

**The Filipina-South Floridian
International Internet Marriage Practice:
Agency, Culture, and Paradox**

Pamela S. Haley

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*The Filipina-South Floridian International Internet Marriage Practice:
Agency, Culture, and Paradox*

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation concerns the structures and individual agency of Filipina brides who met their American husbands through Internet or pen pal advertisements. Popular media, legal scholars, and some feminists have largely described the phenomenon in terms of its oppressiveness toward the women involved, thus dismissing any agency on the part of the women. Similarly, much of the scholarship has located the American Internet grooms as ogres who are out to exploit these women for domestic and sexual services. If prominent researchers of this phenomenon are correct in their assessments that Filipina Internet brides operate as effective agents, then one also assumes these women continue that agency when they settle into their new lives

as Filipina wives married to American men. Therefore, my central research question is: How has this agency manifested itself, and has this manifestation been problematic for the American groom, who, from the typical Internet ad's text and images and coupled with prevailing American cultural assumptions, assumed he was getting a submissive wife? To explore possible answers to these questions I performed a rhetorical analysis of two typical Internet advertisements. The focus on the ads is important to my study because the Internet advertisements both shape and reflect the popular view of the so-called Filipina "mail-order bride." Next, in order to gain the Internet brides' and grooms' perspectives of the phenomenon, I interviewed three Filipina-American couples currently living in South Florida between November, 2005, and October, 2007.

My findings support the scholars who forefront the brides' agency and, therefore, reject the stereotypes projected on the Internet advertisements. My findings also reject the stereotype of the exploitative husband. From my interview data, the women appeared agentive and the men encouraged their wives' agency. An unanticipated and paradoxical outcropping of the interviews was the participants' descriptions of their courtship and subsequent marriages. In this one area both the brides and grooms unanimously deemphasized their own agency, and instead highlighted romantic narratives with each insisting that they had "fallen in love."

DEDICATION

This manuscript is dedicated to my late mother, Helen Sullivan Rogers, who, even though she did not live to see me graduate, had always encouraged me to pursue this goal.

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THE FILIPINA-SOUTH FLORIDIAN INTERNATIONAL INTERNET MARRIAGE PRACTICE: AGENCY, CULTURE, AND PARADOX

When you buy a horse, an ox, a dog, clothes and a bed, even a cup and a pitcher, you get the chance to look them over. But no one displays a bride, lest she displease before the marriage.

Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION

The above misogynistic medieval quote may have been applicable in Chaucer's "The Wife of Bath's Prologue," but today brides are often literally displayed in a format that Chaucer could have never imagined—the World Wide Web. A January, 2008, Google search with the key words *mail-order brides* yielded over 250,000 web addresses. An advanced Google search limiting the search to .com sites with the keywords *Filipina brides* rendered over 82,000 hits. These simple Internet searches suggest that procuring a wife from an international Internet bride advertisement is a novel yet burgeoning marriage practice that has emerged during the last few decades. For example, in the 1990s the number of online matchmaking companies grew exponentially (Schaeffer-Grabiel 331). The majority of these web sites consists of businesses that assist Western men in procuring foreign brides, most of whom come from First and Second World countries. Today, most brides are from the Philippines and most grooms from

the United States (Chun 1). Indeed, the international Internet bride phenomenon has become so common in the Philippines that in 1990 the Philippine Congress passed *Republic Act No. 6955* which states that it is unlawful to match Filipino women for marriage to foreigners on a mail-order basis (“Republic Act No. 6955” Legal News Page”). In 2006, President George W. Bush signed the Violence against Women and Department of Justice Reauthorization Act of 2005. Title VIII of VAWA 2005 is entitled, “Protection of Battered and Trafficked Immigrants,” and contains Subtitle D, “International Marriage Broker Regulation.” (U.S. Dept. of Homeland Security Interoffice Memorandum)

Purpose and Justification

The scholarly debate concerning this type of international bride practice has largely focused on human agency versus victimization, with the majority of scholars emphasizing the bride as exploited, commodified, and even trafficked. The victimization approach locates these women as victims—specifically victims of unscrupulous web site businesses, but more broadly victims of a set of structural forces over which these women have little or no control. Conversely, the agency approach situates these women as human agents who, although they are relatively powerless and easily victimized, are nevertheless actively attempting to escape a bleak future of what they see as dead-end lives in the

Philippines. Advertising themselves on international Internet web sites or joining pen pal organizations is a step towards getting out of the Philippines and poverty.

Generally, this dissertation concerns female agency and the overriding structures that both initiate and constrain that agency. Scholars have examined the international bride phenomenon from both the human agency and social structure approaches and found that neither of these perspectives alone is sufficiently nuanced to capture the complexity of these women's lives and choices.¹ Social scientists have increasingly avoided dichotomizing social phenomena as either agency or structure (Wharton 373), as clearly both the structural and agentic are necessary when analyzing a social phenomenon. Hence, my research will avoid taking a contrastive stance in favor of one approach over the other, but it will offer a synthesis of this often conflicting dualism. In other words, my paper will not be a debate over the primacy of Filipina individual agency over local or global structures or vice versa. Instead, drawing on Giddens' 1984 structuration theory (169), I posit that the overarching structures of the Filipina brides' experience are both enabling and constraining—enabling in that the Filipina brides have managed to muster enough resources to act in their self-interests, but undoubtedly constrained by a plethora of social rules by which they must abide.

Feminist theory teaches that patriarchal structures tend to impede women's self-determining agency (Meyers 5). For example, external structures such as colonial values that honored virginity, fidelity, and patriarchy have been internalized to produce a certain kind of agency, an agency that feminists might argue is negative or that Bourdieu might argue is illusory (81). Clearly, structural forces shape all of our lives regardless of whether we recognize them or not. As my literature review suggests, individual agency is indeed a factor in the Filipina-American international marriage practice. However, structural factors, beginning with the gendered history of the Philippines, ultimately encompass and fashion events leading up to the Filipina placing her picture, height, weight, education level, and so forth on international Internet web sites in the hopes of attracting a Western male.

Specifically, my research will examine the Filipina international bride experience from an angle which social scientists have not yet explored. If social anthropologists such as Constable and Roces are correct in their assessment that Filipina Internet brides operate as effective agents despite the structural forces that constrain them, then one must also assume these women continue that agency when they settle into their new lives as Filipina wives married to American men. Therefore, my central research question is: How has this agency manifested itself, and has this manifestation been problematic for the American

groom, who, from the typical Internet ad's texts and images and coupled with prevailing American cultural assumptions, assumed he was getting a submissive wife? Has this human agency of which Constable speaks, and that I suspect the brides themselves will claim, been denied or preserved in their new roles as American wives?

So far, the narratives of the couples involved in international matchmaking agencies have been produced by others and not the couples themselves. For example, we have learned about the couples through web site creators, newspaper reports, legislative action which focuses on those who have been abused, and even the academy. However, few of these sources have solicited the perspectives of the couples involved. This study highlights and analyzes the narratives and experiences of three Filipina-American married couples whom I met through Internet matchmaking agencies or pen pal organizations and whom I interviewed between November, 2005, and October, 2007. An unexpected and paradoxical outcropping of these interviews occurred when all six informants described their courtship experiences as romantic despite the agentive strategies each took in procuring a spouse.

Definition of Terms

By *international marriage practice* and drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's

practice theory (Barfield 376), I am referring to strategic acts of foreign women who meet their husbands through international introduction businesses, commonly referred to as *mail-order bride* web sites or pen pal organizations. I use the term *structure* throughout this dissertation to refer to both the social systems that form meaningful connections between individuals and the historical and cultural forces which guide human behavior. As will be explained below, in the case of the Filipina I am concerned with both familial and communal beliefs and practices as well as colonial and post-colonial events that have contributed to her set of circumstances. Within the term *structure*, as mentioned above, I will draw upon the theory of Anthony Giddens who recognizes the duality of structure and agency and concludes that one impacts the other. In addition, I will apply Sharon Hays' 1994 analysis which includes cultural beliefs (58) as also encompassing structural forces. Even though culture is usually associated with a micro-study of a group, culture also entails structural forces such as religion, government, and kinship. As Ortner points out, "agency is always culturally and historically constructed" (136). Ahearn suggests that the term *agency* can have various meanings. However, generally, I use the term to refer to the kind of actor who has a certain amount of control over her future. Juxtaposed against *social structure*, I am referring to an individual's power to negotiate, redefine, transform, challenge, or even resist the social structures that surround her.

Similarly, and again drawing on Ortner's current work, the actors possess a conscious intentionality to achieve a set of planned goals (134). As MacLeod notes,

even as subordinate players, [women] always play an active part that goes beyond the dichotomy of victimization/acceptance, a dichotomy that flattens out a complex and ambiguous agency in which women accept, accommodate, ignore, resist, or protest—sometimes all at the same time. (qtd. in Ahearn 116)

In addition, as implied above, I avoid essentializing the terms *agency* and *structure* as binary opposites. My literature review will demonstrate how the Filipina international bride's agency can only operate from within a set of structural constraints that are beyond her control. In other words, individuals act within the limits imposed upon them by the historical, cultural, and societal structures that surround them (Wardlow 5).

Similar to Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*, Strauss and Quinn theorize how socialization processes manipulate individuals and how individuals manipulate culture. In other words, individuals are not totally bound by structure, but neither are they totally unbound by the possibility of choice. According to Strauss and Quinn, we are not robots whose actions are ruled by cultural edicts. Social actors, in fact, make deliberate choices and control their environments—to

a degree. But the motivation to act depends on an internalized set of schemas embedded within actors' perceptions of and their worlds (38). Expanding on Bourdieu's *habitus*, Strauss and Quinn label their schemas as intrapersonal and extrapersonal knowledge. For them these schemas involve humans' reactions to their situations based on: (1) their intrapersonal, or what they know; and (2) their extrapersonal, or their social and physical environments. Humans, they assert, are in constant negotiations within these two realms of cognition (45).

Along with Bourdieu, Ortner, and other scholars of the structure-agency interplay, Strauss and Quinn provide us with yet another understanding of the dynamics that guide human behavior. They argue that humans can actively choose to support the imperatives of social structures. Social actors can indeed accept, resist, or engender change depending on the situations in which they find themselves. Contrary to earlier structuralists, Strauss and Quinn place more emphasis on individual human agency and offer explanations of how human beings actively engage in, but also consent to, their cultural/structural forces.

Besides clarifying structure and agency terminology, two other lexical problems require clarification. Through my initial stages of research I quickly learned that the term *mail-order bride* is problematic and highly contested in that it disparages the women involved. Leo R. Chavez reminds us that the mainstream has the power to negatively define groups and therefore exclude

them from the mainstream (119). A term like *mail-order bride* gives the brides an unwelcomed identity based on negatives which sharply contrast with the mainstream narrative of traditional brides and traditional marriage, casting both the Filipina bride and her American husband as outsiders. As Henrietta Moore affirms and drawing on Edwin Ardener's theory of muted groups:

...dominant groups in society generate and control the dominant modes of expression. Muted groups are silenced by the structures of dominance, and if they wish to express themselves they are forced to do so through the dominant modes of expression, the dominant ideologies. (3)

Constable found many of her informants were offended by the term in that it stereotypes the women as desperately poor and the men as exploitative losers (Romance on a Global Stage 2-3). Piper and Roces point out that labeling these women reduces them to "brides" and therefore ignores their roles as agentive women (6). Simons argues that the term is simultaneously used and condemned by women's advocacy groups (58) but concludes that while the term can be misleading, replacing it with a less offensive term could alter the distinct connotation of the phenomenon (Ordonez qtd. in Simons 59).

The term is also problematic in the sense that it connotes men ordering wives from a catalog. Although e-catalogs are used, typically these businesses

introduce couples who correspond, meet, and then decide if they will marry one another. Still, numerous writings, both journalistic and scholarly, refer to the practice as such. Therefore, as is the case with much of the English lexicon, some sexist terminology is unavoidable. I concur that the phrase may seem to contribute to the pejorative discourse describing women who meet American men through the Internet or pen pal clubs, since it tends to entrap the reader in perpetrator/victim or active/passive dichotomies. This study will challenge these dichotomies and present the Filipina international bride in an alternative portrayal and depict the great diversity among Filipinas' immigrant Internet/pen pal marriage experiences. Because of this controversy, I have refrained from consistently using the term *mail-order bride* as it is considered by many to cast a stigma on foreign women who meet their husbands via the Internet.² I will further explore this perceived stigma in my dissertation as it is an indirect topic of several of my interview questions.

In a similar vein, I use the term *Filipinas* although noting that this term is a result of Spanish colonial rule of the Philippines (Daly 229), and is therefore contested by Filipina feminists. Of course, even the term the *Philippines* could justifiably be contested because the Spanish colonizers named the islands the Philippines in honor of Spain's King Philip II.

I chose the topic of Filipina international brides because it encompasses

several themes of the public intellectual discourse such as: (a) gender and class, (b) colonialism and neocolonialism, and (c) social structure and human agency. Consequently, I am also interested in the structural frameworks of the Filipina Internet bride phenomenon and the individual agency that accepts some structures while rejecting others. The brides' experiences cannot be understood without examining them holistically through these frameworks. In addition, the topic satisfies a personal interest concerning sociological and anthropological aspects of marriage processes. I also selected South Florida Filipinas for two purely instrumental reasons: first, the Filipino ethnicity is well-represented in South Florida, which would therefore allow some access to my target group; and second, because English is taught in Filipino schools, many Filipinas speak English fluently, allowing for more efficient communication between my informants and me.

Chapter 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

In order to examine the Filipina bride's agency and the social structures that both constrain and support that agency, I will examine the international bride scholarly literature that has been developed from two perspectives: (a) the majority of authors who position international Internet brides as exploited victims of the inherent structural inequalities that exist between the more powerful consumer-husband and the disempowered, Third World object-bride; and (b) the minority of authors who acknowledge the coercive structural forces that shape the brides' circumstances, but reject the victimhood discourse. This latter group of authors emphasizes the agency these women demonstrate by taking control of their lives and acting in their own self-interests.

In addition, I will be examining the scholarly articles that have analyzed "mail-order bride" web sites and the ads' projection of the brides as submissive. This analysis is critical to my study because these Internet advertisements serve two functions: (a) they reflect cultural assumptions about marriage in general and the brides in particular; (b) they are the first step in the international Internet marriage practice.

I could only find one book (anthropologist Nicole Constable's Romance on a

Global Stage), two doctoral dissertations, and several scholarly journal articles devoted exclusively to the subject of international Internet brides from a perspective that did not emphasize victimhood. Besides Constable these works produced by scholars such as Nicola Piper, Mina Roces, and Lisa Simons argue that the “woman as victim” school of thought is reductive in that it fails to recognize the bride’s agency. They imply that the international bride practice is not as oppressive to women as women’s rights groups claim. Although these scholars recognize the global structures that contribute to the practice, they suggest that the international bride market is not victimizing because the women “choose” to participate. They assert that the women place themselves on the web sites, and in doing so demonstrate that they are not passively accepting their plight in the Philippines. Instead, these women are attempting to improve their lives and are thereby acting as intentional agents in the shaping of their own destinies. Constable argues that labeling these women as victims denies their agency, or any individual power that the women act upon in the international Internet marriage practice. Therefore, she concludes, some feminist groups unintentionally contribute to the subordinating discourse about Third World women (65).

There are also several articles that critique the Internet bride web sites and bride catalogs, the apparatuses seemingly responsible for the proliferation of the

recent increase in the international matchmaking phenomenon. International Internet bride web site deconstruction is essential to my research because the web site advertisements simultaneously function as: (1) components in agentive processes; (2) reinforcements of constraining social structures; and (3) manifestations of Orientalist representations. Most of the articles critiquing the web sites can be classified within the exploitation camp, at least in terms of examining the structural dynamics that place the women in subordinate positions. For example, the authors point out how these sites reinforce Western patriarchal hegemonic structures represented by the ubiquitous colonial, romantic, and anti-feminist texts and images. Paradoxically, these sites also support the brides' agency by providing a space for the brides to act. Posting their profiles on the web sites is the first step in changing their lives. This review begins by exploring the articles that examine these web sites followed by a discussion of international Internet brides as both agents and victims.

The Web Sites

Articles about matchmaking web sites are critical to my literature review because, as previously stated, these sites are where actors begin the international Internet bride process. As mentioned above, there are numerous Internet "mail-order bride" advertisements, and most web site analysts situate the women as

passive victims and the men, in collusion with the web sites, as exploiters.

However, there is a growing minority who challenge this assertion, which will be discussed in more detail later on in this dissertation.

R. Vartti conducted a study of 60 German matchmaking Internet businesses and differentiates between egalitarian and non-egalitarian German Internet bride web sites. According to Vartti, egalitarian web sites tend to: (1) target people with little to no differences in power or economic level; (2) exclude photographs; and (3) operate as non-commercial pen-pal clubs (55). In contrast, she notes, non-egalitarian sites are characterized by offering poor women to relatively rich men as commodities to be sold and even traded up. For example, many of the latter sites have periodic marketing promotions during which they promote pictures of new women in their catalog picture galleries (53). Another non-egalitarian characteristic is that men from rich countries choose women from poor countries with the women advertised as pretty, young, faithful, undemanding, family-oriented, feminine in the “old-fashioned” way, and sexually acquiescent to their husbands. They advertise the women as good cooks and housekeepers, and willing to quickly learn their husband’s language (62). Vartti also points out that the ads typically portray these women in contrast to career-oriented Western feminists (64). She observes that the web site owners adamantly refuse to use terms such as *mail-order brides*, and blames feminists for promoting this