

# “The royal we”: Gender ideology, display, and assessment in wedding work

Áine M. Humble, Anisa M. Zvonkovic, and Alexis J. Walker

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#### Abstract

Family rituals provide a rich context in which to study the relation between ideology and action. Guided by the gender perspective, we analyzed the experiences of wives and husbands from 21 newly married heterosexual couples who described how they planned their weddings. The interplay among gender ideology, gender display, and gender assessment differed across three types of couples: traditional ( $n = 6$ ), transitional ( $n = 10$ ), and egalitarian ( $n = 5$ ). An examination of gender assessment in transitional couples illustrates how holding competing ideologies contributes to the reproduction of hegemonic gendered work patterns within wedding planning.

Key words: division of labor, gender, housework, ritual, weddings

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**“The Royal We”:  
Gender Ideology, Display, and Assessment in Wedding Work**

Research demonstrates that women do the majority of unpaid labor in heterosexual families (Ferree, 1990; Haas, 1999), despite increasingly liberal attitudes suggesting that this work should be shared. One reason for this “stalled revolution” (Hochschild, 1989) may be that within couples and within individuals, people simultaneously hold competing ideologies; for example, both traditional and egalitarian (Hochschild; Risman, 1998). We examine the specific context of wedding planning to understand the challenges couples face as a result of holding such competing ideologies.

Family rituals provide a unique context in which to study how couples engage in and negotiate household labor and display that work to others. The work women and men do to enact rituals may differ from the routine tasks they perform as part of their daily lives. Rituals are grounded in ideological traditions and thus may be considered inappropriate to change (Oswald, 2000; Oswald & Suter, 2004). Moreover, they are embedded in institutional and social network norms regarding women’s and men’s family roles. For such reasons, it may be difficult to change the division of labor in the context of rituals, despite egalitarian gender attitudes and behavior in other areas of life (Perry-Jenkins, 1994). Coltrane (1998) observed, in fact, that “because society now has fewer outward mechanisms for regulating gender, family rituals and other family practices have become central carriers for the meaning of gender” (p. 19).

We interviewed 21 (first-time) newly married heterosexual couples about how they planned for their weddings. Using the gender perspective (Ferree, 1990; Thompson, 1993) to guide our analysis, we found that some couples conformed to gendered expectations whereas others resisted or attempted to resist larger social imperatives by negotiating gender in nonstereotypical ways. Having first identified three types of couples (i.e., traditional, transitional,

and egalitarian), we then show how gender assessment within transitional couples led them to reproduce hegemonic gendered norms, despite intending not to do so. Our analysis extends previous wedding research by revealing gendered dyadic processes in heterosexual wedding planning and demonstrating how competing ideologies contribute to incomplete social change.

### Gender Construction

According to *the gender perspective* (Ferree, 1990; Thompson, 1993), gender differences in household labor result from factors such as social norms at the structural level, individual positions (e.g., social class), interactions with others, socialization, and personal beliefs. Rather than an unchanging individual attribute, however, gender can be confirmed, challenged, resisted, and changed in interaction (West & Zimmerman, 1987). In fact, gender construction is ongoing and can be contentious (Ferree). Nevertheless, through interaction, gender is typically constructed in ways that legitimize personal and societal benefits more for men than for women (Thompson; Wood, 1995).

Gender construction can be analyzed at multiple levels (Thompson, 1993). Research on heterosexual wedding experiences has focused on gendered *individual outcomes*, demonstrating that women do more wedding work than men, that women and men engage in different types of wedding work (Currie, 1993; Lowry & Otnes, 1994), and that each is expected to have different emotions prior to weddings (Smith, 1997). The strategies or processes that lead or contribute to such unequal gendered outcomes, however, have rarely been examined. Our analysis focuses on gender at the *interactional level*, revealing ways in which dyadic processes may create, sustain, or reject unequal positions (Wood, 1995). The concepts of *gender display* and *gender assessment* (Deaux & Major, 1987; Goffman, 1976; West & Zimmerman, 1987) provide important insights into this process.

Gender display refers to stereotypical presentations of masculinity and femininity (Goffman, 1976). Some contexts, such as *strong situations*, are more salient for gender display than others (Deaux & Major, 1987; West & Zimmerman, 1987). Strong situations “provide salient clues to guide behavior and have a fairly high degree of structure and definition” (Snyder & Ickes, 1985, p. 904). Public situations in which people feel accountable to others, such as weddings, are likely to be strong situations, and evidence has shown that individuals do alter their behavior in such contexts (Deaux & Major). Indeed, weddings may involve much pressure on women and men to display gender through their performance (Goffman); that is, to act in gender-specific ways (Corrado, 2002).

Gender assessment occurs when individuals’ behaviors are judged as to their appropriate level of masculinity or femininity (West & Zimmerman, 1987), and this assessment takes place regardless of whether the gendered expectations are fulfilled. As West and Zimmerman noted, “to ‘do’ gender is not always to live up to normative conceptions of femininity or masculinity; it is to engage in behavior *at the risk of gender assessment*” (p. 136). When partners confirm each others’ gendered expectations, there is little recognition of their actions (Thompson, 1993). If expectations are not confirmed, however, tension or conflict may occur or individuals may experience overt criticism. The strong situation of a wedding likely provides multiple opportunities for gender assessment as well as tension, conflict, and criticism. We highlight these processes in our study.

### Wedding Research

Research on weddings does not yet reflect the pervasiveness of this ritual among heterosexual couples (Ingraham, 1999; Kalmijn, 2004; Otnes & Pleck, 2003; Sniezek, 2005). Carrying out the work of a wedding provides an opportunity to display patterned behaviors that

may contribute to *gender careers* (Cheal, 1989). Previous research, for example, has found that grooms were expected not to know how to shop for wedding-related goods (Otnes & Pleck, 2003). This gender display may set the stage for men’s later admissions of ignorance or lack of skill that excuse them from housework or childcare. Other studies have suggested that bridal showers encourage and celebrate women’s unpaid family labor through the nature of the gifts given (Cheal, 1989; Montemurro, 2002) as well as through the emotional connections women are expected to nurture in these settings. As such, women’s experiences at bridal showers may forecast future kinwork and responsibility for domestic labor (Di Leonardo, 1987; Otnes & Pleck; Pleck, 2000; Risman, 1998). Clearly, gender careers begin long before weddings, but weddings are points at which women and men are expected to officially and ritualistically display gender.

Rather than the processes through which gendered patterns are perpetuated or resisted, research on heterosexual wedding experiences has focused instead on gendered individual outcomes, such as the amount and type of work brides and grooms do (e.g., Currie, 1993; Lowry & Otnes, 1994; Sniezek, 2005). A different line of research has examined heterosexism in weddings and how it affects gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer (GLBTQ), and heterosexual individuals’ wedding experiences (Oswald, 2000, 2002; Oswald & Suter, 2004). Similar to gender display, heterosexist display does not begin at weddings, but rather, weddings seem to be a “lightning rod” that illuminates the display of ideologies. Oswald’s program of research has shown that both GLBTQ and heterosexual couples experienced heterosexist expectations and assessment at weddings, and heterosexual individuals conformed to these expectations most of the time.

Oswald’s research concentrates on how individuals experience family membership at

weddings rather than on how they organize the work necessary for the ritual to take place. It draws attention to the multiple ways that individuals may respond to hegemonic pressures and raised for us an interest in examining “display” in weddings. Rather than heterosexist expectations and assessment, however, or the wedding itself, our focus is on *gender* display and assessment in heterosexual couples *during wedding planning*.

### Method

Our qualitative exploratory approach allowed for study of shades and nuances of gender construction. In-depth interviews enabled us to see how and why individuals organized wedding work and how they presented themselves to their partners and to others.

#### *Sampling Procedure*

A diverse sample was sought through systematic random sampling. First, microfiche marriage license records<sup>1</sup> were accessed from three counties encompassing a large Northwestern city. We obtained the names and addresses of every couple who applied for a marriage license during a three-month period in 2002 and who met the following criteria: (a) both individuals were marrying for the first time, (b) both individuals were 18 years of age or older, and (c) at least one person listed an urban address in the city. Systematic random sampling was then used to identify 30 couples from each county. We used the city phone directory to obtain phone numbers for each of these couples. Because of the number of individuals who could not be reached (e.g., in approximately 40% of cases, a phone number could not be located or repeated phone calls—maximum of seven—were not answered), the entire sampling procedure was followed twice. In the end, 42 individuals (21 married couples) were interviewed over a five-month period. Given 180 possible couples to interview in both sampling rounds, the *total response rate* (Neuman, 2003) was 12%. The *cooperation rate*, however, the percentage of

contacted, eligible couples who were interviewed (Neuman), was 40% (21 of 52 couples). The final sample size was theoretically adequate, as *data saturation*—no new information revealed from additional interviews (Morse, 2000)—had been reached at 19 couples.

*Sample Description*

Respondents’ ages ranged from 21.8 years to 33.6 years, with an average of 26.6 years ( $SD = 3.21$ ). Husbands ( $M = 27.52, SD = 3.18$ ) were, on average, 1.8 years older than wives ( $M = 25.72, SD = 3.08$ ). All respondents were White, non-Hispanic, consistent with the demographics in this particular state. Table 1 presents additional information on the 42 individuals interviewed. A range of socioeconomic statuses was evident as shown in the data on annual income, occupation, and education. Although 43% of the sample had no religious affiliation, several religions were represented among the remaining respondents.

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Insert Table 1 about here

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Couples had been married for about one year when interviewed. Fourteen couples (67%) had cohabited and two of these couples had children prior to marrying. Men had higher levels of education than their wives in only two couples. A majority of husbands, however, had higher personal incomes than their wives ( $n = 12$ ). On average, couples reported having been together for three and a half years before marrying and having a one-year engagement period, although two couples did not identify as having been engaged. The mean wedding cost was \$9,504 (including honeymoons), which was significantly lower than a national average (\$19,000, not including honeymoons) suggested by the wedding industry in 1999 (Condé Nast Publications, 2001). This lower cost may be indicative of less costly and elaborate lifestyles in the Northwestern United States; however, wedding industry estimates may also not reflect typical



wedding costs in the general population. Finally, weddings were financed through a variety of sources. Most couples said that they had paid for the wedding, often combined with financial assistance from the bride’s or groom’s parents. Three couples reported that they paid for their wedding without help.

### *Interviews*

Structured, in-depth interviews were conducted by the first author. Interviews were conducted separately with wives and husbands so that individual responses would not be affected by partner’s responses or presence (Hertz, 1995) or by the spouse’s greater involvement or perceived greater expertise in wedding planning. Whether the wife or the husband was interviewed first was alternated to avoid bias in data collection.

*Cultural interviews* (Rubin & Rubin, 1995) focused on understanding the culture of wedding preparation. A cultural interview consists of asking a small number of questions that allow respondents to answer in great detail in contrast to *topical interviews* that involve much more active questioning and rapid exchange of details (Rubin & Rubin). Respondents were encouraged to talk at length about their experiences, beginning with describing their engagement and wedding and then how they planned for their wedding. Questions focused on how individuals planned for all related events, and probes were used to elicit greater detail. Participants were asked to be as specific as possible when talking about *who* did *what* tasks in wedding preparation because individuals may take one spouse’s interpretation or experience and present it as the couple’s version of the event (Hertz, 1995). A participant information sheet was completed following the interview, in which general demographic information was collected.

### *Data Analysis*

Interviews were taped and transcribed verbatim, and *MAXqda*, a code and retrieve

software program (Kuckartz, 2001), was used for data organization (e.g., coding interview segments, creating memos, comparing multiple coded indicators for concepts). Analysis involved grounded theory techniques of open, axial, and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In *open coding*, individuals’ experiences were coded for what they did (e.g., how often respondents said they did something on their own or as a couple), how they felt, and so on. *Axial coding* moved more toward abstract conceptual thinking (Strauss & Corbin) reflecting gender construction and conditions in which wedding work was shared.

Finally, *selective coding* took place, in which a *core variable* or *main story* (LaRossa, 2005; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) was identified. In this study, the main story emerged around gender display, and by association, gender assessment. During coding and numerous readings of individuals’ transcripts, it became evident that a wide range of gender construction in couples existed. This range was plotted along a continuum and *ordinal comparison*, entailing “the rank ordering of cases into three or more categories based on *the degree to which* a given phenomenon is present” (Mahoney, 1999, p. 1160), was used to compare couples. Common features of each couple type were identified through *analytic comparison* (Neuman, 2003), a qualitative analytic strategy in which regularities or patterns are identified among categories in a small set of cases.

## Results

Although gender construction typically conformed to traditional patterns, there was variation. As noted earlier, three types of couples emerged in the data analysis, which we categorized as traditional ( $n = 6$ ), transitional ( $n = 10$ ), or egalitarian ( $n = 5$ ). Couple typologies were differentiated according to how involved men were in planning their weddings, how couples used or did not use gender strategies reproducing a structural context of inequality, and

how couples presented themselves to each other and to others throughout wedding planning and during their interviews (i.e., displayed gender). We describe the couple types and their gender display. Then, because they represent the potential for change, we highlight the experiences of spouses in transitional couples, looking specifically at gender assessment.

### *Couple Types*

*Traditional couples.* In these couples, brides and other women planned weddings, with their husbands relatively absent from participation. Brides in traditional couples identified strongly with dominant wedding ideology; they and their partners did not expect their fiancés to have an active presence in wedding planning. Nathan said, “I wanted to have a nice wedding, and it was her day, I wanted to make it her day more than my day.” When asked why he thought it was “more her day” he responded:

Um, I don’t know. I just wanted her to have a really special day that day. I think that the honeymoon was going to be my special time and I wanted the wedding to be hers—I don’t know if that’s traditional or whatever else it is, but that’s why I think that I just kind of wanted it and I did the most that I could do to help her through that.

These couples also used the ideology of weddings being for women, rather than for couples, to justify brides’ greater involvement in wedding planning. If the day was *for women*, brides (or brides and other women) were responsible for making it happen, and grooms rarely were involved. Janice said of her husband, “His opinion was he would pay for the wedding and I could plan the wedding.”

Moreover, because these couples had been socialized to expect women to look forward to their wedding day as the most important day of their lives, it was assumed that women and not men would know how to put a wedding together. Men’s inexperience was assessed as

acceptable, and as such, they were excused from wedding work.

I had been planning my wedding [all my life]. . . And so I had already had in my mind a lot of what I wanted for a wedding. And [my husband] didn't. He was, I would think, I would say, he was a little scared. He just didn't know things that I thought people just knew about weddings, he had no idea about. . . . So we just decided, and he said, “You know, you've been thinking about this forever, I don't really care, I trust what you're going to pick, you know.” (Sophia)

When the gender strategy of weddings being for women was unquestioned, it fell to women to plan this event and to display the organizational skills to do so. It was common to hear grooms say things such as “she's a natural planner,” “it's in her element,” or “it comes naturally to her.” Both traditional wives and their husbands described how such organizational skills came easily to brides. Despite these “natural” organizational skills, however, some traditional brides experienced considerable stress during wedding planning. Furthermore, feeling responsible for everything was taxing. Ross, who helped out very little with planning his wedding, said, “[My wife] was probably stressed out most of the time. She [laughing] probably felt like she *was* the only one doing everything.” His wife, who literally said she felt *alone* in planning and who said she would elope if she ever married again, recalled a difficult moment the day before her wedding:

I went to [a grocery store] the day before my wedding, which I don't advise you to do. I got there right when it opened, I had my day all planned out, I'm going to go to [the store], I'll do this, I'll have all this time to set up, I'll help decorate, fine. I'm in [the store] and I just had this moment where I just wanted to scream. I mean I had four cheesecakes, three sheet cakes, nine packages of hamburger buns, and five boxes of

frozen hamburgers in this car, and people were like, “Oh you must be having a party!” and I’m stressing because it’s the day before my wedding and I’m like waaa! I’m like, “Yeah, just a little one.” “Oh, is it a graduation party?” “No, it’s a wedding.” “Oh, well, whose wedding?” “Mine.” “You really should get people to do this for you.” “Thanks, I know that now.” I just had this moment where I got all this stuff and I just wanted to stop and scream, “I’m the bride, dammit, it’s my day!” [laughing]

Traditional couples displayed gender in a way that appeared consistent with both their actual experiences and their ideologies. Traditional grooms and brides clearly stated that women were much more involved in planning the wedding than men, gave numerous examples during interviews to support their statements, and also noted that this was how they believed the work should be structured. Moreover, despite their stress, brides rarely indicated any dissatisfaction with men’s lack of involvement. In fact, when traditional women needed help, they were more likely to turn to other women than to their fiancés for assistance. Traditional grooms, in turn, supported this strategy. Alicia noted that “[My husband] was very insistent that I didn’t do it all alone, so he was on my case to get *other people* [emphasis added] to help,” whereas another bride said:

I should have asked for help more too, cause I kind of took on a lot myself. I felt bad asking people to do things, and I felt like, you know, “I’m going to have to do it to make sure it’s done right, kind of thing,” which I knew would be fine if other people did it, but somehow, you know, I felt like I had to do this, I had to make sure that this was right. I would have done that. Yeah, [laughing] that’s what *attendants* [emphasis added] are for! (Jody)

*Egalitarian couples.* Unlike in traditional couples, both spouses in egalitarian couples

were equally involved in wedding planning. Grooms’ participation was much higher in these couples, compared to the other two couple typologies, and responsibility for wedding planning was shared between grooms and brides. In four of these five couples, brides and grooms did the work together, and in one couple, the groom did more work than his fiancée. These couples questioned a number of gendered ideologies and formal traditions implicit in weddings.

In particular, egalitarian couples rejected the ideology of weddings being only for women, and this influenced how they organized wedding work. Paige said, “it was definitely not [my husband saying] ‘Oh, this is your gig, honey, yeah, you do whatever you want.’” Her husband described how his involvement was “pretty much like a constant” throughout the planning process. Compared to the other couples, these couples also ignored or minimized any reading of publications that described brides’ and grooms’ distinct roles. For example, in describing her dislike for how others might dictate what they should be doing, Bernadette said, “I bought two bridal magazines for an airplane ride once, and I regretted it. After five minutes of looking at them, I’m like, “This is sick, I can’t look at this, I can’t look at this.”

Images of women as natural planners, descriptions of stress-filled planning, and examples of women taking over from men did not appear in egalitarian couples’ stories. Vanessa said of her husband, “Grant’s only happy when he can really have his hands in the mix. . . . for the most part he was really helpful and did exactly what I was hoping he would do.” Grant confirmed this with descriptions of his involvement, which including locating a wedding site, finding flowers, and coordinating his male friends’ participation in the celebration. In fact, Vanessa and Grant were the one couple in which the groom appeared to be slightly more involved than his partner. Grant recognized that he was “different” from other men, noting that his family was “pretty much used to me not doing things the way everyone else is supposed to do them.”

Egalitarian couples wanted to have a wedding that reflected who they were rather than what others might prescribe for them. Justine, who was extremely pleased with how her wedding reflected both her and her husband’s wishes, said, “I think my number one goal was to be true to myself on that day, no matter what, against all expectations of me from the outside world.” Some of these couples, however, may have been rejecting the formality, perceived banality, and/or expensiveness of weddings in their wedding planning rather than the gendered nature of wedding labor.

Only one egalitarian couple displayed a gendered *consciousness* in their wedding planning. For example, when describing an incident at a rental store, Kevin said:

Some of the interactions we had there, was I felt pretty, I don’t know, yeah, pretty sexist I guess. They really didn’t acknowledge me, the woman that we had been working with, you know, kept referring it to, you know, as the bride’s special day, and so I found it pretty offensive.

His wife confirmed his recollection, saying, “The woman just talked to me. And I guess I didn’t realize that upfront. . . . I know that we wanted to be really careful about that.”

Egalitarian couples presented themselves to others in ways that seemed consistent with their ideologies. Egalitarian brides and grooms said that they were equally involved in wedding planning, and in their interviews they provided evidence to support this assertion. Similar attitudes and beliefs also influenced how they approached the wedding planning, and these shared worldviews may have been particularly important in dealing with gender assessment from others. These couples did come under pressure at times to be more gendered in their planning, especially from family members and wedding industry workers, but working together seemed to help them to resist these influences. It appeared that when both partners confirmed and

reinforced each other’s views, they were better able to resist other’s expectations. Bernadette said:

[My mother] wanted to be more involved. I think because people were always asking her. . . . [But] anything that was really, really important, [my husband and I] wanted to do it and we wanted to do it together, and that dynamic of the three of us working together just didn’t work for Kevin. And I really had to honor that, “I’m marrying you, Kevin,” so I need to say, “Mom, you know, we’re taking care of it.”

*Transitional couples.* Transitional couples were the most common couple type in our study, and they were both similar to and different from the other two types. Similar to egalitarian couples, spouses in transitional couples expressed a desire to share wedding work equally and they described how they planned their weddings together. Nevertheless, as evident in their own examples, their experiences were closer to those of traditional than egalitarian couples.

Transitional men ranged from being somewhat to much more involved in wedding work than traditional men, but they did little to move beyond the gendered suggestions communicated by others. Rachel said, “I think [my husband] looked through one of my books I had, or something, and saw what they say the groomsman is *supposed to do* [emphasis added], and he pretty much took on that part himself.” Notably, such publications have long lists of tasks that women need to perform, and much shorter task lists for men. Additionally, men were involved in work that was thought to be female in nature only when other women, such as mothers, mothers-in-law, sisters, or female friends, were unavailable or unable to help. Trish said “I think [my husband] helped out a ton more because he knew my family wasn’t here and that I really didn’t have any help.”

Similar to traditional brides, transitional brides were expected to know what needed to be



done and how to do it. Roland noted, “[My wife] really is so much better at planning these things and she has these visions of what they should be that I don’t.” Unlike brides in traditional couples, however, transitional brides reported having to learn many new things in the time leading up to their wedding. For example, these brides overwhelmingly took responsibility for flowers, yet two of them mentioned that they knew nothing about flowers. One said:

This [was] really hard for me planning this wedding cause I was not one of those kids, these women, the girls that ever dreamed of my wedding. . . . It just wasn’t like that. And so that’s kind of what was hardest was trying to say, “Well, what would I like?” And I knew what I liked in my friends, I knew what I liked and didn’t like in terms of style of things, but not of me in that picture. (Abby)

Nevertheless, transitional brides learned, either through reading books or magazines or through consultations with other women who were knowledgeable. In contrast, transitional men had the option of learning or not. Additionally, rather than fully participating throughout the planning and implementation stages, much of grooms’ work appeared to be initiated when their fiancées were overwhelmed. Transitional men stepped in at the last minute when asked, but they seldom initiated wedding work on their own. Furthermore, the help they provided was sometimes of a dubious nature.

He wouldn’t *initiate* anything but if I definitely needed help he was willing to do anything. So if I said, “\_\_\_\_\_, go outside with the photographer,” it’s like, “No way!” but when I ask him to go to the photographer with me. . . he was totally willing to do all that. (Trish)

Finally, in transitional couples, both wives and husbands often described men’s participation in ways that elevated it. Probing during interviews revealed that much of

transitional men’s wedding work revolved around final decision making<sup>2</sup> despite couples’ statements that grooms were involved throughout the entire process. In this strategy, brides carried out the background research and presented three or four options to grooms, who then chose from those options.

I think we came up with a pretty good plan that we originally formulated specifically for the invitations but then we carried it over to a couple of other things where she would narrow it down to her favorite six or eight invitations in the catalogue and then I would rank them. (Cole)

Both wives and husbands described final decision making in a way that overshadowed the work involved in identifying the final options. Women engaged in lengthy processes to identify these options. Choosing invitations, for example, might require numerous trips to several stores, paging through large books of invitation samples, and talking to sales personnel about possible choices. It also might require looking through hundreds of font and wording examples and consulting with parents to determine acceptable invitation wording.

Some couples saw final decision making as an important aspect of grooms’ involvement. Yet, decision making gave grooms the appearance of involvement and also bolstered their power within the relationship. For instance, occasionally a bride stated that she felt she *owed* her partner the power to make a decision because he was not involved in much else in the wedding planning process. A bride also might feel somewhat guilty that she did not invite her husband to participate in reducing the number of alternatives. So, when a transitional bride felt guilty about the wedding being for her—which went against her egalitarian ideology—she resolved that by giving her husband final say and a sense of shared responsibility. This involvement could help both members of the couple feel as if they were planning the wedding together.

I did run all my ideas by him, I didn't say, “This is what we're going, and this is the way it is,” I had said, “I'd kind of like to do this, I'd kind of like to do this, what do you think of that, what do you think of that?” (Carole)

Transitional couples displayed gender by presenting themselves to others in ways that showed men as more involved than they actually were. Not only was this demonstrated through descriptions of grooms' decision making involvement, but it also was demonstrated in the language individuals used to describe their experiences. During the interviews, respondents described their work as being shared, yet probing revealed that grooms were, in fact, uninvolved or involved to a lesser degree. Samantha, was the only respondent who verbally acknowledged this strategy during the interviews. She referred to this move as “*the royal we*,” describing it in the following way:

A lot of the time I'd start using “we” to make it sound like he was involved when we made decisions and I got in the habit of saying that so it wouldn't sound like I, I, I- I'm doing everything.

#### *Transitional Couples and Gender Assessment*

Individuals are constantly evaluated as to how they construct gender. Gender assessment is often subtle and may be out of individuals' awareness, but is readily revealed when individuals do not meet the gendered expectations of others. As already noted, the shared beliefs of egalitarian couples seemed to help them resist hegemonic expectations from family members or wedding industry employees. In contrast, traditional couples' experiences of gender assessment were less identifiable than those of egalitarian couples because their behaviors were consistent with traditional ideas about gender. Transitional couples also faced gender assessment from others. What set these couples apart, however, was that gender assessment was revealed through

their interactions *with each other*. As will be shown, this within-couple assessment contributed to transitional couples having a gendered division of labor in wedding planning despite attempts not to do so.

Compared to the other two groups, individuals in transitional couples were more likely to report being surprised by something their partner did. For example, several men were surprised by the intensity of their fiancées’ involvement in the wedding culture. Hans said:

When she started, we had more wedding magazines and literature than I’ve ever seen in my life and don’t ever want to see again! . . . There were so many magazines [laughing] and I was really surprised by how much she was reading these things and enthralled with these things. . . . She started talking about wanting to get this for the wedding and that for the wedding and ultimately that never really did happen, but I’m like, “Oh my Lord, that’s just not her!”

When brides immersed themselves in the wedding culture, grooms who wanted to be more involved or who became more interested over time had difficulty finding their place in the process. Gender assessment occurred when brides assessed their partners’ contributions as *beyond* their gendered expectations. Tamara said:

It just floored me the first time he really wanted to be involved in flowers, and I was like “No! It’s my thing, I don’t even want to talk to you about it! Why do you even care?” And that really pissed him off.

Similarly, her husband described his frustrations when his wife took over certain tasks that they had agreed he would do such as making phone calls.

On a daily basis in terms of decisions, we talked about, “I’m calling here, you’re going to call there,” and then, “Well you just called my place?” It wasn’t worth

getting *overtly* mad about it because she just had time and she just did it. . . . So obviously there’s that apathetic lazy kind of sensibility there, “Oh ok, sure, cool, that’s great.”

Another experience of gender assessment occurred when brides assessed their fiancés’ involvement as *below* expectations; that is, when transitional men took on tasks but did not always do the corresponding management work necessary to accomplish those tasks. As a result, transitional brides often took responsibility for reminding their husbands when to complete the task and how to complete it, and they monitored how things were progressing. For example, one transitional bride kept checking in with her fiancé to see if he had developed a guest list yet.

Zachary said:

[My wife] said, “Write down the people you want to invite, get their names and addresses,” which, you know, I got, I was even a slacker about that. But we still got the invitations out a couple of months, three months ahead, well in advance. We got it done in time, but getting all the names together, it didn’t get done, you know, exactly when [my wife] wanted it sometimes, and it upset her a little bit but you know, [she] got over it. We got everything there.

Some brides ultimately felt they had to take over when they perceived grooms attending to tasks with little sense of urgency. For example, one bride noted that she had to arrange for a minister, which she felt her partner should have done months earlier. When this occurred, grooms generally did not seem too bothered by their partners taking over. If they did, they did not reveal it in their interviews.

Thus, gender assessment led to grooms in transitional couples being less involved than their wives. On one hand, brides’ absorption in wedding planning could lead to gender

assessment that pushed their partners into more traditional roles. In response, grooms did not protest vigorously, perhaps because doing so might have required them to do more wedding work. On the other hand, when grooms did not attend to wedding work with a level of care deemed necessary by brides, brides felt they had no option but to take over various tasks. Trish, for example, described herself as “anally organized” *because* she had to do most of it herself. The outcome of these opposite processes was the same: Together, transitional brides and grooms displayed dominant gendered patterns through their interaction. Similar to traditional brides, transitional brides were responsible for planning and overseeing much of the work and their work load was not significantly reduced by their husbands’ involvement.

One factor that may have contributed to such gender construction was a sense of ambivalence or uncertainty over men’s roles in wedding planning, which was not evident in traditional or egalitarian couples’ interviews. Traditional couples were clear that roles should be separate, whereas egalitarian couples felt strongly about being equally involved. Tamara acknowledged the difficulty in determining appropriate involvement for men.

I felt like I should be making decisions with him sometimes and should be able to do that rightfully, and yet there were situations that he really wanted to be involved in that maybe I wasn’t as receptive to letting him be involved in, like one thing was flowers. . . . Men are, nowadays, a lot more invested in weddings than they ever were before and I think they are walking on a fine line where they feel expectations to be more involved in the process but not knowing where to insert themselves, and where to take the lead, and where to jump in, and where to just be there standing and be like, “Yeah honey, I like that too.”

One groom, who had struggled with how to be involved and who, during the interview, realized

that he was not as involved as he thought he had been (“Wow, I really didn’t do a lot!”), described how a wedding created a hierarchical system or “pseudo-government,” with brides at the top, followed by the mother of the bride, and the groom somewhere further down the list. “And if you can’t figure out the system, [you’re in trouble!]”

### Discussion

Because society has become less overtly patriarchal, Coltrane (1998) suggested that traditional family rituals may be central carriers of gender construction. Our study supports that contention, finding that the strong situation (Snyder & Ickes, 1985) of wedding planning influences people to act in stereotypical ways. The findings also extend previous wedding research by demonstrating how gender display and assessment interact with ideology during heterosexual wedding planning. Similar to previous research (Hochschild, 1989; Schwartz, 1994), three types of couples exist: traditional, transitional, and egalitarian. Ideological scripts of weddings (Geller, 2001; Illouz, 1997) influence traditional and transitional couples’ interactions. These scripts are reflected in gender strategies that construct weddings as being for women rather than for couples and that view brides as knowing—naturally—how to organize weddings. As a result, wives in these couples are responsible for planning the event. In addition, a lack of gender consciousness makes it difficult for these women to see the irony that even though weddings are “for women,” they must do all or most of the work to make it happen. In contrast, egalitarian couples reject these traditional gender strategies, and their shared ideologies may help them stay the course of egalitarianism and at the same time resist gender assessment from traditional outsiders.

Consistent with previous studies (Blaisure & Koivunen, 2000; Hochschild, 1989), transitional couples are the most common couple type found in our study. These couples fall

between the other two types: They admire egalitarian relationships but are unable to achieve this ideal (Schwartz, 1994). Transitional couples view themselves as sharing wedding work relatively equally, yet examples from their interviews indicate otherwise. For example, a transitional groom might be involved in wedding labor, but only in gender-appropriate tasks; a type of separate-but-equal strategy similar to findings in Hochschild’s study in which husbands’ work in the garage was equated with wives’ work in the rest of the house. Moreover, these couples are proud of the grooms’ involvement and display them as if grooms are more involved than they actually are. In some ways, the men in these couples are comparable to fathers who are lauded because they do more than their fathers did, even though it is not very much (Risman, 1998).

This study extends previous wedding research (e.g., Currie, 1993) by describing how gender assessment can lead to gendered divisions of wedding labor in transitional heterosexual couples. On one hand, transitional brides who immerse themselves in the wedding culture assess their partners as doing too much, with their fiancés then retreating from wedding planning. Grooms might be disappointed with their lack of involvement, but they also seem to recognize that pulling back means less work for them. Thus, they do not protest vigorously. On the other hand, transitional brides who assess their partners as not doing enough leads to brides feeling that they have no other option but to take over on tasks they had hoped would be shared. Again, grooms do not seem to protest this emerging arrangement, which ultimately means less work for them.

Hochschild (1989) described how some married couples came to share work equally whereas others did not. She showed how couples who seemed egalitarian in their beliefs did not translate those beliefs into congruent behaviors, differentiating between individuals with *shallow* versus *deep ideologies*. Individuals with shallow ideologies talked about being egalitarian but



had deeper feelings that contradicted these beliefs, thus resulting in unequal sharing. Individuals with deep ideologies had underlying feelings that corresponded with their beliefs, resulting in congruent behaviors.

In wedding preparation, it may not be the strength of an ideology that matters, however, but rather that individuals can simultaneously *hold more than one ideology*. That is, they can believe in and see themselves as egalitarian, but have their traditional wedding roles and responsibilities, too. Moreover, ideologies do not necessarily “shift and change” during wedding planning as Sniezek (2005) suggested. Within some couples, competing ideologies are *held at the same time*. Holding competing ideologies seem especially likely in transitional couples.

Traditional couples rarely or never challenge the status quo during wedding planning. Through their display, they reify traditional gendered patterns that are consistent with their traditional ideology, and any gender assessment they experience from each other or outsiders goes unnoticed because their gender display meets others’ hegemonic expectations. Egalitarian couples generally hold one ideology, too, although Risman (1998) notes that there may be vestiges of traditional ideologies even in egalitarian couples’ relationships. Spouses in egalitarian couples maintain an ideology that challenges the status quo. They hold each other in line—using gender assessment to keep any backward slippage in check—and they help each other resist the assessment of others.

Transitional couples, who hold competing ideologies, struggle to combine “companionship with hierarchy” (Blaisure & Koivunen, 2000, p. 81). On the one hand, they are the “new” couple and they are doing things together. On the other hand, brides still have to have the perfect wedding, things have to be done in the “right” way, and they have to keep the process on track. Further, husbands express a desire to be involved equally but they also are comfortable

doing very little. Moreover, family members and people in the wedding industry expect them to do all of these things as well. In this way, transitional couples illustrate both the simultaneous existence of multiple gender ideologies as well as the somewhat weak connections between ideology and everyday life (Berger, 1981).

Contemporary social patterns simultaneously present a traditional and an egalitarian gender ideology (Hochschild, 1989). Hays (1998) described how mothers must relate to both modern and traditional images of women. In our study, brides and grooms must relate to both egalitarian and traditional views of weddings and of wedding planning. Spouses in transitional couples draw at one and the same time from competing ideologies in creating a wedding—and a relationship—that allows them to both maintain the status quo and to think of themselves as modern or egalitarian. Transitional couples want it both ways—and they have it. They display themselves to people—and each other—as the modern, egalitarian couple, yet their behavior does not match that. Because they also have a traditional ideology, they do not hold each other to the egalitarian standard and they do not have to confront the gender assessment of others because they are doing things in the traditional way. Additionally, gender assessment from each other is not strongly protested as a result of their competing ideologies. These competing ideas, however, lead to uncertainty over how involved men should be in wedding planning. The combination of such competing ideologies is reflected in transitional couples’ assessments of each other as brides and grooms, which is manifested in conflict and tension during wedding planning. These couple dynamics illustrate the difficulty many contemporary couples have in moving beyond gender as an organizing principle in their lives (Risman, 1998; Schwartz, 1994).

Transitional men seem more involved when other women are not available to provide assistance. Thus, our findings affirm views that men are more likely to display family care under

certain circumstances (Coltrane, 1990; Thompson, 1993). If men help only in the absence of additional women helpers, however, they will not transform gendered wedding work. As in Hochschild’s (1989) study, only a small number of couples in our study rejected strategies that perpetuated gender inequality, demonstrating that even egalitarian couples may have difficulty moving beyond gender (Risman, 1998). Further, of the five egalitarian couples, one had no money to have an elaborate wedding and three others had mothers or mother-in-laws who were unable to help or were uninterested in helping with wedding planning, thus reducing a major source of gender assessment. Ultimately, only one couple, Bernadette and Kevin, rejected gendered weddings outright, demonstrating *acts of vigilance* (Blaisure & Allen, 1995)—a deliberate monitoring of equality in relationships—throughout their planning process. They show the kind of real change that occurs only when both women and men see weddings as for couples rather than for women and when men are equal partners in wedding planning despite the presence of other women. Future research could investigate more closely the role that social networks, particularly mothers, play in wedding planning.

Although this study improves on previous methods by using couple data, a limitation is that it relied on a small number of respondents living in a single city in the Pacific Northwest. Further, although the sampling strategy was designed to achieve a diverse sample, the final sample was White, non-Hispanic, and mostly middle class. Nevertheless, the strategy did result in a sample that was varied in terms of the theoretical construct of gender. The analysis also is limited in that interviews were retrospective in nature, and it is possible that individuals may have told a story that did not exactly match their behavior. Moreover, because weddings symbolize the beginning of a couple’s marital relationship, events may be described in ways that present the couple to others as a unified dyad. We hope we reduced the likelihood of this

problem by interviewing spouses separately rather than together (Hertz, 1995).

Similar to heterosexism at weddings (Oswald, 2000; Oswald & Suter, 2004), gender is constructed in wedding planning via an ongoing process of display and assessment. Although we cannot make assessments about larger interactions around unpaid labor that may exist in these couples, Sniezek (2005) noted that “wedding work is not simply parallel to other sites of division of labor but prior to them and potentially shapes future division of labor” (p. 217). As an early family ritual for couples, weddings may help to establish a foundation for a couple’s gender careers (Cheal, 1989) or, rather, further solidify gender careers already in development. Patriarchal ideologies, by virtue of their hegemonic power, may supercede other held ideologies, resulting in what Hochschild (1989) referred to as a “stalled revolution.” If wedding work and family labor are to be shared, couples will need to work through these competing ideologies, moving beyond *the royal we* to an *egalitarian we*.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> At the time of data collection, the city allowed only heterosexual marriages.

<sup>2</sup> This pattern also occurred with traditional couples. If traditional men were involved in wedding work at all, this was typically the way in which they participated.

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Table 1

*Participant Characteristics*

Characteristic	Frequency	%
Highest grade of schooling <sup>a</sup>		
High school or GED	8	19.0
Some postsecondary	9	21.4
4- or 5-year degree	17	40.5
Graduate school or professional degree	7	16.7
Employed		
Yes	32	76.2
No	3	7.1
Student	4	9.5
Student and employed	3	7.1
Type of employment ( <i>n</i> = 35)		
Managerial/professional	12	34.3
School teacher/social worker/artist	9	25.7
Technical/sales	6	17.1
Administrative/support	1	2.9
Service	1	2.9
Mechanics/repair/construction	6	17.1
Personal income		
Less than \$20,000	7	16.7
\$20,000 - \$29,999	16	38.1

(table continues)

Characteristic	Frequency	%
\$30,000 - \$39,999	10	23.8
\$40,000 - \$49,999	5	11.9
\$50,000 - \$74,999	3	7.1
\$75,000 - \$100,000	1	2.4
Religion at time of wedding		
No religion	18	42.9
Nondenominational Christian faiths	8	19.0
Presbyterian	7	16.7
Other Christian faiths (e.g., Mormon)	8	19.0
Other (yoga)	1	2.4

*Note.* Data are for individuals ( $N = 42$ ).

<sup>a</sup>One person did not provide a response.