

## DESPERATE HOUSEWIFE? DON'T WORK ON YOUR MARRIAGE, WORK ON MAKING BEING SINGLE BETTER

Just got married? Well, economics professor **Peter Thompson** has some bad news for you: you probably won't like it as much next year as you do now. And if you're a woman, you'll like it even less.

In a research report published in the October 2008 issue of the *Economic Journal*, Professor Thompson (who claims his study is not autobiographical) explores the role that learning plays in the evolution of happiness over the life of a marriage.

He imagines marriage as a process of learning how to live life as a couple. Couples begin life together with a common belief about the 'right' way to live their marriage. Over time, each spouse will have new experiences that induce them to change their beliefs.

The challenge for the couple is that some of these experiences can provide misleading information. As a result, couples are likely to develop different beliefs in the first few years of marriage, and so each partner is forced to live a life full of compromises.

The more divergent the beliefs of a couple, the more onerous is the compromise each spouse must make. For some, the compromise becomes too much and they separate.

Professor Thompson explores what his analysis has to say about the dynamics of marriage, divorce and happiness:

- Disagreements in a marriage can develop quickly, but they take a long time to resolve. As a result, the probability of separation rises quickly in the first few years of marriage, and it declines only slowly over the next few decades.
- Couples who marry young, with less experience and less precise ideas about how they should live their life are more likely to disagree and separate.
- Some couples should rightly expect from the start that their marriage will deteriorate. Eventually the marriage will get better again, but only if the couple can survive the tough times that come first.
- Societies that offer greater freedom about how individuals should live married life will have higher divorce rates than those in which expectations are well defined.
- Couples that reach a stage of marital distress when young are more likely just to walk out the door. Couples who develop problems at a later stage are more likely first to seek outside help such as marital counselling.

Why is Thompson's picture of marriage worse for women? He cites extensive evidence showing that women typically make the larger compromise: how the couple

lives is closer to the husband's preferences than it is to the wife's. As a result, women are less happy in marriage, and they are more likely to initiate separation and divorce.

When women getting the short end of the stick want out, their husbands don't want them to leave. To preserve the marriage, Thompson argues, the husband offers to forgo part of his control over household decision-making, to compensate his wife for forgoing divorce.

But husbands cannot commit to future behaviour. The best they can promise to unhappy wives is that today they will behave just well enough to stop their wives walking out. But they will revert to type at the earliest opportunity.

The paradox is that wives whose husbands are making 'concessions' will be kept, perhaps for a considerable time into the future, as miserable as they are today. These women Thompson calls 'desperate housewives'.

So what is a desperate housewife to do? One tactic is to drag her husband to marital counselling. But Thompson shows that doing so is likely to have only temporary effects on her happiness.

A more permanent solution is to raise the value of walking away from the marriage, which forces the husband to behave better in the long term. Thus, Thompson recommends:

'Desperate housewives should forget about trying to improve their marriage.'

'Instead, they should work on whatever would make them happy after divorce: better jobs, more friends, secret bank accounts or extramarital relationships.'

'Making divorce more appealing makes for a happier marriage. Hey, it's what Gabrielle Solis and her friends in the TV show *Desperate Housewives* are working on.'

ENDS

Notes for editors: 'Desperate Housewives: Communication Difficulties and the Dynamics of Marital (Un)Happiness' by Peter Thompson is published in the October 2008 issue of the *Economic Journal*.

Peter Thompson is at Florida International University, Miami.

For further information: contact Peter Thompson on +1 305 348 6031 (email: peter.thompson2@fiu.edu); or Romesh Vaitilingam on 07768-661095 (email: romesh@vaitilingam.com).