

Why Having a Big Wedding in America Is a Moral Failure

The average American wedding costs over \$36,000 (Benveniste and Forrest). Half the world lives on less than \$3 a day (“Profits at the Bottom of the Pyramid”). Spending enormous amounts of money on weddings represents a moral failure because it wastes resources, reinforces harmful social pressures, and perpetuates inequality.

You might be wondering why I’m targeting weddings specifically and not other forms of excessive spending like splurging on cars, collectable items, etc. A collectible item is on your shelf for a long time. A car is a tool that you can use to increase both your wealth and health and can be used for YEARS. But even then, most people have differing opinions on how much to spend on a car and a lot of people don’t collect expensive items. However, weddings are consistently the one thing people from many different cultures and incomes splurge on and justify splurging on. It is considered to many the most important day of your life and therefore it is justified by the couple, the families of the couple, and other people important to the couple to spend a considerable amount on that day. It’s almost like the value of your dollar goes down as it doesn’t matter how much something costs because it’s for the ‘one special day’. And yes, the same argument could be made for a \$36,000 car but if we consider the utility of a car, the cost of one spread through the car’s lifespan is relatively worth it if it’s used to transport you to make more income (or you can sell the car and make a good chunk back). That is a justification that cannot be made within the wedding argument because you cannot spread the cost of a wedding out to multiple years and the only way to make money back is to hope your gifts can break your bill even. Even then, it is still a day (or a few depending on culture) that this enormous bill is being racked up for and even if somehow you broke even, it was just for fleeting pleasure and

the money seriously could've gone to something else that would've increased the overall happiness of the world.

The wedding industry is a multibillion dollar industry in America, adding around \$70 billion to the economy (“Weddings: Billion Dollar Business”). This differs for each family as some cultures call for extremely extravagant weddings. The cost of a wedding planner can go from \$1,000 to \$20,000 (“Consumer Reports”). The specific wedding expenses like flowers, venue, food, etc. are recorded to be marked up simply because it's a wedding (Scafidi). Flower girl petals can cost around \$20 (“How Much Do Wedding Flowers Cost”). The reason why is that the wedding industry promotes us to believe that the more you spend, the longer your marriage will be (Scafidi). However, the pressure to overspend may not always come from the wedding industry itself. In many cases, it comes from social expectations within families or cultural communities. Parents may want to show off or celebrate their child's wedding at a standard that matches what others in their community have done. In this way, spending becomes a signal of love, status, or respectability rather than simply a personal choice. Couples who want smaller ceremonies often feel trapped by the fear of disappointing others.

When resources are allocated to trivial symbolic gestures such as spending \$20 on flower petals for a brief aesthetic moment while billions lack access to clean water, the moral imbalance becomes clear. For a minute or two of watching a young child throw petals, another child is dying of diarrhea. No, that is not a joke. Diarrhea is an entirely preventable disease, yet annually 400-450k children die from it every year from a lack of clean water (World Health Organization). Distance or social familiarity does not lessen our moral obligation to act (Singer). Extravagant weddings amplify moral distance by allowing us to feel moral innocence while ignoring preventable suffering. It brings back the simple moral point that if you can prevent a child's

death at little cost to yourself, you are morally required to do so (Singer). Choosing extravagance while knowing your money could save lives shows a failure to apply this concept. Some might argue that an expensive wedding is simply financially unwise, not morally wrong. But moral philosophy asks us to consider why prudence becomes a moral question. If moral progress, as Singer and Appiah both suggest, requires expanding our circle of concern beyond ourselves, then ignoring that duty is not just wasteful, it is ethically negligent. When we have the ability to redirect resources toward saving lives or reducing suffering, continuing to indulge in excess transforms what could be a neutral act into a moral failure. A frequent topic of my peers is wealth inequality perpetuated by billionaires. I think this argument can be scaled down to talk about our financial decisions when it comes to spending on extravagant weddings. In my BA 445 class, I watched a video on how a family in rural Kenya lives daily. Despite the mother and father working over 12-16 hours a day, the family can only afford a two pound bag of beans to divide between eight members of the family for a couple of days (London). That family brings home less than two dollars a day despite the mother and father both working extremely hard. Is that family less deserving of food the same way that you are deserving of an extravagant wedding? The answer to the previous question is no. That family is not less deserving of food and yet they still don't have access to food. That is not a fault of their own but the fault of wealth distribution in the world. We push anger onto billionaires but we lack awareness of holding a huge portion of wealth if we have the capital to have an extravagant wedding. Also, the global inequality we see today is a direct consequence of history of exploitation, colonialism, and imperialism, which means that we DO owe it to those who were harmed to use our wealth responsibly and give back.

Beyond responsibility, a further consequence is that it encourages psychological harm to the couple as the couple starts spending more and more to try and please the guests, when in reality it's about the couple themselves. Extravagant weddings also create psychological harm by trapping couples in cycles of debt and obligation. What is for the couple a major financial and emotional burden is reduced to nothing more than an Instagram post for the guests. Social pressures work the same way as social proof: when everyone around you is engaging in excess, it feels necessary to follow, even when it causes harm. There have also been studies that found an inverse relationship between money spent on wedding and engagement celebrations and long lasting marriages. The idea that money should be an indicator of love is blatant manipulation from the wedding industry. In fact, it is shown that the costs from a wedding can create more stress in a relationship leading to divorces and separations (Francis and Mialon).

“But, I need to have a big wedding! I deserve it!”

You might be thinking, is this my problem or is this the problem of the Fortune 500? You know that if those companies had the willpower to do something, this paper wouldn't exist. Those companies are making so much money that could easily eradicate issues of the world, and yet these issues of the world still exist. So when others aren't taking responsibility, you have to. Just because someone else isn't doing the right thing doesn't mean you're not obligated to do so too. We cannot be complicit in the injustices around the world. Our money is our voice and how we spend it indicates our values. We are very clear in our beliefs when we decide that flower petals are worth more than a life.

Let's think about eating meat for a second. It's bad for the environment, it's morally wrong, there are easy substitutions, etc. The biggest reason why we don't stop eating meat is

because we love the taste of meat and convenience. There are different ways we can justify it too, like cultural norms, but the truth is we know that eating meat is just morally wrong. Philosophers call this the “meat paradox,” when people fail to acknowledge something is harmful and continue doing it. May and Kumar identify this as motivated reasoning: our tendency to defend pleasurable but harmful habits by distorting our moral judgments (May and Kumar). Similarly, social proof convinces us that lavish weddings are morally acceptable simply because they are common. We know we’re doing it purely out of pleasure and personal desire, and we know deep down that it’s wrong to spend that much money for a day that lasts only 24 hours. But we do it anyway, justifying it by saying it’s part of our culture, everyone does it, it has religious significance, we deserve it, it makes us happy, or we have the income to afford it. In the end, it’s not you who suffers if you do have the wedding the same way you don’t suffer if you eat the meat. You’re increasing your pleasure at the cost of others suffering.

If we want to dive into the honor side of it and the cultural side, we can look at footbinding. Sure, having a wedding isn’t the same as physical pain forced against you, but we saw how this tradition was continued with minimal protesting even though it was wrong. Not every cultural tradition is honorable, even though our previous generations want to convince us so. Footbinding ended not because people suddenly realized it hurt, but because the practice shifted from being honorable to being shameful. Weddings function the same way: they continue not because people don’t see the waste, but because they are framed as honorable and celebratory. Progress will mean reframing them as dishonorable (Appiah). If I see someone buying Shein for a party theme, I would call them out for it because they are complicit in harming another individual in the world for fleeting pleasure. If I see someone buying Shein for a homeless person, I would still call them out, because they are still complicit in the harm, even

if their intentions were entirely different. There are other alternatives, like thrifting, that ultimately cause less harm in the world. This is how I think we should view the cultural differences in the regards of an extravagant wedding, as even though the intentions may be drastically different, in the end that family still has enough capital to spend an egregious amount on a day and that is still causing harm in the world.

What is an ethical wedding then?

Big weddings are not just personal choices but cultural practices shaped by honor codes, social proof, and motivated reasoning. Like dueling, footbinding, or excessive meat consumption, they continue because they are tied to honor, motivated reasoning, and the capitalist wedding industry. An ethical wedding is one where one avoids spending unreasonable amounts on usual items. If you were to buy a regular dress, you may spend anywhere from \$12 to \$100 on it. A wedding dress could reasonably be a bit more expensive, but you shouldn't spend anything over a grand on it. And there are more options too: you could rent the dress, you can thrift it and work with a seamstress for alterations (or learn to do it yourself!). These approaches apply across many cultural traditions. For instance, Facebook Marketplace has so many second-hand lehengas at significantly discounted prices for South Asian weddings. If the wedding culture is big within one's culture, maybe asking the extended family if they have clothes might make it more affordable, as they are likely to have those clothes. Other cost-saving strategies include asking a friend skilled in make-up to do your make-up for your wedding and paying her \$50-100 or asking her to do it in replacement of a gift, borrowing jewelry from family and friends, or asking a florist for flowers (without mentioning it's for a wedding) and working with friends and family to create bouquets/arrangements. It may sound like you're depending on your friends and family to make your wedding happen, but your family and friends should be

happy to do this because they (should) care about you and not want to put a huge hole in your wallet to appease them!

Beyond these smaller cost-saving steps, when inviting guests, let them know that it is a smaller wedding and that they were picked to be invited because their presence matters to the couple. Include a statement in your wedding invitation or website explaining why you've chosen a simpler or more purposeful celebration, inviting guests to join you in prioritizing joy over expense. Work with your wedding party to agree on a dress code for everyone, such as choosing colors that allow people to re-wear outfits or purchase secondhand, so no one feels pressured to buy expensive attire. Create a time of gratitude by publicly thanking and spotlighting vendors and friends who help create meaningful or community-focused elements at your wedding.

Supporting this, Appiah shows that moral revolutions happen when practices once tied to honor become shameful, seen in the end of dueling or footbinding. The same cultural reframing can apply to weddings. A more aggressive approach to redefine honor can be asking questions like “You’re really going to spend that much on a wedding?” and “Do you know the condition of our world right now?”.

But if guilt feels sour, we can collectively redefine what is honorable. Choosing simplicity over extravagance should become a badge of virtue, while splurging should become a mark of ignorance. Change happens fastest when “exemplars” (like respected elders, religious leaders, celebrities) within a community display new valued behaviors (Appiah). So encourage couples of the season or respected community leaders to set examples with the new wedding norms we want to see so other people feel comfortable to follow. Or you can be a trendsetter!

At a friend level, if you are in a group of friends who are beginning to think about marriage and you know your opinion is valued, talk openly about budget boundaries and what

means the most to you, so that others feel empowered to celebrate intentionally without fear of being seen as ‘cheap’.

We can also create an ‘us versus them’ situation. Average people versus capitalist America. We start encouraging people to say no to spending an extra \$100 for this bridal bouquet because we know it is the same as a regular bouquet; the florist just decided to add the wedding tax. The florist who lives in America can survive if you don’t pay for their wedding tax, but that family in rural Kenya may not survive if they don’t get more food. We encourage people to start saying no to the extras. ‘No Instagram, I do not need a disposable camera at each table of my wedding.’ ‘No Instagram, I do not need three different dresses for the same day.’ We make a stand against Uncle Sam trying to convince us to spend more money in the name of love.

With the money you save, you can utilize it for other things. Perhaps it is increasing your income to create enough momentum for large-scale advocacy for change. Perhaps it is simply donating plenty to a charity you have researched thoroughly. I think the most impactful option, though, is reinvesting it into the base of the pyramid by supporting businesses that are working intentionally to co-create with locals of these rural communities that are struggling financially. There are so many incredible initiatives out there, like the Othakarhaka Foundation.

Ultimately, moral progress requires redefining weddings as dishonorable and unnecessary, shifting our sense of what is honorable away from consumerism and toward compassion and responsibility. Calling weddings a moral failure is not about party pooping; it is about redirecting what we celebrate. True honor lies not in how much we can afford to give others a good time but in how much good we can do with what we have. Reimagining our wedding days might be one of the simplest yet most meaningful acts of progress we can make.

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