



'A relationship is a relationship': Individuals perceptions of whether lack of legal and societal recognition impacts upon same-sex relationships

Jody Murphy

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ABSTRACT

A qualitative study that explored individuals' perceptions of how legal and social recognition impacted upon their committed same-sex relationships. Six individuals (*3 females, 3 males*) in same-sex relationships participated in semi-structured interviews. Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was employed to identify themes within the data. Female participants' discussed how prejudice affected their same-sex relationships and expressed a heteronormative view of marriage. Male participants' discussed the impact societal views had upon their relationships and articulated the fear they felt in the face of stigma and discrimination. Both groups stated the importance of love in their relationships; defining their own sense of commitment and relationship values. The expressed perceptions lent tentative support to previous theorising in this area but raised additional issues that may benefit from further investigation.

KEY WORDS:	PREJUDICE	DISCRIMINATION	SAME-SEX RELATIONSHIPS	STIGMA	RECOGNITION
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In recent years, the question of whether and how society should recognise committed same-sex relationships has become a contentious policy issue (Herek, 2006). This controversy is interesting because same-sex and heterosexual couples have been found to share many common defining characteristics (Rostosky, Riggle, Gray & Hatton, 2007). Currently, only ten of the 193 United Nation countries have legalised same-sex marriage (Coalition for marriage, 2012). MP's in the UK have voted in favour of the marriage (same-sex couples) bill proposed by the coalition government. If the bill is passed in law, full civil marriage equal to that of a heterosexual marriage will become possible for same sex couples (BBC, 2013). At the time of writing, same-sex couples are only granted civil partnership status (Equal civil marriage, 2012) allowing those in same-sex partnerships legal recognition of their relationship. Civil partnership entitles couples to similar treatment and benefits to those afforded heterosexual married couples but falls short of a full marriage. Unlike full marital status, those in civil partnerships have no assured rights to survivor benefits; which married individuals automatically receive. With on-going media coverage of the gay marriage debate firmly focused on the opposition, there is a fundamental need to access the views of the gay and lesbian community and specifically; explore how the lack of recognition from society and public policy impacts upon their committed relationships. Therefore, the current exploratory study aimed to employ a qualitative methodology to explore the views and experiences of people in committed same-sex relationships.

Identity

Lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) individuals face the obstacle of developing a positive identity in an environment filled with social stigma and marginalization (Mohr & Kendra, 2011). This social stigma is illustrated by the process of othering (Taket, Crisp, Nevill, Lamaro, Graham & Butler-Godfrey, 2009); distinguishing 'us' from 'them' by naming the other and forming fixed ideas of group membership. This practice may lead to oppression through labelling *difference as deficit*. For those in same-sex relationships LGB people frequently face further stigma as a result of their attachment to a partner of the same sex. This type of stigmatization, known as minority stress (Meyer, 2003) has been found to contribute to decreased well-being and may mean that the committed relationships of same-sex couples are experienced in a context of prejudice (Rostosky, et al, 2007). Support for Meyers' (2003) theory comes from a qualitative study that sampled same-sex married couples in Vermont. Participants were asked to reflect on the first three years of their marriage (Rothblum, Balsam & Solomon, 2011) and reported attributing an increased sense of stability and security to the legal and social status their relationship now held. These accounts suggested that the minority stress previously experienced was ameliorated by an acknowledged legal status, it was also argued to confirm and strengthen the commitment experienced by the couples (Rothblum, Balsam & Solomon, 2011).

Several other studies have attempted to explore the experiences of stigma and minority stress in same-sex relationships. Frost (2011) examined how individuals within sex-sex relationships narrated accounts of stigma and intimacy in their partnerships. Participants' were recruited from the 'relationship stories project' and studied using Internet questionnaires. Prompts such as, how society impacted on key events in their relationship, were used to guide the on-line discussions. Many participants described the devaluation of non-heterosexual sexualities and the

coping mechanisms they had built in order to cope with discrimination. Although Frosts' narrative approach provided an insight into people's lived experiences, it was primarily focused on how stigma affected intimacy in relationships. So much so that stories from participants with no direct link to intimacy were excluded from the analysis. Defining overall relationship quality as intimacy did not allow for any other aspects of the relationships that may have been affected by stigma to emerge. In addition, Rostosky, et al (2007) investigated same-sex couple's experiences of minority stress using participants' conversations about their committed relationships. Couples attributed minority stress to the lack of legal rights a civil partnership provides, negative stereotypes, invalidation of their relationships and disclosure of sexual identity. This study provided further understanding of the stigma and discrimination experienced by those in committed same-sex relationships.

Conversely, evidence has also shown that minority stress can have positive effects on the romantic relationships of LGB people. Maisel & Fingerhut (2011) investigated the effects of a campaign to restrict marriage to one man and one woman. It was hypothesised that minority stressors would be prominent during the campaign due to the focus on anti-gay messages. This was found to be the case for a proportion of the participants but others reported an increase in commitment and intimacy to their partners. The researchers attributed this increased sense of commitment to Kaniasty & Norris' (1995) deterioration and mobilization hypothesis; asserting that minority stress can overpower a couple but it can also bring couples closer together. This evidence may be particularly significant when considering the effects of the current media focus on the gay marriage bill on same-sex couples in the U.K.

Several researchers have attempted to investigate the similarities and differences between heterosexual and homosexual relationships (Gotta, Jay-Green, Rothblum, Solomon, Balsam & Schwartz, 2011; Baker & Elizabeth, 2012; Mohr, Selterman & Fassinger, 2013). A longitudinal comparative study of decision making, the division of household roles and monogamy within same sex and heterosexual couples explored equality between the sets of partners (Gotta, et al, 2011). Results indicated greater equity in household roles and financial responsibility for same-sex couples, studies of romantic attachment by contrast demonstrate few differences between same-sex and different-sex relationships (Mohr, et al, 2013). The decision to marry, whether in same or different-sex partnerships has also been subject to investigation (Baker & Elizabeth, 2012), the key differences to emerge were the lack of pressure same-sex couples reported feeling from family members or society more broadly to formalise their relationship. Findings from comparative research are somewhat mixed but taken collectively suggest that same sex relationships may function in a similar way to heterosexual couples at a basic level but that families, society and tradition place differential expectations upon couples dependent upon their composition.

The extant literature highlights the impact of marriage on same-sex couples; citing practical benefits, social support and relationship satisfaction as reasons individuals choose to enter into same-sex marriages (Herek, 2006). In one of the first studies of its kind, MacIntosh, Reissing & Andruff (2010) had the opportunity to examine the effects of the legalisation on same-sex marriage. They sampled the first cohort of same-sex married couples in North America. Semi-structured interviews were employed to assess the impact of legal marriage on the couples. The key theme to emerge was the social element related to legal marriage; a deeper acceptance of

their relationship and crucially the impact of creating normalisation of their partnership and for other gay and lesbian partnerships. All of the participants' additionally articulated feeling more protected by society. This study highlighted the impact legal marriage has upon same-sex relationships, making advancements for possible longitudinal research with same-sex married couples.

Butler (1990) claimed that a heteronormative discourse presents same-sex relationships as a failed replication of different-sex relationships. This has been evidenced in law, the current forms of legal recognition available to same-sex partners differing to those of heterosexual couples. An exploratory study of the personal journey of one woman and her partner to have their relationship legally recognised highlights this discrepancy (King, 2010). The couple entered into every emerging commitment ceremony in the U.S consistently asserting that their relationship was still not equal to that of a privileged heterosexual relationship. However, they felt that whilst laws did not recognise them, their actions and commitments were, without doubt that of a marriage. Similarly, Goodwin & Butlers' (2009) exploration of civil partnered individuals demonstrated the advantaged status of heterosexual relationships, with participant's still viewing marriage as the definitive form of relationship recognition.

Evidence suggests that individuals in heterosexual marriages experience better mental health than those who are unmarried (Riggle, Rotosky & Horne, 2010; Wight, LeBlanc & Badgett, 2013); with married couples reporting lower levels of psychological distress. This may be as a result of the sense of stability brought about by the legal recognition of marriage. These findings indicate that LGB people are fundamentally disadvantaged as they are in most countries, denied civil marriage. The committed relationships of this minority group are formed largely without approval and are subject to stigma, contributing to minority stress. A crucial study by Wright, et al (2013) investigated this association between legal marriage and mental health utilising the California Health Interview Survey (CHIS). Results revealed that same-sex married individuals as well as married heterosexuals reported significantly less psychological distress than their unmarried counterparts. This highlights the benefits of legal relationship recognition for both heterosexual and homosexual partnerships. However, the study did not investigate the possible reasons behind the findings.

A considerable amount of qualitative research has highlighted the lack of recognition same-sex couples feel is placed upon their relationships. Nonetheless, it is evident that couples are still able to define their own sense of commitment within their partnerships. This is supported by the emergence of coping strategies to manage stigma and minority stress (Rostosky, et al. 2007). Couples have expressed feeling capable of determining their own relationship values in spite of how the law, society and others define it (Frost, 2011). There is also further evidence to suggest that same-sex couples may wish to reject the heteronormative institution of marriage as it does not candidly reflect the nature of their relationships (Baker & Elizabeth, 2012).

With legal debate prominent and an increased scholarly interest in the experiences of LGBT individuals, the current study aimed to expand on the literature; more specifically to explore whether the lack of legal and societal recognition impacts upon individuals' experiences of committed same-sex relationships. Further research questions stemming from the available literature

were; do people in same-sex relationships feel that instances of stigma and prejudice influence their relationships, do they report differences in their relationships compared with their perceptions of heterosexual relationships and whether they are able to define their own sense of commitment in their relationship despite the lack of recognition it may receive. To explore the research questions a qualitative methodology was utilized, seeking to reveal the lived experiences of individuals within this marginalized population.

Method

Participants

Six individuals in committed same-sex relationships were recruited to explore the research question. Three females and three males took part in the semi structured interviews with the average participant age being 28 years old. The participants' were in committed relationships ranging in length from nine months to four years. Participants were recruited using purposive sampling as the number of people interviewed was of less importance than the criteria used to select them. An email was sent out to University of Cumbria students' and staff to recruit individuals in same-sex relationships that may be interested in taking part in the study. Only one individual replied to the advertisement therefore the researcher relied upon university acquaintances to recruit five more participants. All participants were supplied with information sheets detailing the nature of the study and informing them that participation was voluntary. They were also asked to sign consent forms explaining that they could withdraw from the study at any time. Following the interview process participants were debriefed and signposted to the relevant support had they felt particularly affected by the study.

Interview schedule

The interviews were guided using prompts informed by the literature review. Participants were asked to provide their views and experiences of possible instances where lack of legal and societal recognition had impacted upon their committed same-sex relationship. The questions relating to stigma and prejudice in same-sex relationships were driven by theories of minority stress as the research aimed to explore whether same-sex couples were able to manage the effects of any discrimination they faced. Further questions were policy driven in response to the recently proposed government bill of equal marriage. These prompts focused more on whether the law as it currently stands effected couples sense of commitment to one another and whether it impacted upon the personal significance of their relationship. The finalised interview prompts included: in what way if any, do instances of prejudice affect your relationship? In your experience does society value gay and straight relationships equally? And are you able to define your own sense of commitment within your relationship, regardless of how others may view it?

Analytic procedure

Interview transcripts from six semi-structured interviews were analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). This particular analytic technique was chosen over other qualitative methodologies as it seeks to explore individuals lived experiences; something crucial to the current research. IPA is concerned with individuals' personal perceptions or accounts of events (Smith, 2008), so was deemed effective for analysis of this study.

The transcripts were analysed in the first instance by reading each one several times to gain an insight into each individual's views and experiences. They were then annotated on an individual level noting significant points that the participant made. Initial comments were then transformed into themes as similar responses and remarks emerged. Each transcript was analysed in this way with female and male transcripts then being put into two groups. The researcher subsequently looked for themes that appeared across groups to draw out the similarities between them.

Reflexivity

Qualitative research often aims to empower marginalised populations; as in the present study. Therefore, it was important to consider the epistemological stance of the research and to ensure reflexivity. The researchers' own sexuality impacted upon the formation of the research question; personal reflexivity allowed the researcher to further reflect upon how their own beliefs and values may have shaped the research. Considering this, the credibility and validity of the research was augmented by employing informant feedback. Participants' were sent copies of their individual interview transcripts and the themes that emerged from the data. This allowed them to articulate whether the interpretations of the researcher were accurate representations of their feelings and experiences. All six participants responded to the email requests for feedback; stating that they were satisfied with the way the researcher had understood their responses and happy with the interpretation of the themes that emerged.

Ethical considerations

The current research was initially proposed and approved by the ethics review panel at the University of Cumbria on July 31st 2012. To ensure the anonymity of the participants due to the sensitive nature of the study each individual was given a number for the interview process and subsequent analysis. Only the researcher had access to the interview recordings and written transcripts. Participants were informed prior to the study via consent forms and information sheets that there was a risk of them becoming upset during the study when recalling possible instances of stigma or prejudice. The researcher endeavoured to keep any discomfort to a minimum by asking the semi-structured questions sensitively. All participants were fully debriefed following the interview to provide them with the relevant support had they felt particularly affected by the study.

Analysis and Discussion

The six interview transcripts were analysed individually to identify emerging themes. The themes that inter-related were then clustered together, forming the final themes for each participant. The transcripts were then analysed across groups looking for similarities and differences between female and male participants. The findings are presented as two groups, female and male; drawing out the superordinate themes for each group before introducing the themes present in both female and male accounts of whether they felt lack of legal and societal recognition impacted upon their same-sex relationships. The findings are discussed as they are presented, suggesting theories from the literature that may offer possible explanations for the participants' responses.

Female themes

Six super-ordinate themes emerged from the analysis of the female participants' transcripts: 'prejudice', 'just the same', 'heteronormative view of marriage', 'unaffected by society', 'not taken seriously' and 'marriage does not matter'.

The thematic map below details the female participants' themes with links to the transcript phrases that formed them.

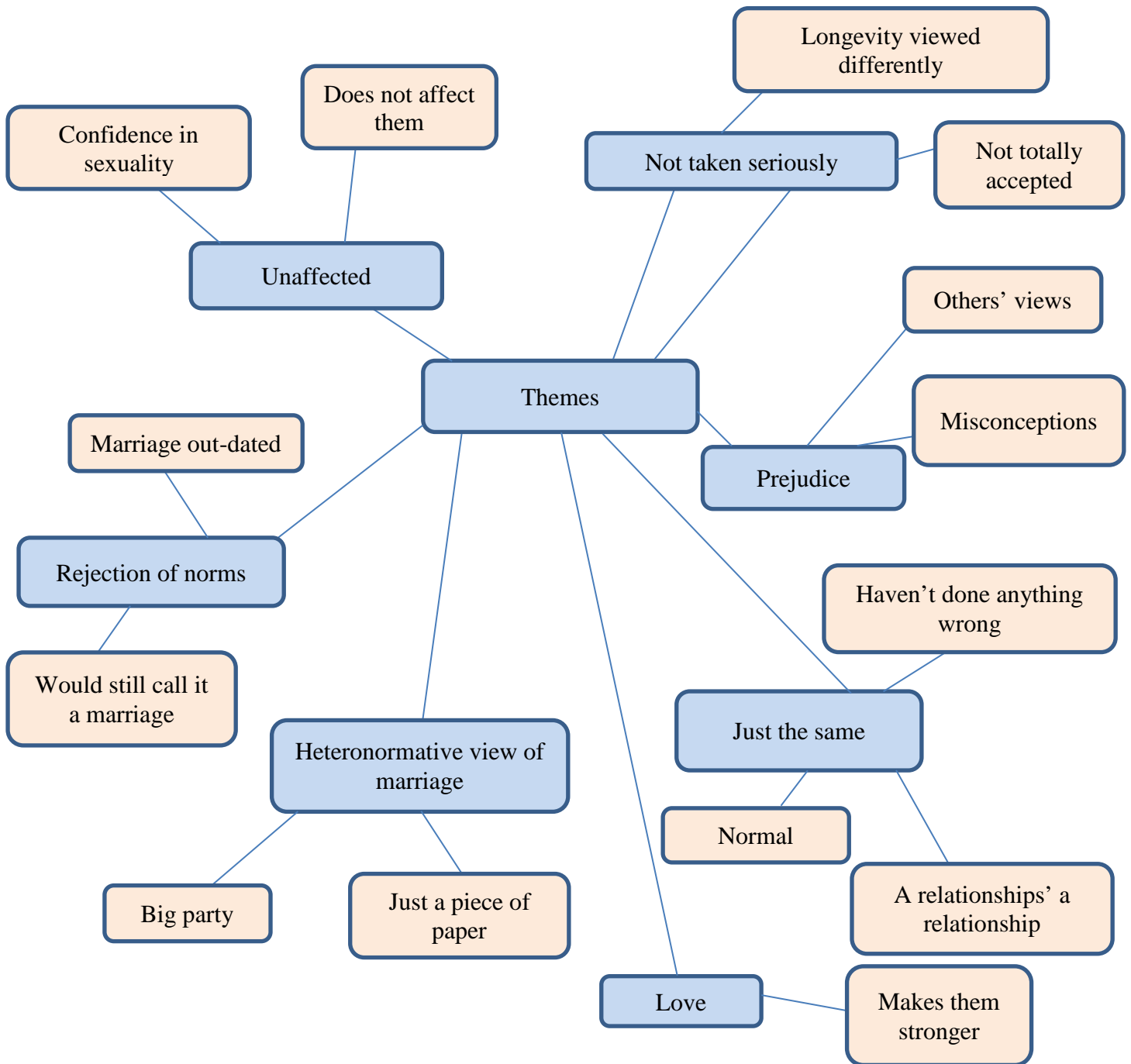


Figure 1: Thematic map displaying the female participants' themes

'Prejudice' refers to participants articulating how other people's views and discrimination impact upon their relationship:

"Somebody'll say something every day we go outside, you know it's that bad. Erm, we used to hold hands when we first got together, in public and now we just don't".

This highlights how instances of prejudice can affect things like demonstrating affection in public. The theme of 'prejudice' is also concerned with how personal participants felt it was that they could not, as it stands have an equal marriage:

"Them saying no, we're not gonna do that for you cause we don't agree with who you are".

This expresses the inconsistencies in fairness that participants talked about. The theme 'Prejudice' mirrors findings from Frosts' (2011) study where participants discussed the devaluation of non-heterosexual sexualities. The study revealed how participants established the link between stigma and intimacy in their relationships. This was evident in the 'Prejudice' theme with participants discussing how instances of stigma have a direct impact on the intimacy they felt they could demonstrate in public. The discrepancies in legal rights and fairness were also part of the theme; with participant's expressing feeling let down by the lack of recognition for their relationships. This lends support to research by Goodwin & Butler (2009) where participants conveyed an awareness of the advantaged status of heterosexual relationships. The theme demonstrates how prejudice impacts not only on an intimacy level but also on some of the individuals perceptions of relationship recognition.

'Just the same' was formed from the way participants expressed their own views on their relationships. Two of the female participants expressed an awareness of how heterosexual and homosexual relationships may be viewed differently by society but said that to them it was just like any other relationship:

"I'm with the person I care about and who I love and so are the majority of people in relationships, to me there's just no difference".

The theme is also present when one of the female participants talked about the differences between civil partnerships and civil marriages:

"Personally, I can't really see a massive difference between them. If I was in a civil partnership with somebody rather than a civil marriage it wouldn't really matter to me because at the end of the day I'm still partnered with that person in some way or another".

The view that it wouldn't really matter to this participant emphasizes that being partnered with someone is, in her view just the same as any other relationship. Although previous studies have attempted to investigate the similarities and differences between gay and straight relationships (Gotta, et al. 2011; Baker & Elizabeth, 2012) very few have simply asked those in same-sex relationships how they view their partnership. The **'Just the same'** theme highlights that for the female

participants in the current study there was no difference for them between their relationship and a relationship between a man and a woman.

The theme '**heteronormative view of marriage**' was established from the way participants described marriage and what it meant to them. They discussed marriage as being a big party and just a piece of paper; asserting that the ceremony itself was not as important as the commitment being made:

"In terms of ceremonies', you know if you're into the big extravagant weddings or whatever you might think it matters. But if you love someone you wouldn't care. I love my partner and I wouldn't really care if we had a civil partnership or a marriage cause I know at the end of the day we'd still be together anyway no matter what was on paper".

This was interpreted as a reflection of how society views marriage and the focus placed upon the ceremony. The theme also refers to the confusion over what a civil partnership is and what a civil marriage is. As a society dominated by a heteronormative discourse marriage is defined as a commitment between a man and a woman. This makes defining gay marriage a difficult concept, even for gay people:

"You know if I was to get a civil partnership it wouldn't make a difference to me getting married, I think I'd like it to be in a church but I'm not bothered about having a religious ceremony at all".

This highlights the confusion over what constitutes a marriage between same-sex partners. It appears that several of the participants thought of a civil partnership as similar to a marriage in a registry office and a civil marriage as a church wedding. These views from the female participants may be in part due to a rejection of the heteronormative view of marriage (Baker & Elizabeth, 2012). All of the females in the study thought it unimportant on a personal level that they be allowed to have a civil marriage.

'**Unaffected by society**' was produced from two female participants expressing that prejudice and societal views did not impact upon their relationship. They discussed how it did not affect the way they felt about their partners; with one of the participants attributing this to a confidence in their own sexuality:

"I think it's also like accepting it yourself and feeling more comfortable with yourself. I think a lot of people, the way they react to you, has a lot to do with the way you hold yourself".

However, the participant later went on to reveal that she felt that other people did not totally accept her relationship, leading to the formation of the theme '**Not taken seriously**'. This is a theme that all of the female participants touched upon in some way; discussing how the longevity of same-sex relationships are perceived differently and that they felt straight relationships were taken more seriously:

"See if like, I was out with my girlfriend and someone was trying to talk to us and you say 'oh no I'm in a relationship with another girl, I don't think they'd respect that I think they'd see it as a challenge".

In addition, another female participant expressed how her partners' mother did not take their relationship seriously in the beginning:

"She'd say things like, don't you wanna wait for a rich man to come and sweep you off your feet".

This emphasizes the challenges people in same-sex relationships face when expressing their commitment to other people.

Although some of the female participants' stated that societies views did not impact upon their relationship they went on to discuss the negative aspects of not being taken seriously.

This may indicate that the lack of earnest from others does have some impact.

The final theme to emerge from the analysis of the female transcripts was '**Marriage doesn't matter**'. This refers to participants views that marriage is somewhat out-dated. All of the females talked about how they did not think that being able to marry would make a difference to their relationship:

"There just bringing this in and I'd wanna prove a point, you know, gay people can get married it's not gonna make any difference to anybody else. That's the only reason I'd choose it. I don't think it makes any difference to us whether we get married or it's a civil partnership."

Here the female participant talks about proving a point being a more significant reason for getting married than the personal difference it would make to her relationship. Another female added to this:

"I dunno marriage to me seems a bit out-dated. I also think that straight people should be able to get civil partnerships as well as gay people if they don't want to get married".

Again, the importance of marriage is brought into question; with this participant viewing civil partnerships' as a viable alternative for both gay and straight couples. This may indicate a possible shift in the standing of marriage in today's diverse society; yet again supporting the rejection of heteronormative views of marriage.

Male themes

Seven superordinate themes emerged from the analysis of the male participants' transcripts: 'Sense of security', 'Impact on relationship', 'Privilege', 'Own commitment', 'Not caring', 'Fear' and 'Upset'. The thematic map below details the male participants' themes with links to the transcript phrases that formed them.

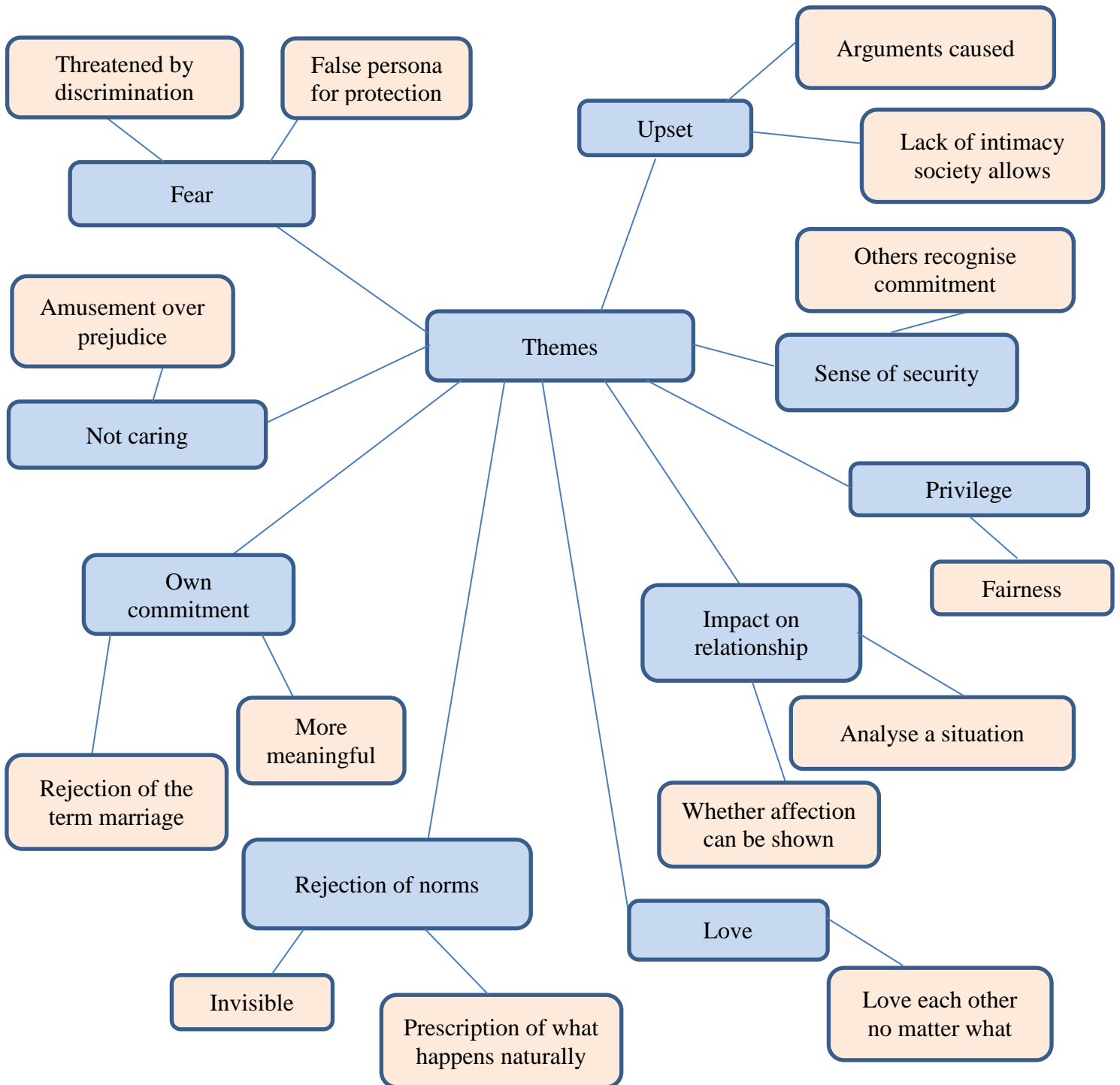


Figure 2: Thematic map displaying the male participants' themes

'Sense of security' refers to how recognition of same-sex relationships has resulted in increased feelings of protection:

"By being in a civil partnership, same-sex partnership you could transfer tenancy rights you could have a mortgage together because the government had put it in legislation that you couldn't be discriminating, they couldn't say 'oh no you can't have a marriage because your two blokes'."

This participant referred to the sense of security civil partnerships offered and the security that came from the government. In addition to the financial security brought about by civil partnerships the feeling of being in a commitment that is recognised by law was also discussed:

"Simply stating I want to be with somebody and I will look after them and they will look after me as a statement, you can do that in a civil partnership"

Here this participant conveys the permissible aspect of a civil partnership. This made making a commitment as a same-sex couple allowable and for this participant appears to provide a sense of security for the relationship. However, in prior studies (Rotosky, et al. 2007) couples have attributed minority stress to the lack of security civil partnerships offer. This demonstrates the individual differences in perceptions of whether this is enough legal recognition and security for same-sex relationships.

'Impact on relationship' stems from participants discussing how lack of recognition affects the way they interact with their partners in different situations:

"When I see my partner I have to decide can we give each other a kiss, is it the right place or are we gonna get subjected to anything from anybody. So it's those things that erm, prevent us from demonstrating our affection in public"

This highlights the decisions people in same-sex relationships have to make when thinking about showing affection to one another. Another participant talked about the awareness they felt they had to have in order to decide whether they could express affection:

"It's always looking around before you do something. Which is a horrible thing to have to do to have to basically analyse a situation before I can hold someone's hand"

The impact on their relationships that these discrepancies have is clear to see when they describe the arguments it can cause:

"That sort of situation where I didn't want to hold his hand walking down the street. If something like that were to happen on a slightly bigger scale, I mean it caused an argument but I think if it was something that constantly happened that, I would become less and less inclined to interact with (partner) out in public"

The same participant also expressed how situations like this could impact on the longevity of their relationship:

"I think that could have repercussions on the relationship because I would hate to feel that the only place I could be myself with my partner would be in my house".

Impact on a personal level is something participants felt was also affected by the lack of public interplay tolerated by society. One participant discussed how not being able to give his partner a hug in public to resolve some sort of conflict affected him:

"It's that thing that's not resolved and so, quite simply it does have an impact on, even just down to health and well-being, if you can't give your partner a hug when you need one, cause you don't want to upset everybody else."

The **'Impact on relationship'** theme highlights how stigma and lack of societal recognition can have an affect not only on same-sex relationships but also on personal well-being. This can be attributed, in some part to minority stress (Meyer, 2003) and how this can impact on both relationships and on a personal level.

The consideration of 'impact on relationship' led to the emergence of the related theme **'Privilege'**. This developed from participants voicing that people in straight relationships do not have to think about how and when they demonstrate affection:

"It's just the sort of thing that I do look at and think that's the sort of thing you don't even think about whereas I have to stop and think is there anyone around that's gonna cause a problem".

And what is acceptable for straight couples:

"So that's why they're there (gay bars) cause it's the only place you can be yourself in terms of just the general expression. If you go to a straight bar men and women are behaving in ways beyond the norms of acceptable expression but that's allowable cause their straight".

The male participants exhibited an awareness of the privilege they felt was granted for heterosexual couples:

"I don't think that I should be anymore privileged than someone else just because I'm gay or like if I was straight I should have the privilege of getting married to my wife but the guy who I know whose madly in love with his boyfriend can't get married properly".

'Privilege' highlights the male participants' perceptions of the advantaged status of heterosexual relationships; supporting Goodwin & Butlers' (2009) inquiry of civil partnered individuals who recognised the same privilege.

The theme **'own commitment'** developed from the emerging themes 'meaningful' and 'what works for us'. They are associated with participants expressing how they defined their own sense of commitment in spite of how society or the law defined it:

"It's a relationship between me and (partner) it's how we want it to be. There are a few quirky things we do that the rest of society think, what the hell, but we don't care cause it works for us"

One of the male participants articulated how for him, a relationship is nothing to do with how society views' it:

"For me, a relationships personal between two people and society shouldn't ever get involved in it. It's just like saying what society would class as a normal family, a man and a woman. If they were in a relationship and the man did all the shopping and the woman went out to work then society would think that she wears the trousers in the relationship. But if it works for them who is anybody to say that's wrong?"

'Own commitment' also refers to what participants felt gave value to their relationships. Here one participant talks about the commitment him and his partner share:

"The only way I look at it is I love (partner) and he loves me and we live together now. It's the longest relationship either of us has been in; we both want exactly the same thing not just now but in the future as well. We've both got different tastes but similarities that bring us together and it's nice to have something that we don't have in common so that we have something to talk about."

The male participants discussed things that make their relationships unique to them and how they expressed their commitment within their relationships. It is evident that the participants could still define their own sense of commitment despite how society or the law defines it. This is something that previous researchers have placed emphasis on (Rotosky, et al. 2007; Frost, 2011), with couples in former qualitative studies stating how they characterized their own relationship values.

The theme **'Not caring'** is derived from participants stating that they did not care about how anyone else viewed their relationship:

"When I was younger it probably used to, I didn't wanna get prejudice or discrimination in the street so I wouldn't have flaunted it in people's faces. Now it's just, well I don't really care, I don't really care what people think."

Participants also expressed amusement over people's misconceptions about same-sex relationships:

"The fact that you have to think that there's a man and a woman in a relationship and still have to try and justify that there's a man and woman in a relationship; even if it's two men or two women. I just think you're just beyond amusing now."

'Not caring' may suggest a shift in the emphasis placed upon other people's views; at least for the male participants. Although they have expressed the impact lack of recognition has on their relationships it is evident from this theme and the theme 'own commitment' that they can articulate what works for them and appear to regard this as highly important.

'Fear' represents how some of the male participants have felt threatened by instances of prejudice and discrimination. One participant talked about how he felt walking down a main road with his partner, late at night:

"It was just sort of like there are a lot of drunk people around. If they see us and get the wrong idea in their heads, it's literally gonna take for someone to run over and punch me or him straight in the face."

Here the participant described the fear of being physically assaulted when being around people that may react in a hostile way. The same participant later discussed being in another situation; a football ground, and how that impacted upon his behaviour:

"I didn't wanna be on my own in that situation cause I don't feel comfortable going to football grounds cause I just feel like it's a very masculine area that is mainly dominated by men. If I was to kiss a guy in the middle of a football stand I'd feel that somebody would turn around and be f-ing and blinding."

The theme also refers to, again, the decision of whether to demonstrate affection. The fear that arises for the participants is evident when one participant discussed deciding whether to give his partner a kiss:

"Is it the right place or are we gonna get subjected to anything from anybody; either of us. Like I might not but my partner might get something or another."

Here the male participants' described feeling threatened and afraid in certain situations. These feelings expressed may indicate minority stress (Meyer, 2003). Researchers have attempted to explore the link between minority stress and relationship satisfaction (Rotosky, et al. 2007). In the present study participants have conveyed how this can impact upon their relationships when explaining the judgement required before expressing affection in public. They also established the personal effects of minority stress, in this theme when talking about feeling uncomfortable in particular locations.

The theme '**Upset**' is concerned with the sadness participants expressed over several aspects of the lack of recognition they experience. Fairness was something that led to the formation of this theme; with all of the male participants touching upon the upset caused by a discrepancy in fairness:

"Whoever you fall in love with is who you fall in love with and if you wanna get married then you should be able to get married; there shouldn't be this whole 'well you're gay so it has to be different'."

The sadness was clear from the emotive responses participants provided when asked about how they thought the lack of recognition impacted on same-sex relationships:

"It would be quite upsetting at the fact that really I could say this is my husband but really he's not in terms of everybody else. He's not my husband he's a civil partner."

'**Upset**' was also present when participants were asked about the differences between gay and straight relationships. This emerged as the participants felt that for them, their relationships were no different:

“For me there is no difference whatsoever cause everybody’s got their own individual like personalities regardless of who you are. A relationship is a relationship at the end of the day, it doesn’t matter what your gender is. It’s exactly the same thing.”

The lack of fairness described in society and the law can be attributed in part to othering (Taket, et al. 2009). The process of labelling difference as deficit maintains homogeneity for heterosexual relationships; making same-sex relationships the opposite of what is deemed normal by society. This can lead to upset which is evident in the current theme, particularly when the participants asserted they saw no difference between their own relationships and heterosexual relationships.

Themes identified across groups

Two super-ordinate themes were present in both female and male transcripts: ‘Love’ and ‘Rejection of norms’.

‘**Love**’ emerged from all of the participants communicating the love for their same-sex partner. They discussed how love was of more importance than any of the obstacles they may have faced and love was how they defined their sense of commitment to each other. Two of the participants mentioned that prejudice and discrimination made their relationships stronger and the theme of love had a strong presence:

“We’re just being normal people who love each other, erm, when people do things or say things it makes you stronger as a couple I think.”

And:

“Yeah it makes us stronger cause, you know I’m not gonna let these people effect our relationship, we love each other, we’re not gonna let them get in our way.”

The theme was also apparent when participants were asked if they could still define their commitment to one another in spite of lack of legal and societal recognition:

“The only way I look at it is that I love (partner) and he loves me. And that’s all that it is, it’s nothing more than that and I don’t particularly want any more than that”.

Some of the participants articulated how overcoming barriers together made them stronger as a couple. This may demonstrate the emergence of the positive effects of minority stress. Maisel & Fingerhut’s (2011) study found that a campaign that they thought would heighten minority stress resulted in an increased sense of commitment and intimacy between partners in some cases. When considering the current changes taking place in U.K legislation and the media focus placed upon opposition of gay marriage it is evident that the participants in this study still feel able to define their love and commitment in their same-sex relationships.

The second theme that emerged from both groups of transcripts was ‘**Rejection of norms**’. This refers to participants rejecting heterosexual norms such as, rejection of the term marriage:

“For me I’ve never understood the term marriage wanting to be used by gay people”.

Here this male participant expressed the idea of marriage as a union between a man and a woman, later going onto state:

“Well if I say I’m married people assume I’m married to a woman. Hang on a minute, I’ve spent all my life fighting for gay rights so that we are seen and not invisible why would I want to go back to being invisible again? That’s hiding everything, so you say you’re married so that nobody will give you awkward questions. I don’t buy that.”

Several of the participants further rejected the religious aspect of marriage:

“Like people who get married now they don’t like believe in god and that’s probably what the marriage things all about isn’t it like a union in the eyes of god”.

This participant sees marriage as defined by religious constraints, picking up on heterosexual couples that get married in church but don’t believe in god. Another participant expressed similar views on the religious position of marriage:

“If I had the opportunity to get married in a church I’d consider it but I wouldn’t be bothered about the religious stuff it would just be because it was in a church and I like churches”.

The meaning of the word marriage and where it comes from was something that did not fit with participants views of their relationships:

“For me it’s where does marriage come from, there’s an inequality there that’s beyond sexual orientation, it’s gender imbalance.”

They also discussed how the heteronormative discourse surrounding committed relationships and family are negative in terms of same-sex relationships and families:

“Family values, we’ve gotta get back to the man and the woman and that concept itself strangles a gay relationship.”

This idea of a heteronormative society is discussed as detrimental to same-sex relationships with many of the participants touching upon the lack of value it gives their relationships. This is supported by Butler (1990) who asserts that a heteronormative discourse upholds same-sex relationships in the context of a failed replication of heterosexual relationships. The rejection of heterosexual norms; in particular rejection of the term marriage suggests that the participants in the current study outlined their own relationship values, unique to what works for them.

Limitations

Although the study ran successfully; generating a rich volume of data, limitations must be taken into account. Some of the participants displayed confusion over the differences between a civil partnership and a civil marriage. The researcher explained the legal differences when this confusion became apparent but it may have been beneficial to make clear the current legal rights of same-sex couples at the beginning of the study. This may have allowed more in depth views to emerge regarding participants’ views on the legality aspect of the study. The researchers’ role in shaping the research and the subsequent analysis is something which should also be noted. The statement of reflexivity aimed to clarify how the researchers own sexuality and beliefs impacted on the formation of the research questions. In addition, informant feedback was employed to provide participants with the

opportunity to articulate whether their responses had been accurately interpreted. However, the resulting analysis and the conclusions drawn from it are ultimately influenced by the researcher.

It is also important to note that the experiences and views included in the analysis are specific to the participants at the time of interview and cannot be assumed to reflect those in committed same-sex relationships in the wider population. Participants' responses are expected to have been influenced by the questions asked by the researcher. It is also likely that a different researcher and different questions would have resulted in different replies. The way in which participants were recruited is a further issue that may have impacted upon the research. Participants' were recruited using purposive sampling as in this instance the characteristics of the sample were of more importance than the number of participants. Whilst the criterion used to select the participants was fundamental to the study it may have been influenced by selection bias.

Conclusion

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore individual's perceptions of whether lack of recognition from society and the law impacted upon their same-sex relationship. The subsequent analysis revealed many themes consistent with existing research on same-sex relationships. Prejudice and the impact of this on both a personal and relationship level was a key theme throughout the participants' transcripts. Minority stress (Meyer, 2003) appears to be an issue effecting same-sex relationships; with several participants' expressing how judgements and discrimination from others impacted on their relationships.

A key concern impacting on same-sex relationships from the present study is how lack of recognition effects the way the participants interact with their partners in public. The decision over whether to demonstrate affection emerged frequently across the transcripts. For these individuals in same-sex relationships having to evaluate their surroundings before giving their partner a hug or a kiss clearly affected them; with some participants noting the tensions this caused between themselves and their partner. The male participants in particular highlighted how difficult it was to behave like a 'normal' couple in public, suggesting that they perceived it to be more challenging for males than females. Perhaps future studies could investigate this further; looking at the possible differences in tolerance for gay and lesbian relationships.

Whilst several of the participants talked about not caring and stated that society's views did not affect their relationship they still emphasized the frustration and hurt caused by their relationship not being taken seriously. This frustration was also present in an awareness of the privileged status of heterosexual couples from some of the participants. Mindfulness of this privileged status was evident when participants discussed what is acceptable for straight couples but not for same-sex couples. These views from the participants echo Butlers' (1990) understanding of how heterosexual privilege confirms same-sex relationships as failed imitations of heterosexual relationships.

The individuals in the study appeared to view their relationship as no different to a heterosexual relationship, describing their commitments to their partners as loving relationships with shared interests that brought them together. However, the rejection of heterosexual norms and for some rejection of the term marriage

suggests that a traditional marriage as is viewed by society does not reflect the nature of same-sex relationships. This is supported by previous research (Baker & Elizabeth, 2012) stating that same-sex couples may wish to reject the institution of marriage as it does not represent the essence of their relationships. Yet, the participants' in the study seemed to question the fairness over the inconsistencies in legal rights; asserting that they were in relationships with people that they loved. This suggests that although many of them placed little importance on marriage, recognition of their relationships as equal to heterosexual relationships is something that is required. What is evident from the participants is their ability to define their commitment to their partners in spite of how society or the law defines it. The theme of love was present across all of the transcripts and it is clear that legal recognition is secondary to this.

In conclusion, the participants in the present study appeared to experience a greater impact on their relationships from others' views than legal definitions. Whilst legalising gay marriage would serve to provide normalisation of same-sex relationships it is likely that until same-sex relationships are fully accepted and tolerated by society, stigma and prejudice will continue to impact upon them. Therefore, redefining marriage as the government are currently striving for may require further research with same-sex couples as to whether this is warranted. Future research should seek to explore how the lack of public interaction society allows same-sex couples impacts upon their interaction in private and overall relationship well-being. If same-sex couples feel restricted in how open they can be within society it may be of interest to examine whether this specific area of marginalization affects the relationship quality of LGB people.

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