

WEDDING NIGHT BUZZ:
CONSTRUCTED MEANING IN MODERN SOCIETY

by

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ABSTRACT

The current study shows the transformation of the meanings attached to sex and marriage in the face of the changing cultural connections between them. Originally, marriage served to integrate couples into an intricate system of community ties and obligations, and it was primarily based on economic and political functions rather than romance. Marriage regulated sex and the wedding night fulfilled the ritual of permitting sex. However, following a long sexual revolution in North America, the ritual of sex on the wedding night became a fading tradition as sex became more casualized and detached from the institution of marriage. Furthermore, the reason to marry moved from the basis of public obligation to a self-sufficient private and romantic experience. Regardless, the experience of the wedding night continues to attract some attention from modern engaged individuals. Using a grounded theory approach, nine interviews were conducted with heterosexual, engaged individuals living in a city of Western Canada. When respondents discussed wedding night anticipations, it was clear that they had not thought about it much. Yet, in discussing the specifics of their own wedding night, it was found that some people recognized the ritual of sex on the wedding night as the necessary act to solidify the union of the two people. While others dismissed its purely sexual significance, they insisted the night to be about intimacy and a private celebration of the marriage. While they differ on the importance placed on the ritual, both focused on the private nature of the experience, which is a profound characteristic of modern marriages. The ritual of the wedding night continues to fulfill its function in modern marriages even though its meanings have been reinterpreted. The ritual promotes a private experience of marriage and withdraws the couple, at least for a time, away from social connections. The findings from the current study show the importance of studying how people think about rituals; the study also

illustrates how cultural change operates and how history continues to manifest itself in the present.

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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this project to my families. I thank my parents for believing in me and allowing this experience happen. Claudia, as you already know so well, your support and encouragement has been invaluable to me. I am grateful for this special relationship that we have developed through these years. Lastly, Jon, I thank you for being there for me when I most needed you. You have helped me immensely on this path - more than you can imagine.

INTRODUCTION

The current study shows the transformation of the meanings attached to sex and marriage in modern society by examining how the wedding night experience is understood and anticipated among contemporary brides and grooms. Historically, marriage controlled sexuality, and the wedding night was the night that the newlywed couples were formally permitted to have sex (i.e., Carpenter, 2005; D'Emilio & Freedman, 1988). However, following a long sexual revolution in North America, the ritual of sex on the wedding night became a fading tradition as sex became casualized and detached from the institution of marriage. Furthermore, the reason to marry moved from a public obligation to a self-sufficient, private romantic experience. Based on these contexts, one might hypothesize that the significance attached to the sexual experience on the wedding night might have changed as the trend of premarital and first sexual relations has changed over time (i.e., Finer, 2007; SIECCAN, 2004). Regardless, the experience of the wedding night continues to attract some attention from modern engaged individuals, and there has been little attempt to explore the significance of this event in modern society.

Within this context, the current research posits that the event of the wedding night may continue to be significant to contemporary about-to-be married individuals, even though it seems ideologically and culturally contradictory. The paper addresses the question as to why there continues to be at least a subliminal acknowledgment that the sexual act of the newly married couple on their wedding night is important, even though it is not the first sexual experience for most people. The paper shows not only how the wedding night continues to be an important event in modern marriage; it also shows why research in the field contributes to the understanding of the meanings attached to marriage in modern Western society. Using a

grounded theory approach, nine interviews were conducted with heterosexual, engaged individuals living in a city of Western Canada. While the number of the sample is small, the findings suggest the striking general importance of the ritual of the wedding night in fulfilling the expectation for romanticized marriage in modern society. Not only does the modern wedding night function to demarcate the transition from the public, community part of the wedding to the first private experience of married life, it detaches the couple from other social connections. The findings from the current study show the importance of studying how people think about rituals; the study also illustrates how cultural change operates and how history continues to manifest itself in the present.

RECENT BUZZ ON THE WEDDING NIGHT

There have been many academic attempts to explore the meaning of marriage and the wedding for contemporary couples and singles (i.e., Bulcroft, Bulcroft, Smeins, & Cranage, 1997; Charlin, 2004; Coontz, 2004; Currie, 1993; Gerstel & Sarkisian, 2006; Gills, 2004; Greenhill & Armstrong, 2006; Le Bourdais & LaPierre-Adamcyk, 2004; Schweingruber, Anahita & Berns, 2004; Snizek, 2005i.e., Charlin, 2004; Bulcroft, Bulcroft, Smeins, & Cranage, 1997; Le Bourdais & LaPierre-Adamcyk, 2004). However, much less attention has been paid to the event of the wedding night itself, and this seems to be also the case in popular culture. For example, the majority of the columns seen in the “Wedding Bell”, a Canadian west coast based bridal magazine and the “Modern Bride”, one of the major US based bridal magazines, were based on the etiquette and the preparation management of the wedding. While a great number of pages illustrated the most recent trends in the wedding industry, only two pages were devoted explicitly to the anticipated sexual experience on the wedding night in the July 2008 issue of “Modern Bride”, and no such page existed for its Canadian counterpart.

However, some evidence suggests a heightened sense of importance or interest attached to the event of the wedding night in modern society. For example, based on a simple web search on www.google.ca, the key word “sex on wedding night” hit 1,300,000 sites while the “wedding” produced 264,000,000 hits. The term “wedding night” resulted in 22,500,000 hits as of April 18, 2008. Furthermore, the number of hits for the term “sex on wedding night” and “wedding night” increased to 2,640,000 and 38,200,000 when the search was conducted again on February 28, 2009. Similarly, the google image search with the key word “wedding night” produced 5,300,000 images (in April 18, 2008) and 15,900,000 images (in February 28, 2009) that depicted sexual, erotic, feminized themes. Taking into account that the Internet is the

invention of the last two decades and also that significant sexual liberation is believed to have taken place in the last century, the large number of these websites seems to imply a great significance or interest in the topic even today. What is remarkable is that the number of sites that were generated by using the terms “sex on wedding night” and “wedding night” has increased dramatically within a time period of less than a year. It seems that people are recently making more information available on the topic of the wedding night. While these representations of the wedding night seem to suggest that the sex on the wedding night is a socially normalized and expected behavior in today's society, at the same time, the extent of the interest in the topic seems to be rather anachronistic since the majority of today's young North Americans are sexually active premaritally (Finer, 2007; SIECCAN, 2004) and that one might hypothesize that sexual anticipation on the wedding night would correlate with the degree of social control over sexual behaviors. In other words, when acceptable sexual behavior is limited to marriage, it seems to make sense for engaged couples to have a greater sense of anticipation for the wedding night as it formally permits the couple to be sexually involved with each other. To conclude, recent representations of the wedding night in popular culture highlights the cultural contradiction that is counterintuitive in modern society. This contradiction became even more apparent when examined in relation to the history of the wedding night and sex in North America.

THE HISTORY OF THE WEDDING NIGHT AND SEX

The cultural contexts linking sex to marriage have changed over the course of history. For thousands of years, people married for economic and political reasons and to gain the status of adulthood as well as acceptance within the community (Coontz, 2004). Marriage was a means of publicly gaining approval of their sexual unions. But this is no longer the case. Following the romantic movements in the Victorian era and the development of the dating system in the post-World War II, marriage became a means of symbolically demarcating the union as private experience and with private obligations. The ideological changes in marriage in recent years actually cut off couples from public obligations, and some scholars called a marriage a "selfish" "greedy" institution (Gerstel & Sarkisian, 2006).

The sexual significance placed upon marriage in North America originally dates back to the values and beliefs held by migrants from Europe to the United States and Canada (D'Emilio & Freedman, 1988). Founded on the introduction of Christian tradition and the economic interest in forming family affiliations, the event of marriage, virginity loss or the first sexual experience, and childbearing became inseparable and inextricably intertwined (Carpenter, 2005). According to Carpenter (2005), although the ancient Jewish, Greek and Roman beliefs and customs value virginity in both genders, the original importance of maintaining virginity was spiritual rather than physical, and virtuous, meaning that virgins were believed to possess special spiritual powers. Most Christian theologies believe that Adam and Eve were both virgins and that their first sexual encounter unleashed sin into the world. Therefore, sexual abstinence was encouraged and eventually embraced by the Christians and came to be valued in Colonial America. If people were willing to be married, sex was

permitted within the marriage and such acts were sanctioned only when the couple wanted to have a child.

For a long time, marriage functioned to integrate couples into the economic and political systems of community ties and obligations (Coontz, 2004). Marriage regulated sex, and sexual relationship was a duty that husbands and wives owed to each other (D'Emilio & Freedman, 1988); it was also a means of publicly gaining approval of their sexual unions. Especially after the Protestant Reformation and the rise of scientific secularism during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the symbolic importance of the loss of virginity in marriage experienced a gradual decline, and in the eighteenth century, premarital and extra-marital female chastity and fidelity became to be more valued than that of men (Carpenter, 2005; Hitchcock, 1997). A decline in the values attached to Protestantism resulted in increased premarital pregnancy in these time periods and increased female vulnerability (D'Emilio & Freeman, 1988). For this reason, more restrictive and cautionary views on sex particularly that of female sexuality, were developed by women themselves and supported by society; women became key in insuring the domestication of lust (Carpenter, 2005).

While the further division of labor and sexual double standards were firmly established and practiced during the Victorian era (Carpenter, 2005), the nature of relationships became to be characterized by individual choice rather than family affiliation and public obligations. Factors such as love and lust became a more respectable basis for marriage (D'Emilio & Freedman, 1988). The emergence and acceptance of romantic marriage during this time period enabled couples to consider a spouse as a private companion rather than as a public obligation. Marriage continued to regulate especially female sexuality, and the feminization of virginity during this time period led to the development of the idea that it was a female virtue to keep one's virginity until the wedding night. However, at the same time, an increased awareness of

prostitution and the practice of family planning suggested the gradual separation of reproduction and sexuality during this time period.

Contrary to the consistent scholarly review of the previous time periods, the view on nineteenth century sexuality in North America varied among scholars. For example, while Carpenter (2005) cited sources that claimed a rise in gender equality and a more liberated view of sexuality for both genders due to industrialization and urbanization, Rosenfeld (2006) argued that the life of young people continued to be subject to family government of some sort. While the former believed that changes brought about by industrialization further loosened the tight link between sexuality and reproduction-- as the changes allowed for the increased sense of control over fertility and the significance of emotional intimacy and love during courtship and marriage-- the latter argued that these changes necessitated young adults to live under more familial and societal control. Most of them lived in some sort of intergenerational co-residence (in the form of boarding, lodging, servitude) as they left their own families for work or school, which in turn restricted their interpersonal and sexual life. That said, it was also the case that the mid-nineteenth century saw a decline in premarital pregnancy rates (D'Emilio & Freeman, 1988). Whether this was due to the ideological reconstruction of sexual life or the restricted life of young adults is in question. However, at the least, D'Emilio and Freeman (1988) claimed that young couples of this time refrained from intercourse during their courtships. They argued that although many couples were highly romantic and likely engaged in other sexual acts, intercourse was generally believed to be acceptable only within marriage. Due to the continuous emphasis on female chastity from the previous time periods as well as the risk of pregnancy, women were in general more reluctant and more regretful about premarital sexual experimentation than men. Furthermore, female sexuality continued to be regulated by public institutions (D'Emilio & Freeman, 1988). For example, these authors

recorded the existence of laws that stated that a woman was the sexual property of her husband, and he could file for divorce if he learned that his wife had lost her virginity to someone before their marriage. Similarly, an engagement could be broken based on the grounds that a woman had been already sexually active. These conditions implied that there continued to be legal and social regulations over female sexuality, and marriage continued to maintain elements of public obligations, especially for women.

Regardless, the late nineteenth century saw an increase in the publicity of extreme cases of sexual abuse in marriage as well as in the number of couples filing for separation and divorce (D'Emilio & Freeman, 1988). These conditions suggested that the conflict between male and female sexual expectations in marriage was not uncommon, and the conflict began to be more apparent in society as it continued into the early twentieth century. The early century saw a major change in theories about sexuality, in great part due to the importance of sexual expression and indulgence advocated by Freud, Ellis and other scholars (Nye, 1999). The emergence of these ideologies was followed by the appearance of underground sexual subcultures, more explicit and public embrace of sexuality in general than in the previous centuries, the redefinition of womanhood to include eroticism, as well as a dramatic increase in the incidence of premarital intercourse for women in the 1920s (D'Emilio & Freedman, 1988). Furthermore, it was found that about half of the population engaged in premarital sex, and the figure remained constant until the 1960's when it witnessed another rise (Finer, 2007). In other words, the connection between sex and marriage has loosened around these changes. The romance- based relationships and marriages enabled couples to move away from the notion of marriage as a public obligation and to focus on personal growth and intimacy. The contraceptive revolution, which began in the 1920's, continued to feed the changes in sexual behaviors and attitudes that begun during the nineteenth century (D'Emilio & Freedman,

1988). Furthermore, the development of co-educational high schools and colleges provided middle class youths with the opportunities to mix with the opposite sex more freely and openly than during previous generations, when life was typically segregated based on gender (Carpenter, 2005). In summary, the twentieth century witnessed an increase in premarital sexual expressiveness as young people began to find romantic partners through a peer-based system which had not existed before. Sex had in many ways become less formalized than previous generations and its ties with public obligations had faded away.

The dating system that developed in the twentieth century especially affected female sexuality, resulting in more acceptance of premarital sexual exploration among unmarried girls (D'Emilio & Freedman, 1988). While young women continued to generally withhold from sexual intercourse except for with a single partner whom they expected to marry (Carpenter, 2005), people were provided with further independence from family control and public obligations and also found the privacy to engage in intimate and sexual relations. Although gender and socioeconomic status continued to be major differentiating factors in sexual behaviors, premarital sexual intercourse had become statistically common throughout North America by the end of the century (i.e., Finer, 2007; SIECCAN, 2004). Furthermore, the expectation of being married to one's first sexual partner seems to have diminished as a small population of adolescents regard sex before marriage is wrong (Zabin, Hirsch, Smith, & Hardy, 1984) and more adolescents are engaging in premarital sex (Finer, 1007; SIECCAN, 2004). The longer time span between the age of the first sexual experience and the age at which the person gets married also suggests that young people today potentially have more years to enjoy sexual experimentation with different partners (i.e., Finer, 2007; Sharp & Ganong, 2007; SIECCAN, 2004). These changes suggest that marriage became a private and romantic

experience rather than ensuring ties with communities and manifesting public obligations in modern society (Rosenfeld, 2006).

Based on the changing cultural contexts between sex and sexuality in the history of North America, it can be hypothesized that the importance of the wedding night may have declined in more recent years. Sex was regulated by public institutions such as marriage, which also served as a way for young people to gain the status of adulthood and acceptance within the adult community. However, sexual and interpersonal changes that took place after 1960's were all suggestive of the decline of familial and social control over young adults' sexual and marital life. Aside from the rise in premarital sexual behaviors (Finer, 2007; SIECCAN, 2004), these changes included the rise of single parenthood due to divorce (Milan, 2000), interracial marriages (Rosenfeld, 2006), cohabitation before marriage (Le Bourdais & Lapierre-Adamcyk; 2004; Milan, 2000), as well as the rise in the number of young unmarried adults living alone or with non family members (Goldscheider, 1997). These changes suggest that sex has been casualized and detached from the institution of marriage for both men and women in North America and that the wedding night may no longer be important as a large majority of people engage in premarital sexual relations. In addition, symbolic and public approval of sexual unions is no longer needed. While marriage continues to serve as a useful demarcation of social status, sexual exclusivity, and delimitation of obligation, it is also the case that the ideological changes in marriage in recent years actually cut off couples from public obligations. Some scholars describe modern marriage as a "greedy institution" as it intensifies the exclusive relationship between partners while allowing the couple to push away from other social relations and community ties and life (Gerstel & Sarkisian, 2006). Romanticism that was unbound after the mid-nineteenth century eroded the notion of marriage as public obligation. Today marriage has become a private experience and commitment, and the dramatic shifts in

sexual attitudes and behaviors suggest that the event of the wedding night seems to be irrelevant to most people.

The literature review outlined above aimed at providing a snap shot of the changing sexual attitudes and behaviors regarding marriage and sexuality in North America. Without question, the North American history of sexuality has witnessed a separation of the first sexual experience and marriage for both men and women. While the earlier reason to marry focused on its economic and political functions and to gain the status and acceptance in the community for young people, following the romantic movement in the Victorian era and the development of the dating system in the post-World War II, marriage became a means of symbolically demarcating the unions as private experiences and obligations. These changes in marriage coincide with the dramatic shifts in sexual behaviors and attitudes. The wedding night had symbolized in the past the public approval of the sexual unions; however, such expectations have diminished in recent years and new meanings are now evolving.

Given these developments in practice and the corresponding shifts in public attitudes and behaviors regarding sex and marriage, it is now an opportune time to ask the question: what does the event of the wedding night actually mean to the engaged couples and individuals of today? Given the above mentioned historical changes regarding North American sexuality, one can hypothesize that the general anticipation of sexual importance of the wedding night has diminished in recent years and that perhaps the experience itself is no longer relevant. To begin with, we need to first ask whether a sexual expectation associated with the wedding night continues to exist today. It is questionable whether today's engaged couples have an expectation, if any, for the wedding night compared to their counterparts in the eighteenth and nineteenth century as most of today's unmarried young people are already sexually active and experienced. In one way, it appears almost anachronistic that the sexual experience on the

wedding night would be highly valued by contemporary about-to-be married individuals, given that, unlike their previous counterparts, most of them are not virgins at the time of their weddings. On the other hand, if the wedding night actually continues to hold some symbolic and sexual importance to people, this wider dimension may work against the idea that the sexual revolution that has taken place in North America has seriously diminished the importance of the sexual experience on the wedding night, as this experience is deeply associated with traditional values and practices. Yet if, indeed, there were some significance attached to the wedding night by contemporary engaged individuals, it would be valuable to explore why this is the case and what people truly expect on their wedding night. Furthermore, the relevance of the gender stereotype attached to this event in modern society deserves to be investigated, especially because female sexuality has undergone dramatic changes in recent decades.

In an attempt to explore the meaning of the wedding night for engaged individuals and couples today, first we look into what has been said about the wedding night and its experience in popular and academic discourses. These pieces of information are necessary in order to provide the context that situates the current study. The following sections will not only present the concrete yet paradoxical summary of the available materials on the contemporary wedding night experience, but also will illustrate the divergence between the popular and academic literatures in capturing “the first night” in the modern society.

THE WEDDING NIGHT - POPULAR LITERATURE

Contrary to the demonstrated changing attitudes and behaviors about marriage and sexuality in the history of North America, a discussion of the sexualized wedding night continues to appear within the popular culture. As previously mentioned, a simple google search with the key word “wedding night” produced 38,200,000 hits on February 28, 2009, and the number of these entries or discourses seems to suggest a great interest in the topic even today. The result from a quick browsing of these sites was that their contents ranged from a personal entry regarding one's anxiety over his or her wedding night to tips provided by a professional in making the night a stress free yet perfect and memorable event. Although the targeted audience and creators of most of these sites were largely unknown, some sites contained an explicit reference to its targeted audience, for example, virgins and people who never had penetrative sexual intercourse. To my knowledge, no analysis or study has been conducted regarding the audience and/or producers of these websites. It is clear that more understanding of the websites would assist in addressing certain meanings that the event may hold for people in modern society. For example, if the sites were targeted at people who maintained abstinence until marriage, a large number of these sites might reflect a quite high level of anxiety and expectation about the night. On the other hand, if the web entries were accessed and/or created by already sexually experienced individuals, it might mean that there is something about the wedding night that may be relevant to anyone regardless of their premarital sexual experiences. In addition, as marriage is legal for homosexual couples in Canada, one may wonder if the event of the wedding night is also relevant to non-heterosexual couples and individuals. In sum, whatever the factors may be, the presence and number of these websites seems to suggest that the concept of the wedding night may not be a totally

forgotten topic in contemporary society even though the event was often associated with traditional values and spiritual and/or social control over female sexuality as it was prominent in more sexually restrictive time periods.

For example, the results from the US online survey by www.bride.com (one of the major bridal websites) provide some understanding of how the wedding night is perceived by many contemporary brides. While I acknowledge that the findings from the survey are not representative of all North American brides nor of all brides who subscribe to this magazine, I believe the survey may still provide some sense of understanding of the experience of the modern brides. According to this survey, over a half of brides (59% of 1057 brides) in 17 US states said that they expect to have sex on their wedding night (BM, 2006). Meanwhile 28% of all respondents anticipated that they would probably be sleeping after their big day. These figures highlight the high level of expectation toward a sexualized wedding night among some of the modern brides. While the premarital sexual experience of these brides is unknown, interestingly, the same survey found that sexual anticipation varied depending on the premarital living arrangement. Most brides in Tennessee, for example, who were also found to be least likely to have lived together with their partner before marriage in the survey (84% of Tennessee respondents), anticipated that they would have sex on the wedding night (72%).

On the other hand, other observations suggest that factors such as premarital living arrangements and also fertility expectations may not interfere with one's expectation for a sexualized wedding night. Take the case of a Hollywood star, Katie Holmes. Then the fiancée and mother of the child of Tom Cruise, Ms. Holmes has reported to have spent \$3,000 US on her wedding night lingerie (McDonnel, 2006). Two interesting aspects of this marriage are that she had given birth to her first child with Tom earlier in the year prior to their wedding, and that this is the third wedding for her husband. Although the actress's premarital sexual history

is unknown to us prior to Tom, the premarital pregnancy with their child, Suri, suggests that the couple has been sexually active prior to their marriage. Furthermore, this example also illustrates the contention regarding the institution of marriage in modern society. Based on the fact that this is the third time marriage for Tom, marriage is no longer a life binding contract as it was traditionally, yet people continue to marry and plan elaborate weddings and make their relationships publicly recognizable. Katie or the couple has undeniably made a great effort, at least financially, to make their wedding night more special regardless of their premarital sexual relationships and living arrangements. I acknowledge that it may be arguable that the case of Katie Holmes is a typical example or an extreme case; however, the choices she made seem to indicate a deep subliminal experience of the importance of the wedding night. That is, that even for people who have already borne children and lived many years together and had many sexual encounters with their partners and people before them, the wedding night is somehow still important and at least some people have a vested interest in making the night more special.

At times in history, marital sex, which begins with the night of the wedding, was closely tied to procreation (Carpenter, 2005). However, this is not the case in contemporary society. In the previously mentioned US online bridal survey, for example, about a half of respondents (53%) of those surveyed in 17 states, said they plan to get pregnant during the next two to five years after the wedding; however, only 16% of the brides in the survey hope to start a family right after the wedding (BM, 2006). This finding coincides with academic studies that captured the changing reasons to be married in Canada and the US (i.e., Coontz, 2004; Gills, 2004; Le Bourdais & Lapierre-Adamcyk; 2004). People are not getting married either to have children or to meet public obligations. Today, sexual encounters take place pre-maritally and within marriage; however, sexual relationship is based on intimacy and love and not necessarily for procreation or other practical reasons.

Consequently, this separation of virginity loss and fertility expectation from the wedding night seems to suggest that the meaning attached to the wedding night is no longer based on these traditional values and practices. The question remains as to why the wedding night has continued to hold some importance to people, if not for reproduction nor for sexual debut reasons. What is more, in the above mentioned online US survey, over 60% of brides said they would be disappointed or slightly upset if sex did not happen on the wedding night as they anticipated (BM, 2006). While 30% of the respondents of the same survey said sex on the wedding night does not matter to them at all, here once again, we see some significance attached to the experience of the wedding night among contemporary engaged female individuals. Given that female sexuality was controlled by the institution of marriage, it may make sense for female engaged individuals to have a stronger anticipation for the wedding night regardless of their premarital sexual experiences. However, other evidence suggests that female sexual anticipation may simply be a reaction to widely acknowledged male sexual desire on the wedding night. According to the column entitled “Wedding-Night Sex Moves” in the popular New York based bridal magazine, sexual anticipation for the wedding night is portrayed as a male trait. The column reads “[a]s you leave the reception, you'll likely be rehashing every detail of your big day. Your new husband, on the other hand, will probably be thinking about one thing and one thing only: hot, steamy wedding-night sex. (McCarthy, 2008, p.222). What is illustrated here is a gender difference in regards to the wedding night, and even though it is a man who wants sex, the column seems to imply that it is his new wife's duty to attend to or at least be aware of his sexual needs and desires. However, at the same time, I acknowledge that it is difficult to argue for the effect of gender on the wedding night anticipation based on these discussions, especially because a majority of readers and writers of

these bridal magazines are women. There is not enough information to evaluate the effect of gender on the wedding night anticipation.

Taken together, these pieces of information regarding the wedding night highlight that there is a further unarticulated reason that the wedding night continues to be important in modern society. These reasons are no longer virginity loss, fertility planning, or the first sexual intercourse with one's spouse for most people. I suspect that an important key to answering this profound question is to investigate how the wedding night is actually anticipated by contemporary engaged couples and individuals and to understand the degree of importance of the act of sex on that night placed by these people. To be precise, a study is needed to investigate whether the components found in the popular discourses of the wedding night anticipation actually exist in modern engaged individuals. For example, in the above mentioned wedding night sex move column, it read: [e]ven if you've been intimate for years, your first time as husband and wife should be special" (McCarthy, 2008, p.222). This simple sentence seems to articulate that the wedding night is something special that demarcates the new married life from the life that came before. Yet on the other hand, the columnist advises the readers not to stress out about the wedding night and reminds them that the purpose of the honeymoon is to unwind and enjoy each other's company, even though she has obviously been paid to write about the sex on the wedding night. I question then what is really important about the wedding night in modern society.

Given that sexual intimacy and exploration have already been experienced by a large majority of unmarried people and other traditional practices and values have been long forgotten, I hypothesize that it may not be sex itself that is important about the wedding night, but rather the meaning of how two people come together for the first time as a married couple. The fact is, contrary to the changing sexual attitudes and behaviors in modern society, the

above discussion highlights the prevalence of the discussion and sexual anticipation on the wedding night in contemporary society. The sexual dimension of the wedding night may be highly important for some, and perhaps, people continue to tie sex to the wedding night simply because a large majority of people have sex only with their spouses and the wedding night symbolizes not only the beginning of their married life but also their sexual monogamy. The modern sexual anticipation for the wedding night may be due to the social understanding that sex brings people together in a very powerful way, and marriage socially and legally recognizes the union of two people. However, some engaged individuals do not care at all whether there will be sex or not on the wedding night (BM, 2006). Then, it remains still questionable if the act of sex itself carries the meaning that people seem to attach to the wedding night. Taken together, all these discussions in the popular culture seem to suggest that there may possibly be a deep symbolic yet potentially unconscious dimension in the modern wedding night experience.

THE WEDDING NIGHT - ACADEMIC LITERATURE

As noted above, various sources in the media and popular culture reflect today's sexual anticipation of the wedding night; however, scholarly articles on the topic are scarce. Topics such as marriage and the significance of other wedding rituals have been studied more extensively (i.e., Bulcroft et al., 1997; Charlin, 2004; Coontz, 2004; Currie, 1993; Gerstel & Sarkisian, 2006; Gills, 2004; Greenhill & Armstrong, 2006; Le Bourdais & LaPierre-Adamcyk, 2004; Schweingruber et al., 2004; Snizek, 2005); however, academic attention to the wedding night has been largely limited to the following three areas: the experience of 'honeymoon impotence' or the treatment of impotence or psychosexual difficulty that led to unconsummated marriages (Bramley, Brown, Draper, & Kilvington, 1983; Chakrabarti & Sinha, 2002; Shamloul, 2006; Ghanem, El-Dakhly, & Shamloul, 2007), the documentations of marital rape or forced sexual experience, especially as engaged in by husbands against wives (Yu, 1990; Bennice & Resick, 2003), and ethnographic accounts of communal and cultural rituals and practices associated with the wedding night (i.e., Fourcroy, 2006; Reed-Danahay, 1996). Although none of these scholarly articles investigated explicitly what the event of the wedding night actually meant to the engaged individuals and couples, these sources are useful in providing a broader understanding of the event. The 'honeymoon impotence' articles (i.e., Shamloul, 2006), for example, introduced the men who seek clinical, pharmaceutical help to cure the impotence experienced during the first few nights following their wedding; the duration of honeymoon impotence ranged from 4 days to up to 3 years (Ghanem et al., 2007). What was implied in these literatures was that for some people, not having penetrative sexual intercourse following the wedding was quite devastating, and that these experiences possibly influenced their sense of self-esteem. In addition, personal and socio-cultural expectations for

family planning signaled by marriage may have further increased their anxiety over not being able to have sexual intercourse with their wives. A strong sexual connotation that the night may hold in various socio-cultural contexts is illustrated in the two other categories. The literatures were consistent in the sense that both highlighted the sexual expectations shared by individuals and/or society over the wedding night (i.e., Bennice & Resick, 2003; Fourcroy, 2006; Reed-Danahay, 1996; Yu, 1990). The male-dominated sexual expectations in marriage and the wedding night seem to be prevalent in the academic literatures as they were in the popular discourse.

However, the experiences of the wedding night depicted in the academic articles are limited to specific populations. First of all, most of the articles on male sexual dysfunction and unconsummated marriage are limited to the Middle East and India (Chakrabarti & Sinha, 2002; Shamloul, 2006; Ghanem et al., 2007) except for one based on a British sample (Bramley et al., 1983). A predominating number of males in these studies seems to further advance the stereotype of the male dominated sexual anticipation on the wedding night. What is more, the men in question had limited or no premarital sexual relationships and sexual education (Ghanem et al., 2007), they were more likely to experience a higher incidence of erectile dysfunction, and they tended to be younger when seeking help from the clinics (the age of the patients ranged between 23 to 28 year olds in the study conducted by Shamloul, 2006, which is younger than the average age of first-time Canadian grooms, 30.2 year olds, in 2003, Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, 2003). Although the characteristics of the wives were rarely mentioned, it can be assumed, based on the cultural contexts, that they were also virgins at the time of their weddings. Considering that only one article is available on the Western population and that the large majority of Western young adults are pre-maritally sexually active, the incidence of honeymoon impotence may be less pronounced among people

in contemporary Western societies. In sum, the characteristics of individuals and couples included in the above mentioned studies do not reflect characteristics of the majority of contemporary Western brides and grooms.

At the same time, however, the fact that these individuals and couples are eager to perform vaginal-penile sex on their wedding night, even by seeking professional help, suggests that the connection between the sexual experience and the marriage is essential in modern society and that some significance is attached to the wedding night. It is probably the case that among these newly-wed couples, the sexual experience on the wedding night is highly normalized and expected especially because most of them were virgins until the weddings. Whether this is a prescribed or idealized experience is yet unknown; however, it may be reasonable to assume that these men sought help because they did not wish to deviate from the norm attached to the wedding night. The above discussion clearly highlights the fact that existing academic literature on the topic of wedding night anticipation and experience is scarce and limited to certain populations. Even more important, the fact that these people were all part of clinical studies in treating their sexual difficulties on their wedding nights suggests the significance of the wedding night in more conservative societies and why one may not expect it to be so in a Western society where premarital cohabitation and sexual relations are more prevalent. These considerations highlighted in the academic literature further addresses the need to investigate the cultural contradiction that surfaces in considering sex on the wedding night in modern society.

CURRENT STUDY

Although the wedding night has long been thought of in relation to fertility and was often synonymous with the first sexual experience for women rather than men, the historical changes in attitudes toward sexuality and marriage have succeeded in separating these connotations attached to the event of the wedding night for most of modern Western brides and grooms. On the behavioral level, at least, in the twentieth and twentieth-first centuries today, most Westerners have had intimate sexual relations prior to their own marriage (i.e., Finer, 2007; SIECCAN, 2004). While marriage used to be a means of publicly gaining approval of their sexual union, it has become a private experience in modern society. Cultural contexts linking marriage and sex have changed dramatically; however, the components of the above discussion, when taken together, suggest a continued symbolic significance that the night of wedding may hold for some, possibly for many people even in Western societies. The currently existing information on the night of the wedding is limited to certain populations and does not provide answers as to how the wedding night experience is understood and anticipated by modern engaged individuals.

The current study is intended to contribute further knowledge about the significance of the experience of the wedding night among contemporary couples. It addresses the question as to why there continues to be at least a subliminal acknowledgment that the wedding night experience should be memorable and that the sexual act of the newly married couple on the wedding night is important even though it seems to contradict the changing sexual attitudes and behaviors in modern society. The study is particularly focused on investigating the meaning of the wedding night and how the idea of sex on the wedding night is understood and anticipated among contemporary about-to-be-married individuals. The ritual of the wedding

night continues to fulfill its function in modern marriages even though its meanings have been reinterpreted. The ritual promotes a private experience of marriage within which couples further push away ties with families and friends. The findings from the current study not only show how the wedding night is understood in modern marriage; the study also shows how people think about rituals and illustrates how cultural change operates and becomes manifest in people's understandings in modern society.

Theoretical Frameworks

In an attempt to reveal the meaning of the wedding night in modern society, I have situated the analysis within a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The expectations attached to the wedding night in Western contemporary society are not generally well documented nor theoretically developed. The currently available information on the experience and expectations for the wedding night are limited to certain areas (i.e., Bennice & Resick, 2003; Fourcroy, 2006; Ghanem et al., 2007). That is why I employ a grounded theory approach to this study, as the methodology allows researchers to systematically analyze data by using the concepts such as categories, codes and coding, in order to generate a theory until the researcher can describe and explain the phenomena being studied. In the current study, the general hypothesis has emerged from the process of writing the literature review and through the observations made about the available popular and academic literatures on the wedding night. The hypothesis, resulting through inductive reasoning, is that the majority of engaged individuals may continue to place some level of significance on the sexual experience of the wedding night, even though they may be already sexually active prior to their marriage and that there may be other non-reproductive, non-theological and possibly non-sexual reasons why people place an importance on the wedding night. The purpose of the current study is to

map out the unexplored cultural contradiction within the wedding night from the standpoint of discovering the meaning attached to the wedding night in modern society. I expect participants to discuss symbols and symbolic experiences which formed their understanding and anticipation of the wedding night. By allowing them to share more specifically about their individual subjective anticipations of the event of the wedding night, I wish to investigate the presence of the sexual or non-sexual expectations of the wedding night and contributing factors in making the wedding night experience more symbolic and distinguished. Goffman's (1959)

Data and Methods

The current study is based on in-person, semi-structured qualitative interviews with nine individuals. The participants were recruited and the interviews were conducted during May 2008 to December 2008. The sample was restricted to those who were going to be married when they initially contacted the researcher. This included individuals (1) who have a date for their wedding; (2) who have proposed or been proposed to by their partner; or (3) who self-identify to being in a committed relationship which will result in marriage. I chose to focus on this population because the primary goal of the study was to understand the importance of the experience of the wedding night and how people plan their wedding night and not simply to discuss their idealized view of how it should be. Potential participants self-identified their about-to-be-married status; however, their eligibility for participating in the study was confirmed with their account of the proposal and/or the presentation of the engagement ring during the interview. The sample was restricted to those above the age of 18; the previous marital status of potential participants did not limit their participation in the study as there was not enough evidence in the existing literature to exclude these participants from this research topic. Although the study did not exclude same-sex couples (same-sex marriage is legal in

Canada), all respondents in this study were in a heterosexual relationship. Individuals who were currently single, dating, married, or divorced at the time of the initial contact were excluded from the sample.

Sample

The current study attracted a number of interested individuals; however, only 10 interviews were conducted in total; one respondent did not meet the sample criteria. As a result, the findings discussed in this paper are based on the nine completed interviews. These nine individuals have become engaged recently or have had a concrete talk with their partner to be married. The sample consists of eight women and a man who is engaged to one of the women in the sample. Most of the participants were in their twenties (three were between the ages of 20 to 25 and another three were between the ages of 26 to 30). Two participants' ages were between 30 to 35, one participant was 50 years old, and the age of one participant was unknown. The age gap between the participants and their partners ranged from 0 to more than 10 years, while most of them fell within 5 years. Seven out of nine participants have been sexually active with their present fiancé/fiancée. One woman had not had sexual intercourse with her fiancé, yet she had been sexually active previously. Another woman had been a virgin and expected to have her first sexual experience and sexual intercourse on the night of her wedding reception. Of the nine individuals, two people identified being religious (one Catholic and one Muslim). Seven people were Caucasian- European -descent Canadians who were born in Canada. Two other people had strong ties to the Middle East. A number of the individuals in the sample had a high level of education. Four of the participants were in graduate school and one was a university faculty member. The remaining four were enrolled in or had just

completed an undergraduate program. The section below is intended to illustrate the demographic information for each individual participant (fictitious names have been given).

Joy: Originally from the Eastern Canada, Joy, a graduate student, lives with her South American boyfriend of 5 years. They met while she was living in one of the South American countries where he lived with his family. Being away from both of their immediate families, they have not been able to decide on the details of their wedding. She thinks both of their families are somewhat religious, but she says they themselves are not traditional.

Helen: Helen is a 25 year old high school teacher, and she has been living with her fiancé, 24 year old, for 2 years out of 2.5 years they have been together. She and her partner are both from Catholic family backgrounds, and although most of her friends have lived with and have had sex with their partners, premarital cohabitation was not so common in their respective families. Her sister kept her virginity until her wedding day.

Ida: Ida is a 34 year old woman whose family emigrated to Canada from a Middle Eastern country before she was born, It was important for her and her family that she marry a Muslim man. At the time of the interview, she was in fact already legally married to her husband, 40 years old, who is also from another Middle Eastern country. The couple married about one month after they initially met. The couple was expecting their three-day wedding reception during the following month at which the first sexual experience for her and her husband was expected to take place as neither of them had had sexual relations previously.

Jessica: An immigrant from a Middle Eastern country and a graduate student, Jessica, who was a 34 year old at the time of the interview, became recently engaged to her long time friend/colleague of eight years whom she met in her home country. Although he obtained his post-secondary and graduate degrees in the US, he currently lives in their home country. They plan to be married in their home country but intend to return to Canada together after the wedding. Jessica has been sexually active but never had sexual intercourse with her fiancé. She believes he had sexual partners before, but she finds it a bit uncomfortable asking about his sexual experiences.

Anna: Anna and her fiancé, who were both 23 years old, plan to be married soon after they graduate from the university. They both come from religious family backgrounds and although she stopped going to church in the past, they go to church regularly and plan to be married with the traditional ceremony at the church in her hometown. Anna is the first sexual partner for her fiancé, and even though they are sexually active, they have tried not to be so. They intend to move in before their wedding.

Rachael: For both Rachael and her fiancé, this is a second marriage. Rachel just turned 50 and her fiancé is in his 60s. Regardless of the long distance relationship as they are faculty members at two different Canadian universities, their relationship has been sexual and romantic. Although her first marriage, which took place when she was in her 30s, was

more traditional style and she wore a white wedding dress, she says the current marriage will be much smaller and more intimate in style.

Brad and Carol: Brad and Carol have been together over 4 years and they have been living together over 2 years. He is 28, and she is 26, and they are both graduate students at the university. They have had other sexual partners and have been sexually active with each other since the beginning of the relationship. Their wedding is going to take place in her parents' backyard. Although they are both familiar with Christian theology, they are not religious, and he says no god is invited to their wedding.

Lesly: When Lesly was interviewed, she had been engaged for less than a month. She (25) and her partner (28) have been together over 3 years and they relocated themselves to this city when Lesly decided to pursue her degree about a year ago, and he took on a new employment opportunity. They have been sexually active since the beginning of the relationship and have lived together over one year. While most of his family members reside locally and are married, marriage is not common in her family. Most of her relatives are in common law relationships and reside in Eastern parts of Canada.

FINDINGS

The Wedding Night - Lost Tradition?

In talking with the respondents, I found that many of them had not actually thought about their wedding night nor had they talked about it with their partner and friends. Regardless of the number of months into the wedding planning, virtually every interview was laced with "... I have not really thought about it that much." However, when asked about what they think or have heard about the wedding night, every respondent made references to the wedding night as traditionally being the night that the couple officially becomes able to have sex as they are legally married. Rachael who is sexually experienced and been married before, explained the expected nature of sex on the wedding night by addressing the power of the tradition on contemporary engaged individuals in the following way.

Well. I suppose if you have never had sex with your fiancé before, it's ah... it is an expectation. It is, you know, you get married to that person and you have been waiting to be married to have sex, and so, it is that night. I mean, we grew up with that. The little girls. You know, you hear the stories of the wedding night, and there is, in some cases it's mysterious and another cases you just know that's the night that you have sex for the first time with your husband have you not already done so.

An account like this one illustrates how the ritual of the wedding night continues to be acknowledged in modern society. However, based on the fact that most of the respondents in the study were already sexually experienced, it also suggests the underlining divide between what people actually do and what they believe to be legitimate.

At the same time, every participant also said that they expect the significance of having sex on the wedding night has declined in contemporary society. This sentiment was also shared by Brad who is the only male participant in the study. He says that the sexual anticipation for the wedding night is a lost tradition.

What I've heard about the wedding night? Huh... I mean it's not something that I would say that I've talked about with people. I mean it's something that just kind of, you know..., you know the tradition of the

wedding night is, you know, it's your first time having sex with your, making love with your significant other. But I mean, that's long behind. That's it at this point.

He attributes the increasing trend of premarital sexual behaviours and cohabitation before marriage to the decline of the significance of the wedding night and says he expects most people to be indifferent about their wedding night. At least, he says, because his parents and friends know that he and Carol have been together and living together for years, he does not think his family and friends would expect them to still be virgins until the wedding, and that if they are not virgins, the wedding night should not be a big deal. From his point of view, the significance of the ritual has died off in the face of changing cultural links between sex and marriage.

Consistent with Brad's account, other respondents also speculated that the changing family life in Canada might be a primary reason for the decline of sexual significance of the wedding night, and that individual and social expectations on premarital sexual relations have changed. Helen, a high school teacher also underlines the changing social expectation about sex as the reason for declining sexual expectation on the wedding night. She says:

... partly just because most people I know... do not wait until they get married. So many people do live together for years and years before... getting married, so, the assumption is that it is just not people's first night any more. People are having sex, most people are having sex early, and earlier, so, even though I was not someone who did [have sex so early], I think, that is not the part of the wedding night anymore. It's not really talked about much...

Pointing out the normalized premarital sexual behaviors in North America today, Helen's account illustrates the fading link between the first sexual experience and the wedding night and that sex has been casualized and detached from the institution of marriage. While sex was controlled by marriage and marriage represented the public obligation of couples to the community in the past, these relationships no longer exist in modern society. According to Helen and other respondents, sex on the wedding night should not matter anymore to young people today especially because “it is not a big deal now [to have sex], as opposed to the back

in the day, they got married right away, and usually waited longer [to have sex]”. What is implied in this statement is that the cultural context linking marriage and sex today are different from the earlier times. Love and intimacy have become respectable grounds to be sexually active, and it is a personal choice to marry someone as supposed to the times where people had to obtain approvals from their kin and communities. Furthermore, the significance of the wedding night seems to be lost in contemporary society as the ritual of the wedding night is associated with the expressions such as “tradition” and most importantly with “virginity”: something that most contemporary people do not personally identify with themselves or with their wedding style.

Regardless, it was speculated that the symbolic significance of sexual intercourse on the wedding night may continue to be strong among religious people and among those who have not had sex prior to marriage: the situations that match the idealized images of the traditional marriage and wedding. In fact, this turned out to be the case with Ida. A devoted Muslim and virgin bride, she expected the first sexual exchange with her husband to take place on their wedding night (the day of the wedding reception). These anticipations had little element of romance as her mind was occupied with her concern over body image and some hesitation about her husband. This probably was the case for most brides in the pre-Victorian era when sex was regulated by marriage and the system of dating was absent. Given that this is Ida's first committed relationship and that the couple got married legally after a one-month of courtship, her anxiety over her wedding night and marriage is understandable.

Two Discourses on Anticipation of the Wedding Night

When asked about the wedding night anticipation, my respondents highlighted that it is something they have not thought about it much. Regardless, in discussing the specifics of their

own wedding night, it became clear that respondents have a certain set of expectations for their wedding night. These expectations ranged from the ideal place they would stay on the night to the key elements that characterize the night. Furthermore, some respondents discussed the activities and props they might use to set the proper scene for the night. By identifying themes and concepts while moving back and forth between the transcripts and the interviews, I identified two different discourses surrounding the anticipated wedding night experience. The findings are that while some people regarded the sex on the wedding night almost the necessary act that symbolically completes the marriage, others dismissed the significance of such ritual yet insisted the night to be about intimacy and a private celebration of the union between the newly married partners. Respondents discussed these two discourses alternatively while situating themselves along a continuum. First, I discuss how the experience of the wedding night was expected as a socially induced tradition that may necessitate some kind of performance. Then, I turn to how the night was understood as a personal entitlement of the couple to reach closure of the day in privacy. Whether sex was perceived to be crucial or not, these two discourses highlighted the importance of the private experience of the wedding night in modern marriages. While its earlier meaning has died off, the ritual promotes a private experience of marriage and diminishes connections to other social ties.

There is Something About It: Fulfilling the Socially Induced Tradition

Virtually every single respondent discussed sexual exchange on the wedding night as a ritual or event that is traditionally expected; at the same time, these respondents were much puzzled when questions were asked to challenge the notion of expected sexual exchange on the wedding night. For example, Anna, a 23 year old undergraduate student, had a difficult time imagining the night without sex and said “I think it would be weird not to... traditionally that

you are told that it would happen... you know.... so... yeah. I think... yeah, I think it would be weird not too". While it appeared that general impressions about the ritual of sex on the wedding night have faded away in modern society, an account like this one illustrates how the event continues to be relevant and possibly important for some people within the context of marriage.

While Anna goes to church regularly with her fiancé and plans to be married at the church, they have been sexually active since the engagement. The increasing trend of premarital sex and more societal acceptance of premarital sexual relations even among religious people seem to point out that sex has been casualized and detached from the institution of marriage at the behavioral level. It is certainly the case that people chose their marital partner freely without restrictions and controls from familial and institutional obligations. However, as seen in Anna's account, the relationship between sex and the wedding night that is understood as traditional continues to carry a significance symbolically in modern society. Furthermore, the findings from the current study seem to suggest that it is this notion of tradition that has ingrained modern young people with the expectation to have sex on the wedding night. In other words, the expectation to have sex on the wedding night does not seem to be based on a long lasting personal desire but rather on the fact that people believe that sex is a normative experience of the wedding night as it has been instilled in people by tradition regardless of religious affiliation or premarital sexual experience. For instance, although Carol considers herself "not terribly traditional", she says the sexual exchange on the wedding night just seems to be "the thing to do".

... I am not terribly traditional, but this just seems like the wedding day, some traditions, I, I kind of just like. And, that's kind of seems like kind of like ah, a good wrap, it's a nice wrap up to that kind of... of the day that it is. It's like, it's about you guys coming together and committing to each other, and, that seems like kind of the summation of the whole thing. So. I would say there would be something missing if it, if it was not there. It's about like waiting till the next day, I would be like, "Huh... quite the same". Even though the sex probably would be the same. But still it seems like apart of the day.

While her account aligns with the theology of the Christian church that considers marriage as a sacrament that is administered by the married couple through the sexual union, she is a self-identified atheist who has been sexually active and has been living with her partner for over two years. While Carol did not use the word “holy marriage” as Anna did in her religious explanation of why marriage is not actually completed until the point that the couple is physically united, Carol's expressions suggest as well that sex is seen as the necessary act on the wedding night. The expressions such as “something [would be] missing” and “[having sex on the wedding night] seems like kind of the summation of the whole thing” suggest that the concept of consummating the marriage through sex, which seems anachronistic today, is still relevant on some level even among those who do not identify with religions in modern society. Following a long sexual revolution, losing virginity and experiencing the first sexual intercourse on the wedding night have become a fading tradition in modern society. However, there continues to be the expectation that sex is going to take place on the wedding night and that the act is necessary to solidify the union of the two people. While the original meanings attached to the sex on the wedding night are no longer relevant, the ritual seems to continue to fulfill its function in modern marriages.

The Wedding Night as a Special Event Requiring Performance(s)

Many respondents say that there is something special about the wedding night. They emphasize that it is important to think prior to the date about how the night should be and to

put efforts into planning accordingly. The importance of the wedding night was taken so seriously that Joy, who is originally from Quebec where common-law relationships are most common in Canada and hence can be more progressive in liberal attitudes, even argued that it is possible to attribute the future of the marriage to the experience of the wedding night. She anticipated that the sexual experience on the night of the wedding might not be the most fulfilling one that the couple would experience in their relationship (as they may be exhausted after the big wedding day), however, she argued that the couple who is going to be married should know each other well enough that they should have reasonable expectations of each other on the night of the wedding. If any disappointments arise during the night, she argued that these would indicate that there is something wrong with the relationship, and, therefore, the experience of the wedding night tells the future of the relationship.

Interestingly, her argument coincides with a plot line of a French movie “5x2” (2004), which illustrates the marriage of a young couple that ended in divorce. Their wedding night is one of the five crucial moments in their life together; the wife was highly disturbed and disappointed in her husband on their wedding night as he was totally drunk and did not make love to her so she went and had sex with a total stranger. I acknowledge that no generalization should be made based on Joy’s account and this French movie. However, it is intriguing that, even in more liberal societies, the ritual of sex on the wedding night is interpreted as the expression of love and commitment, and marriage may be understood as something that brings back the importance of sex in formalizing the relationship. Although other participants in the study did not expect the experience of the wedding night to affect the marriage itself, the wedding night was expected to be something they would remember for the rest of their lives and be somehow different from other nights that they would spend together with their partners.

What was highlighted by my participants is that the sex on the wedding night seems to be situated differently from normal, everyday sex with their partners. The consensus was that the night would be different from their routine nights because it would be on the wedding day (which is considered to be one of the major events in life) and that there is something about the wedding night that makes it special. When asked about how, if any, they would differentiate the wedding night from other nights, the respondents discussed various ways to make their night more special. It was highlighted that consideration was to be paid for the place they would stay on the wedding night, and for some, abstaining from sex prior to the wedding was considered. The wedding night was perceived as a private event that requires the proper preparation. These preparations were deemed crucial in constructing a satisfactory experience of the romantic and intimate wedding night that hopefully involves the sexual exchange between the partners.

For example, all respondents in the study were in favor of staying somewhere special for a night or two following their wedding, and it was emphasized that staying somewhere special is the key element in creating the wedding night that is more private and extraordinary. The following is a typical example of how the respondents described the importance of staying somewhere special. This is what Carol says.

Ah... we wanted to stay at the hotel, because we did not want... I do not want to have my families in the next room or.... thing is just like, the whole wedding day seems like a lot of about you and the family versus things like the wedding night should be more about, you know, it's your first night alone as the married couple, which, you know, even if you are not really religious, yeah, it seems something special. Commitment ceremony, whatever you wanna call it. And yeah, things like, just that time, for you to be together, and I guess sex is the part of that. And, just want some... somewhere romantic, quiet, the view of the ocean, and... hopefully a nice bath tub. Nicer than our ugly green one in the apartment.

Carol's fiancé, Brad, also agrees that they should have a luxurious room; something of a suite with well-separated rooms, unlike “a standard hotel room which is just a box” that reminds him of his old dorm room. Both of them being graduate students who are typically financially

challenged, it appears highly important for this couple to be in an out of the ordinary and private environment on their wedding night. Similarly for Ida, the wedding night will take place somewhere special and private. Her plan is to spend the night at their newly purchased condominium for the first time as it symbolizes launching of their life together. On the contrary, for Rachael, who is going to be married in Nepal, where she and her future husband have traveled together a few times in the past as they have a joint project, staying at a nice hotel in Kathmandu and having a room of their own would just be special as she appreciates being able to do so and having “their own bubble” of privacy in the city where poverty is highly prevalent. All of these accounts highlight the importance of privacy on the night and the night being different from their regular life.

It is perhaps that this element of privacy is one of the key factors in formalizing the experience of being married. The expressions such as “special” and “private” were constantly used to describe the idealized wedding night by the respondents. As illustrated in Carol's account, the geographic separation from families and friends on the wedding night was crucial in making their wedding night experience meaningful. Privacy has been noted as a defining characteristic of modern marriages (Coontz, 2004). In the past, the wedding was a social affair that involved the entire community and functioned to demarcate the adulthood of the couple. However, modern marriage, while some social aspects have been maintained, has become a private experience of the couple. In fact, many respondents explained that wanting to separate themselves from the families and the wedding guests is natural, as the wedding day is about the social celebration of their commitment but the wedding night should be about being alone with their partner. For example, Lesly emphasized that the wedding day should end in a private sphere as it signifies the closure to the celebration and signals the transition into the honeymoon where the couple is expected to be totally private and much further away from

their families and friends. Rachael also agreed with this view and said during her first wedding, her parents or anyone expected to spend the night with them. In sum, the wedding night seems to promote a private experience of modern marriage as it allows the couple to separate themselves physically from their social connections. This separation seems to serve the function of symbolizing the beginning of the private marital life.

While the importance of privacy and the place to stay were discussed by all of the respondents, on a different note, some respondents enthusiastically talked about modifying sexual behaviors prior to the wedding as they believed abstaining from sex would make the sex on the wedding night more memorable and special. In describing this notion, these respondents illustrated its significance and popularity by sharing the stories of other already sexually active people who decided to abstain from sex prior to their wedding. For instance, Helen talked about the couple who had sex early on in their relationship but later the woman in the relationship decided that “she wanted to be more like a virgin on her wedding night” as she believed this would make the marriage more meaningful to them. The couple stopped having sex years after and even though they bought a place together, they did not move in till their wedding night. Once again, this story brings back the unique interplay between the formality of marriage and the casualized sex of modern society. While sex is no longer sanctified by marriage and premarital sex is widely common, the account implies the ritual of sex on the wedding night continues to be meaningful for some. For this particular couple in the story, as Helen recalls, the wedding night was made to be special as it reclaimed the beginning of their life together sexually as well as practically (they spent their first night at the new place). Although, as it turned out, the bride in the story was so tired and the couple did not have sex until the following morning, Helen, the respondent who shared the story was interested in practicing abstinence prior to her own wedding. Knowing that sex may not happen on the

night, Helen's decision to abstain from sex may appear to be difficult to comprehend.

However, what I believe is that this statement actually implies that the sexual act itself may not be as important as they have stated. I wonder if the event of the sex on the wedding night is just romanticized based on the normalized tradition, and it is perhaps this staying power of the tradition that has led people to place high significance on the act of sexual exchange.

Nonetheless, the ideas of abstinence and staying at a special place on the wedding night are examples of arrangements that are believed to make the night or the sexual performance of the night even more fulfilling or special for the individual or couple. While the question remains regarding the effectiveness of these arrangements in making the night more special or meaningful, the concepts of 'backstage' and 'front stage' developed by Goffman (1959) help to illustrate the mechanism that is in place regarding the wedding night. For those people who want to make the night more special, the arrangements made prior to the wedding night is about "backstage" where they perform necessary tasks in making the "front stage" performance, namely the event of the wedding night, successful. The backstage tasks, such as booking a hotel room where the couple can enjoy privacy and intimacy and/or abstaining from sex prior to the wedding night, aid in making the front stage performance more successful. In the front stage, the performers or the partners are expected to exchange their commitment and love sexually, and it is about this orchestrating of a satisfactory performance which results in a memorable and special wedding night experience.

One interesting finding related to this aspect of the wedding night was that although the front stage performance is to be put together by both of partners, it appears that women may be the director of the wedding night performance as they provide grooms (who are also performers) with tips and guidance as to how to stage the night. For example, Helen expected her fiancé to take the initiative in planning the night and to surprise her, but she also said she

would give him tips so that he will know how she wants the night to be. Even Carol, who prefers to plan the night together with Brad, said that she would probably end up with deciding power. These findings are consistent with the study on the engagement proposal by Schweingruber, Anahita, and Berns (2004). In their study, they found that the proposal was a joint performance between the groom and bride; however, women had previously provided men with the images of an idealized proposal, and the partners knew that they both wanted to be married to each other; therefore, the proposal itself was not a surprise to either of them, except for when it was done. In both cases of the proposal and the wedding night, women acted as a primary source of creating the performance.

The above mentioned study and the current study are similar in that they both discuss the performative aspects associated with the marriage; however, one major difference is that the performance of the wedding night is only internal or private. Unlike the proposal study, where the researchers found that the proposal was a performance for two audiences – the woman and their families and friends - the wedding night is a private event and that the performance is put together by and for the woman or for the two people in the relationship. In fact, the respondents in the current study expected that people would not think or ask about their wedding night when they all expected to be asked to share their proposal story.

I believe that these differences stem from the conceptual differences attached to the act of proposal and the wedding night. The proposal is considered as not only a personal matter of the couple but is about the public announcement of their engagement. Therefore, the couple is expected to share the story with their families and friends and possibly with people at wedding venues and even with strangers who they happen to meet on streets. On the other hand, people know and understand that the wedding night is traditionally about consummating the marriage and newlyweds are expected to have sex on that night. However, due to the nature of sex and

sexuality being considered more or less a private matter, people do not usually expect the couple to share the story nor would they ask the couple to share the story unless they have close relationships. In fact, many of the respondents knew about the stories of other people's wedding nights only because they were their sisters or close girlfriends who recently got married. Furthermore, Ida and Jessica, two respondents who were originally from Middle Eastern countries, found that it has been difficult to talk about topics related to sex and sexuality in general. Even though they voluntarily contacted the researcher knowing the purpose of the research, especially Ida found it very difficult to talk about sex. She describes that sex is “the scariest thing” and talking and thinking about sex is “the hardest thing for [her]”. It was during the interview that she realized that she needs to talk to her close girlfriends to talk about her uncertainty over the experience of the wedding night and possibly ask about what their wedding nights have been like. Given that sex has been casualized, it is interesting that many of these respondents have not thought about the wedding night nor have they asked about other people's wedding night experiences especially when they recognize and embrace the connection between the wedding night and sex in modern society by orchestrating a formal performance of the wedding night.

The Personally Meaningful Wedding Night in the Face of the Tradition

While the formalized wedding night and its sexual experience was anticipated and expected by some of the respondents, not all respondents in the study identified with the notion of making the night more special and meaningful through the formalized performance. The emerged theme within the second discourse of the wedding night is that there is a conscious acknowledgment that the wedding night should not only be about the sexual act itself but that the couple should be able to enjoy the time they have with each other in their own meaningful

way. Perceiving the wedding itself as a major performance in life, these respondents have made a conscious decision of not orchestrating the performance of the wedding night. For example, Lesly argued that the brides or the couple are expected:

To like perform, if you, you know, if you came in, and you have rose petals and champagne and like so many different things set up, and that, you know, you have lingerie and... I think it is sort of like a performance, like you are performing this like romantic night together.

She continues to explain that it does not make sense to anticipate a special sexual experience simply because it is the night that the couple got married.

I think... ah, of course, it's a special night. But, that day is crammed. Packed with stuff... [] I just think that day... you know, the morning to night, so crammed with stuff that ... it's just like that's a huge whole other thing to put on that would stress you if you ought to have it perfect.

Lesly believes that it would just add extra stress on the couple or the bride to have any expectation at all for the wedding night when they already have so much to care about the day. She finds that the performative aspects of the wedding night are unnecessary and possibly artificial. Any anticipation or performance in making the night more special is seen by Lesly as 'pressure' and 'stress' added to the big wedding day.

While these respondents acknowledged the tradition of sex on the wedding night, they have also consciously separated themselves from that. Typically these respondents made statements that explained their premarital sexual experiences, premarital cohabitations, and/or the absent of religious affiliation. They also explained that it is understandable for people who have not been sexually active to have a strong expectation for the night. At the same time, however, these respondents also argued that the anticipations and preparation to have a special night may possibly lead to disappointment. Lesly shares her thought on this issue in the following way.

I think maybe people who... might not have had... sex... then it would be more important? To sort of consummate that night? But I think that's a lot of pressure. I think a lot of things can go wrong if you are putting so much pressure on this one night of really ... you know, connected, brilliant sex together... but... it's not, you know, sex is not always like that... so, if it does not end up what would that be on your mind later on or on the next day.... I do not know. I just know that I, yeah, I can't imagine having that ... I feel like it's a lot of pressure.

While acknowledging the possibility of the wedding night involving sexual exchange, too much or unrealistic expectation for the experience is discouraged. An account like this one provides a unique perspective into the changing cultural meanings of sex within marriage. For instance, the primary function of sex on the wedding night used to be procreation or virginity loss. However, Lesly's insight into the unrealistic expectation of formalizing the marriage through sex is based on the perspective that sex is about pleasure or intimate connection between the two partners. She may not have been so concerned over having the wedding night anticipations if the meaning of sex continues to be more practical rather than personally meaningful in modern society.

In modern society, sex and marriage have become grounded in a personal experience rather than in public obligations, and this is why, in fact, the respondents expected to make love to their partner on their wedding night. From their point of view, sexual intimacy is naturally expected of two people who are romantically involved, and sex is expected on the wedding night not because it is a tradition but it is a regular part of the relationship. For example, in explaining the meaning of sex and its importance in his relationship with Carol, Brad points out that it is totally natural for them to want to be together sexually, and they would probably do so on their wedding night.

It's something that we do because we enjoy it. Something that we do, you know, it's for pleasure, it's not something we do because we feel like we have to. Ah.. I do not feel like we... that either of us ever feels like we are, you know, just trying to do things to satisfy the other partner. Like I think we both feel like we are doing it for each other, and for ourselves. You know. Jointly. Ah... now it's very comfortable. You know, just, something we do. That's, and that's what it is. That's what it means to me. It's just something that we do together. Because we, we like each other.

The normalization of sexual exchange in relationships, both pre-maritally and within marriage, as the means to express love and intimacy rather than solely to bear a child or to fulfill any sort of public obligation, is one of the major characteristics of modern marriage. Similarly, Rachael, another respondent who would not consider abstaining from sex at all, says sex is, to her,

always memorable. And special. I mean every time you make love with your partner, it's completely, it's a completely separate incident that's special to that situation. So, I am not sure, ah... abstaining for a period of time in order to make it special, I do not think I would mean to do that.

Taken together these accounts make sense in the context of today's society in which sex has been casualized and detached from the institution of marriage. In this context, sex is expected on the wedding night simply because it is a natural part of the relationship.

Although the respondents acknowledged that sex may take place on their wedding night, many agreed that it is unnecessary to be attached to having sex on the night of the wedding. Brad, for example, provided a detailed analysis of his vision of the expected wedding experience and how it may not be possible for him and Carol to have “a proper romance” on the night of their wedding. Brad says:

we are gonna probably be spending a lot of time with families as the party progresses. It's not gonna end until late. Ah... you know, we'll finally end up at the hotel, and we will probably just be, you know, unwind and kick off our shoes and you know, relax more than anything. If it is two in the morning, neither of us are generally late party people as it is. Right, so, we will both be pooped. So, I can imagine we will go and we might just draw a nice bath and just enjoy each other's company for one hour or two. And then go to sleep. And then we will probably spend, the next day, will probably be more of the, you know, the first... really enjoying each other's company for just two of us, we will probably stay in a hotel and you know, it might be the second night will be the wedding night, so to speak. You know. Where we can really have a romantic evening together.

Unlike the previous discourse where the sexual act on the wedding night itself was considered highly important as it symbolizes the tradition of consummating the marriage, these respondents were not particular about whether they would have sex the wedding night. As long as a private environment is guaranteed for the wedding night and there is time for them to have “a proper romance” following the wedding day, the experience of the wedding night was

successful or meaningful. It is clearly the case that Brad has framed his wedding experience around the ceremony and the reception as these events are the highlights of the day as opposed to the wedding night. At the same time, however, it is particularly important to note that Brad regarded it as highly important for them to be on their own on their wedding night (even if they are exhausted from the day) and to have the time to be intimate and romantic even if it was to happen on the second night following the wedding. The privatization of the experience of the wedding night(s) seems to be the key in modern marriage.

In fact, it turned out that it was immensely significant for the respondents to spend the wedding night privately and to enjoy the downtime after the celebration. Many respondents discussed that sex is not the most crucial aspect on the wedding night but being able to spend the time quietly and privately with their partner is highly crucial. Expressions such as “being alone”, “relaxing moments”, “quiet time away from families”, all illustrated the desire of the newlyweds to spend the night alone with their partner in their privacy. For example, when asked about what she imagines her night to be, Lesly says that she wants time to be with her partner:

mostly just to be together, and, really be each other's company. Hopefully we'd have like quiet moment for ourselves, because I am sure the entire day would be so crazy and that we do not have those moments by ourselves. So, that would be, for me, I think that would be nice to, you know, to get to the hotel room and just be the two of us, and be husband and wife, and just go to sleep, like any other night really that happens in life.

While emphasizing the importance for the couple to be totally together and just be true to themselves after the big celebration, her account also highlights that the wedding night continues to serve its traditional significance to the couple for demarcating the beginning of married life as a husband and a wife. This particular symbolic significance of the wedding night – the wedding night being the first night the couple spends as a husband and a wife – continues to be relevant in modern society. Given that Lesly, who grew up in a family where

common-law relationships are more common than marriage, wants to be married to her fiancé, implies that people consciously differentiate marriage and common-law relationship and that the wedding night is found to be crucial in signifying the beginning of marital relations. While common-law relationships are becoming increasingly common in Canada and North America, the fact that people continue to marry may be based on this demarcation element that the institution of marriage continues to provide.

The wedding day is about making the relationship public and socially recognizable through the ceremony and the reception, and what's involved in these events, such as the exchange of vows, kisses, and rings, or the blessing of the parents and the newly married couple cutting a cake together, are some of the elements of the tradition of marriage that continues to be both personally and collectively meaningful; all these and other customs continue to formalize the marriage in modern society. However, the meanings of the ritual of sex on the wedding night appear to have changed in modern society. The meanings have changed from public to personal obligations. To be precise, it has moved away from virginity loss or procreation which functioned to tie the social connections in communities. In the present, the wedding night signals a closure of the public celebration, and its meaning mostly lies with a private experience that the partners owe to and want for each other.

It appears appropriate to conclude that celebrating their marriage in a private sphere, quietly and romantically, following the wedding celebration, is one of the major experiences in the modern wedding that has been downplayed. What happens behind the closed door on the wedding night may be only known to the couple themselves and perhaps they may not even know what will happen until that moment. However, Brad emphasizes this private and secretive nature of the wedding night by saying that the wedding night is: "not so much of a concern for most other people that would be involved in the wedding planning because they

are not gonna be there. The wedding night, so to speak, right? Like once the hotel is booked, they are out of the picture”. What is implied in his statement is precisely that it should not be anybody’s business after all about what actually happens on the wedding night. Due to the strong link between marriage and sex, the experience of the wedding night used to be a social affair in some societies and communities. In such situations, there were familial or communal attempts to confirm the bride’s virginity loss or the invasion of the wedding night (i.e., Bennice & Resick, 2003; Fourcroy, 2006; Reed-Danahay, 1996; Yu, 1990). However, it is not the case anymore. Brad's account makes an explicit statement that choosing sex and marriage has become an independent decision and right of the partners who married to do whatever pleases them on their wedding night. While Carol's sister has recommended two possible places that the couple could spend their wedding night, what is reflected in his statement is that the wedding night is a private event that should only be the concern of a husband and a wife.

While neither Brad nor Carol minded her sister's involvement in their wedding night planning, it was also found that there are unstated rules as to who of the couple’s family or friends might be privileged to be involved in this process. In this situation, the wedding night not only demarcates the beginning of marriage but also pushes away certain social connections, resulting in making the experience even more personal and private to the couple. The person who brought the light onto this aspect of the wedding night is Lesly, who had not thought much about the wedding night until she received a card from her grandmother. Lesly one day received a card from her grandmother, who lives far away, to congratulate her on her engagement. Enclosed in the card was a \$50 cheque and the invitation to buy a bottle of wine to celebrate their engagement and also to buy “something” for her bottom drawer. She was much puzzled by it as she does not have an intimate relationship with this grandmother nor had

she expected that someone, other than her close girlfriends, would talk about something intimate and private as sex and sexuality related topics.

This unexpected suggestion from the grandmother highlights the unspoken boundaries people seem to have drawn regarding marriage and the wedding night in modern society. While Lesly and her fiancé found the offer to buy a bottle of wine perfectly acceptable, she said they had a great laugh over the suggested item to be purchased for their wedding night. It is because the couple was not expecting at all her distant grandmother to be involved with their wedding night nor their sexual life. Perhaps the gesture like this one engaged by the grandmother may have been more common when she herself was getting married several decades ago when sex was only sanctioned with the ritual of marriage. However, the experience of the modern wedding night has been a private one and a gesture like this one is not so welcome today.

Furthermore, even though familial involvement in one's sexual life remains somewhat common with families and cultures where sex has continued to be formalized within marriage, young people are trying to separate their wedding night experience from social obligations. For example, Ida, a Muslim virgin bride, explained that it was not uncommon for one's sexuality and the wedding night to draw some levels of familial attention. In the Middle East, people, including her uncle, would divorce their wives because she did not look like a virgin, and Ida was once about to be taken to a gynecologist by her mother because she insisted on making sure that "everything was okay with [her]". However, she did not comply with her mother's suggestion as she felt strongly that the subject should not be her mother's concern. Similarly, for Western couples like Lesly and her fiancé, sexuality is a private matter and the wedding night is the event that separates the public dimension of marriage. There continues to be the

cultural understanding that the wedding night symbolizes the beginning of the married life as a husband and a wife spends their first night together. However, the meanings of the ritual of the wedding night have changed in modern society. First, it no longer serves to signal virginity loss or procreation as the cultural contexts linking marriage and sex have changed. While the wedding night used to be tied to the public dimensions of marriage, a modern wedding night experience appears to be completely a private one. The modern wedding night focuses on the private nature of the experience. Not only does it signal a closure of the public celebration as its meaning mostly lies with intimacy and romance, it also withdraws the couple further away from social ties, further making the experience more meaningful to the couple in its own private way.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

To this point, I have discussed the two discourses surrounding sex on the wedding night among contemporary engaged individuals. In discussing the specifics of the wedding night, it was found that some people recognized the tradition of the ritual of sex on the wedding night as the necessary act to solidify the union of the two people, while others argued that the night should be about intimacy and a private celebration of the marriage and sex was of a secondary importance. While they differ on the importance placed on the ritual, both focus on the private nature of the experience, which is the profound characteristic of modern marriages.

Furthermore, it was found that the ritual of the wedding night continues to fulfill its function in modern marriages even though its meanings and forms have changed. Since all of my respondents are well educated, mostly Caucasian, a university sample, it is likely that the analysis I have presented here is more applicable to the Canadian European descent middle class than to any other populations of engaged individuals. Yet I believe there are general conclusions that can be drawn from my study, and I present three elements that emerged in the course of the study that constitute the wedding night in modern society.

The first element that defines the wedding night is a biographic time dimension. People have a unified understanding of the wedding night being the night of the wedding. As obvious as it may seem, the wedding night is not possible without the wedding itself and that the experience of the wedding night has to be congruent with one's experience of his or her marriage. What is more, in discussing with my respondents, I learned that the wedding, hence, the wedding night, is closely associated with the reception or the symbolic celebration of the marriage, rather than the legal one where the couple obtains the marriage license. Ida, for example, was already legally married at the time of the interview, as she and her husband have already "signed the

book.” However, she does not really consider herself being married nor have they had their wedding night, and she was still a virgin. According to her, her wedding night would take place on the night when she celebrates her marriage with families and friends in festivity, and until that evening, her virginity will be kept. Therefore, the wedding night is situated in relation to the wedding itself, yet this element is highly symbolic as the event of the wedding may be differently experienced and defined among individuals.

The second element is undoubtedly that sexual exchange is naturally “expected” to take place on the wedding night even in modern Western society where the formal link between sex and marriage has died off. Regardless of one's religiosity or cultural background, it appears that sexual exchange is still expected between the newlywed couple in the context of the wedding night. This is a controversial contention as in fact a long sexual revolution in Western history has detached sex from the institution of marriage and the changes in sexual attitudes and behaviors have been observed elsewhere. However, the association of the wedding night with sex continues to exist today and some deem the sexual act on the wedding night necessary. Regardless, it is important to note that the meaning attached to sex on the wedding night is far from its original meaning. While sex on the wedding night used to symbolize virginity loss and procreation, which also had a public dimension, the modern experience of sex on the wedding night is focused on the private experience of the couple.

Building on the second element, the third element of the wedding night is the importance of privacy and intimacy. It involves gestures such as staying at a special place, to be able to relax and enjoy each other, and/or being away from the wedding guests. These elements shape a formative significance of the ritual of the wedding night, as they construct the sense of separation from others and the beginning of the married life for the newlywed couple. This finding is similar to the study on the honeymoon conducted by Bucroft, Smeins, and

Bulcroft (1999). In both cases of the honeymoon and the wedding night, the geographic separation away from families and other wedding guests was the necessary element for a newlywed couple as they construct the identity of married couple. In the current study, virtually every respondent discussed the significance of the wedding night as being the first night that the couple will spend as a husband and a wife. While not all of the respondents had plans to go on the honeymoon, every respondent intended to stay at a more extravagant hotel or spend the first night at their newly purchased home. These physical changes allow the couple to establish the privacy and intimacy and also to formalize a unique experience of the wedding night as it differentiates the night from any other nights. Furthermore, the unstated rules as to who would be privileged to be involved in the process of the wedding night highlights the privatization of the experience of the wedding night in modern engaged individuals and couples.

The wedding night traditionally fulfilled the formal ritual of permitting sex, but it is a fading tradition in modern society. However, in the current study, it was highlighted that this weakening link between sex and marriage has led people to reinterpret the meaning of the wedding night in several ways. While it continues to serve its traditional function in differentiating the union from any other relationships, the modern wedding night centers on its importance in creating a private experience for the couple. First of all, the current study highlighted that the wedding night continues to serve its traditional significance for the couple of demarcating the beginning of married life as a husband and a wife. Considering that sex has been casualized and is no longer controlled by the institution of marriage, people have come to make individual decisions about when to be sexually active with little or no social penalty or stigma. However, on the other hand, marriage has remained a formal institution, as it has legally and socially differentiated the union of two people from any other relationships. In

Canada, where common-law relationships are prevalent and similar legal rights are given to marital unions, people continue to be married. This particular symbolic significance of the wedding night – the wedding night being the first night the couple spends as a husband and a wife – continues to be important in constructing the formality of marriage in modern society.

While the wedding night continues to serve the demarcating function, there have been shifts in the meanings attached to the ritual of the wedding night in modern society. The sexual intimacy between the newly married couple continues to be anticipated on the wedding night; however, it is no longer about virginity loss or procreation. Rather, the sexual act on the wedding night is regarded conceptually different as it symbolizes love and commitment, and is focused on pleasure and intimacy. It is in great part because sex no longer regulates marriage and that premarital sexual exploration and experiences based on love and romance are widely accepted. While the wedding night used to be tied to the public dimension of marriage in the form of social control over one's sexuality or familial obligation to bear a child, modern marriage is a private experience where the partners can make their own decisions freely from their kin. Furthermore, its importance perhaps may also be related to the fact there is nothing else for the couple, other than the exchange of rings and kissing the spouse, to formally administer the marriage. From this point of view, the sexual exchange on the wedding night not only behaviorally demarcates the married life but also may symbolize the vow of monogamous sexual relations between the newlywed couple.

Even though sex has been casualized and detached from marriage, the sexual act itself on the wedding night continues to be highly valued in modern society as it formalizes the marriage in its own unique way. However, as the cultural contexts linking marriage and sex have changed, it appears that the experience of the modern wedding night have come to focus on its private nature. In the current study, it was found that some people highly valued the

importance of having sex on the night of the wedding while others did not regard it as a necessity. Nonetheless, I argue that the wedding night is a formal ritual that people symbolically and cognitively identify and value. The success of the ritual may not be dependent on whether there was sex or no sex or whether it was a satisfactory or memorable sexual experience; rather, it is the intimate connection between the newlywed couple within the context of the vow of marriage that carries the significance of wedding night. The wedding night signals a closure of the public celebration, and its meaning mostly lies with intimacy and romance. Furthermore, the experience of the wedding night appears to be more meaningful to the couple in its own way as it withdraws the couple further away from their social ties, physically and symbolically, as they make a transition into their private marital experience.

Overall, the current study contributed to the existing literatures on the topic of the wedding night, a topic that has rarely been studied, and it has shed a light onto the relations between marriage and sexuality in modern society. However, the study also comes with some limitations. For example, without a doubt, a study in this field would benefit from understanding post-wedding night realities. This was in fact something that was discussed among my respondents. For example, Lesly, Anna, and Jessica all noted that they try not to think too much about their wedding night because it would be more disappointing for them if it did not turn out the way they expected it to be. On the other hand, people like Brad also acknowledged that these expectations discussed in the interviews may not necessarily be actualized on their wedding night as there are possibilities that something may go wrong or they may be too tired to do anything. Therefore, comparing pre-wedding night expectations and post-wedding night realities would certainly provide more concrete understanding of the role that the wedding night may play in constructing the meaning of marriage.

Another area of contention is that the findings of the current study are based on only nine individuals from a western Canadian university. The focus of this study was to understand discourses of the significance of the wedding night among contemporary engaged individuals and not the sources of variations within the sample. However, individuals draw from different factors in constructing their wedding night experience and presumably, one's socioeconomic and demographic characteristics may influence the construction of different expectations about the wedding night. Study on a larger scale is necessary to systematically analyze the effects of individual differences on the wedding night experience and expectations. Studies that include unique populations, such as people who have never had sex, people who have been married before, and same-sex couples, may provide further understanding of the experience. For example, the engaged individuals with backgrounds in more sexually restrictive societies and religious backgrounds were believed to hold stronger anticipations toward the wedding night by the respondents of the current study; however, these beliefs need to be confirmed with future studies. Ida, the only person who was a virgin at the time of the interview, expressed little expectation for having a romantic evening. What is more, her interview was more colored with her anxiety and fear for the night and concerns related to her husband with whom she began courting only a month before their legal marriage. While pre-maritally sexually experienced engaged individuals expressed more positive anticipations about their wedding night, however, there were variations within these people as to how each of them anticipated their wedding night. In addition, the current study involved only one male participant. The role of gender differences in the anticipation may provide further understanding of the experience of the wedding night.

In the society where the majority of the population engages in premarital sex, the current study provided a unique opportunity to question how the wedding night, the event that

has been traditionally associated with virginity and marriage, is understood and anticipated by engaged individuals. Given that the sexual revolution was thought to have detached sex from marriage, the notion of making the wedding night more sexual and special seems to contradict the changing attitudes and behaviors in modern society. Regardless, the observations made in the current study suggest that people continue to expect, ideally, a sexual, at least intimate wedding night. This collective preference and the element of social control that implies what to expect on the wedding night may possibly expand to the staying power of the tradition - the importance of studying how people think about rituals, how cultural change operates, and how history continues to manifest itself in the present. Based on the analysis, the wedding night no longer is a synonym for virginity loss or bearing a child in modern society, yet people continue to acknowledge the tradition. For today's engaged individuals, the wedding night is a ritual that the newly married couple engage in to demarcate the beginning of married life. The wedding night and sex were found inseparable not because of the tradition but because most people regard the sexual act between the partners as natural and simply expected.

Furthermore, the ritual promotes a private experience of marriage as it removes the couple further away from social connections. I argue that the significance placed on the wedding night might suggest multiple, complex dimensions in which people find meaning in their marriage through their wedding night experience. The fact is that the wedding night is the first night that the couple spend after being married, and the wedding night allows the couple to physically remove themselves from their families and other wedding guests in order to acknowledge the intimate connection privately. Furthermore, the ritual of the wedding night not only functions as a transitory event for the newlywed couple as they enter into the married life, it may also symbolically allow the couple to administer the vow of monogamous sexual relations to each other as they make love for the first time as a husband and a wife. According

to the once married respondent, Rachael, the sexual anticipation of the wedding night is a part of “wedding package”.

Because I think.... ah.... it is, even whether you had sexual relationship with your fiancé or then husband before, it's still, I think, there is still deep around the fact that it is the launching into your married life. And then, it is your time to be to... it's like the concept of what the honeymoon is. It's your time to be closeted and into just your own world of just the two of you, privately...

Even though she does not think sex is necessary for the wedding night, her insight into why sexual anticipation is normalized for the night highlights the point that it is what formally demarcates the married life and that the sexual dimension is perhaps the extension of acknowledging the recently claimed marital connection with their partner in a private and intimate way.

While the current study was aimed at investigating the importance of the wedding night to contemporary couples, it is my belief that a study like this one may provide further understanding of the meanings attached to marriage and sexuality in today's North America. I argue that the current study highlighted the complex meanings attached to the wedding night but it also illustrated the manifestation of the changes in cultural contexts linking marriage and sex as well as demonstrated how people interpret the ritual in modern society. While common-law relationships are increasingly common and almost indistinguishable from marriage in Canada, the majority of the population continues to marry. What I argue, based on the findings from the current study, is that I hypothesize that people may be looking for an event or ritual in which the nature of their relationship can be uniquely defined and differentiated from their everyday life. The current study found that modern engaged individuals perceived the wedding night as the transitional event into their married life; in this sense, the night appears to serve an important role in making the experience of marriage an even more private one. I believe that the current study demonstrated the transformation of the meanings attached to sex and marriage in the face of changing cultural connections between them. While the meaning of sex

on the wedding night moved away from virginity to marking the beginning of a private experience of married life, and that sex has been no longer controlled by marriage, it may be that the sexual anticipation of the wedding night will continue to exist as long as the institution of marriage remains popular in society. If it is so, continuous investigation of the wedding night may allow for further understanding of people's interpretation of traditions and rituals, the operation of cultural change, and the manifestation of history in the present.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

UBC Research Ethics Board Certificate of Approval



The University of British Columbia

Office of Research Services

Behavioural Research Ethics Board

Suite 102, 6190 Agronomy Road, Vancouver, B.C. V6T 1Z3

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL - FULL BOARD

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Nathanael T. Lauster	INSTITUTION / DEPARTMENT: UBC/Arts/Sociology	UBC BREB NUMBER: H07-02713
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INSTITUTION(S) WHERE RESEARCH WILL BE CARRIED OUT:	
Institution	Site

UBC Vancouver (excludes UBC Hospital)

Other locations where the research will be conducted:

Interviews are expected to take place at UBC, on the Vancouver campus, in the Jack Bell

Building. However, some interviews may take place off campus if requested by the participants

(i.e. coffee shop or at home).

CO-INVESTIGATOR(S): Risako Ota
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SPONSORING AGENCIES: N/A

PROJECT TITLE: The significance of having sex on the wedding night: Capturing individual expectations and the importance of this experience in a relationship

REB MEETING DATE: April 10, 2008	CERTIFICATE EXPIRY DATE: April 10, 2009
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DOCUMENTS INCLUDED IN THIS APPROVAL:	DATE APPROVED: May 16, 2008
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Document Name	Version	Date
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Consent Forms: Consent Form	2	May 5, 2008
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Advertisements: Flyer	2	May 5, 2008
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Questionnaire, Questionnaire Cover Letter, Tests:

Interview Guide

1

February 28, 2008

The application for ethical review and the document(s) listed above have been reviewed and the procedures were found to be acceptable on ethical grounds for research involving human subjects.

Approval is issued on behalf of the Behavioural Research Ethics Board

and signed electronically by one of the following:

Dr. M. Judith Lynam, Chair

Dr. Ken Craig, Chair

Dr. Jim Rupert, Associate Chair

Dr. Laurie Ford, Associate Chair

Dr. Daniel Salhani, Associate Chair

Dr. Anita Ho, Associate Chair

Appendix B

Interview Guide

Relationship:

How did you meet? When were you engaged?

How long have you been together? Do you live together?

What initially attracted you to your partner?

Do you share similar backgrounds? What is your occupation? Your partner's occupation?

Wedding Plan:

When is the wedding? When do you plan to get married?

How is the planning going? How much are you involved?

How much planning have you done? Just started? Still a lot of things to figure out?

Have you planned or thought about the wedding night?

Sex/Sexuality:

What does sex mean to you (and to your partner)? Are you sexually active? How would you describe your sexual orientation? Have you had sex before?

Sex on Wedding Night:

What comes to mind when you think of the wedding night?

What have you heard about it?

Do you think the wedding night is still a sexually relevant event today? Why?

Are you nervous when you think about the wedding night? How would you characterize your emotional feelings about the wedding night?

How do you want your wedding night to be? Why?

Do you have a plan? Have you talked about it with your partner?

Where do you plan to be? At hotel suite? Your house? Why?

Is it part of your honeymoon? Why and why not?

What do you plan to do for your wedding night? Why and why not?

What would you like to do for your wedding night? Anything you would like to have?

Champaign? Wine? Chocolate? Rose petals?

Why?

Some people do not want to make a big deal of the wedding night. Do you agree or disagree with this attitude?

Ten being extremely important, zero being not important at all, how important is the night of the wedding to you? How important is the night of the wedding as it fits into the wedding as a whole?

Why?

What do you think will happen? Why?

Importance of Sex:

Has anybody, other than your partner, talked about the wedding night to you?

What do you think of the idea of sex on wedding night?

Why do you think some people think it is so important or special?

How do you place sex in your relationship? Is it important? How?

Is sex an important factor in deciding to whom you will be married?