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Creating a Neoliberal Millionaire

Patti Stanger, an “experienced third-generation matchmaker” and former Director of Marketing of Great Expectations, one of the oldest and largest dating services in the United States, is now the founder and CEO of the Millionaire’s Club as well as the executive producer of Bravo’s reality docu-series Millionaire Matchmaker (Stanger, 2015). Millionaire Matchmaker first aired on Bravo in 2008 and is now on its eighth season, continuing to be a wildly successful hit series (Bravo Media LLC, n.d.). Millionaire Matchmaker introduces the audience to successful men and women who are looking for love. The audience then witnesses Stanger’s matchmaking process from casting potential matches to watching the dates themselves. By analyzing the most current season, it is plausible to argue that Millionaire Matchmaker is a reality program that both challenges and disseminates notions of neoliberalism to its audience through its representations of ‘self-made’ millionaires seeking love. Commonplace conceptions of masculinity and femininity are adhered to while also embracing the ideals of the neoliberal subject in the workforce. Wealth, and ultimately love, are naturalized and the result of the individual’s hard work and perseverance, adhering to neoliberal notions of power. Finally, the language used throughout the series symbolically references and privileges an affluent subject.

Reality television programming is one of the most significant sites to construct and negotiate gender discourses while regularly providing a template of gendered neoliberal identities for audiences to adopt (Oullette, 2009, p. 232). These sites often depict and reify to participants and audiences constricting ideals of masculinity and femininity that have been normalized in modern society (Sender & Sullivan, 2008, p. 582; Zurbriggen & Morgan, 2006, p. 2). For example, while The Biggest Loser has an equal amount of women to male contestants,
stereotypical masculine traits and values of hard work are favoured when losing weight – contestants are to push beyond their limits and “workout like a man” (Sender & Sullivan, 2008, p. 580). Furthermore, *What Not to Wear* equips contestants with proper style, clothing, and grooming techniques often targeted towards women, assuming that appearance and self-esteem are traditionally female issues (Sender & Sullivan, 2008, p. 581). As a result, both shows reflect through their casts a stereotypical gender composition that has been normalized (Sender & Sullivan, 2008, p. 582).

These templates articulating orthodox ideas of masculinity and femininity are put forward in the dating advice given on *Millionaire Matchmaker* (Zurbriggen & Morgan, 2006, p. 2). Bachelorettes seeking love on *Millionaire Matchmaker* are most successful when embracing hegemonic ideals of femininity. A female is to refrain from initiating relationships as well as initiating sexual encounters, as this is seen as “too masculine,” which defies standard femininity of passivity (Bravo, 2015). A female should be submissive and “let [the man] be the man” without emasculating him because “men hate to be bullied” (Bravo, 2015). Females in relationships are the ones to remain flexible as opposed to men – “if the [female] does not change, [the male] will leave” (Bravo, 2015). Furthermore, women who encompass a “wish list” of all the qualities they are looking for in a partner should refrain from having one – these put too many expectations upon the male populace (Bravo, 2015).

Likewise, bachelors seeking love on *Millionaire Matchmaker* are most successful when embracing hegemonic ideals of masculinity. In the words of Patti Stanger, “biologically, men are driven to hunt, call shots in the family, and fish” (Matthews, 2015). As a result, men should not be told what to do – instead, they should consciously act; “men do what they have to do [whereas] boys do what they want to do” (Bravo, 2015). For example, Stanger believes that men
are expected to take the lead in a relationship by being “chivalrous gentlemen” who romance the woman; this frequently includes spending copious amounts of money and kissing her on the first date. Thus, romancing a woman demands that a man be sexually forward for “[he has] the penis [in the relationship],” but not promiscuous; individuals are refrained from sexual intercourse before monogamy (Zurbriggen & Morgan, 2006, p. 3). The show advocates that members who fail to follow Stanger’s advice are doomed to remain single. By and large, *Millionaire Matchmaker* projects hegemonic identities where “women have to be Beta and men have to be Alpha” (Bravo, 2015).

Prior to the Western world’s adoption of neoliberalism, males were to be the sole breadwinners of the family while females were restricted to unpaid domestic labour in the private sphere (Oullette, 2009, p. 241). Marking a shift away from women being dependant on men, neoliberalism espouses that all women are capable of independency and the ability to financially support themselves (Oullette, 2009, p. 241). *Millionaire Matchmaker* defies commonplace notions of masculinity and femininity by adhering to these neoliberal standards of equal opportunity and labour in the workplace. While neoliberalism and Stanger promotes the importance of traditional values, marriage and a nuclear family, there is also emphasis on the importance of both partners being self-supporting workers (Oullette, 2009, p. 240). In advocating for dual-income families, the private citizen is accountable for themselves and their economic position in society, decreasing the responsibility of the State and the likelihood of state assistance being utilized (Oullette, 2009, pp. 241-242). Interestingly, those who are self-supporting but not *successful* self-supporting citizens on *Millionaire Matchmaker* are chastised; this differs from other reality programs such as *Judge Judy*, which demonizes poor-lower class individuals receiving public aid (Oullette, 2009, p. 241). While projecting conventional notions of
hegemonic masculinity and femininity, *Millionaire Matchmaker’s* emphasis on dual-income relationships defies normalized stereotypes by perpetuating equality between masculine and feminine neoliberal subjects through the representation of its millionaires.

Bravo is a flourishing channel belonging to NBC Universal Cable Entertainment, “one of the world’s leading media and entertainment companies” (Bravo Media LLC, n.d.). In 2009, it was reported that Bravo experienced a sixteen percent year-to-year increase in young adult viewers, in part due to Bravo’s specific target audience (Smith, 2012, p. 287). Bravo has reached success through its creation of an audience deemed “affluencers” – “[attractive men and women in their late 20s whom are] upscale [with shopping bags and personal digital assistants in hand, passports visible in pockets, dressed casually but stylishly], educated, and living in any top-30 city with a metro mind-set” (Smith, 2012, pp. 291-292). Key traits of “affluencers” include members with high incomes approximating around $100,000 and a great deal of social capital; this includes consuming popular culture and expensive products required of an expensive lifestyle whilst influencing culture as a “taste maker” (Smith, 2012, pp. 289-291).

Although Stanger’s Millionaire Club has drawn an explicit line between its services and the reality series *Millionaire Matchmaker*, there are striking similarities in the construction of an “affluent” Bravo audience prevalent in both (Stanger, 2015). As mentioned previously, there is an emphasis for members of the Millionaire’s Club to be successful and self-sufficient. There are a wide range of professions that are represented on the show, including but not limited to, celebrities, entrepreneurs, business owners, and Fortune 100 moguls (Stanger, 2015). Patti recognized the need for “an exclusive [matchmaking] service where [successful people] are introduced to exceptionally beautiful and intelligent matches in a relaxing, discreet, and confidential manner” (Stanger, 2015). Stanger offers up to five different packages that coincide
with different available services to individuals whom are looking to become members of the Millionaires Club. Services offered by the Millionaires Club include but are not exhaustive to: relationship counselling, image consulting sessions, date coaching sessions, and hypnotherapy sessions (Stanger, 2015). It is important to note that these packages do not include the exhaustive price of all services; a basic mixer as an add-on to Stanger’s package prices is approximately thirty-five thousand dollars (Stanger, 2015). Packages start at twenty-five thousand for six months of “unlimited dating [in the] United States and Canada” and can cost up to one-hundred thousand dollars for a one year membership (Stanger, 2015). It is only after a member pays eighty-five thousand dollars onwards for a Gold or Platinum package that Stanger personally “matches and introduces you to the love of your life” (Stanger, 2015).

It is illustrated on Millionaire Matchmaker and through the package prices of the Millionaires Club that accumulating success and wealth equates to individuals whom are worthy and deserving of love. Frequently on Millionaire Matchmaker, it is only through establishing oneself as financially independent and successful that individuals should start pursuing a partner. Stanger espouses that success in a career stemming from hard work and willpower is what defines an individual. This is a common demand of neoliberalism – everyone has equal opportunity and can succeed so long as they are self-disciplined, have will power, and can work hard (Sender & Sullivan, 2008, p. 580). Success, wealth, and love are thus naturalized and available to everyone so long as the individual’s efforts match their desires (Oullette, 2009, p. 233). It is this perseverance and confidence originating from one’s dedication in their career that should be owned and later applied to relationships. As Millionaire Matchmaker aligns with the Bravo’s desired “affluent” audience, the show applies the neoliberal philosophy that individual determination and diligence are avenues of success for love.
Language can be used as a messenger of a race and/or classed subject. In *America’s Next Top Model* language is used to racialize and class bodies through appropriate categories of speech (Hasinoff, 2008, p. 336). Standard American English, in which *America’s Next Top Model* contestant Danielle was not eloquent in, was “constructed as the unmarked category of speech” privileging White, middle-upper class status (Hasinoff, 2008, p. 336). In doing so, the invisible norms of language generate one body as racially and economically superior to another. Because rural Southern accents are often associated with lower class economics in television, it is an unmarketable quality of Danielle whom is vying to be a top model and therefore she must change accordingly; markers of race and class are acceptable so long as they fit the demands of a specific industry (Hasinoff, 2008, p. 337).

It is important to look elsewhere at the symbolic meaning of language. The term Bravo uses to depict its “affluent” audience is another example of how language can be used as a messenger of class judgement. “Affluencers” begin with the “prototypic member of a particular lifestyle category,” essentializing the characteristics of the target audience to upper-tiered purchasing power along with a high degree of “lifetime value” through consumer-brand loyalty (Smith, 2012, p. 291). This suggests that only “affluent” individuals who have purchasing power and lifetime value are capable of influencing others. This in itself creates an economically superior group while also diminishing the lower-middle class’s ability to lead in society because of their assumed lack of knowledge and experience in affluent conspicuous consumptive practices that are crucial to a neoliberal system (Smith, 2012, p. 288).

In *Millionaire Matchmaker*, language repeatedly references and privileges an affluent subject. There are repetitive references to “real” individuals and their consequent actions – only a “real man” would propose whereas “real people” should focus on having “real” and “regular”
jobs (Bravo, 2015). Stanger’s definition of a “real” job is the professions of the millionaires she represents, along with explicitly stating the professions of lawyers and doctors (Bravo, 2015). A “real” man is one who is established in his profession prior to pursuing an engagement. This language used by Stanger implicitly suggests that those who do not fall under the “affluent” umbrella must continuously work to better themselves and meet “affluent” standards.

Furthermore, in a neoliberal world and on Millionaire Matchmaker, individuals should be working towards an income that allows for conspicuous consumption of expensive goods and services; affluencers are “trenders, spenders, and recommenders” (Smith, 2012, p. 291). As mentioned previously, the language Stanger uses moulds and favours an affluent subject with coinciding consumptive practices whilst producing an inferior classed subject. In doing so, she propagates the neoliberal trope of self-improvement – the self can never be perfected in our lifetime thus we must always consciously self-discipline ourselves to be better (Sender & Sullivan, 2008, p. 582).

There are also repeated references by members on Millionaire Matchmaker of the importance of finding a partner in order to be a “power couple”. One could argue that being a “power couple” is the ultimate goal of a relationship on Millionaire Matchmaker. The term “power couple” often implies characteristics including prosperity, success, and wealth. At the same time, the phrase “power couple” denotes ideas of affection and love, which is the supposed goal of dating reality shows, including Millionaire Matchmaker. Instead, there is an emphasis on owning power. Power is essential to capitalism which is essential to a neoliberal society. In a neoliberal society, power is supposedly available to everyone through hard work (Hasinoff, 2008, p. 339). Instead, power is often only available to those who are the most affluent and seldom available to the lower economic classes. Through Bravo’s use of symbolic language as a
program service and on its program *Millionaire Matchmaker*, a neoliberal affluent subject is privileged.

Overall, Bravo has successfully created a reality docu-series that promotes the tropes of neoliberalism that now dominates in our Western society. *Millionaire Matchmaker* projects hegemonic ideals of masculinity and femininity in relationships, yet defies these gendered categories by advocating for equal opportunity and labour between genders in the workforce. Wealth and love are naturalized processes on *Millionaire Matchmaker* that result from individual effort and fortitude, aligning with the neoliberal belief that anyone can succeed so long as they work for it. Through Bravo’s construction of an “affluent” audience, the language used on *Millionaire Matchmaker* favours an affluent body that is able to enhance the economy with their conspicuous consumptive practices that are fundamental to a neoliberal market. It is evident that a relationship is no longer just a relationship on *Millionaire Matchmaker*. Instead, a relationship has become a “project of normalizing and legitimating neoliberalism through cultural tropes and narratives” of gender, wealth, and language (Hasinoff, 2008, p. 339).
References


