Joanna Coker, psychologist and relationship expert, discusses her involvement in ‘Married at First Sight’ the new documentary series from Channel 4

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As humans we are naturally curious about others and their motivations and behaviours. This curiosity has in recent years led to reality TV shows being an increasingly popular genre. People love to watch shows such as "Big Brother House", and marvel at the antics of those who participate. However, behind the scenes we must remember these are real people and there can be negative consequences to appearing on TV for the participants as well as positive ones.

The new channel 4 show "Married at First Sight" could be seen as a case in point. Couples are paired by science and then marry having never met, naturally there has been an amount of shock and outrage at these headlines. However, behind the scenes this has been a long and rigorous process with a great deal of time and effort given to ethical considerations and the care and welfare of both Participants and the Panel. At all times this was about a serious issue in contemporary society and documenting this. We, the panel, CPL (the production company) and Channel 4, looked for participants who met our strict ethical criteria, who were not interested in being on TV, but who wanted to share their experience of love and dating with us. None of them received any benefit, all were committed, wanted to tell their story and find a long-term partner.

What we have created together is I feel a socio-documentary that informs us and, I hope, makes us stop and think about the toxic environment that relationships exist in, in contemporary Britain. This is my story of my participation in the panel of Married at First Sight.

Darren is trying to find a life partner, he is finding the going tough which has affected his self-esteem and led to a depressive episode. "It is so soulless" he tells me "even though people say they want to find the ONE, in reality they are searching for instantaneous love, perfection or one night stands. I just want someone to be there for me, and I will be there for them".

He is one of the many young people of both sexes that I have seen in recent years that echo this sentiment, and it would seem that there are a whole cohort of young folk in the same position. National statistics tell us that more people than ever in the UK are living alone. One in three households now have just one member, compared to one in five at the start of the 1970s, and the 2011 census showed that 51% of people were single. This is especially concentrated in our major cities like London where our participants all lived. Many of these people want a partner, but despite all the available dating sites, they cannot find one.

It was this dilemma that led to me taking part, after much careful thought, in a TV series commissioned by Channel 4 from CPL called "Married at First Sight". The programme uses a panel who are experienced in the world of "love and relationships" and who come from the disciplines of science, anthropology, psychology, sex & relationship therapy and religion.

The potential candidates undergo intensive multi-dimensional assessment, which takes place over many months. The three strongest pairs, unanimously agreed by myself and the rest of the panel, are matched. Once matched, they then prepare to marry, and marry having never met. Sounds crazy? Well I agree, although of course arranged marriage is still very much a feature of some communities in the UK today such as the orthodox Jewish system of Shidduch. When I was first approached about this project, I had to do some very serious soul searching to think about whether I wanted to be involved. I had many questions about the care and welfare of the participants and my own firm views on matrimony to consider.

I am firmly in the "marriage is a special bond" camp, and despite ups and downs, have been married for 36 years. I did not take the commitment lightly and would not want others to. However, people like Darren show me that in our contemporary society, the dating game is problematic, and not delivering the relationship that many of these young people want.

My final thoughts before I joined the panel were "would want my child to do this". This for me was pivotal; if I answered no then it would be hypocritical to be part of the process. Having met the potential panel members and talked to the production team, I was in no doubt that, although the brief was to make a TV programme, they were as personally committed to the happiness and well-being of the participants as I wanted to be. As such I would have felt confident supporting my child taking part, and so I joined.

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Naturally, I cannot give too much away, but I want to say it has been the most amazing and heart rending experience to hear the applicant's stories about how they have tried to find love and failed. It was also a great privilege to help the participants find a partner and prepare for marriage.

Many colleagues who I talked over my decision with said "why marriage, why not live together?" An understandable position, but for me marriage was a key point. In marriage, not only do the couple commit, the families, friends and community support them; and the families support was vital in this project. Indeed, the wedding service asks the guests to do this and bear witness to the vows that are made in their presence. We also know that in scientific terms, at a wedding there is a hormonal change not only in the couple, but also in the guests. That is, oxytocin, "the feel good hormone" is released in us all. We all love a wedding!

For the participants, marriage was to be the starting point in the relationship from which they would move forward and grow, and they gave informed consent to sign up for this, and were free to stop the process at any time. While there was a recognition that they could divorce, and they were fully briefed on this, I believe they were all as serious in their intent to stay married as any couple entering a marriage in contemporary Britain.

I think it is important to remember that "love", whatever that is, being the most important aspect of marriage is a relatively new phenomenon. In the past marriage was arranged and was about securing land, wealth conservation and gaining political advantage; love had no part in it. Parents often arranged the unions and there was little choice in partner; and often force was used. The giving of consent to marry was not part of the marriage service until the 1140 the Decretum Gratiani required that the couple give their verbal consent to marriage before it could take place.

It wasn't until Victorian times that love became an acceptable reason to marry. The rising of a middle class, "new money", increased social mobility meant that people wanted the freedom to choose partners rather than the families use them as a commodity. The public declaration by Queen Victoria and Prince Albert of their love for each other, despite being matched along bloodlines, also altered pubic perception and expectation. Think of the marriage dilemmas presented in Pride and Prejudice written just before this and very ahead of its time in consideration of the complexity of love and marriage. Darcy battles his love for Elizabeth, who was not considered an appropriate wife position-wise or financially; and Charlotte the pragmatic realist, who marries the awfully unctuous Mr. Collins who she does not love so she is not on the shelf and at the mercy of relatives as an old maid.

Today we now have moved on further in our conception of marriage with 20 countries worldwide accepting and supporting same sex marriage, and recently the Republic of Ireland being the first country in the world to legalise same-sex marriage by a referendum.

As well as love, good old sex also raised its head my colleagues' opinions. "What if they are not compatible…. what if they do not fancy each other?" Well the participants were matched for attraction i.e. they found each other initially attractive in the pre-matching testing. But remember attractiveness is a complex emotion, we all know beautiful people who are ugly because they are not very pleasant people, and conversely we know moderately attractive people who become very attractive because of their personal qualities e.g. humour. I, like many sex and relationship therapists, also see many couples who at one time had "searingly hot sex", but now struggle to have any, or even to fancy each other. Often this is because of the pressures of life, the relationship and communication tensions. Similarly, I have helped many couples improve their sexual function in a relationship when it was at an all time low or absent. Sex it would seem is a complex experience and can be potentiated by a good relational experience, destroyed by a bad one or in fact just be a stand-alone experience.

Well, the series is complete and now due to air, and opinion will be divided on the format and the panel's role in this. No-one is saying this is the way forward for all relationships, but it is certainly a way forward for the right people with the right support. It was a risk our participants were keen to try in their quest for love, and I was happy and honoured to take that leap of faith with them. Since my role has been made public, I have been approached by folk of all ages who are so tired of trying to find love and who want help to find it….so perhaps this should inform us as a society and suggest we reserve our judgment on this project.

"Married at First Sight" will air on Channel 4, Thursday 9th July at 9pm

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