

## 'Did you just ask me to marry you?': The gendered nature of heterosexual relationship progressions

MAUREEN BAKER and VIVIENNE ELIZABETH

### Abstract

Previous research has found that relationship progressions from casual encounters to dating, from dating to cohabitation, and from cohabitation into marriage are more likely to be controlled by men than women amongst heterosexual couples (Bogle, 2008; Sassler and Miller, 2011). Drawing on recent New Zealand interviews on the transition from cohabitation to marriage, we discuss examples of gendered transitions, providing verbatim comments from our participants as illustrations. Despite notable changes in gender relations over the decades, we found that female participants were less likely to see cohabitation as a viable long-term living arrangement yet they typically waited for their male partner to propose marriage. In the few cases where heterosexual women suggested formalising their relationship, the proposal was often repeated by the man before the engagement was publicly announced. Furthermore, marriage ceremonies often contain patriarchal symbols. Framed within feminist analysis, our findings highlight the lingering male privilege in intimate relationships, both in social expectations and material reality.

### Key words

*cohabitation, marriage, relationship progressions, weddings*

### Introduction

Previous research has found that men rather than women continue to control progressions in heterosexual relationships, including the shift from casual encounters to dating, from dating to cohabitation, and from cohabitation into marriage (Bogle, 2008; May, 2011; Sassler & Miller, 2011). Despite major improvements in women's educational attainment, labour force participation and legal rights, male partners typically expect and are expected to initiate cohabiting relationships and later to propose marriage. Many female partners accept male authority in relationship transitions and wait to be asked to cohabit or marry, although some cohabiting women hint or joke with their male partners in an attempt to reach an agreement to marry (Sassler & Miller, 2011).

This paper draws on our qualitative interviews from New Zealand in order to discuss the nature of male influence in heterosexual relationship transitions and to provide examples from the verbatim comments of the participants. Our empirical research is consistent with international studies which find that men often assume that they should take the initiative in relationship progressions when *they* are ready to make a commitment or assume responsibility for economic support, and that decisions do not become 'official' and are not shared with friends and family until the man approves of the timing. When couples marry, they often retain patriarchal symbols in their ceremonies, such as the bride's father walking her down the 'aisle' and passing her to the groom, the bride wearing a 'virginal' white dress, or the bride taking

1 Gender relations in patriarchal societies and institutions are characterised by inequalities in power, control, wealth and social status. Specifically, men are accorded more power and agency than women, men's interests are routinely privileged over women's, and men reap a number of material and symbolic advantages that are not similarly available to women – the so-called patriarchal dividend. In such contexts, women frequently strike patriarchal bargains: they adhere to the gendered rules of the game in order to secure access to economic resources and/or to elevate their social status.

the groom's surname. These findings are framed within feminist analyses that emphasises the social construction of reality, and men's continued greater access to power, positions of authority and material resources. Our findings are divided into four sections, including the transition from dating to cohabitation, transitioning from cohabitation to marriage, manoeuvring reluctant partners into marriage, and gendered weddings.

## Survey of previous research

The double standard of sexuality, with men having more freedom to participate in non-monogamous sexual relations, has been somewhat eroded over the decades but researchers conclude that it has certainly not disappeared (Eaton & Rose, 2011; Farvid & Braun, 2013; Lamont, 2013). Although women in the English-speaking countries have become more assertive in dating practices, researchers have found that men are more likely than women to interpret a first 'date' initiated by a woman as a sexual overture (Bogle, 2008; Mongeau & Carey, 1996). Studies have also found that 'sexually aggressive women' are seen by men as off-putting, although flirting with sexual overtones remains an integral part of dating for both men and women (Coltrane, 1998). Parents still monitor their daughter's dating activities more closely than their son's, such as establishing stricter behavioural expectations, prescriptions, and rules (Madsen, 2008). Furthermore, desired characteristics in a dating partner continue to emphasise women's youthful appearance but men's height, strength, and occupational success (Baker, 2010; Bogle, 2008).

Cohabitation rates have increased dramatically in all the English-speaking countries over the past two decades and over three-quarters of couples now cohabit before marriage (OECD, 2009; May, 2011). Although both sexes expect to marry, heterosexual women in cohabiting relationships are more likely to view their living arrangements as a prelude to marriage rather than a form of residential dating or an alternative to marriage (Dempsey & de Vaus, 2004; Manning et al., 2007; Manning, Cohen & Smock, 2011; Qu et al., 2009). Heterosexual women in both cohabiting and married relationships also report higher levels of relationship commitment than men (Stanley et al., 2006).

Men are still expected to initiate relationship progressions, including the progression from cohabitation to marriage through a male marriage proposal (Baker, 2010; Lamont, 2013; Sassler & Miller, 2011). Progressions from cohabitation to marriage tend to occur when couples believe that their relationship will last, when they anticipate having children together, and when they have a secure income and adequate savings for a wedding and future home (Cherlin, 2004; Hewitt & Baxter, 2012). One reason why the average age of marriage has increased since the early 1970s is that these economic goals appear to be harder for couples to attain now than in previous decades. Both males and females need higher qualifications to find secure and full-time jobs, and most households need two incomes to maintain their living standards. Housing and general living costs have increased relative to income but young people have also raised their aspirations about living standards and wedding celebrations (Baker, 2010; Ingraham, 2008).

Men's and women's priorities and choices about intimate relationships are shaped by their differential access to interpersonal power and material resources. For example, men typically earn more money than women, and more often expect to become family earners with uninterrupted lifetime careers (Baker, 2010). Historically, the timing of marriage has been strongly connected to the man's earning capacity, as women tend to earn less but also expect to take employment leave or reduce their working hours for child-bearing and child-raising. Among different-sex cohabiting couples, both men and women still expect the man rather than the woman to be able to support an anticipated family before transitioning to marriage (Carmi-

chael & Whittaker, 2006; Duvander, 1999; Qu, 2003). Despite considerable changes in gender relations over the last fifty years, the marriage worthiness of heterosexual men continues to be based on highly gendered assumptions about the division of labour that should take place within marriage, especially after the birth of children.

Advertising and representations from the media continue to shape wedding plans and spending patterns, which also vary by gender and sexual orientation (Boden, 2003; Ingraham, 2008). Heterosexual women typically spend more time and extract more pleasure from making wedding arrangements, while heterosexual men are more likely than their female partners to control wedding budgets as well as marriage proposals (Blakely, 2008; Boden, 2001; Stanley et al. 2006). Nevertheless, the 'wedding industry' encourages couples to aspire to expensive engagement and wedding rings, wedding outfits, venues and honeymoon trips that often cost more than couples and their families can afford. In addition, popular culture typically portrays 'the wedding' as the ultimate event in a woman's life or as an opportunity to become a celebrity for the day, which encourages consumer-oriented behaviour, especially among women (Boden, 2003; Tombaugh, 2009).

Many wedding ceremonies continue to retain patriarchal symbols (Ingraham, 2008), but researchers have debated the meanings and implications of these symbols for the status of women. Currie (1993) notes that the appeal of the use of traditional wedding symbols for women who seek egalitarian relationships lies in the transient nature of the wedding, suggesting that a conventional wedding is not necessarily a harbinger of things to come. Similarly, Otnes and Pleck (2003) argue that the patriarchal character of conventional weddings continues despite pressures for progressive change in women and men's lives. In contrast, Geller (2001, p. 70) claims that because 'culture is cumulative' weddings are inevitably 'tainted by the historical residue of female subordination'.

These gendered patterns from previous research have informed the way we designed, implemented and interpreted our qualitative study, which is discussed in the rest of this article.

## Methodology

In 2011, we completed qualitative, semi-structured interviews with fifty participants in New Zealand, including ten marriage/civil union celebrants and forty individuals in different-sex and same-sex relationships who had been cohabiting for at least three years and either intended to legalise their relationship or had already done so. We viewed the celebrants as key informants on marriage practices, and interviewed long-term cohabitants because we were interested in the transition from cohabitation to marriage and sought to avoid cohabitants who either had no intention to marry or were involved in short-term or 'co-residential dating' relationships.

We interviewed all the participants individually in their homes in Auckland (New Zealand's largest city) for about one hour each, digitally recording and later transcribing the interviews in full. New Zealand provides an appropriate research venue because cohabitation is widespread and officials already consider couples cohabiting for three years or more to be in a 'marriage-like relationship', perhaps reducing the incentives to marry. In recent decades, the socio-legal differences between cohabitation and marriage have diminished in many countries (Heuveline & Timberlake, 2004) and pressures for same-sex marriage have encouraged some governments to create two categories of formalisation. In New Zealand, same-sex marriage was legalised in 2013 but when we interviewed in 2011, both same-sex and different-sex couples could enter civil unions (with some of the same rights and privileges as marriage) but only different-sex couples could legally marry.

The celebrant sample was 'purposive' (searching for specific categories of people) and selected from celebrant and church websites. We wanted to interview older celebrants who had been marrying couples for years, as well as younger ones who were more recently registered

by government. We deliberately sought out males and females, different-sex and same-sex celebrants, those who were registered to perform marriages and/or civil unions, and secular celebrants and ministers of religion. The ten celebrants had already performed over 1,500 marriages and hundreds of civil union ceremonies.

The gender and age distribution of the celebrant sample reflected many characteristics of celebrants in Auckland, with seven women and three men mainly from 'European' New Zealand backgrounds who ranged in age from 28 to 63, with most over 45. They typically had university degrees in the social sciences or theology and four were ministers of religion, although two were also registered as independent celebrants. In addition to questions about personal circumstances and training, we asked them about patterns and trends they saw in wedding ceremonies and subsequent celebrations, why they thought that many long-term cohabiting couples bothered to 'marry', and advantages and disadvantages of doing so. In the analysis, we mapped each celebrant's answers, searched for patterns or similar answers, and extracted illustrative verbatim comments on key themes.

We also interviewed 40 individuals who had been cohabiting for at least three years and had already legalised their unions or were planning to do so. Amongst these forty individuals, we interviewed fourteen couples, meaning that we generated insights into twenty-six couples in total. All interviews with members of a couple were conducted separately, generally back-to-back by the same interviewer on the same evening, so as to allow each member of the couple to speak freely. This volunteer sample was obtained from formal and informal advertisements<sup>2</sup> but was also purposive, as we sought to include a wide age range of men and women, including those planning to marry/enter a civil union, and those who had already formalised their relationship. We sought an over-representation of those in civil unions due to the paucity of research on this form of formalisation, and wanted to include gays, lesbians and heterosexuals.

At the time of the interview, most participants were already married or in a civil union, while the rest were 'engaged' or about to formalise their relationship. The volunteer sample led to an over-representation of women and university-educated participants, although the sample was nevertheless diverse in terms of birth place, social class, cultural background, education, occupation and sexual orientation, with an age range from 28 to 62 years. Our questions focused on how and why participants came to be cohabiting, how they eventually decided to legalise their relationship, and details of their planned or actual weddings. We also asked how their decisions to formalise their relationship were interpreted by friends and family, and whether they anticipated or perceived any change afterwards.

In the analysis, we searched for common themes and compared the verbatim comments from celebrants and cohabitants, the men and the women, both members of a couple, those entering marriage and civil union, older and younger participants, and individuals in same-sex and different-sex couples. We cannot generalise on the basis of this small non-random sample but the rich and subjective comments can be used to enhance our understanding of previous findings and to provide further insights into relationships, living arrangements and weddings in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In this paper, our interview material is combined with previous research to help explain the circumstances surrounding relationship progressions and how this varied by gender. We are focussing on the different-sex participants given the historical exclusion of same-sex couples from marriage and our particular interest in gender differences.

Conceptually, the paper focuses on intimate relationships within the wider social context, and is situated mainly within interpretive and symbolic interaction theories. These theories typically argue that meanings associated with actions or behaviours are 'socially constructed'

2 These advertisements were placed in various community locations, the university newsletter and a non-university work-related newsletter.

and shaped by our sex, age, sexual orientation, social class and cultural background, and socioeconomic status. Our beliefs and behaviours are also influenced by the ways that we present ourselves to others and especially by the ways that other people interpret, ignore, resist or reinforce our actions and shape our identity (Goffman, 1965; Tombaugh, 2009).

We also emphasise that relationship transitions are not simply *couple* decisions but often require negotiation between partners, who may have different personal goals, values and relationship expectations. Furthermore, whether or not to marry and the timing of marriage are also influenced by the ideas and practices of friends and family members, especially parents and siblings (Manning, Cohen & Smock, 2011; Scanzoni, 1982; Smart, 2007).

## From dating to cohabitation

Most cohabitants suggested that after a period of dating, moving in together was ‘common sense’, although they also implied that it represented a higher commitment than dating. They typically mentioned practical reasons for cohabiting, such as lack of accommodation for one partner (usually the woman), the need to share living costs, and the desire to spend more time together. For example, a now married woman talked about the decision to cohabit: ‘I wasn’t really going to be able to afford to live by myself or find a flat that would take a [large dog] in so I ended up living with [partner]... It kind of made sense at the time in terms of our relationship as well...’

In our study, the heterosexual women usually moved into the man’s home because he was older with more earnings and assets, but he also asked her to cohabit. For example, a 30-year old married woman talked about how they started cohabiting: ‘He probably suggested it ... I moved in with him versus us moving in together’. Another married woman talked about moving into her partner’s new house and helping him with renovations: ‘He bought a house ... and I moved in soon after that with him and we just kind of worked on the house... I think he made the offer of me moving there and it just seemed to be a sensible move for me.’

Not all female participants waited to be asked to cohabit. A forty-year old female participant bought a house and invited her male partner to cohabit with her. She provided the following reasons to the interviewer:

My mum has been married three times and I’ve seen her go through two bad divorces, and women get really hurt, everything gets taken from them. I’m very much a believer [that] you’ve got to protect yourself, especially financially... I sold my house and bought the house in [suburb of Auckland] for [partner] and I to live in. So that was the first time we had our own home, but I owned it, it was mine and he paid rent. And I paid all the rates and everything ... I didn’t want to share an asset, I needed to be in control and [to] control what’s happening.

The few women in our study who did not wait for male invitations to cohabit typically held feminist values or came from families with divorced parents, as the above quote suggests.

## Transitioning to marriage

The celebrants in our study confirmed the findings of previous research by noting that the vast majority of the couples they married were already living together before the wedding, including a few couples who cohabited for more than twenty years. Several celebrants commented on the pattern of widespread premarital cohabitation and noted how rapidly it has become socially acceptable. Some of the couples these celebrants married had already bought houses and had children together, while many weddings involved remarriages for at least one partner.

Many participants mentioned that getting married was the ‘normal’ thing to do and had been part of their social upbringing or gender socialisation since childhood<sup>3</sup>. While some participants anticipated this life course, others had resisted the social pressure or changed the order of

3 Some of the lesbian and gay participants also talked about marriage in these terms.

expected life events, such as having a child before marrying, or marrying but remaining childless. For example, a young married woman under 30 years of age said: 'Marriage was something I always wanted. You know, your little girl dreams as you're growing up, get married, get a house, and have children. We're skipping the children part [but] we've got the house ...' This woman seemed quite content to conform to traditional expectations of adulthood, although she seemed less invested in the idea of becoming a mother.

We were surprised that so many of our participants in different-sex relationships reported that their decision to marry or enter a civil union involved a proposal by the male partner, which overshadowed previous discussions and precipitated their public 'engagement'. Some of these proposals were very elaborate romantic events, while others were more casual. For example, a young woman discussed how her male partner stage-managed a romantic proposal:

It was a very long and drawn out day of extravaganza but the main part was we went to X Beach [north of Auckland] .... that's a place I used to go to a lot when I was growing up and he had had someone set up a picnic there for when we arrived because you have to walk around the rocks at low tide to get there. He went down on one knee and proposed and then we stayed at [expensive local hotel] that night.

Some women seemed genuinely puzzled by their male partner's desire for a formal proposal, such as this young woman who seemed to suggest that such a practice was outmoded:

It was kind of funny. Like he really wanted to do like the traditional proposal that we'd already discussed, there wasn't much point for that but it was really important to him to do that... Yeah we went out and looked at some engagement rings together and then he went back and chose one from the ones that we'd looked at. And then he sort of organised a surprise thing.... So it was our five year anniversary I think and we went to a hotel in town and then he did this big romantic proposal over dinner with a guitarist and like he hired a personal classical guitarist and we were in this separated off area of the restaurant with like little curtains so they couldn't see us and then he did this big thing.

Other women expected and waited for the traditional male proposal, even though they had cohabited for many years, had previously discussed and agreed to marriage, and in some cases had already had a child together. For example, this highly-educated woman in her forties said:

I guess it would have been a couple of years between us first talking about marriage and him finally getting around to proposing to me because ...for reasons that I still do not understand, I wanted the whole you know down on the knee with the ring proposal and for it to be a surprise. So it would have been, I guess probably a full year before we decided we were going to get married and [partner] actually getting round to proposing to me.

Not all proposals in our study were romantic. For example, a young married woman recounted the details of her husband's proposal:

On New Year's Eve, we went to watch the fireworks at the Sky Tower ... and my husband said: 'Do you want to get married?' and I said 'yes' and that was it. And everyone laughs when I say I don't remember a word of *how* he proposed ... I don't remember an inch of it because I was so drunk.

Another man spoke about a similarly unromantic proposal that took place at their home:

We were just sitting on the couch and I asked her if she would marry me. It wasn't particularly romantic or a big event.... It was literally out of this one conversation that we were having and so she was saying that she was thinking of asking me for a while and ... then I was like, 'okay I'll ask her' and so I asked her. And she said 'yes.'

A number of our cohabiting participants also talked about mutually deciding to formalise their relationship rather than experiencing a traditional marriage proposal without prior discussion. In particular, those heterosexual participants who valued gender equity, such as most of the partners in different-sex civil unions, shied away from conventional male proposals. These participants talked about the gradual development of relationship commitment over the years since they started to cohabit. For example, a young woman in a different-sex civil union said: 'No, there wasn't really a proposal, I don't think. There was kind of a well, "Shall we? Okay

let's"... I think it was me who said "shall we". But it wasn't romantic.'

Mutual decisions to marry often involved discussions in which one partner was more certain than the other about the desirability of marriage. In heterosexual relationships, it was often the woman who initially expressed the desire to formalise the relationship. For example, a young male participant, now in a different-sex civil union, talked about the way they initially 'decided' to cohabit: 'That was actually probably a joint decision ... it was practicalities really. We were just living out of each other's hand baskets and bathrooms. So we may as well combine the two.' He also reported that having a civil union was a mutual decision but further suggested that she was the 'bossy one' in the couple:

I'm not really a big family guy, or a big ceremony guy. So the whole thing of a wedding seems relatively, well essentially unnecessary is probably the best word there... But it was obvious that [partner] wanted it and I definitely wanted to continue a relationship with [partner], because she's awesome. So it just sort of happened from there. After a few hints and after a few suggestions as to what rings looked nice on Trade Me<sup>4</sup> I went out hunting...

While some couples mutually decide to marry and some women provide hints to their partner that marriage would be more desirable than cohabitation, many heterosexual men and women still expect the man to propose marriage. Some heterosexual men go to considerable effort to stage-manage romantic and expensive proposals even when the couple has cohabited for years and previously discussed their intention to marry. Research from Australia and the United States also suggests that marriage proposals have remained the prerogative of men in different-sex unions (Carmichael & Whittaker, 2007; Sassler and Miller, 2011).

### Manoeuvring reluctant partners into marriage

A few cohabitants in our study reported that they had to manoeuvre their reluctant partner into proposing and/or agreeing to marry them. In different-sex relationships, this typically involved eager women and reluctant men (see also Sassler & Miller, 2011). For example, a recently-remarried woman over 60 years old, who had been cohabiting with her male partner for 13 years, said:

At about maybe the five year mark... we started having conversations about marriage and when I say *we*, it's basically *me* because I'd say to him: 'I really think we should get married. I'd really like to get married'. And he'd say, 'but why? What's going to change?' And he couldn't understand. 'Convince me', you know, 'that it's going to change...'

She continued to describe her eight-year attempt to persuade her male partner to marry and her continuing quest, especially during vacations, for a conventional marriage proposal. During one international vacation, she wanted to buy a bracelet but eventually settled on a carved ring, which to her surprise her partner offered to buy. About an hour later, he casually proposed. Here is the last part of her long proposal story:

We were driving on this lovely road ... in the mountains ... and we were talking about lots of other stuff and [the proposal] was like an interjection almost. And then we continued to talk about other stuff, and you know, I said to him, 'did you just ask me to marry you?' And I said 'okay, we'll have to sort that out'. And then, 'that sounds good [partner's name], like how many years has it been?'

Another reluctant male cohabitant was persuaded by his long-term female partner to propose marriage through cue cards she had made for him to use during the noisy helicopter ride to his 40<sup>th</sup> birthday celebrations on a nearby island. Here is part of her story:

I was thinking how am I going to get [partner] to propose to me? ... You've got to have some old fashionedness about it, even though I'm controlling it... Conniving woman. He didn't stand a chance. I'm the cat going in for the kill now... I know how I'm going to do it, we're in the helicopter, I'm going to give him the cards with the

4 Trade Me is similar to eBay and is the major online auction house in New Zealand.

words on it to read to me... So I wrote the cards out and I said please read these cards. The next one said 'I love you lots'. The next one said, 'will you marry me?' And then I had one that said, 'yes'. Then I had one ready that said, 'you've got ten seconds, if you don't propose to me I'll propose to you...' I felt sick. I was so nervous. It was just like being the bloke, proposing... So he goes okay, 'I love you lots, will you marry me? And I went 'yes'. And we both went, 'shit'. I went, 'Oh! I guess we're engaged then'. It was quite nerve racking but it was exciting as well... So that was really cool. So that's how I cornered him into proposing to me. I thought that was genius.

This woman persuaded her male partner to propose twice, to ensure that he really agreed to go through with the wedding after eight years of cohabitation.

A married woman under 30 years old told a shorter version of the reluctant male who is persuaded to become 'engaged' after four years of cohabiting:

[My partner] had decided ... to get a motor cycle as we needed a second vehicle .... We could afford it but we thought it would be easier for us to get a loan just to tide us over so that we weren't scrimping. We only needed about \$2,000 but the minimum bank loan was \$5,000. So I said, [in front of the bank officer] 'If you get a bike, I get a ring' and he said, 'okay'. And then when we got home, I asked him again if he really meant it and he said yes, and we were engaged.

Her male partner's version of the same story (told in a separate interview) emphasised his belief that marriage was unnecessary and his embarrassment over the incident. He also reported that she sent text messages to their friends within 30 minutes of the 'proposal' and when friends sent their congratulations, he felt that he had no other option than to 'go through with it'. However, he later implied that he felt lucky to avoid making a formal proposal since he couldn't rule out the potential that she might have refused him:

You just hear horror stories, like guys who have asked *the question*, you hear some really wonderful stories, but you hear some real horror stories. So yeah, I feel quite lucky that I didn't have to put my relationship to the test by having asked someone the question that they might say no to...

Not all participants had made concrete wedding plans at the time of the interview. A woman in her late fifties, who had been cohabiting with her male partner for over twelve years, referred to herself as 'engaged' and was wearing an engagement ring during the interview. When the interviewer asked about it, she answered: 'It's a commitment ring, he said. So he's committed, and that's what it is.... but is he really ready to commit? ... There was never any proposal...' She continued to tell the story of buying the ring:

We were in Michael Hill [jewellery store] and I was looking in the dress ring cabinet and he was behind me and he said 'Why don't we look over here?' which was the engagement ring cabinet. He said, 'What about that one?' and I looked at him and sort of thought, what's going on here but didn't say anything except 'Oh, that one is really nice'. So tried it on and yes we bought it.

She repeated that there was never any discussion with her partner about this transaction or any marriage proposal. Another man mentioned an agreement in principle to enter a civil union with his different-sex partner of fifteen years in similarly open and vague terms: 'We have discussed a civil union several times since it became an option and we were going to do it once I got the [university degree] but life kind of got in the way, so she's just had her 50th birthday and we've just started talking about it again.' This suggests that some reluctant (male) partners can use a verbal agreement, a ring or the idea of 'engagement' to further delay marriage that is desired by the female partner.

## Gendered weddings

Weddings have always been symbolic events, even though the symbols and their meanings have changed over time. In the English-speaking countries, the symbolism has focused on the union of two families, the couple's life-time commitment, the expectation of fertility and child rearing within marriage, the beginning of a new generation, and romance and eternal love. Patriarchal symbols continue to occupy a prominent place in contemporary wedding rituals:

women typically wear engagement rings to indicate that they are 'taken', brides are 'given away' to the groom by their father, and women often take their husband's surname after marriage. The white dress symbolises the historical expectation of the bride's virginity, and confetti and rice are symbols of the anticipated fertility of marriage. The move to uniquely crafted wedding ceremonies that reflect the couples' personal beliefs and lifestyles has resulted in the rejection, modification and/or re-interpretation of these traditions.

The celebrants we interviewed reported that most of their clients retain at least some wedding traditions, even though they do not always acknowledge the historical meanings behind them. For example, this young female celebrant commented:

I'd say 80 per cent of brides walk down the aisle with their dad... Some of them have very big diamond rings, some of them don't... but every bride has an engagement ring and then has a wedding ring and the guys always have wedding rings... I suppose [the brides] all have bouquets and they still have their hair done ... They still walk down the aisle, so they still have that traditional element and they still get given away and they still do all of that. People think, oh this is how it's meant to be, so we'll do it like this. They buy *Bride and Groom* magazines and they go to wedding shows and ... all of the dresses are white.... I suppose it's the whole cultural thing.

The male ministers of religion were amused and sometimes angered by the retention of these symbols, speaking of them as 'sexist' or 'patriarchal'. For example, an older male minister said:

When it comes to weddings... people are very, very traditional and find it very hard to break away from those sorts of traditional norms... Even if we have a wedding in the garden, they'll talk about going down the *aisle*... I think that women, in particular, have sort of fairytale ideas about marriage, which [are] quite inappropriate... I think they pick them out of popular culture.

The three male ministers reported that they tried to talk couples out of specific ceremonial practices, or at least encouraged them to reconsider their implications. For example, a different older male minister said:

The women always want a man to give them away, which I find quite abhorrent. I won't do the giving away thing because I think that's inappropriate in this day and age... I think almost 99 per cent of weddings the bride will be escorted in by her father ... That's okay to a degree, but I mean I won't ask a question of the father: 'Who gives this woman away?' I won't do that because I think that's inappropriate because women aren't chattels to be passed around between the men folk.

The ten celebrants also agreed that most couples are unaware of the original meanings behind wedding traditions, simply seeing them as the way weddings are done. As one female celebrant noted: 'I don't think a woman who's about to get married and thinking what dress am I going to have, I don't think it even crosses her mind, "Oh I'm not a virgin, I won't wear white". It's a wedding dress... I think it's the tradition of the colour rather than what it used to stand for.'

In our study, many of the celebrants and heterosexual participants described what Currie (1993, p. 404) labelled 'modern traditional' weddings. These retain many traditional aspects of the ceremony, such as walking the bride down the aisle, while other aspects are modified, such as writing personalised vows. However, most couples seldom questioned the symbolic meaning of the traditions they retained, or the relevance to their own lives, even though other traditional aspects were rejected altogether (such as women promising to obey men). Rather, many of these symbolic practices were simply accepted as part of the normal conventions of the wedding ritual, which carried no particular significance for their lives beyond the wedding day.

Many participants described their weddings as 'traditional' but variations were apparent in their meaning. For example, a married man around forty years old from a minority background invoked the notion of tradition when he discussed their wedding ceremony, which was held in a rustic bush camp: 'It was formal, very formal. It had traditional elements of a Western wedding in terms of [partner] walking down the aisle with bridesmaids and I was waiting for her to

come down the aisle. That's very traditional, with the guests seated.'

Few of our participants were married in churches or by religious celebrants. In fact, some of the different-sex couples who married in church or used ministers as celebrants appeared to be seeking 'traditional' weddings in picturesque settings or were attempting to please parents, rather than desiring a religious ceremony that required the blessing of God or the validation of a church congregation. Two of the ministers in our study expressed concern about what they saw as a trend towards secularism and the misuse of churches for the weddings among non-religious couples.

Even participants entering civil unions relied on some traditional wedding practices, despite the potential for creating a new kind of ceremony or altering the symbolism. For example, a woman in a different-sex civil union who was about thirty years old wore a long conventional wedding dress. Another young woman who is planning a different-sex civil union talked about the forthcoming event this way:

It's still quite traditional. I mean I'm not wearing white but there's still a dress, there's still flowers but the service doesn't reference God or husband and wife. We're actually having our civil union in an old church which is deconsecrated because it's now considered an historic building and the format is going to be pretty straight forward... it's pretty traditional really.

In our interviews, modern traditional weddings were more prevalent amongst the young different-sex couples entering marriage, while different-sex couples entering civil unions were more likely to opt for simpler affairs.

## Conclusion

The findings from our New Zealand interviews are consistent with international studies which conclude that males typically retain more control than women over heterosexual relationship changes despite improvements in women's educational attainment and earning capacity (McRobbie, 2009; Sassler & Miller, 2011). In these interviews, making the transition from dating to cohabitation was usually initiated by the male, who more often was older and had more money to rent or buy a home. Men tended to serve as 'gate-keepers' by retaining the power to say 'yes' or 'no' to progressing the relationship. Especially the transition from cohabitation to marriage was typically initiated by heterosexual men, who proposed marriage to women, often in romantic and stage-managed settings. However, like some of the participants in Lamont's study (2013), some of the women in our study actively attempted to progress the relationship through casually raising the topic of marriage, trying to persuade the male partner of the advantages of marriage, or through manoeuvring him into an agreement that he could not back out of without losing face. The challenges by these women to the passivity ascribed to women within the gendered norms of courtship were carefully calibrated so as not to jeopardise a partnership they valued and wanted to see elevated to a more secure footing.

Our study also highlights the considerable time and interpersonal negotiation involved in transitioning to marriage, which is not always equally valued by both partners. The women participants tended to prefer marriage over long-term cohabitation, but some of the male partners seemed quite reluctant to formalise their relationships. In these cases, the men typically argued that there was no difference between cohabitation and marriage, and therefore transitioning from cohabitation to marriage was not worthwhile. Some men acquiesced when they knew that a wedding and marriage was important for their female partner. However, several participants or their partners agreed in principle to the idea of engagement or marriage but seemed to use this as a strategy to further delay the actual wedding date.

The pattern of women waiting to be asked to cohabit or marry seems to contradict other improvements in women's status, such as the rising percentage of female university graduates

and more women working full-time and developing successful professional careers (Baker, 2012). However, research also suggests that taking the initiative in intimate relationships is often interpreted differently when it is done by a woman rather than a man. In our study, for example, a female marriage proposal was typically considered less 'legitimate' than a male proposal and less often led to a public announcement of the couple's engagement. In addition, the links between femininity, heteronormativity and weddings seem to have lingered or even expanded with the growth of consumer capitalism and the wedding industry (Ingraham, 2008; Tombaugh, 2009). Particularly women continued to be pressured by their female friends and relations as well as the wedding industry to marry, to engage in traditional wedding practices, and to do much of the preparatory work for weddings. This pressure continues despite the proliferation of feminist ideas and other improvements to the status of women (McRobbie, 2009).

Weddings have always been redolent with symbolism but we were surprised at the number of participants in our study who retain 'patriarchal' symbols in their weddings, apparently with little reflection upon their meanings. Many women permitted themselves to be passed from their father to their husband during the ceremony, while dressed in 'virginal' white dresses. Many of our participants also accepted the idea that the wedding is the bride's 'big day'. Others changed their surnames to coincide with their husband's. In our study, men controlled relationship progressions by being the ones who initiated, the ones who vacillated or even outright vetoed the decision. These findings suggest that despite economic and occupational changes in women's status, gendered behaviour and traditions persist in intimate heterosexual relationships, especially in the transition from cohabitation to marriage.

*MAUREEN BAKER is Professor of Sociology at the University of Auckland and Fellow of the Royal Society of New Zealand. She has also taught in Canada and Australia and worked as a researcher for Canada's Parliament. She is author/editor of numerous books and articles relating to families, social policies, and gendered work. Her recent books include Marriage in an age of cohabitation (with V. Elizabeth, Oxford University Press, 2014) and Academic careers and the gender gap (UBC Press, 2012).*

*VIVIENNE ELIZABETH is a Senior Lecturer in sociology at the University of Auckland. Her research is located at the intersections of family and gender. She recently co-authored Marriage in an age of cohabitation with Professor Maureen Baker. She has also published widely in the area of custody disputes.*

## References

- Baker, M. (2010). *Choices and constraints in family life, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition*. Toronto: Oxford University Press.
- Baker, M. (2012). *Academic careers and the gender gap*. Vancouver: UBC Press.
- Blakely, K. (2008). Busy brides and the business of family life. *Journal of Family Issues*, 29, 639-662.
- Boden, S. (2001). 'Superbrides': Wedding consumer culture and the construction of bridal identity. *Sociological Research Online* 6(1) ([www.socresonline.org.uk/](http://www.socresonline.org.uk/)).
- Boden, S. (2003). *Consumerism, romance and the wedding experience*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Bogle, K.A. (2008). *Hooking up: Sex, dating, and relationships on campus*. New York: New York University Press.
- Carmichael, G. A., and Whittaker, A. (2007). Living together in Australia: Qualitative insights into a complex phenomenon. *Journal of Family Studies* 13(2), 202.
- Cherlin, A. J. (2010). *The marriage-go-round. The state of marriage and the family in America today*. Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group.
- Coast, E. (2009). Currently cohabiting: Relationship attitudes, expectations and outcomes. In J. Stillwell, E. Coast and D. Kneale (Eds), *Fertility, living arrangements care and mobility: Understanding population trends and processes* (pp. ). Dordrecht: Springer.
- Coltrane, S. (1998). *Gender and families*. Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Pine Forge Press.

- Currie, D. (1993). Here comes the bride: The making of a modern traditional wedding in Western culture. *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* 24(3), 403-421.
- Dempsey, K. and de Vaus, D. (2004). Who cohabits in 2001?: The significance of age, gender, religion and ethnicity. *Journal of Sociology* 40(2), 157-178.
- De Vaus, D., Qu, L. & Weston, R. (2005). The disappearing link between premarital cohabitation and subsequent marital stability, 1970-2001. *Journal of Population Research* 22, 99-118.
- Duvander, A. (1999). The transition from cohabitation to marriage: a longitudinal study of the propensity to marry in Sweden in the early 1990s. *Journal of Family Issues* 20(5), 698-717.
- Eaton, A. & Rose, S. (2011). Has dating become more egalitarian? A 35 year review using Sex Roles. *Sex Roles* 64, 843-862.
- Farvid, P., & Braun, V. (2013). The 'sassy woman' and the 'performing man': Heterosexual casual sex advice and the (re)constitution of gendered subjectivities. *Feminist Media Studies*, volume(issue), 1-17. doi:10.1080/14680777.2012.724027
- Goffman, E. (1965). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor.
- Heuveline, P., & Timberlake, J.M. (2004). The role of cohabitation in family formation: The United States in comparative perspective. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 66(5), 1214-1230.
- Hewitt, B. & De Vaus, D. (2009). Change in the association between premarital cohabitation and separation, Australia 1945 – 2000. *Journal of Marriage and Family* 71(2), 353-361.
- Hewitt, B., & Baxter, J. (2012). Who gets married in Australia? The characteristics associated with a transition into first marriage 2001-2006. *Journal of Sociology*, 48(1), 43-61.
- Ingraham, C. (2008). *White weddings*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. New York: Routledge.
- Lamont, E. (2013). Negotiating courtship: Reconciling egalitarian ideals with traditional gender norms. *Gender & Society*, volume(issue),. doi:10.1177/0891243213503899
- Madsen, S. D. (2008). Parents' management of adolescents' romantic relationships through dating rules: Gender variations and correlates of relationship qualities. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 37(9), 1044-58.
- Manning, W., Cohen, J. & Smock, P. (2011). The role of romantic partners, family, and peer networks in dating couples' views about cohabitation. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 26(1), 115-149.
- Manning, W. D., Longmore, M. & Giordano, P. (2007). The changing institution of marriage: Adolescents' expectations to cohabit and marry. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 69, 559-575.
- May, V. (Ed). (2011). *Sociology of personal life*. City, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
- McRobbie, A. (2009). *The aftermath of feminism: Gender, culture and social change*. London: Sage.
- Mongeau, P.A., & C.M. Carey. (1996). Who's wooing whom: An experimental investigation of date initiation and expectancy violation. *Western Journal of Communication*, 60(3), 195-213.
- Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). (2009). *Society at a glance: OECD social indicators*. Paris: OECD.
- Otnes, C., & Pleck, E. H. (2003). *Cinderella dreams: The allure of the lavish wedding*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Qu, L. (2003). Expectations of marriage among cohabiting couples. *Family Matters*, 64, 36-39.
- Qu, L. & Weston, R. (2008). Family statistics and trends: Attitudes towards marriage and cohabitation. *Family Relationship Quarterly*, 8, 5-10.
- Qu, L., Weston, R. & de Vaus, D. (2009). Cohabitation and beyond: The contribution of each partner's relationship satisfaction and fertility aspirations to pathways of cohabiting couples. *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, 40(4), 587-601.
- Sassler, S., & Miller, A. (2011). Waiting to be asked: Gender, power and relationship progression among cohabiting couples. *Journal of Family Issues*, 32(4), 482-506.
- Scanzoni, J. (1982). *Sexual bargaining: Power politics in American marriage* (2nd edition). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Smart, C. (2007). Same sex couples and marriage: Negotiating relational landscapes with families and friends. *The Sociological Review*, 55, (4), 671-686.
- Smock, P. J., Manning, W. & Porter, M. (2005). 'Everything's there except money': How money shapes decisions to marry among cohabitators. *Journal of Marriage and Family* 67(3), 680-696.
- Stanley, S.S., Rhoades, G.K. and Markham, H.J. (2006). Sliding versus deciding: Inertia and the premarital cohabitation effect. *Family Relations*, 55, 499-509.
- Tombaugh, A. (2009). Pretty dresses and privilege: Gender and heteronormativity in weddings. *Sociological Insight*, 1, 106-123.