Postponing the day of your dreams? Modern weddings and the impact of COVID-19

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Introduction

Modern weddings, as many commentators have noted, have multiple meanings for those involved (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2002; Auchmuty, 2004; Nichols, 2012). They are a means by which a couple publicly declare their commitment to each other and have that commitment affirmed and legitimated by those present (Castrén and Maillochon, 2009; Mamali and Stevens, 2020). Weddings also enable couples to display their personalities, individuality, tastes, social status and wealth by creating a 'personally distinctive' event (Ingraham, 1999; van Hooff, 2013), with their fusion of romantic love and consumer culture legitimating conspicuous consumption (Otnes and Pleck, 2003: 8). They are also occasions that rely heavily on the idea of tradition, with certain elements, rituals and ceremonies persisting over time regardless of ceremony type and social change (Leonard, 1980; Wallis, 2001; Carter and Duncan, 2017; Carter and Duncan, 2018; Carter, 2021).

Couples getting married do not usually need to choose between these different meanings. In 2020, however, the Covid-19 pandemic forced thousands of couples to change how they had planned to marry. In England and Wales, restrictions on gatherings meant that weddings were effectively prevented from taking place from 24 March, and this situation continued until 22 June in Wales and 4 July in England (Probert, 2020; Probert and Pywell, 2021; Probert, Akhtar, Blake and Pywell, 2022). Almost all couples who were due to marry during that period had no option but to postpone their weddings. Even after those dates, restrictions on how weddings could be conducted remained in place, so couples had to choose whether to go ahead with limited numbers and comply with the guidelines on social distancing –with the constant risk of even such scaled-down events being prohibited at short notice – or postpone and hope that their original plans could be fulfilled.

In this article we draw on a survey carried out in the summer of 2020, when it was legally possible to get married, to evaluate the factors that led couples to postpone their weddings.

The responses provide a unique opportunity to assess what individuals see as essential for a wedding: when forced to prioritise becoming married or having 'the day of their dreams', what did couples choose, what factors influenced their choices, and what can those choices tell us about the meanings these couples attached to their weddings?

After explaining how the data were gathered, we discuss whether and how couples' plans had changed. We then analyse what respondents said about their reasons for postponing, situating those choices in the context of the sociological literature on weddings. We show that the data do not suggest that individuals were primarily postponing their weddings in order to hold on to a vision of 'the perfect day'. Instead, in many cases, their reasons were rooted in the importance of weddings being witnessed by family and friends and incorporating certain key traditions. And a range of practical considerations that meant that some couples were locked in to having a particular type of wedding, even if they would willingly have changed it in order to marry. We conclude by reflecting on the limitations of our data and how the pandemic may have shaped couples' responses.

Gathering the data

Employing a mix of convenience and purposive sampling, we circulated a link on social media, inviting couples whose plans to marry in England and Wales had been affected by Covid-19 to complete an online survey. We asked whether they had married earlier than they had planned, had been unable to marry during lockdown, had altered or postponed their plans for post-lockdown ceremonies, or decided to marry because of the pandemic. We utilised our private and institutional Facebook and Twitter accounts, our existing contacts, and the gatekeepers of a number of websites and Facebook groups for brides- and grooms-to-be. People aged 45 and over are less likely to use the internet for social messaging than those in younger age groups, and so were less likely to see and respond to our survey; however, as the percentage of marriages involving people in this age group is also relatively low, we do not think this skewed our sample.[1] The survey was open between 30 July and 31 August 2020.

Our main aim was to ascertain whether the impact of the restrictions differed depending on the type of wedding that respondents had planned. The Marriage Act 1949 provides for both religious and civil weddings. Most religious weddings are Anglican, but any other

denomination or faith may register its place of worship for weddings, and special provision is made for Jewish and Quaker weddings. A civil wedding may be conducted either at a register office or on 'approved premises'; the latter, which were introduced by the Marriage Act 1994, are generally privately-owned commercial venues such as hotels or stately homes.

We had focused on the of type of wedding that couples had been planning to have in order to ascertain the impact of the different legal rules applicable to different types of weddings (on which see Probert and Pywell, 2021). We did not, therefore, ask respondents for any demographic details because we did not consider these to be relevant to the data we were collecting; there are official statistics on the age profiles and gender of those marrying, and on the different types of weddings, but not on the demography of different types of wedding.

Nonetheless, the responses we received suggest that our sample is reasonably representative of those who would have married in 2020. In 2018, the latest year for which figures are available, civil weddings accounted for 79.5 per cent of the total, with 90.4 per cent of those occurring on approved premises, and 9.6 per cent in register offices (ONS, 2021). Within our sample, 73.9 per cent had originally planned to marry in a civil ceremony, with an almost identical split (90:10) between approved premises and register offices. Of the remainder, 21.3 per cent had planned to marry in an Anglican ceremony, 4.5 per cent in a registered place of worship, and 0.2 per cent according to Jewish usages.[2]

Given that an estimated 73,432 weddings were postponed on account of lockdown (Probert and Pywell, 2021), our 1,449 usable responses[3] represent only a small percentage of the number of weddings that would have been affected. It would nonetheless be regarded as a statistically valid sample (Bryman, 2016: 183).

We had envisaged that our analysis would be primarily quantitative, as most of the questions – which varied in number between two and 16, owing to skip logic – had pre-set answers. However, we also asked a final open question inviting respondents to say whatever they wanted about how Covid had affected their wedding plans. Almost half of our respondents did so, with a few expressing their gratitude at being able to share their thoughts and feelings. Their wide-ranging answers amounted to 45,000 words.

In order to analyse this unexpectedly rich body of data, we initially created a concordance of the frequency with which words were used to gain a sense of the issues that respondents had raised. We then re-read all of the responses in order to undertake a thematic analysis of the data. Respondents, to whom we allocated numbers for ease of reference, had consented to our using the data, including direct quotations, in our outputs. Where necessary we have made minor edits, denoted by square brackets, to ensure comprehensibility.

How couples' plans had changed

Of our 1,449 respondents, 615 ('the lockdown group') had been unable to marry on their intended wedding date as it fell during the first national lockdown. A further 793 ('the post-lockdown group') had planned to marry between the end of lockdown and the end of 2020 and had had to change their plans in some way. Ten had managed to bring the date forward and marry before the start of lockdown, while 31 had either decided to marry in England and Wales on account of Covid-19,[4] or had decided to postpone their wedding indefinitely, were no longer planning to marry, or were unable to marry.[5]

The couples in the lockdown group had no choice but to postpone getting married. While 42.9 per cent were still hoping to marry in 2020, 53.5 per cent reported that they had postponed to 2021, while 3.6 per cent had either postponed to 2022 or had not yet rescheduled. Within the post-lockdown group, too, some couples had no choice but to postpone because it had not been possible for them to complete the necessary preliminaries before their intended wedding dates (Probert and Pywell, 2021). Others had chosen to postpone: 39.7 per cent were still intending to marry in 2020, but 56.6 per cent had postponed to 2021, and 3.7 per cent to either 2022 or an unspecified year.

Of the 579 respondents who were still planning to marry in 2020, a substantial majority – 77.0 per cent –had had to make changes to their wedding. These respondents were asked whether they had changed the day, time or venue of the wedding or the number of guests. The last was the most common: 89.0 per cent of those who were making any changes (68.5 per cent

of all those still planning to marry in 2020) had reduced the number of guests they were planning to invite.

In broad terms, then, our sample might seem to be divided between those who chose getting married in 2020, but with fewer guests, and those who postponed to 2021 in the hope that the wedding would be as close as possible to the one they had originally planned. However, our analysis of the qualitative data revealed that this would be an over-simplification, and that some of the quantitative data could be misleading.

First, a few respondents made comments indicating that they had not in fact postponed to the date stated in their earlier answers. For example, when asked when they were planning to marry, respondent 1026 had selected 'March 2021' from the drop-down list; however, they went on to explain that '[d]ue to our September 2020 wedding being postponed, we have decided to legally marry at a registry office in September 2020 and postponed the ceremony at our chosen venue until March 2021'. While this was a rare example, it was not unique,[6] and it is possible that some other respondents who had not made comments had also interpreted the question about when they planned to marry as referring to the celebrations rather than to the formal legal ceremony.

Second, as we explore in the next sections, the comments made by respondents revealed a more complex picture that raised questions as to whether they could necessarily be characterised as making a choice at all.

The factors that led couples to go ahead or postpone

In this section our analysis is based on responses to the final open question, without any prompting as to topic. Although we asked a number of questions about whether and why respondents had changed the type of wedding, its timing, and its location, we did not ask a general question about their reasons for postponing because we had assumed that this would have been necessitated by the restrictions.

As noted above, the 692 responses to the open question covered a wide range of issues, with a pervasive theme being the uncertainty and stress our respondents had experienced. Given the diversity of issues raised, our aim is not to try to quantify responses on particular themes, although we do identify which respondents mentioned different factors. Rather, we assess the relative significance that respondents accorded to different meanings of marriage when deciding to go ahead or postpone. For these purposes we focus on three alternative meanings of marriage: an event for family and friends, a traditional ceremony that has to be conducted in a particular way, and the individualistic 'perfect day'.

The wedding as an event for family and friends

A wedding is generally understood as a time to bring loved ones together (Barnes, 2014). Moreover, a wedding has to be attended by the people who are significant to the couple in order for that relationship to have what Finch (2007) terms 'social reality' (Castrén and Maillochon, 2009). Decisions as to who to invite – and who not to invite – send an important signal about the relationship between the inviter and the invitee, with the absence of family members being particularly significant (Currie, 1993; Smart, 2007a).

At the time that the survey was carried out, weddings could go ahead with a maximum of 30 people present. This was considerably lower than the number that most of our respondents had planned to invite. Many had been planning weddings with 100 or more guests,[7] and respondent 190's original guest list numbered 380, the highest number mentioned by any respondent. However, the choice whether or not to postpone was influenced not only by the number that would be able to attend at any given point but also by the significance of particular people being at the wedding. In this context, family emerged as being more important than friends in influencing the choice whether or not to postpone.

Some respondents noted that they had decided to go ahead with a small wedding as soon as possible to ensure that particular family members could be present. As respondent 242 explained:

We are getting married legally this year, hoping our parents will be able to attend. They are all in vulnerable category & we don't want to wait another year or two in case we lose any of them. The world is so uncertain.

Respondent 949, whose original wedding date fell during lockdown, had postponed to September 2020; as they noted, 'I do not want to postpone again as one of my close family members is terminally ill and I need them to be there for when I marry'. And respondent 190 had abandoned their 380-strong guest list to go ahead with a small wedding, explaining that their grandfather was very ill 'and we want him to see me get married'.

Others, by contrast, had decided to postpone in the hope that this would enable them to have particular family members there; respondents 1225 and 1323, for example, noted the risk that parents who were shielding would not be able to attend the weddings. Some respondents had postponed because they had family who were living overseas who were unable to travel; respondent 34, who fell within the post-lockdown group, had postponed their wedding to 2021, explaining that:

[m]y sister is living in Australia and currently applying for her VISA to stay there. She is currently not allowed to leave the country, because no bridging VISA's are being processed due to the pandemic. This has been the deciding factor for my partner and I to postpone.

Respondent 674, who had postponed their planned Anglican wedding from the summer of 2020 (post-lockdown) to spring 2021, commented that they would postpone again if restrictions on numbers remained in place 'as we have a large immediate family living all over the uk/ world and would not want to get married without our parents, children and siblings present'.

No respondents reported choosing either to go ahead or postpone to ensure the presence of specific friends. However, a few did mention friends as well as family when explaining their choice of a longer postponement. Respondent 24 cited their large families and 'a variety of friends from up & down the country' to explain why 'a wedding day of 30 people will never

work for us'. Respondent 518, who had rescheduled their wedding to November 2020, said that they would not go ahead unless they could have all 70 of their guests 'due to having big families and friendship groups'. Similarly, respondent 1404 had postponed twice, first from April to September 2020 and then to July 2021, explaining that '[f]or us, the wedding ceremony is about being able to celebrate with all of our friends and family'.

Such responses illustrate that whether or not a couple chose to postpone their wedding could depend not merely on how much they valued getting married but on the nature of their relationships with others, underlining how people live their lives in connection with others rather than making decisions as individuals (Lawler, 2002; Mason, 2004; Smart 2007b). This came out particularly strongly in the comments of respondent 962:

> As Christians, we don't want to live together before we're married, so having to postpone our wedding a year has meant another year apart from each other. A wedding isn't just about signing a piece of paper and attaining a new surname, it's an extremely important event that marks the beginning of your life together, to remember forever. Furthermore, getting married in front of all your loved ones to celebrate this occasion, is just as important, as many of them have walked life with us and have every right to be [a part] of the start of our new journey, that's what makes a wedding so special!

Some respondents even explicitly repudiated the idea that they had had a choice at all. Respondent 940, for example, commented that '[t]he uncertainty as to whether we could have a ceremony and/or reception with all our family meant we had no choice but to postpone'.

In addition, it was clear that many of those who had married, or were planning to marry, with limited numbers, also valued the idea of celebrating with family and friends. For some, Zoom or live-streaming the wedding was a way of ensuring that a larger number would be able to witness their union.[8] Others wrote of their plans to have a larger celebration at a later date: respondent 748, for example, explained that:

We have decided to have a 2 part wedding with a small family only ceremony this year under Covid restrictions and a small family and a few close friends only meal afterwards. Later on next year once or once the restrictions have been lifted we plan to have the larger reception with all of the people we wanted to invite.

The importance of the couple not only having family and friends present but being able to interact with them was underlined by a number of responses that identified social distancing and the mandatory wearing of masks as reasons to postpone. Respondent 354 who was planning to marry in October 2020, commented that '[w]e are unsure if we want to have a wedding if social distancing restrictions are in place. A wedding is a place of love, we want to be able to hug people and celebrate this properly'. Respondents 187 and 1120 commented on how masks would mean that they would not be able to see people's smiles. And for respondent 164, who had originally planned to marry in an Anglican church post-lockdown, the mandatory wearing of masks had been the major factor in her decision to postpone: in a graphic inversion of the fairy-tale narrative more usually associated with weddings, she wrote that 'walking down the aisle and seeing everyone turn around in masks' would feel 'like something out of a horror movie'.

In the circumstances, it was perhaps understandable that most respondents did not express the ambivalence about inviting family that other studies have found (Currie, 1993; Smart, 2007a; Castrén and Maillochon, 2009). However, a few responses did reflect how social expectations about the scale of modern weddings create pressure on couples. Among the few couples who had decided to marry because of the pandemic, respondent 1 commented that '[w]e both wanted a small and intimate wedding and this gave us the perfect situation to do this'. In a similar vein, respondent 2 explained that:

[p]art of the appeal of finally getting round to marriage after 17 year[s] and two children is that in current circumstances there is less family and peer pressure to celebrate what is essentially being done to make it easier for the other person or the kids if either of us die. This way, we don't feel under so much pressure to invite anyone!

The wedding as a traditional ceremony

Much has been written on the role of 'tradition' in weddings (Leonard, 1980; Currie, 1993; Leeds-Hurwitz, 2002; Kalmijn, 2004; Barnes, 2014; Carter and Duncan, 2018). It has been pointed out that many 'traditions' have been detached from their original meanings and rationale and have become ends in themselves (Charsley, 1991; Walliss, 2002; Purbrick, 2007, 2015). Leonard (1980: 36) noted that, although most sources on wedding etiquette were unanimous as to 'what should be done', people's accounts of the reasons for including particular traditions were 'a jumble of misinformation'. Yet that does not make the role of tradition any less powerful, and the comments of our respondents illustrate the significance that was attached to particular traditions.

The restrictions imposed as a result of Covid had an impact on which traditions could be included. The government's guidance advised that the wedding itself 'should be concluded in the shortest reasonable time' and 'limited as far as reasonably possible to the parts of the marriage or civil partnership that are required in order to be legally binding under the law of England and Wales'.[9] It also indicated that rituals that involved objects being handled communally should be avoided, along with singing.

A number of respondents commented on how these restrictions had impacted on their wedding plans. Some reported that they had been told that the ceremony itself would have had to be shortened, sometimes with no personal vows or readings, or without any music.[10] Others referred to the risk that the bride would not be able to make a formal entrance and be walked down the aisle.[11] A few, primarily those planning to marry in a church, highlighted the restrictions on singing,[12] while some even noted that restrictions had been placed on the exchange of rings between the couple.[13] Some also highlighted the impact on how the wedding would be recorded, mentioning the Covid-related bans or constraints placed on photographers, videographers and their work.[14]

In many cases, these respondents were planning to go ahead despite these restrictions and simply wished to indicate their unhappiness in having to sacrifice key elements of the ceremony. For a few, however, a Covid-compliant ceremony was seen as removing or changing so many of the traditions associated with getting married that they thought that it would no longer feel like a wedding at all and would rather postpone it, although different

respondents invoked different traditions as their reasons for postponing. Respondent 1048, who had originally planned to marry on approved premises post-lockdown, explained why they thought it was 'impossible' to go ahead with their wedding:

> No walking down the aisle, no best man handing over rings and an emphasis on it being as short a ceremony as possible changes it from being a celebration to a legal process. This is not what is wanted by many couples or by society in general. We've therefore had to postpone by a whole year from October [due to] the popularity of our venue.

Similarly, respondent 697, who had also been planning to marry on approved premises post-lockdown, noted that they had decided to postpone their wedding after being informed that the bride could not be walked down the aisle as this 'didn't feel like a wedding' to them. Respondent 21, who had been due to marry during lockdown, explained that they had postponed twice:

> It was important to me that my dad can walk me down the aisle, and that my future husband doesn't see me until the aisle… We were willing to compromise to be able to get married but it felt like we were giving too much.

For respondent 84, who had been planning to marry in an Anglican ceremony, in a 'small family-only church service', it was the restrictions on singing and the social distancing rules that were key to their decision to postpone, as these:

> made us feel that holding any gathering would be unsafe (and no fun!) for our guests. You (hopefully) only get married once after all and we want it to be as memorable (for the right reasons) as possible!

And respondent 286, who had been planning to marry on approved premises post-lockdown, noted that they had originally intended to go ahead but decided to postpone upon learning that in addition to there being no readings, 'the photographer can only stand in one place and no pictures of the signing of the registration document'.

Only respondent 379, who was planning to marry in an Anglican ceremony in October 2020, specifically invoked the idea of 'tradition' as a reason to postpone, but the components she identified as traditional were similar to those mentioned by others:

> We may still postpone the ceremony due to other factors, eg. if my Dad can't walk me down the aisle and if we need to wear masks. We have compromised on so many aspects of our original wedding but there are some things, mainly related to tradition and moments that we will never get back, that we are not willing to compromise on.

These responses are important to understandings of the role of 'tradition' within weddings. First, the fact that the tradition of the bride being walked down the aisle by a family member was invoked by a range of respondents indicates how certain traditions associated with one particular form of wedding may 'leak' into other types of weddings (Carter and Duncan, 2018). That particular tradition has its origins in the Anglican marriage service (Farrimond, 2015), but has been adopted in many civil weddings in recent years (Walliss, 2001). Capturing the event for posterity has for many years been a major feature of the day: Leonard (1980) notes that taking the photographs immediately after the ceremony could take up to half an hour, with further pictures being taken at the reception.

Second, the comments of a number of respondents also underline how certain traditions and rituals are valued as an opportunity to display family relationships (Finch, 2007). The bride being walked down the aisle was not a simple matter of the formal choreography of the wedding, but was a means of reflecting her relationship with her family (Barnes, 2014). Most referred to the importance of 'dad' in this context, but respondent 1281 was planning to be accompanied by her mother, and respondent 1350 by her sister. Another important means by which family relationships were displayed was through the way in which the event was captured for posterity. Respondent 1107's wistful comment that 'no group photos' would be permitted illustrates Leonard's observation that it is important for 'the various collectivities ("bridal party", "groom's side", "friends of the bride and groom", etc.)' to stand together as a 'statement of group entity' that can be shown to others (Leonard, 1980: 178).

Third, the fact that some respondents chose to postpone getting married in order to ensure that they could incorporate a particular element illustrates the complexity of modern attitudes towards tradition. On the one hand, the willingness to defer the marriage can be seen as evidence of de-traditionalisation and the fact that marriage is no longer a pre-requisite for most couples to set up home together (Carter and Duncan, 2018). As we have discussed elsewhere (Probert and Pywell, 2021), some couples explained that they had chosen to marry in a restricted ceremony because they regarded being married as a prerequisite for living together and having children. On the other hand, the fact that some couples were postponing in order to be able to include particular traditions indicates that for these couples at least, tradition held considerable sway. In this respect our findings go beyond the suggestion by Carter and Duncan (2018) that the use of tradition in modern weddings reflects a process of 'bricolage'; for some of our respondents, maintaining some key traditions was simply non-negotiable.

The wedding as the 'perfect day'

As Carter has noted, there is a large body of research that analyses weddings as an item of consumption (Carter, 2021). Otnes and Pleck, for example, writing in the context of North America, suggested that the lavish wedding had 'captured imaginations and incomes within contemporary Western culture' by bringing together consumer culture and romantic love and legitimating consumption through the 'ethic of perfection' (Otnes and Pleck, 2003: 8), while Boden has coined the term 'superbride' to convey how the modern bride's role as 'rational "project manager"' co-exists with that of 'the emotional "childish fantasiser"' who has a particular vision of what her wedding should be (Boden, 2003: 1.3).

It was clear from respondents' comments that they had expended a considerable amount of time, effort and money in planning their weddings and were bitterly disappointed at having to change their plans. As respondent 864 noted, 'it's absolutely heartbreaking to not be allowed to get married and to make it the special day we have always dreamed of'; similarly, respondent 1175 commented '[m]y big day and dreams and hard saving has been shattered'. Yet it was noticeable that those who used words such as 'special', 'magic' or 'dreams' largely did so in terms of what they had lost, rather than the wedding they were still hoping to have. As respondent 184 noted:

Having planned for 2 years, my dream day is now in jeopardy. We are starting a family, I am currently pregnant… I now will not postpone the wedding any further, as the impact puts our lives and plans on hold.

Even postponing in order to have the wedding as planned did not necessarily indicate that the wedding was seen as an item of consumption, as the comments of respondent 371 indicated:

My partner and I have always dreamed of a 'big' wedding and we not have Covid spoil or cut [our] plans. It's is ludicrous pubs can open… yet a wedding can't take place with older parents who have lived for this day 2 years in the plannings and f[r]iends who just want to [witness] to your day.

And while respondent 877 expressed the hope that postponing would enable them to have 'the day of their dreams', no one articulated a desire for the 'perfect' day as their reason for postponing.

This is perhaps unsurprising. Carter and Duncan (2017) found that the individuals they interviewed often distanced themselves 'from the perception of empty, standardized consumption' (Carter and Duncan, 2017: 16). Moreover, spending a considerable sum of money on a wedding loses its legitimacy once it can no longer be justified by the importance of getting married. As Otnes and Pleck (2003) have commented, it is precisely because a wedding can be seen as glorifying romantic love that couples feel that their expenditure is justified. Similarly, excessive spending is only acceptable if 'this "binge" is articulated as subordinate to the primary concern of the wedding' (Carter and Duncan, 2018: 189). The corollary is that conspicuous consumption is no longer legitimate if it is isolated from love and romance.

That sense of 'de-legitimisation' came across particularly strongly in the response of respondent 860, who noted that she felt unable to express how she felt in other forums out of fear of being viewed as a 'bridezilla':

Unfortunately there is a stigma against brides and grooms who feel a lot of sorrow and I think it has massively impacted their mental health due to stress and uncertainty. On some groups there are people who really seem to want to talk about how it has made the[m] feel, but guilty for being upset and angry when you remember it's for the safety of others. Most friends are supportive and will listen, but there are also a lot of people that just don't get the complexity of emotions you feel and can be quite dismissive "all that matters is you love each other" "it could be worse"… But because there is a s[t]igma of "bridezilla" you can't dismiss it but you can't show your true feelings. So yeah. Sorry for the essay.

In addition, some respondents commented that the pandemic had led them to re-evaluate what was important. Respondent 82 was still hoping to have a ceremony and reception with 30 people but noted 'we would accept simply a ceremony. It is nowhere near the wedding we planned but we now simply want to marry and affirm our love/move on with our lives.' Respondent 701 similarly wrote of how the church ceremony was the most important part for them and that the pandemic 'has really clarified what is important for us both in a wedding day'. And respondent 154 acknowledged that the disappointment of having to postpone was a 'trivial complaint' compared to the impact of Covid on others' lives.

The disruption caused to all aspects of life by the pandemic was also reflected in the desire expressed by a number of respondents for a 'normal' wedding. Several explained that they had already rescheduled their wedding more than once as they realised that 'normality' would not be resumed as soon as they had hoped,[15] while respondent 37 was waiting until 2021 to make any decisions about their wedding, commenting that '[e]ven for July 2021, I don't believe we'll have a "normal" wedding in the sense we used to know'.

There were also very practical financial reasons that constrained the choices couples could make, and a number of respondents emphasised that the choices they had made were not the choices that they wanted to make. Many had already paid deposits that committed them to a certain course of action.[16] A number reported how their intended venue had either refused or required them to postpone, or imposed other restrictions on when the wedding

could take place.[17] Respondent 456, whose May wedding had been postponed to December 2020, reported that 'the venue said if we didn't postpone we would loose our money as we are in a contract'; having already paid £13,000 they did not want to risk this, but added '[w]e want our money back so we can elope somewhere'. Respondent 471 reported that their caterers 'would not allow us to postpone our wedding to the following year as they said this would be treated as a cancellation'; they had therefore moved their wedding to November 2020 but indicated that they would otherwise have chosen a date in 2021. Others explained how the terms of their wedding insurance had dictated their decision to postpone. Respondent 27 had discovered that having their legal ceremony with reduced numbers and holding a blessing with the remainder of their celebrations in 2021 would have 'invalidated our wedding insurance'. And some had already paid for a certain type of wedding and would lose that money if they changed venue. As respondent 905 explained:

> due to deposits we've had to rebook for a date we didn't want and potentially with less people… We would have cancelled if we could have gotten a refund and just had a small registrar office wedding but we would lose £1,000's in payments made.

Conclusion

Respondents' comments show just how difficult it was to choose between going ahead with the wedding subject to restrictions on the number of guests and the nature of the ceremony or postponing to a date when it was hoped that no restrictions would be in place. And the context in which those choices were made means that it would be wrong to infer that getting married did not matter to those who decided to postpone their wedding. In addition to those who did not wish to upset their families by going ahead with a small wedding, or who felt that a Covid-compliant wedding would not seem like a wedding at all, there were a number couples whose choices were constrained by contracts with venues or other suppliers or the terms of their wedding insurance.

Our findings reinforce the importance of recognising that people do not make choices within a vacuum as 'free-floating agents with sufficient resources to achieve their goals' (Smart, 2007b). Many respondents were profoundly aware of the implications that their choices

would have for their relationships with others. As a result, some were relieved when the responsibility for making the choice to postpone was taken away from them: respondent 994, who had postponed because their venue was unable to accommodate social distancing, added that '[w]e were relieved that we wouldn't be forced into having a small intimate wedding and have to chose between our family and friends who would be able to attend'.

Our findings also reflect Smart's insights into the difficulty of mapping individuals' experiences onto particular theories (Smart, 2007b). As we have discussed above, the different choices that respondents made could be linked to theories about relationality, connectedness, tradition and consumption, and all of those theories help to illuminate those choices. But for many respondents, the choice was rendered more difficult precisely because a wedding had multiple meanings. Respondent 1040 expressed the dilemma felt by many:

> We'd still love to get married in October but if we can only have 30 people, is that worth the £10k we've already spent on deposits? Or should we postpone again and risk our elderly grandparents never seeing us getting married? And also have to delay starting a family even further?

Given the timing and nature of our survey, it can only provide a snapshot of respondents' views and intentions in the summer of 2020. At the time it took place, many still hoped that restrictions would continue to ease and would before long be lifted altogether. However, restrictions in fact tightened in September 2020. During the remaining months of 2020, weddings were governed by a confusing and rapidly changing mix of legally binding regulations and official guidance, followed by a 'tiers' system that imposed some regional lockdowns. The second national lockdown was imposed at the beginning of 2021. Many couples may therefore have had to change their plans again after the survey closed.

Those subsequent restrictions may also have changed their priorities. Even at the time of the survey, some respondents were considering how they would react if restrictions on numbers remained in place. As respondent 91, who had been due to marry during lockdown and who had rescheduled their wedding to November 2020, explained, '[i]f we can't go ahead with November we will seriously consider changing our wedding plans to a small gathering in a

registery office and a party at a much later date'. Similarly, respondent 96, who had postponed for a year in the hope of restrictions being lifted, noted that if restrictions were still in place:

> we will cancel all plans for a large ceremony (and reception) and have an intimate gathering of as many as we are allowed at a registry office and hopefully reconcile any financial loss on deposits through insurance. It will be sad to not have all the wonderful photos and memories I have envisioned from a big wedding but right now I just want to be able to call her my wife instead of worrying indefinitely about when we can host a big ceremony and what format it will take.

In addition, the fact that the answers to the final open question covered such a wide range of issues is both a strength and a weakness of our study. The open question format meant that these responses were spontaneous ones that reflected the points that these respondents specifically wanted to make. Throughout this article we have tried to give some indication of how many respondents made a particular point, but we cannot know whether other respondents might have made similar points if asked directly.

Given the very specific factors that prompted our survey, we hope that future researchers will not have occasion to replicate it. Almost all of our respondents – with the exception of the few who had decided to get married on account of the pandemic – were being forced to change their original choices and make new choices that they did not want to make and had never imagined that they would have to make. Our findings do, however, suggest a number of avenues for future research into whose attendance at weddings is seen as essential, which traditions are key to a wedding being recognised as such, and the factors that drive the scale of modern weddings.

Reading through our respondents' stories of stress and sorrow made it clear that couples value weddings for many reasons. Reviewing the stories with the knowledge that there had been a tightening of restrictions and a second national lockdown made couples' hopes that they would be able to have the wedding they had planned relatively soon particularly poignant.

But, with restrictions on numbers having been lifted in July 2021, we close with the hope that those respondents who waited to have the day of their dreams were – or soon will be – finally able to tie the knot with their loved ones around them and with the rituals of their choosing.

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[1] In 2018 13.5% of those marrying were aged 45-54; within this age group in 2014, 72% used the internet for social messaging: ONS (2020) *Marriages in England and Wales*, Table 3 Men and Table 4 Women. Online: https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/marriagecohabitationandcivilpartnerships/datasets/marriagesinenglandandwales2013. ONS (2020) *Internet access – households and individuals data*, Table 6 Internet activities, by age group, sex and disability status. Online: https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/householdcharacteristics/homeinternetandsocialmediausage/datasets/internetaccesshouseholdsandindividualsreferencetable. Both accessed 27 August 2020.

[2] Numbers do not add to 100% because of rounding.

[3] We had to delete a further 57 responses where the answer 'no' had been given to one of the consent questions, and 25 responses where the couple fell outside the parameters of our study.

[4] These comprised couples who had previously intended to marry overseas and couples who had decided to marry because of the pandemic.

[5] Those couples who indicated that they were no longer planning to marry were not asked any further specific questions because of the potential sensitivities of the reasons underlying this decision. They were however given the option of answering the open question at the end. Two of the 21 who said that they had postponed their weddings 'indefinitely' used the final free-text question to note their plans to marry on specific dates (respondents 333 and 657), and one of the two couples who said they were no longer able to marry explained that it was because the venue had permanently closed as a result of the pandemic (respondent 101).

[6] See eg respondent 1068.

[7] Respondents variously mentioned 100 guests (respondents 10, 96, 125, 186, 224, 256, 338, 355, 911, 1079, 1347), 101-199 (respondents 32, 100, 559, 689, 950, 1012, 1083, 1192, 1309, 1378, 1396), 200-299 (respondent

642), and 300-399 (respondents 190 and 1361). Where they mentioned different numbers for day and evening we have taken the higher number.

[8] Respondents 50, 895, 1100, 1136, 1152, 1237, 1328.

[9] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-guidance-for-small-marriages-and-civil-partnerships, issued 29 June 2020.

[10] Respondents 42, 171, 173, 237, 286, 472, 488, 534, 625, 666, 698, 708, 732, 733, 778, 814, 872, 902, 911, 914, 1001, 1002, 1099, 1107, 1114, 1150, 1192, 1213, 1257, 1281, 1347, 1350.

[11] Respondents 42, 114, 165, 171, 173, 180, 267, 379, 563, 666, 716, 725, 733, 734, 814, 863, 911, 1001, 1002, 1045, 1048, 1107, 1120, 1150, 1281, 1350, 1356.

[12] Respondents 44, 50, 119, 144, 156, 165, 248, 262, 488, 698, 778, 872, 1099, 1192, 1196, 1202, 1350.

[13] Respondents 42, 171, 563, 663, 666, 698, 708, 814, 1002, 1048, 1150, 1281.

[14] Respondents 165, 171, 286, 663, 902, 1107.

[15] Respondents 383, 584, 795, 875, 998.

[16] Respondents 805, 905, 1040, 1425.

[17] Respondents 56, 232, 371, 456, 541, 548, 597, 687, 844, 873, 1134, 1366, 1378.