Antecedents of Divorce in Later Life

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Background
• The rate of gray divorce (i.e., divorce after age 50) has more than doubled since 1990 (Brown et al., 2012)
• 1 in 4 persons who divorce today is over age 50 (less than 1 in 10 in 1990)
• Even if the divorce rate remains constant over the next two decades, the number of persons aged 50 and older who would experience divorce in 2030 would rise by one-third to more than $28,000
• As Baby Boomers, the first to divorce and remain in large numbers, age into older adulthood, we can expect continued growth in later life divorce
• Nevertheless, risk factors associated with gray divorce are largely unknown

Prior Research
• There is a paucity of research on correlates of later life divorce (Brown et al., 2012; Kastner and Langer, 2003)
• Higher order marriages and marriages of shorter duration are more likely to end through divorce
• Middle-aged (50-64) adults are more likely to divorce than older adults (65+)
• Blacks are more likely to divorce than either Whites of Hispanics
• Education is negatively associated with divorce
• Wife’s illness onset is positively related to divorce

Present Study
• Guided by the life course perspective (Elder, 1994; Uhlenberg, 1994), we examined three key life course experiences that uniquely characterize older adulthood and are likely related to gray divorce
• An empty nest may be linked to a higher risk of divorce (Kessler, Schoenborn, and Drapeau, 1999)
• Asymmetry in spouses’ employment status may lead to gray divorce (Brown and Simonov, 2004)
• Asymmetry in a couple’s health status may increase divorce risk (Ruen and Wallack, 2003)

Data and Sample
• Health and Retirement Study, 1992-2012 (11 waves)
• The HRS is a longitudinal study of a nationally representative, continuous cohort of individuals born before 1960 in the U.S.
• We examined the original HRS cohort, the war babies cohort, and the early middle baby boomers cohorts
• Analytic sample: 9,311 couples in which at least one respondent was aged 50 or older and married at one or more interviews (42,440 couple-wave observations)

Analytic Strategy
• Our aim is to model the transition from marriage to divorce using discrete-time event history techniques
• All couples enter the analysis beginning with the first interview at which they are married
• Dependent variable is coded 1 if the couple experienced divorce during that couple-wave and 0 otherwise
• Couples are censored once they divorce, when one of the spouses dies, or at the 2012 interview
• All analyses were conducted in Stata using svis commands to adjust for complex sample design

Discussion
• Later life transitions are linked to gray divorce risk
• Couples in poor health are especially likely to divorce, raising questions about post-divorce well-being
• An empty nest marginally heightens the odds of divorce
• Some factors traditionally associated with divorce are also antecedents of gray divorce
• Marital duration and marital quality are negatively related to gray divorce
• Younger wives with older husbands are especially likely to divorce
• But other factors (e.g., race, education, and wealth) are not predictive

Limitations
• Our study identified a limited set of antecedents related to gray divorce
• There may be other predictors that are not measured in the HRS, such as more detailed, time-varying indicators of marital quality
• It is surprising that economic factors are not predictive of gray divorce given their close association with divorce earlier in the life course

Future Directions
• Poor health is a risk factor for gray divorce and thus it is important that future research examine how men’s and women’s health and well-being change following gray divorce
• The consequences of gray divorce for other dimensions of well-being (e.g., financial security) also merit future investigation.