

AFFLUENZA COCKTAIL: POWER, MONEY AND GENDER

Despite the perceived comfort and rewards that go with wealth, it creates many challenges. Not surprisingly, affluenza disease and the subject of wealth psychology have emerged in recent years and are gaining increased recognition. In simple terms affluenza relates to the effect of money, wealth and materialism on peoples lives.

Financial inequality

The more money someone has the greater the possibility of disagreement and unfairness within the power dynamics of a relationship. This is particularly true in intimate relationships where even the most self-reassured man struggles to deal with a woman who is wealthier than he is. Our society is ingrained with the belief that the man is the breadwinner and his success and power continuously interweave with how much money he has. When a man becomes intimate with a wealthy woman, his covert beliefs about role and power are called into question.

For women, particularly those who consider themselves advocates of equality, it is difficult to build a relationship with a man who earns less than they do. Why should it matter if two people are emotionally and physically compatible and happy? Our internalised cultural messages have, however, taught us that it usually does matter!

We live in a culture that equates money with power and control. It sends subliminal, and sometimes direct, messages to men that they need to have both to function as respected individuals. Thus being in a relationship with a wealthy or a successful woman puts many men into a situation that they are not equipped to deal with. The situation is uncomfortable for women who grow up believing that a man will take care of their financial security. Most wealthy woman are therefore drawn to men with equal or greater wealth regardless of compatibility.

Women's pain and trophy wives

Many women, who come from a wealthy family or are married into wealth, experience the feeling of being unworthy. "You have not earned it, and therefore are not worthy of much respect!" This is a common, direct or indirect, message they receive, in their own house and in other people's eyes, particularly non-affluent ones. The psychological effects can be damaging and include being bored, discontent, love affairs outside marriage life (for both), the husband's constant absence, or lack of respect by their children. It is not surprising that in research, these women identified strongly with prostitutes and domestics. Their self-esteem was as low as that of the women in these two professions. Because it is not easy for them to change 'employer' as in the other professions their sense of dependence is painfully high. Their feelings and needs are suppressed. Society at large does not accept, allow or understand their discontent or dissatisfaction: "You have all the comforts that money can bring, what else do you want?" Because they are not encouraged to find their own purpose in life they need a substitute, mostly with materialistic effects – getting involved with or attending charity functions, shopping, travelling and gossiping with other affluent women who are in a similar position. The hidden truth is not expressed and their repressed pain is expressed in the therapy room.

The genders' role

We are bombarded with messages that men should have more power than women. In the world of affluence, gender roles are even more clearly defined. From an early age heirs are expected to excel in subjects that will ensure their ability to carry on the family fortune. Young women are encouraged to develop talents to attract a suitable marriage partner.

Money magnifies differences between men and women, creates a strong illusion of power and control, and interferes with the meaning of true love and relationships, resulting in unique problems for affluent people

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Musical or artistic talents are accepted with great approval, but any signs of interest in science or business are discouraged or looked at with embarrassment. In a male-dominated financial arena it might be unacceptable for a woman to know more than her husband. Affluent women therefore unconsciously choose a less financially successful path to ensure favourable odds in the relationship arena. Women with inherited wealth may downplay their financial acumen to appear less powerful to prospective partners.

For a male heir the cultural pressure to achieve is even greater than it has been in the past. The level of the individual's social acceptance no longer defines his success. It is no longer sufficient to have money and live a life of leisure. Men are expected to continue to cultivate their wealth in a manner that makes it clear that they are educated and involved in the process of making money. As their financial worth increases, so does our cultural regard and esteem for them.

Trust

In our culture we are trained to trust what we can see and touch – material things – things that are attained only with money. The truth is that a person's financial worth is only part of who they are. Affluent people have a difficult time in learning to trust when it comes to intimate or true relationship. There is always the conflict and fear of being desired for who you are or for your financial worth. The fear of being 'financially exploited' is a great impediment in finding true love. In most cases heirs are warned by their parents that others may want to marry them for their money. If not accompanied by instilling self-esteem of the child's true self worth (which is not defined by their financial worth) the consequences can be harmful. The grown up heir/heirress will not be able to form and implement a realistic judgment about the women/men they meet. In these cases they usually make the wrong choices about whom they fall in love with (i.e. fear attracts what you fear...) on one hand; on the other hand they are inca-

pable of recognising a true partner (i.e. fear makes you blind to the truth).

Wealthy women seem to have a particularly difficult time finding a balance and trust in an intimate relationship. Their money becomes an impediment rather than an asset. O'Neill has found that it is preferable for a wealthy woman to find a partner who has equal or greater wealth because:

- in our culture most men have not learnt to feel comfortable with women who are more successful than they are;
- they fear that they are wanted for their money.

There is, however, a trend for young women of the current generation to break this pattern and marry for love.

Wealthy men have greater choice. For them it is socially acceptable to marry a woman of lesser means and who is usually young and beautiful.

Coming to terms with affluenza

There are no quick solutions or fixes to the above issues. However some important points that can help are:

- Recognise the challenges of affluenza and how it might influence your life style and decisions.
- Learn to be aware of yourself. Recognise your cultural taboos, decision process and dynamic. What is your belief system and what are your motivational forces?
- Demystify the wealth taboo; take the emphasis off externals; diffuse affluent culture and family expectations; allow maximum freedom in choice of career; encourage women to find their own purpose and get a paid job – there is true value in getting paid for your contribution (besides volunteering).
- Find the right therapists to work with to help you identify and solve the issues and challenges you are facing.
- Create structure, motivation, purpose and mission.
- Dispel the illusion of control.
- Learn to develop self-trust, which comes from true self-esteem and self worth. It makes it easier to learn and trust others...◆