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Pride and Prejudice in Contemporary Marriages: On the Hidden Constraints to Individualisation at the Crossroad of Tradition and Modernity

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Introduction

Contemporary theorisations of family often present change in marriage as an icon of deinstitutionalisation (Cherlin). This idea, widely discussed in sociology, has been deepened and extended by Giddens, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, Beck-Gernsheim and Bauman, considered to be the main architects of the individualisation, detraditionalisation and risk theses (Brannen and Nielsen). According to these authors, contemporary family is an ephemeral, fluid, and fragilereality, and weakening as a traditional institution. At the same time, and partly as a result of the changes to this institution, there has been a rise in the individual's capacity to reflect on and choose their own life, to the point that living a life of *their own* becomes the individual's defining injunction.

Based on an in-depth and detailed analysis of a number of young Portuguese people's accounts of their entry into conjugality, this paper seeks to unveil some of the hidden constraints which persist despite this claim to individualisation. Whilst individuals incorporate a personalised narrative in their construction of that "special day" – stressing the performance of the wedding *they wanted*, in *the way they chose* – these data show the continuing influence of the family on individual decisions (e.g. to marry or not to marry, and how to marry). These empirical findings thus contribute to the recent body of literature complexifying the individualisation and detraditionalisation theses (Smart and Shipman, Gross, Smart, Eldén).

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Using Sociology to Unveil Individualisation's Hidden Constraints

This discussion of contemporary marriages is driven by empirical data from a sociological qualitative study based on episodic interviews (Flick, *An Introduction to Qualitative Research* and *The Episodic Interview*). This research (Costa) was developed in 2009 and aimed at an in-depth understanding of family practices (Morgan, *Risk and Family Practices*, *Family Connections* and *Rethinking Family Practices*), specifically family rituals (Bossard and Boll, Imber-Black and Roberts, Wolin and Bennett). Using a theoretical sampling (Glaser and Strauss), accounts were collected from 30 middle-class individuals, both men and women, living in an urban medium-sized city (Évora) in the south of Portugal (southern Europe), and with at least one small child between the age of 3 and 14 years old. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained, and all names used in this paper are pseudonyms.

For the purposes of this paper, I focus only on the women's accounts. On the one hand, particularly for them, socialisation and media culture helped to consolidate a social representation around the wedding (Gillis, *Marriages of the Mind*); on the other hand, their more exhaustive descriptions of the wedding day allow better for examining the hidden constraints to individualisation. Data were coded and analysed through a thematic and structural content analysis (Bardin). The analysis of emerging themes and issues regarding the diverse ways of entering into conjugality was primarily assisted by qualitative software (NVivo, QSR International) and then presented in the form of contextualised narratives. Using a sociological perspective, the themes presented below illustrate the major conclusions of this study.

Big Decisions: To Marry or Not to Marry? How to Marry?

At the core of the decision of whether "to marry or not to marry?" and "how to marry?," one can find multiple and complex arguments, which go beyond simplistic justifications based exclusively on the couple's decision (Chesser; Maillolchon and Castrén). Women in particular display an awareness of the ways in which their decisions regarding marriage are crossed by the will, desires or preferences of the parents or in-laws. This was the case of Maria dos Anjos, married at the age of 26:

It was a choice of the two of us [to marry]. Not an imposition. I didn't care whether we were married by church or not... and there were times when I even put forward the possibility of a simple civil marriage. However, my parents really liked that I got married by the church. I'm not sure if this is due to tradition, if... and... they

talked about it... and I also thought it was beautiful... it was a beautiful party... the dress, all that fantasy... and I really loved marrying in the church... so it became a strong possibility when we began to think about it [to get marry]...

The argument that two people might marry *because of* or *also to* please the parents or in-laws explains, at least partially, a certain pressure that the fiancées feel before marriage to marry “in a certain way.” Filipa, who dated for ten years, lived the wedding day like “the realisation of a childhood’s dream.” The satisfaction she obtained was shared with her parents and in-laws:

To marry in the church, with the wedding dress, and everything else... My mother in-law is a religious person too, right? So we felt that we both like it, the two of us, my mother, my mother-in-law, they would also like it, so we decided to marry in the church.

To do the parents’ will is to meet the expectations around a “beautiful” wedding, but sometimes also to fulfil the marriage that the parents did not have. Lurdes is an only daughter, married at the age of 29. She argues that “marriage should be primarily significant for those who actually marry, not the parents or in-laws”. Yet, that was not her case:

For us, maybe it was not so important; the paper signed, the ceremony in the church... maybe the two of us made it for our parents. It doesn’t mean that we didn’t have fun [...] and I don’t mean by this that it was a sacrifice, or a hardship [...] My mother had no more daughters, and had a *great* will to marry her only daughter in the church. My mother was not married by the church, but was only married by civil registry. She never managed to convince my dad to get married by the church. And perhaps it was a bit... to project on me what she had not done! Despite her having the will to do but did not achieve it. And maybe I made her wish come true; I realise that she had that desire, a great desire that her daughter would marry in the church. For me, it was not a problem. So, we finally did agree and married in the church.

The family of origin thus clearly has a great influence over some of the big decisions associated with marriage, such as whether to get married at all, and whether to involve the church in the process.

Small decisions: It Is All about Details!

The intrusion of the family of origin is also felt on the apparently more individual decisions as the choice of the dress or several other details concerning the organisation of the ceremony and the party (Chesser, Leeds-Hurwitz). The wedding dress is a good example of how women in particular perceive a certain pressure for conformity and subjection to buy it or choose it "in a certain way." Silvia, who married at age 23, remembers:

I married with a traditional wedding dress, even though I did not want to. I took a long veil, yet I did not want it... because at the time... I wanted to take a short dress... my mum thought I should not... because my mother did not marry in a wedding dress, did not marry in the church, she was already pregnant at the time and so on [downgrade of the tone] so she made pressure so that I was dressed properly.

Precisely in order to run away from these impositions, some women admit having bought the dress alone, almost secretly. Maria dos Anjos, for example, chose and bought the wedding dress alone so that she did not have to give in to pressure from anyone:

I really enjoyed it! I took a wedding dress... I was the one who chose it; I went to buy it myself, with my own money. I said to myself 'the wedding dress, I will choose it; I will not be constrained by... I will not take my godmother and then think'... oh... I knew that if I did it, I would have to submit a little to her likes and dislikes... no! So I went to choose the dress alone. The girl who was in the shop was an acquaintance of mine, I tried a lot of them, and when I tried that one, I said to myself 'this is it!' and so it was the one!

The position of the spouses in the sibling group also has an effect on numerous decisions that fiancées must make in the lead-up to the wedding. Raquel, who felt this pressure before marriage, attributed it to a large extent to the fact that her husband is an only

child:

Pressure in the sense that João [her husband]... he is an only child, right? So... his parents were always very concerned with certain things. And... everybody... even little things that had no importance, they wanted to decide on that! [...] There are a lot of things that have to be decided, a lot of detail and... what I really think is that it is a really unique day, and it's all very important and all that but... but... then each one gives his/her opinion... And 'I want this,' 'I want that,' 'I want the other'... it's too much; it's a lot of pressure... to manage... on one side, on the other side... because to try not to hurt vulnerabilities ends up being... crazy. Completely! Those fifteen days before... I think they are... they are a little crazy!

Seemingly unimportant details (such as the fact that the mother did not marry in a wedding dress) end up becoming major arguments behind the suggestions or impositions made by both parents and in-laws in relation to decisions surrounding their children's weddings.

(Un)important Decisions: The Guest List

The parents of the couple are often heavily involved in the planning of the wedding partly because, although the day is officially about the bride and groom, it is also the way that the parents share this important milestone with their family and friends (Pleck, Kalmijn, Maillochon and Castrén).

Interviewees say it is "easy" to decide on the guest list, since, at first glance arguments behind the most significant family relatives and friends to be present on the wedding day have to do with proximity, relationality and pleasure or happiness in sharing the moment. Nevertheless, it can be a hard task for couples to implement the criteria of proximity in the selection of guests as initially planned. In cases where the family is larger and there are economic constraints, it is common for fiancées to feel some unpleasantness from those relatives who would like to have been invited and were not. In other cases, parents, closer to the extended family, are the ones who produce this tension. On the one hand, they feel the need to justify to some relatives the choices of their adult children who did not include them in the guest list; on the other hand, they are forced to accept the fact that that decision lies with the couple.

When planning the marriage of Dora, her mother at one point said something like “[...] ‘but my aunt invited us to her wedding and now...’” Dora understood the suspension of the sentence as a subtle pressure from her mother, although, for her, the question was indeed a very simple one:

I give a lot of importance to the people who are with me on a day-to-day basis and that really are with me in good and bad times. [...] It happened. It was easy. For me, it was [laughs]. To my way of thinking it was. It cost my parents. However, not to me [laughs]. It cost me nothing!

When the family is larger – but when there are no economic constraints which limit the number of guests – it is more common that weddings are bigger. In these circumstances, it is also more common to have a certain meddling from the families of origin encouraging couples to include the guests of the parents. Teresa admits this is precisely what happened with her:

It was not so difficult because we were not also *so limited*. [...] We left everything to the satisfaction of all. [...] there were many people who were distant relatives, whom I was not close to. It didn't really matter to me whether those people were present or not. It had more to do with the will of my parents. And usually we were also invited to those people's weddings, so maybe it was also because of that...

In some other cases there is a kind of agreement between parents and adult children, which allows both to invite “whoever they want”. This is the case of Marina, who had 194 guests “on her side,” against around 70 invited by her husband:

I invited more people than him. Why? Well... I could count on my parents, right? And what my parents told me was: ‘you invite whoever you want!’. So, I invited my friends, and some other people I was not as close to, but who my parents wanted me to invite, right? [...] but ok, they made a point of inviting them, and since they did not impose any financial limits, instead, they said to me ‘invite whoever you want to’, and we invited... For me, it was a

'deal.' I was indifferent about it [laughs].

Marina admits that she made a "deal" with her parents. By letting them pay the costs, she gave tacit consent that they could invite those who they wanted, even if it was the case those guests "didn't relate to [her] at all."

At the wedding of Raquel, the fact that "there is family that [only her] parents were keen on inviting" was one of the main points of contention between her parents and the couple. The indignation was greater since it was "your [their own, not the parent's] wedding" and they were being pressed to include people who they "hardly knew," and with whom they "had no connection":

There were people who came who I did not know even who they were! Never seen them anywhere... but ok, my parents were keen on inviting some people, because they know them and all that... and then... it went into widening, extending and then... it ended up with more than one hundred guests [...] we wanted it to be more intimate, more... with closer people... but it was not!

The engaged couple thus recognises the importance of the parents' guests. As one of the interviewees points out, the question is not so much the imposition of the will of the parents, rather the recognition of the importance of certain guests because "they are important to the parents." Thus, the importance of these guests is not directly measured by the couple, but indirectly by being part of the importance that parents give them.

Counter-Decisions: Narratives from the Inside Out

Joana, a first daughter, "felt in her skin" the "punishment" for not having succumbed to the pressure she felt over her decision to marry. She told us she had her teenage dreams; however, as she grew older she identified herself less and less with the wedding ceremony. Moreover, with the death of her grandmother, who was especially meaningful to her, "it no longer made sense" to arrange that kind of ceremony since it would always be "incomplete" without her presence. Her boyfriend also did not urge that they marry, instead preferring to live in a *de facto* union. Joana felt strongly the pressure to take on a role that her parents and in-laws wanted: on the one hand, because she was "a girl, and the oldest daughter;" on the other hand, because her mother-in-law insisted since she had not saw her other daughter to get marry in church, as she was only civilly married.

In fact, Joana could marry in church because she had been educated in the Catholic religion and met all the formal requirements to perform a religious marriage:

I was the person who was prepared to move forward with this. And I did not! I'm not sorry. I don't regret it at all!

Although not regretted, Joana felt "very deeply" the gap between the expectations of her parents and the direction that she decided to give to her life when she told her parents she did not want to marry. She had the same boyfriend since adolescence, whom she moved in with on a New Year's Day at the age of 27. On that evening she organised a small party in the house they had rented and furnished, and stayed there for good. The mother "never forgave her." The following year, when her sister got married, Joana "had the punishment" of, in the eyes of the mother, "not having done the right thing":

one thing I would have loved to have was a nightshirt [old piece of clothing, handmade] of my grandmother [...] But my mother kept the nightshirt and gave it to my sister on the day she married! My sister also loved my grandmother..., but she didn't have the same emotional bond that I had with her! So, I got hurt. Honestly, I got! And the day of my sister's wedding for me it was full of surprises...

This episode is particularly revealing of how Joana experienced the disappointment that caused to her parents for not having married:

I did not have the faintest idea that she [her mother] was going to do that... Yet she kept it [the nightshirt]! [...] She kept it, and then she gave it to my sister! [...] It was *my grandmother's*! And then I said, 'but I was the first to get married!' And it was I who had a closer relationship with my grandmother. I found it very unfair! [...]

Joana sees this wedding gift as "a prize":

It was... she [her sister] was awarded because 'you did the right

thing,' 'you got married,' 'you had done it with all the pomp ... so take this [the nightshirt], that was of your grandmother!'

The day of her sister's wedding would still hold another surprise for Joana, that one coming from her father. She remembers always seeing at home a bottle of aged whiskey that her father "kept for the first daughter who gets to marry."

I did not get married, right? And... and it was sad to see that day and get the bottle open, the bottle that was proudly kept untouched for many years until the first daughter to marry...

Whilst most women admit to have given in to pressure from parents and in-laws, Joana's example demonstrates another side – emotionally painful – of those who did not conform to marry or to marry *in a certain way*.

Conclusion

Based on empirical research on marriages as a family ritual, I have argued that behind representations and discourses of a wedding "of our own," quite often individuals grant the importance, of, and sometimes they are even pressured by, their families of origin (e.g. parents and in-laws). At the crossroad of tradition and modernity, this pressure is pervasive from the most important to the most apparently trivial decisions or details concerning the *mise en scène* of the ritual elements chosen to give a symbolic meaning to the ceremony and party (Chesser, Leeds-Hurwitz).

Empirical findings and data discussion thus confirm and reinforce the high symbolic value that, despite all the changes weddings, still assume in contemporary society (Berger and Kellner, Segalen and Gillis, *A World of their Own Making, Our Virtual Families and Marriages of the Mind*). The power and influence of the size and density of the families of origin is not a part of history left behind by the processes of individualization and detraditionalization; rather, families continue to play a central role in structuring the actual options behind the anticipation, planning, and organisation of the wedding. This demonstrates that the reality of contemporary relationality is vastly more textured (Smart) than the normative generalisations of the individualisation and detraditionalisation theses imply, and suggests that in contemplating contemporary marriage conventions, the overt claims to individual choice and autonomy should be contextualised by the variety of relationships the bride and groom participate in.

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