"POPPING THE QUESTION" WHEN THE ANSWER IS KNOWN: THE ENGAGEMENT PROPOSAL AS PERFORMANCE*

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This paper analyzes the engagement proposal as a pre-wedding ritual that couples use to indicate to others that they are going to be getting married. The proposal is treated as a formality by the couples, but it is an important marker for their relationship. Based on interviews with engaged heterosexual Midwestern couples, we show how a couple works together to plan the engagement. The engagement proposal is a performance for two audiences, first for the woman and then for the couple's friends and family as they use the story to demonstrate they are an engaged couple ready to get married. Standard signals are used to convey these messages, and failing to use them may confuse the audience. Although the proposal is a "surprise," the woman works backstage to ensure that it is carried out according to her specifications. Based on this investigation, we argue that in the absence of any ideological challenge to the "traditional" proposal, the proposal as performance has more significance than other issues, such as gender-role inequality.

The American engagement proposal is one of the world's best known rituals. Not only do most Americans participate in this ritual sometime during their lifetime, but it is known to a worldwide audience through American movies and television shows. The very commonplaceness of the proposal may explain the dearth of sociological research on the topic despite both its significance in people's lives and the questions the ritual raises about gender relations and inequality.

In this paper we examine the engagement proposal by interviewing members of 20 heterosexual engaged couples about their proposals. For these couples, the "engagement proposal" is actually a misnomer because no new proposal is put forward. Instead, the couple ratifies a decision they have already made through a "surprise" performance they have mutually planned. The man appears to take the

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lead in initiating the engagement even though his girlfriend has given him instructions about his performance. We argue that the version of the engagement proposal described by these couples should be understood as a performance for two audiences, first the woman and then the couple's friends and families. During these performances, the couple uses standard conventions, such as revealing a diamond ring, to communicate to each other and to their friends and family that they are a properly engaged couple and ought to be married. Couples choose these elements not because of symbolic or ideological meanings attached to them but because excluding them might result in confusion from the secondary audience — friends and family — casting doubt on the relationship and the reality of the proposal. In particular, participants in the proposals downplay or dismiss interpretations of the proposal elements as being sexist. We argue that in the absence of any ideological challenge to this "traditional" proposal, dramaturgical considerations remain foremost in the minds of those planning the proposals.

THE ENGAGEMENT PROPOSAL

The engagement proposal is part of a chain of romantic rites of passage that includes high school proms (Best 2000), bridal showers (Braithwaite 1995), bachelor and bachelorette parties (Tye and Powers 1998), choosing the wedding dress (Beckerman 2000), the cutting of the wedding cake (Charsley 1987), and the rising phenomenon of vow-renewal rituals (Braithwaite and Baxter 1995). The contemporary romantic ritual that has received the most scholarly attention is the wedding. However, most of this research has not focused on the wedding itself but upon the wedding industry. This research on the so-called "wedding-industrial complex" (Ingraham 1999) has included scrutiny of the roles that wedding coordinators (Thompson 1998), photographers (Lewis 1998), and other professionals play in influencing wedding events and creating wedding "traditions" (Currie 1993; Goldstein-Gidoni 2000). A second line of sociological work has focused on wedding attitudes. For example, Scheuble, Vetter, and Swanson (2000) found that women tend to hold more conventional attitudes toward weddings than men.

Rituals have emotional content (Grimes 2000; Hochschild 1998), but they also have ideological content, whose meaning shifts as ideology and cultural practices change (Berger and Luckmann 1966; Graff 2000). Two populations — same sex couples and feminists — are currently raising questions about romantic rituals as part of a larger critique of romance and marriage (Bolte 1998; Jensen 1996; Keister 1998; Stiers 1999). While feminist scholarship has been questioning the patriarchal roots of romantic rituals and customs since the beginning of the first wave of modern feminism (1830s–1920s), recent work has also focused on how women negotiate them (D. Post 1997).

Romantic rituals are also shaped by gendered power dynamics. Previous research has suggested that power dynamics in romantic relationships are complicated. Older approaches to understanding power in marriages in terms of who makes decisions have been refined to include power that is covert or hidden (Komter 1989; Tichenor 1999). Potential conflicts that would make power overt may be avoided because, by accepting standard notions of masculinity and femininity, members of the couple do not perceive anything problematic about the man's greater power in the

relationship. Most romantic rituals, such as the prom and the wedding, are sites where femininity is on display (Ingraham 1999). In preparation for these occasions, women are expected to devote considerable time, money, and effort to making themselves normatively feminine. Men have fewer choices to make (e.g., in clothing) and may be less invested in these events (Best 2000). Other research has indicated that front stage presentations in marital relationships may obscure actual marital power dynamics (Hochschild 1989; Smith 2000).

The topic of engagement proposals has been largely neglected by researchers. The exception is attitude research, which has shown the influences of individual characteristics on attitudes toward engagement proposals. Schweingruber, Scheuble, and Berns (2001) found that women, people with higher levels of religiosity, and younger people were more likely to exhibit support for traditional engagement proposal practices. We have not found other research on engagement proposals.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

We situated our analysis within two analytical frameworks. First, drawing on the work of Becker (1982) and Swidler (1986, 2001), we viewed individuals planning and carrying out proposals as drawing from cultural toolkits. Becker (1982) emphasized the usefulness of choosing tools that are intelligible to other individuals. People are able to communicate and coordinate their actions with one another because of shared conventional meanings that are embedded in social practices and artifacts. These shared meanings make conventional activities easier to carry out while simultaneously making unconventional ones more difficult. Swidler (1986, 2001) focused on how people use culture to make sense of their lives. Second, we drew upon Goffman's (1959, 1974) dramaturgical framework. According to Goffman, individuals use performances to send signals about themselves, their situations, and their performance team. He also emphasized how backstage preparations set the stage for frontstage performances.

This paper addresses three interrelated questions. First, what does the engagement proposal look like when it is performed frontstage? Second, how are these performances constructed backstage? Third, what do these proposals mean to their participants, and why do they construct them as they do?

METHODS

This study was situated within a larger project on weddings and drew from interviews conducted with members of engaged couples. Each member of the couple was interviewed separately. The couples were solicited with advertisements in two newspapers in a Midwestern university town and were paid $40 per couple ($15 to the first member interviewed and $25 to the second). Nearly all of the individuals who responded to the advertisements were interviewed. (The exceptions were four people who failed to show up for their scheduled appointment, eight who responded to the advertisement after we had obtained our sample, and two who did not fit the criteria for the sample.) This paper is based upon 38 interviews — 36 interviews with both members of 18 couples and two interviews with just the female member. (Two males did not show up for their scheduled interviews after we interviewed their

fiancées. Because this paper did not focus on male-female comparisons, we used data from the interviews with the two women whose fiancés did not participate.)

The respondents were all white Americans, ranging in age from 19 to 28 with a mean and median age of 22. Twenty-three respondents were undergraduates, and 15 were college graduates (with associate or bachelor degrees). Of the college graduates, three were graduate students and one was a veterinary student. The other college graduates were employed in a range of positions, including mechanical engineer, auditor, golf professional, landscape foreman, and maintenance worker. At the time of their interviews, couples had been dating an average of more than two and a half years (mean = 2.7 years), with two couples dating for less than one year, and one couple dating for 7 years. Forty-three percent of the couples were cohabitating at the time of their interviews, just over half were not cohabitating (52 percent), and in two couples, the members differed in their responses about cohabitation. The length of time couples had spent dating before the proposal occurred ranged from less than six months to five years, with a mean of 2.25 years. Fifty-seven percent of the couples interviewed had dated between two and three years before they became engaged. While this sample was certainly not representative of all American couples, the findings from this research will help to direct further research on larger samples that include more diverse populations.

The engagement questions began with open-ended questions about when, where, and how the proposal took place. The interviewers then asked more detailed questions about the elements of the proposal, the individuals' feelings toward them, the proposal planning, and the selection of the ring. The first author (male) and the second author (female) each conducted about half the interviews, and each interviewed both men and women. Because the questions did not involve sensitive material and because the interviewers used the same protocols and a similar interview style, we do not believe gender differences between the researchers and the respondents interfered with data collection. Interviews lasted between one and two hours; most were approximately 90 minutes.

Interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed. Transcripts were coded by hand, focusing on elements found in the proposals and the meanings given to them by the respondents. Consistent with grounded theory practice (Strauss and Corbin 1990), we followed open coding with selective coding to develop the main argument of the paper. Although our early focus was on participants' description of the meaning they attributed to elements of the proposal, particularly gendered ones, respondents had little to say about the symbolic meaning of the proposal components. Thus, the dramaturgical framework of our analysis was generated inductively from the data.

RESULTS

THE PROPOSAL AS PERFORMANCE

The engagement proposals enacted by couples in this study were performances put on by the couples to communicate to each other and to secondary audiences of family, friends, and any other interested parties (e.g., rival suitors, wedding product salespersons) that they intended to be married, that they were entering a new phase of their relationship called "engagement," and that they would, in fact, one day marry

one another. The proposal finalized an earlier understanding the couple had that they would marry, and because the decision was settled and public, planning for the wedding could begin. In addition, the proposal was fun, a special event that the couples enjoyed performing.

In constructing this performance, the members of the couple chose from their cultural toolkits the scripts, props, and collaborators needed to get this work done. In putting these performances together, individuals were constrained by what tools were immediately available to them and also by their desire to communicate successfully with their audiences. By choosing symbols and scripts that were intelligible to potential audiences, performers stood the best chance of carrying off a successful performance. More unconventional performances may have resulted in audiences who had doubts about the reality of the engagement.

The result of the desire to communicate using intelligible signals was that all couples in this study adopted some version of the "standard" American engagement proposal, which included, minimally, the man asking the woman to marry him and presenting her with an engagement ring. Although all the couples used this model, this was not our only grounds for calling this the standard model. (Given our small sample, this would be an insufficient reason.) Instead, we argue that this is the standard model because (1) none of the couples were aware of another existing proposal model and (2) the standard model is presented in etiquette books and on web sites, as well as in fictional depictions of engagement proposals. According to one wedding etiquette guide that prescribes the standard model, "The most universal of engagement traditions, by far, is the groom-to-be presenting his bride-to-be with a ring" (Roney 2004, p. 8). Other etiquette books assume the standard model (P. Post 1997) or discuss the woman asking the man as a new option (Baldrige 2003). We do not argue that everyone uses the standard model but that its elements comprise what most Americans think of as an engagement proposal. Deviation in proposal practices is judged in relationship to this standard model.

SECONDARY PERFORMANCES

The initial performance of the man for the woman is followed by a number of subsidiary performances (or one continuous performance) as the couple shares the engagement proposal story with their friends and family and takes on the role of an engaged couple. Two pieces of evidence are presented to this secondary audience: (1) the story of the proposal and (2) the engagement ring. One woman explained the importance of the proposal in this way:

> Nobody would take us too seriously if we started planning a wedding and there hadn't been some official engagement process. [We needed] a story and a ring. . . . Because . . . if I would have said, "Mom, I'm getting married on this day," she would have been like, "Well, where's the ring? Where's the proposal? . . . I'm not gonna start any of this until we have that."

The story and ring are offered as proof that the couple considers themselves engaged and that they have the qualifications (e.g., mutual commitment) necessary to be a successfully engaged and married couple. The response of friends and family can be seen as the "critical response" to the engagement proposal and the engagement. A poor performance in the original proposal or in the retelling may result in the

secondary audience doubting the reality or appropriateness of the engagement, even if the couple has no such doubts. In addition to the primary message that the couple will be getting married, the couple may also try to communicate about the quality of the couple's relationship and the nature of the man, such as whether he is cheap, traditional, creative, or romantic.

THE PROPOSAL SCRIPT

The majority of the proposals in this study contained five elements. Three were found in every proposal: (1) the man asking the woman to marry him, (2) the man presenting the woman a ring, and (3) the man orchestrating the proposal as a "surprise." Another element, the man getting down on one knee, was found in 17 of the 20 proposals. The final element, the man asking permission of the woman's father, was found in 12 of the 20 proposals.

Man as Proposer

A universal element in the proposals of heterosexual couples we interviewed was that the proposer was the male member of the couple and the audience was the female member. Breaking this rule, as only the female member can do, did not result in an official engagement. In fact, switching the roles may turn the proposal into a parody that produces amusement, instead of the usual romantic feelings. As one woman explained:

> I actually, as a joke, the week before, on our one year anniversary, I put in the card, I'm like, "I love you so much. Will you marry me?" And he just looked at me and he's, like [with intonatión of amused scolding], "Oh, Julie."

Another woman twice asked her boyfriend to marry her and even gave him a ring. He wore the ring but did not take her proposals seriously. The couple did not consider themselves engaged until he asked her to marry him.

Although respondents discussed the gender-specific pattern when asked, most did not indicate that they had discussed it earlier or had considered altering the pattern. Both male and female respondents assumed that the male would ask. For example:

> *[Why did he ask you instead of you asking him?]* I have no idea.
> *[Did you consider asking him?]* No. I don't know, I just probably always assumed that he would ask me then. (female)

When explanations for the gender roles were given, three patterns emerged. First, some respondents connected the male-as-proposer pattern and other standard elements of the engagement script to "tradition" or spoke of themselves as "traditional" or "old-fashioned." These were viewed as positive values. Second, respondents pointed out the interconnectedness of the script. Because the man presents the woman with the ring, it makes sense for him to do the asking. The woman would have nothing to present to the man. This male respondent combined both of these explanations:

> I don't know . . . I guess I suppose at that point — the actual asking point — it was more of a traditional thing, I was giving her the ring and that sort of thing, and it was kind of up to me after we had picked out the ring to pick the time and place when all that was going to occur, I guess.

Third, some respondents generated personal explanations for following the male-as-proposer pattern. For instance, one woman explained that she was more eager to be married than he was, so she needed to wait for him to ask her. Although these personalized explanations were commonly used to affirm conventional elements of the script, they were rarely used to alter them. These three explanations of the male-as-proposer pattern are typical of those used to discuss other elements of the engagement script.

In an attempt to clarify what respondents meant when they called themselves or some custom "traditional," we began to ask them what they believed were the origins of traditions. Although they usually said they did not know the origin of the tradition, some made connections between gendered engagement scripts and gender inequality. However, the respondents indicated that these explanations were no longer valid. For instance, when asked why the man usually proposes, one interviewee replied:

> I don't know. . . . It just seems like it's always been that way, like even just historically it seems like the woman never had as much power . . . as the man so he was the one who got to choose, and I don't [think] that it's that much now. But I just think it just never went away really.

Although respondents attempted to disconnect the proposal gender roles from societal gender inequality, some answers suggested that reversing the role would give off confusing signals to the couple and the secondary audience. For instance, the woman who proposed to her boyfriend in a card said that he had earlier explained why he would not accept a ring from her:

> I wanted him to get a ring so that he would kind of be "branded" as taken too, but he didn't think that was a very good idea. He's very traditional. . . . He was worried that it would confuse people and that they would think that he was already married.

The Importance of the Ring

Although the man's verbal request that the woman marry him was important, words without an engagement ring did not make a complete proposal. The presentation of a ring made it clear that what was going on was an engagement proposal. This was a strong necessity not only for the first audience, the woman, but also for the secondary audience. Without a ring, the proposal was not yet appropriate as a public story and did not provide the official marking of their future as an engaged couple. The following two examples illustrate the change in the woman's emotions from hope to disappointment when she realized that her boyfriend was not presenting a ring and thus the proposal was not a "real" one:

> I actually kind of faked her out that night [shortly before the actual proposal]. [laugh] I acted like I was getting something on the couch, and I was on one knee, and I had my hands closed, and she was getting all excited then. And so like I go, "Molly, will you marry me?" And I open my hands up and there's nothing there. And . . . [she] told me how mean that was and that the next time I do that it'd better be real. [laughs] (male)

> He said, ". . . will you marry me?" And I said, "Yes." And then he pulled out this ring box, and in it was a ring made out of pine needles, and I started to cry because I was expecting my real ring. And so I started to cry and he's like, "I promise I'll give you the real ring as soon as I can" and all this stuff. And so I was trying to be really nice about it, but in my head I was going, "Oh my gosh, I want my diamond." . . . So after doing that for about two minutes, then he pulled a box out of the other pocket, and it had my ring in it. . . . I still have the pine ring, but I like this one better. (female)

In the first case the proposal was transformed into a humorous rehearsal. In the second, the joke (until it was resolved) ruined the performance and created the impression that the proposer did not understand the script and, consequently, might not be serious about becoming engaged. Not all women shared the opinion that a proposal without a ring would be illegitimate. However, if there was no ring, some sort of explanation, such as financial exigency, was required.

Without an explicit disclaimer, though, a proposal of words without a ring was considered just a sign that a real proposal would follow. One man stuck to the bare minimum of a proposal, using only words, when he wrote his girlfriend a note several months before the formal proposal took place that said "On [a specific date in] 2001 will you do me the honor of becoming my wife?" Neither of them considered this an actual proposal and did not think of themselves as engaged until a ring was presented.

One reason that the ring may connote the seriousness of the proposer is that he has spent a large amount of money on the ring. Buying a cheap ring suggested to some subjects that the man was not financially ready to support a family. One woman indicated that she did not want a diamond ring, but her fiancé insisted because he did not want anyone to think he could not afford diamonds. She said the diamond ring was "a man thing." Another woman had previously been engaged without a ring, a situation she described as being "engaged but not really." For her the ring was an "investment:" "If he took the time to go out and look for a ring and spent the money on it . . . it seems more like he really means it."

The ring was just as important, or even more important, during the secondary performances. The presence of a diamond ring on the woman's ring finger acted as *prima facie* evidence to the couple's friends and family that they were indeed engaged. The secondary audience may in fact demand that the ring be produced. For instance:

> I think the first thing my mom said is, "Let's see your finger," because she knew he was going to ask so we just kind of broke [the news], you know, told everyone what happened and that we were engaged and let everyone know. (female)

The absence of a ring, though, suggests to family and friends that the engagement is not genuine. For instance:

> I think that because the proposal itself has kind of become so associated with the ring, like, if you say that you were proposed to . . . but you don't have a ring, it's like people don't think of it as real or as committed as, you know, when you have your ring. (female)

When asked what the ring symbolized, respondents typically referred to the "commitment" they had, but they had only vague ideas about why a diamond ring on the left ring finger was traditional instead of some other piece of jewelry or object.

> I think [the ring] means that you're committed to this person for the rest of your life. . . . It shows that you have love for somebody, and I also look at it too as a circle for, like, the never-ending love. . . . I just think the diamond's there to just spice it up, I don't really know what the diamond would

> mean . . . I have it on this particular finger just because that's just the norm that most people wear it on that finger of that hand.

However, if another type of ring was used, it might have failed to communicate unambiguously that an engagement had taken place. One couple whose engagement ring contained alternating diamonds and rubies inset into the band reported resistance from salespersons, disappointment from some people who asked to see the ring, and confusion from others.

> I show it to them and they're, like . . . "I want to see your engagement ring." And I'm like, "this is my engagement ring." . . . And one person even said, "Why don't you ever wear your engagement ring. If I had one, I'd wear it all the time." And I'm like, "Here, that's it." (female)

Surprise

The proposal was supposed to be a "surprise" but only in a limited sense because an agreement to marry had already been reached by all of these subjects. The woman expected that a proposal would be made. What was supposed to surprise her was when and where the proposal would take place. Whether surprise was achieved varied within our sample. At one extreme, the woman knew that the proposal was imminent. She knew the ring had been purchased, and she suspected that she would be proposed to that day. The surprise was in the details. Her fiancé said, "We both knew it was coming, and we both knew it was going to happen that night, but she didn't know exactly how it was going to happen."

At the other extreme, the woman knew that the man would someday propose to her, but the time and place of the proposal caught her off guard. "He surprised me. That was his big thing 'cause we both knew that we'd be getting married. He was afraid that I was going to say I thought this was coming, and I didn't." Note that although this woman "had no idea" the proposal was coming, the couple had discussed the ring. She had also previously given her boyfriend instructions about what she expected from the proposal.

One of the purposes of the surprise was to allow the woman to respond spontaneously to the proposal. As one woman reported:

> It kind of swept me off my feet . . . If I know something's coming up, I can kind of plan for it and kind of prepare myself for it. But this, I just had none of that so maybe it was just like complete raw emotion when you just don't expect anything, you can't have any feeling preplanned or anything. You just kind of react and it seemed . . . more genuine that way. If you don't plan out what you're going to say before or after . . . if it just happens, maybe it's more true.

This outpouring of emotion was an expected part of the proposal and not just by the women. Respondents reported the outpouring of emotion that accompanied the proposal occurred in various ways. First, respondents reported weeping and not understanding what was going on. Second, they reported that they could not remember parts of the proposal because they were overwhelmed by emotion. Finally, men reported that performances were disrupted by emotion and some of their plans were abandoned.

Because the proposal was expected by both parties, the proposer knew that a favorable outcome was insured:

> [I was] 99.9% sure that she'd say yes. . . . Because we had talked about it, and just not so much that we talked about it but just the way that we are together. It's just like something you knew was going to happen. Everybody knew it was going to happen long before we decided to make it happen.

Down on One Knee

Seventeen of the 20 men got down on one knee during the proposal. Another was down on both knees. The two exceptions were explained by the circumstances. One couple got engaged while looking at the stars as they sat in a car (it was too cold to go outside). The other proposal involved the man turning around to show his girlfriend the ring balanced on the end of a hockey stick. In many cases the woman had earlier requested that her boyfriend get down on one knee. This element of the proposal exemplified much of the entire ritual in that it clearly indicated that a proposal was taking place, but its origin or original meaning was unknown to the people who were participating. Specifically, the man getting down on one knee signaled that the proposal was beginning and the presentation of the ring and the verbal request to marry were imminent. When respondents were asked about the meaning of this element, they were able to come up with possible meanings but indicated that they did not know the "real" meaning or had not even given it much thought. For instance:

> I don't know. Maybe it's like going back to tradition, man trying to be submissive to his wife. Who knows really, but it just seems like the chivalrous thing to do, I guess, you know, because you're asking and when you get lower than the other person, you're supposed to be submissive. I don't know what it means really, but I like it. (male)

The lack of a tradition of men's submission to their wives suggests that this man's hypothesis was incorrect. The elements of the engagement proposal are important because they convey that a proposal is going on, not because of other symbolic meanings. Getting down on one knee is uniquely useful in communicating a proposal is taking place because it is rare during typical interactions.

Asking Permission

Twelve of the 20 men asked permission from their girlfriend's father before proposing. As with the proposal itself, asking the father was a performance with dual audiences. By asking his girlfriend's father's permission, the man acted out his respect for his future father-in-law, his hope to have his father-in-law's blessing, and his desire to join the family. His secondary audience was his girlfriend, who viewed asking permission as a romantic gesture and often specifically requested it. In fact, she might have been a more important audience than her father.

> I told them [my girlfriend's parents] that after careful consideration I would really like to marry Shari and wanted to know if that was all right with them, kind of knowing that it was, but they said that that was really all right with them and that was about it. Really it was kind of more of a formality for her than directly involved with us. (male)

As with other sex-specific requirements of the script, most couples did not make the connection between the script and its seemingly sexist symbolism, i.e., its suggestion that the woman is owned by her father, who is empowered to turn her over to

her future husband. Couples liked it not only because it was "traditional" but also because women liked to involve their fathers in the event. As one woman explained:

> I thought it was kind of nice. . . . I just think it would make [my dad] feel special to be involved in that way and stuff, and I think that it really did make my dad feel good that he called and asked him. I mean my dad obviously . . . loves Dan, and we both knew that he wouldn't say "no" or anything, but it's just kind of nice to have him involved that way.

One woman who thought the process "takes out the independence of the woman" still encouraged her fiancé to "notify" her father because he was "old-fashioned" and "I knew he'd get really excited about it and feel like he was part of the process. . . . It gives my dad a story to tell." Only one woman indicated a strong objection to her boyfriend asking her father, saying, "I'm my own person, and my dad has nothing to do with it." Another woman, though, said she thought that asking her father was more significant than asking her, because "then I knew that he was really serious." Only four of the 12 men who asked permission from their girlfriend's father also asked permission from her mother.

Making the Proposal Romantic

Even though there were standard elements, the proposal script was brought to life by the proposers, who carried it out with varying skill levels and projected various images of the couple. Some were virtuosos who produced exquisitely romantic performances. Others performed with less skill and imagination but were able to produce an acceptable effect merely by carrying out the elements of the script. Some women indicated that woodenly following the script was not enough. For instance:

> [In the movies] it's always this big thing and the guy's always down on one knee and so . . . it's not like it wouldn't have meant as much but it's like it almost would have been less real if we'd just been sitting there and he'd been like, "Hey, why don't you marry me?" and pulled out a ring. It wouldn't be quite as [good] because it wouldn't have been quite as big of a production.

Although the hypothetical proposal she described included important elements such as revealing a ring, it would be unsatisfactory, even less "real," because the performance showed no creativity or sensitivity to the importance of the occasion.

This was one reason why the men were nervous about proposing even though the answer to the proposal was already known. Because the proposal story was used as evidence of the quality of the couple's relationship, it was central to the couple's impression management. The man, then, was expected to make the proposal "romantic," often by modifying the script to take into account the couple's unique history. The most common way this was done was by choosing a location that was meaningful to the couple, such as a favorite beach, a campus landmark, a river view the couple had often visited, a park where the couple fed ducks, and an ice rink where they met. Other men planned generically romantic activities, such as watching a sunset, dancing under the stars, or giving a dozen roses. The proposals were also made unique by including a favorite object, such as a stuffed animal, hockey stick, or plant. Other men incorporated their special skills, such as writing and singing a song.

Another common strategy was to deliver the ring in a creative way. For instance, one man inserted the ring into a chocolate egg inside a plastic egg covered

with ice cream and had the restaurant staff deliver it to the table as a dessert. Another man cut the stem of a wine glass, slipped the ring onto the stem, and glued it back together. His fiancée had to break the glass to get the ring. Rings were also tied to the bow of a stuffed animal and inserted into a rose.

PLANNING THE SURPRISE

Each of the couples in the study had earlier reached a decision to marry. Thus, although the proposal was a surprise, it was a surprise anticipated by the audience and, in fact, a surprise that was mutually planned by the audience and the performer. Although many surprises are planned by one person, here the surpriser and the audience planned the event together while working with the understanding that the woman had only partial information so that she could be surprised.

There was a radical change in roles as the couple moved from backstage to frontstage. Backstage the woman acted as a co-director, who instructed, suggested, or hinted to her boyfriend how the performance should be conducted. The man, taking his girlfriend's advice into account, planned the performance in greater detail. The actual proposal was initiated and performed by the man while the woman acted as audience.

Reflecting the tension between making the proposal a surprise and making it a successful performance, the women in the study varied as to how much information they provided their boyfriends. Some women reported they had provided substantial instruction about their expectations of the proposal. For example:

> I just told him that I'm kind of old-fashioned and that it's just something I want, like I want him to propose to me and get the ring. And I told him that he had to make it really special. . . . I told him he had to ask my dad. . . . And he had to get on his knee.

These expectations typically covered four major topics. First, women specified particular parts of the script the man should be sure to follow, such as getting down on one knee or asking her father. Second, women emphasized that the moment was expected to be "romantic," 'special," or "a day I'll remember." For example:

> I do remember talking to him about it, like I was telling him how some guy proposed to some girl, and it was, like, this really romantic story and stuff. And he's like, "Man, I have all this pressure on me to, like, make this magical moment." And I'm like, "Seriously, as long as it's just a day that I'll remember, that's all that I need, you know. I don't need you to awe me and ooh me with this, like, wonderful planned out evening, you know, that you spent all this money on. I just want it to be a nice moment that I'm going to remember." That's really all that I said to him and I wanted out of it.

Third, the woman instructed the man on the proper time and/or place. Some couples planned the approximate date of the wedding (often based upon their graduation schedules). Then, the woman informed the man about how long it would take to plan the wedding. It was then his responsibility to propose within that time frame. Finally, the woman gave instructions about the ring.

Other women stressed that it was more important for the proposal to be surprising than for them to be involved in the planning. This strategy should not be construed as not giving any instruction but as giving instructions that pointed the

man toward secretly planning a romantic proposal without divulging any of the details. For instance:

> She was sure she wanted it to be a surprise. She didn't just want to go to a jewelry store and pick out a ring and, here you go, type of thing. . . . She basically just said that she wanted it to be a surprise. There was no hinting about it. (male)

This type of instruction makes clear that there is something worth keeping secret. However, as one woman with a "traditional" boyfriend pointed out, instructions may be superfluous if the woman is confident that her boyfriend knows the standard script.

> I didn't have to say I want a ring when it's a proposal. I mean that's the tradition, and so he pretty much knew that. I would have been surprised if I hadn't gotten it. . . . We never said, "Okay, when I propose to you is when you'll get the ring." So it was just kind of assumed, that why would he propose to me if he wasn't going to [give me the ring]?

SELECTING THE RING

Selecting the ring exemplifies the careful balance between surprise and planning. The goal of selecting a ring that suits the woman's taste compromises the goal of the ring being a complete surprise and vice versa. As one man explained:

> I think she would have liked it too if we could go back again, and I could have just picked it out by myself. But I wanted her there to kind of pick it out with me just because when we had been shopping, I could never quite see what she wanted just because I think it's hard for me to see distinct features. So, she'd be, like, "Which one do you like?" And I could never quite pick which one I think she would have liked, even though I'm definitely positive that she would have liked anything I would have got her, but it's still hard to get by that. So, no, it's something we picked out pretty much together.

For this couple, the surprise was compromised by the woman helping to select the ring, but a complete surprise might have resulted in a ring the future bride did not like. We can think of couples' choices as lying along a continuum. At one end, when the couple chooses surprise as their prime goal, the man picks out the ring himself without any input from the woman. Only two couples followed this pattern. At the other end of the continuum, the couple picks out the ring together, with the woman sometimes taking the leadership role. In only one case did the woman pick out the ring in the absence of the man and later show it to him. In some cases, the woman told the man to get something similar to a particular ring she liked, and he returned shortly to buy that particular ring.

Most couples we interviewed took a middle position, in which the bride provided some information to the groom about such matters as the diamond's cut and the style and color of the band. This information was usually imparted as the couple looked at rings together. The way couples discussed these shopping trips hints at the tension between the woman selecting the ring and being the recipient of a surprise. Many of the ring-shopping trips were ostensibly not planned as such but took place when the couple "happened" to be near a jewelry store, as these two examples illustrate:

> I think I got her interested in platinum. . . . It's kind of a funny time because I think she knew that I was going to propose to her at some time, but whenever we were in a mall or anything, she'd kind of

> pull me aside, pull me over to a jewelry store, and we'd kind of look around. And we'd looked at least three times that I know specifically together and just kind of pointed out what we liked, and I think it was the second time that we looked that we really . . . knew that we wanted a platinum metal. (male)

> If we'd take her promise ring to get cleaned at the jewelers, we'd stand there and wait and just kind of look over stuff. And we'd joke around about wedding rings that had huge gaudy diamonds, kind of laugh, and I'd ask her what she kind of liked, and she'd show me a few things, you know, "that's kind of neat." . . . It was really casual talk. I didn't really ask for specifics — "What do you want?" The main thing she just always told me — "Whatever you get I'm going to like, it doesn't matter what it looks like, it's going to be fine." And so I could try to get her to tell me some things about what she liked, she really wouldn't say a whole lot, she just wanted me to pick something out. (male)

Each couple was at or near the jewelry story for another reason — visiting the mall or getting another ring cleaned — and looked over and discussed engagement rings together. The first story balances the two ring-selection goals. The couple chose to get a platinum band, and, subsequently, a marquis cut. The proposer then chose the rest of the setting and the baguettes. The second story emphasizes the surprise because the proposer claimed that she gave him no specifics. (He remembered later that she said she did not want an oblong cut.) In other cases, though, the woman simply gave the man instructions about what she wanted. For instance:

> She told me — these aren't a lot of discussions, more, "When you do this, you can do it?" Like, she wanted a round one, and she wanted it as big as I could go, but she understood that I don't have a whole lot of money to be wasting on items such as this. *[What words did she use to say that?]* Oh boy, I would say that she said something to the effect of, "I'd really like [this], but I know that if you got [this], the quality would be less than if you got something smaller so whatever you decide is all right." But there's kind of an understanding when she says that that I kind of need to listen to her, or I'll be in trouble. (male)

An important characteristic of the woman's role in selecting the ring — whether she was a partner in selecting a particular ring or had a less visible role — was that the selection was followed by a period when she was in the dark about the final purchase of the ring and then prepared to be surprised with its presentation. Some women we interviewed specifically indicated at what point their own participation had ended.

> I didn't want it to be something where we picked out the rings, and I knew that he was buying it. I didn't want to know. . . . I showed him a ring that I liked, and then I just said, "Now you know what I like. It's all up to you now. I mean, you can get your mom to help you, or whatever you want." I'm, like, "I don't want to be involved in it." (female)

Even if the woman had known what ring was going to be bought, she was typically not present when the purchase was made and thus did not know exactly when the purchase was made. (The one man who reported that his girlfriend was present when he purchased the ring said that he regretted it.)

GENDER, POWER, AND PERFORMANCE

Throughout this paper we have argued for the importance of dramaturgical considerations in structuring the engagement proposal. The couples worked together to construct a proposal performance that would be meaningful to the couple, the primary audience of the woman, and the secondary audience of family and friends. In

this section we will explore structural and cultural contexts within which the couples are working, particularly regarding gender.

The standard American engagement proposal is notable for its gendered division of labor, which suggests stereotypical roles for the man and woman. The man initiates the ritual, suggesting his dominance in the relationship and the future marriage. He demonstrates his intentions by adorning his fiancée with an expensive piece of jewelry, which he pays for and she wears on her finger to signify her being "taken" by the man. All of these actions suggest the man is the more powerful member of the couple — an assertion rejected by some of our respondents, who viewed any power-component of the proposal as a relic of the past.

However, the question of which gender actually has more power in constructing the engagement proposal does not have a straightforward answer, as other research on power dynamics in romantic relationships suggests (Komter 1989; Tichenor 1999). The man plays the role of the more powerful person, but he is dependent upon the woman, who has given him instructions and who evaluates his performance. However, her instructions are limited by the standard proposal script. Once they have chosen it, the script constrains both the man and the woman.

We explore how power may shape the engagement proposal in two ways. First, we compare the engagement proposal to romantic events organized by women. Second, we show how the frontstage of the engagement proposal obscures a couple's actual gendered dynamics.

THE PROPOSAL AS A MASCULINE MOMENT

Comparing the engagement proposal to other romantic rituals sheds light on how men's greater power in relationships may shape the proposal. Most romantic rituals are the responsibility of women, who are expected to devote considerable time, money, and effort to create occasions where their normative femininity will be on display. For the men in this study, organizing and carrying out an engagement proposal involved much less work than is expected of a woman organizing a wedding, preparing for prom, or even arranging a dinner party. Even if the man botched the performance by forgetting his lines or being overcome with emotion, the mistakes themselves were viewed as proof of his deep romantic feelings. In addition, women often worked behind the scenes with the man to make sure his performance was acceptable. In short, the standard for successfully carrying out the proposal was very low. In this respect, the proposal is similar to the ritual of singing "Happy Birthday."

> When we attend someone's birthday party, we customarily sing "Happy Birthday" to him. We do not hire professional performers for such an event. It doesn't matter if the singing is out of tune or tempo, as long as the song gets sung. Any competent participant in the culture can manage an acceptable version, since everyone knows it and the standard of acceptability is very low. (Becker 1982, p. 246)

In Becker's (1982) typology of artists, activities such as singing "Happy Birthday" and dancing at school dances are examples of folk art. While men who are proposing are allowed to act as folk artists, women, in carrying out their romantic responsibilities, are expected to consult professionals, who have the technical and interpersonal skills necessary to produce romance. We would expect a much different ritual if the

engagement proposal were the responsibility of women. A woman would probably be expected to attire herself elaborately (with assistance from a hairdresser, dressmaker, and others) and create an elaborate romantic scene with help from her friends and perhaps a professional engagement consultant. The low expectations of the proposal appear to favor the man.

GENDER ROLES IN FRONTSTAGE VERSUS BACKSTAGE

The division of a performance into frontstage and backstage regions allows the performers to conceal preparations that would interfere with the impressions they desire to give. One of the hidden elements of the standard engagement proposal is the actual gendered division of labor and power between the two members of the couple (Hochschild and Machung 1989; Smith 2000). While the couple may have an egalitarian relationship, by choosing the standard model they send a message that the man is taking the lead. In addition, the man is presented as the creator of the scene even though he may be following explicit instructions from his girlfriend.

None of the couples spoke about intending to hide the real dynamics of their relationship. They chose a model that presents a patriarchal relationship because that model was intelligible to themselves and their secondary audience. And even though the proposal performance itself may have been private, it was used to construct an official story that became part of the couple's performance to the secondary audience. Thus, the way the couples played out their gender roles to each other might shift dramatically from their everyday interactions and their proposal-planning to the "traditional" roles encrusted in the standard model. The secondary audience was left unaware of the couple's actual power dynamics, the consideration of which would probably have distracted from the romance of the occasion.

The participants themselves usually downplayed or dismissed meanings of the proposal that were connected to gender inequality. The couples did not view the proposal in terms of each other's relative power, and their desire to be "traditional" during the proposal does not necessarily mean the couples want to perform "traditional" gender roles during other interactions.

DISCUSSION

Ingraham (1999) suggested that the standard "white wedding" (referring both to the color of the wedding dress and the event's alleged connection to racial hierarchies) is a result of people being duped by a "wedding-industrial complex" that serves the needs of patriarchal heterosexuality and transnational capitalism. Using a different model of culture, we have argued that the couples in our study are not "cultural dopes" (Garfinkel 1967), but active creators who used the components of the engagement proposal as cultural tools to send messages to one another and to a secondary audience. Although participants in engagement proposals may incidentally benefit capitalists, for example, by buying diamond rings, their purpose in doing so is dramaturgical, not ideological. Discovering who benefits from social action is not the same as establishing causation. Social actions have many consequences that are not intended by the actors (Merton 1968).

Swidler's (2001) typology of culture is useful for making sense of how social action may be related to ideology. Swidler proposed three forms of culture: tradition, common sense, and ideology, which vary from being explicit in meaning to being commonplace and taken for granted. On the one end of the continuum is ideology, which is an explicit and articulated belief system. On the other end is common sense, which consists of taken-for-granted assumptions that seem like a natural part of life. Traditions, such as the engagement proposal, occupy a middle ground as they most likely are derived from ideology but have become expected parts of life whose original meanings are forgotten or given varied interpretations.

Most of our respondents did not see any ideological significance to the proposal. An exception to this viewpoint were two evangelical Christian couples, who justified some of their proposal choices on religious grounds. (Other Christian couples, though, did not.) The rest of the couples, however, did not perceive that the way they carried out their proposals would send messages about their position on issues related to gender roles, religious beliefs, or other contested issues. Because the primary identity they were attempting to create was that of an engaged couple, dramaturgical considerations came to the forefront as they planned and enacted their proposals.

Although their own ideological positions did not seem to drive their construction of the proposal, some respondents recognized that what is now "traditional" may have been derived from ideology. Specifically, they speculated that the proposal gender roles were the result of past male dominance, but that this meaning no longer applied. Swidler (2001) argued that culture based in tradition or common sense can also become subject to ideology. She used the feminist movement as a leading example:

> The contemporary feminist movement, for example, has gradually extended its critique of gender inequality from inequalities in the home and workplace to such issues as violence against women, pornography, and sexual harassment — making matters that were traditionally unnoticed in the wider culture issues of explicit ideological attention. . . . Nonetheless, whatever the new ideology does not tackle directly remains under the sway of the old order. Old orders are resilient, hiding their premises in the minutiae of daily life. (Pp. 101–102)

The engagement proposal is part of such an "old order" because nether feminism, the gay/lesbian civil rights movement, nor any other ideology has been successful in calling into question the traditional model or proposing an alternative that accomplishes the same task as the traditional ritual — communicating unambiguously that the couple is engaged. One woman's response to the question of why she had a proposal illustrated how alien the idea of an alternative is.

> I think the people need the story. . . . I could have just gotten married, but I think people, honestly, like my grandparents, would have looked at me like I was insane if I didn't say we were engaged and I just said "Hey, we're getting married." (female)

Although this woman claimed to be more willing than her secondary audience, her grandparents, to do without the "story" of the proposal, she did not contemplate an alternative ritual to get engaged. Instead, she equated not having the standard proposal as getting married without being engaged.

The findings in this preliminary study are based upon a small homogeneous sample. Survey research on Midwestern college students (Schweingruber et al. 2001)

suggests that the traditional attitudes of the white heterosexual couples in our study may be typical of the Midwest. However, the focus here has been limited to the question of the structure of this sample's proposal performances, not the sources of variation within the sample. This study raises questions that should be explored in future research. First, research on this topic needs to be expanded demographically and geographically through an examination of the extent to which the experiences of nonwhite couples, mixed ethnicity couples, non-Midwesterners, and others bear upon the organizing of engagement proposals.

Second, research is needed to focus on people who resist or modify conventions to a larger extent than the people in our sample. Becker (1982) suggested that studying "mavericks," his term for artists who are trained in the conventions of the art world but reject them because they are too constraining, reveal much about those who work within conventions. Likewise, although presumably few Americans would be unfamiliar with the traditional engagement proposal, some of them may reject the conventions or alter them to such an extent that they no longer are immediately recognizable to their audiences. One key population is same-sex couples, who have chosen to perform engagement proposals and weddings even though the standard forms of these rituals require a man and a woman.

Third, research is needed on weddings, which we suspect will reveal much more complicated patterns of social organization. A variety of stakeholders are involved in planning weddings and applying social pressure on couples, who have many more choices to make than during the planning of their engagement. Couples draw from a wider variety of cultural resources and consult wedding professionals. The state is also involved because the wedding, unlike the proposal, has legal status. Because many ceremonies are at least nominally religious, couples' religious beliefs have an increased significance. Thus, we expect that couples have to engage in more complicated uses of culture in planning and carrying out wedding performances.

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