

## Civil Union Study Gives Insight Into First Year's Couples

BY PAUL OLSEN

Researchers at the University of Vermont (UVM) recently released results of a study of the differences and similarities among three categories of couples: gay and lesbian couples entered into civil union, committed gay and lesbian couples not joined in civil union, and married heterosexual couples.

UVM psychologists Dr. Esther D. Rothblum and Dr. Sondra E. Solomon compared the three types of couples on a variety of criteria including education, employment, religion, children, housework, and monogamy.

"Professor Sondra Solomon became interested in doing this study because we were at a Vermont university and thus ideally situated to conduct research on Vermont civil unions," Rothblum said in an interview. "No one had studied civil unions before. In fact, when we began the study, civil unions had only been legal for six months. We knew that the results would interest policy makers, lesbians and gay men, and the general public."

In the study, Rothblum and Solomon reviewed approximately 300 survey responses from civil union couples, 200 from married heterosexual couples, and 200 from gay/lesbian couples who have not entered into civil union. Responses came from 44 states. Regarding race/ethnicity, 10 percent of the respondents (and in fact, all civil union couples according to the Vermont Dept of Health statistics) are people of color.

"The married heterosexual couples always included one person who was a sibling of a civil union couple and his/her spouse," Rothblum explained. "This makes the results more conservative (i.e., better) because we are beginning with two couples who are already quite similar (that is, they are probably of the same race and ethnicity, same social class background, same general age, etc.). Had we com-

pared civil union couples with other 'newly-weds' in Vermont, for example, and found a lot of demographic differences," she continued, "this would be interpreted as a confound. Similarly, the non-civil union couples come from the friendship circle of civil union couples."

Under Vermont's two-year-old civil union law, gay and lesbian couples are entitled to more than 300 state-provided benefits including inheritance rights, family leave, adoption, public assistance, state tax benefits, and marital communication privileges in Vermont. For most out-of-state couples, entering into civil union is symbolic because, so far, no other state recognizes them.

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According to Rothblum, the study is significant because it is one of the first to look at gay and lesbian couples in legal relationships. "Because civil union certificates are public information, we were able to contact all couples," she said. "This means we can compare couples who responded to those who did not, and this means we can see how representative our study was. In the past, researchers have handed out questionnaires via friendship networks or through gay events and ads in gay papers, so they were never able to know how representative their results were."

The study found that over 90 percent

of couples stated they entered into civil union for love, commitment and legal reasons. More than 50 percent joined in civil union to make a political statement, saying they wanted society to know about lesbian and gay relationships.

Study results comparing lesbians in civil unions, lesbians not in civil unions, and married heterosexual women found differences among the groups. Lesbians had one more year of education than married heterosexual women; married heterosexual women were more likely to have children; and lesbians on average made \$15,000 more than married heterosexual women in the paid workforce.

Married heterosexual women in the study attended religious services more frequent-

Gay men in the study were less likely to have children than married heterosexual men, while gay men in civil unions were more likely to have children than gay men not in civil unions. Regardless of sexual orientation or partnership situation, the men in the study did not differ in income.

Gay men in both types of couples were more likely to identify with no religion compared to married heterosexual men, and the men in all three types of couples spent 6 to 8 hours per week on housework.

Seventy-nine percent of married heterosexual men felt non-monogamy was not okay, compared with only 34 percent of gay men not in civil unions and 50 percent of gay men in civil unions. Over 82 percent of the women in the study, regardless of sexual orientation, said monogamy was important.

Dr. Rothblum declared that the results of the study did not surprise her. "We guessed that civil union couples would be like gay and lesbian couples in many regards, and we also speculated that civil union couples would be like heterosexual married couples in terms of legal issues like owning a house together," she said.

Rothblum hopes the project's results will be useful. "We have heard from policy makers and individuals who are working for civil union benefits in other states," she said. "Our results will allow them to have some data to convince lawmakers and the general public."

The Gill Foundation funded the study for 400 civil union couples, 400 non-civil union couples and 400 married heterosexual couples. "All couples we could not include in this study will be included in the dissertation of graduate student Jelica Todosijevic, and she will be focusing on how couples cope with stress," said Rothblum. ▼

Paul Olsen also writes for In Newsweekly.

## Brits Consider Same-Gender Couples' Rights

BY NAT MICHAEL

According to reports in the British newspaper the *Guardian* (and elsewhere), the Labour government is reviewing proposals to grant legal rights to queer couples and will release its report in the summer of 2003.

"Civil Partnerships" will give same-gender couples property and inheritance rights and recognition as next of kin. There are, however, no plans to extend these rights to straight unmarried couples. A government spokesperson claims that "the Treasury fears about the cost of extending rights to all unmarried couples ..."

The exact extent of the rights included in the report's recommendations have yet to be decided, but may include: right to act as next of kin; right to legal 'divorce'; right to inherit when a partner dies without a will; an exemption from inheritance taxes; survivor's benefits under the deceased partner's pension plan; and the right to sue for damages if the partner is killed.

In Britain, the government

includes a "minister for social exclusion and equalities" in whose portfolio remedies to discrimination fall. That minister, Barbara Roche, said there was an extremely strong case for allowing same sex couples the chance to register their relationships." The major opposition Conservative Party, which designates a "shadow government" of party members, welcomed the review and in the person of Shadow Home Secretary Oliver Letwin, indicated Conservatives would support the measure, as long as it did not try to equate the new status directly with marriage.

The Liberal Party also welcomed the move, characterizing it as "long overdue," and falling short with the exclusion of unmarried heterosexual couples.

Gay rights activist Peter Tatchell said, "Barbara Roche is wrong to exclude unmarried heterosexual couples. They also need legal recognition and protection."

Colin Hart of the Christian Institute claims, "If the special benefits of marriage are given to those in homosexual relationships, then marriage becomes devalued." His point

was disputed by others who suggested that marriage would be more attractive if staying together unmarried carried similar responsibilities.

London Mayor Ken Livingstone is "delighted that the government has recognized the gross inequalities which face same sex couples and that it's taking steps to rectify this." Last year Mayor Livingstone introduced the London Partnership Registry, the first of its kind in Britain, through the Greater London Authority. To date over 350 couples have registered, even though the Partnership Registry does not have the same benefits as the Civil Partnership being proposed. According to a Greater London Authority source, the city's regulation will have to be reviewed after the national government's proposal is released.

Best estimates are that it will be about two years before the government reaches a final decision on Civil Partnership. ▼

Nat Michael is on an extended stay in London, where her partnership is Registered and whence she filed this report.

## Gay Liasons Go Unrecognized

As of press time, Governor-elect-apparent Jim Douglas had not yet responded to a formal letter from gay and lesbian community liaisons Keith Goslant and Virginia Renfrew requesting official recognition.

Goslant sent the letter in early December, as Douglas was appointing his administration's cabinet members and advisors.

OITM's Paul Olsen asked Douglas in a pre-election interview (September, 2002, p. 8) whether he would "maintain a relationship with Vermont's gay and lesbian community through an official liaison." Douglas said he "hadn't thought about that." Further, Douglas said, "I guess the question is broader about liaisons to other communities or organizations. I guess I don't know the answer to that right now."

There has been no indication that Douglas would recognize the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender community's liaisons, given the tenor of his answers during the interview. Most of his answers suggested that he hadn't thought about the issues raised or, when pushed, that he would not treat gay and les-

bian Vermonters any differently from other Vermonters.

Because no candidate received 50 percent of the vote in the general election, Douglas will become the governor if the legislature elects him in a secret ballot. The vote is considered a foregone conclusion because Democrat Doug Racine conceded the election and honored his own pledge to abide by the voters' choice of the candidate with the higher vote total. Ironically, the state legislature is nearly evenly divided, with 69 Democrats, four Progressives, three Independents, and 74 Republicans in the House, and 19 Democrats and 11 Republicans in the Senate.

If all of the Democrats and just three of the Progressives and Independents voted for Racine, the candidate with a strong record of support for the gay and lesbian community's legislative concerns could still have become governor.

Meanwhile, Goslant and Renfrew await the Governor-elect-apparent's response. ▼