

Choosing love? Tensions and transformations of modern marriage in Married at First Sight

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Abstract

Anthropologists and sociologists frequently suggest that marriage is undergoing rapid, worldwide transformation. Yet, while trends in nuptiality and divorce are used to demonstrate its decline, heterosexual marriage based on romantic love remains a cultural ideal in many contexts. This tension is reflected in cultural products like television programmes, including the increasingly popular genre of reality romance television. In this paper, we focus on an Australian version of a recent programme format, Married at First Sight (MaFS), in which ‘singles’ are matched by ‘relationship experts’ and then meet for the first time at their wedding ceremonies. The show purports to document singles’ lives prior to, during and following their weddings. By considering the content and structure of the show, as well as public and media responses to it, we explore Married at First Sight Australia in the context of other reality romance programmes produced and popular in Australia. We propose that the show offers a discourse of marriage based on objective compatibility rather than individual choice, but nonetheless dependent upon scripts of romantic love. Further, MaFS reflects (uneven) realities and popular understandings of transformation in modern Australian marriage.

Introduction

In ‘Western’ contexts such as Western Europe, North America and Australia, scholars commonly describe marriage as a cultural ideal (Macfarlane 1987; Quinn 1996). Such relationships are seen as emerging from long-term couplings that are characterised by feelings of deep, romantic love (Lindholm 2001; Quinn 1996; Strauss and Quinn 1997). Meanwhile, it is argued that marriages have become increasingly disconnected from instrumental, pragmatic concerns (Coontz 2006), and many researchers posit that they are increasingly voluntary relationships (Giddens 1992; Weeks, Heaphy, and Donovan 2001). Rather than leading to the decreased importance of marriage, it is argued that this has enabled romantic love to be seen as the normal motive for marriage, with such relationships expected to be fulfilling *and* lasting (Strauss and Quinn 1997; Quinn 1996).

At the same time, recent cross-cultural shifts in marriage patterns, which include increases in age at first marriage, rising cohabitation rates and growing rates of divorce in most countries (especially ‘Western’ ones) (Coontz 2006; eds Jamieson and Simpson 2013; Macfarlane 1987; OECD 2016), have led to anxieties about the decline of marriage (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995; Bellah et al. 1985; cf. Giddens 1992). Nonetheless, Australian Bureau of Statistics figures find that marriage remains an institution that most Australians—69% of men and 74% of women—will experience at least once in their lives (Jain 2007). Moreover, despite an overall decrease in Australian marriages since 1970 and an increase in divorces from 1975 (when no-fault divorce was legalised), the proportion of couples divorcing has decreased steadily over the past two decades (ABS 2012, 2015; OECD 2016). Additionally,

since the late 1980s, the median duration of marriage to separation or divorce has *increased* (ABS 2012). Such statistics suggest the complicated realities of modern marriage, in Australia and worldwide.

The tensions around Australian marriage are reflected in cultural products like television programs, including the increasingly popular genre of ‘reality romance’. In this paper, we examine the reality television show *Married at First Sight* (hereafter *MaFS*) as an artefact of marriage discourse. After introducing the methods of our analysis, we address the *MaFS* conceptual premise, approach and production: focusing on the first season of the Australian version (screened in 2015),¹ and using the first U.K. season (screened in 2015 in the U.K. and Australia), along with other reality romance programs, as occasional contrasts. This discussion is contextualised within scholarship on reality television, and particularly reality romance television. Next, we provide a narrative account of Season One of *Married at First Sight Australia* (hereafter *MaFSAu*). We explore the ‘scientific’ matchmaking process as a strategy to assist ‘singles’ to attain the goal of marriage in contemporary Australia. We then consider *MaFSAu* as a *transformative* reality romance program, locating it as part of the ‘reality transformation’ tradition and as a program concerned with transfiguring its Australian participants from ‘singles’ into (enduring) ‘couples’.

We find that the show offers an ambiguous presentation of choice: by delegating the choice of marriage partner to ‘experts’, the show implicitly advocates for a conceptualisation of marriage as founded on pragmatism and objectively determined compatibility. However, in negotiating their relationships, the couples follow scripts that construct romantic love—unpredictable, mysterious and visceral—as the ideal foundation of marriage (Lindholm 2001, 337; Quinn 1996; Strauss and Quinn 1997). The couples do not choose each other, but are nonetheless bound to the script of choice that defines romantic relationships. The show thus reflects (uneven) realities and popular understandings of transformation in modern Australian marriage.

Methods: Uncovering social realities in reality television

Reality television has been disparaged by audiences and academics alike, most often for its claims to realism (Cummings 2002; Gray 2009). While such critiques are valid, we posit that the *unreality* of reality television programs reveals wider cultural constructions, social norms and highlights boundaries between what is considered acceptable and unacceptable.

Constructions of what people say and do on reality television, which are concomitantly shaped by the producers of and participants in such programs, are therefore as significant as the ‘truth’ of these depictions (Grindstaff and Tarrow 2006).

We undertook a thematic analysis of the six episodes comprising *MaFSAu* Season One, focusing particularly on what was said, how it was said, as well as the images presented on screen. We also undertook less extensive analyses of the first U.K. series and second, third and fourth Australian series, as well as a number of other reality romance programs appearing on Australian television in 2015, 2016 and early 2017 (for instance, *The Farmer Wants a Wife* and *The Bachelor/ette*).

While our analysis focuses on Australian society, literature on North American and Western European marriage, romance and reality television suggests significant commonalities, particularly among Anglophone countries (Dubrofsky 2006; Dubrofsky and Hardy 2008; Gray 2009; Zurbruggen and Morgan 2006).² Moreover, program formats such as *The*

Bachelor/ette are sold and screened internationally, and versions produced in the U.S. and the U.K. are exported worldwide, and often screened alongside local versions. Perhaps because of such overlaps, scholarship addressing media depictions of marriage and family—and on marriage and family in general—tends to refer to ‘modern society’ broadly, neither specifying the context/s they refer to, nor paying much attention to cross-cultural differences (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995, 2013; Bellah et al. 1985; Giddens 1992; cf. eds Hirsch and Wardlow 2006). Here, we focus explicitly on the Australian context, with a nod to the broader ‘Western’ context.

Locating *Married at First Sight* and reality romance

MaFS is a reality romance television program. The origins of reality television are not clear-cut, however it is widely thought that it emerged as a particular ‘type’ of program in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Kavka 2012). Reality television programs are broadly defined as unscripted shows with non-professional actors, who are observed by cameras in ‘preconfigured environments’ (Kavka 2012, 5). They are characterised by low production values and tend to be ‘unabashedly commercial’, combining ‘the serious traditions of documentary with the entertainment purpose of populist formats’ (Kavka 2012, 5).

Kavka (2012) identifies three generations of reality television: the first, ‘Camcorder Era’ of 1989 to 1999; the second generation (1999 to 2005), featuring surveillance style competitive reality shows such as *Big Brother* and ‘challenge’ style transformation programs; and the third generation, which has focused on manufacturing celebrity and is epitomised by talent shows such as the *Idol* franchise (2001 to the present) (Kavka 2012, 149). As second generation programs, reality romance formats like *MaFS* emphasise transformation (Kavka 2012; cf. Montemurro 2008). Transformation shows often focus on eliciting change—to the body, relationships, the domestic or one’s self-presentation (Kavka 2012)—and the transformations are often framed as challenges, experiments or competitions (Montemurro 2008). The shows are pedagogic, with their focus on individual transformation reflecting the allocation of ‘personal responsibility for individual, domestic and social health’ (Kavka 2012, 137). Kavka (2012, 112) notes that by emphasising an individual’s capacity (and responsibility) to embody change, second generation reality television becomes ‘a social force that seeks to regulate, rather than simply document, ordinary people’s lives and interactions’.

Scholars and critical viewers have contested the degree to which reality television shows can ever present ‘reality’ (Biressi and Nunn 2005; Cummings 2002; Montemurro 2008). Emma Price (2010, 452) observes that the genre, caught between factual (documentary) television and fictional (entertaining) television opens ‘a televisual space [...] in which representation and efficacy is contingent on the construction and cognition of familiar generic and/or cultural conventions’. In the case of reality television, particularly of the post-2001 ‘third generation’, participants are also able to support, challenge and (re)construct the realities presented on television shows, through extensive post-broadcast interviews and media appearances. The commentary and post-broadcast engagement of the *MaFS* couples, including (re)presentation of their experiences on the show, reinforce the nuances of the show’s ‘reality’.

The category of reality romance elicits particular kinds of transformation. The genre includes dating shows where a (typically male) participant selects one partner from a pool of potentials (for example, the popular *Bachelor/ette* franchise), to programs where people are

placed in situations designed to promote sexual and romantic relationships (including *MaFS*) (Gray 2009). Dating shows, in particular, commonly document women vying ‘to attract the attention of a “desirable” bachelor, replicating traditional gendered ideas about women’s preoccupation with romance and relationships’ (Montemurro 2008, 90). Both forms of reality romance programming tend to reinforce heteronormative ideologies of marriage (Kavka 2012, 121). However, it has also been observed that some dating shows are more about ‘fun’ than ‘fairytales and marriage’ (Gray 2009, 266).

The reality romance show first appeared in Australia in 1984, with *Perfect Match* (based on the U.S. show *The Dating Game*), a game show in which heterosexual participants found their ‘perfect match’ by asking questions of three potential partners, all of whom were hidden from the selector’s sight. Since then, there have been numerous popular reality romance programs produced and screened in Australia. Among these is the aforementioned *Bachelor/ette*, in which a large group of women or men reside in a mansion and compete for the romantic attention of a lone bachelor or bachelorette. These shows have had Australian versions since 2013 (*The Bachelor*) and 2015 (*The Bachelorette*).³

As with the above reality romance formats, *MaFSAu* is an international import. Beginning in Denmark in 2013 (*Gift Ved Første Blik*), *MaFS* was then adopted in the U.S. in 2014, and in the U.K. and Australia in 2015. The show has also aired in France, Bulgaria, Germany and Finland. Television rights to the format have been sold to a number of other (largely Western European) countries. In Denmark, the U.S., the U.K. and Australia, the program follows a number of ‘scientifically’ matched couples participating in what is referred to as an ‘extreme social experiment’. The matching process is undertaken by a range of ‘marriage experts’, and couples meet for the first time at their wedding ceremonies. In all of the series aired to date, couples have been overwhelmingly young, thin, middle-class, heterosexual and white.

The singles that have been ‘matched’ celebrate their weddings with all of the associated rituals: a ceremony and reception attended by family and friends, the taking of professional wedding photographs, wedding speeches, dancing, drinking and a wedding night in a hotel’s honeymoon suite. Following this, they travel on a honeymoon together. Upon returning home, each couple moves in together, and they begin jointly negotiating domestic tasks, friendships and relationships with family. After several weeks of living together, the couples then decide whether they want to remain together or to get a divorce. Following this, there is some degree of follow-up with couples.⁴

MaFSAu uses the labels ‘singles’, ‘couples’, ‘matches’ and ‘marriages’ to describe those participating in the ‘experiment’. This is most likely to avoid naming them as ‘contestants’, emphasising the singles’ and the show’s purity of intent. Indeed, *MaFSAu* appears to position itself as more ‘truthful’ than other reality shows. This was particularly evident in the recruitment materials distributed in mid-2015 for Season Two, which describe the show as a ‘ground breaking social experiment [that] wants to help Aussie singles find their potential lifelong partner using the science of matchmaking’, adding that it ‘is not a competition and there is no cash prize’ (@MarriedAU 2 July 2015).

While the series’ tone and format differs somewhat between countries, the Australian series is distinct in that couples are not *legally* married. This is due to restrictions in Australian law, whereby couples must know each other and give at least 30 days’ notice of their marriage (OLDP 2010). Instead, the singles completed an ‘Intention to Get Married form’ prior to their weddings. Following the show, couples could then choose to submit the form to legalise the

marriage. Thus, on *MaFSAu*, the wedding ceremony is described as having a ritualistic function. In contrast, the U.K. version of the show (henceforth *MaFSU.K.*) heavily emphasises the marriages' legality.

What both series have in common is that they frame current dating and relationship practices as problematic. In the first Australian and U.K. series, the program opens with statistics on the number of 'singles' in the country. On *MaFSU.K.*, the audience is told that 'with 15 million single people in the U.K., there have never been more of us living alone. Something isn't working'. The voiceover on *MaFSAu* similarly notes that 'currently in Australia, there are two and a half million singles. Despite more dating options than ever before, people are still struggling to find Mr or Mrs [*sic*] Right'. Such statements offer numerical weight to the 'problem' of mass singlehood, and justify the show's efforts at redress.

While the series has proved extremely popular, its premise has also provoked a great deal of opposition. While many question the scientific legitimacy of the show (Wollaston 2015), others have challenged the show on 'traditional' (often religious) grounds (Rawlinson 2015), arguing that marriage is sacred and that the series makes light of this commitment. Several of the Australian Season Four participants have recently criticised the show for treating them poorly throughout filming, and for editing material to mislead audiences and distort their 'marital' lives (Weir 2017). Season Three of *MaFSAu*, which featured a gay male couple, was criticised for its trivialisation of same-sex marriage equality (Anderson 2016). Given that *MaFSAu* is not based on legal marriage, however, criticism on such grounds has been less widespread than in the U.K. and U.S.

Getting Married at First Sight

MaFSAu begins with sound-bites from the singles, taken from before and during the matching process, and interspersed with comments from 'three of Australia's top relationship experts'. The female voiceover introduces the experts and their role:

The first expert, relationship psychologist John Aitken, puts couples under the microscope [...] Through extensive psychological evaluations, he's created detailed personal profiles of the potential matches.

Next, neuropsychologist Dr Trisha Strathford, shown wearing a white lab coat while working in a laboratory, 'looks at how the brain reacts to love and attraction'. The voiceover tells us that this expert is 'using her years of research into the workings of the brain to compile detailed neurological profiles of the singles'. The final expert, psychologist Sabina Read, is shown at a desk browsing a thick book. Sabina says 'the idea behind these arranged marriages is that we're more mindful of the ingredients we're putting into the mix'.

In the first two episodes of the Australian series, four couples are matched and 'married'. In Episode One, the first couple is Roni, a 32-year-old payroll manager, and Michael, a 31-year-old events manager. The experts emphasise their similarities: both belong to large families and are highly sociable. Both are shown drinking and laughing in pubs with their large friendship groups. Roni is recently divorced, and, while perusing her old wedding photos, she explains she is 'ready to move on', and wants to 'live happily ever after' with 'her man'. Michael is shown sitting on his couch, eating a ready-meal directly from the container. He

tells us that he does not want to be the last one of his friends without a partner: ‘you’re that single guy that’s hanging around at the end’.

The second couple is Clare, a 37-year-old marketing manager, and Lachlan, a 36-year-old farmer who previously worked in marketing. Clare says in the opening scenes of the program: ‘I didn’t think that I would be 37 and unmarried with no kids’. The experts tell us she has ‘passion’ and is ‘kind of fierce’. Meanwhile, Lachlan, who has ‘always wanted to get married and have kids—it’s probably the most important thing to [him] in life’, is described by the experts as ‘grounded’ and ‘stable’. The experts suggest they will balance one another.

In Episode Two, the remaining two couples are matched. First is Zoe, a 25-year-old digital marketing executive, and Alex, the 29-year-old owner of a plumbing company. Zoe is shown walking through the Melbourne city centre. She describes herself as ‘strong-minded’, ‘career-driven’ and ‘mature for her age’. Ethiopian-born, Zoe was adopted with her twin brother at the age of five. She tells expert John that she believes that women were ‘put on this earth to rule’ and that she wants a man to complement, rather than complete her. It is decided by the experts that she needs a man who ‘can be her equal’: Alex. Alex describes himself as ‘driven’ and ‘passionate’. Like Michael, he is shown eating a meal on his couch, and feeding food to his dog off his fork. He describes himself as ‘untidy’ and we see him entering a messy room in his house.

The final couple introduced is Michelle and James. Michelle is a 34-year-old communications manager. We see her drinking with friends at a bar, and she tells us that the men she meets tend to be a lot younger than her, but that she wants to ‘settle down and have children’. James is a 36-year-old sign writer. We see him walking out of the ocean, bare-chested. He says he’s ‘pretty much tried everything’; we see him at a computer and drinking at a pub. He also wants to be married and have children.

In each of the first two episodes of *MaFSAu*, two couples are married. At the ceremonies, the camera zooms in on the body language of the individuals, documenting their facial expressions and verbal interactions upon meeting at the end of the aisle. The receptions, in which couples are shown meeting and interacting with each other’s friends and families, depict varying degrees of physical intimacy: while Roni and Michael are shown enthusiastically kissing, Zoe appears to avoid looking at and speaking to Alex.

Season One of *MaFSAu* shows these four couples navigating their daily lives over one month together. In two of the couples, the male partner moves in with the female, while in the other two the arrangement is reversed. The individuals who have moved into their partners’ homes negotiate new commutes and couples are shown navigating the division of domestic tasks. Shared leisure time is presented as both an opportunity for becoming closer (for example, suburban-dwelling Alex and Zoe explore the city together) and a source of potential conflict (Clare’s weekend amateur theatre obligations clash with Lachlan’s family celebrations).

The science of matchmaking

MaFS posits the unmarried individual as representative of a wider social problem: the decline or delay of marriage, supporting Kavka’s (2012, 137) observation that transformative reality television shows are pedagogic. In *MaFS*, the individual’s failure to find the right partner is corrected through expert intervention: not so much by creating a marriageable individual, but through constructing a resilient couple. Scientific expertise offers an alternative to individual

agency in this transformative process. In fact, the individual's inability to know what is best for them is presented as one of the main obstacles in contemporary dating, and a key incentive to participate in the 'experiment'.

In contrast with competitive dating shows such as *The Bachelor/ette*, where 'the choosers are in control' (Brophy-Baermann 2005, 41), on *MaFS* this responsibility is removed from participants. The obligation to choose is shifted from the 'subjective' individual to the 'objective' experts, thus evoking 'traditional' matchmaking practices not common in Australia. Non-commercial matchmakers typically work with individuals in their kinship or community networks, potentially co-opting new technologies towards the facilitation of marriage (Agrawal 2015, 16). However, in *MaFS* the matchmakers have no personal relationship with singles, their friends or their kin, and their judgement is presented entirely as an outcome of the assessment of *individuals*. While the U.K. experts represent a range of professions (including a social anthropologist and a reverend), in the Australian series, expertise is presented as a function of scientific training (in psychology, counselling and neuropsychotherapy).

The problematic of singlehood, and the critical role of science in its resolution, is evident in the discourse adopted by 'experts' in explaining the matchmaking process. The 'experts' repeatedly note that their matches are dependent on 'chemistry', 'attraction' and compatibility, determined through extensive psychological assessments, questionnaires and physiological testing. These assertions nod to concerns about the validity of marriages between strangers, addressing (potential) public concerns about the morality of the show's premise. At the same time, the scientific allusions reassure the audience (if not the matched singles) that a successful marriage can in fact be ascertained by a quantifiable and pre-assessable set of conditions.

Yet the positivistic approach of experts contrasts with the language of the singles when reflecting on their motivations for joining the series. In Episode One of *MaFSAu*, Michelle includes in her wedding vows a reference to 'faith in the powers that brought us here', and Clare notes before her wedding that she had to 'pray to the gods of chemistry' that it would all turn out. Yet these perspectives are not incompatible. *MaFS* frames the scientific matches as 'predictions' rather than inevitabilities, and this is particularly evident in the show's advertising and voiceover.

The construction of love as scientifically predictable but ultimately uncontrollable both enables and limits the couples in committing to their new marriages. In the opening scenes of the show, the singles articulate that they are fully committed to the *process*. However, the discourse of love as 'magic' supports a conception of love as lacking in predictability and control, and therefore as guided by fate. Such a perspective has been identified among Australian couples more broadly: for instance, one of the paper's authors has found that those in age-dissimilar relationships frequently and uncritically alternate between explaining their relationships as 'fated' and 'chosen' (McKenzie 2015). This implicitly challenges a binary conceptualisation of romantic love as either fated *or* chosen. While *MaFSAu*'s singles do not explicitly exercise romantic choice beyond their commitment to participate in the show (except in their ultimate acceptance or rejection of their new partner) the central participation of the experts in matching the couples promotes an ideal of marriage based on science *as well as* serendipity.

In this way the discourse of scientifically-informed matchmaking is harnessed to support the

notion of love as determined by forces beyond the individual. Indeed Clare suggests that her dating record indicates a flawed capacity for decision-making in romance: ‘clearly I’m not the best one to make decisions for myself’ (*MaFSAu*, Episode 1). Alex and Zoe make similar claims throughout the show. Following their joint decision to remain together at the end of the series, they reflect:

Alex: I don’t think me and Zoe would have been together if it wasn’t for this experiment. I think that sometimes outsiders need to look at you both and match you together.

Zoe: Yeah. Sometimes you don’t know what you need, and you’re like “oh that’s what I want”, but is that what you need? And that’s what the professionals do, they work out, and they give you what you need, not necessarily what you think you want.

In different ways, both science and love are afforded uncontrollable, sacred power in the attainment of a successful marriage.

Similarly, the dual discourse of love as science/magic is highlighted in the U.K. version of the show, when the voiceover tells us that the singles ‘have placed their faith in the hands of science’ (Episode 1). By framing matches as ‘predictions’ and love as ‘fated’, *MaFS*’ experts confine their roles almost entirely to *selecting* matches, rather than ensuring marriages’ continuity. Here, *MaFS* diverges from other contemporary forms of reality television. The experts’ contribution to the transformation of individuals—from unmarried to married—is primarily made in the initial matching process, and couples appear to receive little, if any, ongoing advice from the panel of experts (although in Season Four of *MaFSAu* they played a greater role, with more emphasis being placed on couples’ ‘working at’ their relationships from week to week). Thus, while *MaFS* offers some expert commentary on conflict to the audience, there is otherwise very little explicit intervention by experts. This is most likely because the success or failure of matches is seen as inevitable.

Transformative reality romance and transformative marriages

Reality television contributes to the transmission of values and practices of intimacy, romantic love and marriage, reproducing the ideal of self-actualisation through couplehood and suggesting that romantic engagement, epitomised by marriage, is the key to happiness. However, *MaFS* differs from reality romance shows like *The Bachelor/ette* in regard to its depiction of romance and gender roles. *The Bachelor*, for instance, tends to promote quite rigid gender roles, focusing heavily on women’s appearance and framing women as the ones who are ‘chosen’ by men. It also presents a ‘fantastic’ vision of romance, including elaborate dates, the rapid development of intimacies and much talk of ‘connections’.⁵ Season One of *MaFSAu* is, comparatively, quite egalitarian. Half of the women move in with their male partners, while the other half have their male partners move in with them.

Another point of contrast with some transformational reality television shows is the absence of working-class participants: with one exception (Alex), Season One of *MaFSAu* presents only middle/upper-middle class professionals. The show seeks to match particular kinds of singles to transform. While some transformation reality television shows focus on the deficiency or failure of the (often working-class) individual to fulfil personal responsibilities

(in relation to health, money or family management) (Skeggs 2009), in the case of *MaFS*, the ‘failure to marry’ is presented not as an individual failure, but rather a function of demographic trends that have made finding a marriage partner difficult (Skeggs and Wood 2008, 561).

This is not to say that social class does not play a role in the discourse of marriage presented by *MaFSAu*. The absence of all but professional middle-class singles sanctions certain kinds of individuals as marriageable, and certain marriages as socially desirable. As referred to above, one exception to this is plumber Alex, who is coupled with Zoe. Articulate, white-collar professional Zoe voices concerns to a friend that she and Alex come from ‘different worlds. He finished school in Year Ten’ (Episode 3). Aside from this incident, however, *MaFSAu* does not address class overtly.

The ‘illusory everyday’ of romance as presented on *MaFSAu* contains both familiar and aspirational elements of ideal romance (Price 2010, 453). Kavka (2012, 121) notes the solidly heteronormative ideological basis for romantic reality television: that ‘self-fulfillment can and should be achieved through a monogamous relationship with a member of the opposite sex’. *MaFSAu* makes this premise explicit, identifying a desire for marriage as one of the critical factors in selection of singles, evidenced in their repeated expressions of desire and/or despondency noted above.

Television programs such as *MaFS* and *The Bachelor/ette* reimagine contemporary scripts of romantic relationships. *The Bachelor/ette* franchise promotes an artificially concentrated trajectory of romantic love, beginning with ‘a “connection” between two people of the opposite sex, then develops into a proposal, an engagement, a wedding and children—in that order’ (Kavka 2012, 122). In the Australian versions, there has been far less emphasis on the proposal and wedding taking place *during* the series. Yet the future possibility of these, as well as of pregnancy and childrearing, is constantly brought into focus. For instance, the female contestants—and occasionally the male ones—face challenges designed to test their domestic and parenting skills.

By contrast, *MaFS* begins with a wedding, after which a ‘connection’ is fostered through a honeymoon and then time spent in a domestic setting. Thus while successful coupling in *The Bachelor/ette* is produced through the same stages—if hastened—that are followed in typical ‘real-life’ romantic relationships, *MaFS* reverses the process, placing the commitment before the ‘connection’. While the contestants in *The Bachelor/ette* must demonstrate their commitment to the potential of love through performance of romance—‘as though they were *already* the subjects, or objects of love’ (Kavka 2012, 123)—the singles in *MaFS* need only demonstrate commitment to the relationship that has been established by the experts’ matching. The transformation of individuals into couples is thus dependent upon the combination of commitment plus love, which is ‘magically and perfectly present’ (Cancian 1986, 705).

Without the competitive element, the question of the couples’ (expected) resilience appears less predicated on the performance of romantic behaviour and more reflective of the pre-determined element of compatibility. The construction of compatibility as fundamental to Australian marriage is well-established (McKenzie 2015). However, reality romance television has typically presented the performance of romance as fundamental to a successful long-term romantic relationship. In *MaFSAu* and the series overall, the ideal of romance as intrinsic to marriage is challenged by the presentation of relationships as ultimately

established on the pragmatics of (psychological, even biological) compatibility.

This is noteworthy within the context of representations of romantic love in film and television (Illouz 1997; Galloway, Engstrom, and Emmers-Sommer 2015). The implicit foregrounding of the romance as a predictor to marriage, and the metonymic use of weddings as an immediate outcome of romance, produce particular a cultural logic of the ‘romantic’ in Australia and other ‘Western’ societies (Wilding 2003). As Jamieson and colleagues (2002, 371) observe, the notion of a wedding as a ‘special day’ or ‘big day’ presents an opportunity for a socially acceptable staged performance of romance that is quite distinct from the act of moving in together.

In *MaFS* the inversion of this process challenges both the function of the wedding as romantic apex, and also the prioritisation of romance as essential to the establishment of a marriage. The focus on the domestic mundane, which makes up much of the couples’ month of depicted life, contrasts with shows such as *The Bachelor/ette*, which largely limit the couple’s interactions to ultra-romantic settings. In this way *MaFS* suggests an ambivalent attitude towards romantic love and romance.

This is illustrated by *MaFSAu*’s portrayal of the breakdown of Roni and Michael’s marriage. In the penultimate episode of Season One, Michael questions the long-term sustainability of the marriage, because he ‘can’t flick that switch and be like “wow, I’m falling in love”. I’m sorry, I’m not in love’ (Episode 5). Following Roni’s eventual decision to end the relationship, expert Sabina offers the following commentary:

One of the things that Roni’s learnt from this process is that she’s empowered to leave a relationship when it’s not working. And that may go against the *hope* that she had, or the *dream* that she has, around the *fantasy* of a relationship (Episode 5, *emphasis added*).

Sabina’s use of the words ‘hope’, ‘dream’ and ‘fantasy’ challenge the romantic discourse on relationships that is so clearly evident in other reality romance shows.

In contrast to the pragmatism of the experts’ attitudes, the singles and couples on the program often discuss romantic love relationships (and romance within them) as ideal. For example, Michael suggests that the relationship had suffered because the couple had ‘skipped the fun part’ (Episode 5). Similarly, immediately after Sabina’s commentary, Roni reflects to the camera: ‘I deserved the fairy-tale. So of course I do believe in it. It’ll happen when it’s meant to happen’ (Episode 5). The contrast between the ‘fairy-tale’ of romance and the ‘reality’ of married life reveals a rupture in the program’s promotion of marriage as an essentially mundane but secure relationship, with an extra ingredient of romantic love. Successful coupling thus seems balanced on two key elements—scientifically determined compatibility and chemical happenstance—both of which reduce the need for individual action or choice on the part of the singles. When *MaFSAu*’s couples decide to end their relationships, they often cite a lack of love or compatibility as the rationale.

Conclusion

MaFS, like other romantic reality television formats, draws on established scripts of romance and romantic love in its efforts to transform singles into married couples. Purporting to address the problematic of singlehood, the show harnesses the ‘objective’ knowledge of

experts as a reasonable alternative to individual choice in the mate-selection process. It draws on a discourse of science and biology to justify its interventions in the publicly constructed ‘private’ realm of romantic love relationships (Coontz 2006). Like other reality television, *MaFS* presents particular, curated scenes of the coupling process, rendering depictions that are subject to contestation by audiences, and by participants themselves in post-broadcast media appearances.

However, *MaFS* differs from other programs in the romantic reality television genre in its sequencing of the romantic process: *MaFS* inverts the script that presents weddings as the culmination of romance, subsequent to falling in love, destabilising the notion of romance as fundamental to (successful) marriage. It emphasises ‘objective’ compatibility and commitment as crucial to successful coupling, and contests the role and reliability of individual choice in this process. However, in *MaFSAu* and *MaFSU.K.*, this effort to promote marriage through pragmatism is challenged by the resilience of notions of ‘chemistry’, ‘fantasy’ and ‘falling in love’ espoused by the singles/couples and the experts themselves. This contradiction is necessary to the show’s credibility, as the ultimate ‘failure’ of most of the matches—21 out of the 24 Australian couples as we write—is seen to be not a failure at all.

The depictions of romantic love on the Australian series of *MaFS* are delimited by the televisual format that has made the show popular. This format reflects viewers’ appetites for love stories that juxtapose weddings, fantasy and fate with mundane daily life, conflict and commitment. The apparent unpredictability of the couples’ success is consonant with popular understandings of love as ambivalent, and a risk (worth taking). In any case, the eventual separation of all but one of *MaFSAu*’s Season One couples (Zoe and Alex)⁶—who at time of writing had recently had a baby—suggests that despite the promise of a science rationale, ideals of ‘connection’ and romantic love remain inextricable from contemporary Australian representations of marriage.

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¹ The second season of *MaFSau* screened in April 2016, the third season aired in August and September 2016 and the fourth season was shown from January to April 2017. In Seasons Two and Three, the structure of the show was identical to Season One, and similar couple narratives were shown, with the addition of a gay male couple in Season Three. In Season Four, a number of changes were made to the show’s structure, including an increased number of couples, couples’ co-residence in a large apartment block, formalised ‘hometown visits’ and weekly group ‘dinner parties’ and ‘commitment ceremonies’ featuring advice from the ‘experts’.

² However, romantic scripts and representations of singlehood, marriage and romance are by no means exclusive to ‘Western’ media. For example, the Japanese romantic reality show *Ainori*, which was broadcast on Fuji TV from 1999 to 2009, then returned as *Ainori 2* from 2010 to 2011, and followed young, single contestants travelling around the world in a pink bus. The show was also franchised in Vietnam in 2008. For further discussion of relationship representations on television see: Dales (2014) and Freedman and Iwata-Weickgenannt (2011) on Japan; Lu (2006) on China; and Joyce (2013) on Brazil.

³ There are also a number of other popular Australian reality romance programs, such as *First Dates* (in which participants are filmed whilst on blind dates) and the recent Chinese import *If You Are the One*, which has screened with subtitles in Australia since 2015.

⁴ The exact details vary between countries. For instance, in *MaFSau* and *MaFSU.K.*, the series generally ends by showing couples’ lives a few months later.

⁵ ‘Connections’ is a vague term generally used to suggest the possible future development of romantic feelings. The term is less used once ‘love’ and other explicitly romantic phrases are introduced by the individuals.

⁶ None of the Season Two or Three couples remained together at the time of writing, while two of the 11 Season Four couples are still together.