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May 2007

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A thesis submitted for the degree of Master of Anthropology of the University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand

November, 2002
Dedication:

To my Gran, 
for all her wisdom
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Abstract

This investigation explores the relationship between women, marriage and weddings in contemporary New Zealand society. The persistence of these institutions is paradoxical in light of their social and material redundancy as well as their submission to a vicious critique by the women’s movement. Using a poststructuralist framework to guide my inquiry, I address discourses that sustain women’s desire for weddings as a means of clarifying the continued reverence for matrimony. A holistic approach is taken, addressing social, political, economic, symbolic and material elements of wedding ideology. I argue for a move into a poststructuralist feminist perspective, which brings into question existing institutions and practices. I recognise the historical importance of secular and religious influences in women’s relationship to matrimony and explore briefly their role in this relationship in contemporary society. Within this framework, I look at the persistence of wedding ritual that has previously been assessed by feminists as discriminatory to women, using participant testimony to clarify meanings behind these practices in contemporary society. The infrastructure of the contemporary New Zealand wedding industry has undergone a process of feminisation. Inherent in the production of the wedding and the feminisation of the experience, not only is the bride targeted as the central wedding consumer, but she is also a dominant signifier for the selling of wedding related commodities. Examples from popular culture show how bridal imagery is employed to encode products with meaning: bridal legitimacy is an economic strategy that sustains consumption practices. Integral in this process is the construction of the ‘princess bride’ trope. I explore the consequences of the production of this trope for women, utilising a Foucauldian analysis of power to demonstrate how ideologies of romance and tradition effectively conceal any commercial motivations involved in the signifying process.
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INTRODUCTION

As a postgraduate student in my sixth and final year I have become acutely aware of a mass fetish and fixation with matrimony and weddings around me, both in my immediate circle of friends and in wider society. As my social circle has grown and dispersed, the flurry of engagement announcements, bridal showers, hen’s parties and conventional white weddings of people I have grown up with, translated to me again that, despite escalating divorce rates and a decline in the material necessity of matrimony, marriage and weddings are not obsolete. The ideologies that sustain these institutions are alive in popular culture, social expectations and the ideological trappings we are faced with on a daily basis. I concede that we are in the midst of wedding mania - a wedding obsessed culture. We are bombarded with portraits of them in magazines, television, film, newspapers, talk shows, sitcoms, children’s literature, toy production and the internet. They vary of course, as does any living thing that evolves over time, from lavish and extravagant fairytale affairs featuring the hegemonic beautiful ‘princess bride’ to those that make headlines as a consequence of their oddity.

In this investigation I seek to examine the relationship between heterosexual women, weddings and marriage in contemporary New Zealand. My opening words are deliberately provocative – one of the reasons I found this topic so compelling was that it resonated deeply with my personal reality. In order to clarify this assertion and the direction the investigation is to take, there is a need to describe briefly the origins of my topic.

A pivotal moment in the unravelling of my thesis topic occurred whilst ‘hanging out’ in my bedroom with a group of female friends – educated friends, most whom have at least a fundamental awareness of the constructions and workings of ideological stereotypes - of gender subjugation and the reinforcement of traditional gender roles in popular culture. They were women who speak of pursuing careers (as well as families) and advocate for equal rights for women in all spheres of their lives. But in the casual, safe and unexpected context of my bedroom, the inherent contradictions we face as young women today were exposed. A pile of New Zealand Bride and Groom magazines sat on my floor: a collection of resources I was to use for inspiration on a topic, for insight into the depiction of women in wedding discourses. But while I aimed to deconstruct these resources, the other women were pouring over them, excitedly
selecting their favourite gown styles, flower preferences and whether or not they wanted to wear tiaras or veils at their wedding, "why do so many women wear long veils like that, they cover up all the effort put into the hair and make up?" one of them asked. I realised the polemic at work – no one raised the question, ‘why wear a veil, so reminiscent of patriarchal tenure, gender coercion and feminine vulnerability?’ or even more perplexing, ‘why get married in the first place?’ These women were bringing to life the very social patterns, stereotypes and sexist agendas that they themselves had previously critiqued in gender study papers.

But more than this – it seemed that many people were irritated by my apparent lack of superstitious and sentimental reverence for marriage and weddings. People used to ask me to justify my views and I was honest in my response, despite the fact that it generally left them bewildered. If I was speaking to a bride-to-be I would tone down my reply, but only by emitting that I did not wish to renounce my autonomy through a wedding, to participate in narcissistic self-presentation in order to gratify my own vanity. I would tell them that I refused to yoke myself to a man for the sake of public sanction and that I did not feel a need to bind a relationship with another in order to secure my identity. If necessary, I would also tell them that I did not wish to embrace the historical notion of state controlled sexuality or uphold a tradition so reminiscent of patriarchy. And then I would ask, ‘why celebrate one relationship when so many are important in my life?’ One friend said to me, “stop being so cynical – it’s romantic!” But an institution that has for centuries legitimated gender oppression, discriminating against non-hegemonic sexualities, races, ethnicities and cultures, is anything but romantic to me. To pursue educational endeavours over the sanctioned amorous union we call marriage may be more socially accepted today. But I realised that to be heterosexual and not perceive romance as pivotal in one’s social role, or fail to see virtue in the romance and pageantry that a wedding ceremony has to offer was problematic for many people.

Women today speak of reinventing the social contracts that had constrained our mothers and grandmothers; maintaining their own names, forgoing marriage, creating alternative structures for raising children or not having children at all, finding meaning in professional and intellectual pursuits and the alliance of non sexual friendship (Geller, 2002:6). But I realised that a veneration for matrimony is still strong, even in women whose educations and experiences have enlightened them to the misgivings of a contract with such an unquestionable legacy of gender
repression. It seems that many educated women think that the feminist movement has achieved its goals, that the struggle of the sexes in matrimony is now redundant. I found this state of intellectual oblivion disconcerting, but one that was continuously articulated in my immediate social environment.

While browsing through the plethora of psychology books directed at women, I noticed that it is to the unmarried that many pseudo-feminist self-help books are concentrated. Authored by and for women, many of them echo the stipulations of their predecessor – the post war bestseller Modern Women – the Lost Sex, (1947, Farnham and Lundberg), which declared that all single women were neurotics and proposed subsidized psychotherapy to get them married. The range of more recent publications was extensive: How to Marry the Man of your Dreams (Kent, 1984), Husband Hunting: How to Win at the Mating Game (Carpineto, 1991), The Best Places to Meet Good Men (Lederman, 1991) The Secrets of Winning Men (Andelin, 1993), "If I am so Wonderful, Why am I still Single?" (Page, 1988), Before the Wedding: Look Before You Leap (Cavanagh, 1994) and No More Lonely Nights: Overcoming the Hidden Fears that keep you from Getting Married (Price and Price, 1988). The mass consumption and popularity of such titles reinforced for me the reverence for marriage and weddings in contemporary society – what has been termed - an intensification of the marriage mystique (Geller, 2001:11).

I considered whether the mystique was a product of a resignation to epistemological ignorance or whether perceived egalitarianism in marriage has bred a sense of nostalgia? The New Zealand woman, whether an anthropologist, careerist, full time mother, politician, checkout operator or unemployed drifter should be familiar with at least the most basic historical feminist tenets of gendered relations - discourses that prove that matrimonial ideologies are the product of socialization rather than essential femininity. There is a plethora of information available to us that was not accessible to our parents and grandmothers. Statistics on divorce that are not just freely available but are thrown at us in the media, remind us that romance based matrimony usually does not work. I considered it bizarre that so many people would continue to invest so much time, effort and money into an institution with such a statistically low success rate. As figure 1 below shows, although the marriage rate\(^1\) has been in a steady rate of decline since the

\(^1\) Marriages per 1,000 of the unmarried population over 16 years of age.
1970's, the divorce rate has also been steadily increasing. The divorce rate as recorded in 2001 measured 12.3, a significant increase since 1971 when it stood at a low 5.1.²

![Marriage and Divorce Rates 1971-2001](image)

Figure 1
Source: [www.stats.govt.co.nz](http://www.stats.govt.co.nz)

I also considered however, that a low marriage rate does not necessarily represent a permanent rejection of marriage, it could simply represent a delay. Mansfield and Collard (1988:53) argued that although cohabitation is more fashionable and socially acceptable in contemporary western society than it was for previous generations, this may be, “a preliminary to marriage rather than a renunciation of it.” The average duration of marriage for women today also stands at less than nine years. This duration is also significantly shorter than it was in the 1970s’s, as seen in figure 2. But despite this evidence, reverence for wedlock remains. Even those whose marriages fail tend to personalise the experience rather that question the paradigm itself (Tiger, 1986:19). High

²Per 1000 existing marriages.
remarriage rates confirm this. Figure 3 below reinforces the continued belief in the institution, revealing that remarriage has been increasing steadily since the 1970’s. One in three marriages in contemporary New Zealand consist of one or both partner who has previously been married (NZPA, 2000:21).

Figure 2
Source: www.stats.govt.co.nz

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3 Statistical analysis can provide valuable insights into the relationship between women, marriage and weddings in contemporary New Zealand but demographics cannot express the attitudes and ideologies that have changed or meanings behind the persistence of associated ritual. One important consideration in this context which I addressed was one related to ‘age at marriage’ statistics. Although women are marrying later as seen in figure *, this could simply mean a delay in marriage rather than a rejection. Future research will provide us with further insights into the trend towards later marriages, as a delay would reinforce again the enduring reverence for marriage and weddings.
Unlike previous generations, we also live in an era characterised by more flexible and feasible social choices. Women now have the option not to marry. Despite the pervasiveness of heterosexual ideologies, the pressures are only intangible: women are still ultimately autonomous in their decision to wed. Magazines, film plots, literature and self help books may translate messages to the modern woman that heterosexual romance is the most logical means by which she is vilified, but she may read these messages by her own values. The powers of seduction may be strong, but they are not compulsory and no one is pushing her up the aisle, forcing a ring on her finger. There are also few legal or economic rewards for marriage in contemporary New Zealand. The continuing allure of marriage in the twentieth century, when women have achieved reproductive choice, almost equal political representation, educational inclusion and professional mobility is something of a mystery – one that I seek to explore and clarify in this investigation.

The fundamental question initially posed was, ‘why do young women in contemporary New Zealand society continue to marry?’ Within this context, weddings were to be considered as a mere reflection of marriage and the values women hold towards this institution. I soon realised however, that marriage and weddings could not be so easily conflated. The reoccurring emphasis on the importance of weddings in my research caused a dramatic reshaping of the original inquiry.
and what was originally an exploration of marriage *per se* soon developed into a focus on weddings as a decisive reflection of marriage values. It became clear that the wedding reigned as an extremely important motive for marrying. Weddings came to dominate the investigation, not as a contribution to a study of marriage – but the defining attribute, where for some participants, weddings constituted/justified marriage almost completely.

It was the complex (and deceptive) relationship between marriage and weddings that posed the core methodological dilemma in my research. The structural and theoretical issues that the disjuncture(s) created were initially vastly underestimated and proved to haunt me throughout the research. The crux of the ‘problem’ was that the two institutions – marriage and weddings, could not be examined in isolation. My solution was to examine both simultaneously, employing a holistic approach. I adopted a technique similar to that used by Diana Leonard (1980) in her study of marriage in Wales in the 1960’s, perceiving the wedding as a ‘window’ that provides insight into marriage ideologies and women’s agency within these institutions.

This holistic approach motivated me to look briefly at all aspects of marriage and weddings – two complex, continuously evolving and multifarious institutions. A schematic outline of these institution’s infrastructure was devised and I was left with the following areas of interest: depictions of the bride in popular culture, the proliferation of the wedding industry, ideologies of romance and heterosexuality, the role of the state and church in wedding and marriage protocol and ideologies and notions of deviance in relation to weddings and women. The investigation examines these issues in a New Zealand context – employing a comparison with the relevant theory available and engaging a range of interdisciplinary literatures.

Participants include both married and unmarried women, of varying ages, backgrounds and socio-economic positions. Due to research limitations, I do not give sufficient weight to women of non-European ethnic minorities and sexualities; I focus the inquiry on heterosexual women of European descent. In the initial stages of the investigation, men were also interviewed, but since the focus is on young New Zealand women, it is women that fit into this cohort (20-30 years of age) that constitute the majority of participants. Where appropriate, testimony from my male participants is included, but I emphasise that their involvement is not as conclusive as my female
participants. The methodological problems and implications of these limitations are acknowledged and subsequently addressed in chapter one.

This investigation is situated within a feminist poststructuralist analysis where I ask, what are the cultural discourses and practices that shape marriage and wedding ideology? A feminist poststructuralist analysis facilitates a focus on the production of women’s experience. When language is considered to be constitutive as it is in poststructuralist theory (words are an imperfect medium for expressing an external reality), references to marriage and weddings are constructed as agents that have effects rather than as institutions that are denoted in language. The ways we conceive of the world is dependent on the discourses we create, which are ever shifting. The focus of inquiry is how these discourses operate in the experiences of my participants, as well as how they are maintained and challenged.

Marriage is far from being on a trajectory of waning interest. My investigation rests as mentioned, on the premise that the persistence of marriage and weddings is paradoxical in light of our socio-political climate and the continuous metamorphosis these institutions undergo. Given that they are presently divested of so many of their privileges, how does marriage and weddings continue to engage so many eager and willing participants? I see it as necessary to set the contexts of these paradoxes since they are referred to throughout the ensuing investigation. The three areas of contradiction addressed here are the paradoxical persistence of marriage, the paradoxical persistence of the wedding and the paradoxical reoccurring references by participants to concepts of ‘tradition’ in the justification of their ideals. The perseverance of marriage in an era of increased choice for women was a crucial consideration in my investigation. I saw this as especially significant given that marriage is an institution so reminiscent of patriarchal dogma as well as the fact that ours is also an era that looks back in hindsight at a vicious feminist critique of this very institution. Being such an important bedrock for the investigation, these issues are allocated a whole chapter.

\[\text{\footnote{4 Since the majority of my participants are female, they constitute the default gender in the citing of participant dialogue. When citing a male participant, their gender is noted.}}\]
PARADOX D - PERSISTENCE OF MARRIAGE

New Zealand women continue to marry in an age when premarital cohabitation, premarital sex, alternative marriage forms and solo parenting are more socially accepted, factors that appear to represent the antithesis of previous marriage functions. Marriage historically served specific purposes: as an economic agreement, a pragmatic family paradigm and a religious contract. Changes to the family over time however, render these previously strong incentives atrophic and marriage — formally an institution considered to guarantee a male breadwinner whose primary role was to support a wife and children, no longer holds the same historical/material necessity. Further, marriage, so often perceived as an institution requiring a degree of self-sacrifice and compromise, still survives despite contemporary ideological trends emphasising individualism and self-growth. As Mansfield and Collard (1988:4) argued, it has not been outmoded by the struggle for self-actualisation, which is the obsessive legacy of the ‘me’ decades and the growth of individualism in our society.

PARADOX 2) - PERSISTENCE OF WEDDINGS

Marriage used to be considered necessary for the raising of children and ‘shot gun’ weddings were common in the past as a safeguard for protecting a family’s reputation. This is a diminishing concern today with changing social mores and increasing numbers of brides are pregnant or already have children. For many, the wedding used to signify the entry into adulthood and was a public declaration of legitimacy to live together but today, a significant proportion of couples cohabitate before marriage. The wedding also revealed to the public a couple’s sexual exclusiveness. As society has liberalised attitudes to sexual exclusiveness logically we would expect the significance of marriage and weddings to fall. The secularisation and liberalisation of matrimonial law in New Zealand in recent years has rendered this wedding infrastructure legally void.

Weddings, like marriage, seem to be losing any material necessity they previously bestowed. But where as the marriage rate has been in a state of decline over the years, the wedding ceremony has not only persisted, but its monetary value appears to have inflated: weddings have never been so extravagant and the industry that caters for them is proliferating at an enormous rate. The ceremony’s continued existence reinforces the paradoxical persistence of marriage — if the material necessity of marriage appears to be declining, what purpose is there to the ceremony that legitimates the matrimony? Will weddings ever go out of style? “Weddings persist. Many a
doomster has prophesised their demise, but every one of them has got it wrong. And badly wrong” (Bennett, NZ Herald, 1/2/02).

PARADOX 3) – TRADITION AS A JUSTIFICATION

One concept I vastly underestimated in significance in the early stages of my research was the concept of ‘tradition.’ Many believe that a traditional wedding will imbue the ceremony with seriousness and significance (Coney, 1995:92). It was not until interviews had been conducted and expos, weddings and hen parties experienced that I realised just how significant and entrenched concepts of ‘tradition’ were for my participants. Participants made insistent referrals to concepts of ‘tradition’ - it was often the validation for many wedding-related behaviours to the extent of justifying enormous expenditure in relation to wedding location, attire, celebration, size, theme and extravagance. In many cases it was the fundamental or single reason for wedding ritual persistence. Paradoxically however, although weddings have been a cause for celebration for centuries (some elements of the wedding ritual can be traced back to Roman or Pagan wedding practices), the wedding in the form that is now commonly regarded as ‘traditional’ in New Zealand is a relatively recent creation (Coney, 1995:6). “In European-American worldviews, the term ‘traditional marriage’ brings to mind white veils, solemn promises and a wedding reception” (Ward, 1993:246). The ‘traditional’ New Zealand wedding image is that of the Westernised white wedding (Albury, 1996:1).

Although data and historical information for marriages in early New Zealand is extremely limited, the concept of tradition in the contemporary white wedding as we know it is an ambiguous one. Marriages during the colonial era in New Zealand were quite plain affairs (Coney, 1995:6). The bride and groom wore their best clothes and holidays such as Christmas and New Years Day were popular wedding dates as they allowed friends to gather and celebrate.5 Coney (1995:8) asserted that both Maori and Europeans at this time perceived marriage more as a convenient economic ‘partnership’ than a romantic act. She also pointed out that among ordinary people of the hapu and there was generally minimal ceremony.

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5 While many Maori adopted the ritual and pageantry of the British white wedding, traditional Maori weddings in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries remained prominent. Traditional Maori wedding rituals varied according to the status of the couple. Alliances between Rangatira (chiefly) people involved grand ceremonies with days of feasting, speeches and entertainment. These larger whanaus who could afford the associated paraphernalia were more inclined to conform to the white wedding. Rather than a complete re-enactment of the British white wedding however, elements, namely the dress were assimilated into their present celebrations. Marriages were usually an alliance between hapu or iwi and were often arranged.
The conventional white wedding as we know it today was inspired by a series of royal weddings in the British monarchy during the mid nineteenth century. For example, Queen Victoria's wedding in 1840 had a major worldwide influence on wedding styles and values and has been considered one of the first white weddings (Geller, 2001:226). Prior to this event, white weddings were not the norm. Ingraham (1999:24) stated that by the turn of the century, the white wedding had become the standard in the West. While little is known about wedding trends in early New Zealand, Coney (1995:7) asserted that the white wedding emerged at this time as a display of social standing and economic status.

I first provide an account of the methodological problems and considerations I encountered in the present research. Despite my poststructuralist perspective, I assert that with research that rests on ontological and epistemological foundations, issues of reliability and validity are critical and should be explored. Chapter one deals with these complexities, situating my research style, method, participant range and role as a researcher as inevitably problematic and also discursively influential in the outcomes of my research.

As stated, women continue to marry today despite the critical reappraisal of marriage provoked by the women's movement of the 1960's and 1970's. Chapter two addresses the enormous feminist history relevant in any understanding of women and matrimony in contemporary society. With a focus on a female perspective, feminist issues prove indispensable in the clarification of women's relationship to marriage and weddings - institutions that have been heavily critiqued for subjugating women. I emphasise that this is not a historical exploration of marriage values or wedding ritual, merely a basic outline of previous (major) critiques and a basis for ongoing discussion. I highlight the major feminist critiques of marriage, focusing on coercive influences and relating them to wedding behaviour in contemporary New Zealand.

Chapter three endeavours to clarify the role of the state and church in relation to women, marriage and weddings in contemporary New Zealand. Both state and church have for centuries had a pivotal role in the shape of marriage and wedding ideology. For an institution so indicative of religious dogma (and still strongly religious for some) however, it seems paradoxical that marriage survives in our increasingly secular political climate. I examine the role of legal and religious constituents in New Zealand's contemporary marital climate in order to discern the
position of women in the institutionalisation of marriage and weddings. I look at the wedding practice of marrying in a church and seek to understand whether religious incentives have been replaced by secular ones in this context.

Chapter four addresses elements of the wedding and its associated rituals, focusing on the role of the bride and the meanings created in this production. I look at how wedding planning has been feminised through the targeting of women in the industry, namely in bridal exhibitions and bridal magazines. Within these gendered domains, men are inevitably rendered invisible, where their role is primarily as an accessory to the bride. I examine how these ideals are entrenched, exploring briefly the gendered politics of the bridal shower and the bridal registry as well as looking at some components of the wedding that echo gendered ideals: the dress, the ring, and the veil. I acknowledge however, that women strategically manoeuvre within the boundaries of these ideologies. By aligning ‘tradition’ with ‘convention’ I seek to clarify how forms of resistance within wedding ritual fit into dominant ideologies of heterosexuality and whether their deviance is innovative anti-marriage polemic or just a form of ‘controlled rebellion.’

Chapter five looks at legitimacy still, but in the context of the wedding industry. I approach the relationship between consumption, commerce and brides, looking at wedding legitimacy as an economic strategy that sustains desire for commodities, directed primarily at women. I situate these practices within a capitalist regime of production, which is supportive of a proliferating industry. Here, I looked at the manifestation of ideologies of heterosexuality in consumption practices in the New Zealand wedding industry, through bridal exhibitions and the dominant New Zealand bridal magazine – the New Zealand Bride and Groom. This probe into the proliferating wedding industry utilises my ethnographic experiences at bridal exhibitions as well as examples in popular culture and my own participants’ experiences and perspectives. I aim to discern not only the values but the repercussions that arise for women in the monetary materialisation of the ceremony. This is analysed through the stresses that arise from the feminisation of the planning process as well as the pressures manifest in women to succeed as a legitimate bride.

In chapter six I look at the creation of the princess bride trope in popular culture – a trope which is directly symbolic of the feminisation of the wedding experience and industry. Here, I aim to describe the fairy-tale formula of weddings that is fed to women from a young age. I look at how
ideals of romance are employed by the institution of heterosexuality in preserving dominant capitalist ideologies. Terms of romance – optimism, happiness, wealth and romance are central features of wedding ideology, communicating a sign system that collapses them into one package – the bride. I look at this through examples in popular culture, predominantly the New Zealand Bride and Groom magazine as well as participant testimony. I look briefly at how this ideal is entrenched in the children, through toy marketing in order to secure future consumption. I address the idea that through the naturalisation of this trope, women are made to believe that the ‘wedding of their dreams’ will imbue their relationship with meaning - that the ‘happy-ever-after’ fairytale is achievable.

The investigation is situated in a poststructuralist analysis. Applying a poststructuralist feminist mode of inquiry to the study of marriage and weddings in popular culture means investigating the commodity culture which pervasively shapes the way we perceive ourselves, others and society as a whole. It means determining what is concealed or exiled in relation to what is assumed or represented. This mode of inquiry then, makes visible the ‘permitted’ meanings, what we are expected to assume, what we are allowed to say and how we are allowed to behave in regard to marriage and weddings (Ingraham, 1999:20). By looking at the process by which products are invested with meaning and how these are interpreted we can better understand how women mediate their own interpretations of wedding discourse.

I employ a Foucauldian notion of power in order to examine the persistence of marriage and wedding desire. Foucault identified discourses as historically and culturally variable ways of specifying what can be counted as knowledge and truth – what it is possible to speak of at a given moment (Foucault, 1978, 1980). There are always multiple discourses, or ‘discursive fields’ operating simultaneously which may either collaborate or compete to produce particular identities or kinds of social objects. These discourses contain varying degrees of power in their effects depending on their temporal and societal context (Brown, 1998:67). Foucault’s (1978) description of power as a ‘disciplinary technology’ that operates via discourses which incite the production of particular truths, identities and desires allowed an analysis of the operation of power in the link between discourses of ‘woman’ and those that shape our understandings of marriage/weddings.
Aspects of power as described by Foucault were particularly salient in my interviews. My observations of the relationship between women and marriage can be aligned with a notion of power operating via a form of 'self monitoring.' Such a conceptualisation of power can aid in understanding the paradoxical persistence of marriage and weddings. I came to ask how women understand themselves and their experiences according to these discourses. For example, the ways women experience their role as bride are mediated by discourses that supply the categories, metaphors and models for making sense of who they are and what is happening. Foucault's analysis of power also echoes the feminist slogan the 'personal is political.' Personal relationships and experiences, such as those which constitute marriage and the production of the bride, can be seen as relationships of power and therefore, as legitimate sites for political action (Melton, 1992:82).

SUMMARY
An investigation into the politics and polemics of marriage and weddings allows us to decipher complex patterns of social acquiescence and discord in regard to possible reasons why women marry and participate in a wedding ceremony today. Such a study should provide not only an understanding of what marriage and weddings mean to young women in contemporary New Zealand but also in turn, how these attitudes will come to sculpt the marital or marriageless future of our society. As emphasised, so many elements of marriage and weddings now are anachronistic, rendering the perseverance of these institutions paradoxical. In conjunction with their material redundancy, their lack of religious value, the negation of their legal benefits, their vicious deconstruction by feminists, increasing social acceptance of alternatives to marriage, and the expense of the ceremony, the persistence of these institutions today seems absurd. Despite all these facts, women continue to mythologize marriage and perceive the ceremony as one of the most important and fulfilling events they will ever experience. It is this enduring reverence for wedlock that I direct the ensuing chapters towards.
CHAPTER 1: METHODOLOGY

After more than a decade of reflection on the 'crisis of representation' it seems stale to reiterate that my interpretations are different from the way my participants vocalise their stories. But in research that rests on ontological and epistemological foundations, issues of reliability and validity are critical and should be explored. The development of practices for ensuring that there is a shared understanding of meanings between researcher and researched and that the 'reality' being expressed is accurately represented has been essential to the increased acceptance of qualitative research as a legitimate method of social science (Brown, 1998:34). In poststructuralist inquiries where data is not viewed as a truly accurate reflection of the person, event or situation, conventional practices of ensuring a correspondence between truth and its representation are not appropriate. The methodological and ethical considerations therefore, in any qualitative investigation are inevitably numerous and significant. It is to these concerns in my investigation that this chapter is dedicated. Rather than just reiterate the difficulties I encountered, I seek to acknowledge, discuss and reflect on the discursive elements of the research process, recognising the productive consequences as well as those that potentially debilitate.

CONTEXT - BLURRING OF BOUNDARIES

A central and obvious weakness in any investigation into the institution of marriage and its ceremonies is the ambiguity of its boundaries. I soon realised that I was exploring a highly variable topic wherein any particular component or behaviour was potentially affected by a multitude of factors - a situation that can make it easier for a researcher to prove a point, choosing some aspects of the situation and remaining blind to others. With definitions of marriage and weddings changing in recent years, accommodating a more diverse variety of couples and living situations, the parameters of these institutions are further blurred. All these factors situate the study of marriage/weddings within a complex and problematic arena of research – one that is outside the conventional locus of anthropological research, without boundaries in time, space or even definition. The sites of my inquiry are also ones that are inherent in our everyday lives –
effectively subverting the dynamic of ‘studying down’: we all have some relationship with marriage and weddings, whether as observer or participant.

With this in mind, I endeavoured to explore both the local and wider contexts of my topic. “Until contextual factors are understood and clarified, it is difficult to interpret the meanings and intentions of the trend, policy or ideology under study” (Davey, 2000:3). A stress on individual marriage/wedding idiosyncrasies can detract attention from uniformities of behaviour and from the powerful external constraints from which individuals interpret their role. In contrast, a focus on external trends can obscure important individual issues and can result in inadequate questioning of convention as well as less awareness of (marriage/wedding/relationship) alternatives. It is for these reasons that I decided to take a holistic approach to my topic, exploring the political, economic, material and social infrastructure of marriage and weddings for women in New Zealand.

Rather than treat each participant as existing within a holistic, closed social group, I recognised all my participants as negotiating a common social landscape and experiencing it differently. I saw marriage and wedding ideologies infused in all spheres of women’s lives and experiences: their own weddings and marriages, other peoples’ weddings and marriages and even gossip that shapes personal perceptions and reveals understandings of these institutions. Equally important are those ideologies that shape collective understandings, as translated through mediums of popular culture as well as the ideals that shape the physical boundaries of marriage/weddings, enacted through state and church law. Infused within all these components were considerations that revealed themselves as my research infolded. Ideals of ‘tradition’ for example and the innovative functions behind them that were cited by participants as justifying their perseverance subsequently became areas of focus in my research.

A haphazard literature search informed by my left and feminist bias began and I realised that the first and most significant problem was the lack of relevant literature on women, marriage and weddings in New Zealand. While there is copious amounts of material with an indirect
relationship to marriage: changing demographics and marriage, conflicts between women’s role in the workforce and marriage, maternity and marriage and so on, there is little specifically in the context of women, marriage and weddings. Coney’s recent historical study of weddings (1995) focuses on the aesthetics of the ceremony rather than gender issues. Albury (1996) looked at the creation of image in popular New Zealand culture and how this drives the wedding industry in New Zealand. Her findings provide some valuable insights into the business of weddings, but lack discussion of the feminisation of marriage, dedicating only one paragraph to gender issues.

Similarly, while there are masses of related studies on family patterns and marital trends in the States and Britain, few focus solely on women and weddings and/or marriage. Leonard (1980), Mansfield and Collard (1988), Brown (1998), Whyte (1990) and Ingraham (1999) provide exceptions. Two more recent works by Howard (2000) and Geller (2001) also presented insights into the American wedding industry in relation to women. With such a noted lack of available recent anthropological literature specific to New Zealand, I was forced to rely increasingly on other sources: journals, internet data, popular culture (newspapers, magazines, television, cinema) and of course, participant testimony. I also relied heavily on the relevant feminist critiques of marriage dating from the 1960’s onwards as a background for marriage/wedding critiques.

Bridal magazines are the primary method of marketing used by wedding producers and I cite many examples from such publications throughout the research. I looked predominantly at the New Zealand Bride and Groom magazine in my research (referring to recent publications, those between 2000-2002), which has a monopoly over the wedding magazine market in New Zealand, as reflected in its popularity with participants. It is cheaper than foreign imported magazines and has the obvious advantages of being specific to New Zealand locations and businesses (as well as dealing in a New Zealand currency).

Seeing the enormous success of bridal magazines, many others have joined the market. Magazines such as House and Garden, Vanity Fair, Vogue, NZ Women’s Weekly, New Idea, People, In Style, Town and Country and those that target younger age groups such as Cosmopolitan, Cleo and B, have all published special wedding issues.
DATA COLLECTION
My first job was to obtain ethical consent according to University guidelines, necessary in any investigation involving the living. After consent was granted from the University of Otago Ethics Committee, it was necessary to produce participant consent forms that would enable me to proceed to the interview stage. I then endeavoured to establish a style of research that aligned with qualitative techniques. I required a way of looking at marriage/weddings that would enable me to understand why/how women aspire to participate, the ideologies behind marriage/wedding infrastructure as well as how these ideals are accomplished, maintained and resisted.

I acquired participants through a ‘snowball effect’: friends, flatmates, workmates and women that I talked to through my department would give me further contacts and my participant anthology quickly grew. My next step in the research process was to conduct interviews. These interviews constituted not only a considerable contribution to my primary research but also to the final thesis structure, with participant testimony frequently intersecting, supporting and challenging written theory. In sum, I interviewed thirty women, seven of whom were ‘key participants’ as well as seven men (one key participant) over a period of fourteen months. I met with most participants twice for approximately 30-45 minutes and with key participants for shorter periods but on a more regular basis. These informal interviews proceeded on the flow of spontaneous conversation rather than a planned, systematic structure and my interviewing technique developed into a combination of note taking and recording. I employed the use of a dictaphone, playing back conversation immediately after the interview and taking more detailed notes while the dialogue was still fresh in my memory. If I had further questions or needed help clarifying information, I re-contacted participants.

Some interviews took place in the flats/homes of my participants, depending on where they preferred to meet. Key participants were generally more comfortable with me in their own home. For those that did not stipulate a meeting place, I suggested that we meet at the University’s Clubs and Societies building on campus, where I work part time. My position there also assisted in making new participant connections with members from various clubs and societies, opening
up the range of people I had contact with (Mature Student Association, International Socialists, the Student Christian Movement, sports groups/clubs, Women’s groups, Young Nats Society, Pagan Network and so on).

With an emphasis on the value of ethnographic material, I considered the politics of rapport and experimented with interviewing styles. I found that responses were facilitated and participants more relaxed when a ‘conversational’ interviewing style was adopted. While I preferred to let the interview flow spontaneously, a certain degree of structure fitted with my participants’ expectations of how social research should be conducted. Many seemed satisfied that something was being recorded as they spoke, with some going to the extent of repeating slowly without prompting, a comment they were especially happy with.

I also conducted group interviews/focus groups (with groups of four to six women) at the Clubs and Societies Centre as a means of facilitating understanding between different age, education and socio-economic perspectives/experiences. These focus groups provided valuable insights that would have otherwise been opaque in one-on-one discussion, where difference in opinion ‘opened up’ new debate/perspective. The ‘interactive’ nature of my interviews, where I introduced images of popular culture related to weddings and marriage (magazine articles, images, movie footage) also facilitated expression of opinion and debate. But there was a dual purpose to these focus groups. Apart from facilitating open discussion between divergent opinions, they also allowed me to ask questions and raise issues that were generated during the transcribing of earlier data collection.

Throughout my research I was aware that the researcher and the researched are two equally important elements of the same situation and my participants were not reduced to variables or units, but were treated as existing within the totality of the interview structure. Reducing people to numerical symbols and statistical figures results in the loss of a perception of the subjective nature of their own experiences (Okin, 1999:54). Keeping in mind that it is tempting to find coherent patterns and planning where none may exist, I pursued empirical data, reflecting my
participant’s perspectives rather than a measure of what I wanted to find. For example, I allowed my participants an active role in the interview process, where they dictated and controlled the flow of conversation; my role was to shift dialogue towards the topic at hand if conversation digressed. My focus was on articulating the participant’s story and not trying to decipher it from some predetermined perspective. I saw this as assisting in the demystification of the research process, thus inhibiting potential power dynamics between researcher and participant (see Davidson and Tolich, 1999:64).

Occasionally it may be necessary for the researcher to become ‘anthropologically strange’, to ask seemingly obvious questions, or to probe a respondent’s answer in a way that will make it quite clear that there are no implicitly shared assumptions or meanings (Mansfield and Collard 1988:36). Questions about the seemingly obvious can be risky as they can make the participant question the researcher’s intentions and legitimacy. But since such questions can reveal potentially false assumptions, they can turn out in practice to be of great value. This was particularly notable in questions relating to consent and participation in wedding rituals. A reoccurring justification for so many participants in response to queries concerning reasons for participation in wedding behaviour was the ambiguous answer - ‘tradition’. Dialogue revealed that concepts of ‘tradition’ were simultaneously aligned with notions of normality and legitimacy. Participants often had preconceived ideas of what a ‘conventional’ and ‘traditional’ wedding entailed. These concepts were stipulated so frequently that I dedicated a whole chapter to concepts of deviance and acceptance within the ceremony.

In addition to interviews I kept a journal. These notes were an important source of reflection for me personally, a mock ‘diary’ of my research progression. It enabled note taking during random conversation (informal interviews) and for citing examples of marriage/wedding related ideas in popular culture I encountered on a daily basis. Ultimately, I found myself creating a research narrative from methodical interview transcripts as well as a jumble of journal notes and scraps of paper jotted with random data collected over time.
Part of my research also involved internet-based inquiry – joining discussion groups (including ‘chat rooms’ to discuss marriage/wedding issues), religious sites, marriage-counselling services, theoretical research, wedding advertising, on-line celebrants and accessing data that was only available on line, such as New Zealand census results (www.stats.govt.nz). Responses to my queries in these contexts were enormous and the nature of interviewing different in more ways than just the obvious lack of conventional dialogue exchange. Participants obviously were not formally involved – no ethical guidelines could be met and I had no way of knowing their backgrounds or positioning: it was impossible to guarantee the validity of participants’ responses. In addition, these ‘participants’ could ‘enter’ and ‘leave’ the ‘interview’ as they pleased. Testimony from these resources, while providing valuable insight and background to marriage/wedding-related issues were therefore used sparingly, in favour of first hand participant observation.

The practical ethnographic component of my research included my attendance at engagement celebrations, ‘hen’s parties’, weddings, and bridal exhibitions. Apart from providing me with participant contacts, my involvement in these events also meant that I was not just receiving information second-hand from a participant’s memory. This style of research however, necessitated a change in research style and etiquette. I avoided extensive questioning which would have been intrusive in such contexts. Instead, I adopted a more discrete (observational) research style, taking notes in my journal after talking with participants rather than recording conversation in person. Context necessitated not only a change in the style of questioning, but also a change in subject matter of the questions. For example (and for obvious reasons), avoiding discussions about rapidly increasing divorce rates and the fragility of marriage whilst at a wedding.²

² Some of my pursuits were also harder to discuss directly with participants in an interview situation. Issues of romantic love were particularly complex, especially in relation to discussions of the more insidious nature of romantic ideology. Wedding desire such as the fairy-tale wedding dream and its representation in popular culture were also problematic. Interestingly, the tone of the conversation was mixed with embarrassment and excitement/pleasure when some participants responded to questions about wedding fantasies. Such conflicting, confessional tones clashed with my critical intentions and it was here that I felt most guilty.
I also conducted covert research, going undercover as a bride-to-be at bridal exhibitions as well as two bridal registries - Arthur Barnetts in the Meridian, Dunedin and Stevens Two Double Seven in New Market, Auckland. These experiences necessitated a complete change in research style. I adopted a pseudonym, feigned an interest in weddings and asked questions related to prices of wedding-related commodities and accessories rather than explicit queries relating to ideologies behind the wedding industry.

**Participant Characteristics**

The participant group that I was initially dealing with was unmarried men and women between 20-30 years of age. The implications of limiting my interviews to this cohort however was that I also ran the risk of limiting my research to a group of participants who were merely hypothesizing their futures, based on understandings they have at present (and which is likely to change with experience). I therefore extended the boundaries of my research by including older women who were married or had previously been married. Given the relatively small number of participants in such a qualitative investigation and because statistical random selection was not employed, it was necessary to ensure that my participant range comprised a diverse mix of backgrounds. My participants can be divided into two basic groups; those whose experiences and attitudes related directly to the investigation, (comprising all women), and those involved in the wedding industry (comprising men and women).

For the first group, I was careful to include women from a range of occupations: a checkout operator, a bank teller, mothers and full-time homemakers, business women, teachers, university fellows and so on. They ranged in education levels, socio-economic class, political stance, family size and of course, marital status. Just under half of my participants were married, a quarter cohabiting and the remaining single. The second group categorised participants involved directly in the industry (the majority of whom I met at the wedding exhibitions): photographers, cake makers, flower arrangers, make-up artists, dress makers and so on.
I had three participants whose role was indirect – a lawyer, a travel agent who specialises in honeymoons and the manager at the Dunedin Relationship Services centre. These broad categories also dictated the nature of my interviews. For those involved in the wedding industry, questions focussed on their involvement with specific wedding/marriage related business rather than their own marriages and personal experiences. For example, I discussed matrimonial property law with a lawyer and religious wedding protocol with a female Salvation Army Officer (specialising in wedding consummations) rather than their personal investment in these matters.

Although I stipulate the topic as comprising the relationship between women, marriage and weddings in contemporary New Zealand, my location at the University of Otago and scarce funding resources in the Humanities Division meant that travel was limited and therefore most of my participants resided in Dunedin. I did travel to Christchurch, Auckland and Queenstown twice during my research however, in order to attend wedding exhibitions in these locations (including the Bride of the Year Competition in Whangarei, 18/5/02). While there, I made use of the opportunity to interview women I had made contact with, as well as celebrants and other members of the wedding industry that I met at these functions.

Ethnic disparities were not pursued in this investigation and I do not claim to have documented the diversity of all Pakeha women’s lives. While I did talk with some Maori women, research limitations did not permit me to examine in depth the potential implications and considerations of intercultural discrepancies in marriage and wedding ideology. This was also the case for inter-cultural marriage, which is not dealt with at all in the present investigation. Similarly, I did not have time or scope to explore homosexual issues, although the relationship between the state and homosexual/heterosexual law is addressed briefly in the chapter, Demographics and the State. I acknowledge that a different author may have chosen to consider lesbianism as a counter-strategy to the patriarchal power embedded in ‘compulsory heterosexuality’ (Rich, 1980). I emphasize that it was not my intention to deny the importance of this position, or even imply that an account
of strategies of resistance to patriarchal marital relations can be provided without such a discussion.

As mentioned in the *Introduction*, I started by talking to men and women, but as research unfolded I found it more conducive to focus on the testimony of female participants. Separatism was a fundamental requirement for many radical feminists, who perceived the work of redefining the limits of biological differences of male power and mapping out the effects of culture and ideology upon women as female concerns (Whelan, 1995:179). I emphasise however, that my methodological approach towards a female perspective, although reminiscent of feminist ideals, was more of a methodological necessity rather than a manifestation of radical feminism. I soon realised that a ‘female focus’ was not only more conducive with my findings, but the politics involved in the relationship between women, weddings and commerce was something I endeavoured to expose. My research revealed that women are significantly more susceptible to dominant ideologies of heterosexuality in the context of weddings. They comprise the primary targets of the wedding industry and the ‘feminisation of love’ in Western popular culture further reinforces this: women are central signifiers to ideals of romance, epitomized in the princess bride trope.

Whelan (1995:148) states however, that there has been a tendency within feminism to portray women as the guiltless yet guilt-ridden victims of marital sexual relations. I acknowledge that it is also difficult for men to locate their roles and expectations within social understandings of marriage/weddings and that men are increasingly susceptible to ideologies of masculinity in the media, as are women to ideologies of femininity. There is not one monolithic patriarchal construct, and my male participants often felt underrepresented in regard to such assumptions. Seidler (1991:18) argued that feminism’s tendency to associate men and the male behaviour with dominant constructions and meanings of masculinity makes it, “almost impossible to explore the

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3 Similarly, Maynard and Purvis (1995:1) argued that concerns for sexuality in second wave feminism were seen primarily as a radical feminist preoccupation.
tension between the power men have within the larger society and the ways they might individually experience themselves as powerless.”

But there was another reason why I included some testimony of male participants: too often in my research I was aware of a (generally) male assumption that sexism was a ‘women’s problem’, if they saw it as a problem at all. To a lesser degree, there were also vestiges of this in the arguments of my female participants. Whelehan (1995:33) argued that the conviction that it is the duty of women to be the moral conscience of humankind – to the point that they are in some sense responsible for the control of male sexuality – remains in evidence in liberal feminist thinking during the second wave. Since men are equally involved in the persistence and maintenance of ideological constructions, their opinions are important. I emphasise that it is not a woman’s ‘duty’ to ensure her own equality, but a social obligation.

RESPONSES TO MY POSITION

In contrast to the effect of the participant’s gender on the outcomes of the investigation, I came to consider my own gender in shaping the nature of the interview. It is women who are culturally defined as being interested in weddings. Social convention implies that men may be interested in their own weddings but not in weddings in general. Diana Leonard (1980) studied courtship and marriage in Wales in the late 1960’s and found her gender beneficial to research success - “those being interviewed found it ‘natural’ that a female might be interested in courtship and marriage.” Since there are (still) stronger economic and social constraints on women to have relationships with men than on men to have them with women, marriage and relationships remain ‘women’s concerns’ (Delphy and Leonard, 1992:262). Although this assumption was frustrating for me personally, I came to appreciate that it could facilitate my research. Some of my male participants felt more comfortable disclosing thoughts and opinions they were hesitant to share with their male counterparts, particularly those that conformed to, or were conscious of deeply infused stereotypes of the ‘ideal’ New Zealand male: staunch and emotionally resilient. Even some of my female participants implied that they found me, as a female understanding, “you
know that men won’t really know how to deal with these issues, it’s easier for me to talk to you about it than it is to him (her husband).”

Responses to my position as a researcher varied considerably. Some participants appeared to perceive me solely as a researcher from the university, consequently isolating me from any relationship in the issues discussed. Others situated me as a woman subject to the same contextual marital environment as them, a stance that automatically dissolved any hierarchical relationship between myself and participant. While the first reaction clarified the interview relationship, I found the latter response more conducive to interview rapport, where both participant and I could relate to an issue and therefore stimulate further dialogue. There were further rapport considerations. I was also well aware of the fact that I am not married and therefore have no marital experience that would enable me to relate to my married participants. Also, as a New Zealand woman, I was studying my own culture and experiences, especially since this was not a cross-cultural study but one that focused on New Zealand Pakeha women. There are advantages to being part of the culture under study, such as fewer language barriers and a previous understanding of contextual details that would be lost to an outsider (such as New Zealand wedding ‘etiquette’). In contrast however, participant knowledge that I was a New Zealander and therefore familiar with wedding protocol meant that I would not be so easily excused as a foreigner might be, of asking seemingly obvious questions and certain inquiries that risk of being interpreted as ‘prying’.

SUBJECTIVITY
I was also conscious that the anthropologist no longer has the last word in the dialogue of fieldwork: our reports and interpretations are read and debated by the communities we study. Participants have every means of critiquing research and I was often conscious of this. A few of my participants have requested to read the finished product and I recognise that they have every faculty to appeal and critique my arguments. There were occasions when my participants would ask me my opinion or knowledge of a situation/topic. I would be honest in my response,

4 See Davidson and Tolich (1999:67) for a discussion of how the biases of the researcher influences participants.
disclosing my opinion and asserting that it was inevitable that I would have biases and preconceived ideas simply because we all hold subjective views as a result of our upbringing, education, social positioning and so on. Pragmatism also has to be practiced by researchers: "deciding what is possible to accomplish, researchers are not simply practising expediency; they are also declaring, albeit indirectly, their own preferences and prejudices both as social scientists and as people" (Mansfield and Collard, 1988:27). Ultimately, my representation is like a story based on other stories and the created product has as much to do with me as it does with my participant. In this sense, I was forced to abandon my position as an observer, paradoxically becoming a participant myself.

WEAKNESSES OF POSTSTRUCTURALISM

Under a poststructuralist paradigm, I accepted that meaning is not fixed and that there is no single interpretation of any sign, text or discourse. But if there are multiple readings, all influenced by an enormous range of contextual factors, then surely I was not entitled to adopt a privileged position in relation to texts that I read? I avoided making any claims to ‘truth’, but instead saw my opinion as one of many interpretations and was careful not to assume a superior position in relation to my reading. For example, I did not wish to ‘fix’ dominant ideologies of heterosexuality; rather challenge them. But I wanted to be able to make statements about the ‘meaning’ and ‘purpose’ of texts (admittedly therefore, assuming a degree of authority), their relation to our social context and how they might be ‘read’ by women. But, working within a poststructuralist framework, how could this be achieved?

One logical response to this problem (of multiple interpretations) is to survey the readers about their interpretations. Janice Radway (1984) for example, used such an approach in her investigation of how women readers of romantic fiction interpret their reading and why they enjoy it (Bell, 1991:64). Radway argued that the reader/viewer/participant should be theorized as well, rather than being seen as occupying an empty space, which the text’s immanent meaning fills. She used the metaphor of consumption to illustrate how this view posits the reader/viewer as unable to do anything other than ‘consume’ the whole text as it is presented (Radway, 1984:5-
8). She was concerned to show how this choice makes sense within the context of women’s lives. This concept is important in any ethnographic study, the issue being that readers/viewers will take different meanings from texts depending on the context they view them in. I saw this as one strength in my research style. As discussed earlier, I gained different responses/insights depending on the research context - interviews versus socialising. I also noticed changes in people’s responses when I chose to disclose or conceal my relativity at bridal exhibitions and when dealing with people involved in different sectors of the wedding industry.

DISTORTION

Another methodological consideration that evolved as my research progressed was that of legitimacy. Mansfield and Collard, (1988:35) point out that, “unless it is possible to follow individuals from birth, the researcher has to enter the biography of the respondent at a chosen point.” With this in mind, I was conscious of the participant’s ability to manufacture/distort information. Since marriage is one of the most private of family institutions, anthropologists researching in this area need to be aware of the emotional sensitivities that can be revealed. Feelings of pride or inadequacy may lead participants to cover up their feelings, or to put a gloss on their factual answers, as discussed above. Wilson (1985:38) warns that researchers in this field must make sure they so not overstep the boundaries of what is seen as acceptable questioning. For example, one of my participants expiated a strong sense of loneliness and perhaps depression during an interview. It was my duty as an anthropologist to ensure I was sensitive in my questioning technique, making sure I did not push the boundaries of inquiry to my own academic advantage, while using my own judgement and tact in suggesting that she seek some professional advice.

In my endeavour to pursue genuine research data, it was important for me to remind participants that I wanted their own accounts, no matter how ‘normal’, ‘abnormal’, ‘deviant’ or ‘mundane’ they appeared. The very ordinariness of married life also proved a valuable means of understanding marriage values and the discrepancies between weddings and marriage. Participants were conscious of this ‘ordinariness’ and ‘routine’ and I sensed many trying to avoid
making their marriage appear mundane or trivial beyond the excitement of the wedding. Accounts of the less interesting, and inevitably routine characteristics of marriage and weddings were often punctuated with phrases such as, 'you know what I mean', and 'as you do'. People may also modify their testimony for intrinsic reasons. For example, those involved in the wedding industry who might wish to promote their business. "Change not only occurs in ritual, it is endemic" (Cohen, 1974, cited by Leonard, 1980:2).

It is also worth considering that participant dishonesty, mild or extreme, is not necessarily employed consciously in order to sway interpretation; it could be that the participant is unaware that they are manufacturing an experience. Mansfield and Collard's research showed that there is a large gap between marriage beliefs and experience (1988:39). Duncombe and Marsden (1993:237) found that wives in their study claimed to be happy when there was significant evidence to suggest otherwise. They proposed however, that this may not have been just for the sake of the interviewer, but may be characteristic of 'deep acting' where the participant's authentic feelings are obscured by those they wish to enact, even for themselves as actors. In this context, I assume a certain degree of authority in my arguments on ideologies of heterosexuality. By arguing that women are susceptible to these ideals at a young age I risk censure in my assertion that women absorb some ideologies unconsciously.

PARTICIPANT CONTEXT

One participant's comments brought an important methodological consideration to light, one with potential to sway interpretation,

You need to consider time. Since my first marriage I have experienced a lot, travelled far and had a couple of children. My memories, like anyone else remembering that far, are cloudy...perhaps I don't even realise that they are not so close to the truth.

I came to realise that with each interview, it was crucial to take the context of the situation into account when analysing the responses of participants. Retrospective experience is different to
current experience, and memories are often selective. Participants may exalt or exaggerate their history while others may undervalue it.

As Mansfield and Collard, (1988:36) argued, "any narrative of the past is likely to be influenced by inaccurate recall and retrospective interpretation." Although I stress that current interpretation of the past is dependent on a multitude of factors - general well being, work, finances, children, health and so on, it would only be rational to assume that those participants who had married and subsequently divorced would be more inclined to hold negatively biased attitudes towards marriage/weddings. Of course the reverse is just as likely, if the couple for example were still in the infamous 'honeymoon stage.' "In hindsight, if a couple are still together and happy, we often get a sanitized, romanticized picture of the day, where drunken stag nights, conflicts between families and the tensions and traumas of the big day do not often make it into the wedding album" (Phare, 1995:21).

Fluctuations in perception are also relevant to the period in which the interview is conducted. Since we enter the biography of the participant at one moment in time when we interview them, we must infer details about their experiences and perspectives by their comments. Like the values and ideologies that accompany it, marriage is in a constant state of flux and adaptation. Since marriage ideals are directly proportional to other lifestyle factors, there are a multitude of elements that could, at any time previous or subsequent to the interview, dramatically change the views of the participant. Family ideals and experiences shape our individual perceptions, so for example, variables such as the birth of children or family break ups could also influence participant's perspectives in the interview. As discussed later in the investigation, even international events such as the tragedy of 'September 11'5 had a significant influence on one participant, creating a sense of urgency to wed. But the desire of people to keep telling me their life story indicated to me that the interview was part of an ongoing reconstruction of experience.

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5 Destruction of World Trade Centre Twin Towers by Muslim fundamentalists in Manhattan, New York, 11/9/01
GOSSIP

The interview process continued to provide previously unseen insights into my area of inquiry. Discussions with participants made me realise that some forms of gossip are the beginning of moral inquiry (Mansfield and Collard, 1988:9). My data collection transcended library literary research and I found myself in conversation with people almost everyday on the issue of weddings and marriage. ‘Gossip’ and talk of weddings/marriage arose frequently in casual conversation and although I often tired of the topic, searching for refreshing alternatives, these conversations provided me with some valuable insights. I learned to perceive conversational clichés as qualitatively productive. Jokes for example, were reiterated in relation to weddings and marriage, often reinforcing or transcending gender stereotypes: in these indirect expressions, men articulated fears about the financial costs a wedding entailed. Women however, spoke of pressures to ‘look the part’, including references to issues that initially appeared minor concerns, but eventually embedded themselves as significant considerations - losing weight, clear skin, the ‘perfect dress’ and all the small aesthetic considerations involved in the creation of a wedding image.

I did find it necessary however, to differentiate between the duel (and often competing) tenets involved in these issues: serious talk about wedding/marriage aspirations and mockery. There is a whole discourse in prevailing understandings that sees marriage as a farce, reinforcing traditional gender roles and poking fun at the opposite sex. I considered such references as possibly reflective of the self-consciousness, disdain and ambiguity currently prevalent in contemporary marriage/wedding attitudes. Discussions with one participant in particular made me realise that the realms of women’s ‘banter’ and ‘gossip’ about weddings and marriage were in fact important in a more holistic understanding.

The following passage reveals her more pragmatic perception of pre wedding gossip and preparation,
I think that there is more to women’s gossips/discussions/talks about weddings than the superficial stuff – the smaller details. For a start it helps us collectively cope with the stress of a wedding. But it is also a chance for us self-proclaimed independent-minded women, to come together and share our thoughts/insecurities/struggles/questions/fears about the institution of marriage and how it conflicts with our beliefs or just makes us cringe a little. There is something unique about being a bride (much like there is something unique about being a mother) that comes from cultural standards, societal mores, and all of the other crap out there that we battle as women and as brides.

SUMMARY

The methodological and theoretical implications of this study, as discussed in this chapter are decisive in the outcome of data and participant response. Potential problems with my method were acknowledged and dealt with as far as possible. I recognised the necessity (and problems) of dealing with a diverse range of participants, including varying socio-economic backgrounds, family sizes, levels of education and marital status, while at the same time acknowledging that the physical boundaries of my research did not enable me to pursue important cultural/ethnic discrepancies. The potential limitations with my initial participant cohort was rectified as the research unfolded by opening up the age boundaries and marital status' of my participants and in contrast, as my topic took shape the gender boundary was reduced to a predominantly female cohort. The consequences of these changes, namely the potential to render the male experience invisible, were also acknowledged and dealt with through discussion of gender issues.

The interviewing styles that I adopted: open-ended, group/collective, interactive and internet based 'interviews' all facilitated a qualitative, informal approach aimed at attaining more intimate and reciprocal data. The focus on such a personal approach also enabled me to come closer to 'hidden meanings' and assumptions in marital issues, which could otherwise be invisible. Participants made me aware for example, of other more subtle factors that have the ability to shape perspective, such as timing of the interview in context of their lives.

Such an intimate approach however, also necessitated the consideration of ethical issues, especially since the investigation mediates between public marital trends, legalities, ethnographic
experiences (namely attending weddings) and the more personal issues that constitute the emotions and values of the bride. I was conscious however, not to trespass into areas 'out of my reach' as an anthropologist while attempting to get as genuine an understanding as ethically possible. My own gender and other aspects of my positioning were also raised and situated as potentially influencing the nature of my arguments as well as participant’s responses to me as a researcher.

Basically, the methodological issues I faced in the present investigation were extensive, ranging from broader considerations such as scarce funding resources to the most personal considerations, such as the repercussions of research on my own understanding and how I see myself as a woman/feminist/anthropologist. I proceeded with an awareness of these considerations, knowing that although many methodological problems cannot be avoided, they are resonate and should be consciously considered during data collection and analysis. I emphasise however, that the issues discussed in this chapter are not conclusive and resurface throughout the investigation as the research unfolds.
CHAPTER TWO: FEMINIST CRITIQUES.

“Marriage is an insult and women should not touch it” (Murray, cited by Jeffares and Gray: 1999:478).

*But the willing wife, till life's closing day
Is the children's and husband's to stay
From day to day she has done her best
Until death alone can give her rest
The Farmers Wife, 1885 (New Zealand Farmer, in McIndoe, 1978:10).

Women have historically been defined in marriage in relation to their passivity, definitive in the possession of their husband, where the church sanctioned the union of ‘man and wife’. In addition to promising to love and cherish, the wife also promised to obey. In order to understand the (feminist) politics of marriage in contemporary society, I first saw it as necessary to recognise previous understandings. Geller emphasised the importance of looking at the history of women’s oppression in marriage as well as how this is maintained in contemporary popular culture (2001:18). I do not attempt to provide an historical overview of marriage or to discern whether marriage is now egalitarian - that would extend beyond my research boundaries. Instead, this chapter approaches dominant Western feminist discourses (from the second wave onwards) on marriage, outlining the principle feminist critiques that have come to shape present marriage values, and how a feminist poststructuralist approach can facilitate a more genuine understanding today.

A LEGACY OF OPPRESSION

The position of women in marriage in the West has fluctuated enormously over time, from the first written evidence of women’s subjugation in the law codes of ancient Mesopotamia (110 B.C) where women were described as chattels, to the present day where women hold equity in most Western marriage laws. Status is of course heavily dependent on cultural values, individual interpretations and the socio-political context of the specific era and location. As Weedon (1997:199) argued, discursive power relations within which meaning is located define the degree of vulnerability at a particular moment and the meanings behind categories such as ‘woman’ are
plural, historically and socially specific. Of course, there have always been women who have experienced egalitarian marriage even in the most patriarchal contexts, or have even dominated their husbands (Geller, 2001:27).

But the history of women’s role in Western marriage still predominates as one of oppression rather than liberation (Card 1996:4, Geller 2001:20). As Greer (1971:199) argued, gradual changes in basic assumptions have obscured the traces of the development of the myth of falling-in-love-and-getting-married. For hundreds of years in Western history matrimony was primarily for procreation and was utilized as an economic contract, reducing women to pawns in property exchanges within largely patriarchal societies. The enormity of this history renders it peripheral to the confines of the present investigation. What can be examined however, is the degree of knowledge my participants expressed in regards to the history of matrimony in the West.

Many participants caricatured the difference between our marriage system and that of other cultures, often situating these ‘others’ as lacking in romantic imagery. While most had a minimal understanding of the history of marriage and its treatment of women in the West or even New Zealand (except traces of immediate histories, of the last generation or two), most were remotely aware of historical and non-Western wedding practices. Rather than reiterate factual knowledge of what these practices represent within the context of the specific culture however, this ‘knowledge’ better resembled ethnocentric ‘warnings’ implying that marriage has the potential to subjugate women in other cultures, “I know that in India many women have it bad there, and use to commit suicide if their husband died” (referring to a traditional agrarian Indian practice known as suttee, where an ‘honourable’ wife was expected to throw herself on the burning funeral pyre of her husband.

Other participants spoke of a Chinese practice, where upper-class girls’ toes were curled beneath their feet and tightly bound when they were toddlers, making it painful for them to walk and impossible for them to escape from their husbands on foot (Daly, 1978, 113-52). While these practices, by Western standards are horrific examples of the mistreatment of women and necessitate attention, I highlight them in order to make a different point. Participant’s

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1 This view, however conclusive, is of course open to debate. See Fischer, 1995:33, 282.
2 In what are perhaps the two most influential ancient languages, Hebrew and Greek, the word for woman is the same as that for wife (Geller, 2001:27).
naturalisation of these practices as representative of Chinese and Indian values *per se*, effectively overlooked the history of *Western* exploitation of women within marriage through their comparisons.

The first wave of feminism in New Zealand (c1880-1914) recognized marriage as an institution that required reform but not in an extreme manner (Delphy and Leonard, 1992:6). These early feminists largely accepted heterosexual monogamy as well as a division of labour within marriage. Drawing on liberal humanist discourse with its emphasis on freedom, individuality and equality, they offered an alternative interpretation of the marriage contract. Resisting the construction of women as the subordinate party in a marriage, figures like Elizabeth Stanton and Kate Sheppard believed that women made a different but vitally important contribution to the marriage relationship and that marriage should be a partnership of equals (Malcolm, 1989:4-5, cited by Melton, 1992:86).

What concerned them was that *certain* families were oppressive for those who were subordinates within them so reforms were aimed at protecting such women and children. Activists basically acted philanthropically, seeking change not for themselves but for other less fortunate women. Their achievements were significant although limited: they still presumed the centrality of the family for all women and aimed to actually preserve and strengthen conventional marriage. As a consequence, European white middle class notions of masculinity, femininity and marriage were left largely unchallenged in first wave feminist politics in New Zealand.

The period from the end of the First World War to the 1960's is remembered as one where there was little criticism of marriage (Delphy and Leonard, 1992:10). There was a strong fear of feminism being labelled militant or extremist and feminist concerns shifted away from desire for separation and independence from men towards a quest for autonomy and protection within marriage (May, 1992:161). Later feminist thought however - the 'second wave', was much more critical of social systems and integral to the women's movement(s) in the 1960's and 1970's were notions that marriage as an institution severely disenfranchised women.

Second wave politics argued that the sexual and love relationships between men and women are socially constructed and contribute to the continuation of women's oppression (Delphy and
Leonard, 1992:258). It was this movement that provided a new mechanics for understanding the role of women in marriage today. First it is necessary to look briefly at the paradigms that shaped historic understandings of the relationship between women and marriage - those that second wave feminism deconstructed in its birth, namely the Functionalist and Marxist models. It is the weaknesses of these paradigms that necessitated new (feminist) understandings of women and matrimony.

FUNCTIONALISM

Functionalism, which sees the family as a universal institution serving the same functions in all societies but taking on many diverse forms, was the most widely used paradigm for describing marriage and the family until the 1970’s (Mansfield and Collard, 1988:28). The nuclear family was seen as the most appropriate family form for complex industrialized societies, and marriage within this form was essential – it was the fundamental arrangement on which the family was based. Talcott Parsons (1955) argued that the nuclear family has two basic functions: to socialize children into the appropriate values and norms of society and to stabilize the adult personality through marriage. The marital relationship was expected to provide emotional stability for the couple as they experienced the stresses of everyday life. For the radical right, the Parsonian ideal of an instrumental husband and an expressive wife was the ideal (VanEvery, 1996:41-44, Mansfield and Collard, 1988:28).

Contemporary definitions of the family however are now very fluid and functionalism has long been considered an inadequate means of defining both the family and marriage within the family system (Gittins, 1985:135). Functionalism was widely critiqued by feminists (and others) who recognised its inadequacies in catering for diversity. Because it did not go beyond the status quo in its analysis, Millett (1970:220) argued that it produced a description of the present arrived at by means of the measurements it had devised, in addition to being strongly gender blind. Functionalism either failed to mention patriarchy, gave it no recognition as a form of social

\[3\] Within the matrix of feminism as a whole, many divergent, often conflicting strands can be identified – socialist feminism, black and lesbian feminism, Marxist feminism, radical and liberal feminism. The confines of this investigation do not afford me the time to elaborate on differing interpretations, so I utilise a more general approach.

\[4\] Analysis of weddings independent of marriage are rare in feminist critiques, with weddings generally conflated with marriage values and ideology, "with very few exceptions, feminists have failed to recognise the bridal business' stranglehold on the female imagination and have not acknowledged the ludicrous amounts of money with which the average middle class woman celebrates the institution that has disenfranchised her sex" (Geller, 2001:312). This was of course, a motivating incentive for my investigation.
government or simply assumed that patriarchy was the first form of human grouping, the origin of all society and therefore too fundamental to merit discussion (Millett, 1970:221).

**The Influence of Marx**

Marxist paradigms, which came under strong feminist scrutiny during the second wave, provide insight into taken-for-granted assumptions about women’s relationship within marriage today. The structuralist approaches of Marxism, while still concerned with the functions of the family, focus on the way that particular family forms are implicated in capitalist and patriarchal power relations. Frederick Engels in, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884) argued that as the mode of production changed, so too did the family. This perspective locates marriage within the development of the monogamous nuclear family; an institution implicated by the growth of private property and the emergence of the state. Monogamous marriage came to be protected by the state because it was seen as the means for the smooth operation of the inheritance of private property from men to their sons. “The bourgeois sees in his wife a mere instrument of production” (Marx, *Communist Manifesto* cited by Mansfield and Collard, 1988:3).

In the progression of a Marxist feminist theory, Engel’s work was crucial. A central problem for Marxist feminists however, was that women seemed to be governed by two semi-autonomous but mutually strengthening power mechanisms - the operation of a patriarchal ideology of immutable sexual difference within the family and a sexual division of labour in the workplace (Whelahan, 1995:47). Both had received little attention in the Marxist tradition. Under capitalism, Engel’s position on women’s place was ambiguous, assuming that women independently acquire class status by virtue of the same economic determinants as men, “it also implies that all women are proletarianised within marriage - where in male power is regarded as analogous to that of the bourgeoisie” (Whelahan, 1995:47). The family, according to Marxism therefore, represents a capitalist system of relations in microcosm and it is assumed that once class is abolished, so sexual inequality will disappear (Elliot, 1996:54). In this sense, women’s particular experience of oppression is absorbed and obscured under a description of class antagonism. Although Marxist analysis concentrated on relations of production within the labour market, “no Marxist theory provides a satisfactory historical account of the sexual division of labour” (Jaggar, 1983:72).
ENGELS AND ECONOMICS

Essentially, Engels reasoned that marriage and the family were a historical consequence of the development of private property and the need for legitimate heirs. He saw no need for marriage in the past, with the lack of private property, and similarly, saw no need for marriage in the future if private property were abolished (Gittins, 1985:74). But Gittins (1985:74) made an obvious and important point – although property transactions are important within marriage, this idea ignores those without property who marry. Engels was right to draw attention to the economic aspects of marriage, but that his definition of ‘economic’ relating solely to property is problematic. Economics can also accommodate factors such as time, space, labour, sexuality, service and skills. Millet (1970:36) for example, saw marriage as a financial alliance, with each household operating as an economic entity much like a corporation. Acknowledgment of this diversity emerged as an important consideration in my research, as one participant revealed,

*All those things that we take for granted – having someone there to help with chores, someone to talk to after work, to pick me up and drop me off places, to be there if I’m stressed. Plus the financial security...through marriage we were securing our financial obligations to each other, that’s also part of the glamour and the sex.*

Leonard (1980:5) stressed that marriage is an economic necessity for most women. My married participants generally trivialised monetary aspects of marriage, sometimes making humorous references to financial matters. Very few of them asserted that finances were driving incentives in their decision to marry, although their testimony revealed that economics were crucial components of the marital relationship.  

*It was a difficult time for us, both just out varsity, both in debt. But slowly we managed, found jobs and that took a hell of a lot of pressure off our relationship, so that we could start planning for the future, instead of worrying about paying the rent and whether we could afford that beer at the pub!*

In addition to criticism of Marxist understandings of economics in the marital relationship, there have been strong feminist arguments that the Marxist analysis of labour relations are inadequate as long as they ignore how other forms of unpaid ‘unproductive’ labour (such as procreative and

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3 Gittins, (1985:78-79) argued that the reason that the majority of people choose to marry comes down to whether or not they own property.

6 Of course, the cost of getting married was also an important consideration for participants on issues of finance (discussed further in chapter five). As one participant expressed, “weddings aren’t cheap.”
domestic labour) contribute to the stability and viability of industrial capitalism. It has little to say on the nature of women or patriarchy beyond seeing it as advantageous to the capitalist mode of production (Weedon, 1997:77). Labour has always been a crucial aspect of marriage, although one that has, “tended to be ignored in legal, religious – and indeed sociological - definitions of marriage” (Gittins, 1985:77). Like economics, labour issues were played down by many of my participants, although they often came up in conversation indirectly. One participant expressed her view on her need to marry, situating labour issues as an important factor, despite her not wanting them to be,

*We all have to support ourselves at some time in our lives. I fell in love and wanted to symbolise that love through marriage, but the truth is that I saw it as (unfortunately) necessary... umm, I couldn’t work and raise children without the immediate support of my partner’s income too. Now we are divorced, so now I see the marriage as highly pragmatic.*

Millett gave a positive account of Engel’s work as a contribution to a theory of sexual revolution, especially its descriptions of the patriarchal and bourgeois manifestation of the institution of marriage and the family (Millett, 1977:120-7). She pointed out however, that Engel’s view of patriarchy disregards the effects of patriarchal power relations at other levels, as well as the fact that Engel’s contention that women are made chattels through the establishment of the male’s exclusive sexual possession over women in marriage (a possession that is not reciprocal to women) already presupposes patriarchal circumstances (1970:112). Basically, early feminist critics of Parsonian and Marxian theories emphasised the non-social explanations lurking in predominantly social theories – feminists directed attention to women’s oppression within these frameworks and the apparently ‘natural’ divisions of labour that home and married life entailed (VanEvery, 1996:44).

Weeks (1989:237) pointed out that marriage may be considered, out of necessity, a business arrangement – an exchange of goods and services. Echoing earlier Marxist critiques, Ingraham (1992:102) stated that even in contemporary society, monogamous marriage is crucial to capitalism and patriarchy: it secures women’s subordination to men, preserves heirs, ensures that property passes within the family, and maintains class divisions. These constructions however, are rendered invisible through the emphasis on romance associated with marriage and weddings. The ideologies at work in these processes have been recognised by feminists who stipulate that
romanticism is a cultural tool of male power to keep women from knowing their conditions. It is these ideologies that have a powerful role in the creation and maintenance of marriage and wedding reverence.

IDEOLOGIES OF HETEROSEXUALITY

Ideology has a direct interventional relationship with people's material conditions of existence (Whelahan, 1995:57). Because it produces what is allowed to stand for reality, ideology constitutes a material force and at the same time is shaped by other economic and political authorities. Eagleton (1991:5-6) described ideology as a dominant power that may legitimate itself by promoting beliefs and values congenial to it; naturalizing and universalising such beliefs so as to render them self-evident and apparently inevitable. This definition of ideology addresses the meaning-making processes embedded within any social practice or belief system, such as that which shapes an understanding of marriage and weddings in our society. Recognition of the infrastructure surrounding these ideologies can equip us with the ability to demystify the legitimatisation of dominant beliefs about marriage and weddings, beliefs that are more significant for women due to what Cancian (1990:5) termed the 'feminisation of romantic love' in our society.

Van Every (1996:40) argued that marriage is the hegemonic form of heterosexuality. The wedding is one of heterosexuality's key organizing rituals, "in various sites within popular culture, the reassertion of dominance is most evident in the proliferation of one of heterosexuality's key organizing rituals, the wedding" (Ingraham, 1999: 14). Within this equation, the bride is heterosexuality personified. Whelahan (1995:55) noted the complexities involved in assessing the means by which gender ideologies become equated with 'fact' or common sense, as they are communicated through schools, the law, the media, literature and inform an individual's conceptions of, and attitudes to sexual difference.7

Popular sitcoms for example, are particularly pervasive in translating these ideologies, with the conventional white wedding and beautiful princess bride still pushed as the ideal. In contemporary New Zealand, the range of these programmes is extensive: Friends, The Nanny, Suddenly Susan, Dr. Quinn, Everybody Loves Raymond, Will and Grace, Baywatch, Dharma and

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7 Florida in the United States has set a precedent requiring a marriage education curriculum for public high school students (http://www.divorcereform.org/lea.html).
*Greg, Neighbours, Coronation Street* and *Eastenders* have all featured weddings in their episodes in their most recent series. *Oprah* regularly runs shows that feature wedding related issues, products and even actual weddings on air. Other talk shows such as *Sally Jessy* and *Ricki Lake* feature wedding disasters, scandals and shocking matrimonial defamation, not to mention the many 'bloopers' that mock wedding misfortunes. Even the final episode of *Shortland Street* for 2001 (*Television New Zealand: 2001*) featured a white wedding gone wrong and weddings have been frequently employed over the duration of the series.  

Feminists have summoned ideology to mean anything from ‘false consciousness’ to an unconscious internalisation of dominant social values. Gittins (1985:59) argued that even when individuals manage to obtain what they want, they are not free, because their wants have been manipulated by the mass media and the cultural apparatus of our consumer society. Millet (1977:25) looked at the fundamental power of patriarchal ideology in our society and argued that patriarchy informs our perception of social reality by being entrenched in knowledge itself. Likewise, Rich analysed the effects of heterosexuality as an institution that permeates the lives of all women: their experience and sexual reality, what she calls ‘hetero-reality.’ She concluded that women are physically, economically, emotionally and psychologically coerced into heterosexuality (1980:659).

The success of the institution of heterosexuality is dependent on heterosexual imagery to conceal its regulatory function and effects. Those that promote marriage must transform the wedding into something inherently private, natural and inevitable in order to conceal the fact that marriage is an institution has been inextricably connected to the most severe forms of gender discrimination. The irony is that marriage is a humanly constructed institution rather than an innate human experience - wedding law and ritual are humanly shaped artefacts that are dispensable, “the institution of heterosexuality is socially constructed rather than inevitable” (Maynard and Purvis, 1995:2). Weddings are also defined as spontaneous rather than deliberate, ironic considering the time and effort that goes into planning a wedding. The pervasiveness of heterosexuality is especially relevant to the wedding industry and the ideologies that perpetuate it. In order for the

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8 Portrayals of later marriage however, are almost always farces, satires and dismal tales of misery and betrayal, exemplified in the sitcom, *Married with Children*. Marriage is often portrayed as a 'comic disaster' in children's cartoons.
wedding to be recession proof it must rely on a very powerful meaning making apparatus guaranteeing our compliance and consent to participate (Ingraham, 1999:82).

The ideological framework of heterosexuality must also conceal the diversity of other wedding forms, or highlight them as ‘abnormal’ and unattractive. This idea aligns with a Foucauldian view of power, where in power is tolerable only on condition that it masks a substantial part of itself - its success is proportional to its ability to hide its own mechanisms (Foucault, 1978:97). The way the heterosexual imagery works is by employing both romance and nostalgia. Romance is equated with experience - love is construed as the natural outcome of the wedding. “Weddings, like many other rituals of heterosexual celebration such as anniversaries, showers and Valentines Day, provide images of reality that conceal the operation of heterosexuality both historically and materially (Ingraham, 1999:18).

The consequence of the media machines ability to shroud discrepancies with ideological trappings is that we live with the illusion that marriage and weddings are somehow linked to the natural order of the universe rather than see them as they are - social and cultural institutions produced to serve particular interests (Ingraham, 1999:120). Gender is naturalised as though it is somehow related to our biology and not the result of social processes or organized in the interests of institutionalised heterosexuality. Whelehan (1995:166) argued that the myth of sexuality in its current construct is that it affords the individual liberation through free expression of his or her desires. But it is a myth because these desires are mediated through a powerful ideological image of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ (usually non-productive) forms of sexual relations, sanctioned or prohibited in social relations. There is a whole industry that relies on the perpetuation of these ideologies to sustain desire for wedding commodities and ensure commodity service consumption (the issues of which are addressed in chapter five).

Not only are weddings categorised as normal and deviant, but women are made to believe that the image of perfection is actually attainable. This idea is discussed in chapter six, where I look at how royalty and everyday life are conflated - the ideology seeks to create the perception that there is little difference between the average bride and the ‘princess bride.’ Popular culture’s ability to persuade and distort reality, along with its mass accessibility, means that it constitutes a powerful tool of social influence, so much so that the validity of its messages are often left unquestioned. “Movies, the fashion industry, magazines and television have discovered that
weddings sell” (Spindler, 1998, cited by Ingraham, 1999:82). But more than that, they have discovered that we’ll consent. In order for this to be achieved, the masses must be assured that there will be rewards. Romance is the primary reward offered women in their compliance with these ideologies.

ROMANCE SANCTIONS EXPLOITATION

The politics of romance and love are integral in discourses on marriage and have been the topic of much debate within second wave feminism (Langford 1999, de Beauvoir, Greer 1971, Millett 1970, Atkinson 1974). With my aim of exploring the feminisation of the wedding experience and the ways in which ‘romance’ is utilised by the industry, I saw an understanding of these politics as necessary. Widely discussed is the notion that marriage is an institution that condones what Langford (1999:21) termed the ‘government of love’, rendering women the inferior partner. Ideologies of romantic love were seen to obscure women’s emotional, physical and domestic exploitation within the marriage contract (Greer 1970, Comer 1974 cited by Langford 1999:7). Firestone (1971:139) argued that romanticism has been seen as a cultural tool of male power to keep women from knowing their conditions, while Greer (1971:139) asserted that, “their love persuades them to make vows, build houses and turn their passion ultimately to duty”. Gittins (1985:160) argued that family ideology over the past 150 years has laid greater emphasis on the romantic and companionate ideal of marriage while disguising its fundamental economic and egalitarian aspects. Marriage differs from other labour relationships because it is shrouded in ideals of love, occluding economic inequalities (Leonard, 1980:261).

Falling in love can allow women to ignore the passive, dominated role they often occupy in heterosexual relationships, “for both sexes, the near inevitability of entry into the labour contract of marriage is obscured by the process being seen as one of choice, attainment, love, sexual excitement and individual development” (Leonard, 1980:262). Domestic labour exploitation can be seen as being hidden by the love a wife feels for her husband and therefore her desire to satisfy his needs is encapsulated in the daily tasks she performs for him (Delph and Leonard, 1992: 17). But more ominously, it may appear as if the wife is not exploited especially if she is ‘maintained’ as one participant expressed, enjoying a standard of living that she might otherwise not be able to enjoy. It is these complexities of desire and appeasement that render marriage ethics problematic. Again, a Foucauldian view of power can be recognised here: power is tolerable only on condition that it masks a substantial part of itself (Foucault, 1978:97).
In *Sex and Generation* (1980) Leonard contended that the ceremonial associated with courtship and marriage simply confirms that marriage is essentially a labour relationship, even though it is shrouded in love. Within this relationship, a woman pledges her life (with limited rights to quit), labour, sexuality, reproductive capacity, and receives protection, upkeep and certain rights to children (1980:5). Rich (1986:2) argued that the ideal of monogamous marriage until death is a stable feature of the family, an attribute that permeates even those units that appear egalitarian. Caring for her family and the home is implicitly the (unpaid) job that a woman undertakes when she marries and failing to fulfil these jobs can be grounds for divorce or losing her children. Chapter six looks at how romance lends the archetypal female role an undeserved legitimacy and seeming permanence, reinforcing stereotypical gender roles.

**LOVE AND POWER**

It is often assumed that passionate love is fundamentally rebellious and emerges in resistance to power and control (Langford, 1999:16). But it has been a strong feminist argument that it is precisely the nature of love to be irrational, ambiguous and impossible to investigate that makes it the ideal site for the exercise of power, especially when sanctioned by the marital bond (Langford, 1999:42). Love relationships are socially constructed and involve gendered power relations (Delphy and Leonard, 1992:262). Or as Firestone (1971:124) argued, love is a simple phenomenon that becomes complicated, corrupted or obstructed by an unequal balance of power.

The operation of heterosexuality is further obscured by making it difficult to conceive of the marital relationship as a vehicle for both love and power. Greer (1971:151) argued that the woman is deceived (by others and self) in the marital relationship, where somehow the perception of the real motivation for self-sacrifice exists alongside its official ideology. In other words, women have been seen to confuse love with altruism and see security as the reward that justifies the sacrifices that they make in marriage, rendering the institution a kind of commerce and one in which the female must always be the creditor (Greer, 1971:151).

Langford (1991:1) stated that romantic love is an ideology that obscures the violent and conflictual nature of sexual relations and therefore, particularly in its heterosexual forms, serves to reproduce the oppression of women. Firestone (1979:122), argued that the gendered dynamics of romantic love underpin a patriarchal culture which is, "parasitical, feeding on the emotional
strength of women without reciprocity". Similarly, Delphy and Leonard (1992:17) argue that love hides exploitation in the domestic sphere. Our society has come to venerate `deliverance' through romantic passions and family rewards. Marriage is the means of achieving this and its ceremony, the wedding symbolises these virtues.

While this appears to legitimate the freedom of the individual to love and be loved, does it in fact legitimize the very means by which the desire for selfish gratification and the coercion of the less powerful may be freely exercised in the guise of the `most humane devotion'? How can individuals fall in love and create a relationship, which according to critics, is inherently conflictual and coercive while at the same time aspire to one that is equal, reciprocal and contractual? (Langford, 1999:19). This leaves us with a paradoxical presupposition: love exists in a social zone (marriage), which is by definition free of power, "even when obviously domineering behaviour is exhibited within it" (Langford, 1999:16).

There has been extensive feminist research into the relationship between love and its psychosocial consequences for women. Feminists have widely utilised Freudian theory in analysis of love and power, as Firestone argued, "Freudianism and feminism are made of the same stuff" (1979:49). Delphy and Leonard (1992:48) asserted that Freudianism and feminism grew from the same soil and it is no accident that Freud began his work at the height of the feminist movement. Langford drew on Freudian analysis, asserting that romantic transformation is compelling because it involves the repetition of older, deeper narratives of salvation. Women's accounts of love she stated, may be dressed up in the ideals of romanticism, but, "are rooted in other long-forgotten attempts to give up an imperfect self in exchange for existential security and lasting satisfaction" (Langford, 1999:62). In this sense, romantic ideology effectively condones the desire to seek completion through attachment to a sexual object.9

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9 Related to this is the feminist tenet that human love is a function of narcissism. "When Adam saw Eve in the garden of Eden he loved her because she was of himself, bone of his bone and more like him than any other animal" (Greer, 1971:141). Falling in love has been seen in psychoanalysis as a temporary regression to infantile merging and omnipotence. "Through falling in love with a man, a woman aims finally to become one with the 'father' who in her mind possesses what she lacks, and thus 'achieve' the narcissistic perfection which has eluded her all her life...love is the articulation of resistance to all conditioning; it aims to heal the wounds inflicted by all the 'mothers' and 'fathers' and thereby to resolve all contradictions within the self (Langford, 1999:108). But central and most important to the notion that love provides refuge from the vestiges of an irrational world is the paradox that this sense of safety is delusional. In his analysis of modern love, Weber argues that love's rebellion is deceptive, it appears to be the most profound expression of human freedom, "the lover realizes himself to be rooted in a kernel of the truly living, which is eternally inaccessible to any rational endeavour" (1948:347). "It is the most intimate
Although psychoanalysis has tended to neglect women’s experience (the cornerstone of the Freudian theory of womanhood is the conviction that the woman is a castrated man) as well as proving blind to issues of power (Langford, 1999:43, Firestone, 1979:90-93), some Freudian ideas have been significant in the development of feminist critiques of love and marriage. Despite the enormous inadequacies of Freud’s theories, they gave direct credence to the idea that inequalities between the sexes are socially constructed and thus potentially challengeable (Gittins, 1985:56). Poststructuralism and psychoanalysis share the view that language is transparent in the expression of meaning as well as seeing the unity and fixity of subjectivity (Weedon, 1997:144). These ideas are important considering the weight of popular culture examples in the present investigation.

DESIRE AND POWER

Integral to the discourses or systems of meaning through which we understand the world is desire – an integral consideration if we are to differentiate between institutionalisation and emotion in the creation of desire in the wedding industry. From a poststructuralist perspective, desire does not necessarily originate from the self, but is linked to the ways we are positioned in discourse and this in turn is implicated in the production of power. Foucault (1978:11) asserted that although we tend to see evidence of power when we are prevented from getting what we want, it is important to recognise that power operates in the very production of desire.

The production of desire is invisible once desire is experienced as internal and self-initiated, as we see in chapter six where participants come to desire a certain image as revealed in bridal magazines, and in chapter five where participants spend beyond their means to acquire their dream gown and ring. It is these subtle mechanisms of power that operate most effectively when undetected (Foucault, 1978:97). It is a consistent feature of most forms of discourse that they deny their own partiality. They fail to acknowledge that they are but possible versions of meaning rather than ‘truth’ itself and that they represent particular interests (Weedon, 1997:94). Coward (1984:16) supported this idea, “feminine positions are produced as responses to the pleasures offered to us; our subjectivity and identity are formed in the definitions of desire which

coercion of the soul of the less brutal partner…pretending to be the most humane devotion, it is a sophisticated enjoyment of oneself in the other” (Weber, 1948:348).
encircle us. These are the experiences which make change such a difficult and daunting task, for female desire is constantly lured by discourses which sustain male privilege."

This precept is linked to Louis Althusser’s notion of ‘interpellation’: the phenomenon of believing that we are the authors of ideas that are part of an ideology. Althusser borrowed Jacques Lacan’s notion of the imaginary for his theory of ideology, defining ideology as, “the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence” (Althusser, 1971:52). We may believe that when we are pursuing our ‘true’ desires, that we are experiencing true freedom, without realising the ways these desires are produced (Althusser, 1971:162-163). For example, there is no prerequisite for women to wear makeup, to have children, behave in a feminine manner or to get married. But many women *want* to get married and the majority of my participants have/will seek to symbolise this union with a wedding.

Atkinson (1974:xxii) commented however, that so few are willing to give up the power relationship. Even the powerless cling to the ideology, in the hope that as long as the idea exists they have hope of escaping powerlessness by achieving some way, somehow, powerfulness. She added, that as long as the conceptual framework of ‘power’ itself is valued (especially if valued by the oppressed) none of us have any hope. This idea becomes problematic in chapter six, where I look at how hegemonic and stereotypical images of the princess bride are venerated by many participants.

**POSTSTRUCTURALIST FEMINISM**

Forms of liberal feminism aim to extend to women an equal measure of the choice and opportunity currently enjoyed by men, rejecting the long established assumption that men are by nature more rational than women and therefore should have greater access to self determination and power. In Marxist and radical-feminist versions of humanism, women’s true nature is seen as distorted or repressed by the structure of capitalist and patriarchal societies (Weedon, 1997:77). Much radical-feminist discourse also assumes a humanist essence of womanhood, seeking to revalue the feminine that patriarchy devalues (Weedon, 1997:78). For example, Atkinson (1974:60) adopted a Marxist framework and appropriated it, arguing that female oppression is essentially a class confrontation and that women were the first political class and the beginning of the class system, “my suspicion of class as a base concept of the analysis of any
oppression grows...the institution of the male-female relationship has a fairly simple formalized structure.”

Atkinson argued that marriage, or some variant of it is the prototype of this class system structure. “The family is the natural consequence of the definitive sex institution of marriage. Sex and love are the dynamics of the male and female roles respectively” (Atkinson, 1974:67). For poststructuralist feminism, neither the liberal-feminist attempt to redefine the truth of women’s nature within the terms of existing social relations and to establish women’s full equality with men, nor the radical-feminist emphasis on fixed difference, realized in a separatist context, is politically adequate.

The fixing of meaning is necessary for social life, but in allying meaning to ‘true, essential, non-patriarchal femininity’, other feminist discourses inevitably attempt to fix femininity once and for all. While some feminists have produced their own alternative ‘grand narratives’ for example, forms of Marxist feminism or radical feminism theories of patriarchy, poststructuralist feminists have sought to deconstruct existing meta-narratives and to develop new theoretical approaches which insist on historical and geographical specificity and no longer claim universal status (Weedon, 1997:172). This was an important characteristic of a poststructuralist perspective that made it compatible with my research.

Because a poststructuralist feminism never fixes meaning, femininity and masculinity are constantly altering and subjectivity, which most discourses seek to fix is, “constantly subject to dispersal” (Weedon, 1997:96). For example, participants revealed quite different understandings of marriage and views on wedding values, depending on holistic factors (education, religious upbringing, ethnicity, socio-economic status, family values) as well as very individual concerns (personal aspirations, short term goals, family relations, the desire for children and so on). Focus groups reinforced such value disparities, securing the fact that each participant had their own perspectives on these ideologies, shaping their own conceptions of ‘oppression’ (or vice versa).

A poststructuralist perspective enabled me to more readily deal with the idea of complicity with oppression and how participants saw their own agency within the context of the issues discussed in the broader research plan. For example, some participants saw their early marriages or weddings that conformed to ‘conventional’ boundaries as inherently liberating, while others
argued that these conventions symbolised patriarchal values or at least treaded a fine line between the two perspectives.

These ideas are tackled elsewhere in the research – women in chapter six who saw the princess bride trope as attractive and found self-worth in their successful depiction of this role at their weddings as opposed to those who saw these ideals as debilitating, seeking to invert them. I developed the perspective that in thought, speech or writing individuals necessarily commit themselves to specific subject positions and embrace quite contradictory modes of subjectivity at different moments. If “power is invested in and exercised through her who speaks” (Weedon, 1997:168) then each participant, through her testimony, was giving expression to her experience. I propose that this is also problematic however and address the symbolism that these expressions may entail and repercussions for women’s advancement per se.

I do stress that there have been widespread criticisms of such poststructuralist perspectives, as acknowledged in chapter two. From a feminist poststructuralist perspective the process of criticism is infinite due to the plurality of language and the impossibility of fixing meaning. As a consequence, poststructuralism is seen as denying the authenticity of individual experience by decentering the rational, unitary, autonomous subject of liberal humanism, or the essential female nature at the centre of much radical feminism, rendering it socially constituted within discourse. Also, a move away from any essentialist qualities of women or femininity, which might be thought to unite all women, is often seen as a betrayal of the feminist cause (Weedon, 1997:175). Within this context, the utilisation of Foucault’s theory has also been criticised. The all encompassing nature of power for example, in Foucauldian theory has been seen to deny women a place exterior to power from which to ground transformative political action. This stance has been seen as incompatible with feminism since feminists are thought to need a position outside of power from which to speak and act in order to effect change.

It could be argued however, that the theory that all discursive practices and all forms of subjectivity constitute and are constituted by relations of power is only disabling if power is seen as always necessarily repressive.10 It is precisely such singular notions of power as repression

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10 Jessica Benjamin (1990) argued that in relationships based on desire, domination is not an essential feature, rather the problem is to do with society itself. In a patriarchal society she argues, ‘bonds of love’ become twisted so that when we form attachments, these transform into expressions of authority and submission. This idea of course, stems
progression of marriage values over time. Feminist discourses from the 1960’s onwards have tackled the predicaments of the wife, and situated us with a historical basis for rejecting marriage as an institution that legitimises patriarchal ideals. An understanding of feminist interpretations of dominant ideologies of heterosexuality can also aid in clarifying how these are manifest in contemporary depictions of the bride, especially considering the subtle mechanisms by which these ideologies function.

Contradictory perspectives are still widespread today and even though previous notions of women’s role in marriage have been extensively liberalised, there are new and competing discourses which women must unconsciously and/or consciously mediate. These discourses constitute much of the remaining research. For example, how women perceive and experience those values that shape the ideal ‘princess bride’ and responses to the feminisation of the wedding industry/experience that may provide insight into the extent of these ideologies’ success. Before embarking on these analyses, I turn first to a brief exploration of the institutions that have had a pivotal role in the historical entrenchment of women’s marginalized position in marriage – the church and state.
CHAPTER THREE: THE ROLE OF CHURCH AND STATE

This short chapter seeks to investigate more clearly the role of the state and church in marriage and wedding ideology today. I saw this as imperative in my feminist analysis since historically, female marital dependency on the husband is a phenomenon situated in a complex history in which the church and state have had an intimate relationship. Both have had a role to play in their ability to shape marriage ideology and both are concerned with creating and sustaining official definitions of marriage, especially for women (Bernard, 1972:10, Gittins 1985:154, Leonard, 1980:10, Melton, 1992:85, Mansfield and Collard, 1988:10). Historically in the West, the church and state have been the institutions responsible for the relief of poverty and women with illegitimate children would have been one of the main claimants on state relief (Gittins, 1985:81).

Intervention of state and church was legitimated in relation to the protection of the physically and economically dependent – namely women and children. As a result, censorship took the form of establishing a public marriage ceremony so as to recognize and penalise promiscuity as well as the dereliction of marital, parental or kin duties (Leonard, 1980:10). Such surveillance was closely tied with patriarchal dogma: this intervention can be seen to have provided support for parental and husbandry authority. Integral to the notion that the nuclear family prevalent in capitalist societies developed with the growth of private property and the emergence of the state, is the Marxist idea that monogamous marriage also came to be protected by the state because it was seen as means for the smooth operation of the inheritance of private property through the male line as discussed in chapter two.

Reasons for the continued encouragement of marriage by the church and state in the West are primarily economic, although often veiled in moral terms (Gittins, 1985:81). As a consequence, Gittins asserted that rather than questioning women’s disadvantageous economic situation, the church and state have used the patriarchal assumption that women must be dependent on a man and that marriage is still an important means of transferring responsibility of dependents (1985:82). Some still see state and church involvement as insidious in marriage ideologies and trends that affect women today. Mansfield and Collard (1988:14) argued in the late eighties, that social and economic structures are still highly influential in shaping the worlds of men and
women and the private relationships between husbands and wives. Leonard (1980:261) argued that church and state control of marriage is seen as the judicial apparatus of a particular set of relations of production. She saw the modern marriage ceremony as having parallels with the signing of indentures or even more with the selling of oneself into personal/domestic slavery, when a woman can see no other way to support herself adequately.

Here, I explore the relationship of the state and church in contemporary definitions and experiences of marriage and weddings for women. First, I address the state’s role in the creation of marriage and wedding ideology for women. The New Zealand government has adopted a policy of detachment over the years in relation to the family and marriage, with recent matrimonial concessions reinforcing this trend. I investigate the wider political infrastructure of marriage and changing marriage reform in New Zealand in recent years in order to discern just how pivotal the state is in this context. With the decrease in the role of the state in marriage ideology, I also came to question the role of the church. With marriage traditionally situated by many as a religious contract, the role of the church like the state, has historically had a pivotal influence in marriage ideology for women in the Christian West. With the secularisation of our socio-political agendas however¹, there has been a general decrease in the religious significance of weddings and the church in general has a less influential role than it did in the past. But it is the following paradox that I seek to understand. Despite this secularisation, many women still participate in wedding ritual previously affiliated with Christianity – marrying in a church, reciting vows and employing the services of a minister/priest. I seek to understand just how influential the church is in shaping marriage ideology for women today and whether the persistence of these practices are void of religious meaning.

Every political system has a social dimension. Although marriage may be considered one of the most private of institutions, it has been shaped decisively by our politics and by changing attitudes toward the roles of men and women. Historically, we can perceive the facts of female subjugation in the West as inseparable from the evolution of marriage law (Geller, 2001:19-20). The ‘creation of patriarchy’ as described by Lerner (1986) is intricately linked with family ideals. Gittins (1985:154) argued in the 1980’s that the overall effect of state policy in the west over the

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¹ In the 1996 census, over 1.3 million new Zealanders identified themselves as having no religious affiliation (www.stats.govt.nz).
past two centuries has been to make the vast majority of the population but specifically women, dependent on marriage more than ever in the past. Marriage law in New Zealand has had an important role in the disenfranchisement of women in the marital contract. This has had crucial repercussions in all other areas of women’s lives, considering marriage has historically curtailed women’s economic, social, legal and moral status. But the process of accommodating change however, has been laborious.

Historically, a woman marrying in early colonial New Zealand lost all legal individual identity. A wife’s property, both in the form of assets and wages, belonged to her husband (Koopman-Boyden and Scott, 1984:103). Otherwise known as coverture, she ceased to exist as a legal entity in her own right: she was civilly dead (Malcolm, 1989:6, cited by Melton, 1992:86). Malcolm (1989:7) argued that the clearest expression of this metaphysical death was the replacement of her name for his, an issue explored in the following chapter. It was not until the passage of the 1884 Married Woman’s Property Act that she was able to retain legal title to any property she acquired in her own right (Koopman-Boyden and Scott, 1984:104, James and Saville-Smith, 1989:24). Husbands also controlled the reproductive and sexual lives of their wives. The conjugal rights of husbands were sacrosanct. While changes to the divorce laws in 1867 allowed men to divorce their wives on grounds of adultery, women could only divorce their husbands on grounds of adultery combined with violence (Phillips, cited by James and Saville, 1989:24).

In 1953, the first changes to the divorce legislation for over 30 years were introduced, which for the first time allowed a seven year separation as grounds for divorce. The Matrimonial Property Act of 1976 proved an extremely important legislation, effectively making divorce easier for women. This act provided for the just division of matrimonial property between spouses when marriage ended by separation or dissolution. Four years after the Matrimonial Property Act, the Family Proceedings Act (1980) revised this law. It provided the legal framework for ending marriage through no-fault dissolution (May, 1992:251, Koopman-Boyden and Scott, 1984:198).

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2 Women’s lack of property rights meant that marrying and subsequently deserting a middle class woman represented a sound financial investment (Koopman-Boyden and Scott, 1995:103).

3 This Act also had a significant impact on civil marital behaviour. As a direct result of the 1976 act, 1982 saw the highest divorce rate since World War II, with 12 395 divorces and a staggering divorce rate of 17.1 (per 1 000 existing marriages). It must be observed however, that the marriage rate also peaked in this period, constituting the only increase to be seen between 1971-2000.
Since 1981 applications for the dissolution of marriage have been made to Family Courts, which are less formal and have more simplified procedures than other courts and therefore reduce the costs and stresses of divorce (Faludi, 1991:38). Despite these concessions in relation to the rights of women in matrimonial property law however, Koopman-Boyden and Scott still asserted in 1984 (198) that, “the rights of the husband remain uppermost in policy.” As Park (1991:58) argued, identity is induced largely by society, and young people may still face difficulties in transcending these identities. “Married couples are pressured to stay together and their lives are structured by a myriad of rules and expectations about how they should feel and behave” (Cancian, 1990:122). But just how influential is the power of the state in relation to marriage and wedding law in contemporary New Zealand?

It is clear that the family is of great importance to the state. The married couple was historically, as Lerner (1986:121) described, the ‘basic building block of the healthy organism that was the state.’ The very idea that there is an institution in New Zealand called Births, Deaths and Marriages (by virtue of its position next to birth and death), renders marriage a central life experience. Governments see the family as an indicator of the health and strength of social life. In the contemporary West, social welfare systems in many countries place great importance on family issues and changes in family patterns and structures are of significance to the state (Wilson, 1985:107). “I understand marriage as an institution to which the state is an essential third party” (Card, 1996:3).

In New Zealand, the state’s involvement in marriage law has fluctuated, with political agendas dependant on Labour or National orientations. The predominant change that has occurred in New Zealand family politics over the years is that slowly, the government has come to direct policies towards accommodating diversity rather than opposing it, in the hope of strengthening families and promoting stability. Some small shifts were made in the 1970’s when the Domestic Purposes Benefit (DPB) was introduced as well as increased support for child services. But in general, policy makers were reluctant to proceed too far down a track that acknowledged the possible independence of married women from their husbands and children. Diversity was tolerated and supported if it was seen to enhance stability, otherwise government policy was cautious (May, 1992:232).
New Zealand’s political agenda in recent years appears to undermine such perspectives however. McLennon, Ryan and Spoonley (2000:93) speak of the economic rationalism that is expressed in New Zealand politics. The 1997/98 Coalition Government and the Code Of Social and Family Responsibility it released is a prime example of this. This public discussion document illustrates an increasing trend by liberal democratic states to remove themselves from key areas of welfare (Davey, 2000).

Principles of affective individualism now constitute family ideology, which has come to be understood as a unit having certain responsibilities that were once viewed as belonging to the state. And what would be the most significant reason for the state seeking to transfer such responsibilities onto the family? By whittling away responsibility for state provision of social welfare (as well as health, social security and education), state spending is effectively minimized.

PROPERTY RELATIONSHIPS ACT

The most recent amendment to matrimonial law - The Property Relationships Act came into affect in February 2002. Designed to assist women and children who have been living in a de facto situation for some time and then leave without sufficient compensation, it sets out criteria for the courts to consider when deciding whether or not a couple have been living in a de facto relationship. All couples (homosexual, de facto, married) that have been together for three years or more are subject to this reform, entailing an equal splitting of property. This ‘umbrella’ approach has been widely criticised for over simplifying relationships and imposing criteria on casual and de facto relationships. As Schnauer, (2001:17) pointed out, not all de facto relationships are the same. Some are serious long-term commitments, often with children. Others are more casual with no serious marriage considerations or even long term plans. The Act has also effectively assimilated marriage into the same status as other relationship forms that last for three years or more.

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4 The Code identified eleven key issues dealing with areas of family life (child care, the behaviour of pregnant women, family health, education, parenthood and so on). There has however, been much responsive discussion to its orientation. An emphasis on individual and family responsibility conforms to a dominant theme of modernity, which emphasizes that the rational actions of individuals are the most important in society. However, the degree to which individuals in contemporary Western society act independently of their wider social relationships is debatable.

5 For a more in depth criticism of this Act see Schnauer, 2002 and Walsh, 2002.
Civil Law

Ingraham (1999:69) argued that the inclusion of the politics of marriage within our legal frameworks in Western society is significant when we consider the influence of laws to our everyday lives. Even the ways we think about and engage in the wedding ceremony itself are shaped by the state. "Many of the ideals imbued in family ideology are now well written into the legal system as a direct result of the political power of the middle classes. Definitions of dependency and responsibility are not just ideals but laws, transgression of which is penalised" (Gittins, 1985:159). Ingraham (1999:69) recognised that in the United States, the government still has a substantial stake in heterosexual marriage and protects and preserves its interests in a multitude of laws, policies and practices. In New Zealand, this has followed an understanding of marriage reminiscent of our British heritage, where heterosexual, Christian ideals came to structure modern family values.6

The only power exerted by the state today in relation to marriage and weddings in New Zealand, are in the boundaries placed on marriage, but as discussed with respect to the matrimonial property concessions above, these restrictions are becoming increasingly lenient. In regulating marriage materially through civil law, the state ultimately has authority over who can and cannot marry. The area where this power is delineated most overtly is in relation to homosexual marriage. The boundaries of heterosexual marriage are overtly censored and homosexual marriage in contemporary New Zealand is still legally forbidden. This stands as evidence of the degree in which dominant heterosexual ideologies continue to shape marriage values. The denaturalisation of other forms of sexual expression consolidates and reinforces patriarchal ideology (Whelen, 1995:95). The 2002 Property Relationships Act however, conceded gay and de facto couples the same property rights as married couples (Walsh, 2002:15, Schnauer, 2002:17).

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6 In the colonial period, this was reinforced in the assimilation of Maori values. Successive laws required Maori to conform to Pakeha legalities, with a formal ceremony conducted by an authorized person and recognised with a marriage certificate. The Maori Purposes Act of 1951 abolished any recognition of Maori marriage forms, although it was still not uncommon for the families of intending couples to meet to approve the union as late as the 1950's and 1960's (Coney, 1995:8).
The state also has a role to play in shaping marriage values through restrictions placed on the wedding ceremony. Through licensing practices and fees, the state dictates who is 'legally qualified' to officiate a wedding, as well as charging for licenses and name changes. Marriage in New Zealand may be performed either by a marriage celebrant or before a registrar of marriages (although it was not until the 1933 Marriage Act Amendment that women were permitted to act as officiating ministers for the purpose of solemnising marriages) (www.stats.govt.nz). A licence must be obtained from a registrar and one of the parties must complete a statutory declaration of intent to marry. The minimum age for marriage is 16 years and people under 20 years of age who are not widowed require the consent of parents or guardian. In New Zealand, the state once played a critical role in the choice of venue. A 1994 amendment to the 1955 Marriage Act omitting the words 'with open doors' however, opened up physical restrictions on wedding location and now the requirements are minimal.

**Church Influence**

“All that ominous stuff about sickness, health, richer, poorer and death do us part is heading for the door marked oblivion. It’s sonorous all right, but quite frankly, it lacks relevance” (Bennett, 2002:17).

Inexorable in these issues is the unanswerable question - is marriage/weddings today predominantly religious or civil? Early marriage ideals in New Zealand were strongly moulded by the social and demographic composition of migrants who brought with them family, marriage and divorce ideals. Maori customs and familial patterns provided an alternative but proved too different for most colonists to borrow from or even understand. The tendency was to follow British norms and practices and this led to the direct transfer of British laws including matrimonial law (Koopman-Boyden and Scott, 1984:95). The movement away from a religious conception of marriage towards a utilitarian one was a slow process. In 1867 an ‘Act to Constitute in New Zealand a Court of Divorce and Matrimonial Causes’ moved the jurisdiction over divorce from the Ecclesiastic Court and English parliament to civil judges. The effect was that the control over dissolution of marriages, previously vested in the church, was significantly reduced (Koopman-Boyden and Scott, 1984:104).

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7 No marriage is deemed to be invalid if the reason is infringements of the minimum age only.
8 The couple must remain on/close to land for the recitation of vows (www.nzweddings.co.nz).
Before examining the role of the church in relation to the ceremony, I looked briefly at the role of the Christian church in the marriage and wedding values of my participants. I began with a holistic question, ‘what role does religion have in shaping the relationship between women, weddings and marriage in contemporary New Zealand?’

Religious values, well they are still there, but unless the couple getting married are church go’ers, then the religious side of things are token values, traditions. I think a lot of it has to do with the growth of individualism in our society. Quite a few religious ideals keep women down. Women are less willing to accept these values, especially ideals of the role of the married woman, and consequently, religious practices and values get lost with the changes in perspective.

I asked an agnostic participant how these ideas were situated in her own experience, growing up in a Catholic family.

Religious inclusions are not that important - at least not any more. I was brought up Catholic and my grandparents were extremely devout...married in a church, remained virgins until marriage etc... but there are not really any expectations on me to do the same. I see myself as lucky in that respect. I understand that if I wanted to (do as they did), it would make my family happy, but ultimately, it is not for me... I mean, that is not how I want to do things, and my family understands that religion is not as vital as it was for them... thank God (excuse the pun).

A marriage counsellor that I spoke with had this to say,

In my experience in this work, it seems to me that the religious side of things, its involvement is decreasing. Religious considerations may very well slow things down (couples will abstain from moving in together, and sometimes, sexual relations) but there are very few cases where it is the final defining factor. I have dealt with quite a few Roman Catholic couples and quite often the outcome has (still) been separation.

The following is a transcript of dialogue with one of my key participants, “religious teachings are less and less influential to many young women today... (laugh) television dictates moral value now doesn’t it?” I asked, ‘so would you say that popular culture has a larger role in shaping women’s marriage values than the church?’

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*Eight of my participants were Catholic, two orthodox, and six ‘liberal’, loosely affiliated Catholics. I also had three Anglican participants and a mixture of other faiths – Baptist, Methodist and Presbyterian. The majority of my participants were loosely affiliated with the Christian Church, but remain largely agnostic.*
Of course, it’s substitution. Multinationals, media conglomerates, they’re the preachers of moral worth...how we see women, marriage, the family...our own identity, its all grounded. As people become more self-orientated, then religious incentive is replaced with more commercial incentive.

LOCATION – THE CHURCH WEDDING

Given our societies increasingly secular agenda, I came to question meanings behind wedding conduct for women that have religious and gender oppressive origins. As mentioned, it seems paradoxical that such rituals persevere, given the fact that religious incentives that were once strong in the desire to wed are also diminishing - even the most secular couples adopt religious sentiment. Perhaps it is for tradition’s sake, to please parents, or a belief that somehow the church buildings will enhance the wedding photos? The assumption that marriage needs to be legitimated in a church is one that necessitates reinterpretation. There is no clear evidence that civil weddings are becoming the norm, although this would be the expected consequence of more liberal social attitudes towards marriage and the materialisation of the ceremony. While ‘unorthodox’ weddings in secular locations are more common today than ever before, the majority of my participants still chose to marry in a religious venue, which in New Zealand is predominantly a Christian church. It would be logical to assume that this trend reflects a high degree of religious adherence, but participant testimony did not support this. In order to better understand this discrepancy I pursued an exploration of meaning behind the wedding venue.

Albury (1996:6) argued that the wedding experience is determined by the area in which it takes place. Choice of location often reflects a statement the couple want to make about their values and beliefs, their status in society and their own adherence to accepted practice or tradition. Just as the gender rituals surrounding weddings can mean different things for different women, the ceremony and reception take on different meanings in certain contexts (Howard, 2000:279). Most non-religious participants often responded with ambiguity when asked why they chose/would choose to marry in a church, especially considering that a registry office procedure is cheaper. There were those who thought it ‘the thing to do’ to marry in a church, “it only seemed natural to marry in a church...I do not practice, but I am religious”, and, “its not only what the church represents in a religious sense, but the whole essence of marriage itself.” Others expressed ambivalence towards the meanings behind their wedding locations, or future weddings if they had intentions of marrying in a church. A recently married participant stated, “I
just thought we should get married in a church, no real reason at all, except tradition...marriage for me, now... well I see it as being separate from religious belief.”

A common thread with participants was the poststructuralist idea that discerns no set relationship between image and meaning, enabling each consumer to confer their own readings of commodities and actions. The meaning of the image is derived from its difference with other images. This difference gives the chosen image its identity (Pratt, cited by Albury, 1996:7). In relation to the church as a wedding venue, religious motive and convention became indistinguishable, as one non-religious participant expressed, “I have no intention of marrying again but if I did I would want to marry in a church, with a formal ceremony.”

I had Christian participants who saw no need to consummate their marriage in a church, where as various non-religious participants testified to wanting to wed in a church for secular reasons. As one participant stated, “I think that there are two broad groups. There are those that wish to marry in a church for religious reasons...and those that wish to marry in a church in order to make a statement to friends and family.” There were of course those participants with strong religious incentives, but since I did not pursue religious doctrine and protocol on the wedding ceremony, I did not extensively pursue this direction.

I asked a Christian participant, ‘does a church wedding make marriage more binding?’ to which she replied, “absolutely not! I mean it is totally ridiculous that you have to stand before the government and God in order to ‘validate’ the way you feel about each other.” One participant described her dilemma of whether it is appropriate to get married outside,

I’ve always had an image in my head since I was a young girl I guess, of marrying in a church. But Alex is dead keen to have our wedding in the gardens, which would be nice too, but you never know what the weather is going to do, and it would be inappropriate to wear the dress I have in mind in a garden venue, I mean, imagine the difficulties with the veil, and train. The whole atmosphere would be different.

I asked, ‘So if you marry in a church, the religious side of things will not be the main motive?’

We do want God to be part of our union in some way, but the church would not signify that. The church, the organs, my dress with a train, the wooden floors, the seated guests... I’ve always seen my wedding in this way.
This participant and her partner eventually compromised, choosing Larnach’s castle on Dunedin’s peninsula for their wedding. The castle venue frequently caters for wedding receptions/photo shoots and is the perfect setting for the princess bride wedding. The irony is that the church ceremony weddings that I attended generally the involved a large degree of consumption, as opposed to those civil ceremonies that simply entailed the cost of a license.

SUMMARY

Leonard (1980:10) argues that is it impossible to discern the extent of state and church influence on marriage and how they related to socio-economic changes since they are not spelled out and depend rather on precedent and shared assumptions underlying legislative changes. By defining who can and cannot marry the state has final authority in legitimising marriage, with further power to regulate this relationship through divorce and matrimonial property legislation. As stated, both the church and state have interests in establishing definitions of marriage, most of which have marginalized women (parallel with their historically defined role as homemaker and family mediator, women have also been seen as the figure most ‘responsible’ for the maintenance of marriage). With a decrease in State involvement in the ‘family’ however and recent matrimonial property changes, marriage is being assimilated into the same category as a de facto relationship.

My Christian participants saw marriage as a religious institution and not a domain of the state. Yet religious ceremonies no longer carry the weight of the law. Newlyweds must obtain a state license in order to be officially married. While the church interacts with the state in legalising marriage, their power rests in their moral teachings. As discussed, the church may lay foundational rules for personal and social behaviour and relationships, organizing and regulating marriage, monogamy, patriarchy and control violations of religious law.

My participants have shown however, that religious constituents are mediated according to idiosyncratic interpretations: the influence of religious values for women to marry today were strong for only a small minority of my participants - those abiding by more orthodox religious doctrines. Most of my participants expressed indirect religious ideals in their choice to marry and for my unmarried participants, religious values (if any) were to play a relative to small role in their wedding. The main vestige of religious influence appeared in the desire for a church
wedding, but this can largely be attributed to the desire for a wedding that conforms to a ‘traditional’ ideal, rather than constituting genuine religious values: church ceremonies offer the promise of spectacle and pageantry, of ritual transformation into a new social role. It is to the production and performance of the ceremony that I now turn, in my analysis of the feminisation of the New Zealand wedding experience.
CHAPTER FOUR: THE FEMINISATION OF THE WEDDING EXPERIENCE

"An examination of a ritual as a largely expressive, formalised and symbolic act allows insights into the institution(s) it belongs to" (Leonard, 1980:2).

Despite the decline in the material necessity of weddings as discussed in the Introduction, my research continued to reinforce for me fact that the wedding has retained a powerful hold on our society, and not just for those who may be described loosely as traditionalists. The wedding ceremony is the most decisive reflection of marriage ideology, and has been an important if not the defining image of marriage throughout the history of Western civilization. Coney (1995:5) argued that the wedding itself is still one of the last great rites of passage in contemporary New Zealand. It seemed to me however, that many women do not question meanings behind wedding persistence, its changing functions and values. As Ingraham (1999:8) asserted, western weddings have become the most watched, yet ‘unnoticed’ phenomenon in popular culture. My inquiries into reasons for participating in the ceremony and its associated rituals were often met with vague replies, "it seemed like the most rational next-step to take", "we are in love", "it's only natural", and of course, "its traditional."

Considering the ambiguities surrounding wedding motive, I questioned the woman’s role in the ceremony and whether the rituals that sustain it are really as egalitarian as participants asserted. Ingraham (1992:102) argued that the modern (western) bride continues to exemplify the invisibility of women’s labour in the past and present, that weddings reinforce the ‘women as property’ notion and supporting the concept that women’s work is suited to the ‘private spheres.’ Geller (2001:111) argued that marriage and wedding iconography secure ideals of women’s work as domesticed. Getting married involves a host of female rites of consumption from shopping to bridal showers and as Albury (1996:37) stated, “though each gender may not, on a regular basis, follow traditional roles, it is typical for a ritualistic event such as a wedding, to encourage or result in reversion to typical gender roles.” Howard (2000:99) argued that bridal magazines, jewellers and other members of the industry uphold the cult of domesticity and what Betty Friedan called the ‘feminine mystique’, validating a sexual division of labour and reinforcing
women's primary social role as consumer. She also asserted that the wedding itself reflect a division of labour that assign women a domestic and consumer role (Howard, 2000:195). This ethnographically orientated chapter takes a closer look at meanings behind contemporary wedding ritual, looking specifically at the feminisation of the wedding experience and how these ideals are maintained, mediated and challenged by women.

Marriage is made dramatic by the existence of the wedding, which in turn is anticipated and externally legitimated long before it even takes place in the participant’s biography, as symbolised by toy marketing aimed at young girls that glorify the princess bride (discussed in ensuing chapters). Before interviews had been conducted, I realised that I had vastly underestimated women’s reverence for weddings. Talk of weddings did not just arise when I incited it via my questioning on marriage issues—wedding topics frequently arose as a motivation for marriage. For many of my participants, marriage seemed impermanent without an elaborate celebration, with one participant emphasising, "marriage is not a marriage without the ceremony." Another argued that, "only when the certificate is present do people expect a relationship to last forever." Leonard’s research in Wales (1980) showed that a ‘proper’ wedding is a key goal for many women. My own participants reinforced these ideas, revealing that much time, effort and expense are put into ensuring that the ritual of marriage is performed (as they see it) correctly. The enormous industry that caters to these desires verifies the potency of this endeavour.

A wedding is unique from a poststructuralist perspective, as a site where the consumption of meaning of a sign and the significance of time and location are incorporated into a single event. The traditional wedding construed by the industry and popular culture has become a consumer rite. A significant portion of the New Zealand wedding experience revolves around the spectacle of the event (Albury, 1996:2) and it is this single event that the whole industry caters for. I address briefly the feminisation of the wedding planning process before looking at aspects of the wedding that have previously been critiqued by feminists as symbolising patriarchal forms of power: the bridal shower and registry, the exchange of rings and bridal attire.
FEMINISATION IN THE WEDDING PLANNING PROCESS

I began with an analysis of wedding preparation. My research revealed that many people see wedding preparation as women’s work. Activities such as purchasing the gown and related accessories, preparing invitations, and organising the reception were recognised by many of my participants as forms of consumption addressed by women. A reoccurring theme in my research was the idea that not only are women perceived as ‘naturally’ suited to these chores, but they are also assumed to ‘naturally’ enjoy them. This notion was reinforced by participant’s descriptions of the planning process. One soon-to-be bride stated,

*He’s (her fiancé) not wildly enthused about getting married (rather, with the wedding part of it). Oh, he’s excited about buying new little pretties for his tux (he owns a nice one). But mostly he sits around making fun of me for the role I’m supposed to play. Last night I downloaded and tried out ten planner software packages, and I hated them ALL. I felt like a little girl writing ‘Joanna and Young Man’ and ‘Paula and Young Man’ in her notebook. Ugh. He just looked over my shoulder and laughed at me until I punched him in the stomach.*

Other participants expressed conflicting beliefs towards this idea, such as the participant who asserted, “*the whole thing is very interesting. One moment I am deeply philosophical about the big picture and the next I am daydreaming about spray roses. It’s nice to discuss both.*”

The industry itself tends to ignore the groom and father-of-the-bride although it is still assumed that the latter will pay at least a significant portion of the bills. The title of the *New Zealand Bride and Groom* magazine itself is evident of the industry’s target clientele. The text, ‘Bride’ in the title is approximately nine times larger than that for ‘Groom’, reinforcing the notion that his role in the ceremony is merely as the bride’s accompaniment. In chapter five I discuss the ethnographic components of my research, including the *Bride of the Year Competition* (18/5/02) held in Whangarei. The irrelevance of the groom and the central importance of the bride was exemplified at this event where the groom was referred to as ‘Mr Bride of the Year.’ The competition required contestants to individually ‘parade’ their gown for the judges and audience down a runway. Each bride was accompanied by one of three male models while the ‘real’ groom assumed a role as spectator. These assumptions were also evident at bridal exhibitions where the majority of displays were directed at women. One participant described her experience at one of these exhibitions,
We went to the show this weekend and everything about it, from its name to the attitudes of the vendors summed up the prevailing attitude: the woman must obsess over the bridesmaids matching the centrepieces for a couple of years, and the man shows up, preferably on time, in a rented outfit chosen by his bride. The expectations are all out of whack. He (her fiancé) pointed out that on many of the ‘let-us-bombard-you-with-ads-in-exchange-for-a-freebie’ ballots, the bride’s name was first and foremost and then the groom’s name (with no other details asked) was to be listed at the bottom.

Gender divisions that mimic traditional roles were also notable at the product displays. Women dominated in most of the displays catering to traditionally feminine agendas – make up, hair, beauty therapy and cake making, while men tended to dominate in the more technical services such as photography and video production. The assumption must be that if women are ‘natural’ consumers then they are especially suited to sell to other women. As Howard (2000:136) argued, catering is the logical commercial extension of women’s domestic role.

Bridal magazines recognise that women are the primary wedding organisers and target a female cliental. Advice on how to have a beautiful wedding is always addressed to the bride, aligning with the message that the wedding is the ‘bride’s day’ (see chapter six). Certain tasks are given to the groom, such as planning the honeymoon, organising the marriage licence and preparing his own speech, but even information on the groom’s attire and his ‘responsibilities’ are still given to the bride to be and passed on to him (Howard, 2000:208). Advice to readers in a popular women’s magazine states, ‘get him involved in things that interest him, like organising the honeymoon or music. Or maybe he just needs a wedding-free weekend. You might enjoy it, too!’ (B, August: 2000).

A section in the New Zealand Bride and Groom (Issue 28:152) reminds readers that the bride usually takes charge of planning the wedding with help from the groom and/or her mother or host where, ‘the groom helps the bride to plan the wedding’ (my emphasis). Services in the industry target women, with the assumption that it is women alone that desire beautiful wedding merchandise, adoring over slight details such as whether they want matt or gloss invitation paper and whether the tablecloths will match the serviettes. Figures 4 and 5 below for Serenity Stationary below reflect this feminisation of wedding commodities. The deluxe stationary and accessories are directed at women only, ‘attractive, affordable wedding stationary for the discerning bride’ (my emphasis) (New Zealand Bride and Groom, Issue 27).
Figure 4, For the Discerning Bride 1

Figure 5, For the Discerning Bride 2
Participants admitted that the extent of formality – decoration, guest numbers, accessories and other related expenditures were determined by their own aspirations, while others were resigned to the idea that the ceremony is of the ‘female sphere.’ The reality is that most of my participants were the protagonists of their own wedding, controlling the spending and consumption processes (such as commodity selection). The following dialogue reveals some of their perceptions of these gendered roles and the planning experience. “There definitely would not have been such a display if it was up to Scott. You know what guys are like.” Another participant stated, “he (her fiancé) doesn’t care for the drama, gifts, music and extravagance... but he knows that I do, and anyway, he probably wouldn’t have it any other way. I think he secretly enjoys it.” One participant revealed that she could not deal with the planning alone and in her case, shared this with her partner,

*I’m doing my best to involve him in the planning, not just to be ‘alternative’ but because I need his help. We both tend to get really obsessive about planning events, and we need each other to keep it from spiralling out of control. We have a partnership, after all, which is what this whole marriage thing is about.*

Despite this participant’s attempts to share chores as diplomatically as possible, her reference to her fiancé ‘helping out’ revealed the implied assumption that the role was naturally hers to begin with. One participant expressed her frustration at the ways in which woman, “lost themselves” in the wedding narrative, “I’m always amused when women refer to their fiancés ‘helping’ them with wedding planning. It’s like referring to a father babysitting his own child. Still it’s the prevailing attitude.”

**THE BRIDAL SHOWER: A PAEAN TO DOMESTICITY**

The bridal shower is a wedding ritual that also reinforces gender stereotypes, cementing the feminisation of the wedding experience. Gift giving at weddings in New Zealand dates as far back as the 1890’s, where bridal showers were seen to strengthen bonds between the bride and her friends, provide her with moral support and help her prepare for marriage (www.nzweddings.co.nz). The shower assisted in preparing the bride for her future life with her husband by providing material commodities that would be of use in their home. Although not as common today as in previous years, the bridal shower is still relatively popular. Most of my
participants did not hold a separate bridal shower as such, but assimilated it into the hens’ celebration, where most brides-to-be received gifts.

Depictions of this ritual today however, perpetuate traditional gendered roles where the bride is still often perceived as the central homemaker.¹ Retailers have an investment to make in promoting the shower and it is frequently referred to in the New Zealand Bride and Groom magazine. An excerpt from Issue 28 (2001:46) stated that one of the most common bridal showers is that ‘based on the kitchen theme where guests bring gifts of useful cooking utensils.’ Many couples today however, cohabit before marriage and therefore already possess most necessary household necessities. But rather than disregard the bridal shower as redundant, the magazine suggests an alternative, one that continues to uphold gendered roles, ‘a sure-fire way of hosting a hit party therefore, is to theme it around a type of cuisine such as Japanese or Thai.’ The article further perpetuates the domestic stereotype by stating, ‘an old but amusing tradition is to include the words ‘wishing well’ on the shower invitation. This means the guests should bring an additional inexpensive gift but one that will be of great use in the bride’s new role, such as a box of laundry detergent or a scrubbing brush…then place them in the replica of a wishing well made by the hostess’ (New Zealand Bride and Groom, Issue 28:46).

The wishing well is a shower tradition from the 1950’s where a boxed structure filled with kitchen related items was presented to the bride-to-be. Anastasio (1992:61) suggested in, The Wedding Shower Book that brides-to-be revive this tradition for the sake of romantic nostalgia. Such advice blatantly suggests that brides also glorify a period that celebrated domestic servitude (Geller, 2001:186). An excerpt from Issue 28 (2001:46) of the New Zealand Bride and Groom stated that bridal showers allow the bride to relax – something she ‘deserves.’ Just like the concept of reward dealt with in relation to the bride’s physical appearance (‘pampering’), the shower is described as a sort of compensation for her duties organising the wedding. It symbolises the apparent ‘plentitude’ of married life and as Geller (2001:196) stated, is a “paean to domesticity and a tribute to the stability of married life.”

¹ In her analysis of American weddings, Howard (2000:230) affirmed that the traditional bridal shower, “upheld the status quo and sexual division of labour” in the United States.
CONSPICUOUS CONSUMPTION AT THE BRIDAL REGISTRY

The bridal registry, clearly a practice directed at women, is another expression of the feminisation of the wedding experience. Geller (2001:151-175) went undercover at the Bloomsdale Registry in New York in order to discern the politics of the registry for women. I adopted this research method, going undercover as a bride-to-be at two registry locations – *Arthur Barnett* in the Meridian, Dunedin and *Stevens Two Double Seven* in New Market, Auckland. Like Geller, I found myself surrounded by symbols of fairy tale romance. Although dazzled by the imagery of conspicuous materialism, I did not feel the same degree of yearning as Geller did, as she stated, "I felt more than ever before the allure of the wedding promise, the yearning to step inside the charmed circle of sanctioned domesticity." The experience of making an appointment and going through the procedures with a service assistant did reinforce for me the conspicuous and excessive nature of the registry.

Like the bridal shower, I came to see the registry as another way in which our society reinforces the assumption that domesticity is a woman’s concern. "The bridal registry as an institution is guided by a set of interlocking assumptions: life begins with marriage, home begins with marriage. Domestic pleasure begins with marriage" (Geller, 2001:163) My assigned personal assistant at *Stevens Two Double Seven* informed me that these registries are extremely popular now and as one service attendant assured me, "the rise in incomes with women in the workforce now means that people can spend more on gifts and are doing so... oh and if you are interested in towels then look at this Hilton collection....".

It occurred to me that perhaps this attendant was not aware of recent statistics that revealed that New Zealand women are still disenfranchised in the workplace, earning on average 12% less per annum than their male counterparts in the same occupations, or that they still bear the majority (86%) of unpaid household tasks (www.stats.govt.co.nz). I asked to what degree women dominated in the organisation of their bridal registry. The response was unequivocal, "brides-to-be always make their appointments... umm, quite often with their fiancés, but just as often with their mothers... it does vary, but pretty much the bride-to-be will dominate in product choice." The focus and pivotal role of women in this wedding practice as well as its honouring of female domesticity further reinforced for me the feminisation of the wedding experience.
THE VALUE OF RINGS

The rings associated with marriage – the engagement and wedding ring, are overt symbols of the feminisation of the wedding experience. At all the weddings I attended, rings were exchanged and although they are not actually required - the practice is habitual. Choosing and exchanging rings in a wedding ceremony is a familiar part of our consciousness even if we’ve never been married before (Imber-Black, 1992:269). The phrase, ‘may I have the rings please’ is one that is integral to the ceremony and which many believe has religious or legal authority. A consequence of this naturalisation, like the pressure on the bride to have an extravagant gown, is that excessive expenditure is justified in the name of romance: couples spend beyond their financial means to purchase an, ‘acceptable’ ring. Manufacturers have sold to the consumer the idea that the ‘acceptable’ amount for a groom to spend on an engagement ring is approximately two months salary (Ingraham, 1999:51). The purchase of a wedding ring therefore, is often seen not as a luxury, but a necessity.

The history of the wedding ring is embedded in understandings of patriarchy. This modern ‘tradition’ reflects how an ancient bride economy has permeated our society. Centuries ago, grooms presented rings as partial payment of the bride. Feminists have argued that the ring is still symbolic of ownership, perpetuating patriarchal ideologies. Ingraham (1994:4) asserted that even today, only the bride is ‘required’ to wear a wedding ring, signifying her monogamous loyalty to her husband while Geller (2001:12) argued that a wedding ring is still the primary indispensable symbol of eternal female validation. Historically, it was not compulsory for the groom to wear a wedding ring and although it has become more common it is still optional for men today. Some male participants were hostile to the idea of wearing a ring. Perhaps the vestiges of possession are stronger than we realise in this practice?

Most of my married participants however, argued that the ring held no other significance than symbolism of their relationship. Even if they were aware of historical meanings of the wedding ring, all participants provided their own idiosyncratic interpretation of its significance,

I understand that to some people, this ring represents ownership. But for me, it represents my union with Andrew, and ultimately, the physical ring is not that important...tradition again. You know – it is nice and all, but if we just couldn’t afford it, then we still would have got married.
I approached the issue of ring giving in my focus groups. Most participants were adamant that they needed a ring, "it's the most important part of the wedding, I would rather forgo the gown than the ring." Another stated, "It wouldn't be a wedding without the ring... of course, I would still marry with tinfoil rings if I had to, but I still think that a reasonable amount of money should be spent on the ring – it is a symbol of love." It was this comment that led me to question the degree of correlation between the value of the ring and the measurement of love.

The wedding ring is a powerful symbol of romantic love (Wilson, 1991:3). This symbolism was a reoccurring concept in my research, aligning with the princess bride theme. Blake (2002:23) infuses the ring with emotive qualities, in her statement, 'an engagement ring is a lot more than the sum of its sparkles. It glows with the aura of romance.' Like other elements of the wedding – the gown, the music, the invitations and the reception itself, the ring is emotion in material form. Feelings of deprivation expressed by one participant reinforced this for me. On engagement, she was presented with an engagement ring that she did not like and that it made her feel like she had 'missed out' on the romantic experience,

*Well I knew straight away that we'd have to get it swapped. It wasn't something that I would feel really excited about wearing... the whole thing was a shambles to begin with! There was no bended-knee, no romance really... I can't expect too much from him of course, but we all have a fantasy of how we want it to be.*

Despite the humorous tone of her comment the underlying implication was that the 'perfect' proposal and ring might somehow qualify the relationship.

**THE BRIDAL GOWN – AN EMBLEM OF HETEROSEXUALITY**

Another element of the wedding experience that reinforces the wedding’s feminisation is the bridal gown – the central marker of the beautiful bride and white wedding and one which many participants perceived as ‘completing’ the experience.’ “The white dress is the most salient visual object of the modern wedding” (Geller, 2001:214). The meaning behind the white wedding gown has changed significantly over time, the most notable alteration being that it is seldom symbolic of virginity today. But while most participants were uncertain about the relevance of other rituals, an understanding of this history, of the bride’s purity being symbolised in the white gown, was still universal. As discussed in the *Introduction*, the white wedding does
not hold much historical significance in New Zealand. Paradoxically however, many participants cited ‘tradition’ when justifying the persistence of the white gown today.

There is an inherent contradiction in the values the modern gown embodies: the quest for the perfect gown is synonymous with social victory while also inverting this ‘liberty’, announcing a sense of frail and delicate beauty. The gown is also often seen as the centrepiece and for many, is the most significant purchase of the wedding. In an item in the New Zealand Bride and Groom (Issue 28, 2001:154), stated that, ‘one of the best things about being a bride is being able to wear a beautiful wedding gown.’ The text reinforces the idea pursued in other chapters, that the bride is the centre-piece at her wedding, ‘whatever style you opt for make sure you feel comfortable wearing it, as all eyes will be on you.’ Although styles and conventions are changing rapidly and unconventional and coloured gowns are becoming increasingly popular, the white gown still held significant value for many participants. Retailers and gown makers I talked to asserted that white is still the most popular shade and more traditional gown styles are even coming back into fashion.

Geller (2001:214) argued that because the wedding signifies the transformation that the bride has dreamt of since childhood, her dress is a garment of talismanic power and is, “created to provoke an intense emotional response in her audience.” The dress is a symbol through which women adhere to traditional marriage ideals - an emblem of heterosexuality. It symbolises heterosexual ideology at its apex. All other outfits are expected not to detract attention from the bride – it is ‘etiquette’ that no one in the wedding party attempt to ‘outshine’ the bride on her day. This is further reinforced by the deliberate suppression of the groom. In his discussion of the Western white wedding in the 1930’s, Gillis (1989:294) pointed out how the dark tones of groom’s morning suits in no way competed for attention against the bride’s lustrous white gown so that, “attention was not on the couple, but on the bride.” Still today, the groom’s sober attire highlights the bride’s ceremonial presence.

Geller (2001:111) argued that the modern bride’s dress conjures up images of aristocratic leisure, that her attire is often cumbersome – tight bodices and flowing trains restrict mobility, evoking Victorian dress in an era where women relinquished control of their bodies in the name of fashion (and of course, their independence when they married). The white gown seems designed to contain, to confine, to impede movement and facilitate dependence (Geller, 2001:111). It
emerges from a period in which popular culture had decarnalised women to the point of ethereality, and a powerful ideology claimed that ordinary women possessed no sexual feelings at all (Perkin, 1993:74). The white gown and the black tuxedo also symbolise the ‘complementary opposites’ of femininity and masculinity. The bride, often in white and draped in flowers and jewellery, reinforces notions of vulnerability, innocence, female delicacy and piety.

The fantasy dress is an essential element in the creation of the princess bride, defining legitimacy - almost all portrayals of the conventional princess bride in the *New Zealand Bride and Groom* wore a traditional white gown. The gown transforms the common woman into a bride, the bride into a princess and marks the happiest day of her life. It is, “the ultimate talismanic object of marriage, the prototypical garment” (Geller, 2001:253). One stated, “I took advantage of the opportunity (when else in my life am I going to be spending this kind of money on an article of clothing?) and had my dream gown commissioned.” In contrast, one participant both conformed to and challenged the fairy tale image by wearing a feminine white gown, tiara and gumboots for the photo shoot.

Sexuality is historically constructed, bound and defined by social and cultural meanings (Foucault, 1978:152). The notion of sexuality as natural instinct is one utilised within society to reaffirm preferred social and gendered hierarchies, and has no currency or meaning outside these modalities of power (Whelehan, 1995:154). An article by the famous designer Vera Wang titled ‘The Divine Obsession’ in the *New Zealand Bride and Groom* discussed the politics of the wedding gown for women, personifying it as an embodiment of feminine merit and female sexuality, ‘imagine all the complexity of human emotion and expectation at the crossroads of fantasy and reality. Then add considerations of tradition, propriety, sensuality and fashion and capture all of that in one gown’ (Wang, 2002:35). The article effectively grounded the bride as a lifeless mannequin, seeking a gown that will provide fulfilment, sexuality and identity, ‘for most women, a wedding gown represents far more than just a gown. It is also the embodiment of a dream, perhaps one she has nurtured since childhood. In this fantasy of idealised happiness, the groom represents perfection and the face of all human possibility. The instant a woman becomes engaged, however, all that energy and passion gets transferred to her gown. What follows can be something akin to madness’ (Wang, 2002:35).
Wang (2002:36) argued that the wedding gown is the most important garment a woman will ever get to wear, that it represents far more than just a gown because the wearer’s personality is reflected in its style. In her definition of style, Wang categorised women into seven types: the Sensualist, the Romanticist, the Minimalist, the Traditionalist, the Modernist, the Individualist and the Exhibitionist (2002:35-36). She asserted for example, that the Sensualist doesn’t just wear a gown - she experiences it. She, ‘delights in her body and revels in her powers of seduction. Physical sensitivity guides her every consideration and style is a natural extension of her being.’ The Romanticist however, is transported by a gown. For her, ‘fantasy is always a reality. Her innate femininity and love of beauty can inspire a gown of great fragility and enchantment’ (Wang, 2002:36).

The central message in these excerpts is one of essentialised femininity. The bride is completed by her gown and without it, she risks anonymity – even the ‘individualist’ needs to be categorised. The passages translated for me some insidious ideas – would the bride not be taken seriously without a gown? Would she be compromising legitimacy if she wore trousers? I approached these ideas in focus groups. Some participants were ambivalent about the passages, recognising attitudes that aligned with their own or ‘understanding’ the importance of the gown, “well, despite this, it is true, that every woman wants the perfect gown.” Many however, recognised assumptions that were translated in the text, ones that reinforced essentialist notions of what it means to be a woman. In response to the above participant’s comment, another replied,

Well that in itself is an essentialist call! Not all women want the perfect gown. But what this (passage) says to me is that women need the gown to be the complete bride, otherwise go home... or risk the role of ugly sister instead of Cinderella.

In this context, I considered ways in which women may strategically resist dominant wedding forms. My research revealed that a romantic (legitimate) wedding is often conflated with a sense of tradition. In the context of questioning ways in which weddings and brides are legitimated, I came to ask, why is ‘unconventional’ ‘untraditional’? Poststructuralist theory would stipulate that this is because it is differential from the norm, it is the ‘other’ to ‘traditional’. This led me to question whether the modern bride eclipses legitimacy if she escapes ‘tradition’?
The Foucauldian notion, that where there is power, there is resistance, reigns true in ideologies on weddings, "discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it but it also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it" (Foucault, 1978:113). Although I did not pursue unconventional weddings, I utilise here an example from one participant who consciously aimed to flout wedding convention by wearing a red dress (and numerous other attempts to reject wedding convention).³ The invitation below (figure 6) reveals my participant's blatant rejection of the white bridal gown, with the opening words, 'A big white frock?' According to the wedding's European-Chinese theme, she wore a Chinese dress – even the couples' cake figures deviated from convention and replicated the bride and groom's outfits (figure 7).

BIG WHITE FROCK? TUXEDO?

A STRING QUARTET? A FOUR TIER CAKE?

JUST SAY NO!!

Figure 6, Just Say No!

³ For example, she married in a 'secret location' in Wellington and guests were only aware of this location on the day of the wedding and her husband chose to impersonate Elvis.
Another of my participants verified the existence of a niche in the bridal gown market that opposes, to a certain degree, excessive consumption in the bridal gown industry. As the owner of a second hand bridal store, she saw her business as catering for those that cannot afford to consent to unrealistic notions of what the bride should spend on her wedding day,

Most of my customers just wouldn't have any other option. They would all love their own (new) fantastic gown, but many of them know that they just wouldn't be getting married if they were to insist on that... beggars can’t be choosers. There is something beautiful about recycling a dress too – someone else has experienced the most wonderful day of their life in that very gown, its nostalgia.

The success of the industries message that romantic love is the reward of participating in wedding consumption appears successful to a degree. While this business represents a form of resistance to dominant modes of bridal consumption, the response of my participants’ to the idea of a second-hand dress also reinforced the idea that such niches in the market are unlikely to proliferate. Second hand dresses and hiring a dress did were not attractive options for many women with some refusing to even consider these possibilities. Dresses are kept long after most weddings. The ‘pollution’ involved in wearing such clothes is significant but does not apply to male attire (Leonard, 1980:132). Implicit in participants’ testimony were ideas that registered to me the importance of a ‘personalised’ dress – one that embodied the bride’s individuality symbolising her ‘new beginning’ (the exception to this was the dress that was passed down through family, therefore holding sentimental value).
I've got my first bridal gown appointment in a couple of weeks and while I am looking forward to the 'looking like a diva' aspect, a part of me is completely horrified! I never imagined myself doing the white gown thing, but my guy, the old-fashioned slugger that he is, pretty much begged, so I said yes. I know that a second hand gown would reduce costs, but the dress is such a huge issue you know – I want something that suits me, that I feel completely happy with – I'm looking at it on another level – the dress is symbolic of me as a woman, embarking into the next stage in my life...

This same participant continued in a description of her attire,

I'm going for the evening gown approach, but I cannot imagine myself in a veil. I see them in the wedding magazines and in newspaper announcements and I think people just look so odd in them. I'm also completely mortified by their origin of covering the woman's face before the man sees her so he doesn't run the other way.

It was these comments that made me briefly consider the politics of the wedding veil.

THE VEILING DILEMMA

The wedding veil has a resonant patriarchal history, although there are numerous interpretations of what this history represents. The fundamental tenet is that it was designed to cover the virginal bride, to be removed by the groom as a symbol, like the ring, of his ownership. There are also claims that it in the times of pre-arranged marriages in the West, they facilitated marriage for less-desirable looking women, whose grooms could not see their true features and leave them standing at the alter (www.indiebride.com).

Participant testimony in focus groups came to imply that a veil had a role for some women in 'completing' the bridal image, an issue I pursued. One participant referred to this concept using the words, 'part of the outfit', "I definitely understand the 'part of the outfit' argument, and my beau's mom added that once you put on that veil, then you 'really feel like a bride' (as if spending thousands of dollars on one day is not enough to make me feel like a bride)." Another responded, "its interesting all right. I'm trying to understand how we have a total image that we want to replicate and at the same time, not wanting to be seen as too fragile – you know, we want to look feminine and yet still retain agency."

The contradictions and semantic oppositions expressed in my focus groups over the issue of the veil reinforced for me the enormous ambiguity surrounding this item of bridal attire. It seems
that women are conscious of the symbolic history of the veil and choose to reject it as a result, or appropriate it according to their own beliefs. There were even those participants who saw it paradoxically as a chance to express their own agency because of this history and social stigma.

Although I probably am going to skip the veil in favour of a floral wreath because it looks better on me, my opinion is that most of this worrying about the possible sexist symbolism of the veil comes from our insecurities that we might not be perceived as independent, modern women. But if we are truly empowered women we are also in charge of our own fashions and aesthetic statements, and to hell with other people's judgements and expectations. Let 'em plan their own wedding.

Another participant's comment articulated the contradictions that the veil embodies,

Veils are tied in with sexual imagery, virginity, peekaboo flirtation -- all the underlying sexual drama implicit in any marriage. I think that's what makes them both compelling and annoying. I find it all objectionable from a feminist standpoint, but fascinating from a sexual one.

It seemed that participants were prepared to resign their feminist standpoints for a day, in order to participate in what they saw as possible transgressions from their otherwise 'feminist' lives. Within these discussions, the sexual imagery of the veil was often seen as a desirable attribute and this notion became a reoccurring one in focus groups,

I agree with the connection to sexual imagery, kink, etc. and I also agree that it's not necessarily a bad thing. Just something to try out and play around with, in my otherwise feminist life. I'd probably do the underwear thing with the garter and lace... I mean, with the low-cut white gown at all, it's such a ridiculous outfit that it's irresistible!

Another expressed what she considered her own form of agency in the sexual implications attached to the veil and gown,

I think that the whole damn wedding ensemble is kinky as all hell, when you think about it. The whole notion of white focuses the attention of everybody in the room on the (now usually false) titillating assumption that the bride is teetering on the brink of ravishment. It's voyeuristic in the extreme, and the standard wedding gown style -- the full skirt and the tight bodice and the cleavage -- really enhances the whole sexual focus of the wedding. I tried on wedding gowns, and they felt almost too obscene to be worn in public. I had never been that much on display, what with my breasts pushed up and my shoulders bare and my waist cinched in.
Similarly, a bride-to-be made the following comments,

If you like veils, wear a veil. If you dislike the connotations you can do something to 'correct' them. Lift your veil yourself, wear a veil of a slightly different colour. I am wearing a veil. But, I am wearing one that doesn't cover my face, there will be no lifting of the veil ritual. I just really don't like the idea behind the tradition. The whole passing me off as a piece of property thing. I also don't like the symbolism of my becoming a woman when the veil is lifted. I already am a woman!

Participant testimony revealed that there are deep and alternate readings of the veil, including a link with death and other rituals. This was voiced in focus groups, as the following testimony reveals,

When I put the veil on with the gown, it gave me a very weird feeling. One the hand, there was a sense of comfort, glamour and mystery in being covered and hidden in all of this fabric. On the other hand, there was this feeling of invisibility and total annihilation of self. I looked and felt like someone I don't even know, someone totally unfamiliar. I had a strange sense of death. Like I was dead or covered up like a corpse, the way you cover the face of a dead person. Everything about the wedding is freaking me out; all of the common rituals remind me of death or funerals. The cake and flowers and candles... very weird.

Participants also linked aspects of the ceremony with other rituals, such as Baptism and First Communion,

I think it's interesting how aspects of the wedding remind you of funerals and death. I don't think it's unreasonable, because a lot of times the rituals we use to mark milestones in our lives do incorporate similar elements, I also have an issue of connecting bridal traditions to other events. I feel kinda strange about the white gown and the veil issue because it always makes me think about wearing them for my First Communion when I was 7 years old. Especially the veil. When I look at pictures of veils on brides in the magazines, I sometimes think that they look like over-grown second graders making their First Communion. In a way it just seems really silly to me.

This same participant went on to clarify her thoughts,

Sometimes I think that there was a cake and candles and flowers and a white garment for my Baptism, and my First Communion, and my Confirmation, so why shouldn't I have all that for my wedding too? Kinda like, that stuff is just part of marking a right
of passage... maybe in a way, that stuff connects all these rituals together (the veil still freaks me out sometimes though).

One participant had a more pragmatic reason for wearing a veil, "I'm wearing very simple satin ivory backless gown, and chose to wear a veil primarily to cover up a band of stubborn acne on my upper back while another just liked the glamour and verve that dressing up entailed,

Personally, I love the costuming aspect of it all. There are lots of traditions I'm not sure I'd pay attention to for my wedding, but I'm quite sure I'll do the veil... umm, I mean, it's so pretty, and when else, in my life, am I going to get to walk around in a getup like that?

In relation to this participants comments however, another women in the same focus group said to me in a discussion after the other participants had left,

The thing is, veils look silly. We are not having a broad way musical here, we are having a ceremony (then party)- and it's not a costume party. So why should the female honoree be in costume? I don't buy that whole 'it looked so pretty in the bridal boutique and my mother started crying' business- sorry, the veil was there to hide us from the men we had been effectively sold to, so that they couldn't break the deal after seeing our smallpox pitted faces... we are not commodities anymore, nor should we be packaged as such. The inner five year old girl who loves to play gown ups and who lurks in our hearts shopping for $400 (or $200, or $15) veils didn't understand the political significance of those lace hankies she's been wearing all this time- it's not her fault (laugh) ... but we know better!

In sum, many wedding rituals are characterised by conflicting ideals. Their historical connotations conflict with ideals of the self-sufficient, professionally successful, self assured, economically independent and happy modern woman. But the ideology demands that women occupy both roles simultaneously. While some participants expressed their indifference to these rituals, I did of course encounter those who mediated gender ideals according to their own idiosyncratic interpretations. One participant clearly summed up her awareness of the conflict involved,

Thirty years after my parents' wedding, the second wave of feminism is bedrock to us. Wedding traditions carry the vestiges of male dominance, but they also have beauty and power that I feel entitled to. Two rings are better than none. The white gown signifies new life, not virginity. Sexual commitment enriches our pleasure in each other. We both kept our names.
The feminisation of the wedding however, threatens to negate all that New Zealand women have strived to achieve and women who star in the elaborate white wedding perpetuate these ideals. Wedding ‘tradition’ is often adopted merely for “tradition’s sake” as one participant asserted, but needs to be seen through a more critical and analytical lens. Leonard (1980:2) argued that weddings exist not because they are outdated charades, rather that they are important reflections of contemporary society. But we need to be aware that continuities in wedding tradition have the tendency to conceal interpretation. I questioned what the concept ‘tradition’ really means in the context of women’s choice to wed.

One participant clarified for me an initially complex issue in my investigation – what is wedding ‘tradition’ and despite its ambiguity, why is it so often the single most important justification used by my participants for marriage and the ceremony.

*I think that women are socially conditioned to desire the big white wedding...and this is tradition too. How do you separate tradition from social conditioning...maybe the social conditioning becomes so successfully conditioned that it becomes tradition.*

The white wedding has become so naturalised that many ‘traditions’ are not even questioned even if they have little historical positioning. We are not witnessing a gradual distancing of tradition and a tentative accommodation of the new. These rituals, which so many participants described as ‘tradition’ have either persisted or augmented. Weddings have become more elaborate and traditions that used to be optional are now expected almost obligatory today. The difference now is that the meanings behind these practices have been appropriated within a consumer context.

**Summary**

In this chapter, I sought to explore the feminisation of the wedding experience. I began with a brief analysis of gendered roles as reflected at bridal exhibitions where women almost completely made up the services traditionally assigned to females- make up, hair, fashion and catering, while men dominated in the more technical fields of photography and video production. I then moved on to tangible rituals of the wedding experience that have been critiqued by feminists as symbolic of patriarchal order: the bridal shower, the registry, the ring exchange and wedding attire.
I have argued that these practices effectively feminise the wedding experience. While *conventions* behind wedding rituals have weakened, they are still emblematic of sexist dogma and continue to naturalise an unequal division of labour. These rituals also legitimate the institution of heterosexuality, rendering ‘tradition’ synonymous with legitimacy. As Ingraham (1999:4) argued, “weddings are one of the major events that signal readiness and prepare heterosexuals for membership in marriage as an organizing practice for the institution of heterosexuality.” The presents showered on the bride through the registry and bridal shower (as well as the congratulatory tone of those who gush over her ring, the ecstatic approval of all those she informs about the wedding), celebrate the bride’s achievements in the romance contest. By consenting and embracing these rites, the bride has ‘succeeded’. Despite the bridal showers sexist history and material irrelevance, it is still upheld in the *New Zealand Bride and Groom*, wherein the giving of domestic gifts to the bride-to-be is a ‘sure fire way to host a hit party’ (*New Zealand Bride and Groom*, issue 28, 2002:46).

Participants shared more comparable views on the practice of exchanging rings. None of my participants perceived the female engagement or wedding ring as symbolic of patriarchal possession, instead defining the practice as symbolising love and the resilience of the marital union. The tone of conversation and comments regarding the nature and expense of the engagement and wedding ring however concerned me. While many participants were happy to ‘settle’ for something cheaper and less extravagant than they would otherwise like, many still desired a ring that often exceeded the financial capabilities of their partner’s (or combined) income. The fact that some participants implied that an expensive and opulent ring reflected the degree of ‘passion’ or love in the relationship revealed to me that the dominant understanding of the engagement/wedding ring today is based more on symbols of status than patriarchy.

A brief analysis of the white wedding gown and veil translated some interesting insights into social understandings of women’s relationship to wedding attire. Even though the white wedding gown is now seldom perceived as a symbol of virginity, this was still a credence that all my participants were conscious of. Despite their mediation of this historic rite, all my participants also saw their gown as symbolic of love and/or beauty. Similarly, the veil embodied contradictory and ambiguous values for participants. Focus groups revealed that women are
divided between rejecting the veil as a symbol of oppression and embracing it in their own idiosyncratic interpretation of what it means to be veiled.

Idiosyncratic understandings of bridal attire were seen by some participants to empower women. For example, those who felt beautiful and admired by wearing the gown or veil, those that strategically chose an ‘outrageous’ or coloured gown in order to flout the virginity cliché, or those that suggested unconventional discrepancies such as ‘lifting the veil themselves.’ But as argued throughout the investigation, these mediations reflect ‘accepted’ and controlled resistance rather than renouncement of patriarchal symbolism. There were also some more disquieting considerations in contemporary interpretations of bridal attire. Vestiges of patriarchy are still evident in popular depictions of the gown. Wang’s portrayal of the wedding gown as an extension of the female’s body and identity, alongside notions of the wedding gown as symbolic of the innocent and vulnerable princess bride render it emblematic of its sexist past. The importance placed on the ‘dream gown’ as discussed in chapter six also reinforces the pressure on the bride to conform to a legitimate bridal ideal.

It has also been necessary to understand the ways in which women resist and accommodate change. The context of these rites was seen as a source of agency for some of my participants. Wilson (1985:38) pointed out that courtship and marriage have both very private and very public elements. Weddings are a sign of a woman’s economic and social success. They offer brides the pleasure of a female-centred beauty culture, as well as the perception of limited cultural authority as princess for the day. Some participants mediated these contradictions. For many brides, the benefits that the ceremony had to offer seemed to them, to outweigh the negative values of an industry that clearly echo women’s marginal historical status in marriage.

While participants may express their own idiosyncratic interpretations of these rituals, regardless of how ‘individual’ and ‘unique’ these adaptations are, they inevitably, by virtue of their origin, hold vestiges of a patriarchal history, even if only in symbolism. Whether out of amorous virtue, for ‘tradition sake’, social pressure, sexist conformity or mere complacency, the symbolism is still the same. The dowry may be a thing of the past, but the name change, exchange of rings and practice of ‘giving away’ the bride still honours the economic transfer of women through marriage. The bridal shower and registry may be fun, ‘traditional’ and provide strategic for the couple to material commodities, but still uphold a gendered division of labour. And while the
bridal gown and veil may provide the bride with a sense of feminine legitimacy, they also echo concepts of female vulnerability and subordination.

All women may be exposed and subject to subordinate positioning. But while hegemonic messages may be largely monolithic, our reactions to them do not have to be. But by allowing heterosexual imagery to circulate freely with our consent, we participate in the production and perpetuation of these gender and sexual hierarchies. As one participant stated, despite our knowledge of these ideologies, "we still consent to the ideal... we still oooh and aaaah over the beautiful bride and lavish weddings". It is this enduring veneration for, and mystification of weddings that I now address, as it is created and sustained in the New Zealand wedding industry.
CHAPTER FIVE: FOR RICHER FOR POORER: WEDDINGS 
AND THE MATERIALISATION OF MARRIAGE.

"Here comes the bride...and following closely on her heels is a throng of marketers determined to make their brands the ones that she and her groom vow to have and to hold, to love and to cherish, from that day forward" (Cyndee, 1995:1).

Valuable insights into the relationship between women, marriage and weddings in contemporary New Zealand can be accessed through an examination of the commerce surrounding the ceremony. This chapter addresses the following paradox: despite the abating marriage rate, the decline in the material necessity of marriage and redundancy in previous wedding function as discussed in the Introduction, weddings are celebrated with no less vigour and enthusiasm than they were in the past. But more than this: it seems weddings have never been so extravagant or cost so much. Celebrants I interviewed estimated that the average expenditure of a modern New Zealand wedding is approximately $15 000, although it is not uncommon for wedding costs to exceed $50 000.1

It is a proportional relationship where in the proliferation of the industry is reflective of increasing demand.2 Wedding persistence and the demand for wedding extravagance is sustained by an enormous industry that caters to almost any imaginable commodity request. While the previous chapter explored the feminisation of the wedding experience, this one addresses the feminisation of the industry, focusing on the triadie relationship between production, consumption and the bride. I look at how women are situated in wedding related discourse within the industry and the ways in which they are targeted as consumers. I approach this by looking at processes of consumption in two domains: examples in popular culture and bridal exhibitions, utilising my participants' interpretations and experiences.

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1 The most expensive wedding encountered by the wedding celebrants I talked to was a 'traditional' wedding that totalled $250 000.
I proceed on the premise that bridal legitimacy is an economic strategy that sustains desire for commodities. As discussed in chapter four, a significant portion of the New Zealand wedding experience revolves around the spectacle of the event (Albury, 1996:2). It is this single event that the whole wedding industry caters to. Howard (2000:61) asserted that consumerism is linked to the celebration of marriage through fashion shows, window displays, gift registries and other promotions. In this process, interaction between cultural producers and female consumers in the wedding industry is complex. Integral in the success of this market is the role of the wedding business in defining a socially correct wedding and a socially acceptable bride, as discussed in the previous chapter. Bridal exhibitions, which are becoming increasingly popular as the industry itself propagates, are a virulent tool in this meaning making process and reveal the extent to which the industry has been feminised.

COVERT RESEARCH AND THE WEDDING ECONOMY

A large part of my ethnographic research incorporated the attendance of wedding exhibitions. I attended two in Dunedin, the 2001 Wedding Exhibition (29/4/01) and the 2002 Wedding Exhibition (28/4/02), both held at Forbury Park Raceway and one in Christchurch, The Bride and Groom Exhibition held at The Chateau on the Park (30/4/01). The largest and most opulent exhibition I attended was the New Zealand Bride and Groom Show (19/5/02) sponsored by the magazine publication. It was held at the Ellerslie Racecourse in Auckland and was advertised as ‘The Wedding Event of the Year.’ I also attended smaller community fundraising events, such as the Exhibition of Bridal Attire Over the Century (26/5/01), held at the South Dunedin Presbyterian Church and the Bride of the Year Competition (18/5/02) held at the Forum North in Whangarei.

What struck me first about these exhibitions was their opulence. With each exhibition, I entered a romantic vortex of planning and preparation. The venues were temporarily transformed into plethora’s of stalls and advertising for everything you could possibly anticipate at a wedding and within this labyrinth swarmed hundreds of soon-to-be brides, their prospective husbands and family members. The uniformity of these events was also profound: their primary difference being size and affluence. These exhibitions reinforced for me the fetish our society has for weddings – as Geller (2001:275) described of the bridal registry, I was witnessing, “a materialistic binge.”
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<th>Price Range - $</th>
<th>Average Price - $</th>
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<td>Engagement ring</td>
<td>100- limitless</td>
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<td>Wedding ring – bride</td>
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<td>2 000</td>
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<td>Dress - hired</td>
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<td>Groom’s attire</td>
<td>300-3 000</td>
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<td>150</td>
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<td>40-65/head (based on 100 guests)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Alcoholic beverage</td>
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<td>Flowers</td>
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<td>Cake – 2 tiered</td>
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<td>Music</td>
<td>Varies enormously 350-1 200</td>
<td>500</td>
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<table>
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<td>Celebrant</td>
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<td>Wedding planner</td>
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<td>150-500, Historic churches can charge up to 750 for 90 minutes and extra for organs.</td>
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<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
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| Reception total                | 1 000- limitless (approx. 60% of total budget)
|                               | **22 300**   |
| Honeymoon                      | 500 - limitless | **5 000**   |
| **Grand total**                |              | **27 300**   |

Table 1. Wedding Costs.

*Editor of New Zealand Bride and Groom estimates $20 000, cited by Revington, (1997:69).*
One of my first jobs was to investigate the financial expenditures that a wedding entailed. I assembled the following table as an example of the materialisation that the ceremony has undergone. As mentioned, a standard wedding can be expected to cost, on average, approximately $15 – 20 000 (not including rings, honeymoon). The figures above are based on an average 100 person wedding with a reception cost averaging $45/head.

Assumptions made by those involved in the exhibitions alone provided important insights. At almost every display visited, an eager salesperson would approach me usually with an opening phrase such as, “when is the big date?” or, “have you considered...at your wedding?” My first experiences in attempting to describe the nature of my research, with descriptions of an analysis into the feminisation of wedding planning and ritual, were met with negative feedback and uncooperative responses. As discussed in chapter one I found it easier to conduct covert research, assuming the position of a bride-to-be and ensuring more honest accounts of consumption procedures.

What constituted the ‘New Zealand wedding experience’ was discussed widely with those participants involved in the production of the ceremony. The New Zealand wedding industry can be described as a loose alliance of businesses targeting every aspect of the wedding: attire, gifts, reception venues, food and drink catering, photography, music, the honeymoon, furnishing of the new home, make-up, jewellery, flowers, stationary, dressmaking, confectioners, caterers, celebrant services, cakes, bouquets, photography, limousine services and so on. My ethnographic experiences at these exhibitions were invaluable. They were an indispensable means of exposure to the New Zealand wedding industry, with representatives from key members/groups in each area.

Specialisation in the industry is reflective of its success, exemplified at the wedding shows, which revealed just how many businesses rely solely on the wedding market. As one celebrant at the 2002 Wedding Exhibition stated, “where once upon a time there were caterers who also did weddings and photographers who also did weddings, there are now wedding caterers and wedding photographers.” The rise of a professionalised network of wedding services has also homogenized wedding consumption to a certain degree. Ingraham asserted that constructions of the bride in Western popular culture has resulted in a “romancing of the clone” (1999:121). Similarly, many services and commodity providers in the New Zealand wedding industry loosely
categorise their customers into those seeking the standard wedding package versus those looking for "something a little bit different" as one wedding organiser described. Cake decorators, flower arrangers, dress-makers and reception planners had preconceived ideas of 'standard procedures' - default packages which they used as a yardstick to measure customers against.

The whole format of the bridal exhibitions beleaguered women and I was acutely aware of the blatant targeting of the bride-to-be in advertising and promotions. At the 2001 Wedding Exhibition for example, a fashion parade was repeated at selected intervals during the day. The majority of clothing on display was directed at women with dozens of examples of bridal gowns, flower girl outfits and mother-of-the-bride collections, while only a few suit selections for grooms were featured at the end of the parade. The performance was intercepted with a presentation feature of Celine Dion's 'Our Love will Go On', to evoke a sense of romanticism in the audience. Even the presentation of the grooms selection reinforced the targeting of women, with comments from the (male) MC such as, "now - who wants to look like a princess?" and, "ladies, feast your eyes on this very masculine selection, you don't want your man turning up to the wedding looking like he's just got out of bed!"

The industry strategically seeks women at these events, realising the power they hold as consumers willing to spend superfluous amounts of money on wedding commodities that will make their 'special day' that much more meaningful. At the New Zealand Bride and Groom Show, women (presumed brides-to-be) were handed free samples of designer chocolate, embossed with romantic sentiments and information on the retailer. By the time I had left, I had been given free samples of wedding cake, sampled free wine, had a free hair analysis and had been given a voucher for a pre-wedding facial treatment – all with leaflets and promotional handouts on the retailer.

It was at the 2001 Wedding Exhibition in Dunedin that I met one of my key participants, a local celebrant. In a one-on-one interview (in which I disclosed my research position) we discussed women's relationship in the wedding industry. In regards to the enormous money to be made in the wedding business, he referred to the nature of the show,

There is a huge market and huge money to be made. Couples walk about in a state of hysteria, or shock... there is a lot of pressure and a lot of the associated extras are
unnecessary. But women still think they owe it to themselves to buy into it all: flowers, limos, photography – and once you start it really is hard to stop. It's a frenzy, a feeding frenzy.

I asked him whether he considered the pressures on women to be more significant to which he replied, "there's no doubt. The bride is really the product of the wedding. She's the central attraction and because this is so widely accepted, the industry has come to rely on her complete involvement." Another celebrant stated that many wedding commodities are directed towards the needs of the bride and her guests; this is why many of the producers continuously refer to their consumers as "the girls." The blatant targeting of a female clientele is symptomatic of the 'feminisation of the industry,' a direct consequence being that the bride is the primary customer.

But it is not just the industry’s blatant targeting of women at bridal exhibitions that this is manifest. There are more covert ways in which services and businesses seek their target clientele. Ingraham (1999:31) stated that the consumption patterns of newlyweds are closely followed. The function of wedding announcements in newspapers for example, is two-fold. Not only do they announce to the public the impending union of the couple - as a declaration of social victory and achievement, but businesses use the announcements as address sources to circulate advertisements. This is also a marketing strategy adopted by the bridal exhibition. While at the New Zealand Bride and Groom Show I filled out numerous promotional 'competitions' that were being conducted by participating services. Within a three-month period, I had received, via email and post, a number of follow-up advertisements and 'specials' from these entries.

I also noticed that many of the commodities and services directed at women featured products with only an indirect relevance to weddings: gym memberships, jewellery, skin treatment packages, perfume selections and even vitamin-range displays. These wedding products are encoded with secondary as well as primary meaning - qualities that might have nothing to do with brides or weddings at all, but make the product more desirable.4 From a poststructuralist

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4 I encountered hundreds of products and brand names with little or no relevance to brides, but which employed bridal images in their marketing strategy during my research: Pepsi, MacDonalds, Ford, Colgate-Palmolive products, Toyota, Estee Lauder, Kleins, New Zealand Wine Society, Fresh and Fruity, Mortgage Link, Thermostake Weight control, Clear Eyes eye drops, Gillette razors, Oral B Denial products and hundreds of Hotels, Motels and Resorts. Television adverts that feature white weddings and brides are wide ranging as well, and examples screening in New Zealand at the time of research included, Air New Zealand, PK, Airwaves, Hay Ban (hay fever medication) and Colour Steel Roofing.
perspective, encoding involves the branding of a commodity with an image or intangible quality in order to differentiate it from other similar products. But often, the relationship between signifier and signified is completely arbitrary (Barthes, 1991:35). Along with the commodity, consumers are made to believe that the intangible quality/qualities associated with the product will also be theirs, to the extent that the symbolic reverent(s) with which the commodity is encoded often becomes the predominant one(s) sought by consumers. The material commodity is often seen as a by-product by those consumers seeking to develop an image through the products and services they consume (Albury, 1996:57).

Figure 8, Celebrate the Best in Life         Figure 9, A Cause for Celebration

As Ingraham (1999:62) asserted, the secondary wedding market uses white weddings to sell products that are only indirectly related to them. Romantic love, directed at women is predominantly the perceived ‘reward’, conveying not just romance and love but attributes such as progress and happiness. This technique was most explicitly noticeable in the New Zealand Bride and Groom magazine and the two images below epitomize these ideals. Figure 8 for Deutz wine above shows a happy bride as the dominant image with a man, supposedly the groom (although
this is implicit not explicit) smiling back at her. The words accompanying the image tell the reader to, 'celebrate the best in life' suggesting that a white wedding and the consumption of Deutz wine will enable this (Issue 28). Figure 9 for Daniel Le Brun champagne seen above (Issue 27) shows another stereotypically beautiful princess bride as the dominant image (this time we see only the ‘grooms’ hands opening the bottle for her) happy in her consumption of the product.

The irrelevance of the wedding signifier to the advertised product is exemplified in the three images below. Figure 10 below for Fresh’n Fruity Yoghurt Smoothie shows a beautiful bride, happy and ready to wed, unaware of the impending ‘disaster’ of discovering her dress is dirty, potentially ‘ruining’ her wedding. (SHE, February: 2000). Another example that uses an image of a white wedding to fuse romance and happiness to the product is that below (figure 11) advertising Estee Lauder Beautiful perfume (Cosmopolitan, March: 2002). The fragrance is made desirable through its association with the bride running freely across the beach, signifying beauty, happiness and a sense of unity with her family in pursuit. Ironically, although the bride signals compliance with the heterosexual bridal ideal (and the historical marital limitations that the wedding signals), a sense of freedom is also evoked in the movement and ocean context of the image.

Figure 10, Having a Roughie?
Similarly, figure 12 above for AMI Insurance shows a minister speaking to a bride and groom at the alter. The role reversal, with AMI promising to ‘care, assist’ and ‘deliver’ unwarrantedly assigns the perceived virtues of the marriage contract - solidity and stability, to an insurance company. Once again, the groom is relevant in this image only in his role as accessory to the bride - we see only the back of his head.

Many of my participants reinforced the validity of the encoding process in their purchases and perceptions of commodity consumption. Almost all wedding related commodities were perceived with a desired image in mind, from major purchases such as the bridal gown, ring and wedding venue, to smaller commodities such as confetti and place names, as one participant expressed,

*I'm having a Medieval theme, so a lot of the wedding merchandise will be brought with that in mind. I'm having the medieval dress of course, and Nathan is wearing his kilt, we're having goblets and medieval scripture stylising the place names... everything adds to the romance though... I've just ordered the most perfect paper for the invites, cream paper with a beautiful marble finish.*

Brides are also lead to believe that these additional luxuries are necessary, The New Zealand Bride and Groom (Issue 27) tells the bride, ‘what you wear under your wedding gown is just as important as the gown itself.’ Such messages stipulate what women necessarily need in order to successfully marry, including of course, the purchase of the magazine itself, whose title reads: New Zealand Bride and Groom - the Essential Guide to Getting Married (my emphasis). The naturalisation of these ideals secures continued expenditure on related commodities and services - ideals that are supportive of capitalist production in the wedding industry.

Advertisements use specific linguistic techniques to close off possible paths of resistance to the forms of subjectivity, meanings and values that they articulate. The most common of these is the implicit assumption of a collective subject, a strategy that is hard for the reader to resist. Weedon (1997:98) argued that the reader finds herself placed in a position that implicitly endorses the meanings and values of the text as just ‘good common sense’ or as eminently reasonable. Figure 13 below for Hyatt Regency Hotel in Auckland is an example of how commerce and intimacy are blurred in an attempt to personalize a service. The advertisement uses inclusive pronouns, 'we
propose a perfectly planned wedding. All you need to say is ‘I do’ (my emphasis) (New Zealand Bride and Groom, Issue 27). Figure 14 below for Centra Auckland Airport Resort asks, ‘may we propose imagination, style and inspiration for your special day?’ (my emphasis) while a later version states, ‘we make it so easy to say I do’ (my emphasis) (New Zealand Bride and Groom, Issue 29).

We propose

a perfectly
planned wedding.

All you need
to say is ‘I do’

Figure 13, All You Need to Say is ‘I Do’
Figure 14, Special Day

The hotel with their own wedding specialist, the Carlton in Auckland, uses an intimate approach in their advertisement, ‘Congratulations! We look forward to sharing your special day’ and even go as far as to add, ‘there’s one thing above all else that will make your special day truly memorable – our people’ (my emphasis) (New Zealand Bride and Groom, Issue 26). Weedon (1997:99) discussed the dominant mode for visual culture and argued that as viewers and listeners, we are invited to accept what is offered as a slice of everyday life. Romance, as found in magazines and film, offer us, timeless representations of femininity, masculinity and love (Weedon, 1997:100). In the attachment of emotive virtues and intangible qualities to wedding merchandise and services, the intention is that consumers come to believe that weddings are an
embodiment of these ideals. As Ingraham (1999:14) stated, weddings promise accumulation and wealth. They are also perceived to deliver love, romance, optimism and happiness – qualities that the bride personifies.

PROFIT

Romance is no longer something intimate between two people to express their feelings for each other; it has become a commodity to be sold and purchased. Just look at the ads for diamonds - romance now equals nothing less than two months’ salary. If you’re desperate for those feelings then buy a big shiny rock for the woman -- her love for you will increase!

The message behind this participant’s comment aligns with the fundamental incentive in the reproduction of desired wedding images - profit. By perpetuating and sustaining an image of the perfect bride and how a wedding should be, a niche is created in which consumption practices are guaranteed. Desires must constantly be reinforced in this process in order to maintain consumption profits. The entire feminisation of the wedding industry, as seen in the targeting of women at bridal exhibitions and in magazines that encode commodities/services with arbitrary meaning are part of this naturalisation process.

As discussed, the industry that relies on wedding consumption is proliferating at an enormous rate, evidenced at the colossal range of services and businesses (with primary and secondary relevance to weddings) at bridal exhibitions. The Bride of the Year competition also reinforced the extent of capitalist involvement in the contemporary wedding. Twenty two local and national corporate businesses sponsored the one off event, nearly half of which had only indirect relevance to weddings per se, such as Classic Hits Radio Northland, Estee Lauder, the Lion Foundation, Rouse Motorcycle Repairs and Spares, Mark Crombie Holden, Kaitaia Tractors Ltd, Ferndale and Mainland Cheeses and Hugh Wright.

West (1992) argued that the ‘pleasures’ provided by culture industries are inextricable from the forces of the market and of commodification. In my analysis of the links between wedding consumption, capitalist production and the bride, I considered depictions of bridal fashion as an obvious way in which the production of an image caters to a desired ideal. Baudrillard (1976:131) saw fashion as the central logic of our consumer society, “the most superficial frame
and the most profound social form – the inexorable investment of all domains by the code.” He argued that fashion’s power is precisely that of the, “pure sign that signifies nothing” (1976:144) and that fashion remains the highest expression of the workings of commodity capitalism (1976:142).

In her deconstruction of fashion and theatre, Dorinne Kondo⁵ asserted that fashion is emblematic of cultural production, operating within a regime of commodity capitalism, “fashion’s obsolescence is inseparable from complicity with capitalist production and the mobilization of desire” (Kondo, 1990:16). Fashion is a key arena for the performance of identities, from ‘individual’ to ‘national’ as well as highlighting the performance of gender (Kondo, 1990:5). Like other fields (politics and art) fashion is a site for the reproduction of class and social legitimacy. Bourdieu (1975:35) described this discursive field as one that involves, “a gentle violence that can only be exercised with the complicity of its victims and because of this fact, gives the appearance of liberatory action to an arbitrary imposition of arbitrary needs.”

Although Kondo’s study focused on ‘high’ or elite runway fashion, I saw a connection between this fashion form and the more accessible (cheaper) fashion as depicted in bridal magazines. Fashion attends to clothing for different reasons - that which can be worn for pragmatic reasons as opposed to that which is not necessarily designed to be worn or – is designed to be worn only once. The conventional wedding gown, like many items of high fashion, fits into the minimal wear category. It is the ultimate symbol of conspicuous consumption, as discussed in chapter four, when we consider its cost in relation to its function. While some participants sought outfits that would be ‘wearable’ in a context other than their wedding, most were resigned to the fact that the dress was to be worn only once. This was however, also appealing to a couple of women who saw sentimental value in its impracticality. The wedding gown surpasses its function merely as an item of clothing and a new attraction is seen in its preservation as a family heirloom: a symbol of romance.

As stated, the wedding signifier endows products with meaning. Through fashion, romance is the adopted theme. Romance is aligned with class in bridal advertising through references to famous

⁵ Although Kondo's analysis is primarily focused on 'high' fashion, rather than popular 'low' fashion, the differences of which are vast, both have a role within capitalist productions, both define a market and both cater to desire.
‘couture’ designs (made famous by Princess Diana). This effectively merges the vast differences between the average bride and the mythical ‘princess bride’ so that ‘style’ becomes something dislocated from class and wealth and therefore available to most women, regardless of income. A direct consequence of this is that women pay beyond their means to purchase the ‘dress of their dreams.’ Auckland University’s sociology department’s Professor Maureen Baker argued that the wedding industry, “continually reminds women that it’s their big day and that they should therefore invest in it.” She stated that nobody admits that they are influenced by the bridal magazines as well as other people’s expectations, “they believe that they are planning their own wedding, but in fact, society tells them how it should be” (cited by Newman, 1999:26).

**Desire Comes First**

It is not a monolithic process however, but one fraught with ambiguity and ongoing arbitration. Consumption involves compromise and is often a battle where by the consumer must weigh up what they need, desire and can afford. But participants revealed that consumption is still largely dictated according to the creation of an image and the fulfilment of a dream, privileging desire and image over practicality and affordability (exemplified in the quest for the ‘dream dress’). For example, wedding co-ordinators that I talked to felt that their participants often compromised or financially ‘cut’ on things that they shouldn’t have,

*One couple drastically underestimated their available finances and ended reducing numbers at the reception. Instead of family and friends missing out, I think they should have made cuts on things like flowers, or the honeymoon. But this is quite common, a lot of couples underestimate and cut inappropriately.*

These needs and desires, when combined with monetary resources and symbolic readings of commodities, shape actual consumption practices. Consumption therefore is closely linked with the construction of meaning. It is not a solitary act, but a process of decisions whereby, “objects and texts are actively appropriated and interpreted as they come into contact with the everyday practices of social subjects” (Moores, 1993:622). The desired image is shaped by culture, (perceptions of) ‘tradition’ and a degree of innovation.
TRADITION IN THE INDUSTRY

As discussed throughout the research, the concept of 'tradition' surfaced as a defining justification for participant behaviour. I came to realise that brides, consumption and concepts of tradition are fused together in the wedding industry. As discussed in chapter two, the success of heterosexual ideologies are dependent on imagery to conceal their regulatory function and effects. Traditionalism is frequently adopted by the industry in order to overcome the ambivalence between romance and commerce: commodities gain legitimacy by allying with tradition, embodying romance and evoking nostalgia. New consumer rites demand the expertise of professionals (those involved in the industry such as wedding planners) who make it their business to 'know' tradition and consumers are told that they needed help in following certain these traditions. The industry has effectively naturalised an image of the traditional white wedding (and components within it, namely the dress, ring and venue) to the extent that they are almost seen as necessary for marital fulfilment. But, if these practices were genuine 'traditions' and not the invention of the industry, then why would people need help in establishing them?

Eric Hobsbawm argued that invented traditions are the "set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past" (Hobsbawn, 1983:1-3). Howard (2000) utilised Hobsbawn's notion of invented tradition to show how 'tradition' in the American wedding industry has been employed to sell commodities. She argued that people often forget the original function of a 'tradition' and it simply enters the folklore of a particular group, becoming part of that way of life. A consequence of this is that tradition is now often preserved by being commodified and marketed as such. As Harvey (1989:303) contended, tradition is produced and marketed as an image, as a simulacrum or pastiche.

But more than this – the process is self-supporting. In the selling of tradition as a commodity, demand for a traditional image is supported by the expected presence of a number of related 'traditional' commodities and services inherent to the wedding event. For example, most of my participants who desired a traditional image at their wedding sought this symbolism in numerous commodities and services – the gown, flowers, transport, invites and so on. One of my participants, a caterer, who is involved in the production of the wedding defined this process using the metaphorical imagery of a recipe, "all the ingredients, when combined result in the
finished product, a creation... that is only complete when all the individual elements are brought together on the wedding day."

A QUEST FOR INDIVIDUALITY

In this context, I came to question forms of unconventional wedding ritual. Most people want to individualise their wedding and there is a demand for individuality within the realm of the traditional. Participants went to great lengths to personalise meaning within the creation of their wedding. In the quest for individuality in the ceremony, participants sought to reshape elements of the ritual in order to reflect their own beliefs and values. For example, one of my participants wore jandals for her wedding photo shoot – although she still wore white heels for the ceremony and of course, a white dress. Another arrived at the church, (wearing a white gown) on a Harley Davidson motor cycle. Many participants stated that they were looking for something new and ‘unconventional’ in their wedding experience although they were still looking for a link to the traditional through their commodity purchases. Wedding planners asserted that this is not necessarily hard to do because consumers confer symbolic qualities to ordinary products in order to enhance their personal significance. I realised that people want weddings that are innovative, but still shaped by tradition - personalised, but still shaped by social definitions of what is acceptable. In this sense, many forms of wedding resistance are still controlled within the realms of the acceptable.

CREATING MEMORY

As my research progressed I came to realise that many components of the experience are services or products that are consumed during the wedding experience. One participant stated,

"It seems that documentation of the wedding is as important for many people as the actual ceremony. It seems that every little movement on the day has to be recorded for posterity. From the first yawn in the morning through to the last sigh at night, a record needs to be kept.

In contrast, until recently the only tangible reminders of the ceremony (aside from documentation) were selected props used to create the desired image, such as mementoes that the couple presented to their guests, photography and the gown (many of my older, married
participants maintain vivid and precise memories of their wedding dress, recalling many years later exact details about its fabric and style).

Within the industry today however, a number of commodities in the form of wedding merchandise and souvenirs have been developed to represent and preserve the wedding experience (Albury, 1996:14). In the process of commodity consumption consumers are now also creating memories. It appears that the desire to preserve the wedding day is in high demand – after all, the ‘happiest day’ of a woman’s life should be preserved, at least this is the message in popular culture. Figure 15 below for Courtney Video Productions employs the ‘magic’ and romance directed at brides (see chapter six) as well as utilising the desire for memory, ‘it’s your special day, lets make it last forever’ (New Zealand Bride and Groom, Issue 32).6

Figure 15, Lets Make it Last Forever

6 Advancements in technology are making the preservation of memory more achievable. Consumers can choose to have their wedding images collected on CD Rom, which can be shown later to a group via a monitor. The growing availability of acid-free paper and innovative mounting techniques mean that the wedding experience can now be preserved for generations.
Increasing demand for the creation of memory has opened up a whole preservation sector within the wedding industry and there is huge demand for services such as bouquet preservation, photography and video production. Flower preservation, directed entirely at women, is a rapidly growing service in the New Zealand wedding industry. Standard preservation procedures (previously) entailed a method of pressing and framing the bride’s bouquet, but a new technique has been recently introduced which involves preservation in three-dimensional form. Figures 16 and 17 below, for Treasured Flowers (New Zealand Bride and Groom, Issue 25) and Memory Lane Floral Design in Lower Hutt show two businesses that provide such services. The advertisement for Memory Lane appeals to memory as well as concepts of reward, ‘the most romantic day of your life deserves a romantic memento...’ (New Zealand Bride and Groom, Issue 26). The popularity of preserving the bride’s bouquet is significant when we consider its symbolism. Flowers have traditionally been used at weddings as symbols of fertility, romance and pastoral utopianism. They imply that the couple’s love is as, “natural and perfect as that which comes from the earth” (Geller, 2001:300) and are an important symbol of the bride’s femininity. Further, the ritualised practice of ‘bouquet tossing’ is still a relatively popular practice, where in the bouquet is thrown to a group of ‘single’ women seeking their ‘chance to marry.’

Figure 16, Memories 1
Ultimately, the wedding industry is unique in that the primary product is intangible – a wedding that is memorable, romantic and often spectacular. The wedding is emotion in action, where tradition and romance are employed to convey an image where in the bride is the central ‘star of the show.’ Albury (1996:109) argued that couples can never be sure that the chosen combination of products and services will result in a memorable image and experience, but that they can make certain that the documentation of their wedding experience and the souvenirs they and their guests carry away from the event accurately communicate the image that they intend to portray. But the image that is conveyed is also frequently dislocated from the reality of the experience. Photos of the happy couple for example, can be superimposed on novelty background images such as a tropical beach, fairytale castle setting or deep-sea ocean liner, providing a more surreal/romantic memory of the experience and potentially shaping the ‘reality’ of the day.

FOR THE BENEFIT OF THE GUESTS

The pressures of presenting a ‘viable’ wedding and image of the bride led me to consider that the wedding is a means for the couple to present to others what they love as well as who they love. In the process of creating memory, a huge motive in consumption of wedding commodities is the guest’s sanction of the event. Participants frequently voiced concerns about the approval of those
attending the wedding and their perception of the experience. Conspicuous consumption is defined by the purchase of a product motivated by display considerations rather than a practical function. Chandra Muckerji defined conspicuous consumption as, “wasting wealth in order to display it” (1983:5). Participant’s wedding budgets revealed that a large portion of their total wedding expenditure was allocated to such purchases: table displays, mementos, place names, flowers and so on as seen in table 1. The New Zealand Bride and Groom (Issue 29:56) is developing this market, advising readers to, ‘delight and impress’ their guests with keepsakes and personalised wedding favours.

The role of the bride is integral in this process. The wedding symbolises the bride’s ascent into heterosexual legitimacy – she is heterosexuality and femininity personified. While this idea is pursue in the following chapter, the relationship between proliferating wedding consumption, expectations of the guests and the bride revealed some disconcerting considerations. The burdens accorded women in respect to the totality of the wedding are enormous and participants testified to feeling pressure to live up to other’s expectations – to succeed in the creation of a legitimate wedding and an image of a legitimate bride. While the financial pressures placed on participants who had already married were of huge significance, as exemplified in table 1, I focus here on pressures constrained to the bride.7

The New Zealand Bride and Groom (Issue 28:150) tells its (female) readers, ‘your wedding is probably the biggest event you will ever have to organise.’ Issue 26 ‘warns’ the bride-to-be that, ‘planning a wedding can be one of the most stressful events in your life.’ In a focus group that addressed these issues, one participant confessed, “I must admit, I am already getting sick of planning this wedding. It was fun for about a month and now I would just like the decisions to be made already” to which another responded, “I did have moments of fun here and there. Still, I couldn’t wait for it to be OVER.” When we consider that the experience is witnessed by the public, it is easier to understand the pressure to ‘succeed’ especially if much time, energy and money have been invested. As one participant stated, “it is not the idea of marriage that scares me, but thinking how much I have to do.” A celebrant pointed out, “well, despite all that talk

7 While no such studies have been conducted in New Zealand to date, a survey of two thousand young people (aged in their twenties) from Halifax, Britain found that one in seven said they could not afford to get married (www.atmp.org).
about it being one of the most enjoyable days in the life of the bride, a surprisingly large proportion don’t seem to enjoy it at all. They’re stressed and can’t wait until it’s over.”

Some participants confessed that family disputes (as a consequence of wedding stress) were not uncommon in their planning experience. I also considered that women may be psychologically assuaged by the ceremonialism that surrounds the event. One participant confessed that the pressures she felt could have influenced her sense of autonomy during the planning process, ensuring that she did not act on her ‘second thoughts.’ She talked of her feelings of passivity and the horror of her wedding going wrong,

_There was nothing that I felt I could do, because so many people had travelled so far and I didn’t want to back out then. I could have made the decision not to marry at any time up until then of course. Who knows what I would have done if I had had a small wedding with few people to please._

“DIDN’T SHE LOOK STUNNING”

In an article aptly titled, _Get Me to the Gym on Time_, an American journalist described the modern bride, ‘think of her as Robobride, equal parts Martha Stewart and Arnold Schwarzenegger. In increasing numbers, women in their 20’s and 30’s are seeking professional help to sculpture a body that is fit to walk the aisle...’ (Henderson, cited by Ingraham, 1999:113). Many of the articles and advertisements concerning weddings in women’s magazines address appearances and the importance of looking perfect. The pressure on women to look ‘the part’ at the wedding took its toll on many of my participants, as one stated in regard to her upcoming wedding,

_All these expectations, all those images of size 10 brides, for a while there it was suffocating. I mean, this is supposed to be one of the most meaningful days of my life and then there is all this expectation to look good. So I have managed to tell myself that I’ll never achieve perfection and I’ve quit the ruthless gym workouts in the hope of reaching a goal dictated by the market._

Fields (1998: 92) referred to the nature of contemporary bridal magazines, “page after page of caucasian, size 8 models in $2 000 dresses...try to discover an ad that features a bride who’s a
Various participants revealed similar expressions of conflicting desires in relation to societal expectations,

*Marriage means something sacred, the wedding epitomizes that and yet it takes conscious reminders not to get carried away with all the superficial stuff. I tell myself, 'stop thinking about whether my bun looks fat in my dress, stop obsessing with the hairstyle, the shade of make up and start thinking about what all this really means.'*

Businesses have picked up on these conflicts. At the 2001 Wedding Exhibition in Dunedin, stalls displaying makeup, anti-oxidants and vitamins also included slimming products and right next to a stall for Mr Cake Bakery services was a display for Les Mills featuring ‘pre-wedding blitz packages’.

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Figure 18, ‘All Eyes Will Be On You’

Figure 19, Your Best Body

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8 Since 1959, only four coloured women had ever featured on the cover of Brides. The more typical representation was that of the young, slim, blonde, blue-eyed woman (Ingraham, 1999:93).
Bridal magazines have a pivotal role in the manifestation of these pressures on women, with advertising reinforcing messages that suggest it is essential that the bride look her best in order for her role to be viable. Figure 18 above for Champs-Elysees Beauty-Day Spa in Christchurch featuring a conventionally beautiful blonde bride tells its readers to, ‘prepare for your perfect day’ because, ‘on your wedding day all eyes will be on you’ (New Zealand Bride and Groom, Issue 30). Figure 19 for Finesse Face and Body Clinic in Auckland, featuring another conventionally beautiful woman (bride to be?), this time kneeling in her lingerie looking passive and demure, suggests to the bride that she strives to achieve her ‘best body’ for her wedding day (New Zealand Bride and Groom, Issue 30).

In-home makeup and beauty services are also increasing in popularity in New Zealand. Figure 20 below, for Essential Beauty in Auckland fuses romance, style and necessity with a picture of a happy young bride and groom toasting to their success, with the ambiguous text, ‘romance, elegant, personal. Beauty therapy, hair, makeup and nails…’ (New Zealand Bride and Groom, Issue 28). No further explanation is needed in the advertisement: beauty, romance and happiness are fused together and conflated with the provided service. Finally, the newspaper advertisement (figure 21) for bridal fabrics from Elegant Gowns in Mosgiel reminds brides-to-be that naturally she has to look stunning and that this is easy to achieve, ‘with a little help from us, it can happen!’ (Otago Daily Times, 12/7/02).
Figure 21, ‘Didn’t she Look Stunning?’

It is inferred by the industry that a bride must take months in preparing for the wedding, for her own appearance as well as the practical considerations that the reception entails. A ‘Beauty Countdown List’ in the New Zealand Bride and Groom (Issue 32) tells readers, under the category three-to-four-months-before the ‘big day’, to start a weekly manicure routine since, ‘your hands will be the centre of attention.’ Coleman (2001:77) tells readers, ‘from the moment that he slips that engagement ring on your finger, your hands become an instant centre of attention. Suddenly your previously neglected digits are the subject of close scrutiny as family, friends and colleagues all clamber to see the ring.’ Readers are then reminded of the ‘disgrace’ experienced by the ultimate princess bride, who managed to see the error of her ways - a legacy which remains a lesson for the common bride, ‘those old enough to remember the engagement of Princess Diana will recall her shame when the worlds press zoomed in on her engagement ring and bitten finger nails.’ But the message seeks to conflate the ‘princess bride’/royalty with all brides, telling readers that, ‘Diana soon got her act together and so can you” (Coleman, 2001:77).

MEDIATORS IN THE INDUSTRY

The industry does more than portray images to consumers. It also defines the meanings of commodities utilized in the wedding. Wedding consultants are mediators who help consumers decipher meaning, providing definitions for commodities that might otherwise remain opaque to the common consumer. Consultants that I talked to revealed that while their job is defined as
catering for both bride and groom, most also revealed that in this process, they dealt predominantly with the bride-to-be. Consultants enable women to procure and utilize commodities which will create the image they have in mind.\textsuperscript{9} They also perform other unspecified roles such as advising couples on wedding protocol and organising and reassuring them on the day of the wedding. One celebrant even stated that she regularly becomes the ‘go-between’ when the stress of planning a wedding has resulted in hostility within or between families.

The consultant’s role is becoming increasingly important in the New Zealand wedding industry and is quickly becoming an increasingly lucrative occupation.\textsuperscript{10} The increased spending power of modern couples and the rise in two-income families has amplified the wedding consultancy business. More couples can afford elaborate weddings but do not have the time to organize them. Professionals encourage the bride to rely on experts to make choices for her while at the same time, emphasizing that weddings should reflect her individuality and personal taste (Howard, 2000:112). Being bombarded with a massive selection of merchandise and services, the bride-to-be may feel that employing an organiser will make life easier because they are ‘better qualified’ to deal with this. The shift towards dependence on professionals reflects how people perceive commodities, from a luxury to a necessity, as one wedding planner argued, “\textit{with the age in marriage increasing, couples are paying for their own weddings more, and this means that the role of the mother of the bride in running the wedding is decreasing - that is increasingly becoming our role."} \textsuperscript{11}

The employment of celebrants also reflects the commodification of the wedding experience.\textsuperscript{11} Celebrants are now employed just like the commodities associated with the event (Albury, 1996:95). “As vicars have waned, celebrants have waxed, proliferating like an algal bloom. Celebrants smile a lot and wear hats like satellite dishes” (Bennett, 2002:17). One of my key participants was a celebrant with whom I widely discussed the politics of the role of women modern New Zealand wedding. In the industry for many years, she had tailored her business to

\textsuperscript{9} Albury (1996:77) argued that a large proportion of the wedding actually lies in accurately decoding the meaning of commodities for clients.
\textsuperscript{10} There is even a computer program called \textit{Mother in Law}, which caters for wedding planning (Newman, 1999:27).
\textsuperscript{11} Most of the celebrants and wedding planners I interviewed were women, while all but one of the clergy I talked to were men.
cater for what she called the ‘total package’ wherein she had diversified her business, dealing with all aspects of the ceremony not just the consummation: photography, music, venue organization and so on. In this respect, she saw her role as taking some of the ‘pressures’ off the bride,

*I have done this that many times, I know what they are going through and you know, a lot of them say that they could not have done it without me… there are so many things they might not think of, a lot of them have no idea and that is part of the total package that I provide – taking some of that pressure off the bride who want the big white wedding but has no idea where to start!*

**SUMMARY**

One participant argued that a consequence of the consumer society we live in, *"everything is accessible, everything is instant and everything is disposable. Marriage and weddings are no exception."* This chapter sought to explore the proliferation of an industry that caters predominantly to women, addressing the triadic relationship between consumption, commerce and the bride. In chapter four I explored ideologies and rituals that legitimate the ceremony. Here I have explored in more depth the idea that this legitimation has an economic agenda – there is an enormous industry that relies on consumers’ demand for wedding commodities where in commerce panders to the conjugal ideal. If we consider that the production of wedding ideals exists within discourses of capitalist production that seek to make a profit, then we can better understand why these ideals are so robustly maintained.

Within this industry, the bride is the central figure of heterosexual legitimacy and is the central wedding consumer. The industry has invented the ideal of the perfect wedding, where in the only way to achieve this is to utilise the services of the various related businesses – this is the only ‘serious’ way to marry. In order to ensure this market, I looked at how commodities are encoded with arbitrary emotive values in order to appear attractive to the consumer. By encoding commodities with intangible attributes such as romance, tradition, prosperity, hope and opulence, consumers may come to desire the quality rather than the actual product. This encoding process is so successful that commodities and services with only secondary or nonexistent relevance to weddings employ evocations of bridal romance to sell their products. The bride’s commercial function is now two fold– she is the perfect consumer *and* the perfect signifier.
If weddings are rituals of consumption and consumption is gendered female, then the groom’s role in this equation has to be secondary. This was evident at the exhibitions where a female market is blatantly targeted. Grooms are assumed to be reluctant participants at best where as the wedding for the bride is to be ‘the best day of her life’ (an idea that is pursued further in the following chapter). Messages in popular culture translate to us that women are essentially ‘good’ at marriage, assumed to ‘naturally’ enjoy the planning that a wedding necessitates. Participants testified to feeling responsible for the majority of their wedding planning/organisation. Although this can provide agency and a sense of achievement, the repercussions are significant: not only do these trends echo traditional gender roles, but women also endure most of the stresses involved with the job. While one participant testified that, “it was simply easier this way”, many struggled with a contradictory stance. Dialogue implied feelings of guilt in finding pleasure in the reversion to the traditionally feminine roles associated with the wedding (catering, dress making, flower arranging and so on), similar to the symbolic conflicts over the veil, as expressed by participants in chapter four.

An insidious consequence of this ‘feminisation’ of the wedding industry was evident in those participants who confessed to feeling pressure to ‘live up to the image.’ Magazines such as the New Zealand Bride and Groom provide an image of the default bride – a slim, elegant, young, (predominantly Caucasian) beauty. Related businesses have brought into these ideals, directing services integral to the construction of this image (weight loss, make up, skin therapy, hair removal and so on). It is deemed essential that these commodities and services are utilized in order for women to look their best on their ‘big day.’ While most participants saw these images as unrealistic and unattainable, pressures to ‘look the part’ were still deeply manifest.

I have argued that businesses in the wedding industry use their authority as experts on etiquette and ‘tradition’ to shape wedding practice and set a standard for wedding consumption. This process of naturalisation has necessitated the legitimisation of certain consumer rites. Wedding rituals are not questioned, despite their lack of traditional historicity. Images of romance and tradition effectively conceal any commercial motivations involved in the signifying process as well as the workings of conspicuous consumption.

Also of significance is the large degree of wedding expenditure dedicated to commodities that are consumed on the day, for the benefit of the guests. In the process of conspicuous consumption
huge amounts of money is spent catering to the guest’s perception of the experience. Many of my participants expressed concern over other peoples’ approval. In this sense, the ceremony doubles as a theoretical production and a form of entertainment, where in the bride is the central protagonist.

Some participants argued that the growth of the wedding industry and the increase in more versatile non-denominational celebrants has lifted the ‘burden’ off the bride in planning the wedding. There is more choice in services, more competition and therefore more competitive price options. Parallel with these progressions however, is a growth in anticipation – more is expected of brides. A visible manifestation of this is the tendency for couples to opt for commodities that accentuate the experience even if this means spending beyond their financial means. The ‘burden’ therefore is reinforced. The increase in celebrants and specialists in the industry is also not necessarily reflective of a more gender-neutral job distribution in the wedding planning process. While many women employ the services of wedding consultants, the amount of work has not necessarily decreased, rather the kind of work has simply changed and costs have proliferated.

I emphasise that consumers do ultimately make their own interpretation/use of what constitutes romance and femininity – and the ideal wedding. But while many of my participants did mediate these ideals, selectively utilizing certain available services/commodities and discarding others (due to finances, taste or personal reasons), many also sought to replicate them. Participants frequently purchased related commodities and services with an image in mind rather than the actual product, where in these purchases effectively assisted in the creation of a chosen holistic image/wedding theme (romantic, traditional, medieval and so on). The quest for the perfect dress was also of significant importance for many participants as well as the desire to ‘look the part.’ So, while actual practices vary widely, businesses have a role in defining an idealised image of the bride and in turn, a model of the ideal wedding. My participants revealed that these ideals still widely influence wedding behaviour.

Weddings are a renewable resource and brides within this equation are the most highly valued customers. The wedding industry provides the tools for the metamorphosis of a woman into a bride. The relationship between my ethnographic experiences at the bridal expositions and the theoretical analysis of magazines was integral: ideals of consumption and gender identity that
popular culture revealed in symbolic form, were acted out literally at bridal exhibitions. Within this process, the connection between commerce and romance is strong: romance was the fundamental attribute utilised by many of the services and products available to brides. It is the legitimacy of this quality and its meaning to brides that is the focus of the following chapter.
CHAPTER SIX: THE PRINCESS BRIDE – IDEOLOGY IN ACTION

Every girl dreams of her wedding day right? It’s the one day in her life when she will be the most beautiful and admired woman around — (or at least in a 30 metre radius) — her day as a princess. The day she marries her Prince Charming and then lives happily ever after (Wilson, 2002:18).

Figure 22, Princess for a Day (New Zealand Bride and Groom, 2001:19)
A woman is never so happy as when she is being wooed. Then she is mistress of all
she surveys, until that day of days when she sails down the aisle, a vision in white,
lovely as the stephanotis that she carries, borne translucent on her father's manly arm
to be handed over to her new father-surrogate. She will discover that marriage is not
romantic, that husbands forget birthdays and anniversaries and seldom pay
compliments, are often perfunctory (because he is careless of the rituals that she
established as a blushing bride). Marriage is the end of the romance...she was swept
away in the first place, tricked into this state by the nature of courtship – the wining
and dining. Woman's magazines exhort her not to let the romance die out of her
marriage. She tries not to 'let herself go', keeps young looking, pretty, tries not to
ask her husband every single day if he loves her, wishes his morning kiss before
leaving her alone for the day was a little less mechanical...sooner or later she sees
her courting as a seduction; she may blame her husband for it but in fact she
engendered the seduction herself...she sees that she was a silly romantic girl. Now
she finds that marriage is a hard job. Her romanticism becomes, if it has not already
become, escapism. She treats herself to little romantic things like perfumes, which
her husband does not even notice. Romance is now her private dream (Greer,

The previous chapter addressed the gender ideologies at work in wedding consumption and the
ways in which the wedding industry utilises bridal imagery as an economic strategy. In this
relationship between consumption, romance and commerce, I looked at the encoding of products
and services and the process by which signified meaning is attached to them to make them more
appealing to a female consumer market. This chapter takes a closer look at one of the dominant
signifiers in this process: romance. I look at the ways in which romance is employed in
wedding/marriage discourse in transmitting dominant ideologies through a focus on the 'princess
bride' trope. The construction of this trope depends on a complex ideological infrastructure that
also relies on taken for granted values and assumptions about gender roles. In addition to the
expectation that the bride is to be the beautiful princess at her wedding, is the idea that the
wedding day is one of the most important days of a woman's life, an assumption that renders the
groom invisible. The feminisation of wedding discourse stipulates that the bride is, by virtue of
her gendered role, the protagonist - the 'star of the show.'

Messages in popular culture, television and movies of the beautiful princess bride have been
naturalised, effectively socialising girls from a very young age to the point that child brides play-
acting their future role as the princess bride are ubiquitous. I examine these domains, looking
specifically at how this ideal is manufactured and sustained in popular culture. I utilise images
from the New Zealand Bride and Groom before addressing a domain that aims to 'brand' a
market from an early age: toy marketing. I consider the importance of wedding extravagance and
paraphernalia in making this dream ‘come alive’ and just how my participants mediate these messages in the creation of their ideal wedding and self-depiction as bride. Despite the conflation of marital love and wedding ideology however, these ideologies appear to evolve around discourses of the wedding only, with little relevance to marriage. I conclude the chapter with a brief account of participants’ mediations in the relationship between the princess bride trope and marriage ideals.

Changes in wedding values have developed parallel to changing marriage values. Firestone (1979:32) argued that the blurring of romance with the institution of marriage began in the 1920’s. Many participants were confident in their perceptions that romantic love and sexual passion form the basis of marriage. In the past however, these characteristics did not hold the same degree of importance as they do today. Pre twentieth century, romantic love was not considered of great importance when choosing a wife and health, strength and fertility were favoured (Greer, 1971:198-200). Writing on the European family in New Zealand in the colonial era, historians Olssen and Levesque (1978) asserted that virtually nobody in the early or mid-Victorian period would have considered sexual compatibility or personal fulfilment as reasons for marriage. They argued that women looked for security in the form of a good worker, while men sought the advantage of a proficient ‘helpmeet’ to organize the home and bear children. Coney (1995:6) even argued that romance was deficient in most colonial marriages, defining them primarily as economic partnerships.¹

In modern Western society, marriage has increasingly come to be based on the experience of falling in love. Greer (1971:198) stated, “loveless marriage is anathema to our culture, and a life without love is unthinkable.” Love is articulated through romantic codes and forms the basis of our social identity (Langford, 1999:4). It is an emotion, as argued by all my participants that forms the basis of the marital relationship. In fact, it was the only prerequisite for marriage that was recognised by all of my participants. But more than this – participants’ references to ‘love’ came to characterise wedding ideals, blurring the relationship between emotion and commerce. As one participant stated, “weddings are love personified aren’t they...the whole affair is a love gesture. We could say all this parade is superficial, but we could also say that it is a consequence of the couple’s love for each other.” Although I do not examine politics of love in

¹ Since this is not a historical analysis of relationships in colonial New Zealand this was not pursued, although I emphasise that such a claim is indisputably opinion not based on empirical research.
the present research, I saw it as necessary to now look at how love ideals are utilised in the process of wedding commodity consumption and in the creation of the princess bride trope.

IDEOLOGY: THE PROMISE OF ROMANCE AND FANTASY

One of the most effective and frequently used ideological reward mechanisms in the perpetuation of bridal ideals is that of romantic imagery. Romance is ideology in action (Ingraham, 1999:85). Dominant ideologies of romantic love work to conceal contradictions in capitalist and patriarchal social arrangements in order to maintain the social order. (Ingraham, 1999: 21). Heterosexual imaginary for example, prevents people from seeing the role of marriage in preserving heirs and protecting private property, and instead, romanticizes the fantasy and melodrama of the institution. The ideology of romance overrides contradictions and simplifies overwhelming complexities. And more ominously, as discussed in chapter two, there is enormous scope for sexual, physical and domestic abuses to be rendered invisible through the ‘legitimacy’ of romance through marriage.

Weddings signal compliance to these ideologies. Although marriage may be detached from the ceremony itself, we are made to believe that romance can be achieved by participating in the white wedding and all the extravagance it has to offer. Romance represents the utopian promise of love, joy, happiness and a sense of community. Ultimately, its goal is the creation of illusion. It is not about the real but about the fantasy, fairy tale or utopian vision of the real. “The romantic illusions created by media weddings construct desire to such an extent that, without realizing it we place these illusions before reality (Ingraham, 1999:126).

When applied to weddings and marriage, romance works in the service of heterosexual imagery and delivers messages about the value of weddings and marriage (Ingraham, 1999:132). Ideology manifests itself in words and images, which establish and regulate the meanings and beliefs justifying dominant interests. Consumers are convinced that romance is both necessary and sacred and this outweighs the realities of the commodity market and manifestations of ideology. As discussed throughout the investigation, these ideologies effectively conceal capitalist production at work in the wedding experience, “our myths about wedlock – it is spontaneous, private, natural, personal, romantic – demand that its financial component remained unspoken” (Geller, 2001:171). The white wedding is therefore, the pinnacle of romance and the
bride within this fantasy embodies the romantic ideal: she symbolises the heterosexual ideology at its apex.

SIGNIFYING EMOTION

Weddings themselves are sentiment, romance and emotion personified (Howard, 2000:91). The wedding's embodiment of these ideals was apparent at bridal exhibitions, whose industry seeks to cater directly to the princess bride 'dream.' As one wedding organiser stated in regard to the bride, "they want to float down the aisle looking gorgeous. We help them do that." The following extended quote reveals one participant's concern over the use of romance in the industry.

I completely agree with you about industries persuading people through advertising that consuming their products will help you buy romance – love is being sold. Yes, women have been sold a bill of goods so to speak regarding finding happiness through their weddings. This tale is much older than modern movies, fashion or television, however. Read any Jane Austen novel or any old fairy tale. They always end in a wedding...happily ever after. The difference is that now, it's a tremendous commercial enterprise. Women have absolutely bought into the idea that romance can be purchased. Clearly - it can't. But look at how much more people are spending on weddings these days - and look at the divorce rate.

As discussed, romance is the predominant signifier used in commodity branding in the wedding industry. I found hundreds of examples in the New Zealand Bride and Groom which evoked the fairy-tale white wedding and the romance it entails in the selling of commodities and services. ‘Fairytale fashion’ for example, is popular in many bridal dress stores and material shops as seen below in figure 23. One participant’s wedding featured ‘fairy’ flower girls, complete with wings, wands and tiaras. An advertisement for Desiree Costume Hire in Auckland tells readers, ‘fairytale do come true!’ (Issue 30). Some of my participants wore tiaras, directly symbolic of the princess stereotype and one wore a diamond-encrusted crown. The bride’s attire is of course the dominant symbol of the princess bride theme, to which a huge amount of fashion displays in the New Zealand Bride and Groom are dedicated. Issue 27 feature fashion displays under the following titles, 'The Princess Bride', 'Garden of Roses' and 'Bella Donna' while issue 25 featured, 'Once Upon a Time' and, 'Snow White Rose Red' featured in issue 28. The themes employed by these features reinforce the idea addressed in the previous chapter, where fashion works in the creation and selling of an image. In this process, desire and consumption are fused, effectively blurring the divide between commerce and ideology.
Other elements of the ceremony uphold the fairytale ideal. Plastic bride and groom cake decoration figures for example, espouse the ideal of the perfect couple and the 'traditional' white wedding. Many participants had/would use such figures, although some had adapted them to individualise their ceremony, such as one couple that had dolls custom-made to match their attire (ensuing in the chapter). One wedding service that specifically targets the princess bride theme has recently become available in Dunedin and was on display at The 2001 Wedding Exhibition (28/4/02) – the fairy tale horse and carriage. I interviewed the carriage driver who spoke directly of the target market,

There is a growing demand for this service as more and more couples are seeking something that is, a) a little bit different and b) that embraces tradition. Most of our clients want a traditional white wedding and this is the perfect way to portray a royal impression.

Many of my participants expressed approval and even desire for this service, although it was out of most people’s budgets at $350/hour.
Intangible signifiers that are detached from any physical commodity/service are also resonant transmitters of the princess bride ideal. While wedding paraphernalia assists in the creation of the dream, the bride is also attributed with a sense of ‘grace’ and ‘mystery’ that is seen as unique to the wedding day. In discussions with all participants who had married or were planning to marry, I noticed a universal requirement: all, even the most modest, emphasised the importance of ‘looking the part.’ This desire went beyond physical beauty discussed in the previous chapter however - participants talked of ‘glowing with happiness’ and serenity,

*I’m not too fussed about the big white wedding, I think it would scare me! Something small to medium I think...I better be looking gorgeous though (!)...I should be so happy that you can see it on my face, that’s what it’s all about. The bride should emanate that happiness.*

One participant even conjured a sense of ‘enchantment’ when she described her sister’s wedding, “she emanated elegance, poise and style, it was magical to watch.”

**CENTRE OF ATTENTION**

Clayton (1990:150) argued that, “a unique aura of euphoria and radiance surrounds the proud couple as they exchange vows in the presence of loved ones.” But participant’s made it clear that the bride must necessarily be the centre of attention (Visser, 1994:132, Albury, 1996:37). One participant explicitly decreed weddings as an innately female concern, “the bride should be the focal point of the ceremony, because if it wasn’t for brides, I don’t think we would have weddings! You know – if it was up to men, well they would do away with all the drama wouldn’t they?” Other participants asserted that this was imperative,

*At my wedding, all my friends and family will be there, all those that are important to me. And it is a chance for them to see me at my happiest, marrying the person I love and will spend the rest of my life with. It is a chance for me to show them all that I am happy, yes it is my day in that sense, because men don’t need the same reassurance do they?*

Although confident in her vision of herself as a bride, this participant did harbour some concerns about her role in the ceremony, “...all those people staring! Every eye will be upon me.”

Romantic ideology seeks to make women believe that their wedding day is to be one of the most meaningful of their lives, if not the most important. Howard (2000:219) argued that the wedding
has remained one of the last female rituals in an increasingly hetero-social world. Participant references to weddings were often punctuated with descriptions such as “my special day”, “the big day” and “the defining moment.” These ideals were considered so significant by many that the ceremony was imbued with supreme importance. This message was resonant throughout all editions of the *New Zealand Bride and Groom* that I examined. Issue 28 advised, “Your wedding day, it must be glorious. It must be perfect. It must be the most memorable, idyllic and overwhelmingly love-filled occasion of your entire life.”

*We'll help make your Wedding Day the happiest day of your life.*

*Celebrate the happiest day of your life amidst the romantic Victorian setting of our fabulous venue, complete with crystal chandeliers and ornate gilt finishing. Our professional Co-ordinator will arrange everything including personalised menus, catering for up to 200 guests.*

*With our range of Wedding Packages we offer a complimentary Honeymoon Suite plus special room rates for guests. Call us now and tell us what you propose.*

*Wedding Packages start from $33 per person.*

*Southern Cross Hotel*
*Dunedin*
*New Zealand*

Figure 24, Southern Cross Hotel
Figure 24 above for the *Southern Cross Hotel* in Dunedin employs this ‘superior day’ message stating, ‘we’ll help make your Wedding Day the happiest day of your life’ (Issue 28). The technique employed in an advertisement for *Hyatt Regency* is to assume that the reader is seeking perfection. It uses the strong imperative, ‘you want your wedding to be perfect. It will be, at *Hyatt Regency Auckland*’ (Issue 27:44). Similarly, an advertisement for *Centra Hotel* in Auckland (Issue 27) reminds its readers, ‘you are approaching one of life’s most memorable occasions. Let us help you bring your dream wedding day to life.’ As discussed in the previous chapter, the pressures these expectations generate for the bride are significant, like the self-consciousness of the participant who alleged, “every eye will be on me.” The irony of the situation is that the resonance of the expectations to look and act ‘the part’ make success even more precarious.

![BLOOMSBURY OCCASIONS](image)

**Figure 25, Set a Fairy Tale Scene**
A huge quantity of the *New Zealand Bride and Groom* is dedicated to advertising wedding products. Despite the presence of conflicting themes utilized to advertise bridal commodities, the princess bride trope was still a predominant one. From a poststructuralist perspective, advertisements seldom represent realistic portrayals of men and women, but embody the ways we think they behave. Messages that bridal advertisements relate involve notions of female modesty, glamour, monogamy, a concern with luck and of course an obsession with the ‘fairy-tale’ fantasy. Figure 25 above for *Bloomsbury Occasions* (Issue 27) exemplified the princess ideal. Even advice on wedding ritual concedes to the princess bride theme. Issue 27 suggested, ‘a month out from your wedding what better way to forget about the pre-wedding stress than to be showered in loving gifts and treated like a queen by your closest friends and relatives? (my emphasis)’

![You'll Feel Like a Princess](image)

*Figure 26 You’ll Feel Like a Princess*
The wedding’s embodiment of romantic mysticism and fantasy was also strong in the *New Zealand Bride and Groom*. An advertisement for *Avica* Weddings and Resort told potential clients, ‘whatever you desire, your special dreams will become a reality at Avica weddings and resort’ (Figure 26, Issue 32). Figure 27 below for *Lakeside Convention Centre* in Auckland reinforced this idea stating, ‘you can rely upon the professional team at Lakeside to make your Dreams Come True!’ (Issue 26). Image 28 for *Hyde Park Hire* in Christchurch opens with the heading ‘Wedding Dreams’ before declaring, ‘transform your wedding dreams into reality with our extensive range of accessories...’ (Issue 27), while *Auckland Wedding Videos* promises to ‘capture...the romantic tale of your wedding day’ (Issue 32). Figure 29 for *Castles Party Hire* told its readers, ‘join us for the wedding of your dreams...set under a romantic soft silk canopy with magical fairy lights, in your dream location. At Castles we pride ourselves on making your wedding day a ‘dream come true’’ (New Zealand Bride and Groom, Issue 29).

![Figure 27, Lakeside Dreams](image-url)
Figure 28, Transforming Dreams into Reality

Join us for the wedding of your dreams...

Figure 29, Wedding of Your Dreams
Figure 30 below employs an image of a beautiful blonde bride, looking pensive and soulful to articulate to its predominantly female readers the idea that the wedding is the fulfilment of a long-cherished dream (New Zealand Women's Weekly, January, 2001). The coupling of a bride with a small ‘cute’ flower girl, as seen in figure 31 below was another reoccurring device utilised in bridal fashion displays, reinforcing the notion of the wedding as a ritual that symbolises a woman’s long cherished dream. The bride sees what she once was, a child fantasizing about weddings, and the girl sees what she may aspire to become – a beautiful bride (Geller, 2001:232).

![Image of a beautiful bride](image_url)

**Figure 30, Dreaming of being a beautiful bride?**
These messages translate to women the idea that weddings offer immediate psycho-social rewards for the bride who consents. This idea is embodied in discourses that embody romance as a virtue: the *Bride of the Year* competition which rewarded contestants for their attainment of bridal ideals the bridal shower and registry — accolades which honour the couple in their
heterosexual achievement (as discussed in chapter five).\textsuperscript{2} An article in the popular women’s magazine, \textit{B} (August, 2000) tells imminent brides that while at the hairdresser, ‘enjoy the scalp massage, sit back and relax and let them turn you into Cinderella.’ The concept of reward was a reoccurring one in the \textit{New Zealand Bride and Groom}, implying that women ‘deserve’ a stunning wedding and should look forward to it. ‘Enhance your special day. Spoil yourself with some exquisite \textit{Eden Lingerie}. With your wedding on the way you can treat yourself to something special for under your gown’ (Issue 32:70). Another edition suggested to the bride-to-be, ‘celebrate with the \textit{pampering you deserve} and you’ll feel relaxed, beautiful and completely ready for your big day’ (my emphasis) (Issue 29:70). The \textit{Transform Beauty Clinic} in Christchurch advertises wedding related products and services, for ‘when you deserve the best’ (Issue 32) while an advert for \textit{The Springs} restaurant in Auckland stated, ‘your special day \textit{deserves a perfect venue}...’ (my emphasis) (Issue 29:23).

Cancian (1990:44) pointed out that messages about women’s social role and status in New Zealand magazines alter considerably along with changing social values. Through close analysis of popular culture (magazines, newspapers and journals) she concluded that the rise and fall of images of marriage paralleled the rise and fall of the women’s movement in the 1970’s (at times, marriage was even portrayed as detrimental for women). While I did find some examples of magazine images that challenged dominant ideals, they were rare and despite their challenges to conventional bridal depictions, still ultimately conformed to hegemonic understandings of women and weddings. I showed figure 32 below for \textit{Napuro} semi-permanent hair colour at focus groups, to which there were mixed interpretations. The general consensus was that the image rendered the bride self-sufficient in the strategic, pragmatic motives implied in the image. The bride conforms to the princess bride ideal but also inverts the dream since she is a ‘gold digger’ dreaming of money. The parody on women’s search for financial security in marriage renders her a marital deviant, since her older groom is romantically mislead. But in her conformity to the beautiful princess bride and through her adoption of the bridal role she still effectively validates the heterosexual ideal.

\textsuperscript{2} Runner-up prizes embodies notions of feminine delicacy and romance, including, ‘The Elegance Prize’, ‘The Style and Grace Prize’, ‘The Radiance Prize’, ‘The Serenity Prize’ and ‘The Vivacity Prize’.
Figure 32, Forever is a Long Time

SOCIALISING A PRINCESS

The trope of ‘princess for the day’ is also significant in its embodiment of larger gendered relations of power. In the previous chapter I looked at how the wedding industry fosters an ideal that fuses gender and consumption. Integral to this relationship is the notion that women are wedding consumers long before they marry: in order for the princess bride trope to take effect, it must be naturalised from an early age. Central to this process is the naturalisation of marriage itself. It was a common theme in sociological and anthropological literature in the past that young girls are socialized and encouraged to see their future as lying in marriage and preparing for domesticity as a natural attribute that a wife should perform for her family (Bernard 1972:43,
Rich 1980:9, Gittins 1985:77-78, May 1992:127). Because of early and continuous socialization of boys and girls to accept gender roles, marriage – especially for many women, is still regarded as 'natural.' One participant responded, "I'd have to say that the princess wedding thing has been fed to us since we were children. It's quite a common theme. Most little girls romanticize about their wedding, and have trial runs."

These ideologies are subject to an ongoing process of naturalisation, sustained by a complex disciplinary technology which helps ensure a desire for weddings. The future of the wedding market is secured by the impressions given to children at a young age, through popular culture as well as a more interactive medium – toys. A significant range of toys aimed at young girls reinforce traditional gender roles and idealised body images that conform to the princess bride theme. As expected, the dominant image projected at young girls aligns with those targeted at women in bridal magazines. Toy companies, generally part of large conglomerates often own related commodities such as travel, cosmetics and broadcasting, working to secure future consumption markets for all their products through the selling of wedding toys. For example Toy Biz, which is owned by the same company as Revlon, has manufactured a toy called the, Caboodles Wedding Play Set featuring wedding accessories as well as makeup for the future bride. Mattel, the largest toy producer in the world, has offices in thirty-six countries and sells their products in one hundred and fifty nations including New Zealand. Their largest toy brand is Barbie and included in this range is an extensive selection of bridal Barbies (Ingraham, 1999:63).

Bridal Barbies and bridal gowns are popular items for toy consumers and are available in most toy retail outlets in New Zealand (see figures 34, 35 and 36 below). My Size Barbie is a three foot tall doll, complete with a wedding gown large enough to fit the intended consumer - a four to six year old child. The doll, retailing at approximately $170 is blonde, blue-eyed, slim and pretty and comes in packaging that features a human replica of the doll. While this particular toy was not available in local toy stores, I found similar products such as that seen in figure 33, which

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3 Disney is the world's second largest media conglomerate, after Time Warner, with annual revenues exceeding US$22 billion. Mattel reaped US$1.4 billion in sales in 1998 alone from Barbie and accessories, by far the biggest line in all of toy land. Gross profit margins on licensed figures can run 50%, with the modest cost of making them; most are produced abroad and don't require much investment in plant and equipment (Pereira, cited by Ingraham, 1999:64). Most of these products are available in New Zealand.

4 See Ingraham (1999:66) for an exposure of Disney exploitation in Haiti and Western capitalist exploitation in Asian sweatshops, where Disney products are manufactured by young children for a market they will never be able to enter (1999:63).
replicates the princess ideal. This dress, named *Here Comes the Bride*, retails at NZ$67 and is targeted at girls in the four to six year age cohort. In local toy stores I found a gift set for young girls titled, ‘Dream Wedding Set’ also by Mattel, featuring ‘everything you need for your big day.’ The set included a plastic ring, a tiara, large plastic ‘jewels’ and even a fake wedding license and retailed at an affordable NZ$2.95. Mattel’s range of ‘multi-cultural’ Barbies is also extensive, but there is little variation in the facial or body characteristics of these dolls and the default Barbie conforms to representations of the ideal white bride: slim, beautiful and glamorous. The message for young girls is one of assimilation. Mattel, Disney, Hasbro and other toy companies market a variety of children’s products that feature the same dominant images of the princess bride whose greatest achievement is her wedding to a handsome prince. The wedding becomes both the object of a young girl’s dreams and the site of closure, rendering the material relationship invisible.

[Figure 33, Here Comes the Bride (Retailing at NZ$35.99)]
Figure 34, Barbie 1 (Retailing at NZ$39.95)

Figure 35, Barbie 2 (Retailing at NZ$36.99)
One participant, in discussion about wedding related toys, reminisced about her own childhood,

I can remember being a kid and dressing up in a gown and marrying my brother in the hallway. It was more influential for us as girls I reckon, all the dolls – Barbie and her accessories, jewellery etc. Yes I guess that popular culture has influenced me – well all of us in some way, just to what extent I don’t know. All of the Golden Book series, remember them? They were very popular...we loved them and I am sure we based our understandings of gender and romance on them at that age, but look at how entrenched the ideas were – beautiful, passive princess is be ‘saved’ by her handsome Prince and most likely marries him.

While I did not pursue gender roles in literature directed at children, I became aware of the use of marriage as a popular catharsis technique in popular culture (see figure 37). In her study of ten ‘feminist’ children’s stories, Scrimshaw (2000:19) revealed that, despite the unconventional nature of many princesses in feminist children’s stories, marriage is still their fundamental goal.
She argued that marriage is not the issue, rather whether or not a man has control over a woman's sexuality. Because the stories are for children, marriage she argues, is a euphemism for sexuality and is seen as the only viable option to celibacy: other types of relationships are not discussed (Scrimshaw, 2000:19).

Figure 37, Animated Wedding

WEDDINGS UNDER SIEGE: THE POWER OF POPULAR CULTURE

The princess bride theme is pervasive in many other forms of popular culture, with music, television, movie and popular literature themes frequently caricaturing the necessity of romantic fulfilment and articulating the anguish of love gone wrong. Weddings are often the catharsis to salvage the plot of love-gone-wrong. The following discussion constitutes the responses of one of my focus groups to my inquiry, 'how big an influence do you think popular culture (movies, television, music) has been in influencing the princess bride trope?' Responses varied, fluctuating between expressions of compliance with these ideologies and rejection of them,

Yes, it has been naturalised, I think to the extent that it is strange that you ask me, I sit here now and realise just how popular a theme the 'happy ever after' wedding ending is in mainstream movies. Still today. And even movies like Shrek, which rebel against plot convention, still end with a wedding.

Well that just shows that weddings are symbols of stability and progress. Not just in the romantic sense, but closure on all fronts.
And even though this has been naturalised in girls and women, even though we have awareness, I think it is a more complex issue because most of us desire this fantasy in some way. All women want to look beautiful, to be the centre of attention, because we know that this is the one day where the dream can come alive...

Kondo (1990:13) argued that everything we do, including our engagement with the media and commodities can be included in a repertoire of oppositional strategies. One participant responded to the above comments in a focus group,

*I disagree. Not all women desire the fantasy. For one thing, I was brought up by a feminist mother who was the breadwinner for the family, and who managed to accidentally convince me that marriage for marriage's sake alone was unnecessary...I find the frilly wedding stuff all a little nauseating.*

Another participant voiced this dilemma,

*Is it possible though to exercise feminist agency at the same time as desiring this dream? That episode from Friends (impending in the chapter) that you mentioned...they are independent women, they are in control of their own lives and yet still cling to the dream...I don't know, the two perspectives have been blurred and somehow we have to find a balance.*

Television is an important medium for the transmission of wedding ideology. I use here only one example of the utilisation of the princess bride theme from television, extracting dialogue from two episodes of *Friends*, which were also discussed in the focus group referenced above. *Friends* is one of the most widely viewed sitcoms within my group of participants and one that reflects the conflicting desires women today may be experiencing. The first episode involved the pre-wedding planning for the marriage of characters Emily and Ross (Television New Zealand: 23/6/00). In this episode, Emily asks Ross's sister Monica to pick up her wedding dress from the bridal shop. Monica agrees, goes to the store and being mistaken for Emily, tries on the dress.

The subsequent scene shows the store closing, implying that Monica has been there all day. She brings the dress home and wears it while doing housework. When another flatmate arrives home, she is shocked to see Monica wearing the dress and Monica responds, 'It feels so good, you should try it!' The next scene shows the two girls walking around the flat in wedding dresses talking about how good it feels. Another female flat mate arrives home depressed, so the other
two flat mates tell her about the ‘gown thing’ and tell her they have ‘something that will make her feel better.’ In the next scene we see all three women sitting on the couch in wedding gowns, eating popcorn and discussing how uplifting it feels to wear a wedding gown. The gown comforts these ‘incomplete’ single women of the good things to come and the rewarding feeling of being feminine and beautiful.

In a scene that addresses the difference in the importance of a wedding/marriage to males and females, Monica asks Ross (the groom), how long he has been planning the wedding, to which he replies one month. Monica then states, ‘Emily has probably been planning this since she was five, ever since the first time she took a pillowcase and hung it off the back of her head. That’s what we did! We dreamed about the perfect wedding and the perfect place and the perfect four-tiered wedding cake with the little people on top. And, we had the perfect guy who understood why this is important to us.’ This scene reinforces the extent to which the fairy tale white wedding has been naturalized, as well as the idea that it is primarily the woman’s domain of interest.

Such themes are common in popular culture. The popular sitcom, *Third Rock from the Sun*, features aliens disguised as humans, who are on earth to learn the ways of human behaviour. Sally, one of the leading female characters, responds to a query about why she agreed to get married, ‘I’m a woman and he asked me. That’s what women are supposed to do’ (Television New Zealand: 14/3/00). The message is that women can somehow find an innate sense of identity and femininity by succeeding in the creation of the perfect wedding. The repercussions however, are profound. Ingraham (1999:157) summarises the ramifications of these ideologies on women, perceiving them as, “manifesting a form of anti-intellectualism where women are concerned, reducing their expectations in life to one moment of spectacle, rendering their talents and desires to the domestic sphere, trivializing their interests in the world around them, and situating them as the standard-bearers of traditional femininity and the heterosexual gendered division of labour.”

**ROMANTIC DEVIANCE**

Foucault, (1978:94) argued that sex is placed by power in a binary system: licit and illicit, permitted and forbidden. Desired forms of sexual behaviour are enforced through a process of rejection - identifying and cataloguing forms of deviance. Although heterosexuality is situated as
correlative with the most natural form of sexual expression, the media deals with the sexual ‘failures’ of this world – people whose responses turn out to be ‘abnormal’. This points to what Weeks calls an ‘enduring paradox’ – “heterosexuality is natural yet has to be attained, inevitable but constantly threatened, spontaneous yet in effect to be learnt” (Weeks, 1985:85). Eagleton (1991:5-6) argued, by its nature, ideology must exclude rival forms of thought and obscure social reality in ways convenient to itself. The television series *Weddings* (Television New Zealand, 13/4/01) followed weddings in New Zealand over the last couple of years. I showed segments of an episode featuring a cross-dressing wedding (where in the groom donned a white gown and the bride, a suit) from this series to one of my focus groups.

Using this particular footage appealed because it transgressed ‘normal’ gender identities in the conventional white wedding. Interestingly, this wedding exemplified the antithesis of the conventional princess bride ceremony, situating the bride in a contradictory role. She may be considered active in her role as bride – on her day, yet by wearing a suit, she also inverts this. In contrast, by wearing the dress – the central symbol of the princess bride, the groom also challenges hegemonic ideals of the beautiful bride. The coverage for the show however, was discursively styled. The more unusual weddings such as this in the series, were not celebrated for their unique adaptations, rather the portrayal was closer to the depiction of circus freaks. Participants in this focus group all agreed that the coverage and commentary that accompanied the wedding was condescending and disdainful.

The princess bride fairy tale theme is also perpetuated stoutly through the medium of cinema. According to the Hollywood model, the ideal woman is no longer the dignified mother and supportive wife yet paradoxically, the princess bride theme is as strong as ever. Ingraham (1999:131) argued that, “while the mainstream formula for success used to be ‘tits and ass’ with a dash of violence, contemporary motion pictures include weddings regardless of their relevance to the film.” The fairy-tale formula of weddings is evident even in action films targeting a largely male audience, such as *Armageddon*. While I did not have time to explore individual films in my research write up, I watched dozens of popular mainstream movies that featured weddings. The following are recent mainstream films that feature weddings as their main theme alone: *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994), *Muriel’s Wedding* (1994), *Tomcats, My Best Friend’s Wedding* (1997), *The Wedding Planner* (2001), *The Bachelor, The Wedding Singer* (1998), *Wedding Bell Blues, Polish Wedding* (1998), *Shotgun Wedding* (1993), *Runaway Bride* (1999), *The Princess

Disneyworld: making dreams come true

The ability of mainstream cinema to effectively transmit ideals of romance has been recognised by Walt Disney, whose Company Holdings in 1998 included the following major Cinematic Shares: Walt Disney Pictures, Caravan Pictures, Miramax Pictures, Buena Vista Pictures Distribution, Touchstone Pictures and Hollywood Pictures (Ingraham, 1999:57). All of these holdings have produced movies that are distributed in New Zealand video stores. One film in particular, Father of the Bride (a Touchstone production owned by Disney) was so successful that Disney modelled their wedding consulting business on it (Ingraham, 1999:56, Howard, 2000:150). Until 2001, a New Zealand woman, Lisa Simpson held the position of manager for this consulting business and as Heron (1998:30) stated, it was her job to make, “fairytale dreams come true.” Her successor conveyed the success of the princess bride trope in ‘selling a dream’, “it really is a popular request. People just want to escape reality, even if it’s just for a day, and we provide the means to do that.”

The Disney World business epitomizes all that the princess bride trope stands for. Its advertising is directly reflective of these ideals, ‘once upon a time, in an enchanted land, there was a place where wedding dreams and honeymoon wishes came true every day. Today, such a place actually exists — at the Walt Disney World® Resort’ (www.disney.go.com). Disney World Dream Weddings provide the chance to live this fairytale dream. Situated in Hollywood, the business has married over 15 000 couples since 1991 in an especially designed Wedding Pavilion on site. Couples can even marry in the Cinderella Castle (www.disney.go.com). ‘The most special moment of your life can also be the most enchanted. Embrace this moment, for your wedding day should be everything you’ve ever dreamed it to be. At Disney’s Fairy Tale Weddings, with our magical tradition and history, we make dreams magnificently and memorably come true.’ As discussed in the previous chapter, the use of inclusive descriptive pronouns gives

Despite its title, the film’s setting was Manhattan, New York and featured a conventional Western (White) wedding, dealing with the vicissitudes characteristic of Western weddings. A tragic-comedy, one of the central dramas of the plot is centred around the catastrophe of the bride waking up with a zit on her face. All of the women’s energies are invested in finding the protagonist a husband and the ‘ugly’ dumpling transforms into a beautiful princess bride at the film’s closure.

At the time I tried to contact Mrs Simpson she was no longer employed, but I spoke with her successor, an American woman, via email.
the impression of unity and dedication, rendering the service provider part of the marital union, 'from this day forward we promise to guide you, assist you and stand by you, every step of the way' (www.disneyland.disney.go.com).

Figure 38, A 'Real' Princess

'REAL' PRINCESSES

In the production of the princess bride trope, media constructions of celebrity weddings play a powerful role, institutionalising heterosexuality, linking romance with accumulation and fusing
consumption with commerce. Celebrities embody romance and fantasy and appeal to readers as actual manifestations of fairy-tale romances, personifying the ‘dream.’ Figure 38 (Hello, June: 2001) provides an example of the use of celebrity weddings to increase magazine consumption. Their personal lives become fodder for gossip columns - divorce, remarriage, then disillusionment and the liberation of a new romance. Princess Diana epitomized the ultimate princess bride and is one of the most retold of all celebrity weddings (Howard, 2000:182). Princess Grace also symbolized this ideal. Neither woman came from royalty, yet both married a ‘handsome prince’ aligning with the fantasy that any woman can achieve the fairy tale dream.7 These royal weddings of ‘real’ princesses reinforce the salient belief that even the most ordinary woman can achieve the ‘dream’ and find a prince (Geller, 2001:252).

Aligning with the surrealism of this fantasy, the wedding is often spoken of in terms dislocated with reality. Participants involved in the industry for example, often referred to the wedding as a production – the staging of a theatre. The day was often spoke of in theoretical terms, where brides were prepared with practice runs and dress rehearsals for their ‘big day.’ A flower arranger at the 2002 Wedding Exhibition stated,

*If she (the bride) really wants, then her wedding day can hold all the pageantry of a theatre production – lights, music, flowers, confetti, you name it, it can be done. That’s the wonderful thing, it’s the one day where modesty is not a virtue.*

As Albury (1996:80-85) stated, the modern wedding encapsulates romance, glamour and a “fine sense of theatre” where the imagination is allowed to run full rein in the creation of the perfect day. “They are leads in the drama of heterosexual couplehood, actors in an extravaganza that is both generic and personal” (Geller, 2001:255).

SELF CONSCIOUS BRIDES

There is an inherent contradiction in these depictions of the princess bride. As Geller (2001:112) argued, the modern bride can be seen as an emblem that condenses fantasies of femininity – domesticity, physical delicacy, economic dependence, vanity and female sorority, attributes that

7 Both women were also killed in car crashes at a young age, leaving legacies as symbols of tragedy, where somehow their princess status made their deaths more tragic. One participant referred to their plight, "Diana and Princess Grace... they lived the dream and then had it snatched from them. It's awful isn't it, such young and beautiful women, now they symbolise the fairy tale gone wrong." During the televised events surrounding Diana’s death, all networks replayed scenes from her wedding to Prince Charles. Their wedding became the 'exemplar of the ultimate fantasy of what a wedding should be' (Ingraham, 1999:38).
are also antithetical to ideals of individuality, independence and female autonomy. Betterton, (1987:13) looked at cultural forms that are addressed to women and concluded that there are inherent contradictions in popular culture’s approach to women’s roles. Soap operas, women’s magazines, romantic fiction and film melodrama are sites where pleasure is constructed primarily for women. These pleasures however, are often contradictory since they are bound up with definitions of femininity. For example, while romance is one way in which female sexual fantasy and imagination are articulated, the inevitable conclusion of the narrative in marriage can be seen as a way of closing off women’s desires. One participant articulated these conflicts in depictions of the modern bride,

*Its not that we’re anti-feminist, but we want to indulge in feminine behaviour that seems antithetical to feminist causes. We don’t want to reject weddings completely, but still want to have our cake and eat it too...perhaps this goes against what we should fight for as women, all that symbolism that the bride represents. But – we still put on the dress!*  

It appears that these ideologies evolve around discourses of the wedding only, with little relevance to marriage. Participant testimony revealed the salience of the princess bride theme and its foreignness to the marital relationship. Another participant expressed concern over the unreality of the media’s portrayal of weddings,

*I think a lot of the fairytale aspects of marriage, and the, um...complete unreality of it all is part of this cultural myth of approaching perfection, approaching the 'end of the story.' Somehow, we're supposed to reach a point where everything is 'happily ever after', where the strife is over. Look at any celebrity interview: 'I was so messed up then, and I am so much better now that I have found love. But the wedding is only the first day of marriage itself!*

This participant went on to discuss her disappointment in realising that she had vested too much romance in the wedding ideal,

*For women, that 'end of the story' is supposed to be realised in a wedding (which is part of why I felt like my own partnership was kind of an anticlimax: there was no great drama or emotion, just a falling into another's lives). But the truth is, life is just not that way. The dream cannot last. After you get married you're still who you were before you got married.*
Another participant confessed that when she cannot sleep at night, she lies awake and plans her perfect dream wedding,

“It's funny isn't it, I lie there and think about what shade the bride's maids dresses will be and how I will have my hair, with little daisies woven up with braids, when realistically, I should be thinking about married life and what that means to me.

Another stated, “well you know, its fun to dream, to sneak into Whitcoulls and have a flick through the magazines there. I know what I'd like to do if I had the money.” It was these words that registered to me what this motivation entailed. I questioned, under what conditions does it become necessary to ‘sneak’ in and buy a bridal magazine? It occurred to me that women today are self-conscious about their role as bride, where conforming to the princess trope induced feelings of guilt. Some participants expressed a desire to be ‘princess’ for the day, but their confessional tones revealed that such aspirations conflicted directly with values of the modern ‘independent and liberated woman.’ “I want to be a beautiful bride, but I also want to feel OK about that. I want to have a ‘traditional’ wedding but I also want to have an active role in what that means.” Another participant clarified the issue for me,

I don't want to be subservient to my husband, but I do want to be feminine – to be a wife, a bride - a woman. But just because I will wear a pretty wedding gown doesn’t mean that I endorse the traditional wife role. Marriage is something I want to do on my terms, not anyone else's and especially not those dictated by convention.

I asked her to elaborate, to specify or give examples,

Well, I don't want to be subservient in my marriage, and that holds for my wedding too. You know, for example, many women still let their fathers give them away in marriage. Nobody can be given away and I've never been owned. So, I see my wedding as a chance for me to make a statement, its just that the way that statement is made, well it will be traditional. I want to wear a white dress and feel like a princess...so I will, because I can - not because I am being told to!

Of course, not all women succumb to the princess bride ideology. As with other ideals, those applicable to marriage/weddings can be accommodated or transcended. One participant for example, was attentive to these ideologies and strategically sought to avoid them,
The thing is, I already feel married. We live together, we have shared bank accounts, shared pets, and shared furniture. When it comes to making a lifetime commitment, I’ve already done that internally. That’s why a big, girly dream wedding feels fake.

Reoccurring assertions from participants throughout the investigation that love and romance were defining motives to wed supported messages in popular culture that stipulate that romantic love is the simplest and most socially acceptable justification for weddings. But the equation is not this simple. Although these images may be far detached from love as a genuine emotion, the two are conflated in the symbolism of the princess bride. The insidious consideration is that, in the arbitrary attachment of intangible qualities to commodities and depictions of the bride, other motives may be obscured. We may lose sight of the fact that the wedding, as discussed by participants, should ultimately symbolize the commitment values of those being married. This is also more of a consideration for women given the feminization of the wedding and the naturalization of love in this context. The relationship between love and patriarchal power in feminism has been a reoccurring theme in feminist critiques of marriage with assertions that government by love is the most insidious government of all (Langford, 1999:21). Millett (1970:144) argued that components of the romantic apparatus keep sex oppression strong, as discussed in chapter two. The infrastructure that binds the princess bride/fairy tale wedding can be seen to symbolize so much that the women’s movement aimed to remedy.

SUMMARY
The purpose of this chapter has been to explore the resonance of the princess bride trope in wedding discourse and my participants’ mediation of these ideals. With so many marriages ending in divorce and the historical necessity of marriage diminishing, the industry relies on the romance and fantasy of the wedding to ensure its continued existence. As discussed in chapter five, the employment of romance is also necessary to conceal the economic processes at work in the capitalist order and the reality of the wedding as a profit-making machine. A reoccurring tenet discussed throughout the research is that women are assumed to have an innate love of weddings and romance - the princess bride trope epitomises this assumption. In order to succeed, the trope must have as one of its characteristics, the myth that the experience will last forever: that the dream will continue past the ceremony, into marriage itself.
This illusion is fostered in our culture by the commonly held myth of romanticism, which has its origins in our favourite childhood fairy tales. Weddings celebrate the misconception that the bride has reached that point in her life, where all her dreams accumulate and she is reborn. Ideology has the power to alchemise itself into reality – in this case, to naturalise a belief that the princess bride fantasy can come to life. Through images that employ fairytale 'signs' and through language that draws on associations with royalty and emotions, women are transformed from someone merely enacting a legal union to a goddess or a supreme being – the bride. The power of institutionalised heterosexuality is so strong that she is relegated to a symbol of romantic divinity. As in a coronation, the bride is transformed by her wedding from a mundane to an exalted state.

Poststructuralist theory stipulates the idea that discourses and practices produce particular identities (Brown, 1998:62). The identity of a bride is a unique production, necessarily constrained to the wedding day and clearly marked by fashion, ritual and ideology. The trope of princess bride has become so naturalised that it is barely questioned. Its success has been dependent on its pervasiveness in popular culture and its ability to secure contestants from a young age. The princess bride fantasy is pervasive in popular culture on all accounts – toys, magazines, television, cinema and so on. The mass manufacturing of toys aimed at young girls seeks to replicate these values in order to guarantee a 'market' for later consumption. The message is that the contemporary western bride is to be the beautiful princess at her perfect white wedding.

The industry that caters to these dreams is proliferating at an enormous rate and has a specific agenda in the relationship between women, weddings and marriage. The ideology functions by condensing emotions such as happiness, optimism and romance into a single commodity – the bride. In the words of one participant, "love is being sold." 'The wedding business deals with dreams and strives to make them come true' (Television New Zealand: 28/12/01). But little is said of marriage virtues other than romance. Romance is the one asset that is utilised in wedding consumption negating all other virtues in its operation. Values that survive past the ritual of the ceremony: tolerance, patience, love, forgiveness and so on are rendered invisible in the aesthetics of the modern ceremony.
Responses to these discourses did vary. Some saw the translation of these ideals as unhealthy gender stereotypes, ones that promoted/sustained unattainable physical images, putting pressure on the bride to conform. But many participants did conform to the fairy tale trope, expressing desire to replicate the princess bride. Some saw the wedding and bridal exhibitions as enabling the bride to aspire to her role as 'princess for a day' and seeing virtue and reward in this achievement. By embracing the stereotype, they effectively gained from the positive rewards of admiration, 'living their dream.' But this trope, so profoundly entrenched in our understandings of weddings and marriage, cannot be diagnosed as positive in regards to women's agency. By enacting the princess bride trope, even if only for a day, the bride is indulging in sentimental euphoria. Such emotive fantasising and nostalgia expresses a deep ignorance of matrimony's oppressive history. The princess bride is heterosexuality personified: the ideology is at its apex and this cannot, in any way be empowering for female marital agency.
CONCLUSION.

At first glance, some may question the applicability of my theoretical perspective. The 'problem' of the manifestation of wedding ideologies in heterosexual Pakeha New Zealand women may seem esoteric given the material realities of this participant sub-group. But the complexities we face in relation to marriage and wedding ideology today don't just merit inquiry – clarification of these ideologies is crucial in women's ongoing struggle against gender subjugation. I emphasise that my opposition to these institutions is not symptomatic of hostility to long-term relationships. It has not been my intention to deconstruct a desire for intimacy or critique heterosexual relationships per se, rather to explore the exclusivity or privileged status of marriage and weddings for organising these processes. We can enjoy the pleasures of romance in relationships without a wedding but as I have argued, wedding ideology strives to bind romance with the ceremony, as the most appropriate means of defining amorous love.

In this investigation I have attempted to illuminate a portrait of the relationship between New Zealand women, weddings and marriage. In the Introduction I grounded the paradoxical contexts involved in this relationship. I situated the persistence of marriage and weddings as paradoxical considering their material redundancy, increasing social acceptance of alternatives to marriage and the liberalisation of marriage and wedding ideals and our increasingly secular socio-economic climate (significant considering the historical role of religious dogma in marriage). The paradoxical context is further reinforced by the negation of marriage's legal benefits and its vicious deconstruction by feminists. In conjunction with the materialisation of the ceremony and its proliferating expense, I deemed women's continued desire for weddings incongruous.

Through my poststructuralist approach I have argued that public images of marriage are contradictory, confusing and abstract, offering little practical guidance for the individual woman. The concept of marriage as an economic and social unit and as a union of personalities is ever-present; it is the emphasis in public rhetoric of one concept over the other which is to be preferred and therefore taken as typical for a particular era (Mansfield and Collard, 1988:161). I have aimed to better understand the public context of the wedding, but have been conscious not to underestimate the private setting of marriage - the two are inextricable. With this in mind, I took a holistic approach, collecting data from a myriad of
issues to formulate my story. My *Methodology* chapter reiterated the problems and theoretical implications of the research process, allowing me to voice the inevitable obstacles and convolutions involved in such an investigation.

In chapter two I asserted that it is imperative to understand the historical relationship between women and matrimony in order to improve the condition of an institution so reminiscent of patriarchy. I attempted to briefly trace the central feminist criticisms of marriage and weddings, focussing primarily on second wave theory. Given the enormity of this political and theoretical history, I could not possibly do these issues justice; my aim was merely to outline these critiques as a basis for ongoing debate. I did not provide a comprehensive view of feminist criticism but an argument for a move into a poststructuralist feminist perspective, which brings into question existing institutions and practices. I adopted the precepts articulated by Rich (1980), situating marriage and wedding ideology as resonant in all areas of most women’s lives. I argued that in order to attain productive change, ideals must be challenged at all levels, from family values to ideologies of heterosexuality in popular culture.

Chapter three addressed the interests of the state and church in marriage and wedding ideologies related to women. The fact that women are still prepared to go through with a ceremony decreed by the state reflects a degree of bureaucratic influence. But it is clear that state involvement in marriage and weddings is abating significantly. I discussed how recent matrimonial property changes render a formal marriage in New Zealand the equivalent to a de facto relationship. The only power the state now exhibits over marriage and weddings is in the exclusion of certain marriage forms (homosexual) as well as shaping the physical boundaries of marriage and weddings (location and decree), although these laws themselves are becoming increasingly lenient. Religious values however, were far more ambiguous.

I asked whether secular wedding ideologies are filling the vacuum left by the decline in religious wedding doctrine. The persisting desire for church weddings as revealed by participants seemed inconsistent with our increasingly secular socio-political agendas. I briefly addressed this issue as well as the role of religious values in contemporary wedding ideology for women. I concluded that whether one defines their marital reality in relation to religious or secular definitions is left increasingly to the individual. In an era where the ‘divine intervention’ of the marital counsellor is sought above religious involvement, it appears that religious constituents in wedding and marriage ideology are less relevant for women today than ever before. The church, while historically exerting a powerful ideological
and material influence on marriage and weddings, may still be persuasive but only for those who *choose* to abide by religious protocols. While vestiges of this religious influence did persist in the desire for a church wedding, participants revealed that this was often for secular, aesthetic reasons. Like the persistence of bridal attire and the ring exchange, the centrality of the church wedding can be largely attributed to a desire to adhere to ‘tradition’ - an image, rather than constituting religious values *per se*. Church ceremonies offer the promise of spectacle and pageantry, of ritual transformation into a new social role and since they are synonymous with tradition, nostalgia and sentiment, they are the perfect context for the princess bride experience.

I have argued that the wedding and its associated ritual are arenas where gender divisions are re-enacted, effectively feminising the wedding experience - the focus of concern in chapter four. I looked first at the blatant targeting of women at bridal exhibitions. I discovered that women involved in the production of these exhibitions (predominantly) occupied traditionally ‘domesticated’ roles (such as catering, dress making and make-up). In this chapter I also sought to clarify why women continue to embrace certain wedding rituals, considering their evocation of female subordination in marriage. I looked briefly at the bridal shower, the bridal registry, the ring exchange and the politics of bridal attire. Despite having little or no historical basis, these rituals/practices have ossified into what we know as wedding convention – their naturalisation leaves no need for questioning – they are “*simply done*”, because, “*its just tradition*” as participants asserted.

Depictions of the bridal shower as seen in the *New Zealand Bride and Groom* disclosed that it is still situated within gendered concepts of female domesticity. My experience as an undercover bride-to-be at a local bridal registry reinforced for me the pervasiveness of the industry’s blatant targeting of women as wedding consumers. An analysis into the engagement/wedding ring revealed that although participants did not see the ring as symbolic of patriarchy, it is a omnipresent romantic icon and deemed a necessary part of any marriage. Similarly, my research revealed that bridal attire is emblematic of the feminisation of the wedding experience. Both the gown and veil are pivotal symbols of the heterosexual ideal, embodying notions of female vulnerability, passivity and beauty - attributes central to the princess bride trope.

Chapter five looked at notions of legitimacy in the context of the wedding industry. I approached the relationship between consumption, commerce and the bride, arguing that
wedding legitimacy is an economic strategy that sustains desire for commodities. I situated these practices within a capitalist regime of production, where in they support and sustain a proliferating industry. My experience as an undercover bride-to-be at bridal exhibitions, in conjunction with an analysis of advertising in the *New Zealand Bride and Groom* exposed the profoundly materialistic nature of the wedding industry where in commerce panders to the conjugal ideal. Both these domains also reinforce (hetero) sexual ideals, as manifest in consumption practices. They both seek to ensure consumption through a process of commodity encoding where in the wedding signifier endows products/services with meaning in order to make them more appealing to a predominantly female consumer market.

This process is not restricted to wedding commodities however. I showed how products and services with both primary and secondary relevance to weddings are signified with emotive attributes, as evoked through bridal imagery – happiness, hope, optimism, wealth, tradition and of course, romance. These ideals are also induced through *conspicuous* consumption in the wedding experience. My research revealed that significant wedding expenditure is directed at the creation of an image and much time, effort and expense is devoted to commodities that seek to secure the approval of guests: the dress, flowers, food items and so on. I argued that these ideologies are successful to a certain degree – for many women the fantasy is more engrossing than the reality. This imbalance was reflected in participants’ efforts to successfully replicate the ideal – women spending beyond their means to acquire their dream gown (as well as the costs of the reception itself).

My participant’s attempts to ‘live the dream’ also indicated a more ominous manifestation of the success of the heterosexual ideal. Participant testimony revealed a sense of futility in striving to fit the legitimate bridal ideal. These aesthetic pressures were pervasive in all accounts of popular culture, especially advertisements in the *New Zealand Bride and Groom* where the default bride conformed to an ideal: slender, elegant, demure and beautiful. Many participants were resigned to the fact that this ideal was unattainable, and yet still strived to ‘look the part.’ Participants also affirmed feelings of anxiety and strain in the wedding planning process, admitting that they were responsible for a substantial part of the wedding organisation. Although many embraced these ‘chores’ auspiciously, they also testified to ‘feeling the pressure.’ The ‘confessional’ nature of these discourses also exposed conflicting ideals, where in participants felt ‘guilty’ in their conscious enactment of wedding practice (and even complying with marriage *per se*) which seemed to conflict with their self perceptions as liberated, independent women.
Romance was such a pivotal component in the production and feminisation of the wedding that it became the focus of a separate chapter. When applied to weddings and marriage, romance works in the service of heterosexual imagery, revealed in the salience of the princess bride trope. I aimed to describe the fairy-tale formula of weddings that is fed to us through popular culture, focusing on the creation and maintenance of this trope. The synthetic nature of our concepts of the bride has a role to play in women’s construction of women’s wedding/marriage ideals. The white wedding ideological apparatus relies on the naturalisation of constructed ideals/messages. I argued that messages in popular culture, television, cinema and magazines of the beautiful princess bride effectively socialise girls from a very young age: child brides play-acting their future role as the princess bride are ubiquitous. I examined these domains, looking specifically at how this ideal is manufactured and sustained in popular culture.

I utilised images from the *New Zealand Bride and Groom* as well as citing some examples from television, toys marketing, internet advertising (*Disney World Dream Weddings*) and film. I showed that wedding ideology employs both romance and tradition to sustain demand for wedding related services and commodities. The bride’s role in this formula is fundamental: she is the pinnacle of romance. I utilised a Foucauldian notion of power to show how these ideologies are maintained. Power is tolerable only on condition that it masks a substantial part of itself - its success is proportional to its ability to hide its own mechanisms (Foucault, 1978:97). The industry aims to convince consumers that romance is both necessary and sacred and this outweighs the realities of the commodity market and manifestations of ideology. Dominant wedding messages provide idealised images or representations of reality that mask the historical and material conditions of our lives. The ideology, as reflected in celebrity weddings, seeks to create the perception that there is little difference between the average bride and the ‘princess bride.’

The focus of concern was as follows: through the ideological workings and naturalisation of this trope, women are made to believe that the ‘wedding of their dreams’ will imbue their relationship with meaning - that the ‘happy-ever-after’ fairytale is achievable. I concluded that the wedding allows for a woman’s transition into a bride and a bride’s metamorphosis into a princess. Without these ideologies, perhaps women would not expect so much from marriage? The princess bride theme tells us that the wedding day is the most important in a
woman's life. If the ensuing years of married life are mentioned at all, it is usually as an extension of the ceremony – romantic bliss and the joy of the 'happy ever after' scenario.

**THE PERCEIVED BENEFITS OF MARRIAGE**

Marriage and wedding themes and messages in popular culture remain relatively monolithic, despite the diversity of our social groups and marital alternatives. My poststructuralist approach however, demonstrates that there is no conclusive outcome in relation to participant absorption of these ideologies. For these reasons and as a consequence of my holistic approach, I emphasise that the purpose of my inquiries was not a predetermined polemic. It was never my prerogative that the ideologies behind marriage and weddings are absolutely oppressive to all women in their personal lives, despite my own perspectives. I have endeavoured to understand the contradiction that the boundaries and ideologies that shape these institutions are innately oppressive while simultaneously trying to understand the validation of these institutions by women of similar subject positioning as me.

In my attempt to clarify why women not only accept, but embrace wedding ritual, it was imperative that I try and understand desire for wedlock. Marriage may be seen as a social arrangement that creates for the individual a means of making sense of the world. Marriage can provide women with financial and emotional stability, personal support, social acceptance and much happiness and is still the most socially accepted family form for the rearing of children. As stated, there is no doubt that many women have experienced marriage as egalitarian and perceive their weddings in the same light. In this respect, I do not deny completely the perceived benefits of marriage, rather that these 'benefits' are deceiving and self-limiting for women after the ceremony is over.

But the complexities of these tenets are further reinforced considering accoutrements of wedding ideologies are also not absolute and the process of absorption not monolithic. Society may instruct us on how marriage and weddings 'should be done' but there is much negotiation within this and women are constantly redefining these boundaries. Dominant meanings can be contested, alternative meanings affirmed (Weedon, 1997:73). Participants revealed for example that they mediate their own agency in relation to commodity consumption in the wedding industry. The media offers a variety of interpretations based on a single commodity, but as Albury (1999:80) argued, it is through the independent interpretation of an image that consumers are able to successfully realise their personal wedding experience. The shape a wedding will take and the production of the bride depends
on a combination of interpretations of popular cultural depictions of the ideal wedding/bride and personal images that consumers have of themselves. There may be enormous or trace disparities between these dichotomies and the final product is often the result of compromise between the two.

Most women make concessions, adapting ideologies to their own needs and resisting them in subtle ways (May, 1992:9). Participants did display a high level of tentative accommodation to bridal ideals. For example, those that had married appropriated certain rituals which reflected their own unique interpretation of wedding convention: the bride who married in a church wearing a white gown and jandals, the pair who married in a secret location with the groom dressed as Elvis and the bride as a Chinese doll. Most of my married participants made their own vows and all of them saw their wedding as invested with their own unique virtuosity.

LIVING THE DREAM

It is also clear that the contemporary wedding is unparalleled as one of the most meaningful celebrations in a woman’s life. There is no other event that stimulates such anticipation, planning and celebration. Some may ask, is it really such a bad thing for women to experience their weddings as described by this prescription? By marrying with a conventional white wedding, normality is confirmed and women occupy a role that is socially legitimate. This conformity may enable a sense of empowerment. As Coney states (1995:12), "for women, weddings are the last great female ritual, an opportunity to be unashamedly centre-stage." Participants revealed that the wedding is their “special day” where the prevailing assumption is that the bride is the centre of attention. For one day, a woman is allowed to feel part of a fairy tale scenario, accompanied by her handsome prince. Here, the bride is the protagonist, the ‘star of the show’ wherein the groom is marginalized. Many participants saw these experiences as empowering – something they ‘deserved.’ In this respect, participants sought to make their own experiences as un-oppressive as possible.

A DAZZLING ROMANTIC LIE...

But, all these attributes are effectively negated by the very institutions that formulate them. I have argued that this empowerment and sense of liberation is rendered meaningless considering such attributes are the products of legitimacy. The wedding ideological complex relies on mechanisms of desire to sustain the wedding fantasy, so inevitably the wedding will be experienced by many as cathartic, where in empowerment is the product of hegemonic
legitimacy. Like Rich (1980) I argue that heterosexuality is prescribed as natural and inevitable. At 'her' wedding day, the bride is heterosexuality personified: she is the ideology is at its apex in her transformation into a princess. It is this ideal that is celebrated by others: the bridal shower, the registry and all the congratulatory hype that reinforces for the bride that she has 'succeeded' in her newly acquired state. While she may experience this as liberating, her consent provides unproductive and unstable reassurance. Geller (2002:13) pointed out the incongruous nature of gendered wedding rituals which, "randomly dispense and withhold privilege according to the haphazardness of romantic attraction." By consenting to a white wedding the bride buys into a dazzling romantic lie - that happiness is a commodity to be purchased and that the wedding will deliver romance, love and content.

A PUBLIC PERFORMANCE

In their production, weddings symbolise all the excesses of our societies narcissism, gratifying their participant's vanity -- as Geller (2001:124) described, "a binge of self congratulation." The status symbols and conspicuous consumption involved in the production of the bride confirm this. But all actions have meaning, particularly actions undertaken in a public, ritualised social ceremony. The wedding is an exhibition -- a presentation of the groom's future wife, on display for the public's approval (a concept that was reinforced by those participants involved in the production of the wedding, who spoke of it in theatrical terms). The performance will also inevitably be about more than just the bride. Meanings may persist long after the wedding day -- after the gown has been taken off, the veil removed, the reception venue emptied. By complying with the princess bride trope, women endorse the gender ideologies at work in the production of image and condone the entrenched heterosexual ideologies that define legitimacy. Marriage is also so closely intertwined with family ideology that these ideals are still hard to escape. Culture, gown, costume and conspicuous consumption all have a role in determining public attitudes towards gender identity, no matter how we feel as individuals and no matter how 'personalised' the ceremony may be: an image is still perpetuated.

CONTROLLED RESISTANCE

We are all susceptible to the workings of the dominant order. As argued by Delphy and Leonard (1992:260), the institution of marriage and family restricts and abuses both married and unmarried women in all areas of their lives. But it is how we express our interpretations that either displaces or propagates our agency. Women may choose to marry, but they do not choose the nature of the institutions or heterosexual relations that shape marriage in our
society (Delphy and Leonard, 1992:265). Even women that avoid complete proscription to the princess bride trope do not escape wedding ideologies: expression of taste does not mean freedom from convention. Once we have consented to these institutions, our actions are free only within the boundaries of social norms and penal controls. Unconventional and untraditional wedding expressions are still subject to hegemonic wedding definitions and concepts of legitimacy.

This was revealed most explicitly in the popular trend of personalising the ceremony, where in couples ‘add something a little bit different’ to make their wedding distinct from all the rest. In this context, participants even suggested redefining rituals that have a history of gender oppression, as a means of somehow compensating for any sexist stigma that the practice may connote (lifting their own veil or wearing a red dress). But while women may claim to be repairing the excesses of the history of oppression in marriage through ritual alterations, they are actually reaffirming patriarchal creeds and obscuring the heterosexual trappings at work in the creation of the princess bride.

While wedding improvisation may be celebrated for their uniqueness, this is also usually dependant on a degree of conformity to wedding convention – the bride that wore jandals at her photo shoot still donned a white gown, the bride that arrived on a Harley Davidson motor bike still married in a church and the couple with the ‘anti-marriage’ invitations (chapter four) still signed a marriage contract. It seems that a bride that deviates from the norm is congratulated and condoned as long as she adheres to a degree of convention, within the realms of originality and uniqueness. The term subversion itself implies that transcendent ‘liberation’ from power relations is illusory, for some degree of complicity with the dominant is inevitable (Kondo, 1990:13). As long as she remains beautiful, feminine and includes at least some ‘tradition’ in the ceremony, acceptance is ensured (an idea that was reinforced in the television series Weddings, whose transgender bride represented the antithesis of the princess ideal).

Despite their uniqueness, all New Zealand ‘marriages’ and ‘weddings’ exist within a common social landscape. Whether a bride flouts the princess bride convention or condones it completely, she still accepts the legacy of oppression that matrimony has historically allocated women. And regardless of appropriation, the act of marriage itself reinstates heterosexual ideology. By honouring the bridal ideal, women signal compliance to these ideals. Leonard (1980:266) stated, of her research in Wales, that even if participants fought
against the values represented in the ceremony, they were still inevitably changed by them. But she also asserted that, “most women do not fight them – the rituals affirm values to which they subscribe” (Leonard, 1980:266). In sum, ‘personalisation’ in the industry is an attempt to instil individualism within an institution that breed’s uniformity. Like Wang’s depiction of the bridal gown as an extension of a woman’s innate individuality, the bride is lead to believe that she is completed through her commodity consumption and without it (the paraphernalia, the accessories, the gown and the wedding *per se*), she may risk anonymity.

Available discourses are of course not monolithic and although rare, I did encounter anti-marriage polemics in my research. In the United States, February 12 2001 marked the establishment of ‘National Freedom to Marry Day’, promoting national discussion about ending gender discrimination in civil marriage. I discovered recent publications that support the often contradictory position of women in marriage/wedding ideology: *How to Have the Wedding You Want (Not the One Everybody Else Wants You to Have)* (Claro, 1995), *A Walk Down the Aisle: Notes on a Modern Wedding* (Cohen, 2001) and *Anti-Bride Guide: Tying the Knot Outside of the Box* (Gerin and Rosenbaum, 2002). I also accessed a website that advocates alternative understandings of marriage and provides forums where women can discuss the contradictions and patriarchal complexities that weddings entail ([www.indiebride.com](http://www.indiebride.com)). But, despite the alternate understandings of marriage/wedding ideology that these discourses provide, by endorsing the institutions themselves, they still ultimately signal compliance to a marital legacy of oppression.

**WHAT IS AT STAKE?**

The process of forming new relationships and the production of marriage and weddings is seen by many as a growth experience rather than a familial necessity. Giddens (1992:58) referred to the liberalisation of relationship values as the new grammar of intimacy, where in the sexual couple in the West is becoming a site of emancipation. Weeks referred to the process as the democratisation of love (1995:37), as espoused by popular psychology. Contemporary ideologies of the family presents marriage as an institution of equality between a man and a woman based on love: an ideal that is inflated in wedding ideology, exemplified in the princess bride fairy tale. Marriage may be seen as the beginning of a journey (Geller, 2001:19), based on increasingly egalitarian terms and the wedding may be perceived as a form of female redemption within marriage. But in reality, marital egalitarianism cannot be guaranteed.
Through the enactment of the wedding and its associated ritual, the experience is both linked to and detached from, the condition of women’s position in marriage. While the rituals associated with the ceremony reinforce a gendered division of labour, reinforcing notions of women’s marginalized position in marriage – they can also equip the bride with a sense of empowerment and romantic legitimacy. As John Story (1993:5) described of prevailing customs and rituals, “they offer pleasure and release from the usual demands of the social order but ultimately they return us to our places in this order.”

**Perfect Bride – Perfect Wife?**

I urge women to look closer at the wedding within this context and its repercussions. At stake in these ideologies is the potential subjugation of women within married life, by virtue of their continued disenfranchisement in contemporary society. While women in New Zealand have made considerable advancements in social, political and economic spheres over the years, marriage and the family forms are still innately discriminatory against women. A time-use survey by the *Ministry of Women’s Affairs* in 2002 concluded that women in New Zealand families are still significantly disenfranchised in the domestic sphere. Marriage is still the institution through these discriminations are enacted. Gittins (1985:91) argued that only in the rarest of cases can marriage in the contemporary west ever be equal. It is founded on patriarchal ideology with concepts of men’s and women’s duties and responsibilities that are by definition the basis of an unequal relationship. Despite a detachment in popular culture from the trappings of these ideologies and regardless of how individual relationships may be perceived or how the wedding is experienced, the ceremony is still innately symbolic of these agendas, enabling a renouncement of female autonomy.

**Summary**

Wedding ideology, as incubated in popular culture and played out in the industry that surrounds wedding production has effectively anaesthetised us to the realities of everyday life. The value of weddings as articulated in these discourses is detached from the realities of marriage, despite the fact that the princess bride trope alludes to ‘happy ever after’ fictional

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1 While I have not pursued the politics of married life, empirical studies such as that of Mansfield and Collard (1988) show that there is friction between the contemporary ideal of romantic love and its reality. Mansfield and Collard’s study (1988:179) highlighted significant distinctions between the promise of emotional fulfilment that is the ideal of romantic love and reality. They revealed a wide gender gap in expectation, where it seems there is ‘her’ marriage and ‘his’ marriage.

2 Women spend twice as much time a day as men on housework and cooking and three times as much time a day as men on caring for people in the home. Employed women also continue to earn much less than employed men - despite the closing gender gap in improving levels of education attainment, the pay of women with a tertiary degree is only 81% of men’s pay (www.stats.govt.co.nz).
ideals. As argued throughout the investigation, by embracing wedlock women are perpetuating an institution that has subjugated women for millennia. We need to relinquish the modern wedding and its associated sexist symbolism, as Geller (2001:292) argued, “out of respect for our anonymous ancestors who had no choice, we must summon the courage to choose differently.” But of course this is not easy – fantasies and ideologies have strong seductive power. Ideology has alchemised into reality and the consequence is a persisting reverence for wedlock despite its material, social, legal and religious irrelevance.

As Geller pointed out, the wedding is an institution that has resisted all attempts at demystification, “It seems that we would rather uphold a familiar standard than work to generate a new one” (Geller, 2001:12). I emphasise that exploring desire and the object of marriage as a production rather than a universal necessity is particularly important in light of the growth of conservative discourses despairing at the state of marriage in contemporary society. The fact that marriage still operates very strongly for many women in a way that is limiting and restrictive, is a more important consideration than the ‘future’ of marriage as coined by conservatives, such as Logan (2000, 2001).

In my analysis of the relationship between women, marriage and weddings, the central tenet necessitated concepts of why women comply with these institutions. I conclude the investigation by offering an antithetical proposition: why we should choose not to marry. I argue that we need a critical stance from which to examine our participation in these ideologies in order to avoid the sense of powerlessness expressed by the participant who stated, “marriage is convention and I’ve decided that I don’t want to struggle against it any longer.” As I have argued, to comply with marriage and participate in a ceremony that celebrates female beauty and domesticity, is to legitimate a legacy of discrimination that has marginalized women for millennia and condone contemporary wedding ideological processes.

Greer (1971:323) declared, that, “the essential factor in the liberation of the married woman is understanding of her condition.” We need to be able to differentiate emotion – amorous romance, from institutionalisation: commodities encoded with meaning, the princess bride trope, legitimate wedding forms, conspicuous consumption, the creation of image and heterosexual femininity. We need to recognise the pervasiveness of the wedding ideological complex in the everyday lives of women in contemporary society. Such a clarification, between experience and social proscription, will assist in the recognition that the wedding is
experience and social proscription, will assist in the recognition that the wedding is not a prerequisite to marriage, but an option. This in turn will equip us with the means of deciphering the complex processes at work in the creation, maintenance and glorification of the bridal ideal.

I do not see weddings however, as appropriate vehicles for change. Their capacity for enabling women’s development is constrained within the boundaries of heterosexual ideals. I suggest that we look to feminist lesbian struggles against modes of heterosexual marriage, where in a decree of open marriage reform is seen as a triumph of religious, state-controlled and patriarchal authoritarianism. Foucault argued that silences are a shelter for power (1978:112). Quietly manoeuvring within accepted boundaries of wedding legitimacy only fuels the patriarchal creeds that women have struggled so long against. Rather than appropriate wedding form, I urge women to relinquish attempts to salvage a ceremony that symbolizes the marital bind, to forgo any effort to correct the misgivings of the past and to refuse to be assimilated into a marriage culture that reinforces dominant heteronormative ideologies. I concede that only by rejecting weddings altogether can women hope to lessen the ideologies that sustain the institution. It is not that the existing ideologies and inequities are in any way justifiable, but because these institutions are so profoundly defective for women that they are unworthy of emulation.

I recognise however, that a movement sympathetic to women’s issues that requires women to abide by its regulations is problematic. Changes cannot be made instantly and cannot be made without incurring the pain and personal costs entailed by rebelling against dominant ideals. But, ultimately - resistance to the dominant at the level of the individual subject is the first stage in the production of alternative forms of knowledge.
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[www.disney.go.com](http://www.disney.go.com) (Site for Disney wedding information).

[www.disneyland.disney.go.com](http://www.disneyland.disney.go.com) (Further contact information for Disney weddings).

[www.atmp.org](http://www.atmp.org) (Alternatives to Marriage Project - a national non-profit organization advocating for equality and fairness for unmarried people).

[www.divorcereform.org](http://www.divorcereform.org) (Americans for Divorce Reform – a forum for discussing cultural and legislative efforts to reduce divorce).