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To cite this article: Angie Besel, Toni Schindler Zimmerman, Christine A. Fruhauf, Joanna Pepin & James H. Banning (2009) Here Comes the Bride: An Ethnographic Content Analysis of Bridal Books, Journal of Feminist Family Therapy, 21:2, 98-124, DOI: 10.1080/08952830902952267

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/08952830902952267

Published online: 27 May 2009.

Citing articles: 3 View citing articles
Here Comes the Bride: An Ethnographic Content Analysis of Bridal Books

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Weddings are the most common ritual used to mark a change in a person’s relationship status. Engaged couples in the United States are inundated with messages about how to plan this significant event. Weddings serve as rites of passage and assist in role transitions. When preparing for a wedding, many couples turn to wedding planning books. It is important for professionals who work with couples, particularly premarital couples, to be aware of the messages that are given in wedding planning books. The purpose of this research was to examine advice in wedding books targeted to brides in terms of gender and creating healthy relationships. Wedding books were analyzed from a feminist lens and the overarching themes that emerged are: Women in Weddings, Men in Weddings, Relationship Advice, Changes in Weddings, and Looks are Important. The primary finding of this research is that the advice given to engaged couples maintains and promotes inequality in the planning of this important ritual.

KEYWORD: weddings, brides, grooms, feminist critique, gender, self-help, media, femininity, gender roles, engagements, wedding books, wedding planning, patriarchy, rituals, premarital therapy

Received November 10, 2009; accepted April 6, 2009.
This research was partially funded by the Human Development and Family Studies (HDFS) Thesis Scholarship at Colorado State University.
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INTRODUCTION

Weddings are an integral part of society in the United States. While 90% of individuals in the United States will marry at some point in their lives, approximately half of these first-time marriages will end in divorce (Kreider & Fields, 2002). Of those individuals who divorce, the majority of them will remarry at some point in their life (Kreider & Fields). It is important for couple and family therapists, and other mental health professionals, to understand intimate partnerships in order to help couples have a happy and healthy relationship (Zimmerman, Holm, & Starrels, 2001). Because the wedding is the most common way for couples to symbolize their transition from singleness to a committed partnership in the United States, it is important to understand the messages that couples receive about this ritual regarding their roles and responsibilities. United States culture is highly influenced by the media, and messages about weddings are no exception. Most individuals have easy access to television, the Internet, books, newspapers, and magazines. Because of the availability of these sources of information, many people utilize some form of media to help with wedding planning (Chesser, 1980; Currie, 1993; Knox, Zusman, McGinty, & Abowitz, 2003; Wilding, 2003).

It is crucial to examine the messages contained in bridal books. Information about the wedding ritual may not only guide the bride and groom in the planning of their wedding, but they may also provide important messages about roles and responsibilities in the marriage itself. Therefore, it is important for therapists and other professionals—such as social workers and religious leaders who work with couples—to evaluate the information presented in the media in order to understand their clients and to help counteract potentially harmful messages. For this reason, we examined the contents of 13 bridal planning books in order to determine the types of messages couples are encountering when planning their wedding. Because research has shown that couples do best with an equitable division of power, and gender often privileges men over women (Gottman & Silver, 1999; Rabin, 1996; Schwartz, 1994), we used feminist theory as a framework for coding and understanding the results.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Feminist theory holds that society is gendered and people are socially taught to fulfill specific gender roles (Avis, 1988; Goodrich, 2003; Haddock, Zimmerman, & Lyness, 2003; Haddock, Zimmerman, & MacPhee, 2000; Hare-Mustin, 1989; Zimmerman & Besel, 2008; Zimmerman, Holm, & Starrels, 2001). These gender roles are not simply determined by biology, but by socialization from family and the larger society (Avis; Goodrich; Haddock et al., 2000; Haddock et al., 2003; Hare-Mustin; Zimmerman &
Besel; Zimmerman, Holm, & Starrels). Because much gender socialization occurs through everyday events, its occurrence on a subconscious level makes it difficult for people to recognize and easier for people to maintain (Avis; Zimmerman and Besel). Rigid gender roles can become problematic in relationships because unequal expectations are perpetuated, and assumptions that particular tasks are best completed by someone of a particular gender is limiting to both women and men. These rigid gender roles prevent couples from establishing an equitable division of labor based on individual abilities and, instead, maintain an unequal balance of power.

This inequality is harmful both to individuals and to couples’ relationships. For instance, research shows it is difficult for couples with unequal power dynamics to maintain long-term intimacy (Rabin, 1996). One example of this power difference is that while women more often begin discussions about problems than their husbands, men more often hold the final decision making power and have a greater influence on the outcome of the discussion (Ball, Cowan, & Cowan, 1995). Additionally, inequality in marital relationships has been found to benefit men’s well-being but to be detrimental to women’s well-being (Bernard, 1982; Post, 1997). Given this unequal power dynamic, it is not surprising that women initiate roughly two-thirds to three-quarters of divorces (Maushart, 2001). On the other hand, equitable couple relationships in which couples share power are more successful and are characterized by close friendship, role sharing, and relationship satisfaction (Gottman & Silver, 1999; Schwartz, 1994).

Wedding Rituals

Gender messages and roles are entrenched in society and culture; it is important for people to be aware of these messages in order to make informed decisions about whether to perpetuate these roles in their own relationships. One way to study society’s gendered messages is to study rituals. While rituals can be helpful in establishing and affirming one’s place in society, they can also reinforce potentially harmful values. The majority of marital relationships begin with the planning and execution of the wedding ritual, thus it is important to recognize the messages provided to couples about gender and relationships regarding the wedding, engagement period, and the marriage.

Weddings provide a good example of both the positive and negative aspects to rituals. Weddings can be helpful in that they are often seen as “rites of passage” into adulthood and the beginning of a new family (Currie, 1993; Kalmijn, 2004; Montemurro, 2002; Wilding, 2003). This can also be helpful in affirming the couple’s commitment to each other and to each other’s family and friends. It also can affirm to family that the members of the couple are “all grown up” and that they have separated from their families of
origin in order to create a new family unit. Kalmijn found support for the idea that the wedding ritual reinforced role transitions by reducing uncertainty about marriage and by appealing to cultural and familial norms.

On the other hand, weddings perpetuate society’s bias of privileging heterosexuality and are embedded in a context of patriarchy (Currie; Oswald, 2003). The wedding ritual can be problematic because it reinforces stereotypical gender roles, messages, and power dynamics (Currie; Lewis, 1998; Montemurro, 2005; Schweingruber, Anahita, & Berns, 2004). For example, because of the emphasis on stereotypical women’s traits and women’s work such as femininity, emotionality, and consumption in wedding planning, the job of wedding planning is often relegated to the female partner (Currie; Howard, 2003; Montemurro; Schweingruber et al.). Male partners were only involved in the planning process by giving final approval on decisions that were made (Currie). This finding is similar to research on communication with married couples; the male has power over the female partner in that he gets to make the final decision, emphasizing inequality around decision-making (Zvonkovic, Greaves, Schmeige, & Hall, 1996). Through the wedding ritual, couples are taught to enact “appropriate” gender roles and unequal power differentials. Knowing that equality is important for a successful marriage (Gottman & Silver, 1999; Schwartz, 1994), parts of the wedding ritual that encourage inequality are helping to set couples up for failure.

These unequal gender roles in weddings start at the beginning of the engagement, often with a proposal. Schweingruber et al. (2004) found that for a proposal to be considered legitimate, two components must be present: the man must ask the woman to marry him and then present her with an engagement ring. In this ritual it is clear that the man is the initiator and the woman is the responder. While this configuration is not inherently problematic, it perpetuates the idea that men have more power in the relationship in that they are able to determine when, where, and how the relationship will progress to the next stage. By simply looking at the beginning of the wedding process, it is clear that men and women begin on unequal ground.

Another ritual rooted in a tradition of inequality is escorting of the bride down an aisle to be presented to the groom by her father. This tradition is reminiscent of a time in which arranged marriages were common and during which the bride was actually sold as property (Post, 1997). This ritual is another that is not inherently problematic, but raises many questions. Why does the father escort the bride even though traditionally the mother has put more effort into raising her (Hochschild, 1989; Maushart, 2001)? Why do the parents of the groom not escort their son? In continuing this ritual in the traditional form, the idea is given that the woman is property of one man (her father) and is being given as property to another man (the groom). Again, this ritual sends a message that the relationship begins on unequal ground.
Engagement and wedding rings are another common symbol of weddings. Some argue that the ring is a symbol of trust and unending love, and is worn on the fourth finger because of the “belief that this finger has a small artery in which leads straight to the heart” (Chesser, 1980, p. 205). Other researchers argue that the ring is a symbol of subjugation of the wife to the husband in that it was worn by the woman on her left hand (considered to be the inferior hand because most people were right handed; Chesser; Post, 1997). While the ring might have begun as a symbol of women’s subjugation and submission, many couples today have a “double-ring ceremony” in which both the bride and groom exchange and wear wedding bands. This modification in the symbol of wedding rings helps encourage equality in the idea that men and women are entering a relationship of trust and mutual submission to one another. However, this meaning may be debated in that the development of the “double-ring ceremony” was largely the result of marketing by jewelers to increase consumption, not necessarily as a way to counter the sexism in the ritual (Howard, 2003).

In attempts to alter gender expectations in weddings, people tend to do nontraditional gender activities in a traditionally gendered way (Montemurro, 2005). For example, equality seems to get “lip service” with regard to weddings. This is illustrated by Currie (1993):

> Changing the language and content of wedding vows to convey an egalitarian commitment stands in direct contrast to the way in which women assumed responsibility for the work of weddings . . . For the large part, men participate primarily in decision-making, where they often “had the final say.” Thus, although respondents did not vow to “obey” their husbands, the brides-to-be very often avoided conflict by deferring to their partner’s wishes. (p. 415)

The wedding ritual is so embedded in culture that it is difficult to have a wedding without perpetuating some patriarchal values. Even couples who do not “regularly subscribe to old-fashioned gender roles feel compelled to construct them as a means of enacting the bride-to-be and groom-to-be roles properly” (Montemurro, p. 27).

Self-Help

With the majority of people marrying and sometimes marrying more than once, the business surrounding weddings is substantial. Many people view weddings as a specific event that is conducted in a precise way, but they are unfamiliar with how a wedding comes together and look to the wedding industry for advice. Couples seek guidance from personal contacts, wedding consultants, and other wedding professionals such as videographers,
stationers, and reception site managers to assist them with their wedding planning (Chesser, 1980; Corrado, 2002; Currie, 1993). However, many couples also seek advice from more impersonal self-help sources such as wedding magazines and books (Chesser; Currie; Knox et al., 2003; Wilding, 2003).

The self-help industry has become a pervasive part of United States culture, and numerous books are written every year with the goal of helping people improve aspects of their lives (Zimmerman, Holm, & Haddock, 2001; Zimmerman, Holm, & Starrels, 2001). It is important to note that the self-help industry is made up of both books that are based in research and books that are based simply on the author’s opinion. However, with the immense popularity of self-help books comes a belief from the reader in the trustworthiness of the author’s advice that is not always justified (Zimmerman, Holm, & Starrels). Past research has shown that books based in research are more likely to promote egalitarian values than books based solely on opinion (Zimmerman, Holm, & Starrels).

Self-help books are commonly used in planning for weddings (Currie, 1993), and therefore it may be useful for therapists working with these premarital couples to know the content contained in these resources. It is important to better understand the current state of wedding planning advice as it relates to gender messages and relationship expectations because it marks the official beginning to a couple’s life together, and sharing power equally is crucial for a healthy relationship (Gottman & Silver, 1999; Schwartz, 1994). However, there is limited research on wedding self-help resources and the impact of planning a wedding from an egalitarian perspective. Pepin, Zimmerman, Fruhauf, and Banning (2008) performed a content analysis of wedding books specifically written for grooms and found the majority of these books continued to perpetuate traditional gender ideology throughout the wedding planning process. It is important to expand this research and examine the advice provided for brides in the wedding planning process to determine if these resources also perpetuate unequal gender ideology. Expanding this research will also assist professionals working with premarital clients to evaluate whether couples are receiving similar or different messages about relating with one another. The purpose of this research was to determine what messages are contained in wedding planning books for brides.

METHODOLOGY

Pepin et al. (2008) examined the advice contained in books targeted to grooms. This study is a companion study to the research of Pepin et al., and will examine the explicit and implicit advice in wedding planning books specifically written for brides. Therefore, the method used is similar to the
method used by Pepin and colleagues. However, there were a few differences in the methodology used for this study in sampling techniques and inter-rater reliability.

This study used an ethnographic content analysis to examine advice given to brides. An ethnographic content analysis is used to help investigate people, culture, and “the communication of meaning” (Altheide, 1987, p. 68; Altheide, Coyle, DeVriese, and Schneider, 2008). Ethnographic content analysis allows messages to emerge from the data and is used to examine the messages in the explicit advice given as well as the messages given in the style of writing, the pictures shown, and comments made throughout the books that are not explicit advice (Altheide; Altheide et al. 2008). In this way, both the overt advice and the covert messages in bridal books will be examined.

Sample

To obtain this sample, the same sampling technique as Pepin et al. (2008), a purposeful search, was used (Patton, 2002). The first author began by searching for books for brides using Amazon.com with the keywords bride, bridal, or wedding. Over 10,000 results were found compared to the 16 results found in Pepin et al.’s initial search. The word wedding was included because many wedding books that do not target a specific member of the wedding party are implicitly aimed at the bride. The sampling technique was then altered from Pepin et al.’s study because 10,000 results were too many to search through to find a sample.

In order to narrow the sample, the first two authors employed a naturalistic approach and visited the wedding planning section at the local Barnes & Noble store. This technique was used based on the assumption that going to a large bookstore, in a mid-size town, would be an experience representative of what a bride or couple would encounter when searching for a book to help plan a wedding. We initially selected 15 books for the sample (see Figure 1).

However, two books were removed during the coding process because they did not fit the sample. The first was Going Bridal: How to Get Married without Losing Your Mind, by Robbins (2004). This book was excluded from the sample because it seemed to be more of a memoir with a collection of previous brides’ experience and their advice. The second book excluded from the sample was Wedding Sanity Savers, by Atkins and Gilbar (2005). While this book contained a lot of advice, most of the advice was specific to the variety of relationships a bride may encounter, as well as the self-esteem of the bride. This information was interesting but was excluded because it was significantly different from the other wedding books selected for the sample. Most of the wedding books included a lot of information about the details of wedding planning and gave only a little information about
Themes that emerged from the sample as a whole significantly differed from the themes in this book, thus was excluded. After these alterations, 13 books met the criteria to be included in the sample (see Table 1).
Data Analysis

The data analysis of this study closely followed the methodology used by Pepin et al. (2008). The purpose of this research was to identify and understand the advice contained in books targeted to brides. We used Pepin et al.’s overarching description of “advice” defined as a suggestion or a demand telling someone to do something. Specifically, we defined advice as commands to do something and statements such as “you should, it is best, I advise, I recommend, never or do not do something, it is wise, I suggest, it is important, it is critical, you will want to/need to, the proper way, the easiest way, the perfect way, and it is a good/great idea to.” We decided that statements like “you could, you can, you may, probably,” or commands to read further in the book were not considered advice.

In an effort to attend to the reliability of the deductive coding involved in selection of the advice segments, an inter-coder reliability strategy was employed. However, a slight alteration from Pepin et al.’s (in press) research methodology was used to establish this inter-coder reliability. While Pepin and colleagues attended to reliability by establishing inter-coder reliability through one book, we decided to establish inter-coder reliability from the first chapter of every book in the sample. The first author and a peer (a graduate student with the same training in marriage and family therapy) each coded both the introduction section for practice and then the first chapter of every book separately to establish reliability. Next they met to compare and discuss the advice identified, as well as to clarify any issues encountered about the working definition of advice. A percent agreement was used to ensure that agreed consensus was reached about the “precise values assigned to a given variable” (Neuendorf, 2002, T

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author(s) (Year)</th>
<th>Title</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Blum &amp; Kaiser (2005)</td>
<td>Wedding Planning for Dummies</td>
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<td>Hirschhaut &amp; Taylor (2006)</td>
<td>Bride to Be</td>
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<tr>
<td>Post (2006)</td>
<td>Emily Post’s Wedding Etiquette</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
If the percentage of agreement was 80% or higher in the first chapter, the first author coded the remaining chapters independently (see Table 2). If the percent agreement was lower than 80% in the first chapter, the first author and peer coded subsequent chapters of the book until at least an 80% agreement was reached. Once the inter-coder reliability was established, the first author then proceeded as normal and independently coded the remainder of the book chapters.

Similar to Pepin et al. (2008), an inductive coding strategy was then used to identify themes from the advice coded (Seidel & Kelle, 1995). Reliability of the inductive coding was established through the process of peer debriefing (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). However, another difference from Pepin et al.’s research was identified at this stage. Through the initial deductive coding process of identifying the advice in the bridal books, it became apparent that a large portion of the advice was about the specifics of wedding planning details, such as how to choose the right dress or the appropriate flower arrangements for a wedding. All of this type of advice was immediately identified as a theme, Wedding Planning Details, and excluded from any further inductive coding processes.

A constant comparative method (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) was then used in order to understand the remaining data. After removing the wedding planning detail advice, the first author summarized the remaining advice from all of the books. Informed by feminist theory and the literature previously reviewed, 5 themes and 11 subthemes emerged from the data. Using these themes, the first author reread each piece of advice and assigned a code that corresponds to a theme and subtheme (Boyatzis, 1998). To understand the prevalence of each theme and subtheme, the codes were summed and a percentage of advice for each theme was calculated (see Table 3).
## TABLE 3 Themes and Subthemes

<table>
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<th>Theme</th>
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| Characteristics      | (49%) | (34%) | (46%) | (50%) | (52%) | (46%) | (33%) | (35%) | (4%) | (59%) | (31%) | (48%) | (44%) |        |
| Expectations         | (6%)  | (15%) | (14%) | (7%)  | (17%) | (7%)  | (9%)  | (10%) | (1%)  | (0%)  | (6%)  | (4%)  | (5%)  | (8%)  |
| Roles                | (6%)  | (15%) | (17%) | (21%) | (10%) | (22%) | (22%) | (25%) | (18%) | (7%)  | (16%) | (4%)  | (16%) | (24%) |
| Relationship Advice  | (15%) | (17%) | (17%) | (21%) | (10%) | (22%) | (22%) | (25%) | (18%) | (7%)  | (16%) | (4%)  | (16%) | (24%) |
| Egalitarian          | (10%) | (11%) | (23%) | (18%) | (5%)  | (28%) | (11%) | (8%)  | (16%) | (18%) | (45)  | (11)  | (223) |
| Patriarchal          | (2%)  | (17%) | (2%)  | (6%)  | (8%)  | (2%)  | (4%)  | (8%)  | (28%) | (1%)  | (9%)  | (4%)  | (4%)  | (6%)  |
| Other                | (2%)  | (17%) | (2%)  | (6%)  | (8%)  | (2%)  | (4%)  | (8%)  | (28%) | (1%)  | (9%)  | (4%)  | (4%)  | (6%)  |
| Changes in Weddings  | (28%) | (17%) | (21%) | (15%) | (13%) | (18%) | (19%) | (25%) | (18%) | (22%) | (10%) | (18%) | (27%) | (18%) |
| Men's Roles          | (3%)  | (8%)  | (7%)  | (12%) | (1%)  | (18%) | (6%)  | (5%)  | (9%)  | (5)   | (10)  | (3)   | (94)  |
| Women's Roles        | (24%) | (3%)  | (33%) | (6%)  | (8%)  | (12%) | (12%) | (10%) | (8%)  | (9%)  | (13)  | (20)  | (18)  | (176) |
| Looks are Important  | (2%)  | (11%) | (3%)  | (7%)  | (6%)  | (3%)  | (4%)  | (5%)  | (26)  | (1%)  | (15)  | (6)   | (3)   | (92)  |
| Totals               | (95%) | (65%) | (190) | (121) | (71)  | (168) | (93)  | (61)  | (94)  | (74)  | (175) | (167) | (79)  | (1447) |
Wedding Details | 380 | 228 | 1182 | 697 | 396 | 918 | 601 | 419 | 515 | 112 | 726 | 1069 | 1143 | 8386  
(80%) (78%) (86%) (85%) (85%) (87%) (87%) (85%) (85%) (60%) (81%) (86%) (94%) (85%)

Totals | 475 | 293 | 1372 | 818 | 467 | 1086 | 694 | 480 | 609 | 186 | 901 | 1236 | 1222 | 9833

1. Anti-Bride Etiquette Guide.
2. Bride to Be.
8. The Lifetime Wedding Planner.
11. The Everything Wedding Book.
RESULTS

For this study, 13 wedding books were examined and a total of 6 themes and 11 subthemes emerged from the data. The six overarching themes emerging from the data were: Wedding Planning Details, Women in Weddings, Men in Weddings, Relationship Advice, Changes in Weddings, and Looks are Important (see Table 3). The theme Wedding Planning Details accounted for 85% of the total advice. It was excluded from further examination because the advice in this category did not contain messages about gender or relationships; therefore, the advice in this theme could not be analyzed through the framework of feminist theory. Aside from the theme Wedding Planning Details, the five other themes accounted for 15% of the total advice. Throughout this section, the percentage of advice for each category is out of that 15%. Therefore, when a percentage of advice for a theme besides Wedding Planning Details is discussed it is given out of 100%, but that 100% is from the 15% of advice remaining after removing the theme Wedding Planning Details (see Figure 2).

Eleven subthemes were identified in four of the remaining five overarching themes. The theme Women in Weddings contained the three subthemes: Characteristics of Women in Weddings, Expectations of Women in Weddings, and Roles of Women in Weddings. The theme Men in Weddings also consisted of these three subthemes: Characteristics of Men in Weddings, Expectations of Men in Weddings, and Roles in Weddings. In the theme Relationship Advice, advice was identified in three subcategories: Egalitarian Advice, Patriarchal Advice, and Other Advice. The two subthemes in the

![Figure 2: Percentage of types of advice in wedding planning books.](image-url)
Changes in Weddings theme were split along gender lines as *Men's Roles* and *Women's Roles*.

**Wedding Planning Details**

Overall, the most prevalent theme was *Wedding Planning Details*, which accounted for 85% of the total advice in this study. Advice in this theme included suggestions and ideas specific to the logistical details in hosting a wedding, and was excluded from further analysis because none of the advice in this theme related to gender or relationships. Examples of *Wedding Planning Details* were how to find a ceremony and reception site, what characteristics should determine what vendors are hired, or what type of floral arrangements should be included in a wedding. An example of this advice included, “Don’t forget to talk to your DJ or bandleader about how little or much you want him/her to talk,” (Roney, 2004, p. 269). This theme also included advice about family and friends that did not fit into another category, such as “Certain family members and close friends should hear the news first” (Post, 2006, p. 3).

**Women in Weddings**

With the exception of *Wedding Planning Details*, the theme *Women in Weddings* was the most prevalent theme in this study. The advice in this theme maintained traditional gender stereotypes by implying that the bride and her family should be the focus of the wedding and generalized that women are simultaneously overemotional and responsible for the wedding. Advice categorized in this theme was aimed at the bride, the bride’s mother, the groom’s mother, the maid or matron of honor, and the bridesmaids. This theme contained these three subthemes: *Characteristics*, *Expectations*, and *Roles*.

*Characteristics of women in weddings*. The advice in this subtheme suggests the following: women should exhibit feminine traits such as patience, good communication, and consideration of other people's feelings; women are overemotional; women are stressed; and women are responsible. Particular attention was given to the idea that women are stressed out and overemotional. This idea may be logical because, as discussed in the review of the literature, men are relatively uninvolved with weddings, leaving the practical work of planning a wedding to women, primarily the bride and her mother. Examples of this idea are “Don’t worry about having a panic attack—your rehearsal won’t be as nerve-wracking as you might think” (Mattei, 2005, p. 241) and:

> Even though you’re busy and feel as if you’re time-starved, I want you to make a date to pamper yourself. You need time to kick back and
The examples imply that there is so much work and stress involved in planning a wedding that women should anticipate having panic attacks and needing to calm themselves. While this advice is not necessarily bad, it seems trivial to imply that one can overcome a large amount of stress in a couple hours when it is likely that equally sharing the wedding responsibilities with her fiancé throughout the wedding process would do more to actually reduce a bride’s stress level.

Expectations of women in weddings. The *Expectations of Women in Weddings* subtheme included advice about women doing the majority of the work in wedding planning, brides needing to micromanage every aspect of the wedding, women needing to follow tradition, that women’s identity is connected to their marital status or her parents, that the bride and her family is the focus of the wedding, and finally, that the wedding and marriage are extremely important to women.

An idea within the subtheme of *Expectations of Women in Weddings* is the idea that the bride should micromanage everything. Examples of this notion are: “Follow up on all the details, right down to the last minute, even if the responsibility isn’t technically yours to worry about” (Warner, 2005, p. 244) and “Think like a CEO: write a mission statement outlining what your event is all about and how you want to stage it” (Gerin & Hughes, 2004, p. 97). These pieces of advice are overt in stating that the bride is in charge and should be in control of the wedding. The effect of these message restricts grooms’ and other family members’ participation in wedding planning, and leaves the bride overwhelmed and stressed.

Roles of women in weddings. This subtheme implies that women’s roles are private and “behind the scenes,” relationship focused, and responsible for doing the emotional work. Examples of this role are: “Once you have a solution in mind, approach everyone involved and talk things through . . . Ask that they set aside their differences for one day” (Lifetime Press, 2003, p. 28) and “Keep the lines of communication open for all the wedding details and consult with both families on all major decisions. Encourage both mothers to consult with one another on any major events that each is planning” (Hagen, 2004, p. 15). Both of these examples imply that the responsibility of getting information and handling conflict belongs to women, particularly the bride.

Men in Weddings

This theme contains messages about the traditional traits and stereotypes of men, as well as their participation—or rather their lack of participation—in weddings and the wedding planning process. The advice in this theme
implies that men are irresponsible and uninterested in weddings. The advice in this category is about the groom, the father of the bride, the father of the groom, the best man, and the groomsmen, but seems to be advice written about men but directed towards the bride. Three subthemes, Characteristics of Men in Weddings, Expectations of Men in Weddings, and Roles of Men in Weddings emerged for this theme.

**Characteristics of men in weddings.** The characteristics of men in weddings in this subtheme contained gender stereotypical male characteristics. Some of these characteristics included the following: men are irresponsible, men should be “manly,” men are active, men help the bride but do not take primary responsibility for wedding planning, men are fun, and men are responsible for finances. A prominent theme in this subcategory was advice that assumed that men are irresponsible and cannot take care of details, therefore women should either take over or supervise any action taken by men. An example of this assumption is, “To prevent this type of blooper, someone needs to call the best man the morning of the wedding, to be sure he has placed the ring safely in his jacket pocket” (Warner, 2005, p. 246). While the “someone” specified does not necessarily have to be female, given the attitude towards men in this sentence, and throughout the book, it is likely the author is referring to a female to be the one contacting the “irresponsible” best man to ensure he does not fail at this task.

**Expectations of men in weddings.** Messages about expectations of men in weddings and the wedding planning process were stereotypical. For instance, men were expected to not be interested in weddings or wedding planning, to be able to determine which tasks to participate in, and had the option to work on wedding-related details only when it was of interest to them. One example of this included: “If your fiancé isn’t excited about going with you to set up gift registries, don’t worry about it. Take along your mom or your best friend for advice and establish the registries yourself” (Warner, 2005. p. 26). The advice excuses men from work regarding the wedding, and furthermore excludes him from the work of starting their life together. This expectation sets up a traditional household structure of women focusing and caring about the household while men are uninterested and excused from household labor.

**Roles of men in weddings.** The roles of men in weddings presented in the advice were also stereotypical and traditional in nature. Men were expected to take on public roles such as walking the bride down the aisle, giving the bride away, or toasting at the reception and other parties. Another role for men in weddings was to handle and support overemotional women.

Two examples of men’s public roles from *Bride’s Magazine* (2003) were: “After your father’s toast, it’s customary for your fiancé to rise and respond by toasting you and your parents, then his parents” and “At the altar [the father of the bride], offers his support or blessing (what has traditionally been called
‘giving away the bride’)” (p. 7). These roles are public and bring recognition to the man involved as an important, or even as the most important, person in a woman’s life. It also implicitly implies that the men were thoroughly involved in the wedding. This role is in contrast to women’s role of doing the work of wedding planning, but not getting public recognition. With regard to the example of publicly blessing and supporting the bride, this act may imply that her father was the primary parent. However, it is likely that the actual responsibility of raising the bride was done by the bride’s mother, who is traditionally expected to sit quietly during the ceremony while the father of the bride speaks for both of them.

Relationship Advice

Throughout the books, authors provided relationship advice to be followed before, during, and after the wedding. While the majority of advice in this theme was aimed at the couple, some of the advice pertained to the couple and their families. The relationship advice fit into three subthemes: Egalitarian Advice, Patriarchal Advice, and Other Relationship Advice.

Egalitarian advice. Egalitarian advice included messages that the bride and groom should be a team, divide work between themselves (often specified as dividing work by interest), that the couple should maintain some level of individual independence, and that the bride and groom should compromise with each other. Examples include: “You and your intended are in this together, after all, so both of you should meet with prospective planners together” (Blum & Kaiser, 2005, p. 20) and “Don’t be like our bride to be . . . the best place to start is by talking to your fiancé about the style of wedding you both would like and taking notes on all of your ideas” (Hirschhaut & Taylor, 2006, p. 22). These examples emphasize the importance of planning the wedding together as a couple and the importance of being supportive of each other.

Patriarchal advice. Patriarchal relationship advice included messages that couples should maintain traditional gender roles, money equals power, and traditional is best. Much of the advice in the Patriarchal Advice subtheme was about family relationships and that money equals decision-making power. For example, Blum and Kaiser (2005) wrote,

Measure the importance of financial contributions against your resolve for certain aspects of your wedding . . . If you’re accepting a great proportion of money from others, be prepared to take a great proportion of their advice. Decide which is more important to you: more financial help or total control. (p. 17)

Roney (2004) echoed this message with the caution, “Be forewarned, though—if one set of parents is putting out lots of money for the wedding,
they may object to this ‘equal’ treatment” (p. 127). This perpetuates the idea that money gives a person more power and therefore they are not equals with people who contribute less money.

Other relationship advice. The advice in this subtheme was not either overtly patriarchal or overtly egalitarian, but consisted of messages about how to make a marriage relationship successful. This advice expresses ideas such as the following: marriage should be permanent, couples should focus on the new relationship, marriage is more important than the wedding, the engagement period is practice for marriage, and the couple should plan for their marriage.

While the wedding books examined in this study focused predominantly on planning the wedding and the importance of the wedding day, many of the authors of these books stated that while the wedding is important, the marriage is more important. Examples of this idea are “Enjoy the day, but more importantly, enjoy your life together!” (Mattei, 2005, p. 259) and “Don’t lose sight of what is really important—your marriage” (Lenderman, 2003, p. 178). While this is a helpful message, it may be lost in the volume of advice about how to make the wedding day perfect.

Changes in Weddings

Throughout the books, some of the advice referenced changes in gender stereotypes with regard to weddings and wedding planning. These changes were split along gender lines and will be discussed in the subthemes Men’s Roles and Women’s Roles.

Men’s roles. Of the advice categorized in the theme Changes in Weddings, 35% of the advice fit into the subtheme Men’s Roles. These messages portrayed men as responsible, interested in wedding planning, and that men should share wedding duties and costs. Examples include: “Well, say goodbye to that shadow groom of old . . . Sharing the duties is the loving, considerate thing to do—and it’s also an excellent indicator of how the couple will work together on important issues in the years to come” (Post, 2006, p. 62), and “The best advice I can offer grooms is to get involved with the wedding plans (it’s your wedding, too) and keep those lines of communication open with your family” (Lenderman, 2003, p. 165). These examples imply that men are more interested in weddings than in the past and should be involved in planning. Grooms were also encouraged to participate in some emotional work by communicating with their family.

Women’s roles. The second subtheme in Changes in Weddings was Women’s Roles, which accounted for 65% of the advice in this theme. Changes in women’s roles were depicted as the bride and her family not being the sole focus of the wedding, encouraging the groom and his family to be involved in wedding planning, and messages that the bride does not have to follow tradition, but can follow individual preferences.
Most of the advice in this subtheme focused on the idea that the bride does not have to be restricted by tradition and family expectations. Examples of this idea are “Think strategically, do your own thinking, and you’ll be just fine” (Mattei, 2005, p. vi); “Keep in mind that it’s perfectly okay to keep your maiden name after you get married” (Ingram, 2005, p. 173); and “Remember: These are traditional guidelines. If circumstances require that you do things differently for your own wedding, don’t be afraid to throw out tradition” (Hagen, 2004, p. 9). All of these examples express the importance of women being independent and thinking for themselves. However, it should be noted that throughout the books, many authors stress the importance of following tradition to some degree, and imply that women need to be careful when breaking tradition.

Looks are Important

Messages in the theme *Looks are Important* conveyed the values that weddings, and the people that participate in them, should look good, weddings should be perfect, and weddings are shows for the guests. The impression that people in weddings need to look good especially applied to the bride and other women. An example of this sentiment was, “If you weren’t one of those girls—or even if you were—you’re going to need to source a dress, shoes, and hairstyle to inspire admiration, and perhaps a little envy, in everyone” (Hirschhaut & Taylor, 2006, p. 63). Two examples of the emphasis on perfection were: “You want the dresses for your wedding to look perfect, after all” (Mattei, 2005, p. 161); and “Grab a scrapbook and your imagination and start fantasizing about your Perfect Day” (Hirschhaut & Taylor, p. 19).

DISCUSSION

Review of Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the advice provided in 13 bridal books. The six themes, containing a total of 11 subthemes that emerged from the data were: *Wedding Planning Details*, *Women in Weddings*, *Men in Weddings*, *Relationship Advice*, *Changes in Weddings*, and *Looks are Important*. In addition to these themes, there were prominent ideas present throughout the data that warrant further discussion. It is important to recognize and understand the advice given in relation to gender roles and beliefs because many people use wedding books and magazines to assist them in planning their wedding (Chesser, 1980; Currie, 1993; Knox et al., 2003; Wilding, 2003). The engagement process may set the stage for relationship patterns and planning a wedding may be metaphoric of couples’ roles, values, and expectations for their committed relationships.
Men are Peripheral

The lack of advice concerning men throughout wedding books, specifically wedding books for couples, is an obvious example of the idea that men are peripheral in wedding planning. While it is logical that the books for brides would contain little advice directly for men, in the wedding books for couples an egalitarian message to wedding planning would contain an equal amount of advice for grooms and brides. However, the amount of advice was almost six times more likely to be targeted to women as opposed to men. Additionally, even in books for the bride, the presence of the groom as a partner in wedding planning was strangely absent. The groom was rarely referenced, and when he was mentioned, it was often in stereotypical ways such as helping the bride, budgeting, and handling issues with his family.

Ideally, marriage is an equal partnership, but the messages throughout wedding books imply an unequal relationship. The messages suggest that even though the wedding is an important day in a man’s life, he not only does not want to, but does not need to, be involved in its preparation. The result of the assumption that the groom is not interested in the wedding planning process is that in order to get him to participate, the bride must determine the groom’s interests and delegate those duties. This maintains the set up of an unequal relationship in that the bride has to micromanage the groom and he has the power to determine the amount of his contribution to the wedding planning process. This message is similar to what is known about housework and parenting in couples’ partnerships. In many couples’ relationships, women do the majority of the housework and parenting partly because men rely on the belief that women are just more interested in those things than men (Hochschild, 1989; Maushart, 2001). However, this division of labor creates an unequal relationship that can lead to marital dissatisfaction (Erickson, 1993; Gottman & Silver, 1999; Haddock et. al, 2000; Rabin 1996; Zimmerman, Holm, & Starrels, 2001).

The lack of advice for men perpetuates the idea that although the wedding is supposed to be a celebration of a couple’s relationship, the bride is likely to do most of the actual work of creating the event. Men are excused from labor, but brides are expected to keep grooms informed about the process in order to consult with them on any major decisions. For example, “You should assess your fiancé’s level of interest, act accordingly, and keep him informed as major arrangements fall into place” (Hirschhaut & Taylor, 2006, p. 84). This set-up is an example of orchestration power versus implementation power. Orchestration power is defined as the “power to make only the important and infrequent decisions that do not infringe upon their time but that determine the family life style” (Safilios-Rothschild, 1976, p. 359) while implementation power is described as the unimportant and time-consuming decision-making (Safilios-Rothschild). In the wedding, brides appear to
have more implementation power, while grooms hold the orchestration power.

Furthermore, it can be inferred from the lack of advice for grooms that men are not expected to be involved in traditionally feminine activities. Authors also at times explicitly expressed expectations for men and women to maintain these gendered roles. Interestingly, the authors also referenced the practice of changing these traditions and roles, and that the gender divide is becoming less stereotypical. However, the advice suggesting that genders are equal, and that marriage should be based on equality, seemed to be superficial. For instance, Blum and Kaiser (2005) wrote, “Contrary to what some sexist ninnies think, the bride and groom should be responsible for pulling the wedding together. Of course, a natural delineation of duties may occur . . .” (p. 5). While the authors initially promoted an egalitarian relationship, they ended the advice by giving the groom a free pass on anything not deemed masculine. This exemption may carry over from the wedding planning process to other traditionally feminine responsibilities. It is likely to leave the female partner in a heterosexual marriage responsible for all the housework, emotional work of the couple and family relationships, as well as childrearing. Not only is this division of labor unequal, but it is likely to put extra stress on the female partner and prevent the man from experiencing the joys of childrearing and a good relationship with his spouse and family.

Perfection is Expected

While the theme of Looks are Important only contained a small percentage of the explicit advice, the message that the wedding should be perfect and is the most important day of one’s life dominated the books. Additionally, several books expressed the notion that women have been dreaming about their wedding day for years and want everything to be perfect (Hirschhaut & Taylor, 2006; Lifetime Press, 2003; Post, 2006). It is deceptively attractive to believe that if the wedding day is the most important day of a person’s life, that it makes sense to put a significant amount of time and energy into one day. Furthermore, this sentiment can be invoked to justify an irrational amount of consumption for a onetime event (Kingston, 2004). If perfection is the standard, no wonder heterosexual couples are willing to spend upwards of 51% of their income (Ingraham, 1999).

This focus on perfection of wedding details results in weddings becoming an overwhelming event. The most concrete manifestation of this impression is simply the size of many of the books and the amount of advice contained in them. Advice was also embedded with messages that it was not enough for the wedding to be perfect, but that is must also be unique. It is easy to imagine that this suggestion focuses couple’s time and energy on minor details rather than on their relationship and the meaning of the ceremony.
The concept of prioritizing the marriage over the wedding was present in most of the wedding planning books, but it was presented once or twice among thousands of pieces of advice about how to plan the wedding day. While to some extent this idea is logical because the purpose of these books is to help people plan the wedding day and not their marriage, the reminder that the marriage is important is lost in the overwhelming amount of detailed wedding advice.

Clinical Implications

With 90% of the population in the United States marrying at some point in their lives (Kreider & Fields, 2002), it is important to understand the context in which the ritual marking this commitment takes place. The wedding industry is a multi-billion dollar industry (Lenderman, 2003, Roney, 2004, Montemurro, 2002). Many couples actively seek out wedding planning advice by utilizing wedding planning books and magazines (Chesser, 1980; Currie, 1993; Knox et al., 2003; Wilding, 2003). Additionally, the rate of divorce in the United States is upwards of 50%, and engaged couples are also increasingly turning to professionals for premarital therapy (Kreider & Fields; McGeorge & Carlson, 2006). Therapists, social workers, religious leaders, and other professionals who work with engaged couples will better be able to serve their clients with knowledge of the messages contained in media directed at them. The abundance of self-help literature on planning this important ritual tends to reinforce the dynamics that premarital and marital therapy tend to confront; this knowledge can help professionals anticipate the need to challenge media messages that are not supported by research on how to have a healthy relationship. To ignore the media pressure on couples is a missed opportunity to assist partners in becoming critical consumers of relationship advice from the media. Professionals can assist couples in thinking about their wedding, and the planning of it, as a metaphor for their own relationship and practice the skills necessary for a healthy relationship.

More specifically, contrary to what research shows about healthy relationships, the results of this study indicate that wedding planning books are permeated with messages encouraging couples to maintain traditional gender roles and expectations. Questioning rigid gender roles is an important skill for couples in building a healthy foundation for their relationship (Gottman & Silver, 1999; Haddock et al., 2000; Schwartz, 1994; Rabin, 1996) and planning a ceremony is a great opportunity to reflect on these gender roles. Using the wedding as a metaphor for a couple’s relationship is a concept not present in most premarital therapy curriculums, and clients may be well served by professionals who encourage couples to take this opportunity to reflect on these issues seriously.

Additionally, it may be beneficial for therapists to enquire about the wedding planning process of their married clients. This discussion may provide
important insight into the communication and gender role division of the couple from the beginning of their relationship. It may be helpful in the course of therapy to examine how gender role expectations were set up before their marriage and how they may have changed. This may be useful in that a couple can reflect on a difficult topic using a more distant example of the issue so that they may be able to examine the current manifestation of the issue more objectively. How couples talk about their wedding and the planning of their wedding may also give therapists an idea of how the couple views their relationship. Gottman discusses that how a couple remembers an event (fondly or not fondly) is related to whether or not the couple will eventually divorce (Gottman & Silver, 1999). If a couple is not satisfied with the wedding or wedding planning process, the therapist can encourage the couple to start making changes in how to celebrate different milestones in the relationship, such as anniversaries. This can be a way couples can make a repair attempt in their relationship and can move couples toward becoming equal partners in their relationship.

Wedding books in this study not only contained messages supporting rigid gender roles, but the advice also sets up a pattern of an unequal division of labor; these messages are in contrast to what research documents as essential for a healthy partnership (Deutsch, 1999; Fraenkel, 2003; Gottman & Silver, 1999; Haddock et al., 2000; Rabin, 1996; Schwartz, 1994; Steil, 1997; Williams, 2000; Zimmerman, Holm, & Starrels, 2001). Therapists and other professionals working with premarital couples can assist their clients in mindfully making decisions about how to equitably divide the chores regarding planning a wedding. Helping couples navigate this distribution of labor in an equitable way can lay the foundation for a lifetime of decisions based on the value of equality. Therapists can educate couples about the problem with distributing labor along gender lines throughout a couple’s relationship, beginning with the wedding planning chores and continuing with other tasks such as household chores and childrearing. Professionals can encourage couples to prioritize creating a shared division of labor as a way to create a foundation of equality and a meaningful friendship (Gottman & Silver; Haddock et al.; Zimmerman, Holm, & Starrels).

Unfortunately, the results of this study suggest that those who dispense advice during the engagement period often view men as peripheral throughout the process. Couples would be better served if the messages contained advice about the importance of creating shared meaning in their relationship (Gottman & Silver, 1999). Premarital therapy may be the only opportunity for couples to take the time to reflect on the messages and values they are communicating about their relationship during the ceremony. Therapists can encourage clients to critically analyze the wedding rituals often encouraged in wedding books in order to foster a sense of shared meaning about this significant representation of their partnership. Mindfully and purposefully choosing rituals to use during their ceremony will allow premarital clients to
practice sharing their values, dreams, and goals for their committed partnership. These discussions may be an ideal opportunity for therapists working with engaged couples to effectively navigate through differences in their expectations.

Limitations and Future Research Initiate

The sample used for this study was purposeful, as opposed to a random sample, and the ability to generalize the findings is limited to the books sampled. In order to reduce the impact of inevitable bias in research, significant effort was paid to the trustworthiness of the study by using a guided theory to interpret the content and by continuously consulting peers to ensure a similar interpretation of the data. It is also important to note that people using wedding planning books to assist them may not read these books all the way through. Instead, it may be that brides and grooms use these books as a reference when they need ideas for their wedding, rather than soaking in all of the advice at one time. It is unclear how this may change the influence of the messages about gender and relationships in the books on engaged couples. Couples are also likely to seek help and advice from friends and family members, which may have more influence on a couple's decisions than advice from a book.

A next step in further understanding the messages that brides and grooms receive about the engagement period would be to explore other media messages, such as wedding television programs and Web sites. As more people have easy access to the Internet and the number of wedding television programs increases, engaged couples may be shifting how they seek out wedding advice. A specific focus on wedding advertisements may also be incredibly helpful in understanding the messages targeted to engaged couples since the wedding industry spends millions of dollars a year to reach this population (Geller, 2001). Researchers may also add to the literature by interviewing brides and grooms about the messages they received on wedding planning, how or from whom they received them, and how much value they placed on those opinions. This would add to the understanding of the context in which brides and grooms use wedding resources and the potential impact of the messages they are receiving.

Furthermore, it would be useful to understand the similarities and differences of messages contained in ceremony-related advice directed to lesbian, gay, and transgendered couples and other marginalized communities. This study predominantly utilized feminist theory to interpret these results by focusing on gender power dynamics. However, because power differences based on gender are inextricably linked to other forms of oppression, such as racism and heterosexism, it would add to our understanding if follow-up studies examined wedding rituals by utilizing frameworks about white privilege and queer theories.
REFERENCES


