ROOM FOR DEBATE A Running Commentary on the News

Divorce: It's Not Always About You

By THE EDITORS

Lannis Waters/Palm Beach Post, via Associated Press)

Updated, 5:55 p.m. | Ralph Richard Banks of Stanford Law School explains the cultural shift in American marriages.

In the discussion that followed this week's news that Al and Tipper Gore were separating — the "if they can't make it, who can" ruminations — we heard that the breakup of such long-term marriages is going to be more common, as baby boomers, healthy and relatively wealthier than previous generations, don't want to stick it out, or don't have to stick it out, with their longtime spouses but can indeed have a new start, to go it alone, or find new romance.

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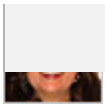
But what do we really know about the broader economic and social consequences of the break-up of long-term marriages? Are we far more insulated from its effects, given that couples have more legal and financial resources than in the past (or do they)? Which groups are affected most?

- Betsey Stevenson, economist, University of Pennsylvania
- Ralph Richard Banks, Stanford law professor
- Kathleen Gerson, professor of sociology, N.Y.U.
- Andrew J. Cherlin, professor of sociology, Johns Hopkins

Divorce in the Golden Years



Betsey Stevenson *is an assistant professor of business and public policy at the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania. She has designed a calculator for judging a couple's risk of divorce, based on marital history research.*

Al and Tipper Gore's announcement that they are separating after 40 years of marriage has many of us wondering about divorce after decades of marriage. While divorcing after decades of marriage is less common than divorcing early in marriage, it isn't rare.

> The big cost of a divorce is more likely to be worth it if there remain many more years to enjoy the payoff.

Analyzing recent Census Bureau data, I found that among recent divorces, 8 percent involved couples who had married 30 to 50 years earlier. Compared with the rest of the married population, these couples divorce at one-quarter the rate of those who have been married for fewer years.

Who are these silver-haired divorcees?

Not surprisingly, they are in their late 50s or early 60s, reflecting the fact that this generation married in their early 20s. Moreover, improvements in health and longevity mean that they still have plenty of life left to live.

As an economist, I suspect that this is an important factor driving "gray divorce." Economists think about the world in terms of costs and benefits, and the big cost of a divorce is more likely to be worth it, if there remain many more years to enjoy the payoff.

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The Soul Mate Factor

Ralph Richard Banks *is the Jackson Eli Reynolds professor at law at Stanford and the author of the forthcoming book, "Is Marriage for White People?" which you can follow on Facebook or on Twitter.*

The unexpected announcement by Al and Tipper Gore that they plan to divorce after more than 40 years of marriage has prompted a lot of hand-wringing, with some commentators worried anew about the state of marriage. But the Gores' story offers little reason to worry.

> People want more from marriage than ever before.

It is the case that long-married couples are more likely now to divorce than ever before. In prior generations, the marriages of couples in their 50s or 60s typically ended when one partner died. That divorce has become a more common ending to long-term marriages reflects two developments, one cultural, the other biological.

The cultural development is that people want more from marriage than they ever have, an expectation embodied in the idea of soul mate, a partner who can not only help to pay the bills and raise the children but who understands you to your core. People now want a marriage that promotes their personal fulfillment.

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Uncharted Territory

Kathleen Gerson *is a professor of sociology and Collegiate Professor of Arts and Science at New York University. She is the author of "The Unfinished Revolution: How a New Generation is Reshaping Family, Work, and Gender in America."*

In a world of fragile relationships, the Gores' marriage seemed to defy the odds and offer hope to the rest of us. Most Americans, including the vast majority of young people, dearly want to forge a lasting and satisfying commitment to one intimate partner. My study of today's young adults, who came of age in an era of rising divorce rates and blurring gender boundaries, found that 95 percent of both women and men (including gays and lesbians) hope to create a collaborative, mutually supportive relationship that stands the test of time.

> Adulthood now involves new life stages and shifts. Who can predict how our own and our partner's aspirations will change?

Rightly or wrongly, the Gores seemed to embody this growing ideal. Yet, for a variety of reasons – some good, some not-so-good, but all largely beyond our control – today's long-lasting marriages are entering uncharted territory, with new challenges to their resilience. The fate of Al and Tipper's marriage may represent the tip (forgive the pun) of the iceberg.

First, consider the implications of living longer, healthier lives. Although few would want to return to the distant past when early death represented the major cause of marital breakups, even vastly beneficial changes, such as longer life spans, bring new risks.

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The Risks Men Take

Andrew J. Cherlin *is professor of sociology and public policy at Johns Hopkins University. He is the author, most recently, of "The Marriage-Go-Round."*

It's only recently that so many couples have been facing the prospect of spending years and years together after their children move out. I don't know of any studies of the effects of late break-ups, but studies of widowhood suggest that if we begin to see more divorce among these empty nesters, we'll find that husbands are the losers as often as the wives. That's not the case in mid-life divorce, where husbands often move out of the house and leave the burden of caring for their young kids to their ex-wives. In late life divorce, however, the issue is who will care for the divorcing older parent when he or she needs it, and here older women have an advantage.

> Older divorced dads may find that their daughters aren't so eager to take care of them.

growing up.

Those children may feel less obligation to help out a father who chooses to divorce. We know that older men rely heavily on their wives for support and that if their wives die, they often flounder. (That's one reason they remarry so quickly.) Older widows, in contrast, are sustained by female relatives, most importantly their daughters.

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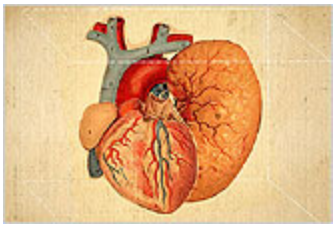

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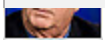
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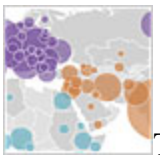 The United States has experienced the greatest surge in immigration since the early 20th century. This series examines how American institutions are being pressed to adjust.

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