

The price of success

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Did Courteney Cox's marriage fail because of her success? Photo: Snapper Media

Fame, wealth and a golden statuette ... it's what Hollywood dreams are made of. But in Tinseltown, it seems, the more successful the wife, the more endangered the marriage. Just ask Courteney Cox.

From *Sunday Life*

Hollywood is notorious for its fragile marriages, ones that shatter like glass under the stress of infidelity or incompatibility. But it's also an incubator for a special breed of marital breakdown: where the rupture is apparently brought about by the wife's professional success. In A-list circles it's become known as "the Oscar curse", referring to Halle Berry, Kate Winslet, Sandra Bullock, Reese Witherspoon and Hilary Swank: all winners of the Best Actress gong who soon afterwards found themselves sleeping with a statuette on the bedside table instead of a spouse under the covers.

More recently, Courteney Cox has joined their ranks. Opening up to Oprah Winfrey on the reasons behind the breakdown of their 11-year marriage, David Arquette revealed the contributing causes had little to do with forgotten toothpaste lids, raised toilet seats, another woman or lack of communication.

"A couple of days ago, some girl comes up to me and she goes, 'Aren't you David Cox?' [Courteney] was on this incredibly successful show and she made more money than me," Arquette recalled, referring to Cox's reported \$US1-million-per-episode pay cheque earned during the latter years of her run as the neurotic Monica on *Friends*. "I was sort of always in her shadow, and I'd have all this bitterness."

Back in the real world, while those income figures may not relate to your average Josephine, it seems in some cases the reasoning does. Sharing coffee one morning with an old friend, I was startled to hear her recount a similar tale: that of a marriage torn apart following two children and 10 years together as a husband failed to adjust to his wife's escalating career success. It may sound more like a *Bewitched* plot line than a modern relationship reality, but social psychologist Dr Dina McMillan insists it remains a culturally relevant scenario.

"Every time I go to a business luncheon for women ... I hear women talk about how hard it is to find a partner they can keep because men are often intimidated by women who are very bright, very educated, who are successful," says McMillan, suggesting it comes down to the enduring legacy of gender roles that see men brought up to act out competitive relationships with each other. Strong and successful female partners, the psychologist explains, can upset the apple cart by making men feel vulnerable; forcing them to put their guard up lest a misstep expose their vulnerability to a partner who brings out their alpha instincts.

In a study entitled *The Effect of Unemployment and Relative Income Disparity on Infidelity for Men and Women*, Cornell University sociology doctoral candidate Christin Munsch found that men are more likely to cheat when they are unhappy about their financial standing and their failure to assume the role of breadwinner. In these cases, Munsch explains, sexual conquests are used to shore up their threatened sense of manhood.

Hers is not the only study. Inspired by the aforementioned raft of Hollywood women left high and dry by their partner's post-Oscar win, University of Toronto and Carnegie Mellon University researchers found that award-winning actresses had a divorce rate 1.68 times higher than their male award-winning or female non-winning counterparts. The authors placed this finding alongside previous studies identifying the apparent risks



Actor David Arquette and his wife actress Courteney Cox in 2005.
Photo: ? Mario Anzuoni / Reuters

women take in being successful in their careers: "A wife's high income has been linked to an increased risk of divorce

at all levels of the husband's income, but especially when the wife's income exceeds her husband's," the authors found. "In addition, to make their marriage look and feel more conventional, women who contribute a greater share of the family income than their husbands may increase their proportion of household labour and childcare, while the husbands decrease theirs."

Certainly, 32-year-old executive Samantha Jayne has wrestled with the successful-woman conundrum. As the founder of a thriving executive dating agency, Jayne's intelligence, energy and competence in the business arena proved too much for her ex-partner to take. "Initially he was very impressed with my drive and focus but then, as the relationship developed, it became a threat," explains Jayne. It's a near mirror of Arquette's admission that, while initially able to ignore the issue of Cox's greater success, the day-to-day grind of a long-term relationship required him "to start dealing with people's [perceptions]".

The result, says Jayne, was a relationship where he felt threatened and she was left unsupported. Resentment that simmered under the surface would bubble over in increasingly frequent arguments. It wasn't about one person being out of their depth financially. "It was just a problem of not being traditional, and some men find being traditional really, really important," she says simply. "It was just that feeling of him not being the breadwinner."

But psychologist Heather Yelland believes the issue is much more complex than that of a man struggling to accept modern relationship codes. "I find that many women have lost connection with their feminine energy and are operating from a very masculine energy," Yelland ventures, offering her opinion that men are far more intimidated by women who operate in a very masculine way than they are by strong women who manage to achieve great things and maintain their femininity. "Eventually men will struggle to make sense of this 'unclear energy exchange' and will respond to a masculine woman in the same way they do to intimidating men."

As a successful owner of her own public relations firm, Dani Lombard has experienced first-hand Yelland's hypothesis. Happily married for three years, Lombard says a period in which both she and her husband worked from home challenged his perceptions of her, despite his acceptance of her independence and career success. "My husband always says that he hates my work persona," Lombard laughs, though she is quick to add that theirs is the type of modern marriage in which bills are split 50/50, with both husband and wife considered team players on equal par. "We used to work at home together and he said he couldn't stand it because I'd be different."

Carefree and "light-hearted" in her personal life, the Sydneysider says time pressures force her to adopt a take-no-prisoners attitude during those crucial working hours. She, like Yelland, believes it is the failure of some successful women to leave their corporate attitude in the boardroom that creates friction.

As does Dina McMillan. "You have to tone it down a bit," she advises, citing her experience with a local mechanic that saw her asked out each time she took her cars in for repairs. The reasoning? "I'm very well educated but I know nothing about mechanics, so I'd walk in and I'd be like a deer in the headlights. I'd have no clue. And they'd feel all strong and manly and their chests would pop up and I'd think, 'Isn't that interesting?'" says McMillan. "Because men don't fall in love with you, they fall in love with how you make them feel. So if you make them feel strong, if you make them feel confident about themselves, if you make them feel supported, then they'll like you."

For her part, Suzi Dafnis finds such suggestions horrifying. As the community director of the Australian Businesswomen's Network, Dafnis believes the propagation of views like Yelland's and McMillan's hampers progress towards full equality for women in business and society. "Women don't do enough to flaunt their achievements," she insists, vehement in her belief that holding back on revealing personal successes to a prospective partner serves nobody's best interests. "For us to brag is still considered a no-no, and so that could be why perhaps we are not getting those CEO roles. It could be why we are not as prominent on boards. If it's the truth, then it's not bragging - and even if you are bragging, who cares? It is our responsibility to be good role models and to demonstrate our success, not only for our own advancement but for the advancement of the young women who are watching us."

Nor does she believe taking such a stance would see women trekking the long and lonely road to spinsterhood. Insisting her partner is her biggest supporter, she says that tarring all men with the same brush is unfair and inaccurate. Sure, there may be men out there intimidated by a successful woman - so leave them to it. "Any man that would be put off like that? Who cares?!"

Former NSW Liberal leader Kerry Chikarovski has a slightly different take on the matter. Following 12 years in politics, the divorced mother-of-two (and soon-to-be grandmother) has gone on to sit on a number of boards while also developing her own health supplements company. At the age of 54 she remains ambitious and highly successful. She is also single. Having ticked all the relationship boxes at one stage or another, it is Chikarovski's belief that it is not the woman's success that makes finding love difficult. What it comes down to, she says, is a not-so-simple case of time management.

"[The] challenge for successful women - a bigger challenge than profile - is managing to actually fit in all the things you need to make a marriage successful as well as making a family successful as well as making a career successful," Chikarovski muses. "Finding time to do your job, arriving home at 7.30 at night, looking after the kids and putting them to bed and then finding time to invest in your relationship - that's the greatest challenge, and I still think that applies to successful women more than to successful men."

And the solution? For Samantha Jayne, it's quite straightforward, in principle at least. When it comes to a relationship, she says sagely, it's all about finding the right man - a challenge she understands well, courtesy of the years spent running her executive dating agency. "What I've found is that there are definitely two types of men. I'm now in an amazing relationship with an incredible man who is really, really supportive and we work together as a team and there is a really big difference in the dynamic of the relationship. It really does come down to individual personality type."

Standing in the shadows

It's not just David Arquette and Courteney Cox whose relationship fell by the wayside. These high-profile couples also failed to clear the successful-woman hurdle.

1. Delta Goodrem and Brian McFadden

With their seven-year engagement recently broken, "friends" of McFadden have revealed to various media the Irish singer's apparent insecurities about being cast in Goodrem's golden-girl shadow.

2. Sandra Bullock and Jesse James

Busted for having an affair with a tattooed stripper within days of Bullock taking home the Oscar for Best Actress for her film *The Blind Side*, James admitted, "I took a perfect marriage and a perfect wife and the perfect life and stepmother and, like, threw it away."

3. Jennifer Garner and Scott Foley

Splitting in 2003 after Garner was awarded the lead role in the TV series *Alias* in 2001, Foley admitted the relationship crumbled due to her new-found success. "Jennifer became a huge celebrity. She became a huge star ... There was no other relationship; there was no infidelity, nothing."

4. Reese Witherspoon and Ryan Phillippe

After seven years and two children, their separation was announced in 2006, the same year Witherspoon won an Oscar for her portrayal of June Carter Cash in *Walk the Line*, while Phillippe's career had stalled.



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»A curious article. It starts out talking about why successful women are struggling to have successful relationships (or even relationships at all). But with the exception of a reheated quote or two from David Arquette (who isn't exactly a typical man in a typical relationship) not even one man was actually asked what he thought. «

»In future you may find more insight about what men think by actually asking them, instead of asking women what their exes thought. «

»«

Rob | Melbourne - May 16, 2011, 11:37AM

»«

»I find Suzi Dafnis' words strange. Is she really suggesting that women should brag about their accomplishments and flaunt their achievements as a means of having a good relationship? What does getting a CEO role have to do with finding and keeping a partner? It's like she ignored the journalist's question and talked about something else entirely. «

»«

Rob | Melbourne - May 16, 2011, 11:41AM

»«

»Dear Courtney, «

»If you marry me, I promise not to whine about the fact that you earn more in a week than I do in a year. «

»Nor will I complain about being constantly referred to as your partner. «

»I won't have a problem with being far less famous than your good self either. «

»In short, I feel I'm perfect for you. «

»Yours etc, «

»A bloke from Melbourne. «

»«

John | Melb - May 16, 2011, 11:44AM

»«

»This is all rubbish. People are people, just that, equal. Careers between within a couple modulate, up and down, get used to it girls, there are loads of men out there who don't care if you are successful or not, so long as you are yourself and you can let a man be himself. «

»«

Sean | Sydney - May 16, 2011, 12:00PM

»«

»Blame so called feminist who have killed femininity in a woman. Once u kill the femininity in a woman than the relationship is dead regardless of how successful the woman is. «

»«

JAM - May 16, 2011, 12:18PM

»«

»So the dating agency businesswoman says "sagely" "there are two types of men". Oh PERLEEZE! I'd really be interested in knowing how mong she has been in her latest

relationship. I think Chikarovski hit the nail on the end, if you are madly busy (as any OSCAR winners would be) it must be easy to feel sidelined in a relationship. It may also be the case that the woman instigates the divorce as she is so absorbed in her work and trying to fit in her kids that she loses touch with her hubby (or finds she just doesn't have time for a relationship anymore). As Dina McMillen says about men, maybe these uber successful and fulfilled women "fall in love with how [their career] makes them feel".«

»«

Maggie - May 16, 2011, 12:26PM

»«

»Just a further thought about successful women needing to show their feminine side, isn't it interesting how most of the successful actresses in this story have long, girly hair? (apart from Berry, who is very sexy and feminine in any case).«

»«

Maggie - May 16, 2011, 12:27PM

»«

»More time at work = less time with partner = failed relationship . My wife earns 15k more then i do and it does worry me one bit. «

»«

Simmo | Sydney - May 16, 2011, 12:41PM

»«

»I think that there is an element of truth in men still needing to feel they are the protector/provider, albeit in this day and age that may present itself in a different way â€" caring for and protecting your partner isn't just about bringing home cash. «

»I roughly double my husband's income, but if either of us lost our job it would hurt a lot, so even though he's not the largest income earner, we're in this together. «

»He also 'provides' by being the main cook in the house â€" the comment in the article about working women trying to take on more house work to compensate is funny. Well duh that that they have no time for their partners if they continue to take on more and more. «

»I make an effort on a regular basis to check in and ensure that he's OK too â€" generally yes, but sometimes no and he lets me know that I am getting to wrapped up in work. The fact that he will speak up about that is good for me too. «

»No one can really understand what happened in any of the relationships mentioned, but if you're partner's not a priority in your schedule and you're not getting time together, it's no surprise when it all goes South. «

»«

Naomi | Sydney - May 16, 2011, 12:49PM

»«

»This article really confused me. Who says a seven year relationship is not a success? - how many years do you need to be with someone for it to be considered successful? - forever? - until you die? Who the hell is Dina McMillan? Why would we care if she picks up at the mechanics? Did I miss part of the article?«

»«

tajw - May 16, 2011, 12:52PM

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