

First Wives Club and the Myths of Divorce

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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 those women who are divorced.

Rather, *The First Wives Club* describes a very small minority of divorced women that commonly receive a lot of attention in the media, getting in the way of a genuine understanding. The book 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% of men report that they have never cheated on their wives.ⁱ

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.ⁱⁱ 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 they are less likely to consider the option of divorce.ⁱⁱⁱ

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^{iv} 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. Many middle-aged women enjoyed sex more.

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 emotion health and well-being.^v

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.^{vi}

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

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% of divorced men and 75% of divorced women remarry whether or not they have children, and most do so within three years.^{vii} Conse-

Psychologists are well-suited to review movies, and this month we provide three examples. Although this material is not essential to your practice, we thought it would be entertaining to see how psychologists respond to the current film scene. After all, this IS Los Angeles. ... Ed.

quently, many members of the “first wives club” should shortly be forming a “second wives club.”

One aspect of the movie is accurate. It is undoubtedly true that women are generally worse off financially in the years immediately following a divorce. But, one important study indicates that five years later, after most men and women have remarried, the average woman’s household income increased slightly more above predivorce levels than that of her ex-husband’s income.^{viii} Furthermore, one very recent study indicates that women are generally more satisfied with their divorce settlements than men, and that this satisfaction is stable over time.^{ix}

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 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, and how one should behave in divorce. The truth is richer and contains many positive possibilities for both women and men. ▲

ⁱ Laumann, E.O. (1994). *The Social Organization of Sexuality in the U.S.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

ⁱⁱ Bloom, B.L. & Hodges, W.F. (1981). The predicament of the newly separated. *Community Mental Health Journal*, 17, 277-293.

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First Wives, continued from page 4

ⁱⁱⁱ For a review see Bernard (1972). *The Future of Marriage*. New York: Bantam.

^{iv} Hayes, C.L. & Anderson, D. (1995). *Our Turn*. New York: Pocket Books.

^v Chirboga, D.A. & Cutler, I. (1977). Stress responses among divorcing men and women. *Journal of Divorce*, 1, 95-106.

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^{vi} Aarons, C. (1995). *The Good Divorce*. New York: Harper-Collins.

^{vii} Cherlin, A. (1981). *Marriage Divorce Remarriage*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

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^{viii} Duncan, G.J. & Hoffman, S.D. (1985) Economic consequences of marital instability. In M. David & T. Smeedings (Eds.), *Horizontal equity, uncertainty, and economic well being*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

^{ix} Sheets, V.L. & Braver, S.L. (1996). Gender differences in satisfaction with divorce settlements. *Family Relations*, 15, 336-342.

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