

Getting married in times of COVID-19: Structure, agency, and individual decision making*

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Abstract

Based on my digital anthropological research (nethnography, online surveys, and in-depth interviews) this paper will examine the individual decision-making processes and choices related to getting married during times of COVID-19 in Hungary. The paper raises questions about the extent to which these choices and decisions were individual and reflexive, and how they were influenced or restricted by legal structures and contexts. Using classical and contemporary social theories about decision-making (structuralist and reflexive approaches), on the one hand I aim to explore the structural and contextual circumstances of making decisions about whether to go ahead with, hold-off, modify, postpone, or cancel wedding plans. On the other hand, I study the individual ‘decision horizons’ as well. Through examining discourses surrounding weddings as well as through case studies, I look at how social actors identify and perceive their options and how they perceive and interpret the related structural constraints, contexts, and rules. The results emphasize that despite – or rather in the face of – changing circumstances, many couples sought new opportunities and new means of adapting, but in the meantime they recognized and interpreted the structural constraints that could potentially influence their weddings, maneuvered between them, or just overcame or circumvented them, and at other times sought to create new structures through their individual and community practices.

Keywords: changing patterns of getting married; COVID-19; micro-weddings; social and legal structures and rules; agency; individual decision-making

1. Introduction

1.1 Research problem and questions: On the otherness and sameness of quarantine weddings

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the process of getting married changed considerably around the world, including in Hungary. In Hungary between March and June 2020 (the first wave of the pandemic) – the period broadly understood as times of ‘quarantine’ – many wedding receptions (*lakodalom*) and civil wedding ceremonies were postponed, reorganized, or cancelled. In other

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cases, for a variety of reasons couples got married at the city hall or in a church ceremony in front of two witnesses or their immediate families, without a wedding reception and without wedding providers and services. The day of their marriage then continued with just the couple or with an intimate circle of family, or friends and/or neighbors, accompanied by friendly conversation and light refreshments. At the same time, the newly married couple also tried to include some of the ritual-like elements of 'traditional' wedding receptions – for example, the first dance as a married couple, even on the balcony of an apartment in a housing estate, or the joint ritual of cutting the cake and its consumption. The phenomenon attracted lively media attention from the very beginning. These reports showed news of strange, unusual, smaller, simpler, and more personal new kinds of weddings, and spoke of their *otherness*, characterizing them as *quarantine weddings*, *COVID weddings*, *mini-weddings*, or *micro-weddings*.¹

Soon after the quarantine ended, everything seemingly returned to normal. Grandiose weddings with many guests were back, and wedding providers also returned to action. At the same time, post-quarantine wedding ceremonies became slightly 'different' – the pandemic had left its mark on them. Rites and modes of getting married, seating arrangements, and the texts of rituals were modified. Besides large wedding receptions combined with a civil ceremony, there were a surprisingly large number of 'piecemeal' weddings (when the process of getting married was broken down into its constituent parts and completed in several installments). Smaller, civil marriages held at city hall – also characteristic of the period of the quarantine – reappeared, along with plans for large receptions (*Big Days*) to be held at a later date; as well as wedding receptions without an official civil wedding ceremony in cases when the latter had already taken place. Ex-post statistics for 2020 and 2021 show that during the period of the pandemic situation (three waves), only in Hungary among the countries of the Visegrad Group (V4) was there no drop in marriage rates.² In fact, in 2020, the number of marriages even increased slightly (67,301) compared to the previous year (which saw an exceptionally high number of marriages: 65,300 couples). However, it can also be seen that the number of marriages per month during the pandemic tended to decrease during periods of severe restrictions and lockdowns, and increase during periods of temporary loosening.³ While the period of restrictions was characterized by civil ceremonies and mini-weddings, the period of loosening of restrictions saw a mixture of large weddings and smaller weddings and civil marriages.

What are the reasons for the otherness of the weddings that were planned and replanned or held during the first wave of COVID-19, and what are the reasons for their sameness? How can we explain the strategic detachment of the legal act of getting married from the wedding reception? How can we explain the popularity of micro-weddings and of wedding receptions without civil marriage? Were individual decisions shaped by changing political, economic, and social factors and contexts, or did individual decisions become normative and shape structural constraints, and along with them, weddings? What can we say about the interconnections between structural constraints, agency, and personal decision-making through looking at wedding ceremonies and wedding receptions?

1 See e.g. <https://www.noklapja.hu/olvasnivalo/2020/05/20/10-12-ezer-eskuvo-keresi-a-helyet-a-naptarban-2-resz/> Accessed 13-7-2020. In the English-speaking world, these shorter, abridged mini-weddings are also jokingly referred to as *minimony*; the word is derived from a playful combination of 'mini' and 'ceremony.' Cf. <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/submission/22590/minimony> Accessed 16-10-2020.

2 E.g. https://adatujsgiras.atlatszo.hu/2021/04/15/a-jarvany-ellenere-hazasodik-a-magyar/?fbclid=IwAR2I2LQRdl_WwgAMse308cBhFjNvSOy8vS8gr9xB4cWnULzC9AQanvxGh9s Accessed 20-5-2021.

3 See e.g. <http://www.ksh.hu/gyorstajekoztatok/#/hu/list/nep> Accessed 10-5-2021.

1.2 Aims of the paper: Exploring reasons for the otherness and sameness of quarantine weddings – structure, agency, and individual decision making?

Anthropological and sociological research that deals with decision-making either stresses the role of structure – traditions, customs, and social relations – or individual agency and reflexivity. Although from the 1950s to 1970s social scientific research spoke about individual decision-making determined by social structure (cf. Goodenough, 1955; Freeman, 1961; Horowitz, 1967; Howard & Ortiz, 1971; cf. Quinn, 1975, in more detail), and from the 1980s and 1990s the impact of the *reflexive* turn, lived and embodied (*lived experience* Ingold, 1993; Bruner, 1983; Turner, 1986; reflexive approaches Foucault, 1978; Giddens, 1992; Illouz, 2012), the emphasis has shifted to *lived experience*. Pierre Bourdieu took a different approach to the reflexivity of decision-making when he argued that, although everyday decisions are reflexive and ‘immediate,’ agents’ structurally determined *habitus* influences them (cf. Bourdieu, 1977; 1990). Similarly, although current research that deals with decision-making and choices in principle attempts to formulate some kind of integrative viewpoint, it tends to still either stress the continuing role of structure in individual decision-making and consider personal agency and reflexivity to be of lesser importance (e.g. US and British research on the sociology of the family: Gilding, 2010; Rosalind et al., 2012, p. 739; Gross, 2005), or to analyze the dynamic decisions of agents using an internal, phenomenological focus (cf., for example, Boholm, 2013; Goldstein & Gidoni, 2001). Duality is also observable in the social scientific literature on getting married and choosing a partner, and it seems to me that, to some degree, the approach that is chosen determines the outcome. Studies that focus on structure in modern, Western countries (including Great Britain) basically underline the influence of social relations and structures, or rather of the reigning normative discourses, and consequently of traditions and customs (cf. Carter & Duncan, 2018). Research that focuses more on individual agency, resistance, and resilience emphasizes the particularity of individual decision-making, and sees it as a turn against dominant norms and customs that are continually reinterpreted, even in the case of the forced marriages of post-socialist Asian countries, such as bride abduction (cf. Werner, 2009).

In my paper, I will attempt to examine individual decisions related to getting married and the complex ensemble of social and cultural contexts, as well as regulations and structures affecting them, paying equal attention to these factors. I will combine my external, etic observations with internal, emic perspectives and contrast them methodologically. I call attention to the productive tension between the purposeful agent and the society that constrains her (structure), and between structural determinism and situational openness (cf. Meyer et al., 2016). In the current paper, I only reflect on my observations concerning the period between March and August 2020, and address the situation outside of this period in a few, necessary cases. Thus, I will not touch upon the effects of regulations on getting married during the second wave of the virus (ongoing since November 2020 and still continuing at the time of writing in December).

1.3 Research design and methodology

Since mid-March 2020, the time of the first appearance of COVID-19 in Hungary, I have been investigating Hungarian wedding practices and situations of decision-making involving the re-planning of wedding ceremonies and wedding receptions. During the lockdown period, legal constraints, special regulations, structural constraints, and the discourses connected

to them became more evident. Furthermore, those individual and more general situations in which individual agents tried to manage and realize, modify, or suspend their own ideas relating to getting married as they were trying to adapt to or counteract the structural constraints shaping their experience also become more visible and audible. The paper is part of a 'multi-sited' cultural anthropological project that I began in September 2019. As originally planned, it was to include a large amount of 'classical' anthropological fieldwork on transformations in decision-making about getting married and ways of conducting weddings. Due to the pandemic, I had to modify the direction and methodology of the research to involve COVID-19 and getting married. In the course of my research, which due to the virus situation I was forced to temporarily move over to the digital sphere, I archived offline and online news, legal and health regulations, as well as Facebook discourses reflecting on the latter in Hungarian-language wedding-organizing- and chat-groups.⁴ I also 'listened to' debates and conversations related to the organization and reorganization of weddings, as well as to individual and collective dilemmas. Thus, I documented several live-streamed civil marriages, as well as the commentary (comprising thousands of supportive statements) accompanying the signatures related to an online petition in favor of holding wedding receptions during the pandemic.

In April, I put out an online questionnaire with detailed and for the most part open questions (henceforth, 'COVID questionnaire'), which inquired into the strategies and specific practices of reorganizing weddings among those planning a wedding after March 2020. I published the *Google Forms* online questionnaire for self-completion in the form of a paid ad on Facebook. As many researchers have pointed out, survey-based studies may experiment with strategies that employ the digital footprints left by users on Facebook as entry points for recruiting participants and complementary data sources. Facebook's advertising platform represents a great opportunity due to its marketing tools that target advertisements based on users' demographics, behaviors, and interests (see Iannelli et al., 2020). In my case, the target group was defined by age (20–60 years), residency in Hungary, engaged or newly married status, and interest in marriage and weddings. I highlighted the questionnaire twice (for three days each) between April and May: during the April campaign, it reached 23,900 users (1,400 activities), and in May 12,200 (448 activities). I thus reached a total of 34,531 users: this figure does not exclude repetitions, but I constructed partially different target groups in terms of social stratification, educational level, and target counties for the two advertising periods. Almost 500 people filled out the questionnaire. I also received a lot of feedback (emails, Facebook posts), reflections, and thanks. Nearly three-quarters (72.7 per cent) of respondents were between 20 and 30 years old; the age of 27.1 per cent ranged from 31 to 50. The proportion of those defining themselves as female was 96.5 per cent. The overwhelming majority declared themselves to be of Hungarian nationality (three Swabian or German, one Romanian), 60.2 per cent had graduated from university/college, while 2 per cent had also obtained a PhD, 30.6 had a high school diploma, 7.7 per cent had been through vocational or technical high school training, 1% had received a post-secondary certificate, 1 per cent had associate degrees. About one-quarter (25.5 per cent) lived in the national capital, 29.4 per cent in a county capital or large town; 25.5 per cent lived in a small town; 19 per cent in a village; and 3 per cent on a farm.

In addition, I recorded (through Zoom, Skype, and Microsoft Teams) 20 in-depth interviews with brides who were planning (and replanning) their weddings at the time of COVID-19. The majority of the brides lived in the capital or in rural cities and county capitals (Somogy

4 I was present in about 12 groups. I paid attention to the four most active groups most intensively, on a daily basis (the number of members in the groups varied between 2,500 and 29,000).

and Csongrád County), and were 20–35-year-old graduates, while two of them lived abroad. After completing the online questionnaires, they also had the opportunity to volunteer to be interviewed. The call for interview was included in the last point of the online questionnaire. In the course of my research, I primarily gained insight into women's status and opinions; my interviewees as well as the participants of the online discussion groups – not counting some mixed-sex wedding providers – were primarily women.⁵

2. Findings

2.1 *Legal, political contexts and structures – Checks and driving forces*

2.1.1 *Checks*

First, let us look at the structural context in which couples had to make decisions about their weddings during the time of COVID. Here I will primarily focus on the politico-legal contexts and structural constraints. Due to the pandemic caused by the COVID-19 virus, a variety of politico-legal and health measures and restrictions were introduced in Hungary, similarly to in several other affected countries. In keeping with Government Decree 41/2020. (III.11.) larger gatherings, also including *wedding receptions*, were first restricted from March 11, 2020, while from March 16, in accordance with Government Decree 46/2020 (III. 16.), they were banned. Since family events, thus marriage ceremonies, were not considered 'events,' it was still possible to hold civil and church marriage ceremonies. From March 28, 2020, in accordance with Government Decree 71/2020 (III.27.), the government also introduced restrictions on the number of participants at civil marriages. Until June 1, civil and religious ceremonies could only have two witnesses and a small number of participants. Certain local municipalities interpreted the number of participants differently. Until May 4, the easing of the restriction, there was a shorter period (starting around April 18) when not even photographers or videographers were admitted to such ceremonies. The government announced on May 14 that from June 1 'ceremonies with a maximum attendance of two hundred people will be allowed in the countryside and in Pest County.'

2.1.2 *Driving forces*

Beyond pandemic-related central and local restrictions and decrees, another important factor may be mentioned – the role of political, family- and population-policy-related regulations that, in my opinion, often determine practical-material considerations and motivations when planning and weddings. That is to say, for several types of favorable credit packages – for example, the *Babaváró hitel* (Childbirth Incentive Loan), and *CSOK* (Family Housing Allowance) – being married and planning to have a child are prerequisites (for details cf. Szikra, 2018; Hungler & Kende, 2019). The abovementioned family policy measures and subsidies regarding family policy are important for us here because I hypothesize that the timing and reorganization of the weddings that had been scheduled for 2020 may have been influenced by these subsidized credit packages. The connection can be best demonstrated through statistical data. According to a report by KSH (the Hungarian Central Statistical Office, CSO) in 2019, the

5 Note that this gender ratio does not result from a specific gender focus of the research, as I tried to address both women and men with my self-administered questionnaires. It also follows from the gender division of the responses and the disproportionate presence of women on online wedding planning interfaces, so to speak, that marriage is primarily a 'female topic.' Social discourse and relevant knowledge about the topic is primarily under female supervision.

year of the introduction of the *Babaváró hitel*, significantly more weddings were held than in previous years. Between January and December 2019, 65,300 couples got married; 14,472 or 28 per cent more than in the previous year (what is more, since 1990 this was the largest number of marriages to take place in a single year). According to estimates and 'predictions,' this increase would have continued throughout the 2020s. However, presumably owing to restrictions due to COVID-19, this growth stopped and the number of weddings began to decrease. Let us recall that although in May wedding ceremonies were not yet possible, from June (June 1 in the case of the countryside, June 15 in Budapest) wedding receptions could resume, while restrictions and tightening up started again from November. While in January–March and April 2020 there were 10.1 per cent and 8.8 per cent more weddings registered (respectively) than in the same months in 2019, from May on a decline began: in May there were 30 per cent fewer marriages; in June and July the figures show a 26 per cent drop, and in July–August 6.9 per cent fewer weddings took place than in the previous year. From September, there was another increase, with 2.9 per cent more people getting married in September and 17 per cent more in October. In all, 67,301 couples were married – 3.1 per cent or 2,033 more than in the previous year. Between January and February 2021, 6,877 couples married – 6.8 per cent fewer than in the previous year.⁶ However, compared to the period before 2019, these numbers still indicate a very high degree of willingness to get married. Based on the above, it seems probable that there is a relationship between the subsidized low-interest rate credit opportunities and the willingness to get married, just as it seems likely that the COVID-related restrictions that affected weddings led to the decrease in the number of weddings that took place.

But what role did these restrictive regulations on mass gatherings – introduced in connection with the pandemic – and the motivation provided by favorable credit play in personal decisions regarding getting married during the first wave of COVID-19? How did the people affected by the regulations interpret the situation? To what degree does the detection and existence of structural constraints and forces and social discourses correspond to decision-making according to the rules or to the social practices that (in part) follow from these? Let us examine how agents perceived and interpreted or reinterpreted the structures, contexts, regulations, and information at their disposal that affected their decisions, and in light of these, examine how the latter defined their options, and with what alternative(s) they associated them (cf. Boholm, 2013; Ingold, 2000). I also address how the latter decided, and what their related activities were.

2.2 Communal-individual identification and interpretation of legal-political structures and contexts

According to 68 per cent of the respondents of the COVID questionnaire, the outbreak of the pandemic and the epidemiological measures influenced their civil wedding ceremony and their wedding reception. Six per cent had already held the civil ceremony prior to the period of quarantine, thus, according to them, only the wedding reception was endangered. For 2.2 per cent, their church ceremony was also affected by the regulations. A few (1.8 per cent) did not plan a large reception, so the restrictions only affected their civil ceremony. According to 6.4 per cent of the respondents, the restrictions did not 'endanger' their getting married (e.g. due to a later date, smaller number of guests, or a more modest wedding). Thus, as a starting point we can state that the majority of those planning to get married felt the effects of the restrictions on their own plans to wed. They regarded most of these as restrictive.

6 Available at <http://www.ksh.hu/gyorstajekoztatok/#/hu/list/nep> Accessed 26-04-2021.

What about those who said that the pandemic situation did not affect their wedding in any way? This is a smaller group; they spent less time and energy on the organization of their weddings and did not make any irrevocable decisions about them, either because of their very distant wedding dates or because they had originally planned a simpler civil ceremony without service providers and guests. Based on my questionnaire survey and interviews, it is my impression that the events of already concluded ‘under-planned’ weddings did not follow entirely from the decisions and choices that had preceded them. Niklas Luhmann writes that there can often be discontinuity between decisions and actual actions; actions do not automatically follow from decisions in any logical or causal sense, except to the extent that decisions always confirm intentions (Luhmann, 2005, p. 96). But that is not quite what happened in this case. Rather, the discontinuity concerned the fact that in the course of their decisions the couples also improvised, drifted, and followed the scenario of the civil marriage and its emotional roller coaster along with their various spontaneous ideas. They did not participate at all, or only minimally, in the everyday discourse about COVID-19 weddings; they did not read about the changing conditions for getting married or of holding wedding receptions; they did not seek to, or perhaps they did not wish to, recognize the structurally restrictive nature of the changed conditions.

In contrast, the members of the other, larger group recognized and identified the structural constraints weighing upon them due to COVID-19, and not only perceived them, but also reacted to the limiting effects of the regulations. They did not perceive them all at the same time and at the same pace. Rather, ‘COVID panic’ hit couples in several waves, depending on how far along they were in the planning process, how involved they were in it, and, on the (earlier or later) date of the planned wedding, while occasionally the effects of the perception of the suspension of restrictive regulations could also be felt. Often, members of a given couple reacted differently or at a different pace to the increasingly stringent measures. Based on my observations, I think that a bride’s personal, family circumstances as well as her relationship with her partner and her personality also affected her recognition of the structural constraints. Several of my interviewees reported that in their case the interplay of specific situations and events pointed to the need for redesign; the need to address structural constraints.

At other times respondents were not necessarily confronted with restrictive structures, but, for example, with their socio-economic effects. Thus, for example, many came to understand the legal and economic implications of the restrictions caused by COVID-19 through their recognition of their own precarious financial situation and that this jeopardized their intended marriage.⁷ More than half (55.6 per cent) of respondents of the COVID questionnaire felt that the cost of the planned marriage remained manageable, despite the pandemic, while others felt that their economic situation had become more unfavorable and uncertain: The latter was especially true for those who were forced to change jobs or to take unpaid leave, etc. More than one in ten (12.9 per cent) were not at all sure whether they could continue to afford the cost of their wedding. 11.1 per cent of the respondents reported the depletion and loss of their reserves, 6 per cent the loss of their job, 2.7 per cent the loss of a partner’s job, and 2.1 per cent the need to change jobs.

7 As transpired from the answers to my questionnaire, the costs of weddings during the period under review were as follows: 38 per cent of the respondents budgeted amounts above HUF 2,000,000; 39 per cent planned to spend an amount between HUF 1,000,000 and HUF 2,000,000; 15.8 per cent reckoned with an amount between HUF 500,000–1,000,000; and 7.5 per cent with an amount less than HUF 500,000. The majority, 80.8 per cent, planned to cover the cost on their own; 42.2 per cent with financial help from their families; 2 per cent with a bank loan; and 27.6 per cent with the proceeds of the wedding (respondents could choose several options).

Often, they had to realize that the legal restrictions would affect their social relationships. For example, that the wedding guests, family, and friends would constantly question them and worry about the future wedding, or that close relatives and family members would cancel their attendance at their wedding one after the other. Or they themselves began to worry about the possible non-attendance of guests. Because during the quarantine period the presence of guests at weddings was simply forbidden, after this period brides tended to fear that economic hardship caused by the epidemic and specific health threats and the fears resulting from it, as well as international travel bans, would lead several of the invited guests to cancel. Uncertainty about guest cancellations culminated in concerns about wedding gifts (i.e., monetary gifts, cf. Vasile, 2015) on the one hand (27.6 per cent of the respondents were hoping to cover the costs from the proceeds of the wedding). I have listed above the changes in my respondents' financial situation that had the potential to endanger their wedding plans. In addition, 40.2 per cent of respondents assumed that guests might also have problems affording wedding gifts. On the other hand, if the guests were to stay away, the grand celebration with family and friends would also be jeopardized. After all, if there are not many guests, there is no big wedding reception, and there is no real ritualization and celebration. One of my interlocutors, a thirty-year-old bride from Budapest, only realized the negative, indirect social effects of the legal-political restrictions on their wedding in the third month of the period of quarantine when her best friend, her witness, withdrew from the wedding. But while in the above case wedding cancellations were merely the first serious confrontation with restrictions, they heralded the need to work out other options and create further plans. In other cases, the withdrawal of those invited led to specific decisions such as the postponement of the marriage ceremony (and all it entailed) by a year. This was also the case with a 25-year-old interviewee in Siófok, who with her fiancé decided to postpone their wedding due to the cancellation of the attendance of close family members.

COVID-19 regulations entered the crossfire of everyday discourse not only because of their recognized restrictive, prescriptive, and prohibitive nature, but also because of their uncertainty and variability. My interlocutors and the respondents to the COVID questionnaire also referred to the instability of regulations on numerous occasions. The perceived uncertainty about the regulations made wedding planning more difficult than the specific restrictions themselves. As a result, stakeholders often suspended decision-making about marriage planning and re-planning. At the same time, uncertainty also gave way to hope. Both in online discourses and in the responses to the COVID questionnaire, it was repeatedly pointed out that couples preferred to delay the implementation of their plans and 'wait,' hoping that the restrictions would sooner or later be relaxed or lifted: 'We have agreed to be in a position of waiting until the beginning of June [...] Perhaps the hardest part is that everything is still uncertain. We really hope we can keep it as originally planned' (March 29, 2020; Zala County).

2.3 Collecting and producing information during the first wave of COVID-19

In addition to perceiving and recognizing the structural constraints, wedding planners and couples planning to wed were not only passive observers or 'victims' of circumstances, and did not only delay their decisions but were also socially active and engaged in resistance prior to the government's announcement of May 14⁸ that promised the relaxation of regulations

8 From June 1 it was possible to hold wedding receptions again with appropriate precautions – e.g., with individuals maintaining a distance of 1.5 meters.

in the near future. Members of the wedding organizing Facebook groups – brides and wedding providers – continuously followed and interpreted centralized and local measures related to the epidemic, government decrees about weddings, press conferences and parliamentary broadcasts, local government measures, and various media reports that reflected on them. At this point, it is also important to see clearly that individual decisions about weddings and wedding receptions did not only concern specific couples, families, and so on, but also the wedding industry that provided them with services. Due to COVID-19, the situation of wedding service providers became fundamentally precarious and vulnerable, especially in cases when the service was the main source of revenue and main job, and the related company did not have adequate reserves. The economic situation of the wedding service providers, which had become unpredictable, was also recognized and acknowledged by the couples, and they expressed solidarity with them through their action as well as at the level of public discourse. What I found was that wedding service providers tried to mediate between individuals, as well as between power holders, policy makers, and officials⁹ in the form of private initiatives and trade union advocacy (*Lakodalmi Szolgáltatók Érdekképviselője*) through online petitions, open letters, and various inquiries. Meanwhile, in addition to representing consumers and brides, they naturally also represented their own interests. In countries where the bridal industry is a key element of GDP such as the UK, according to official statements made during COVID the government worked closely with investors and managers in the bridal industry and jointly set up guidelines concerning safe methods for getting married and establishing cohabitation.¹⁰ The ‘wedding industry’ generates significant annual revenue, from the United States through India to Europe, year after year. According to the predictions of the Hungarian Central Statistical Office CSO, before the outbreak of the virus in the country, the industry was set to generate HUF 138 billion in revenue in 2020.¹¹ As the actors of the Hungarian wedding industry saw it, they did not get an opportunity to directly influence decisions affecting them because of their (thus far) less significant economic weight. ‘We have reached the level of secretary of state through several channels; they are aware of the problem. However, we do not appear to be a determining economic factor’ (wedding service provider, Facebook wedding planning group, April 18, 2020).

The moderators of the wedding organizing groups of the wedding service providers created ‘collection posts’ and regularly updated the latest information and deleted obsolete posts, such as those involving regulations that had already expired. Typically, they published the more general and specific rules of local municipalities. In addition to these, dozens of individual questions and dilemmas were formulated every day. From the first weeks of March, in relation to the appearance of the virus first abroad and later in Hungary, and related media coverage, concerns surfaced again and again, sounding very much like ‘pre-wedding panic.’ From March 11 onwards the Hungarian government limited the number of participants at weddings and other events to 100, anxiety finally set in and brainstorming and speculation regarding rethinking the number of wedding participants began. The majority of marriages

9 I.e., the Operative Taskforce set up by the government to co-ordinate the fight against the disease.

10 Available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-guidance-for-small-marriages-and-civil-partnerships/covid-19-guidance-for-small-marriages-and-civil-partnerships> accessed 08-08-2020.

11 Available at <https://24.hu/fn/gazdasag/2020/06/01/koronavirus-eskuvo-junius-riziko/> accessed 08-08-2020. In the UK, it generated revenue of £10 billion a year (Carter, 2018, p. 175), in the US, the figure reached \$72 billion according to a figure from 2016 (<https://www.marketresearch.com/IBISWorld-v2487/Wedding-Services-Research-10625277/?progid=89606> accessed 08-08-2020), while for India we can read reports of 50 billion revenue in 2019 (<https://www.livemint.com/opinion/columns/india-s-big-fat-wedding-industry-is-slowdown-proof-11580406700650.html> accessed 08-08-2020).

scheduled for 2020 were not yet affected by these initial restrictions, as according to my April–May 2020 COVID questionnaire, 65 per cent of respondents had planned an event with fewer than 100 people. However, the weddings of a smaller group were already in jeopardy at that time. One-third (33.3 per cent) of respondents were planning wedding receptions with 100 to 200 attendees, while less than 2 per cent were thinking of large weddings with more than 200 people.¹² However, fears were already growing beyond concerns about the specific 100-person limit. When in addition to the central governmental limit of 100 people at wedding receptions the number of attendees at civil weddings was also regulated at the local level, reports of the changing regulations from both service providers and brides-to-be began to appear in rapid succession in the chat groups. For example: ‘I spoke to the registrar of Óbuda, Budapest 3rd district, everything remains [the same] for the time being, there are no official restrictions [...]’ (Facebook wedding planning group; March 16).

The government’s April 29 press conference and the one on the following day (April 30) that clarified the previous day’s announcement was surrounded by lively discourse, as was the publication of all other regulations in *Magyar Közlöny* [*Hungarian Gazette*] the official government publication (2020/96). From the subsequent clarification of the regulation, it transpired that, until the regulation was revoked, no events – i.e., not even those with fewer than 500 participants – could be held. Civil and church weddings were permitted, but wedding receptions were still forbidden. The announcements led to speculation about the possible holding of wedding receptions with fewer than 500 attendees. Again, weddings became the focus of epistemological interpretations. Facebook group members tried to determine whether legislators, or those implementing the regulations, by the word wedding (*esküvő*) meant civil or church ceremonies, or possibly wedding receptions. ‘Well, the concepts are all helter-skelter. Civil ceremony, wedding, wedding reception, of which the first two are listed in the decree, both of which are permitted in the countryside. Now what?’ (April 29).

Thus, during the quarantine period it transpired that brides and wedding service providers sought information intensively, trying to understand the situation brought about by the new legal structures and restrictions as much as possible.

Why was all this necessary? Classical economic anthropological approaches underline that such intensive collection of information is primarily needed when the choice between individual decision alternatives proves problematic and promises to be conflicting (cf. Howard & Ortiz, 1971; cf. Carter, 1954 earlier). Stakeholders will also actively gather information when faced with entirely new decision situations compared to their original plans and decisions, and they do not have some kind of preferred alternative, but at the same time are trying to make good decisions (cf. also Howard & Ortiz, 1971).

The majority of prospective brides planning to marry during times of COVID (57 per cent) had some very specific, often pre-conceived ideas about their own weddings that predated the restrictions, and often even their current relationship. This coherent *dream wedding scenario* could also be called typical (‘habitus’), although 33.8 per cent of respondents said they did not have any such ideas. In addition to these typical ideas, my respondents also listed new ideas, often referencing the specific relationship or ideas they had taken from various inspirational web pages among their preliminary plans. Not only were the brides’ own old-new preferences included in their marriage plans, but in 40.2 per cent of responses so were the (male) partner’s, and in 18.8 per cent of cases the wedding dreams and ideas of parents, friends and relatives were also incorporated. My recorded in-depth interviews often touched upon the expected or

12 This number was also typical of previous years.

actually fulfilled role of the groom in wedding planning and/or reorganization. While several brides emphasized their partners' passivity and lack of interest, they also discussed how they had tried to please the groom during the organization of the wedding, or how they had managed to circumvent the latter's various ideas. Among relatives and friends, the ideas of female relatives (mothers-in-law, mothers, grandmothers) and, less often, male relatives (primarily fathers and fathers-in-law) were incorporated. My interlocutors alluded equally to compromises and disputes, parental pressure, and a lack of consensus about decision-making roles during the preliminary planning.

Based on contradictory socio-cultural expectations and their own preferences that were presumably influenced by these expectations, the majority of the couples getting married during times of COVID had created a specific *wedding timeline*, often with the help and guidance of service providers (mostly wedding planners, semi-professional groomsmen, or MCs). According to the COVID questionnaire, out of a total of 487 respondents, for 38.4 per cent a first, pre-epidemic version of a *wedding timeline* had already been completed. In the case of a further 39.5 per cent such a *timeline* had been partially prepared. In 13.6 per cent of cases, no timeline had been developed yet, while 11.9 per cent did not even plan to compile such a list. It is important to recognize, therefore, that the means and outcomes of the re-planning that became necessary during COVID-19 were also related to the progress of the wedding organization and planning, the preliminary elaboration of scripts, and the solidity of parental and personal preferences. The majority tried to adhere precisely to these preliminary scripts or looked for completely new opportunities that, however, were most compatible with their own expectations.

It also follows that, during the period under review, prospective brides actively sought information not only about structural constraints and regulations, but also tried to obtain as much knowledge as possible about fashionable and traditional aspects of contemporary weddings. During the time of COVID-19 brides often inquired on online surfaces about the contemporary opportunities (rural, urban, traditional, modern) and meanings of getting married, of civil weddings, and wedding receptions. In the meantime, questions about both general and special norms and rules and expectations related to getting married were raised numerous times, as well as about how these could be met and implemented in times of COVID-19. These brides-to-be were especially interested in the rules and guidelines related to getting married. For example, who adheres to these rules, why, and in what way can they do it? Among the social networks of a couple, who is going to hold them to the rules? Furthermore, how can the various wishes and suggestions of 'vigilantes' be fended off and ignored? When, why, and with whom is it necessary to compromise – in effect, to live up to their expectations? My results so far indicate that although the issue involves some rural-urban and social differences, couples try to meet the expectations of their friends and contemporaries rather than those of the older generation: their parents and relatives.

The priority of making their own decisions, quasi-independent of the family, was repeatedly touched upon by my interlocutors, and the topic was overrepresented in the discourses of everyday online wedding groups as well. In one of the Facebook wedding planning groups, similarly to many other posts, members reacted with great outrage and empathy to a May 30, 2020 post of a young bride-to-be in which she shared details of the cancellation of her wedding reception. She had, together with her fiancé, decided to celebrate with a two-witness, civil wedding instead of the large-scale wedding-cum-reception originally planned and already organized. Although several thousand other couples had also made the same decision, in the young bride's interpretation (although her decision was influenced by COVID-19-related legal-health regulations), in the end the indifferent attitude of the guests who had been

invited, and especially the intrigue of the mother-in-law (the groom's mother) led them to cancel the event. It also became clear from the comments on the post that the members of the Facebook bridal group, in this case at least, condemned external (family) interventions in the organization of wedding receptions, such as those that were made in the name of tradition. Instead, they emphasized primarily the autonomy of the couple in relation to getting married, and considered their joint choices and decisions in the organization of marriage to be decisive. Nonetheless, the possibility of making decisions jointly, compromising with family, relatives, and friends, evaluating rules, regulations, norms, and contexts on a case-by-case basis also arose in connection with certain issues.

Thus, with the help of intensive information gathering, prospective brides essentially sought to find new options and evaluate them individually and communally. They tried to actively seek, recognize, and create new opportunities while beginning to look for ways of challenging the restrictions. On the one hand, a kind of game involving maneuvering between the structures was observable that was characterized by a high degree of resilience. On the other hand, both disregarding consciously recognized structures and 'relinquishing' decision-making to structures that social actors were fully aware of, while they relegated themselves to the background, were common practices. Besides these cases, I also identified examples of active attempts to transform such structures.

2.4 Strategies and practices for maneuvering between structures, crossing structures, and building new ones

2.4.1 Maneuvering between structural constraints – Searching for previous unconventional practices

Marriage planners looked for ways of maneuvering between structural constraints and novel modes of getting married, sometimes finding them in older, unconventional wedding practices. One of the most typical examples of this style of getting married as a quasi-norm was the detachment of civil weddings from *Big Day* celebrations and their celebration as two separate occasions. Smaller, two-witness civil ceremonies (i.e., micro-weddings) held first and separately from subsequent wedding receptions at a later point (days, months, or years later) and the accompanying ritual confirmation ceremonies have been part of Hungarian marriage practices for several years, and have become particularly common in the last two or three years. On the one hand, *confirmation ceremonies*, following contemporary wedding fashion, try to showcase the biographical, personal aspects of the couple's relationship; on the other hand, in keeping with more traditional norms, they also stage and mimic the civil wedding ceremony for the benefit of wedding guests. The separation of the formal civil ceremony and the wedding reception has also created another role for wedding service providers, or rather opened up a new avenue for them. This is because in most cases when couples get married without planning a church wedding, they ask the wedding service provider to act as a *ceremony leader* to *stage* or *confirm* the act of getting married.¹³ Hungarian *confirmation ceremonies* are a specific subtype of *commitment ceremony* practiced internationally in the case of unregistered, unofficial wedding ceremonies. Internationally, the most important argument in favor of separating the commitment ceremony and the *Big Day* (i.e. liberating participants from the burden of the formal wedding ceremony) is allowing the couple to pay attention only

13 Contemporary anthropological research has primarily covered the phenomenon in connection with certain minority groups, such as European e.g., British Muslims, as cases of unregistered, unofficial marriage (Akhtar, 2018), and as alternatives to Western LGBTQ marriages (Marzullo & Gilbert, 2011, pp. 535–536; Reczek et al., 2009).

to themselves, their families, friends, and acquaintances.¹⁴ In Hungary, couples choose to have such ‘piecemeal’ weddings with a confirmation ceremony added on as an extra to the formal act of getting married for several reasons. One is that if all components are held on the same day the event becomes too ‘congested’; another reason may be the extravagance and extraordinary nature of the wedding venue and date; while finally a couple might choose this option because there are some other family-economic circumstances that precipitate the need for completing the legal act of getting married, but the latter wish to celebrate ‘properly’ at a later date. It also seems to me that by planning a piecemeal wedding, brides seek to take control of their event by making a conscious choice between a formal wedding and a confirmation ceremony – deciding when, where, and how they wish. Furthermore, it can be assumed that bridal narratives that emphasize the couple’s personal ideas, uniqueness, their specific relationship, and romantic feelings reflect critiques of contemporary weddings that also appear in everyday discourses. That is to say, due to the fact that although there are many divorces and many marriages are entered into primarily for economic reasons (see also the problematic of the *wedding paradox*; Carter & Duncan, 2017; 2018; Willoughby & Spencer, 2017).

The results of my questionnaire that examined the decisions of those planning or replanning their wedding at the time of COVID-19 show that about 19.8 per cent of respondents wished to get married (at least in part) because they wanted to take out a loan (more specifically, the Childbirth Incentive Loan). Two per cent of them were expecting a child, and 41.8 per cent were planning to have a child; 18.6 per cent were preparing to buy, build or expand a house, partly from loans and / or wedding gifts, which are often monetary. Just over three percent (3.1 per cent) were also motivated by various tax breaks. According to my questionnaire survey, it was primarily those people who held their wedding during the three-month quarantine period of COVID (and thus separately from the wedding reception) who needed the ‘papers’ as soon as possible because they expected a child (7.8 per cent), or wished to obtain an already planned loan (10 per cent). Just over twenty-seven (27.5) per cent simply did not want to wait any longer or postpone a long-planned wedding. For 8.8 per cent, a simple wedding was just fine, as it was all ‘about them’ and this was what was important to them. At the level of narrative representations, getting married solely for the purpose of applying for credit, especially the housing subsidy program called CSOK, and the subsidy for those expecting a baby (*Babaváró hitel*), were mentioned primarily as practices attributed to ‘others.’ The respondents indicated that although they themselves would take advantage of these forms of credit (since they were getting married anyhow, they would take advantage of the opportunity, and so on), they knew of people who only got married because of the subsidies. ‘It’s not primarily why we are getting married. [...] There was someone for whom the point was that the child was coming, it had to be fast. [...] There were those who [got married] because of CSOK and they didn’t even care, just to get the loan.’¹⁵

The contemporary fashion of separating civil wedding ceremonies and wedding receptions is also clearly illustrated by the fact that a smaller proportion of COVID weddings were already planned to be ‘two-day weddings’ even before the pandemic. 8.4 per cent of respondents of the COVID questionnaire held a minor civil wedding ceremony on a separate day and a wedding reception accompanied by a church wedding on another day. Just over four (4.1) per cent had their civil ceremony and a wedding reception on different days; the latter accompanied by a confirmation ceremony administered by a wedding service provider. 2.7

14 Cf. <https://www.bustle.com/articles/21696-7-reasons-to-get-married-before-your-big-wedding-day-why-i-tied-the-knot-early> accessed 27-03-2020.

15 Interview excerpt, woman 25, Siófok, May 5, 2020.

per cent of respondents planned a separate civil wedding and a wedding reception spiced up with both a church wedding and a confirmation ceremony conducted by a ceremony leader. One per cent intended to have a separate small civil wedding and a reception held on another day without any other ceremonies or rites. The original plan of the majority was to celebrate everything on a single day: 40.3 per cent planned to have both the civil and the church wedding ceremony and the wedding reception on the same day; 34.2 per cent wished to have a civil ceremony and a wedding reception; while 6.5 per cent planned only a small dinner in addition to the civil ceremony. During the quarantine period, if the couple did not postpone getting married altogether – this was the strategy of the majority, or they held off making a decision – then the individual ritual components (the civil ceremony, the church ceremony and the wedding reception), were separated (25.6 per cent got married in a civil ceremony on the originally planned date, and 5.8 per cent at an earlier date). To make the separately held wedding reception a real celebration, 13.4 per cent of respondents also postponed their church wedding along with the wedding reception. Eighteen (18.1) per cent of respondents asked for a ceremony leader from a wedding service provider to conduct the confirmation ceremony, and 2.5 per cent decided to augment their original plan with a church wedding ceremony. During the COVID-19 period, weddings and wedding receptions with ceremony leaders became so popular and thus visible that during the second wave of the virus, on 10 November 2020, the *Hungarian Gazette* (§ 6) mentioned that, in addition to married couples, witnesses, parents and grandparents, siblings and children, only registrars or ceremony leaders could be present.

Brides who were ‘originally’ not thinking of holding a civil wedding and wedding reception on separate days but for the reasons discussed above saw this as an option tried to learn as much as possible about how it could be done and what the best practices were. Thus, for example, in the preparatory stages of decision-making, brides posed many questions to brides, married women, and wedding service providers who had real, personal experience with this. For example, how does it feel to experience the confirmation ceremony; how ‘real’ is it; how did the wedding guests react to it, and so on. Parents, friends, and acquaintances belonging to older generations could not really help with these issues – only those could who were familiar with the world of contemporary weddings. So, while parental and family ideas and decision-making roles were slightly re-evaluated and (temporarily) rearranged, in many cases this meant that members of the older generation were relegated to the background, which sometimes caused very serious conflicts: the influence of online discourse dominated by brides and wedding service providers grew significantly.

The majority, who were not satisfied with smaller weddings and therefore postponed their wedding receptions or the civil ceremony along with the reception, or those who simply ‘waited,’ hoping that the restrictions would end, mainly tried to stick to their original plans (47.4 per cent). As a bride living abroad put it briefly after the cancellation of her wedding in Hungary scheduled for September: ‘And what is going on inside is frustration, defiance (then it should be a year later, but it will be what we want, and we shall not give up our ideas because of circumstances) and ultimately hope, but hand in hand with doubt, which by now has become unavoidable.’¹⁶

Those who clung to the idea of a big wedding feast saw it as a celebration with friends and family that would have been meaningless to them in the context of a narrower, more puritanical, service-free civil wedding – the true ‘rite of passage’ would not have taken place. More than one-third (36.3 per cent) said that the wedding was a family holiday and 36.8 per cent added that it was important for them to say their promises and vows in front of their family

16 E-mail excerpt, female, approx. 30 years old, Vienna, September 5, 2020.

and friends. Only 2.9 per cent of respondents to the COVID questionnaire also mentioned that not only they but also their parents insisted on a public, larger-scale, service wedding reception and wedding ceremony. Thus, in addition to rejecting and eliminating 'traditions,' the reorganizations were also motivated by references to norms and traditions. The latter were mentioned more as preferred patterns, norms, or models to be adopted; they were evaluated positively. For example, many of the marriage planners and re-planners insisted on big weddings, big family celebrations, spectacular rites, and ceremonies, and at the same time rejected puritanical, guestless, simplified civil ceremonies because they thought the former were traditional and therefore normative. They considered the former format to be a legitimate model that they tried to conform to because 'it used to be that way.' Referring to the tradition of large-scale weddings as a model also proved to be a narrative strategy during COVID-19 that could be used to argue in favor of earlier, pre-restriction types of weddings and/or those that coincided with one's own ideas. The signatories of the above-mentioned online petition for holding wedding receptions referred to the customary order of weddings in thousands of comments. Namely, that in fact the wedding reception is an essential, traditional part of getting married. The comments contained dozens of references to traditions and customs, as well as to traditional wedding receptions, as their source of argument. They stressed that betrothed couples, by holding a wedding reception, were merely intending to comply with traditions and customs: 'We would like to hold the wedding reception along with the civil wedding'; 'I would like to be able to have both the reception and the wedding ceremony according to Hungarian customs' (May 3, 2020).

Couples also identified deferred weddings, cancellations of certain services, and temporary cancellations of wedding receptions as previously existing plans that could be adapted to the circumstances. The legal background for these decisions to cancel, postpone, and replan wedding receptions and especially wedding services was the state of emergency ordered by the government due to COVID-19 that constituted *force majeure*. *Force majeure* is an unforeseen situation (which fully describes a pandemic emergency) for which neither party is responsible. According to Section 6 of Article 185 (2) of the Hungarian Civil Code: 'If the contract is terminated for a reason for which neither party is responsible' – thus, in view of the unforeseen *force majeure* situation due to the pandemic – the service provider has to return the down payment to the customer. At times this was not so easily accomplished in practice. It only happened if the parties had earlier signed a contract and if the customer decided to claim back the down payment. This step was not entirely automatic, and several online legal aid teams were formed to deal with such problems. For example, in the case that weddings and wedding receptions were planned for farther away in time, as the scope and timing of the restrictions were not known in advance, it was not possible to refer to *force majeure*. The most economically viable and best supported strategies proved to be restructuring, deferrals, searching for new dates, and waiting. The biggest structural barrier to postponements and reorganizations, primarily from the point of view of the service industry, was the well-founded fear of the piling up of future weddings and receptions in fall and winter. That is to say, it became clear that, together with the weddings that were being postponed and those originally planned for the following year, as well as newly scheduled weddings, it would hardly be possible to find free dates, because, for example, couples still preferred weekends for their *Big Day*. Not surprisingly, wedding service providers began to argue for weekdays as ideal wedding days, which option had thus far been overlooked. The interests of wedding service providers were best served by postponements, renegotiations of dates with customers, holding on to reservations and advances, and the planning of the following year's expenses and revenues (includ-

ing a potential increase in service fees). They primarily supported cooperation, the finding of mutually satisfactory solutions and compromises, as well as the making of decisions that pointed in this direction. From the point of view of customers, in the case of cancellation, they tried to get their deposits back, while in the case of postponement they hoped to find and hold on to 'good' dates and venues. If the service providers were inflexible, which made it difficult to find the most suitable dates, customers looked for new providers. While most questionnaire respondents (69 per cent) did not cancel services at all, 74 per cent held onto their personal *dreams* and postponed wedding seeking, above all to find another date suitable for everyone. Either they hatched a completely new, definitive Plan B, or a conditional one: 'We wouldn't cancel anything, we would just set a new date for the postponement of the wedding reception by negotiating with the service providers and adjusting it to suit everyone' (May 1, 2020; Győr-Moson-Sopron county; the planned wedding date was August 5, 2020; no new date at the time); 'We didn't cancel anything, we just rescheduled for next year' (May 11, 2020; Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén county, prior to decision, original wedding date June 20; new date May 22, 2021). Fourteen (14.3) per cent said that during the redesign of the wedding reception they would have to give up on earlier dreams, 11.7 per cent were still uncertain about this issue. However, 7 per cent had decided to cancel some services, 4 per cent sought additional ones besides those they had already booked, and 5.8 per cent stated that they thought it would be necessary to change service providers. The cancellations were mainly due to the need to reduce costs. Due to their precarious financial situation, respondents decided to cancel services, or more generally to reduce the wedding-cum-reception budget (4.7 per cent) or to limit the number of guests (8.4 per cent) (cf. Howard & Ortiz, 1971).

2.4.2 Maneuvering between structures – Innovation

Moving on to the innovative steps taken in response to constraints at the level of strategies and practices, one of the most striking examples was the formal transformation of photographers into 'wedding witnesses.' This began to appear as a strategic 'countermove' in the course of replanning weddings when the presence of photographers and videographers also was banned at civil ceremonies. Instead of one or both 'official' witnesses, it was the photographer or photographers who participated in the ceremony. Competing with this line-up was the 'witnessing' of parents, especially of mothers, in cases when they could not have attended their children's wedding in any other way due to severe restrictions at the local level. The 'witnessing' of photographers was supported by both couples and wedding service providers, albeit with different intentions: 'My God, let the photographer and the videographer be the witnesses. At most, they won't be in the photos, but at least professional shots will be taken' (wedding service provider, 18 April 2020); '[...] For my part, I'm going to bring the photographer into the wedding ceremony come hell or high water. If I must, I will "adopt him" as my "brother" for the duration as – what a surprise! – he knows a bit about photography. And if it turns out that it really gets bad, I'll pay the fine (there is little chance of that)' (bride, April 18, 2020).¹⁷

2.4.3 Overlooking recognized structures and 'drifting along with the tide'

Overlooking recognized structures primarily meant minor violations of rules and a more or less strategic application of a 'philosophy' of willful ignorance: namely, if you don't ask about something, you cannot get a negative answer. Thus, for example, it often happened that

17 Members of wedding planning Facebook group.

the couple to be married invited more people to the civil ceremony (which had a defined maximum number of attendees) than were allowed in the hope that they would still be admitted. Often such moves turned out to be successful. Also, small weddings were secretly held in the courtyards of private single-family houses, or at restaurants that had an outdoor space, and many people did not bother to wear a mask. These practices and ideologies of disregarding recognized structural constraints directly contradict 'classical' studies that posit the structural determination of individual decision-making, as are well known from the social science literature of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s (Goodenough, 1955; Freeman, 1961; Horowitz, 1967; Howard, 1970). However, in the present case we are not merely dealing with the passive acceptance of structural constraints, but much rather with an active strategy and/or normative ideology that leads to and legitimates the temporary suspension of one's own agency in decision-making due to the uncertainty and the difficulty of making choices under these circumstances. Many of the difficulties and anxieties associated with decisions and choices can be avoided by drifting along with the tide, allowing events to take their course, as ever-changing structural constraints allow us to act when decisions must eventually be taken. 'Letting go' of control was often associated with the religious or spiritual notion that Fate or God would decide the outcome. 'So now I'm like, let's flow with the tide, as has been discussed, wait until June, and if we see in June that this whole thing isn't going to work, let's finally just forget about this year, and then let's just prepare for 2021.'¹⁸

2.4.4 Attempts to transform structures

One of the most spectacular examples of attempting to effect change in legal-political structures was an online petition that responded to a government announcement on April 30, with which the signatories – mostly prospective brides and wedding service providers – wanted to make it possible to plan for and hold spring-summer weddings and wedding receptions. In their own interpretation, they were successful. The petition that was started on the initiative of a wedding service provider (a wedding planner) was signed by about 13,000 people, mostly brides and service providers (as well as family members, friends, and grooms). Two weeks after the launch of the petition, the partial lifting of the earlier regulations and restrictions followed: as a result, from June 1 in the countryside and from June 15 in Budapest the wedding season could begin. 'Thank you to everyone who supported our initiative by signing. In the countryside and in Pest County as well, from 06.01 the government will allow wedding receptions to be held with up to 200 people. Congratulations to all engaged couples' – stated the initiator of the petition on May 14, and the signatories themselves interpreted the newly introduced easing of the restrictions as a success, and as a genuine change in structural constraints. However, this can also be contextualized differently. The significant decline in the number of weddings that was also discernible at the level of CSO statistics and manifested in the mass postponement and cancellation of civil ceremonies may also have influenced the legislators. I would argue that all of this may have played a significant role in easing restrictions on weddings, as the government narrative supports an increase in the number of marriages and, with this, birth rates.

18 Interview excerpt, woman, approximately 30, Budapest, May 8, 2020.

2.5 How do decision-making ideologies and strategies work?

Finally, it is also important to realize that the decision-making strategies outlined above and the practices that follow from them are not exclusive; they appear in succession or simultaneously as alternatives that appear and reappear, situationally, numerous times among the practices of marriage planners. Thus, for example, one of my interviewees in Budapest sometimes put her plans on hold during the COVID period and surrendered to the decision-making situations brought about by structural constraints, and at other times (by even signing the online petition) attempted to change the structural constraints, while at the same time actively researching contemporary wedding practices with an eye to adapting them to her reorganization plans. Thus, she thoroughly researched how a *lakodalom* 'detached' from a wedding ceremony would work, and thought about how all this was compatible with her own preconceived notions. In possession of the information, she also produced B and C plans (postponement by an entire year as opposed to by a few months, holding a civil wedding at the original time, postponing the wedding reception). Finally, her civil wedding and wedding reception were held in July 2020 on two consecutive days, in a manner similar to her original plans – the first day a civil wedding, the second day a confirmation ceremony with a ceremony leader – on the date that was originally planned. My interlocutor in Kaposvár also put her plans on hold several times, postponing or suspending decision-making on the grounds of uncertain, ever-changing decrees, and then in the wake of the April 30 new decree banning events until August 15 decided to adopt an alternative wedding strategy as a Plan B (church and civil wedding ceremonies on the original date, wedding reception with confirmation ceremony with a ceremony leader postponed by a year). Then, following the lifting of the wedding restrictions in May, the couple decided on holding the *lakodalom*, church and civil wedding on the original date, in August. Thus, as we have seen in the previous examples, decisions and choices leading to decisions are not one-off events but rather multi-directional processes accompanied by a series of considerations (cf. Luhmann, 1995, pp. 296–297; 2005, pp. 85–89) – although what Luhmann did not deeply take into account was that these choices are all closely related to the reflexive recognition and evaluation of structuring conditions and, as we have also seen, to an active search for and the innovative creation of opportunities and the information leading to them.

3. Conclusion

So, what is the reason for the otherness and similarity of COVID weddings? During the quarantine period, from the legislative point of view, the primary goal was to ensure the ease of getting married in a legally valid way (without services), acquiring proof of legal marriage, and 'obtaining the papers.' This legal-political will of the legislature was confronted with the different interpretations of the complex notion of *lakodalom* by wedding planners and wedding service providers, as well as by betrothed couples and related needs that point beyond a desire to merely obtain papers. We have seen that despite – or rather in the face of – changed circumstances, the majority of couples adhered to the ideas and dreams associated with their 'original' 'habitual' (cf. Bourdieu, 1977) ideas, while a smaller proportion of them gave up on more expensive, unnecessary, redundant services, choosing cheaper and absolutely necessary ones instead. They did this because their primary preferences, expectations, and ideas encountered economic and legal constraints, and circumstances beyond their control hindered their implementation. They sought new opportunities, new and adaptable patterns, and in the meantime they recognized and interpreted the structural constraints that could potentially influence their weddings,

maneuvered between them, or just circumvented them; while at other times seeking to create new structures through their individual and community practices.

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