Evidence suggests that hostile and unsupportive environments can lead to same-sex relationships being more likely to breakdown. Relate welcomes the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013 as a positive step towards promoting equality and reducing institutional discrimination towards same-sex couples and their relationships. Relate aims to provide effective and inclusive services supporting same-sex couples at all stages of their relationships.
Introduction

For decades Relate has offered services to same-sex and opposite-sex couples alike. We believe in supporting relationships of all types and promoting good quality, strong and stable relationships. We recognise the importance of equal legal recognition of relationships, and also note the negative impact that discrimination, including institutional discrimination, can have on same-sex couples’ well-being. As such we welcome the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013 as a positive step towards promoting equality and reducing institutional discrimination directed towards same-sex couples and their relationships.

Key messages

1. Relate believes in the importance of good quality, strong and stable relationships for both same-sex and opposite-sex couples alike. The evidence says that what matters most is the quality of relationships, not their legal form.

2. Relate believes that that same-sex couples should be able to have their relationships legally recognised if they choose to. This is important to combat stigma and promote a culture change where same-sex relationships are given equal value (to opposite sex relationships) and support is available for those in same sex relationships.

3. Relate aims to provide effective and inclusive services supporting relationships for every section of the community, including same-sex couples, at all stages of their relationships.

4. Relate acknowledges the pressures that can come as part of being a minority group, and evidence suggests that hostile or unsupportive environments can lead to same-sex relationships being more likely to breakdown. Recognition of same-sex marriage may help create a more supportive environment for same-sex relationships (of all types, not only between married couples) to thrive.

Why does same sex marriage matter?

Justice

There is an ever growing evidence base on the relationship quality being more important than relationship type or status when it comes to physical and mental health (Meier, 2013) and child development (Mooney, Oliver, & Smith, 2009; Goodman & Graves, 2010). Despite this, many hold marriage in high esteem and see it as the ultimate recognition of a couple relationship. As such, same-sex couples being excluded from being able to recognise their relationships through marriage could be perceived as a serious injustice (Eekelaar, 2014).
Well-being

Being part of a minority group can lead to unequal treatment in society at large which can result in psychological distress. This is sometimes known as ‘minority stress’ and has a detrimental impact on relationship quality among lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) couples (Otis et al., 2006; Frost & Meyer, 2009). Further to this, analysis of the National Child Development Study indicates that LGBT people are likely to experience less stable relationships, which may well be a result of minority stress (Kneale & Sholl, 2013).

Further evidence from the USA also suggests being prohibited from getting married, which can be seen as institutional discrimination and lead to minority stress, may impact same-sex couples’ mental-wellbeing. The research indicated consistent increases in rates of psychiatric disorders and comorbidity (for 11 out of 13 outcomes) among lesbian, gay and bisexual individuals living in the 16 states where there had been constitutional amendments banning same sex marriage during 2004 and 2005. States where there had been no amendment did not see similar increases (for 12 out of 13 outcomes) (Hatzenbuehler et al., 2010).

Religion

The Coalition for Equal Marriage argued that same-sex marriage is important due to the significance of faith or religion to marriage, and that Civil Partnerships did not provide for a religious ceremony or blessing (Shipman & Smart, 2007). Being excluded from being able to recognise your relationship through a religious ceremony or blessing, as same sex couples were, is likely to be experienced as discrimination.

Relevant statistics

Size of LGBT population

There is no comprehensive estimate of how many people either define themselves as LGBT or whose behaviour reflects LGBT in the UK. The Office for National Statistics estimated that, in 2010, 1% of population were gay, 0.5% were bisexual and a further 0.5% identify as ‘other’ (an amorphous option for those who don’t class themselves heterosexual, gay or bisexual) (Kneale & Sholl, 2013). These statistics have been criticised on a number of accounts: first, because they focus on identity rather than on behaviour or attraction; secondly due to the methodology and question wording used; and thirdly, the statistics also do not include estimates of transgender people (Potter, Bamford, & Kneale, 2011). Overall the figures were significantly below previous estimates that tended to be in the 5-7% region.

Civil partnerships

Up to the end of 2012 there had been a total of 60,454 civil partnerships in the UK since the Civil Partnership Act came into effect in December 2005. This started at a high with 16,106 civil partnerships formed in 2006 (the first complete year in which civil partnerships could be formed) and since then numbers have stabilised with around 6,000 - 7,000 a year since 2008 (Office for National Statistics, 2013).
As we can see from the figure above, there has been significant change within the last 50 years, from the decriminalisation of homosexual acts between men (with certain limitations) through to the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act in 2013 which allows same-sex couples to marry subject to certain restrictions which we outline below.

**Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013**

The Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013 received Royal Assent on 17th July 2013. The act enables same-sex couples to get married in England and Wales, and the first same-sex marriages took place on 29th March 2014. Such marriages are to be treated the same as marriages between a man and a woman. It permits marriages by civil ceremony and also according to religious rites and usages and in religious premises where a religious organisation has opted in.

There are two notable exemptions to this, the Church of England and the Church of Wales.

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1 While there have been other important areas of progress over this period, we've only outlined what we saw as the most major legal changes over this period.
who may not opt in to marrying same sex couples. The Bill does provide a process whereby the Church in Wales can request legislative change to allow marriages of same sex couples in their churches if they wish to do so. In addition there are specific measures taken to protect against obligation or compulsion to carry out or participate in a same sex marriage ceremony and provide protection under equality law for organisations and individual ministers of religions that do not wish to marry same sex couples.

The Bill does not remove the availability of civil partnerships for same sex couples, nor does it allow different sex couples to form civil partnerships.

**Relate’s work on same-sex marriage**

Historically Relate has not taken a stance on same-sex marriage. However Relate has offered its services to same sex couples for many years, helping to support good quality, strong and stable relationships of all types.

**Views of other relevant organisations**

- Penny Mansfield, CEO of OnePlusOne, welcomed the Act:

  > We know that married relationships are less fragile; it seems that making the decision to publicly commit and for that commitment to be recognised publicly can strengthen commitment for some, though not for all. Therefore OnePlusOne welcomes the change in law to allow same sex couples to marry and hopefully strengthen their relationships (OnePlusOne, 2013).

- Tavistock Centre for Couple Relationships (TCCR) response to the Equal Civil Marriage consultation showed that they were strongly in favour of couples being able to marry regardless of gender (TCCR, 2012).

- Many more organisations have not commented on the Act.

**Other organisations in support of the Act**

- Lesbian and Gay Foundation
- Stonewall
- Quakers
- Peter Tatchell Foundation
- The British Humanist Association

**Other organisations critical of the Act**

- Society for the Protection of Unborn Children
- Christian Legal Centre
- Gay Marriage No Thanks
References


This paper was written by Patrick Sholl. It is part of a series of policy positions published by Relate that set out our view on a variety of topics relevant to our work. The positions contain our overarching key messages on a given subject and provide some context including supporting evidence, relevant statistics and the policy and legal background.

More policy positions dealing with other relationship issues can be downloaded from www.relate.org.uk/policy

For further information on the issues raised in this paper please email policyandresearch@relate.org.uk

About Relate

Relate is the UK’s leading relationship support organisation, serving more than one million people through information, support and counselling every year. Our vision is a future in which healthy relationships are actively promoted as the basis of a thriving society.

We aim to develop and support healthy relationships by:

- delivering inclusive, high-quality services that are relevant at every stage of life
- helping couples, families and individuals to make relationships work better
- helping both the public and policy makers improve their understanding of relationships and what makes them flourish.

www.relate.org.uk