

Chapter 4: The transformation of love? Choice, emotional rationality and wedding gifts

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Introduction

The wedding is an important symbolic ritual in contemporary British society. Despite changes in form, content and format, evidence shows that the wedding retains meaning for British couples that extends beyond its associations with consumerism and commercialisation (Carter and Duncan, 2017, 2018). Yet the wedding is often overlooked in current discussions of coupling in sociology, as much of the wedding research takes place within media and cultural studies or marketing and consumption. This is a significant oversight since the wedding is an ever-evolving social ritual which in every different and unique guise speaks volumes about couples, family relationships, emotions, rituals and relationality.

While the number of marriages taking place each year in England and Wales continues to decline, the significance placed on the wedding appears to grow. For example, while the marriage rate dropped to its lowest on record in 2015 for England and Wales (ONS, 2018), almost 18 million British households tuned in to watch the wedding between Prince Harry and Meghan Markle in 2018 (Waterson, 2018). As the need for marriage as a rite of passage or social necessity disappears, the wedding reconstitutes and reinvents its meaning in a society with an increasingly playful approach to its traditions (Gross, 2005; Carter and Duncan, 2018). What Carter and Duncan argue is that rather than declines in marriage rates reflecting a decline in adherence to traditional values, traditions are played with and reinvented so that individuals can recreate 'traditional' looking relationships in novel ways. Thus living apart together (LAT) relationships are very far from traditional co-residential marriage in form but in practice, traditional married-like couples replicate practices of marriage while living apart (Carter et al., 2015). What this means for weddings is that while some may interpret the increasing commercialisation of weddings as an emptying out of meaning and traditional values, the evidence shows that for couples, weddings retain their traditional meaning, which is combined and enmeshed with new meanings, including aspects of consumerism and consumption (Carter and Duncan, 2017, 2018).

What has been overlooked by this research is, however, the meaning and process of gift-giving in weddings. Whilst as a component of weddings we could interpret contemporary gift-giving as another element in the wedding bricolage process, on the other hand, gift-giving has its own ritualised history and meaning-making tradition. Thus, the intersection of weddings, bricolage, gift-giving and ritual tradition offers a unique and under-explored avenue for further investigation. Along with many other traditions associated with weddings, the growing importance of buying gifts for wedding couples really took hold during the 19th century when 'the celebration of nuptials was seen by commentators as being irreversibly transformed into a vehicle for business interests, class aspiration and fashion' (Penner, 2004). Again, this does not mean, however, that gifts are without special meaning and value to both giver and receiver. Indeed, Rebecca Purbrick (2003, 2015) has studied wedding gifts extensively and writes that wedding gifts can convey social approval, and that in the act of giving and within a particular context- a wedding- otherwise mundane (often household related) objects become imbued with special, sacred meaning. For example, Purbrick provides an account of a housewife aged in her 30s from Durham whose wedding gifts are intricately linked to her family history (2003: 217). Thus wedding gifts, as with other aspects of weddings, convey particular and special meanings, about family relationships, social bonds, status and approval.

What is interesting about the wedding gift is how it has changed over time and adapted with the change in meaning around weddings and relationships more generally. As Penner (2004) notes, in the 19th century it was appropriate to gift decorative non-essential household items (at least among the middle- and upper-classes) as the assumption was that land, property and household items were provided by close family (usually parents). Moving into the 20th century, household items became the staple of wedding gift lists amongst the ‘ordinary writers’ in Purbrick’s study of Mass Observation respondents.ⁱ This was at a time when the wedding represented the start of cohabitation for many couples who required or desired help in setting up an entirely new household. Now, attitudes have changed and the vast majority of wedding couples in England and Wales have cohabited prior to marriage (Barlow et al., 2005) and therefore do not require the same provision of household items. We may, therefore, see a reversal to the 19th century standard where wedding gifts are largely luxury items, designed to go beyond the everyday.

This rise in cohabitation and shift in the purpose and meaning of weddings (and by extension weddings gifts) is the result of a number of changes in contemporary intimate life. For Illouz (2012) these changes emerge because of shifts in the ‘ecology’ and ‘architecture’ of choice: the context in which choices are made and the individual process of decision-making. Illouz explains that modern subjects are defined by their ability to choose, especially in relation to consumption, politics and also in love. While marriage decisions were once made within wider moral communities, these have since broken down so that individuals are free and disconnected, at a loss for a legitimating ideology into which they can embed their conjugal and romantic decisions. Thus individualism has come to replace wider community moral frameworks as decisions are made by self-reflexive individuals. According to Illouz, therefore, ‘it is the fine-tuned compatibility of two constituted selves that makes up a successful marriage, not the display of roles. The fine-tuning of the emotional makeup of two persons becomes the basis for intimacy’ (2012: 39). This reliance on individual preference means that while we have more choice now, this has led to greater ontological suffering as these decisions are dis-embedded from a community and are therefore less certain or secure. As a consequence, decisions come to be based upon rational, economic, balances and psychological reasoning rather than romantic visions of all-encompassing love. In this way, emotions have cooled, and intimacy has an economic rationale and basis in reason, not emotion.

This theoretical approach is appealing, not least because it captures the ephemeral changes in our decision-making processes as well as the perceived ‘cult of the individual’ (Durkheim, 1997) modernity induces. There is substantial evidence for a change in the way decision-making happens within the therapeutic turn (Illouz, 2008; Giddens, 1992). What is less evident is the dis-embedding of individuals from wider moral community frameworks (Dawson, 2012). While the decline in marriage rates, high divorce rates and growth in family types outside the traditional nuclear family are often used as *prima facie* evidence for this dis-embedded thesis, change in form does not always equate to change in practice. Likewise, as Gross has suggested in the US context, a decline in regulative traditions (such as traditional heterosexual marriage) does not necessarily lead to a decline in meaning-constitutive traditions (such as practices of relating; Gross 2005). Thus there remains evidence that individuals continue to be embedded in communities defined by traditions and crucially rely upon these in making decisions about their lives and future lifecourse (see Mason, 2004 for example).

That said, our argument has many points of convergence with Illouz; for example, we agree that modern intimacy appears to prioritise ‘choice’ and its reversibility, and we agree that individuals act as if their romantic partners exist on a marriage market rather than being embedded in local or social communities (see also Ansari and Klinenberg, 2015). Within this chapter, however, we seek to highlight some of the limitations to Illouz’s overarching claims. We do so through a focus on wedding gifts and their meanings, highlighting: first the capacity for wedding gifts to provide a route to transcend the market logic of romance; second, the importance of wider moral community frameworks in making sense of weddings and gifts; and finally, the possibility that self-gifting reveals an ethical life appropriate to the new romantic architecture of choice that is not the individualised self-determined project hypothesised by Illouz. This chapter addresses these issues using data from research projects outlined below.

Researching weddings

The data for this chapter was collected in two projects, the first an interview study conducted in 2008 as part of a wider project on marriage and relationships. This project aimed to interview young women between the ages of 18 and 30 to find out about their relationship aspirations and experiences and in particular their attitudes towards marriage. The second project from which data was gathered took place in the summer of 2014 and was specifically concerned with wedding practices, therefore only those planning for or recently having had a wedding were recruited. This project involved interviews with 15 individuals (five couples and five individuals) ranging in age from 22 to 58. Six were men and nine were women, all couples were living together except Cathy who was living apart from her partner at the time. This combined sample covers a range of class and socio-economic groups although almost all participants were White (except Mandy), heterosexual (except Shirley) and all were British. Interviews took place in provincial towns in the South of England and across two larger cities in the North of England. Both studies utilised convenience and snowball sampling which have limitations but are useful in providing an easy to access group. To this end, data discussed here is not intended to indicate national or cohort trends but instead may point to nuances within theory-making.

Both studies utilised semi-structured interviews which were recorded and transcribed. Analysis of interview data was grounded in the material and organised thematically. An important point to note is that at no point were wedding gifts specifically asked about by any of the researchers in the interviews. Therefore the data presented here offers spontaneous mentions of wedding gifts- times when gifts occurred naturally in the wider interview setting and in the context of what was otherwise being discussed. While a number of women spontaneously discussed gifts, none of these spontaneous mentions was by a male interviewee. Nevertheless, as Purbrick has also noted, more detail was often provided by her female Mass-Observation writers than male writers who tended to ‘discuss fewer objects, focusing on those they liked and had something to do with or were expected to like and forced to know about’ (2003: 217). On the other hand, women were much more likely to know about, have used, and cared for their wedding gifts. It is therefore reasonable to conclude that by not asking directly about wedding gifts, we have effectively excluded men from this discussion. The result being that this conversation continues to reflect a division of labour ‘where women are much more likely to have a daily and durable relationship with domestic objects’ (2003: 217) including wedding gifts. Participants’ relationships with weddings gifts are discussed in more detail in the following sections.

The wedding gift and rationality

Illouz's account of modern romance relies upon the claim that the 'cultural organisation of choice' in marriage partners has undergone transformation. In some respects marriage has always been about individual choice, but the meaning and conditions of choice has not always been the same. It is the *ecology* and *architecture* of choice which Illouz claims have transformed dramatically (Illouz 2012: 40). Reframing Polanyi's *Great Transformation*, Illouz speaks of the 'great transformation of romantic ecology' with the emergence of the marriage market. In this new romantic ecology, the choice of one's partner is deregulated from one's immediate social group and dis-embedded from a shared moral/normative framework. For her, the 'triumph' of romantic love is to be seen in the cultural belief that our romantic decisions are the result of individual, introspective consideration in the face of an 'open market' of potential partners, a decision separated out from wider normative frameworks of appropriateness.

Within this ecology of choice, the architecture of decision making for individuals carries the existential problem that decision making is never final or absolute. The reflexive monitoring of one's own emotions combines with the general spread of rationality which Weber diagnosed for modernity: people need to respond to their own individual desires and emotional needs; likewise they need to engage with another's equally individual will and emotionality; and they must be constantly alert to renewing decision making. In romance this means that relationship decisions are never final, can always be revised or revoked, when judged rationally by individuals through their emotional reflexivity. For Illouz (2012: 91f) this architecture of romantic choice mirrors the centrality of choice to consumer markets. Those who have explored choice in consumerism have noted that the 'romantic ethic' which underlines consumer purchases is not a longing for *the commodity*, more the *idea* of the commodity (Campbell, 1987; Slater, 1997; Varul, 2015). Modern romance may well be inherently dissatisfying, according to Illouz (2012), as it suffers from the same problem of the 'romantic consumer': part of the pleasure of romance is the dream itself, not the reality experienced. In this regard, an emotional hedonism results where desiring is, in part, autonomous from the desired object and, what's more, desiring itself becomes pleasurable (over and above its satisfaction in experience) (Campbell, 1987:85-86). In such circumstances, Illouz (2012) sees commitment as inherently difficult for late-modern couples when their romantic choices are subject to ideals over actualities: the idea of the perfect relationship takes precedence over lived experiences.

For us, however, we detect within the new romantic ecology of choice a subtle and implicit salvation story which resists the ontological suffering in love and commitment. While Illouz (2012: 159; 2007) is right to see rationality infused in emotional fields, the point we wish to make is that individuals can find the limits to this market logic of choice (and reversibility) in romance through gifting. For instance, take Penny's (27, engaged cohabiting) statement on what her wedding means: '...my feelings won't change, I don't think ...you know my views of him wouldn't change it would just literally be those things [what she already has], and hopefully a lot of presents.' It is in the promise of presents that we detect less the profusion myth of a consumer society infecting romantic couplings, more gifts announcing the *end* to choice and market logic.

This view of gifts sees a process of re-traditionalisation within the great transformation of romantic ecology. Our participants, as noted, organically brought up a discussion of gifts in the context of discussing their wedding choices and decisions. It was in their spontaneous reasoning on the nature of wedding gifts that we felt the presence of both the great transformation of romantic ecology and, equally, gifting scripts taking on special significance

to limit such rational, calculative decision making on the 'marriage market'. These came in the form of two different narrations on gift giving: one by the currently unmarried (or not-yet-married) who (anxiously) viewed the wedding through the lens of commercialisation, and one narrated by the soon-to-wed who viewed the wedding gift as moving beyond the commercial features of weddings. Below Eleanor reflects the first narrative while Susan exemplifies the second.

Eleanor (26, cohabiting) remarks:

'I don't see the point in having lots of peripheral friends and things there because, well, because it's an intimate thing, and while it's a public declaration, it's kind of, I don't know, it's a thing for families um... So I think there's a lot of fuss and it's very expensive, and I think money can be put to better use, and the whole tradition of wedding gifts... is a bit strange now as well, I think. 'Cause it used to make sense in that you get married and then move in together, so you wouldn't have anything so you'd need crockery and everything to start up with. But now you have two sets of crockery before you've even got married 'cause you've both lived by yourselves, and then you've both moved in together... So, in a way, wedding lists seem a bit greedy because there isn't the need there now [for] what it was supporting before...'

Eleanor's talk relates 'fuss' with 'expense' and conflates gifts of expense with the corrupting presence of 'peripheral friends'. She talks with a market coolness: 'money for better use'. Yet this is not cool intimacy, and neither is it wholly reducible to rationality infecting romance. Such an interpretation would be a misplaced slippage from the commercialisation of 'the wedding' to the commercial cooling of intimacy. Eleanor's talk in 'cool, market' logic is there for boundary work to avoid a commercialisation of romance, and an extending of such commercialisation to *her* (potential future) wedding. Commercialisation not only corrupts intimacy with 'greed', it also encourages reading a 'big do' as itself an expression of such greed. 'Peripheral friends' only become 'peripheral' when they could potentially be seen as being invited more for their presents than their presence, as such.

We detect in Eleanor's talk an anxiety that a cooling of intimacy could be found in the cooling of gifting practices. In so doing, Eleanor conflates two distinct traditions of gifting in her talk. Purbrick's (2015) study of c.1945-2003 UK wedding gifting practices distils these two traditions. The first, arising out of post-War (1945) necessity, are domestic gifts to establish a couple in their new domestic setting. These gifts are given by close and extended kin (Purbrick, 2015:86). The second, dated c.1980, is the 'commercial gift list' tradition where couples write a list of desired consumer goods from department stores for guests to purchase. Eleanor's talk conflates these two, and her conflation signals their normative 'out of place' corruption of the wedding as a marker of intimate coupling. Eleanor's 'opposition to the list is an embodied and intellectual response to ritual undermined...' (Purbrick, 2015: 91). A gift is defined by the act of giving and receiving, therefore, a list of 'gifts' (as in a wedding gift list) defines objects as gifts prior to the action that would socially mark them out as gifts. In this way, wedding 'gift' lists are a corruption of the moral script of disinterestedness inherent in Western gifting imaginaries. And, the provision of domestic necessities as 'gifts' once utilised scripts of (disinterested) 'giving' to conceal their source in interested calculation. For Eleanor, weddings gifts are out of place as they are neither one thing nor the other. They now have to create their own justification for existence which may, within the market logic, be said to be 'greed'. Eleanor's talk is not, therefore, a mere rejection of the market logic of romance but registers instead an anxiety on the part of modern couples that

the boundaries between markets and romance are, normatively speaking, perceived to be porous.

Susan (20, engaged cohabiting) offers instead a resolution to the anxiety of the market logic of gifting:

‘I mean even just the basic cost of an actual ceremony is now like hundreds of pounds and that’s like, only when we’re young, and on like a fairly reasonable wage, it’s quite a lot of money. And it’s a lot of money for everything else as well. And there’s the expectation of a honeymoon and like, the gift list, has changed probably quite a lot as well people didn’t used to register for gift lists and sort of say I want this, this and this. They used to sort of accept anything that anyone gave them whether it matched or not. That’s kind of changed as well. But I think it has escalated in what is expected to happen in a wedding. So I’m looking forward to the week afterwards ‘cause, we like, get to play with our new stuff like [laughs], our new presents and things, and then we’ve got a week off work which will be nice to just unwind.’

Here, we find the language of calculation is situated within the language of equally normative expectation. For with the emergence of the marriage market and the *perceived* dis-embedding of romance from moral-normative frameworks, the new ecology of choice has obliged the couple to pursue a repertoire of ritual aspects - the registering for wedding gifts and the honeymoon - which legitimate the couple. In this account, rather than gifting being left out in the cold world of market logic (greed), it is firmly embedded within kinship practices and social norms. The perception of being dis-embedded from moral communities leads individuals to find new ways of re-embedding connectivity with others. Moreover, the gift of the ‘new things’ and honeymoon to ‘unwind’ is understood to be precisely for the *couple* and, because of this, announces a denial of the commercial, acquisitive logic by which the wedding is defined.

In a dis-embedded ‘marriage market’ it is telling that the most common gift that was brought up by our participants was the honeymoon. Fiona (23, married cohabiting) says:

‘We were quite lucky, ‘cause we’d been living together, we didn’t need anything so for wedding gifts we set up honeymoon accounts. I think the honeymoon cost £2,500, and rather than people buying us gifts they were paying into that account. So we ended up only paying about £1,000 for the honeymoon in the end.’

While Claire (24, engaged cohabiting) said of her fiancé:

‘My boyfriend got it into his head that he wanted to go to Iceland for honeymoon. So that was his big incentive to get married [laughs]. ...He keeps joking now about the reason we’re getting married is ‘cause we’re going on a honeymoon... we want it to be part of our wedding present.’

While gifting of money contributions towards a honeymoon might be perceived as the height of wedding market logic, we instead argue that the honeymoon as gift is the exemplar for *transcending* such a market logic.

Notably both Fiona and Claire speak of the honeymoon as a gift, and as an incentive for the wedding. In Fiona’s case the honeymoon gift appears alongside quantitative reckoning

(£2,500 becomes £1,000), and in Claire's case the incentive ends with a present. While the ideal 'gift' in Western imaginaries, its fictive generosity and symbolic efficacy, is in the spontaneity of its being given (Mauss, 1990), the honeymoon's fiction seems to be that the recipients tell themselves that what is subjected to quantitative reckoning is in fact beyond the logic of the market. One of the foundational assumptions of gift analysis is the question, why would gifts be given if the people receiving them do not need them? The answer being that giving creates obligations - that people need social relations more than they do things. Yet the fiction of treating honeymoons as a promissory gift, an expectation or investment, with all the assumptions this has of 'yield', 'interest' and notions of capital accumulation, insists upon a similar question: why treat as a gift that which is subjected to commodity logic? The answer, we argue, is that the honeymoon's symbolic fiction is that it announces the end of being 'on the market'. The honeymoon as *the* wedding gift is a gift whose elaborate and excessive quality, is money spent without return, wasted and squandered, money spent on a memory, is entirely *for the couple*.

The honeymoon is given such high value precisely because it evidences less the coolness of romantic relationships, nor their contamination by consumerism's logic of reversible choice. Rather the honeymoon, a unique holiday chosen by the couple, gains its exceptional quality because it epitomises the *limits* to rational accounting and calculation in marriage markets and sexual fields. The honeymoon is the conversion of acquisition and getting, into the realm of getting without payment or giving. In the romantic ecology of choice, the honeymoon is both the highest expression of the economic competition and consummation of couples as well as its negation by way of transcending the logic of acquisition.

Re-embedding in moral communities

For Illouz, one unintended consequence of the emergence of the marriage market within the new ecology of choice is that it leaves individuals vulnerable and open to the re-evaluation of their choices. While, of course, the existential question 'Did I make the right choice?', much like the individualistic nature of Western societies, is not confined to the present, what does result from 'the great transformation of romantic ecology' is the over-riding sense that one's *own* actions and decisions are ultimately responsible for success or failure. Furthermore, the moral and normative frameworks that underline weddings, and marriage's ritual facets, become devoid of meaning and significance. The dis-embedding of the individual from an embedded marriage economy, in part, strips away the substantive rationality of marriage decisions and choices. Given this existential consequence for individuals in the new romantic ecology, the tendency to draw upon and redeploy facets of 'tradition' (invented or otherwise) has become evident in marriage and wedding practices. The appeal to tradition in 'individualised' conditions of romance gives rise to a process of 're-traditionalisation': a perceived decline in tradition results in the reselection of aspects of tradition at a time when choices are felt to have their origin in individual desire (Carter and Duncan 2018; Carter 2017).

In the past, Illouz argues, love was ritualised and followed a proper sequence: 'emotion confirms commitment as much as commitment confirms emotion' (2012: 30). She argues that this regime is in contrast to what we have now- a regime of emotional authenticity where: '[a]uthenticity demands that actors know their feelings; that they act on such feelings, which must then be the actual building blocks of a relationship; that people reveal their feelings to themselves (and preferably to others as well); and that they make decisions about relationships and commit themselves based on these feelings' (2012: 31). This inevitably leads to the contingent commitment and confluent love of Giddens' (1992) 'pure

relationship' which need last only as long as the couple are satisfied with the relationship. Thus while relationships are supposed to be built on emotion, this emphasis on emotional authenticity is actually obscuring the role of rationality in relationship decision-making where degrees of happiness and satisfaction are weighed against the possibility of finding a better partner in the extensive and easily accessible new marriage market. The emphasis on emotions therefore, in fact obscures the cooling of emotion that has taken place and the replacement of emotion with rational calculations.

A problem with the logic of this argument occurs when you consider the conclusion drawn by, among others, Dawson (2012) who notes that it is a mistake to see the claims to individuality and individual justification for action as a 'faithful depiction of how people act' (2012: 314). Rather, the increase in claims to individualism reflects a 'shift in the common vocabulary' in an era where individuals are increasingly called upon to account for their behaviour (Dawson, 2012: 314). This argument is lent further weight when we consider the breadth and depth of additional research pointing both to the ongoing class, gender and wealth inequalities which continue to enable or disable access to free choice (e.g. Carter and Duncan, 2018; Thwaites, 2016, this volume; Smith, 2016; Jamieson, 1999; Skeggs, 2005), and to the continuation of social categories in defining and guiding behaviour. On this last point, for example, Carter (2010, 2017, 2018) has demonstrated how the social role of 'wife' is used by young women to guide their attitudes towards marriage. This use of 'wife' is social and relational: it depends upon an agreed collective understanding of the role, as defined and recognised by others but especially important others such as close friends and family.

Illouz concludes thus: 'what has been lost in the modern experience of romantic suffering is the ontological security which derives from the organization of courtship in a moral ecology of choice, commitment, and ritual and from the embeddedness of self-value in the social fabric of one's community' (2012: 155). From the above discussion we would take issue with the assumption that an apparent change in the moral ecology of choice and dis-embeddedness from a wider community has led to a change in actual behaviours. This issue is twofold: first that changes in the vocabulary of choice equate to changes in the operation of choice, second that changes in the vocabulary of choice, where it appears to be the sole responsibility of individuals, result in a disconnection from wider moral frameworks in which choices are made. For it is our contention that while the vocabulary of choice promotes individualism, the operation of choice continues to happen in reference to wider social moral frameworks: they are not just individual cognitive efforts. The changes in the ecology and architecture of choice are, therefore, more about perception than operation (see Dawson 2012).

There are a number of examples of this embeddedness in wider moral frameworks in our data regarding wedding gifts. The first comes in the form of the wedding itself being a gift for those attending. Emily (32, engaged cohabiting), for example, explained:

'the food is nothing spectacular, but the idea that you will pay any amount because you're getting married. We wanted to have a much more relaxed approach so most of our money is being spent on providing our friends and family with a wonderful weekend rather than spending it on chair covers and ribbons to tie around chairs'

Helen (21, LAT) echoed this sentiment:

'I think I probably would spend quite a bit of money on it, still not anything stupid and OTT [over the top] but spend quite a bit of money on it so it was like the perfect

day for everybody but that's the thing about weddings, you're not sup- not please everybody but I wouldn't see it as *my* day or anything like that I'd want everybody to have a good day and have a good time so I think most of the money would probably go on the bar: Champaign for everybody!

These examples illustrate that while perhaps not operating under the same moral frameworks as in the past, there is clearly a wider normative guide for behaviour which frames the wedding as an essentially social event and one that is 'for' the guests: family and friends. While couples continue to be embedded within communities, weddings are events which bring together a celebration of couples, individuals and groups. Thus a new moral order is apparently established, one which neither relies solely on individuals nor communities for validity but instead incorporates both: wedding guests become key components of the ritual.

The presence of wedding guests operates as legitimation and confirmation of a couple relationship at a wedding. But the role of guests- and their gift-giving- can extend further to provide the very moral framework for action at weddings. Gift-giving creates and cements relationships between people and so large gifts made to a wedding couple cements both the importance of the couple as the centre of the ritual, and the importance of the relationships between the couple (receivers) and gift-givers. Once again, the gift becomes the means through which to transcend the infiltration of market logic into romance. For example, Mandy (30, married cohabiting) explains:

'it wasn't a traditional wedding like there was a dress and there was a cake but it was all very, we did it on like on a budget and put all the money into the reception so that we could have loads of friend there rather than into fancy stuff and like I wasn't going to have flowers and then like my auntie said 'well for your present I'll buy you flowers'...'

This gift of wedding flowers here emphasises the importance both of the wedding couple- who deserve a large economic gift- and the relationship between giver and receiver (auntie/niece). In this respect both the choice to gift a particular item, and the choice to provide a wedding reception 'for' friends, are not just choices based on personal reflection, rational logic or economic reasoning- they essentially involve relationships to others and a moral framework which promotes the valuing of those same relationships.

Lucy (30, LAT), for example, explains at some length the obligations and manipulations at work within her immediate family:

'mum said to dad have you thought about putting money aside it's like traditional and my dad probably like my mum says was really like ignored my mum and was just like phew what like how old are you and then mum said well your parents did it for your sister and then he went quiet and then apparently a couple of years later mum said that dad turned round her and said yeah I've been putting stuff aside and he's not told me this yet yeah so.. it's I'm just and my mum and mum spilt the beans so don't tell him I told you act surprised but I was so surprised absolutely amazed because I wouldn't expect anything from them 'cause they're so untraditional um not not because of that just 'cause I I just wouldn't expect anything from them I would hate for them to feel obliged and he obviously does.. but yeah I'm sure he knows that I would never expect that and would never ask for that.. so it's just hilarious'

Even though her parents are not ‘traditional’ they are saving up money to give her for her wedding. Such gifts connote parental (or social) obligation, responsibility, approval, love and connectedness. While the architecture of choice may have become individualised and infused with rationality, the gift of a wedding from parent to child offers salvation from such market logic. Illouz overlooks the importance of emotional connections, relationality and kinship in her theory construction. For while individuals may increasingly be required to make decisions independently, lacking the wider social scripts from the past, and living with greater uncertainty, the gift of a wedding, for example, can re-embed a couple within a moral community which uphold traditions (fathers paying for the weddings of their daughters), creating a sense of security in a world of uncertainty.

As gifts can operate to create transcendence from economic market logic infiltrating romance, we can likewise see through the lens of gift-giving the continued importance of, and our embeddedness within, moral communities. In fact, the social, normative work of ‘the gift’ becomes the figure and ground for such moral communities to be activated and given shape. These may not be the moral communities of the past (Illouz uses the example of the small communities depicted in Jane Austen’s novel), yet they are moral communities nonetheless: passing judgement on appropriate behaviour (as Lucy’s mum does for Lucy’s dad), communicating traditions (for fathers to pay for daughters’ weddings), forging connections (between family and friends), and promoting self-sacrifice (making weddings *for* others). The claim of complete dis-embeddedness from moral communities and normative frameworks is unfounded; such claims are blind to continuities in personal life. An alternative approach to understanding the ongoing significance of moral communities is outlined below.

Self-gifts: or, love’s law of the individual

With the couple at the centre of the wedding, our final critique of Illouz’s account of modern romance is the place of, and the inevitable suffering bestowed upon, the self in late-modern love life. For Illouz, the problem is that love has become a site for the affirmation of the self at the expense of other social sources of recognition. Love is capable of this supreme metaphysical task of self-affirmation precisely because contemporary individualism rests upon people being seen as singular, unique and differentiated from others (Illouz, 2012: 111-121). To be loved is to be affirmed for one’s uniqueness. But the dialectic that Illouz explores is that love is unable, in the end, to affirm the self. The form of recognition that love entails is dyadic. When love becomes recognition of a unique individual self it equally runs up against the problem that the lover must not sacrifice themselves completely to their beloved, and neither must the beloved be only an object of desire, affection and emotional validation for the lover. There is a tension between autonomy and recognition of self-other that modern romance suffers from. We suggest a reconciliation to this dialectic of autonomy and recognition in Simmel’s inversion of Kantian ethics, ‘The Law of the Individual’ (e.g. Nielsen, 2002: 89; Lee and Silver, 2012; Barbour, 2012).

Of course, Illouz is not denying that other sources of recognition exist in late-modern societies, and neither is she denying the possibility of satisfying romantic relationships. However the problem with Illouz’s diagnosis of modern suffering is that it is unable to accommodate a positive vision to the existential significance placed upon love as a source of the self. Today the moral substance of love is without anchor:

What has been lost in the modern experience of romantic suffering is the ontological security which derives from the organisation of courtship in a moral ecology of

choice, commitment, and ritual and from the embeddedness of self-value in the social fabric of one's community (Illouz, 2012: 155)

Simmel certainly would have been sympathetic with this view of modern love, however he would not have longed for the pre-modern certainty of one's social fate. Simmel's moral philosophy is opposed to the substantive morality Illouz followsⁱⁱ: Simmel knew that reason alone could not save the modern soul. With this, Simmel inverted Kant's 'categorical imperative' - moral laws universally applicable to all particular persons - because it denied an essential part of our humanity: our emotional life. As modernity affirmed reason above all other dimensions of the human subject, Simmel argued moral decisions (as Illouz notes of emotionality being incorporated with rationality) would be stifling when conducted with reason alone. For Simmel, reason *and* a deeply 'sensuous' (i.e. emotive) dimension were required for a properly *individual* moral law (Lee and Silver, 2012: 132f). Our decisions to commit to certain actions are not to be predicated upon a rational, universal moral law but the obligation for 'each of us to form our deeds into a coherent narrative that defines the person we are living to be.' (Lee and Silver, 2012:133)

We find such an individual law within the modern marriage market: weddings are defined by the annulment of choice; a decision to commit in the face of choice. The highest value of romantic life is the decision to cut off all other choices in an ecology where choice is defined primarily by individual emotional and rational reflexivity. As we have argued, the vocabulary of motives which pervades romantic relationships is premised upon individual desire and emotional reasoning, but this has not meant the wholesale takeover by either a consumerist ethics of reversibility nor a removal of moral obligations to others. Weddings come to be expressions of individuality ultimately because they are a decisive plot-point in our individual moral narratives. They provide us with a cultural space to express, to ourselves as much as others, what our choices mean.

Consider Jane's (22, engaged cohabiting) statement about the wedding as a 'self-gift':

I just think it's a gift to myself. Like, I've never spent this amount of money on anything. And ... to you know... I sort of thought to myself you haven't done expensive holidays, you haven't done these things. Give yourself this, give yourself this gift of this memory and this event, you know. ... But ...no it's that just that important personal step. [...] Because you're like... 'I want my Cinderella day' [laughs]. That's kind of what it's like. [...] There are things I know I could have saved money on... like my dress for instance, I know I could have got a cheaper dress. But I thought 'no, I don't want to take a chance on a dress from...the internet, they look like they make them really well...' but you have no idea what it looks like when it comes. [...] So I know I could have saved money on my dress, but then I sort of think, that's the thing I don't want to get wrong... it's my wedding dress, again it's something I would have never spent that kind of money on. But it's my wedding dress. That in particular as well is my gift to myself. I mean, I'm paying for my wedding dress. Nobody else is.

Jane's statement of the wedding - the memory of the day - and the 'wedding dress', in particular, speaks to a triumph of her emotional desire, a fantasy of Cinderella that breaks through from her inner life: the sacrifice of money is transformed from purchase to donation, from commodity (defined by selfish acquisition) to gift ('my gift to myself') situated in a romance narrative (see Mick, 1996: 105). Jane's insistence that the dress is hers, in the

paradoxical language of the 'self-gift', is telling. Jane's self-gift evidences the ethical maxim of the individual law: that she desires to keep this memory and dress as hers beyond all other considerations. Absent from Jane's account is, crucially, others - her partner, family or friends. This is Simmel's 'law of the individual' at work; while the moral communities of the past may be fragmented, the self does not lose anchor completely. Jane acts as her own moral community: in late modernity the self becomes differentiated not only from others but 'themselves', too. As a result, the self becomes obliged to, and capable of, finding meaning 'within' through self-dialogue (Smith, 2017).

We give to ourselves to maintain a boundary between our deliberative actions involving ourselves and others, and that part of ourselves we reserve for ourselves. While the self-gift is logically impossible, Simmel reconciles the impossibility by allowing the self to speak to the self. Thus while gift-giving relies on the assumption that one is giving to someone else, self-gifting requires the self to be separated from the self. Illouz positions self-value within the social fabric of one's community and therefore interprets the decline of moral communities as undermining our ability to value ourselves. However, following Simmel's 'law of the individual', we see how self-value can be sourced from within the self and with it, an individual morality encompassing both emotion and rationality.

Conclusion

We hope to have demonstrated in this chapter some of the limitations of Illouz's theory of emotional capitalism, marriage markets, and changes in the ecology and architecture of choice. Crucially we have used the framework of wedding gifts to demonstrate how engaging with gifting can transcend the limits of the market logic of romance: gifts can offer an end point to the perception of endless choice and choice reversibility. While wedding gifts may be redundant and overly-commercialised to the anxious not-yet-married, for the soon-to-wed they represent a resolution to the rational uncertainty within the marriage market. The honeymoon-as-gift, moreover, may represent the ultimate rejection of the infiltration of market logic into romance since it transcends the logic of acquisition- it is a gift simply for the couple with no tangible end product.

We can also see that through the gifting of the wedding itself- to others or to the self- that this reflects the continued salience of moral communities and normative frameworks operating to guide behaviours. On the one hand this is seen in the gifting of weddings (or elements of the wedding) from relatives or friends which reflects collective values and beliefs held by groups. On the other hand, this is demonstrated in the self-gifting of the wedding, illustrating an individual moral law that works to guide behaviour through self-dialogue. In both cases, moral and normative frameworks continue to operate in important ways in individuals' lives and decision-making processes.

Through this discussion of wedding gifts, we hope to have demonstrated that changes in intimacy practices have not resulted in the wholesale takeover of consumerist ethics nor the entire removal of moral obligations. For while individuals consider themselves individuals first, they do so in order to better embed themselves with others (their romantic partners, intimate others, even themselves). They certainly know their choices to be open and subject to rational calculation, but they equally see others having to be accommodated in these choices and courses of action. Our choices always have limits and these limits require a sense of meaningful orientation. That is, limits are longed for as much as they are a curtailing of choice. We hope to have provided one such meaningful limit to the great transformation of the romantic ecology: we may be disentangled from a communal, substantive morality, but

we have ways to re-embed ourselves. In doing so we can find a morality which does have substance despite having to carry much of the burden of our choices ourselves. By using this morality of the gift - an ideal more than a reality - love's law of the individual is able to find a way for couples to be couples, families to be families, and brides to be brides in a world where we are obliged to think of ourselves as ultimately individuals.

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ⁱ The *Mass Observation survey* invites volunteer members of the British public to record their responses to particular topics or questions. Participants are given no specific instruction what to record. The archives are based at the University of Sussex and contain material from c.1937-1955 and 1981-present.

ⁱⁱ Illouz's reading of Simmel's theory of modern alienation in *Cold Intimacies* (2007: 111-112) refers to a loss in the experience of love, as the comprehension of the whole of the other, due to the increasingly abstract ways in which we relate to one another. Our reading of Simmel draws upon his later ethical theory, not present in Illouz's sociology, which offers a means of overcoming the alienation he initially outlined.