

Sally Smith

Professors Freeman and Harvath

English 2

3 November 2011

The Inequality of the Engagement Ring

The human race has a well known history of placing a monetary value on the participants of marriage, whether it be through a bride price, dowry, or traditional custom. However, many modern cultures look down on such pricing, particularly because marriage is primarily thought of as a loving union, rather than a union of status or economic gain. Yet, in the United States, the common equivalent to such a bride price is the engagement ring. The engagement ring is an expensive symbol of the future husband's commitment, as well as a status symbol of his financial capabilities, as the ring is expected to cost a significant portion of his earning power. Because of its exuberant cost, the ring creates an inherent obligation to faithfulness for the bride-to-be that the future husband does not experience as acutely, which then fosters an innate inequality in the relationship.

When a woman accepts a diamond ring as a symbol of engagement, there are far greater implications by the nature of reciprocity. Author Dean Rieck wrote that Americans live in a culture of circular debt to others in response to their generosity, whether it be paying for a meal or buying an engagement ring. In his article regarding reciprocity he says, "The Rule of Reciprocity firmly states we are all bound – even driven – to repay debts of all kinds" (Rieck). Thus, by this logic, when a woman accepts an engagement ring, she is implicitly agreeing to repay her partner in some form. This starts a relationship in an inherently unequal way.

Not surprisingly, the price of the diamond correlates with the quality of the bride. Researchers Cronk and Dunham found that the priciest rings went to the youngest brides. This suggests that men are willing to pay more to ensure such valuable brides will remain loyal until they officially married. Inherently, the greater the investment by the future groom, the more indebted the future bride will feel, resulting in faithfulness during the engagement.

However, some men would argue that a ring is an important way to tell a future wife that they care. Economist Tyler Cowen discussed the signaling couples do in relationships, specifically as it pertains to buying gifts. Cowen believes that the reason why diamond rings hold so much value to women in the United States is because the rings are completely undesirable to men; thus, the men who purchase them for women are buying them solely to signal affection and commitment (82). However, it is this very value that undermines the equality in a relationship. By the rules of reciprocity, the act of giving a ring puts the giver at a distinct advantage, and this can ensure a one-sided loyalty on the side of the receiver as an unspoken repayment.

It is not gift giving or an expectation of loyalty that causes this inequality. Instead, it is the notion that the engagement ring is only worn by the woman. If both parties were to purchase engagement rings for one another, not only would this foster greater financial equality, it would also signal to friends, family, and acquaintances that both engaged individuals are committed to their future marriage. This equality has greater cultural implications to those wishing to encourage a more egalitarian society.

Works Cited

Cowen, Tyler. *Discover Your Inner Economist: Use Incentives to Fall in Love, Survive Your Next Meeting, and Motivate Your Dentist*. New York: Dutton, 2007. Print.

Cronk, Lee, and Bria Dunham. "Amount Spent on Engagement Rings Reflect Aspects of Male and Female Mate Quality." *Department of Anthropology for Human* 18.2 (2007): 329-33. *Academic Search Premier*. EBSCO. Web. 29 Oct. 2011.

Rieck, Dean. "Influence and Persuasion: The Rule of Reciprocity." *Dean Rieck*. N.pag., n.d. Web. 1 Nov. 2011.