

Mount St. Mary's

COLLEGE MAGAZINE

The Marriage, Family and Child Counseling program at Mount St. Mary's College is one of the few in Southern California to offer training for counselors in divorce and remarriage. Taught by Dr. Orli Peter, associate professor of psychology and director of the MFCC program, the Divorce and Remarriage course at both the undergraduate and graduate levels examines the consequences of divorce on family members.

With her extensive background in the area of divorce, Peter looks at divorce issues in popular culture with an experienced eye. The box office smash, "The First Wives Club," for example, caught her eye and made her fingers fly on her computer keyboard. She wrote the following opinion piece shedding light on the myths and stereotypes that are portrayed in the film. Her words have since appeared in Time magazine and The Cleveland Plain Dealer.

A Firsthand Look at *The First Wives Club*

Olivia Goldsmith, writer of "The First Wives Club," is mistaken when she claims that "This is the experience of middle-aged women in America right now and you don't need a sociologist to tell you that." If she had consulted sociologists or psychologists who specialize in divorce, she would have learned that her book does not depict the common experience of middle-aged women in America — not even of those women who are divorced.

Rather, "The First Wives Club" describes a very small minority of divorces that commonly receive a lot of attention in the media, getting in the way of a genuine understanding of the common aftermath of divorce. The story relies on stereotypes and perpetuates myths that are harmful to both women and men. Here are some of them, contrasted with what recent sociological and psychological studies tell us:

Myth 1: Most men cheat on their wives.

Actually, the best designed study to date indicates that nearly 80 percent of men report that they have never cheated on their wives.

Myth 2: Most divorcing women are jilted by their husbands.

Many studies have corroborated that the great majority of divorces (two thirds to three quarters, depending on the study) are initiated by women. This makes sense because numerous studies indicate that men are generally happier being married than are women, they report less marital frustration and dissatisfaction, and are less likely to consider the option of divorce.

Myth 3: Women bitterly regret divorce.

Most divorced women do not regret divorcing. Moreover, divorced women are generally happier than divorced men. And contrary to what the film depicts, one large study suggests that women may become happier when they divorce in middle-age. Most middle-aged women showed an increase in positive self-image and self-esteem and were inspired by their divorce to gain more control of their lives. Moreover, many enjoyed sex more after their divorce.

Myth 4: Women emerge from divorce more emotionally scarred and psychologically damaged than do men.

This is generally not true. Not only are divorced women

happier than divorced men, but they are better off emotionally, too. In study after study they consistently outscore divorced men on psychological tests to assess emotional health and well-being.

Myth 5: Ex-spouses are highly antagonistic toward one another, even to the point of acting unethically.

Divorced couples, of course, vary widely in the civility of their interactions. But about half of divorced men and women even describe their relationship with their ex-spouse as friendly or cooperative.

Myth 6: Most divorced men can remarry while most divorced women can't.

Well, it is true that divorced women are less likely than divorced men to *want* to remarry (after all, they are happier than the men being divorced). But both groups do remarry at very high rates — and soon. About 80 percent of divorced men and 75 percent of divorced women remarry whether or not they have children, and most do so within three years. Consequently, many members of the "first wives club" should shortly be forming a "second wives club."

One aspect of the film's depiction of divorce is accurate. It is undoubtedly true that women are generally worse off in the years immediately following a divorce, but some studies have shown, five years later, after most men and women remarried, remarried women's income increased more than remarried men's increased.

It is important to distinguish fact from fiction and entertaining stereotypes from behavioral norms. One fan was quoted as saying she took her daughter to see the film to learn what was in store for her as a married woman.

But viewing the antics and adventures of "The First Wives Club" as "normal" is dangerous. It offers false lessons regarding both what men and women should expect from each other and how one should behave in divorce. The truth is richer and contains many positive possibilities for both women and men.



Dr. Orli Peter