Later Life Marital Dissolution and Repartnership Status: A National Portrait

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Background

• A growing share of marital dissolutions after age 50 are voluntary
  - The gray divorce rate has doubled since 1990
  - Widowhood is declining

• Our goal is to provide a national portrait of individuals who experience marital dissolution after age 50
  - Compare gray divorce vs. widowhood (accounting for repartnership)

Rationale

• Widowhood is linked to poorer outcomes, but the comparison group is the continuously married
• How does divorce after age 50 compare with widowhood after age 50?
  - Divorced and widowed men exhibit similar levels of repartnered status

Analytic Strategy

• Establish the prevalence of divorce versus widowhood separately for women and men across four age groups
• Estimate logistic regression models of the competing risks of being remarried or cohabiting vs. unpartnered
  - Divorced women twice as likely to be repartnered
  - Divorced and widowed men exhibit similar levels of repartnered

The Present Study

• Compare those who experience marital dissolution through divorce versus widowhood after age 50, accounting for repartnership status
  - Repartnership should be more common following gray divorce, not widowhood
  - Divorced and widowed men exhibit similar levels of repartnered

Data and Sample

• Health and Retirement Study (HRS), 1992-2010
  - The HRS is a longitudinal study of a nationally representative, continuous cohort of individuals born before 1960 in the U.S.
  - Analytic sample: 4,886 respondents who experienced marital dissolution through either divorce or widowhood at age 50 or older and were interviewed in 2010
  - 4,176 gray divorce
  - 3,421 widowhood

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• How does divorce after age 50 compare with widowhood after age 50?
  - Divorced and widowed men exhibit similar levels of repartnered

Limitations

• Repartnered status was captured at a single point in time
  - Cohabitation dissolution was not examined
• The HRS does not measure non-coresidential repartnerships (e.g., dating or LAT relationships)

Future Directions

• Examine the role of marital dissolution type and repartnered status for health and well-being
• Investigate the predictors of repartnered after a later life marital dissolution

Discussion

• Older adults increasingly experience marital dissolution through gray divorce, not widowhood
  - This shift foreshadows growth in repartnered
  - Gerontologists should widen their lens to include gray divorce
• Divorced men are more likely to re-partner
  - >50% of men’s dissolutions are through divorce, not widowhood
  - <25% of women’s dissolutions are through divorce

• Marital dissolution type is linked to subsequent repartnered status
  - Divorced women twice as likely to be repartnered as widowed women
  - Divorced and widowed men exhibit similar levels of repartnered

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