

Public sex, private intimacy and sexual exclusivity in men's formalized same-sex relationships

Sexualities

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journals.sagepub.com/home/sex**Brian Heaphy and James Hodgson** 

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Abstract

This article revisits the personal stories that younger male civil partners told about their sexual practices, in what most termed their 'marriage', to generate insights into the extent to which they succumbed to the dangers that critics of same-sex marriage foretold. It provides a baseline analysis against which the findings of future studies of both heterosexual and same-sex marriages and civil partnerships can be compared. The data we discuss are comprised of joint ($n = 25$) and individual ($n = 50$) interviews with couples. Participants' stories about 'public', 'private' and 'exclusive' sex can appear to support the predictions of some key critics. Participants tended to make commitments to sexual monogamy and link their sexual practices to deepening couple intimacy. However, viewed as stories of socioculturally shaped and biographically embedded sexual practices, they offer insights into the more complex relationships between civil partnership, marriage, sexual exclusivity and intimacy. On closer examination, they suggest it is not simply the case that civil partnership or same-sex marriage (and marriage more generally) 'imposes' heteronormative sexual conventions but that relational biographies are significant in shaping simultaneously conventional *and* deconstructive approaches to married sexuality. Partners in formalized same-sex relationships do not simply follow heterosexual norms. Rather, they juggle the often contradictory norms of mainstream *and* queer sexual cultures. Understanding the implications for marriage as an institution requires approaches to analysis that do not pose heterosexual marriage as the 'straw man' of queer analysis.

Keywords

Same-sex, heterosexual, marriage, civil partnership, queer, conventions, biographies

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Introduction

Early critics of same-sex marriage argued that the formalization of same-sex relationships through marriage or marriage-like legal arrangements would have negative consequences for same-sex relational cultures. Specifically, it was feared that marriage would blunt distinctively queer approaches to intimacy by limiting sexual practices to the respectable committed couple and devaluing non-monogamy and erotic friendships. This study considers key examples of such forewarnings in revisiting a study that personal narratives, generated between 2009 and 2010, of sexual practice told by younger couples (where partners were aged under 35 years) in Civil Partnerships in the United Kingdom. Partners and couples mostly described their relationships as marriages (Heaphy, 2015). The article provides a baseline analysis against which analyses of same-sex and heterosexual marriages and civil partnerships can be compared. On the surface, participants' narratives of 'public', 'private' and 'exclusive' sex appear to support the warnings of critics. The men tended to prioritize the couple bond over other relationships, make commitments to sexual monogamy and link their sexual practices to deepening relational intimacy. However, viewed as socioculturally shaped and biographically embedded stories of practice, they offer insights into the more complex relationships between civil partnership, marriage, monogamy and intimacy. In analyzing these sexual stories, we suggest that it is not simply the case that marriage and marriage-like relationships impose heteronormative conventions but that relational biographies are significant in shaping simultaneously conventional *and* deconstructive approaches to married sexuality. Partners in formalized same-sex relationships do not simply follow heterosexual norms. Rather, they juggle the often contradictory norms of mainstream *and* queer sexual cultures. This has important implications for the conceptualization of contemporary marriage as an institution, which cannot be grasped where heterosexual marriage is the 'straw' man of queer analysis.

Literature review

Ken Plummer has illuminated how personal stories about sex and sexuality can shape new experiences of community, bringing people together around shared tropes like 'coming out' and facilitating new understandings of identity and belonging. Stories about gay sexuality emerged from, shaped, and were shaped by, broader same-sex relational cultures, which some argued posed a challenge to dominant ideas about how relationships could and should operate (Heaphy et al., 1999; Blasius, 1994; Weeks, 2002). It was argued that such relational cultures promoted inventive relational practices in everyday life that were based on the detachment of sexuality from reproduction (Giddens, 1992), grounded in an ethic of friendship (Blasius, 1994; Weeks et al., 2003), gave rise to new forms of life-political erotic friendships (Blasius, 1994) and turned conventional definitions of kinship and family on their heads (Weeks et al., 2003). Some scholars viewed these cultures as transfusing the public sphere with new possibilities for sexual intimacy that undermined the division of 'the private' and 'the public'. Warner (1993) hoped that in time this would lead to democratic and egalitarian social changes on a broader scale, while Duggan (2002) hoped it would lead towards 'building an unmolested collective life'

(Duggan, 2002: 181). This would be based in part on the right to live and behave in public how one behaved in private – the right to take sexuality out of the bedroom and ‘into the streets’ (Duggan, 2002: 181). Other scholars, like the European Late Modernists (especially Giddens, 1992), viewed developments in same-sex relational cultures as part of wider social changes (for example, the separation from sex from reproduction as well as radical individuation) which made sexuality and intimacy a public (or life-political) issue of citizenship.

Despite some broad agreement that sexuality and intimacy raised significant public issues of democracy, equality and citizenship there was disagreement amongst theorists about how such issues should be addressed. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, rights-based activists turned their attention to the question of same-sex relationship recognition and marriage. As same-sex marriage became more politically tangible with the recognition of civil unions (Civil Partnership was legalized in the United Kingdom in 2004), alarm bells were sounded by critics concerned with the politically negative effects of marriage on same-sex relational cultures. Michael Warner described the problem as follows:

Try standing at a party of queer friends and charting all the histories, sexual and nonsexual, among the people in the room. (In some circles this is a common party sport already). You will realize that only a fine and rapidly shifting line separates sexual culture from many other relations of durability and care. The impoverished vocabulary of straight culture tells us that people should be either husbands and wives or (nonsexual) friends. Marriage marks that line. It is not the way many queers live. If there is such a thing as a gay way of life, it consists in these relations, a welter of intimacies outside the framework of professions and institutions and ordinary social obligations (Warner, 2000: 116).

Warner’s arguments are well known. He proposed that by privileging the (presumed monogamous) couple over other relationships, marriage rights activists overlook the diversity of gay relational life and contribute to the retreat of same-sex sexual and relational cultures out of the public sphere (Warner, 2000: 139). With marriage in ascendancy, he argued, sex is only acceptable to society if ‘married, heterosexual, private, loving [...]’, while ‘all other kinds of sex are no more dignified than defecating in public’ (ibid). Warner’s contention was that a renewed focus on gay respectability makes it much easier for conservative authorities to cleanse public spaces of sexuality, particularly those like public bathrooms, sex clubs and parks, because political resistance by gay men (no longer rebellious queers but married, respectable ‘identity gays’) would have been blunted (Warner, 2000).

Lisa Duggan’s equally well-known position is similarly pessimistic, declaring that (same-sex) marriage is a strategy for privatizing gay politics and culture for the new ‘neoliberal world order’ which lacks a ‘vision of a collective, democratic public culture or of an ongoing engagement with contentious, cantankerous queer politics’ (Duggan, 2002: 188–189). Duggan (2002: 179) viewed same-sex marriage as the relational emblem of a ‘new homonormativity’, ‘a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them while promising the possibility

of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption'. Marriage, she suggested, turns our political attentions inward, scrubbing sex from public spaces and discourses and sequestering it to 'privatized' partnerships, where it is 'domesticated'. Ruskola (2005), writing soon after the outcome of *Lawrence v. Texas*,¹ suggested that gay marriage is acceptable because it shepherds sex into a form more palatable to straight society – conjugal relations taking place within the marital bed: 'The intimate sphere of the family [...] is the one place where a liberal society not only permits but expects its citizens to shed their individuality and connect with others. And the privileged intimate bond in this most private of spheres is the sexual one between a man and a woman' (Ruskola, 2005: 245).

Theorists like Warner, Duggan and Ruskola proposed that same-sex marriage would clean up a messy sexual public of unconventional intimate relationships, while neutralizing the egalitarian potential that glimmered within such inventive polymorphous bonds. Empirical evidence for their arguments has so far been mixed. Many scholars continue to view same-sex sexual practices as flexible, negotiated and troubling to the heteronormative social order and sensitive to the mutable flows of power. Such practices are thought to stand in contradistinction to heterosexual sex practices (Van Hoof, 2017) which continue to be impacted by hierarchical valuations of gender despite apparent steps towards gender equality in broader society. Mutchler (2000) found that tensions between the major sexual scripts shaping younger gay men's sex practices continued to provide freedom to innovate new scripts and enable degree of sexual agency. Reflexive negotiation and egalitarian forms of relating also continue to feature in studies of gay sex practices by Hoppe (2011), Whittier and Mendez (2004) and Ravenhill and de Visser (2018). Some scholars suggest that public sex cultures have been impacted by relational developments like civil partnership and the legalization of same-sex marriage in ways that Warner and others forewarned. Duncan et al. (2015) found the 'gay scene' was often viewed by gay men as the space in where they could find a partner and realize their ambitions for an committed relationship, but also a space that encourages sexual behaviour in ways thought to be inimical to the formation of a committed relationship. As one of their participants remarked: 'I'm kind of being double-sided, 'cause there's the potential that I would want to go off and have sex with other people but I wouldn't really want them [their partner] to, which is – not good!' (Duncan et al., 2015: 809). For these young gay men, the most valuable form of intimacy is to be found not within erotic friendships and non-conventional intimacies but within the securely committed couple.

Despite Duncan et al.'s (2015) study, what is currently missing from the literature are more in depth analyses of the sexual stories told by partners and couples who have formalized their relationships. What do younger same-sex partners' stories about their sexual and intimate practices tell us about 'public sex' and 'private' and 'exclusive' intimacy after sexual citizenship has been recognized through legal marriage and 'marriage-like' arrangements? To what extent do they indicate diminished sexual and intimate innovation or otherwise, and what are the implications for understanding the changing nature of the institution of marriage as a whole?

Methodology

The personal narratives considered in this article were generated through joint and individual interviews with 25 male couples (50 partners). Partners were aged up to 35 years when they entered civil partnership. Interviews with male same-sex partners were part of a larger study of Civil Partnerships, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (REF: RES-062-23-1308), were undertaken in 2009–2010 (see [Heaphy et al., 2013a, 2013b](#) and for a full account of the methodology). Partners were recruited with the help of registrar offices in England and Wales and through the General Registrar Office of Scotland. Recruiting in terms of civil partnership status meant that interviewees did not necessarily identify in terms of sexuality. Among those who did identify, men almost exclusively identified as ‘gay’. The sample was predominantly white (90%) and mixed in terms of the indicators of social class, rural/urban location and religion. None of the interviewees were previously married. Relationship length ranged from under 6 months to over 10 years, and civil partnership length ranged from 1 month to 5 years. None of the men had children.

The fieldwork comprised of both couple *and* individual interviews. While sexual practices were explicitly discussed in the 50 individual interviews, they did also arise in more ‘organic’ ways in many of the couple interviews. The analysis drew on critical interactionist approaches, with an emphasis on the links between personal and cultural stories of relating, narrative reality and social change (see [Atkinson and Housley, 2003](#); [Gubrium and Holstein, 2009](#); [Heaphy et al., 2013a, 2013b](#); [Plummer, 2002, 1983](#)). By focusing on ‘younger’ civil partnerships, the study generated findings about ‘new’ generational experiences. A drawback of this approach was the inability, within the study, to compare how civil partnership is incorporated into midlife and older experience. However, we drew on the findings of studies of previous generations ([Weeks et al., 2003](#); [Weston, 1991](#)) and of civil partnership among older cohorts ([Auchmuty, 2015](#)) to consider developments in how same-sex relational commitments are organized and framed (see [Heaphy et al., 2013a, 2013b](#)). While analyses of this dataset have been published (see also [Heaphy et al., 2013a, 2013b](#); [Heaphy, 2015](#)), the themes and analysis in this study are novel, having emerged from a full re-examination and reinterpretation of the dataset.

Public sex

A common way participants talked about ‘public sex’ was in reference to a gay ‘scene’. While Mark (25) and Callum (21) viewed themselves as ‘married’, they continued to enjoy spending time in nightclubs, both gay and straight. As young men, clubbing, drinking and going out with friends were part of everyday life, a way of feeling ‘just like everybody else’. However, Mark told us the gay scene often made him uncomfortable. Since entering into civil partnership, the couple had ‘moved away from the gay scene, to, like, more straight friends’. This was partly because, Mark didn’t like ‘other guys or lads hugging or dancing or flirting and stuff like that’ and partly because Mark disapproved of public sex, believing that practices like cottaging (sex in a public toilet) were ‘wrong’. . . His attitude to public sex helped to establish a moral identity, and Mark positioned himself

as morally upright and respectable by framing sex within traditional hierarchies (public = bad and private = good) (c.f. Rubin, 1984). Mark explained his socializing and sexual preferences in terms of 'being married' which, on the surface at least, could be taken to support the notion marriage and marriage-like arrangements promote the domestication of sex insofar as sex is framed as moralistically appropriate only within the privacy of the home, while public sex is rejected as irredeemably 'other'. Mark's partner, Callum told us:

We were out one night and Mark went to the toilet and a guy followed him in and Mark didn't know anything about it or didn't see him or anything, he just went, 'Oh babe I'm just going to the toilet' and then all of a sudden this guy walked in with a big smile on his face. I was like Oh, I'll leave it, I'll leave it, I'll leave it, and then I just wondered what that guy would do, why all of a sudden he went with him so I went in the toilet there was this guy trying to get it on with Mark. Mark was trying to tell him no but his guy was, erm, quite what's the word, not abusive but wouldn't take no for an answer and it just got him upset and me upset because I walked in on a situation where Mark was hopeless. The guy wanted to have his way with him. And it made Mark upset because he only wanted to be with me but he had this guy trying to like take him back to his house, so I think we're just happy with each other.

Callum's story only truly makes sense in the context of the gay scene, a world where brief interactions like catching a glance from another man could flow into a sexual encounter. But in Callum's story, the sexual conventions of the scene enable a predatory interloper; he frames them as risky and dangerous rather than liberating.

Other couples also felt the 'scene' threatened their relationship in some way but were less united on what exactly the scene was or what that threat represented. Some respondents talked specifically about gay cultures of cruising, gay saunas and having multiple sexual partners as presenting risks to a 'married' relationship. Others emphasized drinking, clubbing and partying and made less reference to strictly sexual interactions. Herman (21) told us 'I personally don't like gay lifestyles as its being portrayed by the media [...] like the Soho lifestyle. To have another guy over every other day [...] I don't want that for myself basically, as I said I want a family and that's not really part of a family'. Herman presented the 'Soho lifestyle' as antithetical to his ambitions for family-making and merely a space for transient, anonymous sexual interactions. Frazer (28) and Todd (31), who met on the 'scene' at a nightclub, told a different kind of story. Although they began a committed relationship very soon after meeting, Todd kept up what he called a 'singleton's lifestyle' for the first year (regularly drinking and frequenting nightclubs). This, he said, provoked jealousy in Frazer and led to a relationship-defining argument, the resolution of which saw Todd scale back his participation in the scene and redirect his attention to their relationship. Neither Callum, Mark, Herman or Todd discuss the scene as the focus of community, kinship or erotic friendship. Rather, the only kinship or erotic friendship that appears to matter for these partners is the couple relationship, which is actively threatened by the scene's predominantly sexual ethos. These narratives appear to lend weight to Warner's thesis that same-sex marriage and marriage-like arrangements could diminish the political import of 'public' nature of gay male sex, by dint of the idealized monogamy they promote.

However, what Warner does not account for is the complexity of lived experience, and how diverse relational biographies shape and are shaped by experiences of the scene itself. Mark's view of gay male public sex is nested within a broader story about the difficulties in navigating relationships as a young gay man. Central to his feelings about public sex, he told us, was the fact at some point in his previous relationships he had discovered his partners had participated in sex at service stations ('trucking'), as well as escorting, and talking to other men online in ways that tested the commitment to the relationship. These behaviours were viewed as breaches of trust and caused him considerable emotional pain. By disparaging public sex in the context of the couple interview, Mark underscores his expectations *to* his current partner in an effort to protect himself from re-encountering emotional harm. Rather than simply parroting of an ideological line, his account is as much about the hardships of forming and conducting relationships within what he perceives to be the unstable and uncertain relational context he associates with gay culture as it is an expression of subscription to heteronormative standards.

Some partners viewed public sex cultures within the 'scene' as having value at particular points in their relational biographies. Fredrik (36) recounted that 'the gay scene was always a kind of a means to an end, it was where you found gay men [...] It wasn't somewhere you went because "Oh, isn't that cool". It was cool because there's lots of gay men there'. Fredrik viewed the scene as largely a space for single gay men to meet, and that once they form a couple 'you kind of don't need it anymore'. He did not express a sense of solidarity or commonality with other gay men beyond their shared sexual interests, and saw the scene in pragmatic terms, as having a specific role in a grander scheme about relationship-making. Herman, who rejected the 'Soho lifestyle' in an earlier quotation, also told us that: 'I'm not judging [that lifestyle] because I did it too – I think a lot of gay people did it'. He understood the scene-based lifestyle as a kind of relational and sexual adolescence that had given way to committed coupledom.

Both Fredrik and Herman's comments echo gay 'life stage' arguments, such as that proposed by [Brown et al. \(2013\)](#), which suggest gay men move through a series of linear stages when they come to terms with their sexuality: first developing an awareness of same-sex desire, then forming a new gay identity, and then, having come out to friends and family, 'making up for lost time' by engaging in sexual exploration. While such life stage models are problematic (their universalizing tendency ignores the vast diversity of experiences that gay men actually have), a sense of the scene being important for 'sexual adolescence' chimed with many of the participants who were less antipathetic to gay male public sex cultures. Robert (32) told us that 'one of things about coming out at 15 and being a relatively attractive young guy is how easy it is to get what you want when you use sex. And I've had my fair share of random encounters throughout my life.' Although he 'calmed down' once his relationship became more important to him, the scene nonetheless formed an important part of his reflection on his biography and how came to understand himself. Passage through time and space was entangled with a story about his own developing maturity.

Finally, some of our respondents re-evaluated public sex cultures as their relationship developed. Todd and Frazer both felt that disconnecting from the scene was an important part of how they stabilized their relationships early on, with Todd's departure from his

'singleton's lifestyle' being taken as a sign of commitment to the couple. After they had been 'married' for some time, however, they re-engaged with public sex cultures again and participated in a threesome on holiday. It was clear the couple's attitude towards the scene was shaped by the status of their relationship and by the degree of trust they felt towards their partner.

On the surface, Warner's argument about the deleterious effect of marriage on public sex cultures could seem to be supported by the narratives of public sex that many of our respondents told, where the marriage-like relationship is the sole or primary focus of sexual intimacy. However, a more complex picture also emerges from our data, where men appear derive what they desire from the scene at particular points in their lives, and dis-engage and re-engage with public sex in ways that they negotiate as a couple. In this sense, civil partners can find what they perceive as the scene's ever-present encouragement of sexual connection, a continuing source of both relational threat *and* relational possibility.

Private sex

A major criticism of same-sex marriage and marriage like legal arrangements have been their privatizing impetus: marriage, it is argued, fuses sex to love, promoting the combination of sexual and emotional intimacy only within the confines of 'the home'. As we have seen, in some respects, this argument could seem to be supported by partners' narratives, but this is an overly simplistic interpretation. In this section, we analyse the links between sex and privacy in two respects: firstly, by considering how our couples negotiated the sex they had 'in private', and secondly, the focussing on the other meanings and practices that came to bear on the idea of sexual privacy.

Responding to questions about their sexual lives having entered into Civil Partnership, the men often linked sex in 'marriage' as furthering intimacy and a sense of interconnectedness and as being about emotional togetherness. Some described their sexual practices as having become 'very tender and passionate' (Oliver, 30) or 'soft and affectionate' (Ben, 32). Such responses often generated additional narratives about how sexual experimentation encompassed efforts to improve and develop couple intimacy. This could be purely couple-focussed but could also involve a third partner. Tim (33) talked about feeling more comfortable having sex with his husband Fredrik, partly because he did not feel under pressure to perform, and partly because he and Fredrik were used to each other's bodies. He recounted that the couple occasionally had a threesome in order to 'spice it up a bit'. For most participants, experimentation meant broadening the couple's own sexual repertoire. Callum and Mark engaged in negotiations where they both explored and experimented with a range of different sexual practices to learn what the other enjoyed, so as to be a 'better' or more responsive partner. Their sexual life as a couple came to include a variety of activities, from vanilla sex, to having sex outdoors, naturism, watersports (urine play) and bondage. As Callum remarked: 'Mark has said he likes certain things and if I haven't done them then I'm prepared to do it with him and the same with him'. Accounts like this presented experimentation as important to the

strengthening of the relationship. Keeping sex exciting could form part of the couple's broader relational labour.

Experimentation and creativity tended to be led by one partner more than the other. Daniel (34) recounted that he was interested in a diverse range of sexual practices, from bondage, sadomasochism, cock and ball torture, electro-play, fisting and watersports. While Robert, his partner, considered Daniel to be 'more adventurous', he was nonetheless open to 'trying anything once'. Robert told us that 'sexually, it's interesting because there are things that [Robert] enjoys more than I do. But because I love him I'll do them' [...] that's part of the contract we have with one another.' Here again, sex can be viewed as an aspect of relational labour, part of an implicit or sometimes explicit relationship contract. For partners who had been previously less inclined towards sexual experimentation, civil partnership could provide a sense of relational stability and trust that enabled them to experiment with sex and to try out a range of unconventional sexual practices. Sexual experimentation was framed as a way to deepen the couple connection, to express love and commitment.

Not all our participants equated their civil partnership with greater sexual creativity, underlining the need to take relational biographies into account when considering individuals' sexual practices. OJ (27), who enjoyed S&M, bondage and threesomes, recounted that his sex life had been largely unaffected by entering into a civil partnership. In fact his relational and sexual life before civil partnership was already highly experimental and creative. Civil partnership was not the safety net required to enable a sexual experimentation with his partner. Robert, who prompted much of his and his partner's sexual experimentation, recounted that he while he saw experimentation as increasing their intimacy, it did not entail the expansion of *his* sexual practices per se. These were already diverse prior to committing to Daniel. Mark told us that despite his desire for innovative and experimental sexual practices, sex itself was not actually that important to his idea of what a relationship was about. He did not equate sex with love. In different ways, the specificities of relational and sexual biographies are important to take into account in examining how far experimental 'marital' sex was equated with the development of the couple's intimacy. In addition, eight participants had sexually 'open' relationships. Like Mark, they could separate sex from love and form the couple commitment. Within their civil partnership, Otto (32) and Phil (34), for example, simply carried on with their own established sexual practices, which included casual encounters. As Phil put it: 'it's come up in conversation with other people, when I'm just having a conversation, and Otto has never said to me "that's not what I want, I want a monogamous relationship"'.

Overall, participants' narratives suggest that civil partnership or 'marriage' is not a *consistently* privatizing force. Some participants expressed a sense that unconventional sex practices were long-standing features of their sexual repertoires, developed prior to civil partnership or during what they described as their sexual 'adolescence'. Others simply did not see sex as that important to intimacy, as Fredrik put it: 'it's not the be all and end all'. Thus, they did not reproduce narratives that fused sex and love in ways that some argue characterizes (heterosexual) marriage. Neither did all couples embrace monogamy; several were committed to continuing their 'public' sex lives as individuals. Couples who

considered themselves exclusive and monogamous, like Daniel and Robert, could throw cold water on the idea the married sex as always being about private sex. Daniel recounted how he and Robert had recently begun to enjoy visiting sex clubs together to have sex in a public space with others watching. In a similar way to Todd and Frazer, this putatively 'privatized' couple nonetheless continued to incorporate public space into their sexual practices. If civil partnership is seen as a sanitizing force, cleaning the public sphere by sequestering gay sex within 'the private', several of our participants suggest how this process unfolds imperfectly in everyday life.

There is a second angle to the issue of private sex linked to how some participants declined to talk about specific aspects of their sexual lives. When we provided them with a list of sexual practices (from the Gaydar website) and asked participants to identify their sexual preferences, the majority of participants responded by discussing their sexual practices in some depth. Some participants refused the invitation to recount particular aspects of their own practices and preferences. Others confirmed their interest but were clearly unwilling to discuss some of these in terms of their own practices, as Callum put it: 'some of them I don't want to say'. Clearly, feelings like embarrassment and shame could colour the experience of telling sexual stories in a public context (in this case in an interview with stranger). For others, sex was hard to talk about even inside the privacy of the couple itself. Oliver (30) told us he that he 'finds it quite hard having conversations about sex with anyone'. He understood this to be linked to inherited practices of family and personal privacy. His parents 'did not divulge how they lived their relationship and certainly did not discuss it', even going so far as to communicate to each other in a non-English language that their children could not understand. As Smart (2010, 2011) notes, privacy, non-disclosure or information management are important to the everyday ways in which families manage impressions and relationships, both internally and externally. Oliver's approach to his relationship seemed to be patterned after his parents' marriage; his relational biography shaped his approach to couple practices to the extent that he was 'not very demonstratively physically in public' or comfortable with having an argument in front of other people, nor comfortable discussing sexual intimacy or disclosing sexual desires in most contexts.

Another participant, Herman, openly discussed some elements of his sexuality, including his comfort with diverse sexual practices like BDSM and role-play. But he declined to talk about whether or not he adopted a sexual 'role' (whether he had a preference to be a 'top' or 'bottom', the receptive or penetrative partner in anal sex). Displaying a sociological sensibility, he described the ascription of such a role as 'heterosexual terminology' and as reductive. OJ shed a different light on Herman's story: 'Yes, normally I'm top, Herman had a history of medical problems and for a while saw himself only as top. When we got together, it was something he brought up and he was like, 'Oh, but isn't it going to be boring two tops together?'' This account suggests several reasons for Herman's impression management within the interview: alongside taking a critical view of sexual conventions, his partner's account suggests he was also possibly managing stigma or a sense of shame around his illness and the implications it had for sexual dysfunction.

Writing about same-sex relational cultures, Warner states: 'Shame is bedrock. Queers can be abusive, insulting and vile towards one another, but because abjection is understood to be the shared condition, they also know how to communicate through such camaraderie a moving and unexpected form of generosity' (Warner, 2000: 35). The notion of sexual shame as a *shared* reality was not evident in our participants' discussion of the sexual practices and preferences. In that sense, these sexual stories could lend weight to Warner's broad thesis in two contradictory ways. They could suggest that the majority of participants' same-sex sexual lives nowadays were not experienced as shameful as they were experienced from the perspective of a committed 'married couple'. On the other hand, these stories could also suggest that it was, in fact, the spirit of open communication associated with queer cultures that diminished a sense of sexual shame. As far as those participants who were less comfortable in discussing their sexual lives are concerned, it is in fact difficult to identify if they felt straightforwardly embarrassed when talking about sex, nor is it easy to pinpoint the different sources of shame this might indicate. Other participants clearly felt comfortable, or even keen, to tell their stories of their sexual practices. This suggests that the valuing of privacy in this context may not always be the straightforward result of conforming to a new standard of respectability, but an expression of socio-biographically rooted habitual forces that shape personal understandings sex as a private matter for the individual.

Exclusive sex

The majority of the male couples told us they considered their relationships to be monogamous. Nonetheless, sex with others featured in many of their stories. Broadly speaking, these stories fitted into two groups: stories about sex with others that were considered to be a breach of the relationship's 'rules', and stories about sex with others that worked within the terms of the monogamous relationship (usually in the form of a threesome). Stories about exclusivity often did not align with the predictions made by Warner, Duggan and others. While couples might have superficially followed heterosexual patterns, they also tended to diverge from them in striking ways.

In terms of breaching 'rules', Oliver and civil partner Ben were in a monogamous and sexually exclusive relationship. However, Oliver found his sexual 'drive' had increased after recovering from a period of ill-health, which he said had led him on two occasions to seek out casual sex via the internet. Ben found out about this and confronted Oliver, which led to 'a massive row'. The experience was described as painful for both partners and represented a critical moment in the story of their relationship. This may seem similar to heterosexual tales of infidelity: a wronged party, a betrayal of trust, unruly sexual desire set against the harmony and stability of the couple (Duncombe et al., 2004). However, just as participants' stories hit these major narrative beats, there were also key points of departure. First, prior to the 'affair', neither Oliver nor Ben included sexual fidelity in their 'marriage vows', with Ben having argued that 'we should not have a vow of chastity because in the future we may want to [have sex with other people]'. Second, Oliver separates sex from intimacy in a way that, while characteristic of same-sex relational cultures, is also shaped by his Catholic upbringing. For him 'sex is almost something

which is separate from love' because, while openly enjoying sex makes him feel very guilty, 'having sex with people I do not really care about or I do not really know is much easier,' because 'it just has no emotional value' for him. Finally, while Oliver's infractions prompted a painful discussion with Ben, the couple then resolved the issue by recommitting to monogamy in principle, while also leaving future sex outside the relationship as open to discussion. Oliver's story is inflected at every stage with the values and sexual conventions of public sex cultures (like, for example, the separation of sex from love) and can hardly be said to simply trot out dominant ideas about marital commitment or intimacy. Daniel was straightforward about the monogamy of his relationship with Robert, but nonetheless recounted that earlier on in their civil partnership they occasionally had sex outside it:

We both fucked around. Over the last few years it's a conscious decision of not fucking around, you know, if we want to fuck around we'll have a threesome. Yeah, in the earlier years we both used to cheat on each other I guess for want of a better term.

Daniel gives sex outside the couple a relatively light meaning: 'fucking around' and does not provide details on the number of times it took place, which could suggest the breaches in exclusivity were somewhat unremarkable. Philpot et al. (2018) argue that committed gay relationships often start with a period of monogamy, which is typically idealised as how a couple 'should' be, before they open the relationship up to other sexual partners as trust in the relationship grows. Daniel's story qualifies this picture by differentiating between the 'cheating' which took place early in his relationship and a threesome that is mutually agreed later on in the relationship. He links increasing emotional commitment to greater honesty and openness, rather than to a cessation of sex with others. Although Daniel describes his relationship as monogamous, the model he followed is arguably far closer to committed contemporary same-sex relationships than to that of conventional heterosexual marriages.

Herman also told us that his relationship was monogamous, but that he had made several 'big or small mistakes' by having sex outside the relationship. These had resulted in a difficult discussion with his partner that focused on how to navigate monogamy as the relationship went forward. Rather than tightening the equation of sex with love and commitment, these breaches in exclusivity came to be accepted by both partners as almost inevitable – with the conclusion to their discussions being: 'if we do something like this because it's just natural [...] a human being to be attracted to other human beings'. In line with Philpot et al. (2018), couples and individual partners in our study appeared to be negotiating between ideals of what a marriage-like arrangement 'should' be about (and a desire to present their own relationship as a serious and committed marriage) and the need to accept the sexual 'realities' of desires that went beyond the couple. Fredrik described this as follows: 'my personal view is that most men have two brains, the brain that does the thinking most of the time and then they have their dick that does the thinking [for] the rest – when it's aroused. You put any man in a situation where he's aroused and sexual activity will occur.'

Even couples who presented themselves as wholly committed told us how their ideas about monogamy changed over time in response to shifting desires. Frazer recounted that initially 'we both made it very clear to each other that if we ever slept with somebody else that would be the end of the relationship'. He viewed exclusivity as 'foundational to' the stability of his 'marriage'. But at the same time, Frazer remarked that Todd has been his only sexual partner and he had not 'explored' his sexuality much beyond his current relationship. He did not have the 'sexual adolescence' mentioned by respondents like Daniel or OJ. To compensate for this, Frazer and Todd had discussed opening the relationship up to include sex with other people. Ben, who features as the 'wronged party' in Oliver's tale of infidelity, told us: 'a lot of stuff about marriage is about sexual fidelity. It is a lot to do with children, and I don't necessarily think that same-sex relationships are exactly the same'. Ben leaves open the possibility for sex outside the relationship by reasoning that the rules around exclusivity may not apply to same-sex married couples because they do not necessarily share 'straight' concerns about children, parentage and parental responsibility. Although most of the couples we interviewed conceived of their civil partnerships as monogamous and exclusive and could view breaches of exclusivity to be critical events, rarely was unagreed sex with other people seen as evidence of relational failure. At most, sex outside the relationship was understood as an (sometimes unwelcome) opportunity to clarify the rules of the relationship. Often, such episodes led to renewed commitments to the 'marriage' that somewhat paradoxically came with the possibility of accepting extramarital sex again in the future.

Threesomes were one solution to the issue of wanting to have sex with other people. As noted earlier on, Daniel mentions that although he and Robert have become more exclusive over time, if they want to have sex outside of the couple they would normally choose to have a threesome. Herman told us that '[he and OJ] did have two threesomes' but stated that this was less about having sex with another person and 'just more about us'. These sentiments were echoed by OJ, who found threesomes a helpful way to maintain a sexual connection with Herman while expanding sexual intimacy outside the couple. If civil partnership or marriage can both restrict and multiply the opportunities for sex, arguably Warner's predictions about same-sex marriage (in particular, that it neutralizes the possibility for a 'welter of intimacies') are not wholly convincing.

Not all our couples felt that threesomes offered an ideal resolution to the question of sex with others. Fredrik talked comfortably about moments where sex took place with other people and told us about a threesome that occurred with Tim and a mutual friend. For Fredrik, the threesome itself is almost a non-event. 'It was no big deal', he told us, 'it was a bit rubbish to be honest'. Nor did the threesome have much impact on his relationship: 'we're still friends with the chap, you know, it's caused no problems'. In Fredrik's account, the weighting given to intimacy, friendship and sex seems more shaped by the norms and conventions of same-sex relational cultures, and of erotic friendships, than of heterosexual marriage (see [Weeks, 2002](#); [Weeks et al., 2003](#)). At the same time, however, sex within friendship is described as relatively banal: not a thrilling, transgressive escapade but one moment in a broader story about diverse sexual practices within the marriage.

It is difficult to trace a straightforward ‘domestication’ of sexuality in these narratives, and sex does not seem to be so easily contained within the confines of an intimate and ‘private’ couple in the ways that critics of same-sex marriage have forewarned. While most couples considered themselves monogamous and exclusive, they also subtly or openly disrupted heterosexual conventions. Some monogamous couples had threesomes or found threesomes an effective way of reconceptualizing desire for sex with others; amongst other couples, breaches of monogamous agreements could be dismissed as relatively inconsequential or even natural ‘mistakes’. When they did emerge, arguments about breaches in exclusivity often led (somewhat paradoxically) to discussions in which exclusive monogamy was reaffirmed on watered-down terms. Elsewhere, even the most rigorously monogamous couples appreciated the value of sexual experimentation such that they would consider altering the terms of their relationship to have sex with other people in the future. What looks like the continuation of (heterosexual) conventions around sexual exclusivity in marriage – and is often conceived of as such by the couples themselves – often belies greater complexity, generated in part by the meeting of a heteronormative ethos that supports such conventions *and* a queer ethos that troubles them. It seems fair to say that male same-sex marriages do not simply reproduce or deconstruct the sexual norms of marriage – they simultaneously do both.

Conclusion

To what extent do the personal narratives of formally committed younger same-sex partners evince a newfound sexual conservatism? Has marriage domesticated sexuality? What are the implications of same sex partners’ sexual practices for understanding the changing nature of the institution of marriage as a whole? The predictions around same-sex marriage made by some queer critics in the late 1990s and early 2000s appear to be supported by some of the personal stories generated for our study. It is undeniable that the majority of these couples privileged the marital bond over other erotic-intimate relationships. Some of these couples saw public sexual spaces and practices as a threat to their marriage-like commitment, and love and sex often seemed fused together and contained within the privacy of ‘the home’. Many of our couples also affirmed monogamy as their preferred mode for conducting a relationship. However, the queer critics of same-sex marriage that we have discussed do not take into account the flow of sexual norms, nor the capacity for people (queer identified or otherwise) to negotiate or live and relate with contradictory norms in the context of everyday life. The conventions and rules that shaped our participants’ married-like relationships were not, in general, experienced as rigid determining limits. Rather, the codes for sexual behaviour that structured civil partnerships – monogamy, domesticity and sexual privacy – were often creatively engaged with. Such engagement is productive of, and produced by, a diverse range of relational practices. New conventions could be traced within our data, like the affirmation of threesomes as monogamous behaviour, or the acceptance of breaches in the rules of sexual commitment as critical but not an indication of relational failure. At least within the context of formalized commitments, the relational inventiveness cherished by critics of

marriage is less fragile than some have supposed: it is sustained within the creativity by which our couples reconfigure the sexual conventions of marriage itself.

Broadening out the implications of our analysis, we argue that there are lessons to be learnt about how we conceptualize marriage – heterosexual and same-sex – in the contemporary era. The process of reproduction and deconstruction of sexual norms within same-sex ‘marriage-like’ relationships is likely to be also at work in actual same-sex marriages. This together with the struggle and ensuing recognition of heterosexual civil partnerships suggest that marriage is indeed, as Beck (2002) suggests, a zombie institution, where the institution itself seems to live on but norms and conventions associated with it are undergoing radical change. For example, as is the case with gay sexualities, shame has long been a feature of married women’s (and many men’s) ‘unconventional’ sexual desires and practices. However, heterosexual married women often nowadays make public claims about their rights to sexual ‘freedom’. Like some gay men, married heterosexuals sometimes see themselves as monogamous but engage in threesomes. Few of us would be shocked to hear that some married heterosexuals are openly non-monogamous! In addition, while many heterosexual married partners will view a breach of assumed ‘rules’ as critical for the relationships, others will take it more lightly, especially where sex is deemed less important than emotional intimacy. We can no longer assume to know that heterosexual marriages follow heteronormative sexual conventions, as much as we cannot assume that same-sex relationships do, or that the latter are at the vanguard of sexual innovation. Further research might productively assess both same-sex and heterosexual sexual practices in the context of committed relationships. Indeed a study that was inclusive of both sets of marriage arrangements, and the cultural and socio-biographical influence on diverse sexual practices, could ascertain the value of continuing to discuss marriage as a primary location of heteronormative convention at all. Put another way, understanding the norms of marriages and civil partnerships today – both heterosexual and same-sex – requires more in-depth study of them, that contextualizes them in terms of socioculturally shaped relational biographies and does not fall prey to the temptation to treat marriage as the ‘straw man’ of queer analysis.

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Note

1. *Lawrence v Texas* (2003) was a landmark decision by the United States' Supreme Court, which ruled laws prohibiting same-sex sexual activity between consenting adults as unconstitutional (Ruskola, 2005).

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