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Marriage Stands Up for Itself

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THEY'RE done. Toast. The governor needs his head checked. His wife needs to launch his clothes from the bedroom window. Time for those two to get in line behind that "Jon & Kate Plus 8" couple and call this charade off.

The speculation over the future of the marriage of [Mark Sanford](#), the South Carolina governor, after his recently disclosed affair is likely to die off well before the family's pain. So, too, will the unsolicited lectures — about his hypocrisy, about her obligations, about the dire state of marriage in general.

Yet if recent research is any guide, the marriage itself has a chance to outlast all of it, the public leer and the private sting, by many years.

Despite strong social riptides working against it — the liberalization of divorce laws, the vanishing stigma of divorce, the continual online temptations of social sites like [MySpace](#) or [Facebook](#) — the marriage bond is far stronger in 21st-century America than many may assume. Infidelity is one of the most common reasons cited by people who divorce. But surveys find the majority of people who discover a cheating spouse remain married to that person for years afterward. Many millions more shrug off, or work through, strong suspicions or evidence of infidelity. And recent trends in marriage suggest that the institution itself has become more resilient in recent years, not less so.

"Every marriage has many, many more dimensions to it than faithfulness," said Betsey Stevenson, an assistant professor of business and public policy at the Wharton School at the [University of Pennsylvania](#) who studies marriage and divorce trends. "We don't see the other sacrifices or other betrayals of promises. I wonder if faithfulness really is a litmus test in marriages, or if it just becomes a litmus test in the media because that's the one betrayal we hear about in these celebrity relationships."

Historically, the institution of marriage has not succumbed to infidelity so much as coexisted with it, like a body does with the flu virus: weakening at times, yet developing some immunity from long exposure. Anthropologists have found patterns of infidelity in diverse communities around the world, just as historians and novelists have. Many men and women, and most visibly men, have long been "publicly monogamous and hidden their affairs," as the anthropologist and writer Helen Fisher of [Rutgers University](#) has said.

Temptation stalks even close marriages, as researchers have had no trouble documenting it. In one survey, psychologists at the [University of Vermont](#) asked 349 men and women in committed relationships about sexual fantasies. Fully 98 percent of the men and 80 percent of the women reported having imagined a sexual encounter with someone other than their partner at least once in the previous two months. The

longer couples were together, the more likely both partners were to report such fantasies.

In another study, psychologists at the [University of Washington](#) and the [University of North Carolina](#) reported that married men and women who called their relationship with their spouse “pretty happy” were twice as likely to cheat as those who said their relationship was “very happy.” But perhaps the strongest risk factor for infidelity, researchers have found, exists not inside the marriage but outside: opportunity.

“People tend to assume that bad people have affairs, and good people don’t, or that affairs only happen in bad marriages,” said Peggy Vaughan, a San Diego-based researcher who runs the Web site [dearpeggy.com](#), and author of a forthcoming book on infidelity and marriage, “To Have and to Hold.” “These assumptions are just not based in reality.”

In any given year, about 10 percent of married people say they have had sex outside their marriage. These numbers say nothing about whether the affairs were discovered; but researchers have surveyed couples in which they were. In one survey, among 1,084 people whose spouses had affairs, Ms. Vaughan found that 76 percent of both men and women were still married and living with that spouse years later. Similar surveys have found rates of about two-thirds and higher.

Such surveys say little about the private hurt and struggle that couples live with in the months and years after a discovered betrayal. A good deal of these couples limp along, laboring to repair the severed trust — and the dynamic between the couple changes forever, as millions can attest.

But the investment in a marriage lasting more than a few years usually includes more than fidelity. Spouses share history and goals, children and strong bonds to friends and community. And there is some reason to believe that in recent years, such deeply integrated marriages have become more prevalent.

For instance, one of the most commonly cited statistics about marriage is that half of marriages end in divorce. But that number reflects the expected lifetime divorce rate of people married in the 1970s.

The story is different for more-recently married couples. A comparison of 10-year divorce rates among college-educated men married in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s shows that divorce is becoming less common, said Dr. Stevenson, the Wharton researcher. Among men who married in the 1970s, for example, about 23 percent had divorced by the 10th year of marriage. Among similar men married in the 1980s, about 20 percent had divorced by the 10th year. Men married in the 1990s are doing even better — with a 10-year divorce rate of 16 percent.

Divorce rates among those with only a high school education are higher, but even among this group, divorce is becoming less common. Among male high school graduates married in the 1970s and 1980s, about 25 percent had divorced by the 10th year. But among high school graduates married in 1990, the 10-year divorce rate is 19 percent.

The reason for these shifts, some experts say, is that many couples today are delaying marriage. And age matters. People who marry after age 25 are less likely to divorce than those who marry earlier, studies find. Men and women born in the 1930s who married in the 1950s have the highest marriage rate of any generation — about 96 percent married. But among more recent generations, the number has dropped to about 90 percent. The data suggest that the weakest relationships, which years ago might have resulted in a

marriage followed by a divorce, are now ending before the couple ever heads to the altar.

In short, marriages appear to be stronger from the beginning. “We have more selection pressure for stronger relationships,” Dr. Stevenson said. “That’s part of why the divorce rate has declined. Some of the weaker relationships are washing out before marriage.”

Some of the same social changes that have unsettled traditional 1950s-era marriages have seemingly deepened them in the 1990s and 2000s. Today women are contributing more financially to relationships than earlier generations, and men are contributing more to the domestic duties. Compared with earlier generations, men and women today are more likely to marry someone like themselves, with a similar educational background, experts say. The relationship is less about dividing economic and domestic duties and more about shared interests and mutual happiness.

“It might be that those types of matches, people who are more kindred spirits, are more able to weather a small storm,” Dr. Stevenson said. “You just have so much in common, you have so much invested together. A blip is just that, a blip, and it becomes easier to get over.”

The culture itself has also become more clear-eyed about the costs of divorce, despite and because of its frequency. Most social scientists today, no matter their political persuasion, agree that divorce, while sometimes necessary, financially drains families and is often tough on children. Many therapists now counsel couples coping with infidelity not to act rashly, to work on reconciliation for at least six months — divorce, almost always, is for good.

“It used to be that marriage therapists were trained to be neutral about marriage, to try to find what made the individuals happy,” said Diane Sollee, founder of smartmarriages.com, a clearinghouse for information, and the former director of professional education for the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy. “Now, more therapists consider themselves, first and foremost, a representative for the marriage.”

And it’s worth noting that most couples who have been publicly humiliated — the Clintons, the Spitzers, the Edwardses — have so far stayed together.

In a statement last week, Jenny Sanford, Governor Sanford’s wife, said that she had recently asked her husband to leave the house after discovering the affair. She also said that she still believes their relationship can be repaired.

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