

I will reply with a text saying “I’m okay”

Once the interview has finished I will contact ‘buddy’ to confirm that the interview is finished

Stage two:

If ‘buddy’ does not hear from me within 15 minutes of their first text, or if I reply with a text that says anything other than “I’m okay” they should ring my mobile

If my ‘buddy’ is in any doubt about my safety or whereabouts they will take the necessary action
Appendix G: Participant Information Sheet
University of Manchester
School of Social Sciences
Participant Information Sheet

After the Act: Narratives of Display and the Significance of Civil Partnership

Introduction
I have invited you to take part in my research project. This sheet has some important information that will explain why the research is being conducted and what it will involve. This information may help you to decide whether you would like to continue to participate. Please ask questions or I can explain things in more detail.

What is the aim of the research & why have I been chosen?
This PhD Project focuses on the significance that civil partnership has for people who were aged 35-60 when they had a civil partnership. If you are aged 35-60 you may recall forming relationships with people you love, and for many decades being denied legal protections and recognition for your relationship because you are in a relationship with a person of the same-sex. In 2005 you may have become aware of the introduction of civil partnership, and that you can now gain legal protections and rights for your relationship by having a civil partnership. At some point you decided to have a civil partnership for your relationship. I am interested in how you made sense of these different experiences. Therefore, I am asking people who were aged 35-60 when they had their civil partnership to share their experiences of having a civil partnership. I am also interested in your experiences and relationships with friends and family and whether having a civil partnership has had an effect on how you and your partner display your relationship in social and public situations. Having the opportunity to hear your story would be exceptionally beneficial for my project.

What do I have to do & where will the interview be conducted?
Before you share your story I would ask you to complete a time-line and choose some photographs of you and your partner on different occasions. The time-line and photographs will help you to share your story in a narrative interview. The interview should take about an hour to maybe an hour and a half. The interviews will most likely take place in your home. This is because you may feel more comfortable sharing your story in familiar surroundings and would mean that you had access to photos that will help you to narrate your time-line. Another important reason for asking to do the interview in your home means that I can preserve your anonymity and avoid the chances of your story being overheard or disrupted by others. However, if you would prefer, we can negotiate an alternative local venue where you feel more comfortable to share your story.

What happens to my story & how do you preserve my confidentiality?
Everything that is said within the interview will be kept confidential. Only I will have access to your information. With your permission I will audio-record the interview so that I can type up an accurate record of your account. As I type up your account I will anonymise and remove any identifying details from your account and use pseudonyms in place of real names and places. Some parts of your anonymised account may be used in the final write up of the thesis. If you would like to request a copy of either the final write up or the chapter of the project in which this anonymised interview will be quoted, please indicate below:

Please tick the box if you would like a copy of the final write up and/or chapter in which you are quoted.

---

11 The photos would only be used in the interview.
What happens if I do not want to take part or if I change my mind?
Participation in the interview is entirely voluntary. You are free to stop taking part at any time during the interview without giving a reason. You do not need to answer a question if you do not feel comfortable about it or, you may ask for further explanation before deciding whether you wish to answer. At any point during and after the interview you can ask me to remove your data up until September 2013, which is when I anticipate that the final thesis would be completed.

What benefit might this research be to me or other subjects of the research?
Researchers have not considered the significance and impact civil partnership might have on the everyday lives of people who have one. I think stories like yours would be valuable for illustrating the significance and impact that civil partnership has on people’s lives. I would especially like to share the findings that come from this research with interested parties; such as other people who are considering having a civil partnership, LGBT history groups, policy makers, service providers and others who would benefit from understanding how civil partnership is significant for those people who have one.

Em Temple-Malt  
Mobile: 07543 464 338  
Email: Emmajane.temple-malt@postgrad.manchester.ac.uk

Who to contact to make a complaint:
Professor Brian Heaphy (PhD supervisor), Department of Sociology, University of Manchester, Brian.Heaphy@manchester.ac.uk or telephone: (0161) 275 0266
Dr Vanessa May (PhD supervisor), Department of Sociology, University of Manchester, Vanessa.May@manchester.ac.uk or telephone (0161) 275 0263

Thank you for taking the time to read this sheet
Appendix H: Consent form [not to scale]
University of Manchester
School of Social Sciences
RESEARCH VOLUNTEER CONSENT FORM

Project: After the Act: Narratives of Display and the Significance of Civil Partnership

The researcher has explained to me the nature of the study and that I would be asked to fill in a time-line, select some photographs of me and my partner on different occasions and participate in a narrative interview. I have read the information sheet about the study and understood it. I was given my own copy of the information sheet.

I understand that the PhD project is about the significance that civil partnership has for people aged 35-60 who have entered into one.

I understand that I will be asked to:
- Share my experiences of what my life was like before civil partnership was available
- Share experiences about my relationships with family and friends
- And whether having a civil partnership has altered how I might display my relationship in social and public situations

I understand that participating in the research involved being interviewed. I understand that I will be asked questions about the significance that civil partnership has for me and for my relationship. I understand that:
- I can refuse to answer any question and terminate the interview at any time without giving any reason.
- Any extract from the interview that appears in the final report will be fully anonymous and any information I give will be kept securely in line with data protection requirements.
- The anonymised interviews may in the future be used by the researcher to share findings from this project.
- I can withdraw any contribution that I make to this project during or after the interview until September 2013
- I was aware that I could ask any questions about the research during the interview if I was unsure of anything.

Please initial where your consent is given:

- I consent to being interviewed for the above project
- I consent to the interview being audio-taped
- I give my consent for the anonymised interview to be shared with ET-M's supervisors at the University of Manchester
- I give my consent for the anonymised interview being used in future publications about this project

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of participant [Please Print]</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Signature [please sign below]</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Em Temple-Malt</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Once signed, original to be kept by ET-M and copy to be given to interviewee
## Appendix I: Demographics sheet

### Participant details form

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Answer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Your Age</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partner’s Age</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How long have you been in this relationship?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>How long have you been living together? (if applicable)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year you entered your Civil Partnership</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you have any children? Yes/No (delete as applicable)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If yes: How many?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Their ages</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do they live with you? Yes/No (delete as applicable)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What word(s) would you use to describe your sexual orientation?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How would you describe your ethnic identity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you have a religious faith? Yes/No (delete as applicable)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If yes, what word(s) would you use to describe this?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highest Educational Qualification</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job Title</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix J: Information Pack sent to participants.
Appointment letter

Em Temple-Malt
Email: Emmajane.temple-Malt@postgrad.manchester.ac.uk
School of Social Sciences
Mobile: 07543 464338
Arthur Lewis Building
Bridgeford Street
The University of Manchester
Manchester
M13 9PL

Date:
Dear:

PhD project exploring the significance of civil partnership

Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed. The arrangements for the interview are as follows:

Researcher conducting the interview: Em Temple-Malt

Date:
Time:
Place:

If you can no longer keep this appointment or have changed your mind about participating please contact me as soon as possible.

The interview will last between an hour to an hour and a half. I would like to make sure that we have the opportunity to explore the significance of civil partnership for you and your partner and so, I would be really grateful if you could complete the enclosed time-line before you meet me and also have some photographs ready for us to discuss in the interview. I explain what I mean by the time-line in the attached document and I also give some ideas about the kinds of photographs that might be useful – although the choice is yours. I would like to reassure you that the photos will only be used in the interview. I hope preparing these things in advance will ensure that I can gather a full account of the significance of your civil partnership. I would like to reassure you that everything that is said in the interview will remain confidential.

I look forward to meeting you soon.

Yours sincerely

Em Temple-Malt
Appendix J: Information Pack sent to participants
Guidance for completing time-line and photos

Guide to filling in the time-line

Here is a guide for completing the enclosed time-line.

I would like you to use the time-line to jot down significant relationships and significant experiences that you have had across your life-time; from your early years to the present time.

I have asked you to jot down these significant relationships because it might help you to focus on the kinds of things that you would like to talk about in our interview.

I have left the time-line blank so that you can plot a line that is meaningful for you. The time-line has a central line, and a series of points. You may like to begin the time-line by putting down the year you were born, the year you reached your early 20s, the date that civil partnership became available (2005), and then finish the time-line with the present year.

Use of Photos for the interview

It would be extremely helpful if you could choose some photographs of you and your partner at different occasions (including your civil partnership).

Could you please bring them with you to the interview?

Having these photographs at the interview might help you to recall more detail about some of these relationships and experiences that you have put on your time-line.