

Conde Nast Portfolio

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The Future of Marriage

It's no longer about producing together, but consuming together.

That's the argument in a brilliantly presented essay by **Betsey Stevenson** and her partner **Justin Wolfers** -- both of Wharton.

[Here is their call](#) for a new economic model of the family:

So what drives modern marriage? **We believe that the answer lies in a shift from the family as a forum for shared production, to shared consumption. In case the language of economic lacks romance, let's be clearer: modern marriage is about love and companionship.** Most things in life are simply better shared with another person: this ranges from the simple pleasures such as enjoying a movie or a hobby together, to shared social ties such as attending the same church, and finally, to the joint project of bringing up children. Returning to the language of economics, the key today is consumption complementarities -- activities that are not only enjoyable, but are more enjoyable when shared with a spouse. We call this new model of sharing our lives "hedonic marriage".

(emphasis mine)

This model is based on the fact that more people are "empty nesters" than ever before and that divorce rates have been dropping over the past 30 year. Combined, these trends could likely mean couples aren't staying together "just because of the kids," but because they share similar values, enjoy doing things together, and/or find each other intellectually stimulating.

While the romantic in me really hopes this is true, the cynic has a question.

The last child is usually finished and shipped out of the house when parents are in their mid-50's. That means there are about 20 years of healthy living left. Let's assume there was no benefit from shared consumption, then it might make sense for couples to get divorced, have their fun with new people, and then die.

So why is this not happening?

One very sensible view is presented by Wolfers/Stevenson above.

But what if people at 55 are very concerned about old age and who will be there to take care of them? What if people decided to stay together because it's more risky to try to find a new partner at an advanced age? Staying together then becomes more about companionship and less about love.

I can think of two ways to test this hypothesis:

1) Compare divorce rates of parents with and without children, under the assumption that an extended time jointly taking care of the children is what [is keeping couples together](#) through the first part of a marriage. (According to Table 25 of [this CDC document](#), there is some suggestive evidence that this could be the case. After 15 years of marriage, the two groups most likely to suffer a "disruption" in their married life are women who had children before they got married (perhaps getting married for the sake of keeping up with norms) and women who never had children.)

2) See what happens when life expectancy reaches 100 and beyond. After the children leave the home, there is still an entire half-century of living left for the parents. Will the shared consumption of a hedonic marriage carry the day, until death?