

**Same-sex couples arranging civil partnerships and marriage ceremonies encounter hostility from families and the public**

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Many same-sex couples arranging civil partnerships and marriage ceremonies encounter hostility and disrespect from families, colleagues and the public, research shows.

But others found respect and affection when they announced their decision, Dr Mike Thomas told the British Sociological Association's annual conference in Glasgow today [Friday 17 April 2015].

Dr Thomas, of the University of Kent, interviewed 13 gay couples and five lesbian couples in the UK, and another 27 same-sex couples in California and Canada. They were aged between 21 and 75 and had been together for up to 40 years.

His research was carried out from 2010-12, after legislation was passed in the UK to allow same-sex civil partnerships but before same-sex weddings were legalised in 2014. Same-sex marriage had been legal in California and Canada during his research.

Dr Thomas told the conference that "a number of narratives highlighted what couples interpreted as being denied respect or recognition, or not being listened to. Equally, these stories revealed a sense of powerlessness and a degree of anger, resentment, and fatalism about the disrespect couples received."

He said that "negative reactions from family members were a regular theme." In the UK, Martin, a man in his 50s, told Dr Thomas about informing his father of his forthcoming civil partnership ceremony. "My father, when I told him, sort of hung his head and I said, 'what's wrong, dad?' And he said, 'well, you're abnormal.' So I spent about two days working through this bloody shame that I've been carrying for 40 years."

Dr Thomas said: "This is an extreme reaction and elsewhere during the interview – Martin recalled this as replicating his experience of coming out to his father as gay many years previously."

Another gay British man, Fred, told Dr Thomas about the preparations for his civil ceremony: "We invited my brother, sister-in-law and their two children and I think eventually my brother said he would come, but he would be coming on his own. I think the official reason was that my sister-in law had come to the conclusion that she wouldn't know how to explain it to her children, which I can't say I was particularly impressed with. And I'd been best man at his wedding."

Dr Thomas told the conference: "The task of organising a ceremony brought couples into contact with a range of service providers, including registrars and local government officials, celebrants, hoteliers, caterers, jewellers, photographers and outfitters.

"In the UK, Hamish and Drew, a couple in their mid-30s and together for six years, recalled their trip to the jeweller's to buy rings for their civil partnership ceremony.

"Hamish told me: 'We found the guy who was doing it quite frosty and we just weren't sure what he was making of the fact that two men were coming in to buy rings. He wasn't nasty, he was just very matter of fact. He was just a bit cold with us. I mean, we spent quite a bit of money. I wouldn't go

back there again though.’ Drew said: ‘That was a shame really, it was one of the only things, I felt as though he would have been different with a straight couple.’ ”

Dr Thomas said: “For those who took part in the study, there was a depressing familiarity and even a predictability to the stories they told. If legal recognition raised couples’ expectations about their social status, the response of hostile relatives, indifferent officials and disrespectful service providers sometimes provided a check on these aspirations.”

However, there were also positive stories, said Dr Thomas. “There was ample evidence of marriage or civil partnership as having had positive effects, for example in providing legal rights and entitlements and in giving couples an opportunity to celebrate their relationship in the company of family and friends.”

Eric, a 47-year-old British man, in a relationship with Tom, his civil partner for 27 years, told Dr Thomas: “I’ve always been treated very much as an in-law, but now in my brain I do think I’m an in-law and I definitely am my nephews’ uncle now. I remember Tom’s sister introducing me as her brother-in-law for the first time and it felt good.”

These stories, said Dr Thomas, “can be seen as evidence of the successful deployment of couples’ new status in a range of contexts. Some of these stories are available directly as a result of legal recognition, with ceremonies and celebrations providing opportunities for couples to gain recognition and respect, whether from officials, service providers or family and friends.”

#### **Further quotes (from UK):**

Fred’s partner, Simon, told Dr Thomas: “I was pretty furious with that [the snub from Fred’s sister – see above] for lots of reasons, and I was trying to think of ways they could accommodate it, I was prepared to make quite a lot of sacrifices by saying ‘well, just come to the party’ or whatever. But I kind of thought, why should I?”

Bella, in her 40s, told Dr Thomas that when the news spread at her workplace that she was to have a civil ceremony rather than a heterosexual wedding, the atmosphere “wasn’t all warm like it had been, the temperature dropped. And I wouldn’t have chosen to come out, but I suddenly was out, and now I am fully out.”

The positive side could be reflected in everyday interactions. One gay British man, Richard, told Dr Thomas: “Just recently I had to go to outpatients and the receptionist was typing in and she said, ‘next of kin?’ And I said, ‘Iwan’, and she said ‘who’s that?’ And I said ‘that’s my civil partner’ and she didn’t bat an eyelid, she just typed it in. That’s the first time I’ve had to say it.” He said that felt “absolutely fine”.

#### **Further quotes (from the US and Canada):**

Dr Thomas: “There were similar reports in California, where news of Ralph’s forthcoming wedding divided his family to the extent that it became a matter of conflict between his parents: ‘My dad said, ‘I can’t have any part in this. I’m not going.’ My father just couldn’t deal with the fact that we were having a wedding. We didn’t know until the day whether he was going to turn up or not. I’ve a feeling that my mom threatened him with divorce. And on the day he had a great time.’ Although Ralph made clear during the interview that his father had accepted his three-year relationship with his partner, it was clear that despite the happy ending to this story, marriage was a step too far.”

Brad, 40s, California: “They talk about what they did at the weekend with their partners. But they have to be prepared to hear what I’m going to say. And when I mentioned my husband, the personal conversation came to an end at that point and we went right back to business. Because they didn't know how to deal with it.”

Dr Thomas: “In Toronto, Jenny, in her 40s and with her spouse for eight years, recalled her wedding day and the train of thought set in motion by seeing her friends assembled at the ceremony: ‘I don’t think I can remember ever experiencing so much love. Just that sense of affirmation and love. Because the thing often when you are in a same-sex relationship is it’s sometimes difficult to know whether your friends are putting up with the fact that you happen to have fallen in love with someone of the same sex. And sometimes that’s the question mark you can have. And if I’m honest, I didn’t really know the answer to the question myself until the day we got married.’ ”

***For more information, please contact:***

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**Notes**

1. The British Sociological Association’s annual conference takes place at Glasgow Caledonian University from 15 to 17 April 2015. Around 800 research presentations are given.

2. The British Sociological Association’s charitable aim is to promote sociology. The BSA is a Company Limited by Guarantee. Registered in England and Wales. Company Number: 3890729. Registered Charity Number 1080235 [www.britsoc.co.uk](http://www.britsoc.co.uk)