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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?

[Betsey Stevenson](#), University of Pennsylvania

[Marilyn Yalom](#), Clayman Institute for Gender Research

[Julie Metz](#), author, "Perfection"

[Julie Gottman](#), clinical psychologist

[Ruth Houston](#), Infidelity News and Views

### Separate Spheres vs. Shared Lives

***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.*

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.

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### **Colluding on a Hidden Life**

***Marilyn Yalom**, a senior scholar at the **Clayman Institute for Gender Research**, Stanford University, is author of “**A History of the Wife**” and “**The American Resting Place**,” among other books.*

Wives — like husbands — sometimes have no idea that their spouses have a secret life. Usually, the “other life” is of a sexual nature, as in the political marriages that have recently been exposed. But sometimes the “other life” involves business fraud and even violent crime.

To what extent do these spouses collude in keeping the hidden life hidden? There is often, I think, some degree of consciousness that one’s partner is “cheating.” A wife who wants to preserve her marriage may at times shut her eyes to even blatant signs that her husband has other sexual partners -- like extended trips and time spent away from home for late nights out. (Sometimes such denial can have tragic consequences, as in cases where mothers refuse to believe that their daughters have been sexually abused by their husbands or boyfriends, even in the face of implicating evidence.)

A true mate is someone to whom you can confess mistakes, even those that violate the norms of marriage. Women in past centuries often suffered their husbands’ betrayals because they had no means of support outside the marriage and because divorce laws often separated them from their children. Women today have more options. Most American wives are wage earners who contribute to the family economy, most divorced mothers are granted at least joint custody of their children, and most women expect to be treated as equals within marriage. Even if marital infidelity is still more of a male than a female practice, women are robustly closing the gap.

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### **The Bubbles We Create**

***Julie Metz** is the author of “**Perfection: A Memoir of Betrayal and Renewal**.”*

“Like everyone else, I feel betrayed and confused. The man who committed this horrible fraud is not the man whom I have known for all these years.” — *Ruth Madoff*

As I read Ruth Madoff’s statement I tried to imagine the universe she lived in for all those years as Bernie Madoff’s wife, overflowing with the perks of wealth: the penthouse on 64th Street, private planes, a villa in the South of France. Two weeks ago I read that [she was no longer welcome at her hairdresser’s](#) for touch-ups on her famously blond bobbed haircut. “Let her do it herself, like the rest of us,” I remarked to a friend. Like most people I thought she didn’t deserve special treatment. With all that stuff, that over-the-top life, how could she never have

wondered about the source of all those millions?

I invested too much of my identity in being my husband's wife and therefore overlooked many signs. While Ruth Madoff's plea of ignorance appears to strain credulity (we may find out more in time as investigators do their work) I can attest to the power of the bubbles we women create for ourselves when we attach ourselves to powerful and charismatic men. I don't think Mark Sanford's wife knew about Maria in Argentina until the evidence leaked out, nor do I think Eliot Spitzer's wife knew he was paying prostitutes.

And I, living a more modest life in the exurbs of New York City, had no idea that my husband had been involved in a long affair with a neighbor and friend when he died in January 2003. When I found out half a year later I felt just like Ruth Madoff — betrayed and confused. For me, the lesson is that even though I had thought of myself as a strong and independent woman, I had invested too much of my identity in the idea of being my husband's wife and had therefore overlooked the signs that were surely there, had I been brave enough to look at them.

I believe that those signs were there for Ruth Madoff and those political wives who give up so much to support their husbands' ambitions. It was painful for me to look at my life in a new way, so I understand how bewildered these women are as they begin to reassess their lives.

### **Knowing Each Other's Secrets**

*Julie Gottman is a clinical psychologist and the co-founder and clinical director of the Gottman Institute.*

Betrayals in marriage are nothing new. In the case of Ruth and Bernard Madoff, Mr. Madoff was just as good at deceiving his wife as he was his clientele. In relationships where both partners lead parallel lives, are busy and ignore the inner lives of each other, there's fertile ground for betrayal. A good relationship requires a commitment not only to no secrets but also to knowing each other's secrets.

That's what real intimacy is about. Sharing secrets with one another — about what's on one's mind inside and out.

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When secrets emerge like Mr. Madoff's financial deceptions or Gov. Mark Sanford's extramarital affairs, the partner suffers profoundly. Post-traumatic stress disorder is the result — being battered by unwanted intrusive thoughts about the betrayal, nightmares, emotional numbing coupled with unpredictable explosions, sleep disturbances and hyper-vigilance as the partner or spouse searches for yet some other betrayal.

Healing is possible, but only with extensive work. Questions about the betrayal must be answered truthfully, and emotions must be listened to, even as they surface and resurface.

In fact, a new marriage or relationship must be built from the ground up — new honesty, new transparency and new patterns of telling, not hiding. Complete forgiveness may not be possible. But commitment to the truth can make a difference and spawn deeper intimacy as partners accept each other's flawed humanity.

## **False Impressions of Happiness**

**Ruth Houston** is the author of *“Is He Cheating on You? — 829 Telltale Signs”* and blogs at *Infidelity News and Views*.

Many wives are clueless to what their husbands are doing because they're under the false impression that as long as their husbands are happy, and their marriages seem problem-free, their husbands will never cheat. Last year, three separate studies published in three prestigious journals found that happy husbands cheat, too. A good, stable marriage will not necessarily prevent an extramarital affair, though it might have a better chance of surviving an affair.

It's also harder now to detect infidelity with technology and the Internet making communications effortless and constant. Twenty years ago, a spouse would have to leave home to seek out someone with whom to have an affair. Now it can all be done in cyberspace without the risk of running into family members, nosy neighbors or inquisitive friends. And a cheating spouse who wants to communicate with his mistress no longer has to sneak out to call, he can text or email anytime. So it's not terribly surprising to hear that Governor Sanford's affair with Maria Belen Chapur started out as an innocent email exchange, which grew over time.