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**Nice Day for a White Wedding? Within 21<sup>st</sup> Century Ireland, is the notion of the ‘modern traditional wedding’ still desirable?**

**Third Year Special Research Topic**

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**Date Submitted:** 29/04/2016

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## Abstract

This research paper is a qualitative study of the contemporary Irish wedding day and its ramifications for the brides who are involved in it. I am interested in the various factors that shape Irish women's wedding experiences. Since getting married in 2012 I have become acutely interested in the reasons why contemporary women opt for traditional, expensive weddings that involve a lot of invisible labour that largely falls on them. This interest was sparked as I too opted unwittingly for a wedding that contained all of the aforementioned attributes. The research conducted was qualitative, unstructured interviews with brides from a largely urban setting. Underpinning all of the research are three themes that I identified as being an integral part of the wedding experience, these being; traditions, gender roles and commodity. I have endeavoured for the most part to place this study within a feminist framework.



# Chapter 1

## Introduction

### (1.1) Introduction

Marriage is one of the oldest institutions known to humanity. One could argue, as long as history has been written, people have been getting married. Society expects us to get married in some shape or form. However, getting married is a complicated business. It has numerous stages, from mastering certain complex courtship games, to negotiating the rituals and ceremonies that celebrate the act of marriage, to finally navigating the difficult requirements of domestic life within a heterosexual marriage (Cadwaller 1996). The wedding day is an enormously elaborate round of activity, yet for a lot of people it is the ultimate symbol of a successful relationship. The purpose of this thesis is not to try to understand marriage as an institution. I am simply endeavouring to investigate the event that is the wedding day from a feminist perspective. The actual event of matrimony is steeped in tradition. From the white wedding dress and veil, to walking down the aisle with a predominantly male family member, tradition and ritual plays an important part in getting married. The wedding experience is a highly gendered arena with the event and the pre-wedding labour serving to possibly reinforce conventional male-female roles, either intentionally or unintentionally. Getting married is also a highly commodified affair, where neoliberal wants can subliminally become bride-to-be desires. By investigating these areas of tradition, gender roles and commodification this thesis serves to investigate the appeal of the modern-traditional wedding. But first, I will begin by examining weddings through a historical lens.

### (1.2) Historical Background to Marriage and Weddings

Although this thesis has, from the beginning, stated that it will not examine the institute of marriage, I feel that in order to understand the meaning of the contemporary wedding day, I must briefly examine, historically, how we have now arrived at the modern traditional wedding. Marriage and weddings historically have not been an egalitarian affair. European laws, from the middle ages until the 20<sup>th</sup> century, records the extensive ways in which a husband was allowed to control the body, property and freedom of his wife (Vogel 1994). Long after the abolition of slavery and feudal servitude, women as wives still lacked some of the basic attributes of autonomous legal agency (Vogel 1994). Within Ireland, up until the 1970's marriage could have been described, in legal terms

at least, as a burden to women. The Marriage Bar in Ireland, which was removed in 1973, meant that women, when they married, could not legally keep their jobs in the public service or banks (O'Toole 2012). Until 1976 married women had no rights to the family home in which she lived. Even if the woman was the main earner within the home, her husband could legally sell the family home without her consent (O'Toole 2012). Marital rape was not defined as a crime in Ireland until 1990 and the first successful case was not tried until 2002. A husband was assumed to have the right to have sex with his wife and consent was not, in the eyes of the law, an issue. This bleak historical synopsis only serves to illustrate the origins of the legal context marriage as gendered. It does not take into account the agency that men and women bring to their married lives, especially in the contemporary context, it is however important to bear in mind the historical legal ramification of marriage for women.

Contemporary wedding traditions also carry hidden historical gendered meanings. Wedding traditions that women willingly take part in, such as the wearing of a veil, walking up the aisle with a male family member, are all rife with historical patriarchal meanings. Asking the bride's father for her hand in marriage, which is still relatively common, dates back to a time when marriage was more of a matter of social class and less about love. A father could decide if a groom was suitable and the issue of dowries and other financial arrangements with regard to the bride were discussed between the men (The Knot 2016) (Montemurro 1985). Walking the bride up the aisle or 'giving her away' dates back to medieval times where arranged marriages were the norm and the bride was given to the groom in exchange for some form of property (Bride & Groom 2016) (Montemurro 1985). The wearing of a veil dates back to Roman times and its symbolic significance could be argued is problematic for brides. During an arranged marriage the veil was kept over the face of the bride during the service so that the groom could not back out of the wedding if he didn't like what he saw, it was also worn long to cover the body of the bride, this was to hinder her escape route in case she didn't like the groom (Donohue 2016). While all these traditions on the surface now can be described as 'a bit of fun' it is important to note the gendered meanings behind these customs. There is very few historical subordinating practices for grooms within the wedding day. Historically, marriage as an institution bolstered men's legal standing within society while simultaneously reducing women's. It is worth

bearing in mind this historical gendered analysis of the institute marriage and the wedding day while investigating the contemporary act of matrimony within this thesis.

### (1.3) Themes: Tradition, Gender Roles, Commodification

The act of getting married in Ireland has always been popular. Traditionally a Catholic country, Ireland has a long history of gendered norms when it comes to matrimony. In 2014, the CSO recorded the largest number of weddings in Ireland since 2008, the beginning of the global recession. Of the 22,045 registered weddings in the country, 13,072 were Roman Catholic, while 6,167 were Civil Marriages (CSO 2015). This marks a definite move towards civil ceremonies yet traditional church weddings are still by far the most popular. One must question this from a feminist perspective. Traditional Catholic weddings are by nature a subordinating practice for women, from the actual church service where they must promise to love, honour and obey, to the mandatory marriage course which reinforces stereotyped gendered roles. Do women engage in this tradition due to social practice? Is it still regarded as the 'done thing' or do they involve themselves within in it as a collective experience for their families and loved ones? Is the act of being a bride a continuation of the feminized role in which they live or is it a representation of a deeper understanding of their gendered role within the day? Even within Civil partnerships, wedding labour and work is still predominantly undertaken by the bride. How much do families influence the experience of the civil partnership bride? Is the tradition and ritual that is present within a church wedding as important to the civil partnership bride? Are issues surrounding tradition, ritual and family universal to all weddings? These issues will be examined within this thesis in both theoretical literature and data analysis.

Getting married can become a highly gendered affair. Couples, who once may have been egalitarian within their relationship can find themselves ensconced in a construction of femininity and masculinity that is neither desired nor indicative of their relationship. The media reinforces such constraints, it is hard to escape the gender role reproduction within wedding. T.V. shows such as *Don't Tell the Bride* and *Bridezilla*. Countless bridal magazine and bride blogs offer women monthly doses of romance akin to Mills and Boone novels (Engstrom 2008). The reproduction of gender roles

within the media is none more evident than in *Don't tell the Bride*, a transnational wedding show that offers to flip the gender roles and get the groom to plan the wedding. A constant 'pick of the day' from the Daily Mirror to The Guardian, Breaking News.ie described it as 'a reality T.V. show targeting Bridezillas and their hapless grooms' (BreakingNews.ie 2014). The Independent (2015) in describing the show stated that brides were leaving the 'biggest day of their lives' to the grooms. When gender roles are continually reproduced in all media outlets it makes it difficult for brides and grooms to escape gender conventions. When these gendered conceptions are offered as the norm, they can be hard to break. Do brides and grooms willingly engage in these constructions of hyper femininity and masculinity? If there is a hegemonic construction of gender within weddings do individuals even realise that they are part of it? These issues of gender role reproduction will be dealt with within this thesis.

While the act of getting married may be a traditional one, it is also an expensive one. In January 2015, popular Irish wedding forum, *weddingsonline* released the findings of the largest wedding survey of its kind. They found, through a survey of 2,000 brides that the average cost of getting married in 2014 was €21,219, with 18% of people taking out a loan to fund the day (Mahon 2015). It was also recorded 35% of brides went over budget with 17% overspending by more than €5,000. The cost of getting married in Ireland for some is similar to what they would spend on a deposit for a house, yet people are getting married and are spending more on the day than before (Reynolds 2015). The wedding day has become an extremely commodified experience that is primarily directed at single women. Do market driven, neo-liberal structures accelerate what is desirable and coveted within the wedding experience? Are women sold an idea about what makes the perfect day? Who carries out the labour of the wedding event both formally and informally? While brides-to-be usually carry out the emotional labour of a wedding, who within the wedding industry carries out the invisible labour? It could be argued that this is also a highly gendered space, from wedding dresses being made primarily by women to the clean-up staff at 3.00am after the wedding routinely being made up of women working difficult hours.

#### (1.4) Thesis Motivation and Basic Layout

I was motivated to undertake this research project as I got married in 2012 and I was very surprised at the largess of my wedding; this was something that neither my husband nor I consciously wanted. Although I always identified as a feminist I was surprised at how much I became subsumed into the gendered nature of the wedding, not at the behest of my groom or family, but much to my own accord. Since then I have been acutely interested in the reasons why contemporary women opt for traditional, expensive weddings that involve a lot of invisible labour that largely falls on them. The basic layout of this thesis begins with Chapter 1: Introduction. After this introduction chapter, the next chapter in this thesis is Chapter 2: Literature Review. This chapter examines various theoretical understandings of weddings along the lines of tradition and family, gender roles and commodification. Following the Literature Review is Chapter 3: Research Question, Methods and Methodical Approach Chapter, this chapter gives an outline of the research method that I used within this thesis. Also within this chapter is a statement of my research question and the main objectives of the study. Chapter 4 within this thesis is the Discussion of Findings and Analysis Chapter where I present the findings from the study and analyse them using sociological literature from the literature review. Finally, Chapter 5: Conclusion, will offer conclusions to this study along the aforementioned themes. Also discussed within this chapter is the possibility of further research. Underpinning most of this thesis are the themes of family and tradition, gender roles and commodification. For the most part, I have endeavoured to write this thesis from a feminist perspective.



## Chapter 2

### Literature Review

## (2.1) Introduction: Literature Review

While there has been a considerable amount of feminist research into the act of getting married, the topic has not been oversaturated. Within this literature review I endeavour to discuss aspects or elements of the research that will focus on the role of tradition, gender roles and commodification within the wedding experience. Beginning with the concept of tradition I examined Currie's (1993) article on the making of the 'modern traditional wedding'; a wedding that could be paradoxically described as being modern yet beholdng to tradition. Following this I explored Barn's (1994) article on family and ritual within the modern wedding and how brides can quite often be the purveyor of tradition at these large events. Finally, within the concept of family and tradition I examined Castren and Maillochon's (2009) study about the role of family in deciding crucial elements of the wedding day such as choosing guests. When examining gender roles within wedding days I investigated Fairchild's (2014) work in which she regards weddings as being a window into the process of gender reproduction. Following this I analysed Sniezek's (2005) work into the gendered division of labour with regards to wedding work. The last theme that I examined was the concept of commodification within weddings. I began by surveying Wolf's (1995) anecdotal critique of weddings. I then examined the concept of the political economy and cultural hegemony within wedding media as offered by Engstrom (2008). Following this I explored Otnes and Plek's (2003) book examining the lure of the lavish wedding within modernity. Finally within commodity I consider Matrix's study of weddings through bridal magazines and T.V. shows, paying special attention to the concept of the Do-It-Yourself bride.

## (2.2) Tradition, Ritual and Family

The term 'Modern Traditional Wedding', that I have appropriated for this thesis was coined by Dawn H Currie (1993) in her article 'Here comes the Bride, the Making of a 'Modern Traditional' Wedding in Western Culture'. Currie explores the lived experience of 13 brides and 3 grooms either planning their wedding or having just got married based in Canada. She noted that legal marriage was perceived as an indicator of greater commitment and the wedding ceremony is frequently seen as a 'rite of passage' into adulthood (Currie 1993). She suggested that families save for years and spend

considerable sums on wedding clothes and receptions even though the event is short lived. Currie interprets the persistence of customs as a reminder that emotions and not fact based knowledge surround the activity of a wedding (Currie 1993). She found that despite modifications of wedding vows, participants consciously followed tradition, and in doing so acted out rituals somewhat lacking in progressive meanings. This is a key issue within the study, it is the concept of tradition being reproduced in unthinking ways. This study was relevant for my thesis as Currie explores the rituals and customs that make up the 'modern traditional' wedding. While investigating commodity issues for said brides and grooms, Currie was more interested in the group's experiences with regard to their wedding day. As a ritual, weddings symbolise family ties but beneath this is the reproduction of unequal marital relations and women's wedding work (Currie 1993). However, she also notes that the wedding is a rational pursuit of a pleasurable occasion to celebrate personal and familial relations. As the 'brides day' weddings remain one of the few public occasions where a women's roles within the family is celebrated. Basically Currie looks at the paradox that is the modern traditional wedding.

Family, be it intimate or extended, plays a significant part in the wedding experience. Wedding traditions are included in some shape or form within the event. Mendora W. Barns in her 2014 article, 'Our Family Functions: Functions of Traditional Family Weddings for Modern Brides to Postmodern Families', explores how the traditional functions of formal weddings are still relevant within contemporary society and how these functions are important when trying to understand the modern bride (Barns 2014). Large family weddings encourage extended family bonding. They are usually held in venues big enough to hold large numbers of people and are usually planned months in advance which allows for more friends and family to attend (Barns 2014). New 'invented traditions' are sometimes included in weddings to allow for a greater participation of the wider range of family members (Barns 2014). The lighting of Unity Candles and the tying of hands in Hand Tying Ceremonies allow for the symbolic coming together of the bride and groom, while also allowing for parents and step-parents to take an active role within the ceremony. This idea of tradition within the wedding ceremony is important for my study as a small number of brides that I spoke to voluntarily identified as being traditional. These brides identified as subscribing to traditional rituals and offered

that they knowingly and willingly reproduced them. All of the brides within the sample had varying family relationships, in that a number of brides were close to their parents, while some were independent to them. Yet all of the brides in the sample placed family, close and extended, as an important factor within their wedding decisions. Barns work is important as it looks beyond the commodification and the hegemonic nature of the bridal industry to suggest that tradition and kinship structures also play an important role in producing the modern traditional wedding.

Family and tradition are again examined in Anna-Maija Castren and Florence Maillochon's (2009) article 'Who Chooses the Wedding Guests, the Couple of the Family?' Castren and Maillochon examine how wedding guests play an important part within making the perfect wedding day. They analyse 12 weddings in France and Finland with a view to finding out the dynamics of wedding guest choice. It is a qualitative study in which a number of empirical questions are presented. The first question being; who is responsible for choosing the wedding guests? The second question asks how are the wedding guests distributed, are the guests made up of predominantly family or non-family? The final question deals with who the non-family guests are (Castren & Maillochon 2009). This study is of particular interest to me as the majority of my participants discussed family as being an issue surrounding the wedding. Families seemed to play a significant role in selecting guests. A number of comparisons can be drawn from Castren and Maillochon study and my study. Their results proved that despite couples having a predominantly individualistic discourse when planning their wedding, in the end, the wedding day is still largely a familial affair, with family ties constraining and well as enabling the choices available to the couple (Castren & Maillochon 2009). This study is also important as it displays how brides, as managers of their wedding preparations, are central in deciding how the couple and their personalities, identification or lifestyle are displayed (Castren & Maillochon 2009). When family members of both the bride and groom dictate various aspects of the wedding this can add extra pressure to the bride. This study encapsulates the understanding that weddings are really a family affair, albeit a gendered and classed one too

### (2.3) Gender Roles

Within most weddings is a gendered division of labour. Brides play one gendered role while grooms perform another, while continually reproducing gendered conventional stereotypes. Emily Fairchild's qualitative work, 'Examining Wedding Rituals Through a Multidimensional Lens: The Analytic Importance of Attending to (In)consistency' examines wedding rituals through a multidimensional gender lens. Fairchild examines weddings as a window into the process of gender reproduction, suggesting that the act of matrimony is rife with gendered conventions (Fairchild 2014). However, it is Fairchild's analysis of the dimensions of gender that hold significant importance within the article. Through theoretical analysis she understands gender as being multidimensional in that it operates simultaneously in multiple processes in multiple dimensions of society (Fairchild 2014).

On the individual dimension, people make sense of gender for themselves and have ideas of themselves as gendered; on the interactional dimension, individuals might or might not behave in accordance with sets of expectations based on their gender status; and on the institutional dimension, there are ideologies and organizational structures that shape lives as gendered. Fairchild 2014

She also acknowledges the concept of 'doing gender' in that 'gender is a routine activity in which participants behave and perceive others according to a set of expectations associated with their sex category' (Fairchild 2014). Fairchild, after theoretically exploring gender roles and rituals, examines weddings through a multidimensional lens. Her body of work is significant for my thesis as she demonstrates clearly how gender roles are reproduced at weddings. Interestingly enough, although a significant amount of her sample did not conform to traditional wedding norms, their weddings still proved to be gendered, in that the bride was given away, or carried out the majority of the wedding labour. Her analysis displayed how brides can often be the driving force within these gendered conventions, something that I found consistent within my own analysis. Fairchild suggests that when we do gender appropriately we sustain, reproduce and render legitimate institutional arrangements that are based on a sex category (Fairchild 2014). She also suggests that when people do not behave appropriately within these gendered conventions, he or she is held accountable, not the institutional

arrangement, sanctions are applied if the bride or groom deviates from their gendered stereotype (Fairchild 2014). For the most part these sanctions present as societal judgement that is usually directed at the bride (Fairchild 2014). This idea is important as it shows how being complicit within a gendered role reproduces inequality. On a practical level, this idea has significant merit when analysing bridal performance within in my data.

Another qualitative study of gender roles is Tamara Sniezek (2005) examination of how wedding planning work is divided between the bride and groom. She investigates how couples meaningfully interpret the division of labour within the organisation of their individual weddings. She examines how women have been subliminally prepared for weddings since childhood, through dolls and wedding accessories followed by debutant balls in adolescences. In adulthood, the wedding industry targets women almost exclusively making the wedding an important and desirable part of being a woman (Sniezek 2005). Yet it is Sniezek's analysis of wedding work that is most relevant for my thesis. She suggests that a large portion of work involved in wedding is overlooked as it is frequently 'invisible' stereotypical women's work. Wedding planning involves very similar tasks as routine housework, such as decoration, making meal choices, stamping envelopes etc. Within her study, and my study, women adopted the role as the wedding organiser and thus became the main 'behind the scenes' worker. This understanding of gender roles is significant as a universally, brides complain about doing the mundane wedding work, as well as other tasks associated with getting married. Sniezek (2005) notes the significance of wedding planning as being the first major project that the couple complete together. Sniezek (2005) offers that wedding planning can almost socialise brides and grooms into their respective gender roles that they will adhere to throughout their wedded life. Wedding planning can help to establish the pattern of their division of labour (Sniezek 2005). Studies like Sniezek's help to illustrate the importance of wedding behaviour analysis. In the worst case, what may be perceived as a 'bit of fun' within wedding planning can possibly establish patriarchal power structures within a household that could be reproduced.

#### (2.4) Commodification

In 1995 Naomi Wolf wrote an amusing anecdote in relation to the wedding industry called 'Brideland'. Here Wolf criticises how the rituals surrounding weddings preserves traditional notions of femininity, even while increasing numbers of women see themselves as independent individuals who are not becoming their husbands property. This article is interesting as it combines an analysis of the traditional rituals that surround a wedding while also illustrating the commodification of the day that is directed at women. She describes it as a fantastic, anachronistic world that exists nowhere beyond itself. She describes the theme-parking that is 'The Event', from the preparation of the wedding, to the 'Big Day' to the honeymoon. Wolf conveys how everyone, for the period that is the wedding, is catapulted into middle class. Modern traditional weddings in general can create hyper-visible examples of traditional gender roles, revealing the more durable and constraining forms of gender convention.

It is a theme park in upward mobility, in Brideland, in events surrounding 'The Event', everyone is temporarily upper middle class: everyone routinely throws catered events and hires musicians and sends engraved invitations and keeps carriages or vintage cars awaiting. Wolf 1995

This concept is interesting as it brings the idea of class structure into weddings. It could be argued that Wolf is suggesting, during the course of a wedding, people strive for a class that is not their own, a form of social mobility that everyone can partake in. Wolf's essay was very insightful as a snapshot of the commodification of a wedding. Although it is not a peer-reviewed article, it is more of a social commentary, Wolf is writing this as a feminist yet she understands the allure of Brideland. She negotiates Brideland from a feminist perspective before succumbing to it. I presume that this social commentary is satirical, but this does not make the ideas proffered in it less relevant.

Erika Engstrom's 2008 study 'Unravelling the Knot, Political Economy and Cultural Hegemony in Wedding Media' is an important exploration of U.S. wedding media and the dominant neoliberal concepts that they sell to women. The article examines hegemonic messages about weddings, gender roles and consumption in modern society published by 'The Knot', a bridal media company that has brand extensions into magazines, books and a reality television program (Engstrom 2008).

Engstrom (2008) offers that 'The Knot' and its various media alliances illustrated the political economy of the media. She suggests that 'The Knot' and its media synergy create for its female audiences the image of the perfect wedding, which maintains the status quo by reinforcing femininity and consumerism (Engstrom 2008). This article is important as it proposes that women are sold the idea of the traditional wedding through hegemony, which appears to the uncritical eye as a harmless feminine pursuit, but she suggests that it results in a silent domination that is not experienced as domination at all (Engstrom 2008). She explores how the repetition of messages from wedding media contribute to the creation and maintenance of hegemonic structures. This article is relevant for this study as it places political economy and hegemony within the wedding industry. It shows how wedding media can reinforce a dominant neoliberal agenda that offers only the lavish, white wedding. Overall, Engstrom's (2008) study is beneficial as her justification for studying weddings became mine;

Weddings may be viewed on the surface as mundane and unworthy of serious study. However, when one considers to whom wedding media target themselves (unmarried women) and the cost associated with complying with the dominant version perpetuated by self-interested wedding media, such hegemonic practices deserve critical examination. Engstrom 2008

I became acutely aware that hegemonic messages about hyper-femininity and gender, when directed only at women, could serve to reproduce gendered norms.

Otnes and Pleck, in their 2003 book 'Cinderella Dreams', have reservations about the international wedding industry. They query why the decision to plan and execute elaborate weddings is rarely questioned. The lavish wedding, complete with gowns and trimmings is the dominant form of matrimony in much of global culture today. Internationally marriage is rewarded socially, legally and financially. They offer some theoretical reasons behind the popularity of the lavish wedding such as it being a way to communicate wealth and social prestige before giving their own opinions with regard to the logic behind the lavish wedding. It is suggested that a lavish wedding 'marries the tenants of both consumer culture and romantic love', while also 'offering magical transformations' (Otnes & Pleck 2003). They propose that a lavish wedding 'provides memories of a sacred and singular event'. However, it is their final offering that I am most enthusiastic about, that being that lavish weddings

‘legitimate lavish consumption through the ethics of perfection, the standard that includes the desire for both flawless beauty and perfect performance’. Within my sample, four of the weddings could be described as lavish, in that they cost in excess of €25,000, within these weddings the quest for flawless beauty and/or perfect performance was significant. Lavish consumption played a significant role, with all four brides regretting elements of the day due to overspending. This book was useful within my thesis as it links global consumerism to the desire for upward mobility within social class and the cult of individualism all within the framework of the modern lavish wedding.

Sidney Eve Matrix, in her 2006 article “‘I-Do’ Feminism Courtesy of Martha Stewart Weddings and H.B.C.’s Vow to Wow Club’, explores the irony of the “I-Do” feminist. She examines the wedding industry in the U.S.A. through the lens of middle class women who are not only embracing their wedding day but manicuring it to perfection (Matrix 2006). She suggests that we have entered the era of the “I-Do” feminist, a feminist that could be described as;

A bride who expresses her freedom of choice and liberation from patriarchy and its traditions of coverture by (paradoxically) eagerly embracing (what appear to be) classic trans-normative and hyper-consumerist rituals of the white wedding and housewifery. Matrix 2006

Matrix proposed that the bridal industry reigns supreme as the bride cannot achieve all the goals of the “I-Do” feminist without the help of industry specialists. She suggests that the tale of the ‘Runaway Bride’, a woman who literally ran away from her own wedding because she was crippled with anxiety after planning an all too lavish affair, is offered as a spectre that haunts engaged women, warning them about the perils of planning a wedding without professional help. The article considers the influence of popular wedding industry media on brides. Matrix (2006) pays special attention to Martha Stewart Weddings which ironically, three brides within my study consulted regularly. Matrix notes that popular wedding publications, such as Martha Stewart Weddings, are in the business of normalizing the DIY (Do-It-Yourself) perfect wedding, offering it as being a pleasurable and fun undertaking (Matrix 2006). The lived experience of brides with Matrix’s study was quite different, stressed out brides identified the media as the culprit in establishing unattainable and unreasonable standards of perfection (Matrix 2006).

The participants in my study tended to agree, while in theory, making paper lanterns for a small wedding may be fun, undertaking to cut out 150 gold doves for name tags, (which a participant within my study did), can produce the opposite effect.

### (2.5) Conclusion

In conclusion I would like to suggest that the three themes within this literature review do not stand alone, the themes of traditions, gender roles and commodity are all interlinked. Each bride adhered to elements of each theme and as such these themes were an integral part of their wedding day. The themes that are within this literature review, run right through this thesis. The framework for this thesis, begins in this literature review.



## Chapter Three

### Research Question, Method and Methodical Approach

### (3.1) Research Question and Objectives

In conducting this research I wanted to understand how women primarily negotiate their engagement experience and later their wedding day. I was particularly interested in three areas I identified as being key to the bridal experience, tradition, commodification and gendered roles. I began my research by exploring feminist sociological literature on weddings and it was here that I identified the areas of exploration. Following from this, when I gathered data, the idea of performance became another key area that warranted further study. Performance can be applied to all of my key areas as the brides I interviewed performed various roles within each area. They performed these roles unknowingly and knowingly. After reading literature and gathering data I formulated my research question and my sub-questions;

Nice day for a white wedding? Within 21<sup>st</sup> Century Ireland, is the notion of the ‘modern traditional wedding’ still applicable?

#### Sub-Questions

1. How relevant is tradition, family and ritual to the modern Irish bridal experience?
2. What roles were played by the bride in negotiating her wedding?
3. How did the bride negotiate the economic landscape within her wedding experience?

The research was essentially exploratory in nature in that I had a preconceived idea about weddings through my own personal experience but I had no idea of how other women negotiated the event.

### (3.2) The Qualitative Method

For my research project I used a qualitative approach to research. Qualitative methods can be defined as a research method that is concerned with how the social world is interperated, understood, experienced or produced (Benson 2015). It is flexible and uses relatively unstructured data. Qualitative research emphasises the essential role of subjectivity in the research process while also using verbal rather than statistical forms of analysis (Hammersley 2013). I personally have a preference for qualitative methods of research but quantitative methods are not without their merits.

Quantitative methods of research could be described as a distinct, labelled approach to research that is generally committed to testing a pre-defined hypothesis through using numerical data that is later evaluated using statistical analysis (Hammersley 2013). Qualitative research, as opposed to quantitative research strives to study what happens in the real world, rather than what happens under experimental conditions (Hammersley 2013). It allows for observations and interpretations of the social world. It has been suggested that in the past quantitative research ignored the complex, contingent and context-sensitive character of social life, and the extent to which actions and outcomes are produced by people interoperating situations in diverse ways (Hammersley 2013). In contrast to quantification, qualitative data is generally evaluated through the use of themes or categories that emerge after data collection. This was of particular relevance to me as I had no explicit hypothesis that I wished to test. I was interested in understanding women's experiences of their wedding day by conducting in-depth interviewing of recent brides.

### (3.2.1) Research Paradigm

There are different approaches or 'paradigms' to qualitative research. Paradigms are ways of looking at reality, they are a basic set of beliefs that guide action (Hennink, Hutter & Bailey 2011) (Bailey 2007). Research paradigms are made up of four interrelated beliefs that guide the study, ontology, epistemology, methodology and ethics (Bailey 2007). Ontology refers to what we think reality looks like and how we view the world. Epistemology explores issues such as what is the relationship between the enquirer and the unknown. Methodology refers to how we gain knowledge about the world through research data. Ethics refers to the principle of conduct that the researcher applies to the project (Hennink, Hutter & Bailey 2011). The research for my project was set within an interpretivist paradigm, in that it was focused on interoperating social relationships as well as the processes through which people within a setting navigate and create their social worlds (Bailey 2007). My research focused on Irish weddings from the bride's perspective, paying careful attention to how said women navigated their way through the experience, while simultaneously producing the day. Interpretivists argue that researchers cannot understand why people do what they do without grasping how people interpret and make sense of their world and act on their interpretations (Hammersley 2013). I used this

concept as a guide within my study as I endeavoured to understand how every bride made sense of their own experience while trying to interpret what their wedding day meant to them.

### (3.2.2) Validity, Generalizability & Reliability within the Research

Within any paradigm, qualitative researchers must answer questions about the validity, generalizability and reliability of their work (Baily 2007). Most field researchers primarily concern themselves with validity, also referred to as trustworthiness. Within an interpretivist paradigm, trustworthiness can be the overarching evaluative standard for research (Baily 2007). The research must be believable and worthy of attention. I did this within my research by initially reviewing feminist and sociological literature on weddings and the gendered division of emotional labour. This was followed by conducting eight in-depth interviews that, including breaks, took up to two hours each. Finally, after the field research was complete I returned to literature analysis in order to better understand the data that I had. It has been argued that qualitative methodology has high internal validity in that the in-depth and contextualized nature of qualitative research results in better and more nuanced understandings of the settings and the participants within the study than is possible within quantitative research (Bailey 2007). I endeavoured to do this within my research by producing an accurate representation of the Irish wedding experience from the bride's point of view.

Generalizability or external validity proved more difficult to achieve within my study. External validity refers to the ability to generalize from a sample to a larger population or from one setting to another (Bailey 2007). I found the concept of generalizability difficult working with such a small sample (eight participants). Although I endeavoured to have a diverse sample, the time limitations within my study only allowed for eight participants. Within my study, I had no women of colour or ethnic migrants, and although I included working class women and a woman who had children before marriage I did not have access to women who were in full time receipt of social welfare or with limited educational access. In other words my sample was not indicative of the larger population. However, I hope to substitute the goal of generalizability for transferability, in that the findings from my research can be transferable to other bridal experiences in other settings (Bailey 2007). I cannot

claim that my findings are generalizable to the majority of brides in Ireland, but I can suggest that they could be applied to brides in similar situations to those within my study.

Reliability is another important criterion for evaluating research (Bailey 2007). Initially, before conducting the interviews, I was concerned about the reliability of the data. Data should be reliable or consistent (Bailey 2007). I was worried that the bride's would falsify or distort their answers, either on purpose to promote the idea of a perfect wedding day or unwittingly through distorted recollection. This did not happen possibly because reliable questions tend to produce reliable answers. All brides were asked the same questions and given ample amounts of time to talk through their answers. The respondents each had their own personal story to tell, but overarching issues that occurred within each wedding story were largely universal to all brides. Each bride was also emotional when telling their story, as part of the memory was difficult or overwhelming. These moments occurred at different stages for different brides; some produced tears of joy, some tears of sorrow. This led me to believe that all of the respondents were giving honest and truthful answers.

### (3.2.3) Subjectivity & Reflexivity within the Research

The interpretive paradigm acknowledges the need for subjectivity and reflexivity within qualitative research. It acknowledges that the perspectives of the study participants reflect their subjective views of their social world, and that researchers also bring their subjective influences to the research process, particularly during data collection and interpretation (Hennink, Hutter & Bailey 2011). My own subjectivity allowed for me to identify with the brides as we all shared similar experiences. I married in 2012 and while initially both my husband and I wanted a low key wedding situated in our back garden, I found myself eighteen months later in a large hotel surrounded by 120 guests. I was interested in understanding how my wants for an unobtrusive wedding escalated into a grand affair and if any other brides shared similar experiences. When gathering data I had to exercise caution in order to remain as objective as possible. Data gathering could have easily turned into a reciprocal chat about wedding experiences which was not the object of the study. Initially I think the respondents found this difficult as it was somewhat out of character for me not to be involved in the conversation. However, as the interview progresses each bride found their voice and responded very well.

I was reflexive surrounding issues of authority and power within the interview situation. In order to try to neutralise the power issue I asked the participants to tell me their wedding stories, from one bride to another. On approaching possible participants I informed them that I was interested in the lived experience of Irish brides as I had been one myself. On a practical level, before the interview started I gave all participants a quick rundown on the areas I would be covering within the interview. Internally I was aware of my feminist perspective on the whole process, and I endeavoured to keep the interview as power neutral as possible.

### (3.3) Sources of Data

The source of data that I used for my thesis was my own kinship and work networks. Qualitative research seeks to gain a detailed understanding of a certain phenomenon, to identify socially constructed meaning of the phenomenon and the context in which the phenomenon occurs (Hennink, Hutter & Bailey 2011). This requires a smaller number of participants who are willing to explore issues, but also necessitates the recruitment of participants with specific characteristics that can best inform the research topic (Hennink, Hutter & Bailey 2011). The sampling method that I used was availability sampling, a method of sampling in which respondents are selected on the basis of convenience (Chambliss & Schutt 2013). Available women, who had recently married and were willing to talk to me, became my data. My sample was small, but all women were willing to talk in depth about their wedding and they all shared the same experience, that of being a bride.

The following is a table of the respondents.

RESPONDENT	NATIONALITY	AGE	OCCUPATION	CIVIL/ CHURCH	WEDDING TYPE
MC	Irish	48	Retail, Self Employed	Civil	Moderate Wedding
SM	American	38	Therapist, Self Employed	Civil	Moderate Wedding
TMM	Irish	28	Finance	Civil	Lavish Wedding
DR	Irish	36	Home-maker	Church	Lavish Wedding
PB	Irish	37	Administration Home- maker	Church	Lavish Wedding
MOC	Irish	60	Home-maker	Church	Moderate Wedding
JC	Irish	42	Architect	Civil	Moderate Wedding
LR	Irish	35	Home-maker	Church	Lavish Wedding

### (3.3.1) Interviewing

I chose in-depth interviews as my qualitative field research method. An in-depth interview is a one to one method of data collection that allows the interviewer and an interviewee discussing specific topics in depth, it has also been referred to as a conversation with a purpose (Hennink, Hutter & Bailey 2011). Underpinning all of my research was a feminist approach to the study. Feminist interviewers are interested in uncovering the subjugated knowledge of women's realities that often lie hidden and unarticulated (Hesse-Biber 2013). The interviewer seeks to understand the lived experience of the individual. In-depth interviewing allows for the feminist researcher to access the voices of those who are possibly marginalised within society. It was especially relevant for me as it allowed me to interview women and discuss the various divisions, actual or perceived, that occur within the wedding

realm. My interviews were issue-orientated in that I used the bridal experience as the issue to gain focused information on the entire wedding event (Hesse-Biber 2013).

Using issue-orientated interviews I was able to garner information from participants that may have otherwise been hidden. My questions were open ended with a view to gaining a complete understanding of how the participants experienced their wedding. I then used the data to formulate my research question and sub-questions.

I initially contacted many women via email in my network who were married in order to see if they would take part. I had quite a positive response yet when the time came to actually meet to interview a number of women refused to take part or ignored me. I was left with eight women to interview. Of the larger sample who initially agreed to take part in the research, four women choose to ignore my emails to arrange the interview. After emailing two subsequent times to arrange the interview I felt it was appropriate to not pressure them. They clearly had thought about the study and decided that they did not want to be part of it. I was aware of the possible power dynamic, they were wary of the study from the start and asked me a number of times to email the questions to them rather than meeting to interview. Their possible perception about what the study entailed may have led them to be suspicious of it, however, they may have simply been time poor. Of the final sample, three of the women were interviewed in a public place of their choice, i.e. a coffee shop, two women were interviewed in their place of work during lunch time and three were interviewed in my home. I included one older women in the study to explore the differences between contemporary weddings and weddings that took place 20 years ago. Although all women gave permission for their real name to be used in the study I have chosen to change their names.

### (3.3.2) Issues around the Interviews

The most significant issue surrounding the interviews was time. Time for both myself and time for the interviewees. All but two of the interviews took place in Dublin which meant travelling took up a significant part of my day. The emotional nature of the interview would have suited a longer time frame in which to conduct them. Each respondent had a lot to say about each area and the memories

were highly charged. After talking for twenty minutes about a memory, the respondents were tired, and then we had to move onto something else. It would have possibly been better to split the interview up over two days, but I didn't have the time to do that.

Six of the brides that I interviewed became emotional when talking about their wedding experience, either through joyous memories such as recollection of a proposal or through sad memories such as missing a father or a mother. This was of significance within the study as it was something I had to become sensitive to. I didn't push any of the brides to recollect a painful memory if they didn't want to, whoever was willing to talk, I was happy to listen, but if they brushed it aside I left it and moved on. I did so because I was aware of the public place that the interview was conducted in and that I was only with them for a short time. All brides explained their tears but one bride wanted to move past it quickly, I respected her decision.



## Chapter 4

### Discussion and Analysis of Findings

#### (4.1) Introduction: Discussion and Analysis of Findings

Within this chapter, the discussion and analysis of findings is situated within the three themes that have been offered throughout the thesis, namely tradition, gender roles and commodification. Within the tradition section there is a number of subsections that examines tradition within the engagement, the ritualistic act of giving the bride away and the significance of family within the wedding experience. Following this the theme of gender roles is explored, encompassing subsections that analyse gender role reproduction and wedding labour. The next theme explored is commodity and the prevalence within this study of the lavish wedding. Finally, the last section of this chapter is a brief account of the outliers within this study.

#### (4.2) Traditions: Rituals and Family

Most people can probably describe the key elements that make up a traditional wedding; the white dress, walking down the aisle, the exchanging of rings, the bridal waltz etc. Weddings, more often than not, are sites of tradition. Wedding traditions do not stand alone, they are inextricably linked with various rituals. Rituals have been defined by Barns (2014) as formal actions that are repetitive, structured and filled with symbolism. As a ritual, a wedding can be seen as traditional, including symbols of gender specific roles (Barns 2014). These traditions and rituals are often performed for family members while at the same time promoted by family members. Traditions and rituals are indistinguishably bound up within the shared family experience of weddings. Within this study, no matter how untraditional the brides claimed their wedding service to be, all of the participants wore a white/ off white dress, they all exchanged rings and all of the participants were escorted down the aisle. Tradition and ritual can be hard to escape.

##### (4.2.1) Engagement

Four of the brides within the study claimed that the wedding proposal was a complete shock. While they all had talked about marriage with their partners, they were not anticipating the proposal when it came. However, in all four cases, the bride's family were acutely aware of the impending proposal. LR is 35 and got married after a six months engagement. She is a stay at home mother with one child. Her wedding was one of the most expensive within the sample, coming in over €30,000.

LR                      He did that (*asked parents' permission*) months before, and mam and dad had a bottle of champagne chilling, waiting for me to answer.

PB is 36 and got married one year after her engagement. She works part time and is mother to two children. PB wedding cost approximately €20,000. PB lost her father before her partner proposed noted how the family were all in on the wedding proposal before she was asked.

PB                      But all my family were in on it. I didn't realise. He'd asked my mam and he would havin' loved to ask my dad but that wasn't to be. But he spoke to my dad, which I didn't know, in the October before my dad died, they had a

conversation,.. but now when I think about it, a week before my dad died he said 'I know you're going to end up marrying him' and I was like 'oh', things make sense after.

Both LR and PB noted that they were happy that their respective partners asked their parents for their hand in marriage, stating that they liked it. They both identified as being quite traditional in their approach to getting married, they wanted to be proposed to, and asking parental permission was identified as important to them within the bridal experience,

LR I defiantly looked at it as an achievement in my life... but you now for me, I'd be old fashioned. I was really happy, but I'd be traditional as well.

PB I think it's nice if it comes from them, it's a bit more.. I'm a bit 'fairy-tale' so, it's more romantic

Both LR and PB wanted the occasion. Currie (1993) offers that conventional wedding ceremonies and receptions are filled with customs that are unambiguously patriarchal and that much of the symbolism in Church weddings is sexist. The bride is the object of attention, the exchange usually occurs between the father's bride and the man to be her husband and the ring is a remnant of the brides price (Currie 1993). Currie (1993) offers that the persistence of these customs are a reminder that emotions, not fact based knowledge, surround the activity of the wedding.

Both LR and PB placed their family's happiness within their engagement experience.

LR To be honest, my parents were so happy, and everyone makes you feel so important (*when you're engaged*), but you kinda feel a bit like, wow, you know, now that's just great (*implied stability in the word great*)... it was always a milestone I wanted to achieve, to be engaged, and get my wedding... I had always wanted to be married. Because you're brought up that way, you want to please your parents...

PB mother was actually directly involved in her engagement. PB partner was finding it difficult to get PB out of the car to propose to her in an elaborate pic-nix adventure situated in her deceased father's favourite park.

PB     So he brought me to St. Stephen's Green... where my late dad used to go on his lunch breaks- and I was thinking to myself, -what an insensitive p\*\*\*k, bringing me here, my dad's only dead six months-... I refused to get out of the car, so he then rang my mam, and she told me to get out of the car, to cop the f\*\*k on and get out of the car...

Barns (2014) offers that wedding rituals serve various functions, one of them being uniting two families while simultaneously fostering emotional bonds between family members. LR repeatedly discussed how her engagement brought happiness and security to her parents. LR parents anxiously waited for months for the proposal to be carried out and repeatedly used the narrative of stability, pride and security when discussing the engagement. PB mother and sister were for a long time involved with R planning the engagement. They were waiting by the phone to hear her reply on the day R proposed. These wedding functions served to bond the groom to the bride's family while simultaneously keeping the bride out of the engagement process. This reinforces Curries (1993) narrative that the bride is the object within the wedding. It also reinforces the concept that it is the 'brides occasion', that women are somehow 'otherworldly' within it (Fairchild 2014). The labour involved in the engagement is also another was to socialise women into 'wedding labour'. Being involved in the invisible work in the engagement such as prepping the bride for the proposal, or keeping it a secret, could be argued, sets up mothers, sisters and potential bridesmaids for the wedding labour that is about to start once the wedding is underway.

#### (4.2.2) Giving the Bride Away

All but one participant within this study was given away by a family member. Most were ambivalent to the custom as displayed by TMM. TMM is the youngest bride in the study. She is 28 and two years married. Her wedding was lavish, costing in excess of €30,000, she took eighteen months to prepare for it. TMM works full time in finance.

DOC So who walked you down the aisle?

TMM My dad, to Pachelbel's Cannon. We weren't having a church wedding and I always said it to dad, 'you can still walk me down the aisle, to Pachelbel's Cannon, just not in a church'. It was always a favourite of dads, he always wanted that played when we (daughters) were getting married.

All but one of participants did not note the significance of been 'given away', a custom that symbolically views the bride as an object, being passed from one man to another. DR is 36 and two years married. She got married after being engaged for a year. Her wedding cost in excess €25,000. She is mother to a new born and works part time. DR commented on the interplay between her father and the groom in front of alter.

DR Myself and my dad walked really quickly down the aisle, we hadn't practiced it, I kinda wish we had now. Then when we got down the aisle he made a kinda elaborate joke of pretending to pull me back from my groom, like he was keeping me. Everyone laughed.

DOC How did that make you feel?

DR Well, I was glad that everyone laughed because I was so nervous and felt really out of place. My dad is a bit of a joker so I felt that this really diffused the situation. I knew that M would be nervous as well.

Tradition and ritual are linked here within the act of walking down the aisle for DR. She noted that the experience was nerve wracking for her but she carried it out as it was the perceived 'done thing' and it was a ritual that her family were part of so it was important to include it, even if another option could have been more suitable to her wedding.

PB understood the significance of been given away as she had discussed it with her mother.

PB Now she (*mother*) walked me down the aisle, cause she wanted my uncle to do it and I said well I'm not his daughter- like why would you not walk your daughter- like I'm not his to give away.

PB was the only bride who was walked down the aisle by a family member who contemplated the significance of being given away. The act of being given away was important for PB as it was wrapped up in memories of her father coupled with an urge give her mother an important and meaningful role within the wedding. Castren & Maillochon (2009) argue that family and family relationships need to be constantly displayed since they are subject to change over life course. They offer that children grow up, start an independent life and relationships between adult children and their parents need to be re-established. PB displayed her new family life here in insisting that her mother walked her down the aisle. She re-established her mother's role within her new family and displayed it a prominent place within the wedding ritual. PB seemingly transgressed gendered traditions by rejecting the concept of a male relative giving her away. It could be argued that she took on an older tradition and inscribed a modern take on it.

#### (4.2.3) Family Significance

All of the brides interviewed for this study discussed how their families played a significant role within their weddings. Through helping with wedding work to causing fights during the wedding, the concept of family was fundamentally part of this study. SM is a 38 year old American woman. Her parents split when she was young and she has most family ties with her father. She married K, who is father to two teenage boys. Her wedding cost less than €10,000. SM works full time as a beauty therapist.

SM We didn't want to have a big thing, we just wanted something with the four of us. I actually just wanted to go to Vegas and get married but he wouldn't do that to his mum, so we ended up having a registry office and a party. I wasn't even going to have a party. But when my dad said 'I'm going to come, your aunty is going to come

and your cousin' (*all from America*). And all three of them made a journey over and it was very special

SM also noted that the choosing of guests, on their marginal budget, was difficult.

SM I did feel pressure, yeah. I felt pressure when my family said they were coming and then that impacted on K family. You see I don't have family over here but once they (*K family*) knew I had family coming, they wanted their family to come.

SM felt pressure to please all family members involved and although it was not how she originally wanted it she kept reiterating that the presence of both her and her partner's family made the experience special. In fact, SM got quite emotional talking about her family as she does not see them often and since the wedding her sister has split from her husband. SM informed me that her wedding was the last time they were together. After the wedding she invited her family on honeymoon with them. SM felt it was important for her to include them in all aspects of her wedding after they travelled so far to be with her. Their trip over was unexpected and framed a lot of SM's wedding experience.

Within this study the eight brides interviewed noted some form of stress with family and wedding guest. MOC is the oldest bride in the sample at 60. She got married forty years ago this year. MOC is mother to four adults and she works very hard in the home. MOC made her wedding guest decisions with her parents, her family were paying for the event so it seemed appropriate for her to include them in the decision making.

MOC The wedding went on all night. It was a big wedding, about 140 guests. I am part of big Dublin family, but I had a tons of friends, a real mix of ages, young and old. One of my cousins J.R bullied me, she would have been obvious choice for my bridesmaid, but she would have only upset me. I talked about it with my parents and we decided not to ask any of the cousins. My aunt wouldn't come because of it, but J.R. would have only upset me. My mam was very upset but she understood, my dad said it was my day, so my happiness was the most important.

Broader dynamics in MOC's family system shaped the decision making about the wedding ritual and acted as a form of family tension. Although tension could have possibly occurred between MOC parents and MOC aunt, MOC felt that the possibility of conflict between herself and J.R out weighted the probability of family tension.

LR stated the wedding invitation issues that she had with her mother in law. These issues provided exceptional stress for LR.

LR     She made so many problems. – She didn't like-. B mum is like all diamantes and things like that. And she really was not happy with my invitations cause there was no diamantes on them. – They weren't flashy enough for her. And she wanted so many people, they (*B family*) kept looking for more numbers. I found that so pressuring.

While LR and MOC noted the centrality of their families within their wedding, LR felt overwhelmed by it. Other participants discussed the issues surround guest lists and feuding family members but all participants placed a certain emphasis on family. Castren & Maillochon (2009) note that weddings are culturally such a meaningful moment that the presence of at least some kin seems unavoidable. Couples choices are embedded in family networks which could not be ignored in a ritual that essentially builds on ideas of commitment, love and the centrality of family (Castren & Maillochon 2009).

Rituals, traditions and family are all part of the wedding experience. Data within this study shows that brides participated in elements of the wedding day in the name of ritual and tradition or at the behest of family that they may not have liked. While it was regarded as 'the brides day', some of the brides felt that they had to conform to gendered visions of themselves for the sake of tradition or performance. Within this data it is evident that tradition is also reproduced in unthinking ways, some brides were ambivalent to the patriarchal traditions and sexist rituals that were present within their wedding day. This symbolism within the wedding became more important than what it represented, it almost took on a life of its own.

### (4.3) Gender Roles

Universally it could be argued that weddings are rife with gendered conventions. Fairchild (2014) offers that weddings are salient cultural objects that, from a macro perspective, reinforce ideologies and, from a micro perspective, hold women and men accountable for their gender performances. Weddings can be powerful conduits for message about gender inequality (Fairchild 2014). I was particularly interested in two areas of gender within my study. The first being how gendered roles were constructed, did the bride willingly engage in constructions of hyper femininity. Was the brides role on the day a continuation of the feminised role in which she lived or was it a break from her more consistent gender roles and behaviour. I was also interested in the gendered division of labour within the wedding or what has become commonly known as ‘women’s wedding work’.

#### (4.3.1) Gender Role Reproduction

Within the study, 7 of the 10 grooms proposed to their partner on bended knee. Most brides were happy to have been proposed to on bended knee, but not all. TMM remarked how it unsettled her due to the reversal of gender roles;

DOC How did you feel when he proposed?

TMM Oh my God, terrible, to be honest my stomach just like, turned cause I was like ‘WHAT’. And it was really weird cause he got down on one knee, which I didn’t really like because P was normally very strong and solid. I think it’s a real vulnerable position for guys to be in and that’s not him.

TMM also noted how uncomfortable she felt within work once she announced that she was engaged.

TMM One thing that really did bother me when I went to work and I said I was engaged everyone was like, ‘ah, next soon it will be babies’ and everyone had type cast me into ‘now you’re an Irish women getting married you’re going to have a baby’. That’s it, that I found frustrating.

In both of these instances TMM had an issue with the gender roles that had been prescribed to both herself and her groom. The performance of traditional wedding hyper masculinity that was involved in the engagement was unsettling for her as it did not conform to the usual masculine script that her partner had. It is almost as if she is viewed her groom, on bended knee, as being soft and venerable rather than being his usual solid self. Whereas the imposed gendered convention of a wedding followed by a baby that was ascribed to her by her work colleagues also perturbed her. This resonated Fairchild (2014) argument that weddings reflect dominant cultural understandings of gender and that gendered rituals demonstrate how gender expectations are communicated. TMM at the beginning of her wedding experience felt somewhat overwhelmed by the gender roles attributed to her and her partner.

TMM also noted the performance that is in a wedding and she talked about how this played out on her wedding day.

TMM I was thinking, maybe I'm just going to be one of those brides that don't enjoy their wedding day. So I went to bed after the speeches and fell asleep, I fell asleep and woke up about an hour and half later and I was like, no, f\*\*k it, it's my wedding day, I am getting up, I'm not going to stay in bed, this is ridiculous. So I remember coming back down stairs and saying (*internally*), 'it's time to put on the T and P show'... It's a real day where you have to perform and myself and P are great at that. If we go to big events we're on it and we can perform; centre of attention, having the crack.

TMM had a long wedding day, it started at 6.30am yet the service was not until 4.00pm. However, TMM's partner P organised the majority of the wedding. He carried out most of the wedding labour. Although she did not describe herself as being overwhelmed it was possible that the gendered role ascribed to her was somewhat difficult. She understood the performance that was required as a bride but it was outside her usual performance. She complained her dress was too restrictive, she didn't like the photographs and it was only after the meal and her time alone that she felt that she could cope with what was being asked of her by way of performance. She described herself as someone who was

used to being the centre of attention, but on her own terms, not in a hyper feminised role that she was unsure of.

In contrast to TMM wedding day performance, PB enjoyed the bridal role that was ascribed to her. She noted the 'otherworldly' feeling that was the role of the bride, she stated that it started when she walked down the aisle and continued for the day;

PB     You do feel like King and Queen for a day. You feel like someone else. You are floating... I felt like I was watching it on a television program, I felt totally on a high... I have never had that feeling since

MOC also noted the feeling of romance and floating that happened when she walked down the aisle

MOC    When we got to the church... I was very overwhelmed... I stood waiting to go in, they put the veil over my face and I floated down the aisle. I was very young, probably quite romantic.

Most of the brides had an internal predisposition to 'do gender', in that their roles became hyper feminised. The 'doing gender' formulation is one that posits that gender is a routine activity in which participants behave and perceive others according to a set of expectations associated with their sex category (Fairchild 2014). Some of the brides acted appropriately according to their gendered roles and for the most part brides happily took part in the hyper feminised situations. However, TMM and MC felt uncomfortable with the feminised role of bride ascribed to them. MC is 48 and mother to one child aged four. MC is the only bride in my sample who had a child before she got married. She works in retail and is the lead singer in a band. Her wedding cost €8,000. While TMM and MC did not mind being the centre of attention in other situations, being the centre of attention as a bride was difficult. MC felt being a bride and the centre of attention was a lot of responsibility and you had to behave accordingly. MC regretted not performing her bridal gender role appropriately;

MC     I wish I didn't get so mouldy (*re intoxication*). I wish I wasn't the last person standing. I wished I didn't get so jarred. Like I wasn't p\*\*\*ed but I was the last

person in the members bar, singing all night. It's my only regret, I should have paced myself.

As a front woman in a band MC was used to the limelight and also used to late nights, yet here she felt that she should have performed the bridal role differently. It was perhaps that she was not really performing that upset her the most. MC by her own account was behaving on her wedding day the same way she would on a Saturday night out. This was what she regretted the most, that she did not perform her role as a bride appropriately. She possibly felt that her role as a bride was being judged from others at the wedding. MC may have also wanted her wedding performance to be a break from her more consistent gender role in which she is most often the main focus of attention but not overtly feminised. She may have wanted to perform her role as a conventional bride.

#### (4.3.2) Wedding Labour

The amount of work that goes into producing a wedding day was a common complaint amongst 9 out of 10 the brides within my study. The wedding planning work fell disproportionately to the women within the study and much of labour that is carried out was invisible. Fairchild (2014) noted that within her study participants talked about certain aspects of the wedding which indicated that brides and grooms take for granted the gendered aspects of the wedding script. This too was true for my study when 6 out of the 10 brides directly commented that they did all the wedding work with 4 of these brides suggesting that this wedding work is women's work and taken for granted.

PB I did it all, I was happy to do it. But I think that was the way, really...- Like R, the band was his, because he is into music,- but every other decision was mine. But I think that's the way it is for everyone.

SM also felt that she did the majority of the wedding labour but unlike PB she was not happy about it.

SM So we had no money to do this. It was really stressful, K. was f\*\*king useless, as I'm sure many brides would say, He didn't even.., he had nothing to do with the organisation at all.

The findings within my study resonates the findings with Sniezek's (2004) study into the division of wedding labour. She found that just as women do more housework, kin-work, childcare and household management, women also complete a disproportionate amount of wedding work. Wedding work to some extent, resembles the unpaid labour of housework, as a good deal of the wedding work that women perform is time-consuming and frequently unnoticed (Sniezek 2004). She notes that women were found to perform wedding work which was the most invisible. This was also true for my study the majority of the brides performed the invisible wedding labour while grooms organised visual aspects of the day such as the wedding bands and wedding cars. Here the gendered division of wedding labour allows for grooms to get praise for visible wedding work, while the brides invisible work goes largely unnoticed.

Sniezek (2004) offers that couples were less likely to label wedding work as unfair because to do so may challenge the relationship during a time when the couples harmony and compatibility are being very publically celebrated. This was to an extent true for my study as although the participants were recalling their wedding only two brides expressed anger at the amount of work they had to do. The construction of couple harmony was still important years after the event. Women partners did not blame their husbands for the unequal wedding work, even when they felt burdened by it. Brides within both Sniezek (2004) study and my study offered a strong sense that this 'burden' was inevitable and appropriate.

Sniezek (2004) also argues that wedding work serves to prepare women for their future traditional roles. She claimed that wedding work is an early form of family caring and kin work (Sniezek 2004). This claim is not something that my data can fully support, but there was one instance when LR made reference to the domestic division of labour resonating the division of labour within the wedding.

LR I would have like him to have had more of an impact (*with regard to wedding preparations*) but he's just not like that. What's the point in forcing someone to do something that they don't want to do? So I just did everything. It's like the baby, I do everything for M (*child*). I don't even think he's packed a nappy bag. That's just the way it is in our house.

There is a probability that the gendered division of labour that is within the wedding work for LR also resonates the division of labour that is within her marital home. LR also possibly started this gendered division of labour before she got engaged as she worked for her husband as a temporary secretary before they began dating. LR earlier identified as being traditional and she is the only bride in the sample that gave up work after she got married. The probability is that the gendered aspect of LR's wedding could be described as a public display of traditional role she inhabits at home.

#### (4.4) Commodity

The international bridal industry is exceptionally lucrative, with an annual estimation in the U.S. at between \$50 and \$70 billion dollars (Engstrom 2008). The average cost for a wedding in the U.S. is \$20,000 while here it is higher, averaging out at €25,000 which equates to approximately \$28,000 (Engstrom 2008) (Reynolds 2015). The investment of money and time that goes into the traditional wedding make it not only a big event but also a major expense for those starting married life. A question must be asked regarding why couples spend so much emotional time and money on this single event. Why has the bridal industry grown so exponentially in recent years? Are women really the driving force behind this rapid expansion or are there invisible forces in place to promote certain structures within the wedding economy? Within this section of this thesis, I will examine the concept of the lavish wedding. I am situating the lavish wedding at anything in excess of €20,000. In doing this analysis I hope to answer some of the questions that I have proposed above.

##### (4.4.1) The Lavish Wedding

LR felt very let down by the service industry that was involved in her wedding. The manager and staff got a number of things wrong on the day, the most significant being getting her table plan wrong and not providing seating for ten people.

LR       the whole thing turned out to be stressful...but when the seating plan wasn't done and people were wandering around with nowhere to sit, it was terrible... and this man (venue manager), he's on T.V., he's supposed to know what he's doing... if you're paying for something that big, that big of a wedding, it should be just perfect.

Matrix (2006) indicates that modern women appear to be planning extravagant wedding more than ever before. She suggests that the contemporary bride, in order to achieve the norm of the 'white wedding', needs to enlist the services of many wedding professionals at considerable costs (Matrix 2006).LR in her planning, had deployed the help of a wedding professional and felt utterly let down by him. She argues that this wedding manager, being a hotel T.V. celebrity, should have known what

he was doing and should have provided a certain standard of service for her on her wedding day. She placed her utmost faith in the wedding industry to deliver to her and she was disappointed.

PB also discussed the issue of money and the spending associated with her wedding. Although she knew in the basic costings behind the wedding, she was surprised by how much professionals involved in the wedding industry tried to extract more money out of her by trying to sell her 'extras' to her already elaborate wedding day.

PB I'm surprised how much you're milked, you know what I mean? It's like people don't see a bride and groom, like you know, venues, businesses, companies, all they see is dollar signs. And like you know, you're on a high and they just get that dream and there sucking you in and pumping you up and they're like now, give me the money.

PB could identify the wedding industry at work and she acknowledged her vulnerability within it noting the constant need to keep herself in check with regards to spending. She understood that the added extras within the weddings could bring the costs up.

PB I wasn't surprised by the cost of it, you know how much weddings cost, but I was surprised by how much you get drawn into things, it could spiral really easily, I had to keep bring myself back down to earth... All these little 'add ons', you think it's only this or it's only that but my Jesus it adds up. I was more surprised at me, getting drawn into the whole thing.

LR acknowledged how much the little things cost but she felt somewhat justified with regard to the money she spent. She felt that these extravagances were what she wanted.

LR When you add everything up, like all the bits; the band, the live music at the drinks reception,- I really wanted that-, the church, the string quartet, they were expensive. B said they were an extravagance but I wanted that. But they all add up. But I stood my ground, I wanted that.

Engstrom (2008) offers that wedding media promotes an underlying message that women need a large, expensive wedding in order to move from being single to being married. She suggests that the repetition on these messages contribute to the creation and maintenance of hegemony, ‘the natural, unpolitical state of things accepted by each and everyone’ (Engstrom 2008). Engstrom (2008) indicates that the creation of this hegemony, which appears to be a harmless female pursuit, results in a silent domination that is not experienced as domination at all. This hegemony was evident with all of the brides within the lavish wedding sample. All of the brides felt they spent too much yet none of them could identify at what point this overspending occurred. The wedding spending seemed to have a snowball effect in that if they bought an expensive dress, they had to have the venue to match. Engstrom (2008) offers that wedding media not only helps sell wedding products but also reinforces certain societal norms, namely, the right way to wed. She suggests that the wedding magazines, combine political media economy, through its advertising and merchandising, along with hegemonic structures send women the same message: they need a big white wedding and they (the media) can help create it.

TMM discussed what she initially wanted by way of a wedding and how her parameters changed once they started to plan it.

TMM When I first got engaged I wanted a pretty alternative wedding but I ended up with a pretty traditional one. I didn’t have any preconceived ideas about how my wedding was going to go so it didn’t feel like a big sacrifice that I ended up with a traditional wedding but there was no other options there.

It may seem slightly ironic that TMM when discussing why she opted for a lavish traditional wedding, somewhat paraphrased the Neoliberalism catch-phrase, ‘there is no alternative’. TMM felt, once she started to engage the wedding industry that there was no alternative to the traditional, lavish wedding. This most likely happened through a combination of family pressures, the pursuit of perfection and the hegemonic structures that offer little alternative to the unwitting bride.

TMM also admits to spending a lot of time and effort on crafting within her wedding. TMM partner P carried out most of the wedding labour and did most of the organising. TMM job was to organise any décor that she wanted for the wedding. She admitted that this ended up being a lot of work.

DOC Did you feel overwhelmed?

TMM Yes, absolutely. But I put 100% of that on myself, no body put that pressure on me. It's because I like doing it, in high-insight it wasn't too stressful. It was more like I have to get those gold name tags carved out, all two hundred of them. I read a lot of wedding magazines for the décor, that was my job.

Matrix (2006) notes that bridal magazines advertise all the material for Do-It-Yourself lavish wedding through appropriating and co-opting feminist rhetoric's of freedom, choice, empowerment, equality and liberation. In the process of selling wedding merchandise, these publications also sell ideologies about the good life and what you need for a 'happily ever after', while telling brides to be that they can have any dress/ venue/ wedding they want, as long as it conforms to what they are offering (Matrix 2006). TMM spent a considerable amount of time on elaborate wedding craft and enlisted the help of her family. Matrix (2006) offers that wedding media, especially Martha Stewart Weddings, teaches readers that the time spent enacting the ritual of wedding crafting is as crucial to the success of the wedding as are the final products themselves. Matrix (2006) states that wedding media leads the bride to believe that involving other women, namely family members, in assembling crafts will guarantee the significance of the wedding event. Although TMM did not identify with any of these rituals, crafting for her wedding was very important. She works in the banking sector and her creativity is somewhat untapped within her occupation. This crafting became a large part of the wedding experience for TMM. However, this crafting experience came with a cost. The hotel where she married had a wedding the day before so any decorating that had to be done within the venue had to be carried out on the day of the wedding. TMM had to hire a woman, through the hotel, to decorate the venue for her.

In conclusion, I would suggest, that although women seem to be the biggest purveyors of the lavish wedding dream, they are in fact negotiating their wedding day within a highly hegemonic arena. From an early age women are socialised into conforming to gendered conventions, then, on engagement; they are ushered into the coveted world of wedding media where one narrative is sold to them. This narrative is set against the backdrop of a multi-billion dollar wedding industry. It is hard to escape this narrative as wedding hold such allure for the general public. From royal weddings to celebrity weddings, the general consensus is; the bigger the better.

#### (4.5) The Outliers, and ultimately, The Modest Wedding

Not every bride within this study fell into the realm of the lavish wedding. A number of brides also discussed how people within the wedding industry listened to their needs and ultimately their budgets as they negotiated their 'big day'. One such bride was SM, she stated that the venue where she was having her wedding listened to her requirements and ultimately decreased her stress levels

SM No, they didn't try to upsell at all, they were great. In fact the manager knew that we didn't have a lot of money and he told us to bring in our own bubbles. He recommended a very good bottle of prosecco from Aldi and we bought cases of it. I thought that this was a really good idea and in fact, we then got other things that we needed from the venue. I had money in my pocket to get nice cheese for my guests and a decent snack at midnight

SM admits that the saving she made from bringing in prosecco to her venue, rather than using the venue prosecco, enabled her to spend more money in the venue. I would argue that this spending was her own choice, she did not feel overwhelmed by the venue to use their wine. In turn she spent money in the venue, purchasing things that she wanted. She did realise however, that this was a good tactic from the manager as she was very happy to spend her saving on the venue.

When talking to MC about the money she spent on her wedding she informed me that her father gave her €6,000 and her partners' parents gave €2,000 towards the wedding. She spent a total of €8,000 on the wedding. She said that this enabled her to move through her wedding planning with minimal stress. Every venue she went to she told them of her budget and her numbers, once she found a venue that suited both, she booked it. This meant she did not think about flowers, bridesmaids or the added extras. No one tried to upsell to her as she did not have the money for it. MC really enjoyed her wedding.

JC is a 41 year old architect with two children. JC got married ten years ago on a beach in South America. JC's parents split when she was in her twenties and she is now somewhat estranged from her father who has since remarried and started a new family. The main focus of her wedding was to

enjoy herself with whomever could make it to South America. Her partner S lost his mother when he was young, and he has a somewhat strained relationship with his father. S organised most of the wedding, which took place on a beach, with any family members who could make it and their close friends. They had no budget for the wedding, in that it cost them the price of a meal for their acquaintances. JC intentionally waited until her own family life had settled before she contemplated marriage. She noted that her parent's experience made her wary of marriage and thus she wanted a very relaxed day, which felt more like a party. Tradition, ritual and commodity played little part within their wedding day, possibly because JC did not see anything advantageous from the act of getting married due to her parent's difficult separation. JC really enjoyed her wedding day and has suggested that we all go to South America later this year for their anniversary.



## Chapter 5

## Conclusion

## (5) Conclusion

The last question that I asked the brides within this study was ‘would you get married again?’, half of them said yes, unequivocally. The other group, the group that fell into the lavish wedding bracket said yes, but with provisos. On reflection, I wondered why, after spending such a large amount of money on a day and admitting to being genuinely unhappy on said day, they would want to do it again? Initially I placed the reasoning behind this firmly at the feet of neoliberalism. The wedding industry is a multibillion dollar industry, which connects media, commerce and industry in order to sell the dream of a picture perfect wedding. However, it could not be neoliberalism alone, as women, in lots of ways have fought against the neoliberal project. I began to examine the gender socialisation that young women and girls go through throughout their early life in preparation for their wedding day and marriage. From first holy communions to debutant balls, young girls and adolescences are socialised into their gendered role and all that goes with it. Gender socialisation theory then also became an important element in understanding the appeal of the modern traditional wedding. Finally, I started to question why this inordinately gendered and expensive ritual was still gaining traction. From here, I deduced that I had to examine the important role that tradition holds within the modern Irish wedding. Within this conclusion I will explore these tripartite elements of the wedding experience in order to offer some reasons for the appeal of the modern traditional wedding.

Getting married is an expensive business. But it has not always been so, from the data gathered within this study, there is an idea that weddings in the last twenty years have become highly commodified affairs. I would like to link this to the rise of neoliberalism. Numerous studies used in this thesis; Barnes (2014) Castren & Mallochon (2009), Engstrom (2008), Matrix (2006), Otnes & Pleck (2003), offer that the landscape of wedding has changed due to the dual earner family; couples are paying for their weddings rather than their parents. Fraser (2013) offers that the dual income family is now the societal norm and was born out of an adherence to free market economics. Neoliberalism engulfed feminist ideals of gender equality and reshaped common sense views of family, work and dignity (Fraser 2013). Women now had the freedom to work where they want, when they want and with whom they want. The reality is that a lot of women work in precarious working conditions with zero

hour contracts and very little rights (Fraser 2013). The traditional family wage has been undercut by disorganised neoliberal capitalism and has been replaced by the dual earner family (Fraser 2013). In short both partners are now working, for longer hours and with less pay but still bringing in slightly more income than in the traditional male breadwinner household. This dual income household allowed for greater exposure to the goods and services industry; through either working within it or through buying from it. Industries that had previously not existed now became multibillion dollar enterprises. One such industry was the wedding industry.

The wedding industry allows for a certain amount of social mobility and prestige for people involved within it for the space of a day. Wolf (1994) argues that it transports everyone involved into the middle class, this sentiment is shared also by Otnes and Pleck (2003) I would argue that with the advent of this dual income household, coupled with young couples paying for their own wedding, neoliberalism has managed to harness gendered traditions offered by the wedding ritual and exploit young women. This works in two ways; the first being that brides to be are told they can have anything they want for their big day as long as they comply to a dominant version of weddings as perpetrated by the self-interested wedding industry. The second exploitation happens through the narrative that encourages brides to spend money on whatever they deem fit because they are now independent earners. This deception occurs covertly and is presented as a harmless feminine pursuit (Engstrom 2008). When this pursuit is directed only at women, it could be argued that it is exploitive. However, what I find to be the most tragic element of all this spending is the feeling of dissatisfaction that the brides within my sample felt. Not only did they spend lavishly, they all ended up feeling like they got it wrong on the wedding day somehow. It could be argued that this is to some extent the neoliberal dream; engage people enough to make them spend a lot on their wedding day but leave them feeling that they could do it all again, only better.

The 'harmless feminine pursuit' that is the wedding day is only one of a number of gendered occasions that women will have been involved in throughout their lives. Within Catholic society young girls are subjected to the gendered occasion that is first Holy Communion. Later on in adolescence, debutant balls; which were once viewed as a debut into society for 'ladies', prep young

women for the highly gendered arena that is the formal dinner dance. Again, these occasions can be viewed with an amount of frivolity and carelessness, but when it reinforces greater cultural norms, they cannot be ignored. Feminists have often critiqued essentialist understandings of gender (Richardson 2015). Richardson (2015) offers that social reproduction of gender in society, such as debutant balls and American purity balls, is connected with the production of gendered inequalities. She argues that gender is connected to the social, economic and cultural status and power in society. In this instance gender is theorised not as difference but as social division. Gender roles within the wedding can also serve to be performative, in that the gendered stereotype that has been attributed to the bride is performed as part of the wedding day. Richardson (2015) argues that gender is constituted out of attempts to compel a belief in others that we really are a woman. Within the study, numerous brides discussed the performance that was given in order to reproduce their ascribed gender on their wedding day. The feeling that some did not 'do gender' correctly, was a reoccurring theme, so to was the concept that for the day they had to 'be the bride'. In summation I argue that gender role socialisation, which has occurred since childhood, prepares women for the performance that they feel compelled to give on their wedding day.

While neoliberalism and gender theory can be interconnected and somewhat complementary, I believe that an adherence to ritual and tradition also reproduces the modern traditional wedding. Gender socialisation into feminine roles is inextricably linked to concepts of tradition. The concept of longevity and reproduction that goes with wedding traditions is exceptionally strong. Take for example the wedding dress; one bride within this study offered that her wedding dress was her least favourite part of the wedding day, she stated; 'oh the wedding dress, yeah, ugh, you can't really do much with white, I was so unexcited about it'. Yet all of the brides wore white, with only a handful liking their dress. Wedding traditions, although understood to be archaic and patriarchal were adhered to by the majority of the brides within this study and the brides within most of the qualitative studies within the literature I reviewed. While we may change how we carry out weddings in the future and who can get married to whom, I argue that tradition will be a crucial component keeping the wedding

experience viable. It is this durability of tradition that possibly serves to reinforce the concept that the wedding day is a coveted and scared space.

My finding within this study indicates that there exists degrees of unconscious adherence to neoliberalism within the wedding experience. It also illustrates that there exists a continuum of awareness of and participation in a particular form of gendered conformity that reproduces market logics. Within this study I have found that women occupy different positions on that continuum. Yet neoliberalism and gender role reproduction are not the only forces behind the modern traditional wedding, there are some archaic ideas that still cling to the ritual of weddings that predate the neoliberal logic. I suggest that within this study individual brides reproduced, negotiated and resisted all of these elements to varying degrees. However, I feel compelled to note that within this study, each bride, brought to their wedding an amount of agency that shaped their experience. Although some may have spent more than others, they were in a position to spend that money. No bride involved in this study was considerably financially challenged after their wedding day. There is considerable scope for study of weddings and brides. I for one would be interested in a study that examined the experience of rural brides as opposed to this study which studied only urban brides. There is also scope to look at the wedding experience of couple in same sex marriages or women who got married in later life. The combinations are vast for a qualitative study that wishes to explore the lived experiences of people within the wedding industry.



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## Appendices

