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# Our Family Functions: Functions of Traditional Weddings for Modern Brides and Postmodern Families

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## **Our Family Functions: Functions of Traditional Weddings for Modern Brides and Postmodern Families**

**Abstract** In many ways the continued popularity of traditional weddings in the United States may seem surprising in light of the increased rates of divorce, cohabitation, and non-marital child-bearing in the latter half of the twentieth century, which have accompanied the rise of what has come to be called the “postmodern” family. This research draws upon in-depth interviews with twenty white, middle class women who recently had traditional weddings and explores the connections between the postmodern family context and the desirability of traditional weddings. Specifically, it examines how traditional functions of formal weddings are still relevant within contemporary society. Findings indicate that the traditional functions of weddings operate differently in the current family context, but are important aspects of the appeal of formal weddings for modern brides. Large, formal weddings encourage extended family bonding, which may be more important now than in past decades due to the high rates of divorce and remarriage. New “invented traditions” are sometimes being included in weddings to allow for the participation of the wider range of family members that exists in post-modern families. Furthermore, having a large, traditional wedding may serve to decrease anxiety about marriage through providing a predictable entry into marriage and a testing ground for the couple’s marital work ethic.

**Keywords** Weddings; Bride; Marriage; Tradition; Ritual

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**M**ost people in American society can probably describe the key ingredients in a “traditional” wedding. They include: a long white dress, flowers, music, a clergy member, attendants in matching clothing, and a ceremony with a ring exchange, which is followed by a reception with a tiered cake. Although sometimes appearing centuries older, this

“traditional wedding” (or “white wedding”) only began in the United States in the 1800s. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth century “traditional” weddings slowly began growing in popularity and spread from being only rites of the white, upper class to include other classes and races (Pleck 2000; Howard 2006). That traditional weddings became very popular in the 1950s should not be surprising as their themes in many ways expressed the values of that time, which emphasized traditional marriage and female domesticity. That traditional weddings have continued to remain popular – and have increased in size and in the average amount of money spent on them each decade since – is less easily understood.

Since the 1950s, the institutions of marriage and family have undergone incredible changes. Marriage rates have declined; divorce rates and cohabitation rates have soared. In many ways the need to marry has decreased as marriage has become disconnected from cohabitation, economic support, sexual activity, and child bearing. These changes in the American family have been well documented, and along with changes in gender roles and the legal recognition of same-sex relationships they have contributed to an increasingly “deinstitutionalized” model of marriage (Cherlin 2004; 2010). As family structures become diverse, and neither gender nor marriage needs to dictate one’s destiny, the age of the “postmodern family” has arrived (Stacey 1990; Cherlin 2010). Yet, how can these changes in society be reconciled with the continued popularity of traditional weddings?

Recently, there have been scholars from a variety of disciplines interested in the popularity of traditional weddings. They have explored the history of wed-

ding rituals (Pleck 2000), the rise of the bridal industry (Howard 2006; Mead 2007), how weddings and consumption come together in a “commodification of romance” (Otnes and Pleck 2003), and the relationship of weddings and heterosexuality (Lewin 1998; Ingraham 2008). Most researchers have emphasized the power of the bridal industry and consumerism in encouraging their continuing popularity – sometimes to the detriment of examining other aspects.

This study seeks to extend these explorations by focusing on the relationship between the continued appeal of traditional weddings and the changes in the institution of family. How traditional weddings continue to play an important role in the lives of the families they touch has not been given adequate attention. Although the bridal industry has many techniques to encourage people to consume, unless the items or rituals “connect” to real people’s lives and beliefs (and in this case ideas about the family), they will not succeed. Examples of this principle can be found in looking at the successful acceptance of wedding bands for grooms (who previously did not wear them) that began in the 1940s as men went away to fight in WWII, but the failure of the wedding industry to convince a significant number of consumers that it is appropriate to purchase engagement rings for grooms in the 1920s or since (Howard 2006).

This research draws upon in-depth interviews with twenty white, middle class women who recently had traditional weddings and explores why these recent brides say a traditional wedding was appealing. Specifically, it examines if and how traditional functions of formal weddings may still be relevant within contemporary society. How rituals and their

functions adapt as society changes are important sociological questions. It argues that there are important connections between the postmodern family context and the desirability of traditional weddings that have thus far been overlooked and under-theorized. Findings indicate that the postmodern family context adds new resonance to the traditional function of bringing extended family members together. Additionally, easing anxiety over divorce continues to be an important – even if somewhat altered – role of formal weddings, which scholars should take into account when considering reasons for the popularity of weddings.

### Functions of Wedding Rituals

Anthropologists have defined rituals as formal actions that are repetitive, structured, and filled with symbolism (Turner 1969). All rituals – and family rituals in particular – have a recognizable structure to them, which is played out each time they are performed, although each family might personalize them in some way (Pleck 2000). Like other rituals, a family ritual fails when it is “empty” or when the people participating in it do not feel anything. Functionalist theory suggests that rituals, like other practices, exist in society because they fulfill specific functions (for at least some people in society), and when they cease to fulfill these functions, they will end, unless they begin to fulfill other new or unrecognized functions (Goffman 1967; Merton 1968). Traditionally, wedding rituals have served three functions. These include: (1) serving as a transitional rite for an individual moving from one life stage to another (adolescent to adult, single to married), (2) providing reassurance that one is making the

correct choice of partner and has approval of family and friends, and (3) uniting two families and fostering emotional bonds between family members.

Although in past generations all three of these functions were believed to be important, to some extent they all have been dismissed as less important for modern brides than they were for earlier generations. The increased power of the wedding industry to encourage specific trends and personalization, as well as the increased autonomy of the wedding couple, has been seen as evidence that traditional weddings are no longer about uniting family groups and instead simply about individual achievement. As Rebecca Mead explains, weddings are now “an individualistic adventure rather than a community sacrament” (2007:11).

It makes sense that a wedding would be less important as an individual life course ritual (function one) now that men and women are waiting much longer to get married. Whereas in the 1950s, marriage was the boundary between adolescence and adulthood, that is no longer usually the case today. In contemporary times, both men and women move out of their parents’ home, economically support themselves, cohabit with a partner, and sometimes have children all without marrying. This does appear to decrease the importance of a wedding as a ritual that indicates the onset of adulthood, although it does still define the onset of married life.

Historian Ellen Rothman (1984) wrote at length about the role of the second function when she argued that it was not a coincident that formal weddings became popular initially during the Victorian Age. She

argues that its rise at the time was linked to the vulnerability that women must have felt when marrying and knowing that their entire economic security (as well as emotional happiness) was tied to making a good choice. As she explains, formal wedding rituals helped provide a “predictable beginning for a life that appeared unknowable and risky” (Rothman 1984:172). Whether this role of providing reassurance for women is still an important part of formal wedding ceremonies now that women can economically support themselves and divorces are easy to obtain has not been clearly examined. Regardless, the idea that having an elaborate “white” wedding could be a way to stave off divorce has been implicitly encouraged by the wedding industry for decades. Advertising slogans such as “A diamond is forever” (coined in the 1940s) encourage couples to connect their decision to have an expensive traditional wedding with the chances of marital permanence (Pleck 2000; Ingraham 2008). Otnes and Pleck (2003) state that it makes some sense that this function would still apply as there is currently anxiety over marriage due to high divorce rates; however, they dismiss this idea as contributing to the popularity of traditional weddings today because they believe Americanized “white” weddings are on the rise even in countries where the divorce rate is not rising.<sup>1</sup>

How the third function of weddings – promoting group solidarity and/or uniting families – may

<sup>1</sup> Otnes and Pleck (2003) do not specify which countries they are referring to (see page 8), so it is impossible to confirm whether divorce rates are rising or not. Traditional Western “white” wedding rituals do appear to be on the rise around the world but so, too, are concerns about marriage. In most countries, falling marriage rates can spark concerns about marriage in a way similar to the debate generated by the high divorce rates in the U.S. Only a few countries have escaped a decline in marriage rates over the last few decades (Cohen 2013).

work differently in contemporary society has not been recently examined. Castren and Maillochon (2009) carried out related research when they explored the social and familial influences that Finnish and French couples experience when choosing the guests to invite to their weddings. They argued that although modern couples often see weddings through an individualistic framework, the presence of family and friends is an integral aspect of traditional weddings and serves an important function. They find that it is only those people who are close to the bridal couple and/or significant in their life (i.e., family and close friends) who can truly understand the commitment they are making through the wedding ceremony and how significant the transition from being single to married will be. It is their recognition of the event and its significance that helps to create the meaning in the event (Castren and Maillochon 2009).

### The Increase in Expensive Traditional Weddings

It is difficult to obtain data on the exact numbers of brides who choose to have “traditional” weddings each year due to the variations in definitions, although researchers agree that weddings became bigger and more expensive throughout the twentieth century. Scholars have estimated that between 60-80% of Americans getting married for the first time choose a traditional wedding, and increasingly some people marrying for the second time will also choose to have a formal wedding (Whyte 1990; Pleck 2000; Ingraham 2008). As over 2 million women get married in the U.S. each year (CDC/NCHS National Vital Statistics 2013), the numbers are sizable. Most

data on issues connected to the wedding industry is problematic as it is collected by the wedding industry itself and not by neutral sources. That most Americans do choose a traditional wedding when marrying for the first time is supported by recent data, which found that 93% of first weddings had over 50 guests (with an average of 139 guests), 69% of couples had their own personal wedding website, and the average wedding had 4-5 bridesmaids in attendance (The Wedding Report 2012). While the average wedding cost only \$392 in the 1930s and \$4000 in 1984, the cost soared in recent decades and quickly reached over \$20,000, as “lavish” weddings became more and more common (Pleck 2000; Otnes and Pleck 2003; Howard 2006). In percentage terms, the average wedding increased from costing about one third of a family’s yearly income to almost two thirds (Pleck 2000). Although the average cost of a wedding declined during 2008-2010 due to the economic recession, by 2012 it rebounded to \$27,021 and almost reached the 2007 pre-recession rates of \$28,730 (Reaney 2012; The Wedding Report 2012).

There are several theories as to the increasing popularity of expensive, formal weddings. One simple reason is the changing demographics of the couple involved. As couples decide to wait longer before getting married, it often results in couples who are further advanced in their careers and with more disposable income (Pleck 2000). This is not the whole story, however, as scholars have found that couples and their parents in recent decades are also more willing to go into debt to pay for an extravagant wedding (Pleck 2000; Ingraham 2008). That couples may have more money to allocate is important as the traditional rules concerning who pays for which

wedding item have also broken down. In 2011, 83% of couples and 51.5% of their parents contributed money to the wedding, with other relatives (14.6%) and friends (6%) also sometimes contributing (The Wedding Report 2012).

Americans are different from couples in many other Western nations as they continue to legally marry at rates much higher than one would expect given the lack of practical necessity for sexual activity, cohabiting, or child rearing (Cherlin 2010). Cherlin (2004; 2010) has argued that this may be due to one perceived benefit to legal marriage over cohabitation, which is the emergence of higher amounts of “enforceable trust,” or the perceived lower risk that one’s partner will easily end the relationship. He writes that legal marriage produces higher levels of enforceable trust because by its nature it is a public commitment to a lifelong relationship (whether it lasts or not). Having a large, traditional wedding where family and friends hear one’s vows may help increase the public nature of marriage, and therefore, increase feelings of enforceable trust (Cherlin 2010).

It is believed that couples also may be drawn to traditional weddings as a way to communicate social prestige. As marriage rates begin to decline, marriage itself becomes a “marker of prestige,” and formal weddings can be viewed as a status symbol in a way they were not in the past (Cherlin 2004:855). In addition, as weddings become increasingly paid for by the couple themselves, this can enhance the way in which weddings become an important symbol of the couple’s personal achievements (Cherlin 2004; 2010). It is a common idea that conspicuous consumption is behind the popularity of tradition-

al weddings and their increase in cost as weddings provide significant opportunities for families to demonstrate their wealth and status (Pleck 2000; Ingraham 2008). Nonetheless, Otnes and Pleck (2003) point out that consumption has become democratized in recent decades due to credit cards and loans, and lavish weddings have become standard in even many middle and working class households. They argue that although some couples or families may see a traditional wedding as a status symbol, merely the occurrence of an expensive formal wedding does not set one apart from the masses.

Recent research has examined the influence of the bridal industry in convincing couples that marrying lavishly is in good taste, and the ways in which it is tied to the broader processes of commodification and consumerism in the U.S. (Currie 1993; Pleck 2000; Howard 2006; Mead 2007; Ingraham 2008). Otnes and Pleck (2003) argue that a symbiotic relationship between romantic love, consumer culture, and “magic” has been created that explains the popularity of traditional weddings today. They write,

[w]e believe that while lavish weddings do glorify the institution of marriage, enhance the status of participants, and have special appeal to women, these explanations are insufficient to explain the popularity of the event ... the rite of the lavish wedding is increasingly popular because it glorifies both romantic love and the love of “romantic” consumer goods, promises transformation to its participants, provides a repository or memories of this magic and romance, and offers the promise of perfect (e.g., boundless and guilt-free) consumption. (Otnes and Pleck 2003:19)

Other researchers interested in the material and consumer aspects of weddings have had different goals and/or have reached different conclusions. Chrys Ingraham’s (2008) examination of wedding culture and the wedding industry focuses on patriarchy and the institutionalization of heterosexuality, while Vicki Howard’s (2006) book analyzes the origins of the wedding industry to examine how it grew into such a powerful business.

Within the United States, the wedding industry does not always target or serve all people equally, but instead more often targets those upper-income groups that are better able to take advantage of their services (Ingraham 2008). Due to higher rates of marriage, the overall population size, and lower poverty rates, Ingraham argues that, “the white wedding industry targets primarily whites more prominently than any other group” (2008:52). This is done through media images, marketing campaigns, and strategies used in advertising by the wedding industry.

## Data and Methods

This research is based on twenty semi-structured in-depth interviews with young women who had married for the first time in the previous eighteen months and had a formal or “traditional” wedding. Two methods were used to recruit participants; referrals from six local clergy members of varying religious affiliations who were contacted for the study (two Catholic, one Jewish, three different Protestant denominations) and snowball sampling methods. The majority of women who desire to have a traditional wedding are married by a clergy member



(Otnes and Pleck 2003), so reaching out to local clergy members was deemed an appropriate method. All clergy members who were contacted agreed to assist with the study, which included allowing flyers to be hung up in their house of worship (in their location of choice) and directly referring couples. Twelve women were located through referrals from clergy members<sup>2</sup> and eight through snowball samplings methods. Snowball samples begin with a short list of people who have the pertinent characteristics and then use referrals from those initial contacts. Although snowball samples are said to contain some amount of bias (i.e., are not representative) because people are likely to know other people like them, they can often lead to high-quality interviews as participants tend to be more honest and willing to reveal personal information to researchers who have been endorsed by someone they know (Small 2008). No more than three participants were obtained through any one referral chain and no participants were related to each other. Recruitment ended when a point of theoretical saturation had been reached. All the names used throughout this article are pseudonyms.

### Sample Characteristics

The range in participants' ages was 24-40 years old with an average age of 28.9 at the time the interview took place, which is a little older than the state aver-

<sup>2</sup> The clergy members I contacted included two who were at houses of worship that had large racial minority populations; however, I received only one referral from one of them and none from the other. The other eleven women referred were from the four other clergy members. I am not sure if this reflected church marriage rates, or if some clergy members were more willing to refer to me or some women were more willing to volunteer.

age at first marriage of 26.7 years (American Community Survey 2010). As young women in their twenties and thirties, all the women had grown up in a time in the U.S. when postmodern family forms were common, which was clear in their own relationship choices and family histories. Of the twenty women interviewed, fifteen of them had cohabited before marriage, while the other five lived independently before marrying. In the general population, rates of cohabitation among young people today are very high with the majority being preceded by the couple cohabiting (Cherlin 2010). Several of the women interviewed were also coming from families of origin that had experienced divorces and/or remarriage. Seven of the women interviewed came from families where their parents had divorced. Of these seven, five women had experienced one or both parents remarrying and three had step or half siblings. This is aligned with current estimates that approximately one-third of first marriages will end in divorce and that approximately two-thirds of divorced men and women will remarry (Bramlett and Mosher 2002). In addition to their own experiences with divorce, many women were marrying men whose parents had divorced and/or remarried. The women also held a variety of viewpoints about gender norms within relationships, which were expressed during the interviews and measured using a brief survey.

There were significant differences in the economic means of the women and their families, although the sample did not include any poor women. The jobs the women held ranged widely and included a bank teller, an administrative assistant, a mental health worker, a veterinarian technician, a nurse, three public school teachers, two engineers, a psy-

chotherapist, and a computer systems manager. The amount of money that the participants and their families spent together on their weddings ranged from approximately \$8000 to \$60,000, with a mean of \$16,000.<sup>3</sup> As some of the women were much more detailed and forthcoming in their calculations, and other women were very unsure or just gave a rough estimate of the wedding expenses, this should be understood to be a loose approximation. Out of the twenty women, there were three women in particular who spent considerably more than the rest, with the woman who spent \$60,000 renting a small island hotel off the New England coast for her guests for the entire wedding weekend. All of the couples used some of their own money to pay for the wedding, although the amount of money contributed by parents and the level of influence that parents had in the wedding planning process varied greatly.

All of the women were born in the United States and residing in Connecticut during the interviews. Fifteen of the women were college educated and three additional women were still working on their bachelor's degrees at the time of their participation. Nineteen of the women were white and one was African American. Ten women were Protestant, eight women were Catholic, one woman was Jewish, and one woman had a combined Jewish/Protestant wedding. Among the Protestant and Catholic women, there did not seem to be any differences in the way they interpreted the rituals they used or why they

<sup>3</sup> The average the women gave me was supposed to include all the expenses of the wedding event – ceremony, reception, the dress, the rings. It did not include the money spent on a honeymoon, which differs from how some industry averages are calculated. If the money spent on their honeymoon was also included, then the average spent in my sample would be significantly closer to the amount spent on the average U.S. wedding.

included them. In addition, the answers of the two Jewish women appeared similar to those given by the Christian women, although there was variation in the specific rituals included. All of the women (and their husbands) were marrying for the first time and only one had a child prior to marriage (with the groom). There is considerably more variation in the formality and size of weddings of people marrying for the second time (Ingraham 2008), which is why it is important to differentiate between first and second marriages.

The final group of participants in many ways matches Ingraham's (2008) description of the group that is catered to by the wedding industry and those most likely to choose a traditional or "white" wedding. As Ingraham has argued, traditional weddings are primarily a ritual "by, for, and about the white middle to upper class" (2008:33). My final sample appears to mirror this most sizeable group of brides and allows me to examine the ways in which the women who *are* embracing "white" weddings (i.e., heterosexual, middle-class, white women) explain their choices.

### Research Design and Analysis

An in-depth semi-structured interview was conducted with each woman at her home, lasting between one to two hours. The interview guide covered many topics, including: why they chose to have a traditional wedding; a detailed description of their wedding ceremony and reception; how and why they decided to include each wedding element; her feelings/beliefs about marriage, divorce, and cohabitation; and the division of wedding planning. A brief history of her relationship with

her husband was also taken and each participant was asked to fill out a brief survey. During fourteen of the twenty interviews, the women got out either wedding photos or the ceremony bulletin to be able to show, as well as verbally describe, the ceremony and/or reception.

Like many other researchers who conduct semi-structured interviews, I loosely relied upon grounded theory methods of data analysis. Grounded theory methods involve taking an open-ended approach to one's data and modifying hypotheses as the analysis proceeds (Glaser and Strauss 1967; LaRossa 2005). As part of the grounded theory techniques, I used a thematic or "issue focused" approach to data analysis. My initial coding categories were developed and defined in an ongoing interaction with the data and data collection process. I first coded for specific themes, and then worked on integrating the separate themes into a single coherent story (Weiss 1994). Because this study uses a non-random sample, it is not generalizable to the larger population. However, like most other qualitative studies, generalizability is not the major purpose of this research, as instead the goal of this study is to describe in detail a particular phenomenon and experience (Krefting 1999).

## Findings

Traditional weddings in part functioned to help encourage emotional bonds between family members and reassure brides about the choices they were making. While the American family has undergone a dramatic transformation over the past several decades, according to the women interviewed,

these are still important reasons to choose a traditional wedding. The high rates of divorce and other postmodern family patterns may actually make it not less but *more* appealing to have a traditional wedding.

### Bringing (Post)Modern Families Together

Several of the women I interviewed said that they had considered holding a small, informal wedding with only immediate family members or getting married at a courthouse, but they decided to hold a larger "traditional" wedding and reception because they wanted to allow all their extended family members to be present. Traditional weddings are usually held in venues big enough to hold large numbers of people and are usually planned months in advance, which allows more friends and family to attend than other types of weddings. The important role of these weddings in bringing their extended family together was often stressed by the participants. As one woman explained, "[w]eddings are our family reunions – they're the only time we see each other." Another woman said,

[i]t's the only good time in your life where you're probably going to have all your friends and family together in one spot, all at once. It was quite an experience, but one day just wasn't enough. It didn't last long enough. [Lily, age 29]

One woman downplayed the significance of the event being a wedding at all and argued that bringing her family and friends together was the reason for the event.

I was really interested in having this giant family and friend reunion. This was the one opportunity we would have to get everyone together that we were close to all at once. If you've got to call it a wedding, because that's what's going to get people there, then okay. [Laurie, age 27]

In these women's statements, one can see the value they are placing on their weddings as important times to reconnect and reinforce social ties with extended family members. Many of the women argued that weddings were the only time set aside in contemporary American society for this to be done. This supports previous research that found that due to a lack of other family rituals, weddings frequently are seen as *the* major life ritual for many people (Young and Willmott 1957; Pleck 2000). During the interviews, the women also suggested that in contemporary life family members are more disconnected and have fewer opportunities to visit each other than in past decades. Americans are more likely to move from place to place than citizens from other countries, although there is no evidence that this level of mobility has increased in recent years (Cherlin 2010). Regardless, their belief in this increasing lack of connection with their extended family members influenced their decision to have a traditional wedding.

Although the idea that weddings are an important life ritual and a significant time to see extended family members is not novel, how this dynamic may have changed in an age of high marriage and divorce rates has not been clearly addressed. Researches on traditional weddings that include the issue of divorced families have so far regarded divorce as a reason for couples to simply avoid hav-

ing a traditional "white" wedding (Otnes and Pleck 2003; Mead 2007). Although some women from divorced families do undoubtedly decide that it may be easier to forgo a large traditional wedding, it is important to understand that it also can encourage women to have one.

Among the women in my sample, the importance of having all one's family members in the same room or at the same event appeared to be heightened for those brides who came from divorced families. Although there were additional concerns about seating arrangements and hurt feelings, there were also more expressions of joy in having everyone together. This appeared to be especially true for the three women who had half-brothers or sisters. One woman whose parents had divorced when she was young and who has half-siblings on both her mother's and father's side explained:

[m]y father and mother were divorced before I was a year old and I have a stepsister and three half-brothers between both sides. I had a great childhood and wonderful parents who communicated well and I really grew up between both houses my whole life. But I knew that the day I got married would probably be the only time that would bring my whole family together – all of my extended family. I would have all of my siblings in the same room – and I think it was the first time that had ever happened. For everyone to be there seemed to be such a special thing. It was really huge for me! [Katherine, age 35]

This description is similar to that of another woman who had half-siblings on her father's side living

in a different state than the sibling on her mother's side. Her wedding was the first time the siblings met each other, which she described as having waited years for this to have happen. Rather than discouraging them from having a formal wedding, the greater need to bring extended family members connected (or separated) by marriages and divorces appeared to encourage the women to choose to have a large, traditional wedding.

Among two other women who had parents who had divorced when they were young, the parental divorce did not seem to either encourage or discourage having a formal wedding. In both cases, they were not in touch with their fathers and other family members stepped in to fill the traditional role of the father at the wedding. One of them explained,

[m]y father's not around. I don't really know my real father because my parents divorced before I was three and I haven't seen him since then, so I think it was always going to be my older brother who walked me down the aisle. And I wanted to include my brother somehow so it was sort of perfect. He was the very first person I asked to be in the wedding. [Jessica, age 30]

Due to my sampling method, those women who chose not to have a traditional wedding because of issues connected to parental divorce would not appear in this study; however, this does not diminish the validity of the finding that for some women divorce is not a reason to skip having one. Instead, among some women, it may actually encourage the practice because of the unique opportunity it pro-

vided to bring one's divorced parents and step/half siblings together.

Constance Ahrons (2004) has argued that "good" or civil divorces are often largely ignored both in popular culture and by academics. Her research shows how people connected by "divorce chains" can support each other both emotionally and practically (Ahrons 2004). The way in which formal weddings today can bring together people connected through chains of divorce/remarriage in a way that feels appropriate and unifying is both traditional, yet, historically specific, and should be acknowledged.

#### **New & Changing Wedding Rituals Acknowledge Family Bonds**

That an important function of formal weddings was the opportunity to strengthen family bonds was also frequently illustrated by the deviations that couples chose to make from traditional rituals. Many of the rituals the brides followed, from music to vow choices, were included simply because they were seen as traditional. When questioned about why these were included, brides frequently said it was because "that's how it's usually done." In contrast, the deviations that were chosen could usually be more clearly explained and were frequently done to include additional family members. One woman explained the deviation that she and her husband made to begin their ceremony,

I had always thought that it wasn't fair [to your mother] to have only your father walk you down the aisle. I thought this from years back, from

when I was seven or eight. [My parents] laughed at me then, but I think they liked doing it. And David's parents both walked him down the aisle. So, first the Justice of the Peace walked down the aisle, then David and his parents, then the bridesmaid, then me and my parents. [Kelly, age 29]

In this instance, the parents of both the bride and groom were still married, but in the other two instances where the bride asked both her mother and father to walk her down the aisle (one mother accepted and one refused), they were in families where the parents had been divorced. By having both one's mother and father walk down the aisle with the bride, it provides a visible symbol that both parents are important in the life of the bride without her having to verbalize it. It also avoids the potential of hurt feelings as – traditionally – mothers of the bride have not had as visible a role in wedding ceremonies as the role of fathers in walking the bride down the aisle.

In addition to altering older rituals, several of the women who participated decided to include new rituals in their wedding, although many of them were unaware of how recently these rituals had been created. The last few decades have seen the emergence of new wedding rituals, including the Unity Candle, the Rose Ceremony, and the Family Medallion Service. These rituals may be understood as "invented traditions" as they imply continuity with the past, even though this continuity is largely fictional (Hobsbawm 1983). According to historian, Eric Hobsbawm, invented traditions are a "set of practices...of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms

of behavior by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past" (1983:1).

The only one of the three new rituals that scholars have investigated thus far is the Unity Candle, which was introduced by the Catholic Church in the 1980s and performed by several of my participants. In the Unity Candle ceremony, a husband and wife each take a lit candle and together light a more elaborate center candle. Although the reason for the rise in popularity is unclear, prior research suggests three reasons, including that (1) couples liked the religious symbolism of two halves becoming whole, (2) including white candles and candlelight in the ceremony appeared romantic to some couples, and (3) that the rise in popularity may be due to the strong marketing by the candle industry (Otnes and Pleck 2003).

In contrast to these explanations, among the seven women I interviewed who included the Unity Candle ceremony, all but one of the women said that they performed the ceremony as a way of including their parents. In a common variation of the ritual, the couples all had either their parents or just their mothers come up to the altar to light their "individual" candles before the bride and groom lit the center candle together. One woman explained, "[i]t gave both our Moms some kind of special role in the lighting of it." Among brides of divorced families where the mother and father may be reluctant to act together, but desire equal inclusion in the ceremony, inviting one's mother to light the Unity Candle was seen as a balance for having one's father walk her down the aisle.

Another new ritual that was performed at two of the weddings was the Rose Ceremony. While data on



the frequency of the use of this ritual is unavailable, it appears to be a new and fairly un-formalized ritual.<sup>4</sup> In this ceremony, the bride and groom usually both say a few words of thanks to special people in attendance, and then give the people they wish to acknowledge a long-stem single rose, which is often wrapped with a ribbon. One woman reported that she and her husband included this ceremony and gave roses to their mothers. The woman explained this decision,

[i]n the middle of the ceremony we did a rose ceremony. He [the groom] went to my mom and gave her a rose and I went to his mom. I think part of it was paying respect. I think the moms kind of get lost in the ceremony. You know, your dad walks you down and I think my mom would have liked to have walked me down the aisle. [Caroline, age 26]

This quote suggests that, like the Unity Candle ceremony, the introduction of the Rose Ceremony is also being influenced by a desire to have the mothers of the bride and/or groom play an equal role in the ceremony.

In addition to providing a special acknowledgement for their mothers, these new rituals are flexible enough that they also can allow for the participation of any kin or non-kin (or those that are in-between

<sup>4</sup> Although I cannot find any information on its origin, someone reading this manuscript later suggested a possible connection between this type of Rose Ceremony and the one done on the television show, *The Bachelor* (ABC network), which first aired in the United States in 2002. On this reality show, the bachelor gives long stem roses to those women he would like to single out for special attention and be able to spend more time with. Conversely, roses have long been a symbol of love and the wedding ritual may have risen completely independent of the TV show.

due to the postmodern construction of family) that the couple wants to include. The other woman who also included the Rose Ceremony in her wedding explained that she and her husband chose to give out roses to various family members, including aunts, uncles, and nephews, that they were especially close to. Furthermore, they not only attached a small note to each rose saying how much they appreciated the support of their family they also held a special “rose dance” during the wedding reception where only the rose recipients were out on the dance floor. As a ritual not yet formalized, it allows couples great flexibility in whom to include, and may be used to reflect the increased diversity of family structures.

One other new wedding ritual that celebrates the reality of the postmodern family is the Family Medallion Service. Although no women in my sample included this, the ritual was discussed in five of the interviews, and has been witnessed by the author on several occasions. This ritual was first created in 1987 by a Christian minister who wanted a way to acknowledge the children of the bride or groom, especially in cases of second marriages. In the Family Medallion Service, a child of the bride, the groom, or the couple together is called up to the altar during the wedding ceremony. A blessing is then read that emphasizes how the marriage of the bride and groom is also the beginning of a new family, which includes the child. A pin or necklace is then given to the child in the shape of three interconnecting rings to symbolize the new family. As more people now remarry or marry for the first time after having children, this ceremony lets the new couple include these children in the ceremony. It also implicitly acknowledges that the temporal order between

marriage and childbearing is not as straightforward as it used to be, and in doing so is more aligned with postmodern family patterns.

It should also be mentioned that these new rituals appear to be less religious than traditional wedding rituals. While God is often mentioned by the presiding clergy member during the Unity Candle ceremony, it can just as easily be performed leaving out the religious wording. The Rose Ceremony has no religious symbolism and appears to include no mention of religion at all. Although the Family Medallion Service was created by a Christian minister, it was designed to be non-denominational, and can be performed in either religious or civil wedding ceremonies.

As big, formal weddings increased during the twentieth century, so did the percentage of couples who were married by clergy members, as this came to be seen as an important part of a “traditional” wedding (Pleck 2000). Nonetheless, one should be careful not to assume that this indicates that couples today therefore place a higher value on the religious component of the wedding. Recent polls have found that just less than 20% of all adults and a third of adults under age 30 do not identify with any religion (Pew Research Center 2012). Although women in this study chose to be married by a clergy member as a part of having a traditional wedding, a number of them expressed a desire to have a fairly secular ceremony.<sup>5</sup> One woman reported that she asked the minister to “take God out” as much as possible. An-

<sup>5</sup> These requests appeared to be made more frequently by those women who were married by Protestant ministers than by those married by Catholic or Jewish clergy members.

other said they eliminated most of the references to God because otherwise it would have been “hypocritical.” Choosing to be married in a church or by a clergy member may be done simply as a reflection that one sees marriage as a “sacred” or special institution (Pleck 2000), not because one is especially religious. In some cases, these new wedding rituals may be appealing because they can be performed as secular rituals, while still reinforcing family bonds.

### Decreasing Anxiety over Marriage in a Time of Divorce

An additional reason that formal weddings are still relevant and appealing to women, even though marriage and families have changed, also emerged during the interview process. Having a traditional wedding may be an attempt to decrease anxiety about marrying in an age of high divorce rates. The U.S. has the highest divorce rates in the world, with nearly half of all marriages predicted to end in divorce (Cherlin 2010). While the wedding planning process itself may be stressful, successfully planning the event together and holding a large public ceremony that displays their commitment may decrease apprehension about marrying. Having a traditional wedding helps provide a predictable entry into married life and allows the couple to demonstrate their “marital work ethic” (Hackstaff 1999).

A little over half of the women expressed the belief (some explicitly and some implicitly) that it was important to have a “real” wedding if one wanted to get one’s marriage off to a positive start. While there is no evidence that having a large traditional wedding decreases the divorce rate (Otnes and



Pleck 2003), the idea that having a large formal wedding may serve as a form of “divorce insurance” was evident in my interviews. For the majority of the women, only a traditional wedding was seen as constituting a “real” wedding. One woman explained that she had considered a small private wedding, but said,

[i]t was important to [my husband] to have a traditional wedding. You know, a **real** one, with lots of people. [Samantha, age 36]

The idea that having a “real” or high quality wedding increased the odds that one would have a high quality marriage was also something they frequently implied. One woman said,

[t]here are a lot of things that happen in marriage that you can’t control. What kind of wedding we had is something I could control, so I wanted the best wedding possible. [Danielle, age 25]

In this quotation, the woman acknowledges that she has been thinking about (and perhaps worrying about) the fact that there will be things in her relationship in the future that she cannot control. Her way of dealing with this uncertainty was to focus on what she felt she could control – their wedding – and to try to have “the best wedding possible,” with the implication being that this would give her relationship the best start possible. It is also noticeable that she believes that the “best” wedding is a traditional one.

Throughout most of the twentieth century, the wedding industry has been encouraging this un-

supported but powerful idea that having an elaborate wedding is a way to stave off divorce (Pleck 2000; Ingraham 2008). It appears that it has been since the 1970s when divorce rates began to soar in the U.S. that the idea has had truly fertile ground. Perhaps coincidentally, but perhaps not, the 1980s, 1990s, and more recent decades have seen huge increases in cost in the average wedding. Splurging has been encouraged as a way to show your commitment to the relationship (and if nothing else is permanent, the debt may be for some couples).

In addition to providing a practicable beginning for married life, weddings also appear to reduce anxiety by providing opportunities for the couple to demonstrate their marital work ethic (Hackstaff 1999). Previous research has found that most couples today believe that having a successful marriage that does not end in divorce involves “marital work.” Important aspects of marital work include communicating, adapting, and compromising with each other (Hackstaff 1999).

Five of the women who were interviewed argued that the wedding planning process can act as an important testing ground for relationships. One woman explained,

I think maybe you can see, especially in the wedding planning process, how people work together, and what some of the issues that may come up in the marriage will be. [Anne, age 24]

The women were generally in agreement that if a couple can work together and support each other throughout the wedding planning process, then it

was a good indication that they would have a successful marriage. Although all the women reported doing more of the wedding planning work than their fiancés did, they also said that they had “expected” to do more of it. This is aligned with previous researches that found that weddings are viewed as primarily “women’s work” by those involved (Nett 1988; Currie 1993).

Among the couples in the study, there was a wide range in the amount of planning and decision making being done by the groom. In the last two decades, grooms have begun to become more involved in the wedding planning process (Otnes and Pleck 2003), which may increase the likelihood that women see it as an important testing ground for their relationship. In the cases where the bride-to-be was doing the bulk of the work, her fiancé demonstrated his marital work ethic by being emotionally supportive of her through the process and being available when she did ask for his help. In other cases, the division was much more equal. One woman explained,

[a]lthough the wedding planning was hard, I felt really good about it at the end. The wedding was so beautiful and it was something we had done together. That just felt good. A symbol of what we could do together. You know? [Gloria, age 28]

Successfully navigating the wedding planning process provided this woman with tangible evidence that she and her future husband could work together effectively. It appeared to allow her to enter her marriage feeling happy and optimistic about her chances of marital success.

## Discussion

Ritual scholars contend that rituals generally become more elaborate when people perceive that the social institution being celebrated is vulnerable and tenuous (Otnes and Pleck 2003). When elaborate weddings first became popular in the Victorian era, they expressed not only the value that was placed on marriage but also the common anxieties about it at the time (Rothman 1984). There is little doubt that the institution of marriage today is often seen as fragile and unstable due to the declining marriage rates, high divorce rates, and changing gender roles. Contrary to what some might have expected, this has not led to a decrease in the popularity of large traditional weddings.

Recent researches have highlighted a number of reasons for the continued popularity of traditional weddings (Pleck 2000; Otnes and Pleck 2003; Mead 2007; Ingraham 2008). Although these studies explain their phenomenon of focus, they are insufficient as a whole as they do not fully consider the continued functions that traditional weddings can play in contemporary family lives. Weddings have not lost their usefulness as a family ritual, even though their usefulness may be different than in years past, and families definitely are. Although the practical significance of marriage has been lessened over the last several decades, traditional weddings continue to play important roles in the lives of postmodern families.

The personal narratives of women in this study indicate that traditional weddings can function to decrease anxiety for modern brides through creating a predictable entry into marriage using rituals which

appear to have ties to a past where divorce was much less likely. These anxieties are different than the ones eased by wedding rituals two centuries ago, although the function they play may be similar. In the 1800s, women were concerned with the rise of the companionate marriage and the increased expectation for emotional happiness and intimacy in marriage (Rothman 1984). Today's brides often seek reassurance that they and their future husband are both committed to "working" together through life's challenges (Hackstaff 1999), which wedding planning gives them a space to practice and seemingly conquer. Although this function of traditional weddings in decreasing anxiety for modern brides has been overlooked by some wedding researchers and discounted by others, it deserves to be examined more closely and among various populations.

Traditional weddings also continue to bring families together – a role that has changed, but not decreased in importance as divorce and remarriage rates have climbed. While weddings traditionally united two separate kinship groups (and to some extent continue to), weddings also function today to bring together people connected by "remarriage chains" (Ahrns 2004). This role holds unique significance in a society that otherwise does not set aside a space for these extended family members to come together. The ways in which modern brides value involving family members in their wedding celebration can be seen in the deviations they make from traditional rituals and in new "invented traditions" they are including.

The women who were the focus of this study were those most likely to have a large traditional wed-

ding – white, middle class, heterosexual women who are marrying for the first time. This group has seen very little decrease in marriage rates over the last few decades as their rate of marriage is still over 90% (Cherlin 2010). This contrasts sharply with other groups. Rates of marriage among African American women have declined noticeably. At current rates, only two out of three African American women will marry, and 70% of these marriages will end in divorce (much higher than the 47% of white marriages that end in divorce) (Cherlin 2010). Nevertheless, beginning in the mid-1900s, African Americans also embraced traditional weddings, although they spend less money on average than do whites (Howard 2006; Ingraham 2008). In recent decades, some couples have also chosen to include older ethnic traditions, such as jumping over a broom and/or ritual drumming (Otnes and Pleck 2003). The role of traditional weddings in African American communities, where families have experienced even faster levels of change than white families, should be examined in future research.

The U.S. is one of a few countries where women with higher incomes and education levels are more likely to marry than those with lower incomes and education levels (Cherlin 2010). Although low-income women tend to marry at lower rates, this should not be taken as proof that the less affluent do not value weddings or the institution of marriage, as they will frequently say they are just waiting for the right situation (partner, job, money in the bank) or even to save enough money to have a traditional wedding (Edin and Kefalas 2007; Cherlin 2010). Future research should explore whether tra-

ditional weddings play similar functions as those discussed in this study in the lives of those with lower education and income levels.

Although rituals are by nature repetitive, rituals and their functions can and do change. This study has examined how two of the three traditional functions of weddings have adapted to the rise of postmodern family patterns so that they continue

to fulfill family needs. Many other family rituals (Thanksgiving dinner, Mother's Day, trick-or-treating, etc.) that appear to be long-standing traditions are actually not as old as many believe (Pleck 2000). How some traditions continue to adapt as families change, and how other traditions remain relatively fixed while their functions change, are important sociological questions that should be re-examined in this age of family transformation.

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