An Analysis of the Framing of Women As Marriage Partners Through Subcultural Patterns of Wedding Gift Giving

Basil Englis, Pennsylvania State University
Mary Ann McGrath, Loyola University, Chicago

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/15609/gender/v03/GCB-03

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As we illustrate in our previous work on wedding rituals (McGrath and Englis 1995), weddings represent important rites of passage and may serve as venues in which gender role expectancies are communicated. Thus, these ritual events can provide researchers with insights into culture-bound expectancies concerning the roles that men and women are expected to play within the marriage dyad. Weddings, as liminal events, are particularly compelling as they are associated with the transition to new roles for men and women—roles that are expected to endure for the remainder of the life course (as captured in the traditional wedding vows). Indeed, Lalli and Dahl (1994) call attention to the roles wedding rituals can play in bonding individuals to scripts as implicitly or explicitly endorsed by a variety of social groups (ethnic, cultural, religious, and so on). These authors characterize wedding traditions as "the ties that bind, across continents and across generations," and as rituals that "are about continuity, about the ties that transcend time and are symbols that have universal meaning."

In our research, we examine the giving of gifts in connection with weddings: gifts given at weddings, at showers, to wedding guests, and so on. We consider how these gifts convey gender-linked role expectations to women as well as to men. But our particular emphasis is on the messages sent to women by the forms that these gifts take, as well as the meanings they have for giver and recipient. In addition, we analyze patterns of gift giving that are associated with different cultural groups across several generations as a means of understanding cultural expectations concerning gender roles within the context of marriages. Our data are taken from interviews conducted with over 300 informants, using structured interview techniques, projective storytelling and scaled questionnaire items. We conducted interviews with three samples designed to provide different perspectives on these issues: (1) people who were interviewed about their experiences as wedding guests; (2) individuals who had plans to marry within six months; and (3) a cross-generational sample where family members across three generations were interviewed in order to provide insight into the degree to which culture- and/or family-bound rituals are transmitted between generations.

Our preliminary analyses show that the majority of gifts fall into two categories: money, and kitchen or household appliances. On the surface, these categories of gifts are not obviously connected with gender
role prescriptions. However, from our thematic analysis it is clear that, with few exceptions, the gifts are meant to connect to the woman's expected role as homemaker/caretaker. Two forms of monetary gifts exemplify that: (1) money that is meant to help the couple "set up house"; and (2) money that is used as a means of supporting and/or "buying" the wife. Moreover, household gifts often relate to care of the home, cooking, entertaining, and so on. It was extremely rare to find wedding gifts that involved traditional male activities. We provide an analysis of the meanings that givers and recipients attach to wedding gifts and discuss how these meanings are used in the construction of social identities.

NOTE

1. References are available upon request from the authors.