Independent Celebrant-led Wedding Ceremonies: Translating, Tweaking and Innovating Traditions

Abstract

This article explores ceremonial design of independent celebrant-led wedding ceremonies in England and Wales. It draws on a qualitative study which involved focus groups with celebrants and interviews with individuals who have had an independent celebrant-led wedding ceremony. Six factors are described which influenced how couples translated and tweaked traditions or innovated ceremonial elements: faith, heritage, values, kin, informality, and temporality. In line with a bricolage process, it is suggested that the keeping of and minor adaption of traditions through the personalisation offered by independent celebrant-led wedding ceremonies may support inclusion of relationship practices such as interfaith couplings and blended families. Examples of kinship display-work and self-display-work were found throughout participant accounts of their wedding ceremonies. It is proposed that both may act as an important means by which the needs of individuals for whom a religious or belief framework is not prioritised over other contexts of identification can be met in a wedding ceremony. Further research is needed to explore the transferability of these findings to larger samples, as well as specific sub-populations.

Keywords

Introduction

Weddings in twenty-first century England and Wales take many different forms, reflecting both increasing religious diversity and decline in religious beliefs (ONS, 2022a; 2022b). A growing number of couples are now choosing to have a personalised independent celebrant-led wedding ceremony; hiring a celebrant who is not affiliated with a religious, belief or government organisation to lead the ceremony and collaboratively designing its form and content with them. From a survey of independent celebrants working in England and Wales, Pywell (2020a) estimates the number of ceremonies has risen from around 4,000 in 2015 to 9,500 in 2019. While in countries such as New Zealand, independent celebrants can perform legally binding wedding ceremonies if registered by the state to do so, in England and Wales they do not have legal recognition. The Law Commission of England and Wales (2022) has recently set out recommendations which if implemented would provide a legal framework that would enable Government to allow independent celebrants to conduct legally binding civil ceremonies. It is therefore timely to take a closer look at this form of wedding ceremony.

Drawing on a qualitative study involving focus groups with celebrants and interviews with individuals who chose to have an independent celebrant-led wedding ceremony, our aim in this paper is to further understand this relatively new phenomenon, as well as contribute to the literature regarding the personalisation of weddings. We start by briefly outlining the context for this form of wedding ceremony and the theoretical concepts of bricolage and display-work which acted as our lens for this work, before describing the study and who took part. The paper is then split into two parts. In part one, we discuss what factors influenced ceremonial design and how ceremonial traditions were translated, tweaked or innovated through personalisation. In part two, we consider how a bricolage process and display-work may support both relationships and individuals to be understood socially, as well as personally.

Independent Celebrant-led Wedding Ceremonies

Independent celebrants typically work as sole traders but will often be members of a professional network that also provides accredited celebrant training. The ceremonies they conduct are usually in addition to a legally recognised ceremony, with celebrant-led ceremonies having no legal status by themselves. In line with Pywell (2020a), our earlier research showed that decisions to have an additional wedding ceremony were shaped by restrictions in current marriage laws, costs, and availability of civil registrars (Authors, 2022). For example, couples wished to have their wedding ceremony on a specific date when registrars were fully booked or to hold it at a location which had personal resonance for them, and was less expensive, but was not approved for legally recognised weddings. While civil and religious weddings can both be personalised to an extent, our prior work also showed that couples seeking an independent celebrant-led wedding ceremony sought to determine for themselves what was meaningful and to include elements which due to their religious association, involvement of alcohol or interpretation as too frivolous or time-consuming would not currently be permitted in civil ceremonies (Authors, 2022).

Yet, despite the unfettered choice suggested by having a wedding outside of a regulatory framework, the personalisation of independent celebrant-led wedding ceremonies has not moved far from traditions commonly associated with getting married in England and Wales. We found traditional elements such as making vows, walking down an aisle, including readings and music, exchanging rings and signing a register were all commonly shared features of an independent celebrant-led wedding ceremony (Authors, 2022). Existing research in the UK has also consistently found weddings continue to look remarkably similar and suggests that whilst couples are both seeking control and wishing to express their individuality, the inclusion of traditional elements is perceived to add a sense of gravitas or correctness to the ceremony, as well as preserve continuity with the past (Walliss, 2002; Pywell and Probert, 2018).

Research specifically into celebrant-led weddings in New Zealand has similarly reported that whilst the availability of this form of wedding has enabled a greater degree of personalisation, couples continue to incorporate many traditional elements such as a bride walking down an aisle with her father (Baker and Elizabeth, 2014). The authors suggest that for a minority, personalisation may involve redefining traditional practices to fit with personal values, but for the majority, personalisation reflected a desire for a "memorable and unique event that celebrates their relationship but also announces who they are in terms of social class, sexual preference and lifestyle aspirations" (Baker and Elizabeth, 2014:404). Carter and Duncan (2017) also propose weddings can act as a form of display between the couple to confirm their emotional success. How does this apply to independent celebrant-led wedding ceremonies in England and Wales? Why, without a regulatory framework to restrict content, do these ceremonies continue to share common traditional elements?

Bricolage and Display-work

Two theoretical concepts acted as a lens for this work. Firstly, we drew on the concept of bricolage which has been developed to explain how institutions adapt over time. A bricolage process describes how actors actively assemble institutional elements by consciously questioning some yet unconsciously accepting others, so that the institution continues to act as a legitimising symbol of socially embedded practices (Cleaver, 2002). Carter and Duncan (2017; 2018) have applied the concept of bricolage to weddings to explain why ceremonies continue to look remarkably similar:

> In the wedding bricolage process, individuals can draw upon customs and traditions from their own or different cultures, generations, time-periods, and social groups to create an assemblage of meanings, but one that is conferred with social legitimacy because it

reflects at least something which can generally be recognised as wedding-related (2018: 211).

Acknowledging the relational and pragmatic limits to individual resources, they emphasise how the continued use of the same symbolic wedding formulae and adapting from tradition reduces cognitive effort to come up with something new which would be as easily recognised as legitimate (Carter and Duncan, 2017; 2018). Our study offered an opportunity to see how this theoretical concept would apply to independent celebrant-led wedding ceremonies. As we will discuss in part one, couples and celebrants acted as bricoleurs in their ceremonial design. A wide range of factors were drawn upon to explain how traditions were translated, tweaked and innovated, yet the inclusion of traditional ceremonial elements was often taken for granted. For example, participants described how they adapted the tradition of walking down an aisle; however, they did not disclose any reflection on the possibility of not having an aisle. This suggests wedding ceremonies have a tacit framework; a suggestion supported by a survey into the impact of coronavirus restrictions on weddings which found couples were unhappy to sacrifice what they saw as key elements (e.g., being walked down an aisle) due to social distancing requirements and a few even postponed on the basis that without these elements 'it would no longer feel like a wedding' (Pywell and Probert, 2022: 10).

An essential component of the bricolage process is the recognition by others of the meaning imbued in adapted traditions. Recognition is a central idea of display-work, the second concept which informed our analysis. Developed by Finch (2007), display-work refers to the explicit symbols used to confirm kinship such as sharing the same surname. Acknowledging the social nature of family practices as highlighted by Morgan (1996), Finch (2007) suggests family needs to be displayed, as well as done, to both communicate the nature and strength of relationships to others and to be accepted as family. Research has explored display-work in weddings for couples in same-sex relationships and found that traditions (such as exchange of rings), are commonly included so that the meaning of the ceremony is fully understood by others (Heaphy, 2018). Mamali and Stevens (2020) suggest that while entangled with a normative framework, display-work is more than compliance with hegemonic norms. In their research with same-sex couples, they found that traditions acted as a guide, with conscious choices made to either a) 'do' a perceived traditional rite such as walking down an aisle to gain social recognition, b) 'undo' a rite through conspicuous absence or c) 'redo' the rite through personalisation to better fit the couple (Mamali and Stevens, 2020).

In line with this study and the work of Carter and Duncan (2018), we will similarly suggest that there can be a circular relationship between display-work and bricolage in the context of wedding ceremonies. Display-work can support the recognition of imbued meanings of ceremonial elements personalised through a bricolage process, while the drawing on and continuation of traditions alongside personalised ceremonial elements in a bricolage process can support display-work to be recognised and accepted. In part two of this paper, we examine how together, bricolage and display-work may support changes at a macro-level. We also build on both concepts by exploring what being involved in a bricolage process may mean for bricoleurs. In a study of celebrant-led funerals in England wherein celebrants acted as facilitators to jointly create a ceremony which met the individual family's needs, a three-stage process of meaning-seeking, meaning-creating and meaning-taking was found which could result in transcendent experiences (Holloway et al, 2013). While that study involved religious and humanist celebrants, in part two we discuss how our findings may similarly point to a process of individual sense-making and self-actualisation in the design and enactment of independent celebrant-led wedding ceremonies.

The Study

This article draws on data collected for a qualitative study exploring non-legally binding wedding ceremonies in England and Wales (Authors, 2022). As part of that study, three focus groups with independent celebrants and seven in-depth semi-structured interviews with individuals who had an independent celebrant-led wedding ceremony were conducted. Ethics were approved by [*information redacted for peer review*]. A purposive sampling strategy was adopted to specifically engage individuals who had conducted or had a non-legally binding wedding ceremony in the ten years prior to April 2021. Celebrants were recruited through study notices sent out by email or posted on celebrant Facebook pages via Civil Ceremonies Ltd. Celebrants were asked to pass study details on to couples with whom they had worked, and individuals were also recruited through the research team's social networks. The topic guides asked participants to describe their ceremony, or the last ceremony they conducted prior to the COVID pandemic, and why this form of ceremony was chosen. Reflecting the lockdowns due to the pandemic, which was ongoing during data collection, all interviews and focus groups were held remotely online via Zoom videoconference software. Participants completed written e-consent forms prior to participation. For more information about the study, please see the project report (Authors, 2022).

To specifically explore the content and design process of independent celebrant-led ceremonies, a secondary content-led narrative analysis was undertaken following the original study analysis. This involved multiple careful readings of the focus group and interview transcripts to explore broad patterns yet allow for individual variation in experiences and meaning-making (Frost, 2013). Written summaries were then produced for each participant paying attention to individual biography, rhetorical devices, taken-for-granted assumptions and micro and macro contexts (Hammack, 2005). The summaries were then compared for recurrent themes and differences.

Sample Characteristics

Nineteen independent celebrants took part. This sample were largely female (3 males), White British (18) with just one celebrant identifying as Indian, and a median age of 58 years (range 30 – 64). Around half had religious beliefs (Christian 6, Jewish 1, Hindu 1, Buddhist 1), two described their beliefs as atheist, whilst two described themselves as a non-practising Christian and six as having no beliefs. Some had worked as a wedding celebrant for several years whilst others were fairly new to the role or worked as a celebrant on a part-time basis alongside other work (range 1 to 35 years, median 5 years). One celebrant had previously worked as a celebrant conducting legal weddings in New Zealand. Four had previously worked as civil registrars and one had also conducted religious wedding ceremonies. Most had undertaken celebrant training and held accredited celebrancy qualifications from a variety of providers.

The seven individuals interviewed about their independent celebrant-led wedding ceremony were all female and in mixed-sex relationships. Their ages ranged from 25 – 61 years old (median 38) and all were graduates, with five working in professional roles. Four described their ethnicity as White British, two as White European and one as British Hindu. Two held religious beliefs (Hindu and Christian respectively) but were not practising, whilst the remainder identified their beliefs as atheist (1), agnostic (1) or none (3). Their husband's beliefs were described as atheist (3), agnostic (2) or none (2). The length of their relationship prior to marriage ranged from 3 to 10 years (median 4 years) and in all cases had involved premarital cohabitation. Four were describing second marriages and all had held their wedding ceremonies prior to restrictions brought in by the COVID pandemic. Five were parents, three still with children living at home. Three interviewees also worked as independent wedding celebrants and one interviewee also participated in one of the focus groups.

As the key sampling criterion for the wider study from which this data is drawn, was to have had a non-legally binding ceremony, participants were not recruited according to socio-demographic characteristics. However, the triangulation of individual experience with the descriptions by celebrants of ceremonies they had conducted, which included ones involving same-sex couples, meant that we had a rich picture of ceremonies held for couples with a wide range of backgrounds. Participant quotes are referred to by assigned pseudonyms with a letter to indicate whether the speaker was a celebrant (C) from a focus group or an individual (I) who had an independent celebrant-led wedding ceremony.

Part One: Translating, Tweaking and Innovating Tradition

> *"I mean, our wedding day, very much was a wedding… we did all the things that people do in weddings, generally, with our own little touches thrown in"* (Mairead (I)).

In line with the concept of bricolage and as the above quote suggests, participants described how through personalisation, wedding traditions were kept but meanings were translated, or ceremonial elements underwent "*little tweaks*" (Ruth (C)) or were innovated to better fit the couple. These translations, tweaks and innovations of bespoke ceremonial elements were motivated by a range of autobiographical and collective meaning and memory-making factors which participants saw as important to include within their wedding ceremonies. In this part, we describe six interlinked factors which influenced how traditions were translated, tweaked or innovated.

(i) Faith

Participants explained how ceremonial elements could acknowledge religious beliefs within an independent celebrant-led wedding ceremony without necessitating a full religious ceremony. As per Sue (C):

> The religion [was] *important to them… they did include some Muslim elements in the wedding ceremony and used poems from the Prophet… they did what's called a sapatia, where they smash clay pots that are decorated with gold and full of symbolic elements.*

Similarly, Jacob (C) gave an example of a ceremony he led where he included Jewish traditional elements to acknowledge the groom's faith: "*Just so happens we're Jewish, so breaking the glass is not a problem. I put in some Hebrew prayers as well. Actually I sung in Hebrew and I spoke Hebrew and it was totally bespoke and it was fantastic*". In this case, each partner held different religious beliefs. Participant accounts suggested that for both interfaith couples and individuals who held beliefs but were not practising, independent celebrant-led wedding ceremonies provided an opportunity for ceremonial elements to be '*translated'* (Lakshmi (C)) so that they were a better fit. In line with the notion of culturalisation of religion, symbols could be transformed from their religious meanings to connect individuals to their past and their communities (Beaman, 2020) but also to their personal circumstances. For example, Sita (I) felt that "*because I'm kind of not overly practising, I thought it would be a bit hypocritical to go into a temple and have a big Hindu ceremony… it's just not how I am as a person".* She was marrying an atheist and their ceremonial action of inviting guests to light candles was translated to symbolise both the Hindu celebration of light and their feeling that the wedding was bringing "*brightness into our lives".*

Participants explained that the tweaking of traditions associated with religious beliefs could require careful consideration of how wider family would react. Lakshmi(C) provided an example of a couple walking around a fire as per a Hindu wedding ceremony, but instead of reciting scripture as they moved, they spoke aloud vows which they had written themselves. She explained that within the Asian

communities she worked with, older family members had expressed uncertainty about the acceptability of tweaking ceremonial elements: *"I almost have to…* [let] *them know that what we're doing is not wrong, it's not blasphemous. You're not going to be told off by anyone".* As Bethany (C) agreed from her experience of interfaith ceremonies: "*if they don't have that trust in you, then it would all fall apart and… become a bit of a mockery".* In a different focus group, Kester (C), described how he innovated a ceremonial element to distinguish the symbolic from the enacted in order to respect the couple's beliefs but also those of their community. By constructing a sound circle (wherein the audience were immersed in deep audio vibrations), he supported the couple to include Pagan elements which were spiritually significant for them without alienating Christian grandparents in attendance.

In these examples, the celebrant shared a similar background with the couple which could help decisions as to how ceremonial elements could sit alongside each other in a meaningful way for the couple and the guests. However, while participants emphasised the importance of there being a good fit between the celebrant and couple, a shared faith may not be prioritised. As Emily (C) commented: "*every couple is unique and they're choosing you to be that person they can relate to because of their uniqueness… celebrants are equally unique… people choose them for their personalities and the people that they are".*

(ii) Heritage

Ceremonial elements were also tweaked to reflect the couple's heritage and these tweaks could similarly require careful thought and design. Lakshmi (C) described how she had reflected on a need to balance a ceremony for a Punjabi bride and Italian bridegroom due to her experience of "*Italians hav*[ing] *an immense, humungous, enormous feeling of love in everything they do and bringing that in with the subtle nuances of the Asian culture… love is there, but you don't express it openly".* Tweaks to ceremonial elements to symbolise heritage appeared to often involve the use of representative distinctive objects. For example, Carla (C) described a ceremony wherein the tradition of saying vows was tweaked to combine personalised imagery through the Groom wearing a kilt and the couple standing on Fijian matting to symbolise his mixed Scottish and Fijian heritage and "*give a nod to the parents, which they really appreciated".* This demonstration of respect for lineage was also seen in Mairead's (I) use of her mother's quaich cup to bring her Irish heritage and her partner's English heritage together: "*we had a bottle of Irish mead and a bottle of English mead and our mums poured a little bit of each and we drank from the cup".* She described not knowing about this tradition prior to her wedding planning but had translated the meaning it held for her:

> *Again, very much thinking about bringing family together. I think it was technically Scottish, and we thought that was quite nice because I'd lived in Scotland at one point in my life when I was quite small…. So, we thought there was a little connection there… I* [also] *sort of thought it'd be nice to bring in something that almost has… a little bit of a religious feel, or…. a ritual kind of quality to it, like pouring a bit of drink in and then taking a sip from it. It felt like a little nod to my Irish Catholic upbringing* (Mairead (I)).

(iii) Values

In line with research carried out by Mamali and Stevens (2020), ceremonial elements were also tweaked and translated to express values held by the couple. For example, it was important for Chloe (I) to reject the patriarchal meanings and traditional gender roles implied in some wedding traditions: "*it was all about me going 'I don't like that tradition, we're changing that'".* Her adaptations included herself and her partner walking down an aisle separately but each with their respective mother and father, as she did not "*like the father giving away the bride thing"* and wished to involve and honour both sets of parents. They had also chosen the bridegroom's sister to be 'best man'; and to double-

barrel their existing surnames with a new name: "*so, we share a name but also have kept our own names. And then any kids will just be* [new surname]".

Chloe (I) also described choosing to wear a white dress but *"made a point of not wearing a 'wedding dress'… again that adds hundreds onto it, so it was like a forty quid dress from Top Shop"*. Karen (I) had her wedding ceremony in the garden of her mother's house where she had grown up. She had asked friends and family to help decorate and set up, for example by hanging photos of loved ones from the tree branches under which the ceremony took place. She similarly told her *"dishonourable matrons of honour... [*to*] wear what suits you and come along and enjoy the day"*. An anti-consumerist stance was also found in the focus groups. Celebrants reported that they often tried to support couples to keep costs down by making them aware of the option to have a low-cost statutory civil wedding or suggesting more affordable venues like village halls. As Deborah (C) commented: "*it's lovely to be able to achieve a very personalised venue at such a low cost for couples… to encourage them that they don't have to have a big package at a registered venue"*.

(iv) Kin

Wedding ceremonial elements often demonstrated a deep commitment to a couple's family of origin. In addition to the respect shown in the prior examples, ceremonial elements could be included to reduce family tension. For example, Bethany (C) described how a couple may ask "*their dad to do a Bible reading, because it's an important part of getting him to be part of the wedding, whereas he wants them to marry in church".* Participants explained that where the couple have children, whether from their relationship or a prior relationship, the focus of the ceremony may be widened to include them: "*they have children from different, maybe blended, families and they want to make them a big part of the ceremony. It's very, very important to them"* (Zara (C)).

Celebrants described handfastings as a common ceremonial element which can be tweaked to include family members. For example, instead of the celebrant tying the wrists of the couple together, loved ones are invited to tie a ribbon. Vicky (I) had adopted her partner's son following the death of his biological mother. They tweaked their action of signing a wedding register, so that he (aged nine years) could sign it as well: *"I think a couple of people might have thought it was odd that… he signed one of the certificates… obviously, you can't have an under 18-year-old being a witness for a 'real' wedding"*. Similarly, Amanda (I), together with her celebrant, innovated a symbolic action that drew on the couple's shared love of fishing and water. They and three children from her partner's prior relationship *"all had pebbles with our own names on them and then we put them into a bowl of water that had sand in it, to symbolise that we were all coming together as one family unit. We have still got the pebbles now that we can just reflect on"*.

Who was involved within the ceremony reflected couples' definitions of family. As Pywell (2020a) found, celebrants reported that incorporating dogs was a common request. Jan (C) involved all ten of one couple's dogs because for them "*they were their babies… they are their life".* Karen (I) similarly explained that they included a reading of a poem about their dog in their ceremony, who was involved as the ringbearer to reflect that there were "*three of us in this relationship".*

These first four factors indicate contexts of identification which participants sought to express through the ceremony. The final two factors suggest attributes that they felt were important for their ceremony to have, but also indicate vocation, interests and nostalgia as influences on how ceremonial elements are personalised.

(v) Informality

Participants compared their experiences to the formality they associated with civil or religious ceremonies. They highlighted the flexibility and relaxed atmosphere that an independent celebrant-

led wedding ceremony could offer, which they felt meant couples and their guests could feel comfortable and enjoy themselves more. Chloe (I) described her relief that she was able to tweak her vows so that she spoke them together with her partner, relieving their discomfort with public speaking: "*we wrote what we wanted to say, which was things that were important to us and then we read them out sort of at the same time, because we were both just too nervous to write anything on our own and say them on our own… that was nice that we had the freedom to do that*". Bethany (C) explained how not being under restrictions of time meant that she was able to include innovative personalised elements to lighten the atmosphere:

> *We've had a tie the knot ceremony where literally we have had two yacht ropes tied together and we have had bride's side and groom's side and it's been like a tug of war… It's a bit of fun, which as a registrar, there's no way in the timings for my service I could ever have allowed that. But now I can.*

The desire was for gaiety, not levity; translating, tweaking or innovating ceremonial elements so that they added a degree of fun without taking away from "*romantic serious*" (Mairead (I)) solemn moments. The ceremonial elements included to add gaiety could reflect the vocation or interests of the couple; whether that was sailing as in the above example, or a love of Elvis music through the tweaking of vows to add a supplementary promise to "*never have a suspicious mind*" (Jacob (C)).

Lucy (I) felt that "*because everybody was relaxed, it was fun, and it was a really memorable day for us both*". She described how her celebrant's script referred to her career as a police officer: "*she was saying, 'there he was, stood with his glasses on. He was wearing…' It was just like a police statement, and it was just funny… everybody was laughing*". They also jumped a broom which was included as a ceremonial element both for its gaiety and long-standing connection to weddings: "*we enjoyed it because it's like that old Pagan type thing, isn't it? It comes from Africa as well, doesn't it, because they used to jump the broom. And in America they used to do it as well to show that they were actually married, because they couldn't legally do it*". Her partner had feared falling over the broom and "*did slightly land into the people that were sat there but it doesn't matter, it was just a bit of fun, really*".

(vi) Temporality

Ensuring the wedding ceremony was memorable came through as important for all participants, with their accounts suggesting that rather than symbolising a single moment in time, it could act as a bridge connecting the present with both the past and the future (Mamali and Stevens, 2020). As discussed above, ceremonial elements were included to reflect a couple's current circumstances as well as continuity with the past. The latter appeared to support feelings of belonging. For example, Lucy (I) made candles with images of deceased loved ones on them for a symbolic action in her ceremony where the bespoke candles were lit both to commemorate and indicate that those absent were "*present in spirit*". Mairead (I) also described how a particular sonnet was read to strengthen a shared family history:

> *It was the sonnet that* [husband's] *sister* [was meant to] *read at* [husband's] *brother's wedding. But it was a bit of a family story in the sense that when we were at the wedding,* [husband's] *sister… hadn't written it down. She said she was just gonna get it on her phone…* [but] *there was no coverage in the church. She was like, 'I can't remember it,' so myself and* [husband's] *dad, who knew the sonnet pretty well… teamed together… to try and remember what the lines of the sonnet were… And* [husband's] *Dad told that story before he read the sonnet… which was lovely*.

There was also a keen sense of ceremonial design curating anticipatory nostalgia. Participants suggested that the distinctive elements included (such as the aforementioned pebbles) could over time

help solidify the connection with the meaning attributed to it by acting as a future stimulus for retrieving memories (Baker and Azzari, 2020). Indeed, celebrants expressed the view that personalisation could support long-term commitment. As Bethany (C) commented: *"it's great to actually talk to them about their vision and let them have their vision. And that then makes it meaningful for them and hopefully that gives them the cement that's going to keep them together"*. Reflecting a future outlook, Tashi (C) similarly explained how both personalised vows and signposting to guests could symbolise ongoing support:

> *When you're having your disagreements… you pull on the vows that you made and say, 'this is what we said we would do for each other'. That's why it's important… The guests are recognising that yes, they're there to enjoy the good bit of this fantastic, happy day but also, you're making a commitment to support this couple when life gets a bit more difficult, because that's reality… that is such a precious gift.*

Mairead (I) too described how a ceremonial element was included with an explicit future outlook. During her wedding ceremony, a bottle of wine was placed in a box alongside two letters that each partner had written to the other, then it was sealed to be opened at a suitable point in the future. She explained that they "*ended up opening it on our first-year anniversary… you felt like the wedding was carrying on a year later... It was nice to read thoughts that we'd had before getting married*".

Part Two: Being Understood

Drawing on the experiences described in part one, in this second part, we look at how the continued use of traditions through a bricolage process, together with display-work, helps to ensure the imbued meaning of adapted or innovated traditions is understood and accepted by the communities within which a couple belong, as represented by the wedding guests. We then consider what acting as a bricoleur may mean for the couples involved and suggest display-work in this context may extend beyond recognition of relationships to self-actualisation.

Social Legitimation

In line with existing research, our findings suggest that drawing on wedding traditions and including recognisable cues of a shared understanding of what constitute a wedding helped avoid the ceremony being dismissed as not a real wedding (Carter and Duncan, 2018). A sense of belonging was a recurring trope in the participant accounts, with careful consideration of the cultural values of the guests who would be attending featuring in decisions as to how ceremonial traditions were translated, tweaked, or innovated. Due to their current lack of legal recognition, a need for approval was perhaps greater for couples choosing this form of wedding ceremony. A common experience reported by celebrants and confirmed in our interviews with individuals was a desire from couples for the celebrant to pretend that the ceremony "*is the real day. They don't want their guests to know that they've gone off to the Registry Office just the two of them and done that*" (Sue (C))*.* Concerns were reported as to what guests might think when their celebrant announced that they were already married. As per Amanda (I):

> *I tried, on the day, not to look at too many people's faces when that was announced… I didn't want people to think 'what's this all about?' But they had no real reason to think any different. A man and a woman were stood in wedding clothes getting married to each other.*

As this quote indicates and in keeping with the concept of display-work, including, and using traditional ceremonial elements as a guide from which to personalise an independent celebrant-led wedding ceremony reflected a desire for meanings to be comprehensible to others. Throughout the

participant accounts are examples of tools such as original poems, family anecdotes, and personalised candles which were used to convey meaning and depth of the relationships of the displayer. Yet, reflecting Finch's (2007) suggestion that the costs can be high if the contingent responses of others are not positive or efforts of display-work are wrongly interpreted, personalised ceremonial elements (such as an innovated pebble ritual), were typically included alongside, or as a tweak to traditional ceremonial elements to ensure attributed meanings were both understood and accepted.

Finch (2007) proposed that the intensity of need to make relationships intelligible to others will differ depending on fit with conventional norms. That is, those who are further from convention will feel a need to be more explicit. Having a wedding ceremony which does not result in a legally recognised marriage may be viewed as unconventional by wedding guests not familiar with such a process. Yet, the personalisation offered by independent celebrant-led wedding ceremonies also enabled the diversity of family forms represented in this study to display and have their relationships recognised in a way that others may take for granted (Baker and Elizabeth, 2014). As shown in part one, interfaith and mixed-heritage couples could translate, tweak or innovate traditions so that the importance attached to more than one faith or cultural background could be simultaneously displayed. Similarly, blended families, or those who already had a long-standing committed relationship, could adapt the ceremonial elements to reflect their shared history or include children from prior relationships to display their family unification. This suggests that minor but meaningful translations, tweaks and innovations of ceremonial elements through a process of bricolage, can over time support the adaptions of wedding traditions so they can include changes in social practices whilst still acting as a legitimising symbol.

While there may be *"no set rules or etiquettes or traditions"* (Jan (C)) or overarching framework to guide the content of independent celebrant-led wedding ceremonies, our findings suggest that social censure acts as a limit to personalisation due to the importance attached to belonging. The continuation of traditions, or re-traditionalisation as per Carter and Duncan (2017; 2018), means performed identities will continue to be constrained by normative expectations which have potential benefits as well as costs. On the one hand, an expectation for guests to understand and accept wedding ceremonial elements may act as a curb on cultural misappropriation of traditions. On the other hand, it may continue the reification of heteronormative values and gender roles, such as an expectation that a wedding is a bride's 'perfect day' (Carter and Duncan, 2017; 2018). However, the example of an innovated ceremonial element wherein a sound circle was created so that grandparents would not be upset by Pagan symbols, suggests that through careful thought, these wedding ceremonies may support the authentic expression of individual lived experience, to which we now turn.

Individual Legitimation

Telling stories is thought to be a particularly important tool of display-work (Finch, 2007) and participants explained that the personalised celebrant script would often be "*about them, that says what they are, how they got there, what their relationship means to each other in front of their loved ones*" (Laura (C))*.* As this quote indicates, the findings of this study suggest display-work in this context not only signifies family relationships but also conveys understanding of how individual partners within the couple relationship see themselves and their place in the world.

This reflects our finding that, as per Holloway et al (2013), the pre-ceremonial design process can act as a vehicle for sense-making for the bricoleurs. Working out what is important to include and how ceremonial elements can sit alongside one another in a way which is meaningful to the couple but also the attending guests can be a highly reflexive process (Mamali and Stevens, 2020). Celebrants reported being in touch with couples over many months to collaborate over the form and content of

an independent celebrant-led wedding ceremony. In line with findings of Baker and Elizabeth (2014), similarities were drawn with premarital counselling:

> *A lot of my couples almost say they feel like they've been to a counselling session… because I'm trying to get them to think about their relationship and they reminisce… think about how they came about and what is important to them… they think carefully about what they want to include and the words that they want to say to each other* (Jan (C)).

Mairead (I) reported that the pre-ceremonial process prompted them to consider *"what do we both love, what do we both want… it was a lot of fun…* [and] *really nice just to have these kinds of conversations and thinking about things you wouldn't normally ask each other".* As she suggests, it can be difficult to think about what creates meaning for ourselves outside of an imagination exercise. Access to cultural capital is recognised to influence orientation to reflexivity (Adams, 2003), and in keeping with this idea, celebrants reported variation in the degree to which couples contributed to ceremonial design. While Mairead (I) explained that the *"creativity behind wedding planning… really appealed to us… to decide what we wanted to do",* other celebrants explained that individuals may not have any idea of where to start and looked to them for guidance. Heather (C) reasoned that it can sometimes get "*overwhelming… they have just so much choice now to do whatever they want, wherever they want".*

As Holloway et al (2013) found, celebrants appeared deeply committed to human flourishing. For example, Lakshmi (C) described how she had an "*inner smile"* at every ceremony as she loves "*making people smile…* [and] *giving people choice"*. Whether deluged with information or struggling to articulate their value frameworks, dialogue with the celebrant could support reflexive awareness of the factors which contextualised the couple's position as it has been, as it is, and projecting into the future, the model of life they wish to live by – all of which informed ceremonial design as discussed in part one. Some ceremonial elements were included to give a sense of continuity with perceived historic traditions associated with wedding ceremonies (e.g., jumping the broom) or to confirm the couple's emotional success (e.g., a shared love of water or love letters to future selves). However, many ceremonial elements were relativised to be an authentic expression of the individual partner's lived experience: for example, in Mairead's (I) reasoning for choosing to include a traditional quaich cup in her ceremony, she attached an importance to both her having lived in Scotland and being raised Catholic. Others such as the pebble joining were designed to curate anticipatory nostalgia for an imagined future which is thought to have an important and positive role in the continuity of self over space and time (Baker and Azzari, 2020).

In addition to display-work to confirm kinship, our findings suggest that through translating, tweaking and innovating ceremonial elements, couples are displaying the many varied anchors as to what is important in each partner's lived experience. This may be political values, or spiritual beliefs which do not reflect a practised religion, interests such as a love of Elvis music, or indeed a sense of humour and lightness for life. Research into Humanist weddings in Scotland and Poland has similarly described factors such as personal convictions, cultural traditions and a relaxed feel as important in ceremonial design (Kasselstrand, 2018; Rejowska, 2022). In England and Wales, there can be a popular cultural association between non-religious ceremonies and humanist ceremonies (Authors, 2022; Pywell 2020b). However, some couples in this study sought to have religious beliefs acknowledged while others struggled to articulate beliefs. Vicky (I) explained that they had met with a Humanist celebrant *"and he put together some wording for us, and we didn't like it at all. And I don't know if that was him, or if it was the Humanist side of it… But it just didn't feel right for us".* Our findings suggest that the choice of an independent celebrant meant couples could determine what was important without the constraints of a framework of beliefs.

Echoing a theorised idea of secularisation as the widening of the palette of options as to how one lives one's life, the findings suggest that couples may not be firmly embedded in just one context (e.g., a religious community) and may need to draw on several traditions to acknowledge a sense of wholeness (Taylor, 2007). As Taylor (1991; 2007) has posited, societal shifts from socially defined identity based on categories such as religion to internally defined identity based on individual decisions as to what constitutes a fulfilling life mean that the latter is not recognised by others a priori. Reflecting linked ideals of authenticity and expression thought to be inherent in secular societies (Taylor, 1991; 2007), a wedding ceremony offers an important opportunity both to be true to one's own original way of being and to enact it. As an internally attributed identity depends on dialogue with others, we suggest that through a sympathetic reception from loved ones in attendance at the wedding ceremony, the individual partners may be able to expand and realise their potential selves.

Our study into independent celebrant-led wedding ceremonies suggests that self-display-work, in addition to the display-work of kinship, may be an important means by which the needs of individuals for whom a religious or belief framework is not prioritised over other contexts of identification can be met through a wedding ceremony. Akin to the bricolage process whereby couples draw on varied traditions and customs to personalise their independent celebrant-led wedding ceremony, bricoleurs too may look to the varied factors of their lived experience in a process of self-discovery, and through self-display-work realise self-actualisation.

Conclusion

This study has begun to build a picture of the meaning of personalisation in the context of independent celebrant-led wedding ceremonies. As a small qualitative study, further research with larger samples is needed to explore the transferability of these findings. With a limited existing evidence base, it is not possible to evaluate the extent to which our sample (largely White British and not practising a religion) is characteristic for this form of wedding ceremony. While the sample was diverse in respect of age and first/second marriages, further studies are needed to address gaps, such as male partners and potential socio-economic differences. As participants were recalling past ceremonies, studies are also needed with couples at the time they are designing their ceremonies.

If independent celebrants were able to officiate at legally recognised weddings, our findings indicate that interfaith couples and blended families, as well as individuals who define themselves through a variety of contexts (rather than simply religious or non-religious), may be able to marry in a way which reflects what is important to them. It will be key for those devising the details of any new regulatory framework to understand not only what independent celebrants do, but also the significance of the translations, tweaks, and innovated ceremonial elements to those involved.

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