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## ROOM DEBATE

A Running Commentary on the News

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### The Clueless Wives Club

By [THE EDITORS](#)

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When Bernard Madoff was sentenced last week, Ruth Madoff, who has been married to him for nearly 50 years, issued a statement saying that [she did not know of his fraud](#) until just before his arrest. Several of the wives in the political marriages rocked by disclosures of infidelity, including Jenny Sanford, seemed to have been in the dark for years.

Assuming these women didn't know, were they particularly blinkered, or do these cases show the limits of knowing another person, even in the most intimate and long-term relationships? Or is this simply how partnerships are set up in this culture?

### Separate Spheres vs. Shared Lives

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When the story about Eliot Spitzer's prostitutes broke, my partner exclaimed, "How could he spend money like that without his wife knowing?" Our partnership is best described by what we have called "hedonic" or "consumption" marriages in our research: couples who are matched on shared desires on how to live their daily lives. In these marriages, spouses typically share the daily jobs of running a household, with both employed in paying jobs and both contributing equally to home production.

By contrast, more traditional marriages are described by economists as "production-based" or "separate-spheres" marriages. In production-based marriages, couples benefit from dividing and conquering. One person specializes in market production, while the other specializes in raising the children and work in the home. This specialization makes these marriages more efficient and thus everyone is better off in the marriage.

Modern marriages are more stable, than marriages that began 40 years ago. But they may not be happier.

Household specialization may be efficient, but it comes with ignorance of each other's domains. Spouses who are truly surprised to discover that their partner has been having an affair or running a billion-dollar Ponzi scheme are experiencing the downside of separate-spheres

marriages. While equal sharing across domains does not necessarily come with full disclosure — even with shared household production one person may keep a closer eye on the finances — marriages based on shared values about how to consume and how to spend one’s time does require more intimate knowledge of each other’s daily lives.

In my “hedonic” partnership, we have joint and shared knowledge about earnings and spending in our household, and that means that neither of us could earn nor spend a substantial sum without the other one knowing (and it certainly rules out secretly running a billion dollar Ponzi scheme!). That’s not to say that those in these more modern relationships will never surprise each other with a life-changing betrayal, but simply that it is more challenging to do so without being quickly discovered.

While many find Ruth Madoff’s claims of ignorance difficult to believe given her almost 50 years of marriage to Bernie, her ignorance may be a product of the fact that separate-spheres marriages dominated in the 1950s and 1960s. Marriage has changed substantially since then as the value of household specialization has declined because of improvements for women in the labor market and an explosion of labor-saving technological inventions for the home.

Modern hedonic marriages are substantially more stable than the marriages that began 40 years ago. However, despite the fall in divorce, reports of marital happiness have declined over this period. Perhaps these facts reflect both the upside and the downside of knowing our spouses better.