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Why Marry? The role of tradition in women's marital aspirations

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Abstract

While the individualisation trend has given way to a relational, reflexive turn in the sociology of relationships in Britain, there continues to be a writing out of convention and tradition in understanding relationship processes (excepting Gilding 2010). This paper aims to write tradition back into discussions around relationships by drawing on the accounts of young women and the central role that tradition plays in their relationship narratives. The analysis focuses on: participants' accounts of marital security reflecting the desire for permanence in an impermanent world; accounts of romance and fairy tales in contrast to pragmatic concerns; and participants' use of bricolage in combining the desire for 'invented' traditions with an emphasis on personal choice and agency. This paper highlights the ambivalent nature of the young women's discourse around relationships, agency and tradition: ultimately, themes of individualisation are revealed in their restatement of tradition. This emerges in three distinct ways: the emphasis on marital security appears as a response to 'risky' relationships; participants aspire to the 'traditional family' in response to growing fluidity in family relationships; and romance is appealed to in order to counteract their often very pragmatic approach to the life course. Thus, while there are changes in the ways couples can and do live in their relationships, there remains continuity in the ways that tradition is used by participants to articulate relationship aspirations. Tradition becomes reaffirmed in a context of individualism and de-traditionalisation which reflects a pragmatic response to changing social norms and values.

Key words

Bricolage, de-traditionalisation, marriage, relationships, tradition.

Introduction

While the notion of tradition retains meaning in everyday practices, there have been strong arguments since the late 1980s and 1990s for the decline of traditional values in ‘post-traditional’ reflexive modernity (Beck et al. 1994). Most notably, Giddens proposed in the early 1990s that significant changes in working life, equal rights and globalisation trends had impacted significantly on the ways in which men and women relate to each other in their personal lives (Giddens 1992). This breakdown in traditional restrictions around courtship led to more ‘experimental’ intimate ties that could be broken easily and at will: the emphasis being on flexibility, negotiation and contingency (Giddens’ ‘pure relationship’). Despite numerous later critiques, this and subsequent theory (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995; 2005; Bauman 2003) had a great deal of impact on directing the course of the sociology of family life as well as policy and media interest in personal relationships in the UK.

What followed was a re-centring of discussion back onto the importance of relationships with others beyond the partner, focusing on friendship (Pahl and Spencer 2004; Roseneil 2004) and relationality within family units (Finch and Mason, 1993; Mason 2004). Roseneil and Ketokivi (2015) develop these ideas, suggesting that we should understand the ‘emergence of individuality as a relational process’ (2015: 4). In other words, individualism and relationality are not oppositional ideas as they work symbiotically to produce fully reflexive individuals. This is a very important addition to the debate in terms of highlighting the potentially complex interconnection of processes. Thus, in this paper while the focus is on tradition and the importance of this in the participants’ accounts, this does not negate the also apparent influence of certain elements of individualisation, particularly around aspiring to choice, agency and creating intimate life-projects.

Family studies has become a process oriented discipline with a focus on lived experiences of family life, such as: family practices (Morgan 1996), ‘doing’ or ‘displaying’ family (Finch 2007; Nordqvist 2010), the everyday endurance of couple relationships (Gabb and Fink 2015) and intimacy (Ferreira et al. 2013; Ketokivi 2012). Nevertheless, Edwards et al. (2012) note that the term ‘family’ functions at an institutional level in a way that other and alternative terms fail to operate. This is nowhere more evident than in the operation of policy and government where family still serves its function as a structuring institution (see, for example, the recent British government programme centred on ‘Troubled Families’). Likewise, Gilding (2010) calls for more consideration of convention and the role of the

family as an institution rather than made up of open-ended relations. According to Gilding, reflexivity is overstated in conceptualising intimate relationships and perhaps a better way of understanding family life is through a combination of acknowledging the role the family plays as an organising institution, while simultaneously recognising the importance of reflexivity in constructing family practices.

There is much continuity then, in the practice and operation of 'family' and family life. A number of recent studies have found, for example, that long term commitment and stability are still primary concerns for couples in Western societies (Carter 2012; Van Hooff 2013; Carter et al. 2016), despite being free to live life differently and explore individual, emotionally reflexive projects. As Adams points out, the notion of unbounded reflexivity, 'overlooks many crucial factors in identity formation, and misjudges somewhat the nature of the current age' (2003: 224). Using reflexivity alone, without limits, to create self-identity ignores the culturally situated resources individuals use to inform and understand themselves, such as traditions passed down through the family and beliefs influenced by friends, media and schooling, or space, place and distance (e.g. Holmes 2014). The move towards individualism should not be denied, however, and Adams (2003) argues that the focus on individuality is in fact another way of embedding individuals into particular frameworks (2003: 226). While some people clearly choose to live in relationships differently (Roseneil 2004), others are rejecting this notion of de-traditionalisation through continuity in relationship practices; for example, the proportion of married couple families out of all family types has remained stable over the last 5 years (ONS 2015).

Giddens himself notes that traditions are not altogether extinct but rather they 'are called upon to 'explain' and justify themselves [...] traditions only persist in so far as they are made available to discursive justification' (Beck et al. 1994: 105). For de-traditionalisation theorists, we live in a post-traditional society where tradition has become merely a linguistic device with connections to the past, used to provide meaning for action (Giddens, 1994). The problem with this understanding of tradition is that it over-looks the ways in which tradition is lived, not just discursively but experientially; for tradition can be used as an organising system that guides behaviour. Gross (2005) attempts to address this de-traditionalisation question by drawing a distinction between traditions associated with system, institutions and regulation, and those associated with culture, meaning-making and interpretation. While he argues that regulative traditions are in decline, leading to arguments for de-traditionalisation, there is little indication of certain other types of tradition receding.

The aim of this paper, therefore, is to draw attention to these traditions and the role they play in informing, guiding, structuring the decisions individuals make regarding their relationships. This paper argues that ‘tradition’ should be reconsidered as a highly significant concept in personal relationships, encompassing a set of contested meanings which guide behaviour. The ways in which these contested meanings are created and adapted is understood as a process of ‘bricolage’: a term initially used by Levi-Strauss to refer to the ways in which new myths are generated in traditional societies (Altglass, 2014). I use bricolage in a similar way to infer ‘an active assembly of parts, the adaptation of norms, values and arrangements to suit a new purpose’ and to ‘confer new arrangements with the legitimacy of ‘tradition’’ (Cleaver, 2002: 20, 16). Bricoleurs piece together various resources and different types of information to create meaningful actions and decisions (Duncan, 2011). In this paper, bricolage will be used to understand two separate but related processes: first, how the meaning of tradition is created and constructed in response to changing norms; and second to understand how tradition itself is a part of the process of bricolage in crafting meanings around relationships and marriage. The next section outlines the methodology and sample used to investigate these themes.

The Study

This research project was a small-scale qualitative study based in the UK and designed to understand young women’s relationship and marital aspirations. Given the focus on meaning and understanding, an intensive approach was adopted that suits interpretative aims above the search for broad trends or patterns. An intensive approach is focused on depth of analysis and the interpretive meaning of data, situated within a broader social context (Sayer 1992; Brannen 1992; 2005). This paper emerges out of a wider project that has also addressed issues such as commitment, love and weddings, specifically for women between 19 and 30 years old. This age group was especially chosen to reflect the group of women who supposedly have the means and capacity to forge the way in ‘experiments’ in personal life and relationships (Giddens 1992; Beck et al. 1994; see also Duncan and Phillips 2008). It was one particular aim to see whether this thesis resonated with the group of young women interviewed in the summer of 2008.

Despite the relative age of the data upon which this paper is based, and the subsequent changing economic and social landscape (the introduction of same-sex marriage, for

example), what this paper aims to do is raise some questions about the use of tradition in discussing marriage and relationship aspirations. While it is certainly likely that attitudes have changed since the data was originally collected, more recent research suggests that there is also continuity in the use of tradition presented here (Carter and Duncan 2016).

Beyond the age and gender restrictions, there were few other restrictions placed on the sample in terms of participant characteristics (sexuality, relationship status, and so on) and they ranged in relationship status from single through to married. Class was not openly discussed with participants, given the ambivalence involved in directly reporting it (Savage and Bagnall 2001) but I made an attempt to interview women from a range of class backgrounds by stratifying through education level. The resulting sample is varied with some participants being the first in their family to access higher education and others following parents into postgraduate study. Ultimately class and/or education background seemed to have little effect in determining the views of interviewees.

The sample consisted of 23 women who were recruited through a variety of means including leafleting, snowballing and convenience. Since the aims of this study were intensive rather than extensive, a systematic approach to sampling was not necessary. Thus women were recruited through friends and contacts, through a local orchestra, in response to leaflets placed in locations across the city (in women's changing rooms in large departments stores, in the city library, for example) and further respondents were snowballed from these initial contacts. This is, therefore, largely a convenience sample with limits on gender and age. To gather the data I spoke to the women using a partly structured topic guide. The study was explained as an extended project focusing on young women's views and experiences of relationships, commitment and love. Questions asked of participants covered their relationship history, aspirations, experiences and desires. We also talked about love, marriage, cohabitation, commitment and weddings. These topics were repeated in each interview, to ensure consistency, but the conversations were fluid and free-flowing; the participants largely directing the structure of the interview.

All respondents were born and raised in the UK and their responses are therefore a particular reflection of British norms and narratives in the early twenty-first century. Participants ranged in age from 19 – 30 with an even spread through the range (see Table 1 for more details). One participant identified as bisexual while the remaining 22 identified as heterosexual. In terms of ethnicity, 22 respondents were White and one respondent was

Mixed Race, perhaps reflecting the ethnic composition of the locations of recruitment (a wealthy city in the North East and a provincial area in the South West of England).

Once interviews were transcribed, I implemented a thematic analysis to code recurrent topics emerging from the discussions. As described by Thomas and Harden (2008), thematic analysis allowed me to stay 'close' to the data and to develop transparent and explicit analytical themes and conceptual groups. This method of analysis allows for complexity in an individual's account and is, therefore, particularly suited to qualitative and intensive research. The resulting analysis represents the thoughts and aspirations of this particular group of people, as related through the personal narratives of their desires and experiences.

The difference between desires and experiences is important to note, especially since the women involved in this research were engaged in different relationship trajectories ranging from single to married: married women may reflect on experience whereas single women may be speculating about desired or possible futures. What I want to clarify here, then, are three points. First, my sample is small and selective and making a distinction between those who are married (just 3 participants) and those who are not would not aid in drawing out and unpacking the complexities embedded in the accounts. Even drawing distinctions between those in relationships and those not, would be fruitless as all participants had at least some experience of intimate relationships. Second, the analysis (and the research) is focused on narratives, and the stories and narratives that women produce about their relationships and relationship goals (whether real or imagined). The reality of the relationship is actually secondary to the narrative that is being produced as ideals are (necessarily) represented in narrative form rather than reflections of reality. Moreover, the lines between aspiration and experience are necessarily blurred- experiences influence aspirations and vice versa. But more than this, when speaking about such a publically idealised notion as marriage, it is not necessarily the case that those who have experienced marriage will draw on those experiences in reflecting on marriage. While experiences may be a part of this reflection, so will (past, present and future) aspirations for their marriage, popular discourses, parental influences, tradition, and so on. Indeed, as the paper demonstrates, those in married or cohabiting relationships offered the same narratives of relationship aspirations as those who were single. This is possibly due to the young age of the participants but it is also possible that relationship experience is less important in determining relationship aspirations than other factors.

What is particularly interesting is that despite the different life-histories and experiences of participants, a common theme to emerge running through almost all accounts, was the importance of tradition, in various forms, to the relationship narratives. Rather than making any claims to generalisation then, this paper will instead present some themes that emerged from these discussions about relationship aspirations.

Table 1 Participant Profiles

Pseudonym	Age	Marital status	Education level	Method of recruitment
Zoe	19	Single	University	Snowballed
Catriona	19	LAT ⁱ	University	Snowballed
Amy	20	Single	University	Through a contact
Susan	20	Engaged	School	Snowballed
Abigail	21	Engaged ⁱⁱ	School	Snowballed
Helen	21	LAT	School	My hairdresser
Lauren	22	LAT	University	Through a contact
Fiona	23	Married	University	Through Facebook
Eva	23	Single	University	Snowballed
Claire	24	Engaged	University	Orchestra
Grace	24	Cohabiting	University	Orchestra
Rebecca	24	LAT	School	Leaflet in library
Alice	25	Single	School	Snowballed
Elizabeth	25	Engaged	University	Leaflet (unknown)
Eleanor	26	Cohabiting	University	Orchestra
Adele	27	Single	School	Leaflet in town
Shirley	27	LAT	University	Orchestra
Penny	27	Engaged	School	Snowballed
Ruth	27	LAT	University	Snowballed
Hermione	29	Married	School	Snowballed
Michelle	29	Cohabiting	University	Snowballed
Mandy	30	Married	University	Leaflet at University
Lucy	30	LAT	University	Snowballed

Source: Interviews, 2008

ⁱ LAT refers to those participants who were in a relationship with someone with whom they were not currently cohabiting (living apart together).

ⁱⁱ While all other engaged or married participants were cohabiting, Abigail was not cohabiting with her fiancé at the time of interview.

Security in fluidity

Many definitions of tradition cite connections with a historical past (e.g. Giddens in Beck et al. 1994) and many women interviewed discussed ‘historical’ reasons for marriage: providing a clear line of ancestry (assuming monogamy), instituting financial co-dependence, and ensuring legal binding of that reproductive and financial arrangement (issues dealt with in family sociology since the 1950s; see Parsons 1954). This theme emerged across all accounts, from those who were single to those who were married. When asked why they wanted to marry (as the vast majority did), the participants’ replies indicate that marriage is still very much seen as a relationship type that provides these essential functions: reproductive, financial and legal security. Moreover, marriage offered more security than other forms of relationships, pointing to the continued emphasis on marriage as a prevailing secure, structuring, institution. Hermione (29, married) said that being married was:

a more secure way of being with [her husband]

also highlighting the perception that marriage offers something extra to the relationship beyond cohabitation.

Moreover, the perceived stability of marriage was frequently evoked as the most stable environment in which children should be raised. Of the 23 women interviewed, 15 said that they would rather be married before having children. Even Rebecca (24, LAT), who had previously commented that she was not bothered about marrying, stated that if children were involved then she would rather be married. Children were clearly a significant influence on the decision to marry. As Eleanor (26, cohabiting) said,

I think we kind of thought if we were going to have children we should get married before we had children because it provides a bit more stability and security.

There was also evidence of normative societal pressure in promoting marriage before children:

it’s still a taboo subject I feel in the eyes of kind of general society it’s more slightly more unacceptable I feel in like the opinions I get from other people to have a child before you get married’ (Susan, 20, engaged).

This is despite just 37% of those questioned agreeing that those who want children ought to marry in a recent survey carried out by NatCen (2016). It is not that long ago that women

who gave birth outside of a marriage or women who had many sexual encounters were sanctioned by societal mores and outcast from society. A number of participants note, in relation to having children within a marriage, the remaining societal restrictions on this behaviour, based on moral judgements. Moral judgements that in other areas appear to be in sharp decline (regarding same-sex relationships, for example). Marriage, nevertheless, continues to be seen as a better and more stable environment in which children should grow up (Jamieson et al. 2002). This view has also been recently reinforced by the government who have encouraged marriage through their same-sex marriage bill (see Thomas 2014) and through their promotion of the 'Marriage Allowance' which could save married (and civil partnered) couples hundreds of pounds a year.

Marriage also concerns financial and legal security. For Michelle (29, cohabiting), marriage would mean a change from relying on her parents for income support to relying on her partner, despite already living with her partner in a cohabiting relationship:

I mean you would have that security that if you lost your job that that person would support you while you looked for another job.

The issue of legality becomes important when children are concerned. Rebecca (24, LAT) mentioned the importance of ensuring maintenance if anything went wrong and having some kind of ties

to make it harder for the other person to like walk out on the responsibilities.

Lucy (30, LAT) also emphasised this point saying that she would want to

have legal rights if anything went wrong.

Eva (23, single) linked these legal ties to financial security and the safeguard marriage affords in case of death or divorce:

I'd like the security of it, I'd like to know legally as well knowing that our money is sort of all together in one place if he dies or something um [...] I'd be sort of in the eyes of the law part of his life sort of financially.

Not only does marriage offer security to the partners through the legally binding contract, however, it also provides a public statement of commitment to a secure relationship. As Amy (20, single) commented,

if you've got married you've actually publicly made a commitment to each other so in a way you've got some actual proof of security.

Interestingly, what Amy is suggesting here is not a private marriage ceremony between two people and a couple of witnesses- the commitment has to be made publically, implying a wide audience and public event- what we now imagine as weddings. It seems that the wedding plays a central role for Amy in actually, physically, providing witnesses to prove commitment and to provide external reinforcement to the relationship (see Carter and Duncan 2016).

That the young women interviewed were so concerned with stability, certainty and commitment, regardless of relationships status or age, suggests a number of conclusions. First, the reliance upon notions of traditional 'family values' and convention above notions of individualism was striking. Tradition, in the sense of securing a traditional stable familial relationship, is certainly important (and not called to justify itself when it comes to marriage), and yet, so is their aspiration to marry and their incorporation of marriage into their life projects. What is also apparent is a lack of relational accounts presented here: rather than participants talking about marriage or the decision to marry as part of 'relational, connected and embedded' (Mason 2004: 166) processes in 'webs of relationships' (Roseneil and Ketokivi 2015), this discussion has shown that for some, the decision is based, at least partly, on notions of obligations (to partners and children), and legal and financial security. What this suggests is that while 'traditional' values are emphasised in the decision to marry, these are often expressed in an individualised way- as of central concern for the individual or, at most, the individual and their children.

Second, marriage still operates, at least for these participants, as a legitimating institution that sanctions sexual relationships, financial co-dependence and child bearing. As Ingraham (1999) notes, marriage 'becomes the way to certify legitimacy, normalcy, and morality' (1999: 110), the heterosexual imaginary convinces us that it is important to participate in the 'legitimizing illusions of the institution' (1999: 110). Marriage becomes the norm because of the heterosexual imaginary: 'Rather than seeing the various interests at stake in decisions of this kind and making fully informed decisions, we instead consent to the illusion that you can't have commitment, love, and family without marriage' (Ingraham 1999: 111).

Finally, the question is, why is the emphasis on security, stability and permanence among these young women so strong? It could be argued that these issues have never disappeared as

significant factors for women to think about in terms of their relationships in Britain. Despite much relaxing of attitudes towards relationships and family life, there remain certain 'traditions' to which individuals should conform to align with the normative conventions of British society: tradition is not entirely optional. Similarly, women for the majority of the 20th Century were also heavily dependent upon men for their financial security and financial and housing stability (see Comer 1978, for example). While these customs now seem outdated and are no longer socially or legally enforced, they have instead become incorporated into the collective imagination. While no longer outwardly or meaningfully patriarchal - marriage offers security to both men and women arguably (despite retaining some patriarchal customs in the wedding ceremony) - the values behind the sentiment remain. The values of stability associated with marriage remain. It is also possible that these values are even more important for these individuals in an era when couple relationships are seen to be increasingly contingent (Giddens 1992), or fluid (Bauman 2002). Thus the permanence that marriage apparently offers is highly valued; contrary to Gross' (2005) suggestion that regulatory traditions are in decline, these traditional notions of stability and security are highly valued and strongly regulatory.

Aspiring to the traditional family

This appeal to marital longevity could be interpreted as a continuing obligation to permanently structured couple relationships. Again, Gross (2005: 288) suggests that morally regulative traditions remain in many societies where adherence to particular behaviours continues to determine inclusion or exclusion from the 'moral community'. In the case of personal relationships, while it can clearly be demonstrated that cohabitation and living apart together are more acceptable now than in the past, they are still not as privileged as marriage which remains the dominant family type (and living alone and lone parent families are even more marginalised). This appeal to the 'traditional' family who regulate moral standards was reflected in many participants' narratives; Zoe (19, single), for example, commented,

I think I'd rather see like more old fashioned like families and they all sit down and have their tea at the same time [...] I'd rather it be more acceptable to be a normal family.

This is something Zoe expresses a desire for:

I suppose like it is the normal thing for me of people just grow up and get married.

In this dialogue Zoe at once normalises marriage and marital family life whilst placing it outside the norm within society now ('I'd rather see...'). Her discourse is therefore reflecting the appeal to 'traditional' family life alongside the assumption of de-traditionalisation.

This ambivalence in Zoe's account is a reflection of the contradiction between notions of de-traditionalisation- marriage no longer necessary, growth in rates of childbirth outside of marriage, legalisation of same-sex marriage, and so on- and the contention that identity still very much is influenced by and made up of rituals, traditions and convention. Gross (2005) asserts that while some reliance on tradition is in decline, reflexivity alone cannot fill this void, and certain customs relating to intimate practices continue to pass down through generations. Respondents react to viewing wider society (other people) as ultra-modern and abandoning customs, by simultaneously desiring very traditional lives for themselves.

Yet the form that this 'tradition' takes is perhaps a little more nuanced. For participants, their concept of 'tradition' was also bound up with ideas of having an order to life: intimate life should follow a correct, proscribed route and ontological order. This notion appeared repeatedly in conversations; Mandy (30, married) gives one example of progression:

there still seems to be quite a traditional pattern of we'll meet, we'll settle down, we'll have an engagement, have a wedding, have a year or so and then have children.

In order to progress successfully though life one must marry at some stage. Eva (23, single) reflects on this idea commenting,

[you] meet someone, after a few years, you know, live together, then a couple of years after that get married, then a couple of years after that have kids, that feels like a nice sort of steady progression, can't really go wrong...you know I mean there's rational reasons for those sort of gaps.

The idea of marriage as progression and a stepping stone in life is discussed by Sutton et al. (2003) who found that many older participants in their study felt societal and parental pressure to marry, giving them little option but to conform. Although most overt forms of pressure to marry are now invisible, this view of marriage as 'the accepted "stepping-stone" to adulthood' (2003: 11) remains widely endorsed. Nevertheless, the thinking around such pressures has transformed and instead of framing the cultural expectation to marry as a pressure, it is now seen as a freely chosen ('rational') act to conform. This emphasis on

choice is reflected in arguments made by Giddens and Beck who note that while life stages have not disappeared, these are now imported in our biographies by us- we have to make these part of our life stories and recognise these as important events in a reflexive way. Similarly, Lewis comments, '[o]nce marriage became a choice rather than a necessity, a much more conscious decision had to be made to enter it' (Lewis 2001: 144). Thus, while the imperative to marry remains, young people talk about choices (or aspirations to choice) rather than pressures to tie the knot, despite responding to similar cultural discourses.

This is a significant element in understanding the mechanism of tradition since, as Gross notes,

In some social settings, agents may realize, at the level of discursive or practical consciousness, that they will be excluded from some moral community in which they have a stake in belonging if they do not enact the specific practices the community regards as fundamental to its historical identity or if they do enact others that are proscribed (2005: 306).

Marriage is, arguably, a practice that is fundamental to the historical identity of the UK and Western culture. By not partaking in this activity then, individuals become morally excluded since it is through engaging in such activities that individuals in a community can distinguish between insiders and outsiders. Therefore, when participants are referring to 'normal' behaviour and life having a 'correct' or 'rational' order, what they are drawing upon are notions of abnormality and incorrect lives which do not conform to these regulative and regulated traditions.

One notable extension of the 'traditional' family is the inclusion of non-married cohabitation in orders of relationship progression. Almost all participants in this cohort expected to live with their future husband before marrying. This progression is assumed to be traditional and the correct way to live life, yet cohabitation prior to marriage is a break from recent tradition. In less than half a century, this relationship process, now taken-for-granted, has altered considerably. This kind of 'invented tradition', found commonly in discussions around weddings and relationships, reflects 'the contrast between the constant change and innovation of the modern world and the attempt to structure at least some parts of social life within it as unchanging and invariant' (Hobsbawn 1983: 2); the perceived fluidity of relating results in attempts to draw more heavily on notions of custom and perceived 'tradition'.

The question is, why is the traditional family such a strong aspirational dream for these young women? Why aren't they aspiring to revolutionary, free, unbounded, unstructured ways of living? Very few people want to stand out and break the mould- or to be completely free- there is safety in structure. There is a lot of appeal in tradition and lineage, doing things the way your ancestors or kin did: it connects you to past and future, situates you in a line of relatedness. There are also strong narratives against 'alternative' relationships or families- single parents, non-monogamy, and so on. And there are strong narratives in favour of the traditional family- political, social and fictional. The 'traditional' family is appealing because it links us with our kin and it allows us to conform to the social norm. The way that tradition is used in accounts is particularly interesting when relatively new customs are included (such as cohabitation or the 'traditional white wedding'). What this suggests is that ultimately what is 'traditional' is always appealing because we get to decide what traditional is: what is considered 'traditional' actually reflects the current attitudes, preferences and norms of the day. Historical values are used to give meaning to current customs and this is safe, connected. By defining things as 'traditional', actions and objects can be justified with no further explanation. Thus traditions become 'invented' and individuals become bricoleurs in creating their narratives: selecting and enmeshing aspects of modernity and history to create stories of their personal lives (Duncan 2011).

Creating the fantasy/Counteracting pragmatism

One participant who exemplifies the 'traditional family values' position is Ruth (27, LAT) who saw marriage and having a family as her 'life's ambition'. Ruth had grown up seeing how her parents had been together and said:

I want to have a husband and I want to have kids and I want to be the Mum and you know do the shopping and all the rest of it and that's... that's always been a dream that's always been a bit of a fantasy.

The appeal of family life is very strong for Ruth who idealises traditional family roles and a gendered division of labour. It could be argued that her ambition to be a housewife supports Holmes' assertion that 'for some women, gender roles might be becoming retraditionalized' in some areas (Holmes 2004: 252; see also Adkins 2000). Indeed, Adkins (2000) goes further to suggest that tradition is not just being revived, rather 're-traditionalised norms, rules and

expectations [...] concern new positions and new traditionalised socialities' (Adkins 2000: 268).

On the other hand, if tradition is understood to be a term that is utilised to reflect the norms and values of the day, then tradition may not be renewed or revitalised but rather simply updated. Thus, the tradition discussed by participants may resemble a new development of 'tradition' with new norms and expectations (for example, cohabitation enters the lexicon of legitimate relationship practices and progression). Yet what I suggest is that the notion of tradition remains static: it is a term that connects history with present and that reflects the norms and values of the era. What changes then are the practices that the term includes: cohabitation, or white weddings, for example. Through using the term 'tradition' in this way, this is how bricolage is done - by creating new modes of behaviours using old customs, invented traditions and modern attitudes and packaging these as the new 'tradition'. Thus the desire for the 'traditional family' includes the desire for old customs (financial/legal security), invented traditions (such as the 'traditional' gendered division of labour, the big white wedding or fairy tale romance), and modern attitudes (cohabitation and an emphasis on choice)

It is interesting to note that family life is Ruth's ultimate fantasy and arguably her means of 'escaping from the daily grind' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995: 175). Nevertheless, Ruth makes sure to assert, 'that's my choice'; she is aspiring to a choice which enables her not to sacrifice her career but to prioritise her family. The 'traditional' family becomes a form of mediated individualism then where these 'traditions' represent the pinnacle of personal life and are articulated through an aspirational discourse of choice- discourses made available through the very processes of de-traditionalisation that respondents seem to so strongly reject.

What Ruth also highlights is the element of fantasy in her account, almost acknowledging the unreality of her vision. The image and discourse of this exact fantasy, of the mother and father with children and a gendered division of labour, is one which is common in popular culture as well as media and political narratives in the UK and elsewhere. Indeed, it is a so-called 'fairy tale' ending that can often be found at the end of blockbuster Hollywood films (think Richard Gere, the rich businessman, coming to rescue Julia Roberts, the fallen woman, at the end of *Pretty Woman* (1990)). Fairy tales that are often derived from folklore and oral narration are reclaimed by corporations and repackaged and sold as highly romanticised. Disney are now synonymous with fairy tales that have a 'happily ever after'; they have taken

the original stories and have sugar coated these, often dark tales almost beyond all recognition to produce the modern day interpretation creating new notions of (invented) mythology (see, for example, the original stories for the Little Mermaid (Hans Christian Anderson) or Sleeping Beauty (Giambattista Basile)). In other words, Disney fairy tales have been subject to a form of bricolage, combining folk tale and the worship of love as a new secular religion (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995).

The format of the standard fairy tale promoted primarily by Disney, is that of a female searching for her one and only true love, falling in love, overcoming all obstacles and getting married (see Cokely 2005)¹. This taken-for-granted nature of fairy tale discourses regarding finding your ‘one-true-love’ emphasises the notion that it is ‘so “natural” for women to want to be married’ (Cokely 2005: 170); a tool of the institution of heterosexuality to keep women subdued (Rich, 1980: 645). While not the case for everyone, the fairy tale image was, for a few participants, a significant influence on their own views of marriage. When Grace was asked what had influenced her opinions she responded,

even all the fairy tales and meeting Prince Charming and living happily ever after, and other respondents used the image of the fairy tale to explain their wedding fantasies.

Disney was also mentioned specifically as an institution designed for the regulation of fantasies. Amy, for example, commented,

people are still brought up with like Disney films and looking in the media and stuff and there is still marriage and it’s the most brilliant day of your life.

According to Cokely, when Disney situate romance at the heart of the female characters’ goals, alongside the prevailing institutionalisation of heterosexuality, women, in particular, continue to hold up marriage ‘as a goal and dream of the romantic fairy tale wedding’ (2005: 171). Otnes and Pleck (2003) agree that while these stories are primarily designed for children, they have ‘an equally powerful hold on the adult imagination’ (2003: 27).

This ‘powerful hold’ can be observed in Rebecca’s account. From the start Rebecca (24, LAT) positioned herself as unlikely to marry, she had never ‘been interested particularly in getting married’ and she declared she could live happily without ever being married. And yet, later in the interview Rebecca said,

I think most of my friends, and maybe deep down [I], have got this like little fantasy in their head they'll just meet Mr. Right [he'll] sweep them off their feet you'll get married and live happily ever after.

Even Rebecca stated the influence of romanticism and appeal of the fairy tale ending and living 'happily ever after'. This discourse is not one just promoted through fairy tales and Disney, of course, but is also represented in endless romantic (-comedy) films and the post-feminist discourse of heterosexual femininity (McRobbie 2009). The daily grind of married life need not be shown, perhaps contributing to young people's high expectations of marriage (Shumway 2003; Wouters 2004). In this way, a language of love, romance, and the uniqueness and specialness of monogamous and preferably married couple relationships is created and reinforced.

While most participants were actually very pragmatic in their accounts and rarely had expectations of living happily ever after without challenges, what can be seen from the few accounts discussed here is the reliance upon languages of romance and fairy-tale that can be used to camouflage the far more mundane, pragmatic and un-romantic accounts regarding legal and financial ties and being a 'normal' family. By using romantic language and fairy tale comparisons, family life and marriage become fantasy, they become extra-ordinary. Thus the work that these participants are doing in talking about their aspirations to be married do not just involve using tradition to justify this choice but to package this choice and notions of 'traditional' family life as 'romantic' and beyond the mundane. Reasons for this use of romance are considered below.

Tradition and bricolage

First what these accounts show is that when it comes to marriage, the 'traditional' aspects of this relationship do not require justification by participants. In fact, quite the opposite seems to be happening when 'tradition' itself is used to explain the decision to marry. There is little evidence here for a process of de-traditionalisation. What appears to be happening instead is a reaffirming and a reinvention of 'tradition' through bricolage. Constraining traditions are reaffirmed involving: historical reasons for marriage including children (ensuring a clear lineage), financial co-dependence, legal binding of the reproductive unit. The 'traditional' family is aspired to, following progression through the 'normal' stages through life, reflecting invented notions of 'traditional' families and life progressions. By using tradition, marriage is

justified in an age where it is not necessary for social or normative reasons, although the legal and financial implications of marriage remain. While marriage is weakened in social norms therefore, it is strengthened instead through notions of tradition and romance. Thus, what is considered 'tradition' can be seen to reflect and respond to the concerns and values of people today. As bonds become optional, the act of marriage is given support or strengthened through appeals to tradition. And this is achieved through bricolage: combining and adapting norms, belief-systems and customs such as marital security, romance, and heteronormativity, to confer the behaviours with legitimacy.

And what's more, such tradition becomes fantasy: it can't just be about law, finance, children, social sanctions and being 'normal', that is not romantic! Relationships now are less about structuring society and so have become more about romance and love (Illouz 1997; Beck-Gernsheim 2002); love is the new narrative of marriage, relationships. So in using notions of tradition to justify marriage, this 'tradition' must be packaged as a romantic tradition- marriage becomes essentially a romantic story. Perhaps, as Rich (1980) might argue, this in order to maintain compulsory heterosexual order where women's choices remain restricted, despite the illusion of freedom.

Thus bricolage is evident not just in the creation of tradition, but also in the creating of relationship narratives: combining the historical, normative, traditional and contemporary. Individuals first take the optional nature of the relationship type- their ability to choose to marry rather than feeling a strong and overt social pressure to do so (although they may feel some pressure nevertheless). Hence aspirational discourses of choice and decision- deciding to get married, choosing to marry their partner. They combine this with the more historically routed reasons for marriage- joining a couple together for financial, legal and reproductive security. Thus bricoleurs innovate through combining historically patriarchal notions of marital security, romance marriage, and mythical family life (progression) with narratives of choice biography mixed with fantasy.

The way that individuals reconcile and bring together these notions as bricoleurs is to create a fantasy, a fantastical story around marriage and weddings that is narrated, at least in part, through notions of tradition. If bricolage is a process of combining new social customs with old practices and norms, it can be suggested that these women combine a narrative of desired choice and agency with a longing for the 'traditional' way of life including co-residential marriage, love and children. Thus tradition becomes a guiding resource for choice

biographies, but the form this tradition takes is fluid, invented, reinvented: more like myth. If cohabitation enters this mythical fantasy of the 'traditional' life trajectory then that is simply the process of bricolage in action. We are constantly constructing and reconstructing notions of tradition to reflect our own desires as well and the customs of the time. 'Tradition' can only be seen through the lens of the present.

This ties in nicely with the thesis set out by Hobsbawm (1983): tradition is essentially something created by us to serve a particular purpose, for validating a certain course of action. In this case, a certain vision of tradition is created (the traditional nuclear family) so that my participants can express their choice to marry through appealing to notions that stretch through time. This lends weight to their argument. There might be alternative motivations for appealing to such a notion of tradition for others, however, politicians for example. These might draw on such a notion of tradition in order to maintain a certain form of order, social structure or political economy.

Concluding remarks

One aim of this paper has been to highlight the ways in which tradition is invoked in order to create a romantic aura around an institution that, in the UK at least, has become cynical, commercialised and pragmatic. Since these are not 'valid' reasons for wanting to marry (for the legal protection, for financial security, and so on), participants necessarily constructed additional, far more idealised explanations, for their decision or desires to marry. As so far suggested, tradition is not necessarily a notion in competition with certain aspects of individualisation (depending on how you conceive 'tradition'), rather as individualism takes hold on attitudes and aspirations, individuals become more reliant on anchoring and legitimating notions of tradition and love. Marriage is desired because it is assumed, traditional, natural, and 'normal'; not to marry is undesirable and abnormal, socially unacceptable in a culture of individuals free to 'choose to do so'. This is the paradox inherent in the culture of marriage. Tradition is used as a legitimating ideology for the continuing practice of marriage- it justifies the continued appeal of marriage to young women in a context of declining marriage rates. Whether appealing to tradition or deciding to reject it, what is clear is that notions of tradition were still incredibly influential in these participants' behaviours and present in their language of relationships. While the accounts presented here reflect little of the processes associated with the de-traditionalisation process, with appeals to

security and stability, and claims to morally appropriate ‘normal’ families alongside discussions of the ‘fairy tale ending’, such discourses may not be available to these individuals without some understanding of or recourse to individualised self-reflexivity.

My argument here is not that marriage is the most secure relationship form or that it should be considered in the terms outlined above. Rather, what this paper demonstrates is that there continues to be an emphasis on security, tradition and convention in making relationship decisions, particularly regarding marriage, at least by these participants who are situated in a ‘Western’ context. There is, of course, plenty of other research that strongly suggests that marriage is certainly not always viewed as the best or most secure relationship form (see Carter et al. 2016, for example). And other research suggests that individuals are moving further away from traditional values in relationships than this current paper suggests (Budgeon and Roseneil 2004). It cannot be denied that there is more opportunity now for couples to create the relationship that suits them and individuals are, indeed, fulfilling this to a certain extent. But it must also be acknowledged that this research suggests that despite having the opportunity to experience ‘pure relationships’ or ‘living beyond the conventional family’, this is not ubiquitous and, in fact, relationship decisions are still very often bound by considerations of tradition, family, obligation and convention (see also Gilding 2010; Duncan 2014; Finch and Mason 1993). Indeed, this is the normative discourse that prevails in British society and British culture, (see David Cameron cited in Hall 2015, for example) through which nearly all relationship decisions must define themselves, whether positively or negatively.

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ⁱ Although this is perhaps changing with the hugely popular Disney film *Frozen* representing a deviation from the traditional storyline.