

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 and Lin, 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 828,000 (Brown and Lin, 2012)
- As Baby Boomers, the first to divorce and remarry 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 and Lin, 2012; Karraker and Latham, 2015):
 - 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 or 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, 1964; Uhlenberg, 1996), 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 (Hiedemann, Suhomlinova, and O'Rand, 1998)
 - Asymmetry in spouses' **employment status** may lead to gray divorce (Davey and Szinovacz, 2004)
 - Asymmetry in a couple's **health status** may increase divorce risk (Wilson and Waddoups, 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 and 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 `svy` commands to adjust for complex sample design

Focal Life Transitions by End Status of Marriage

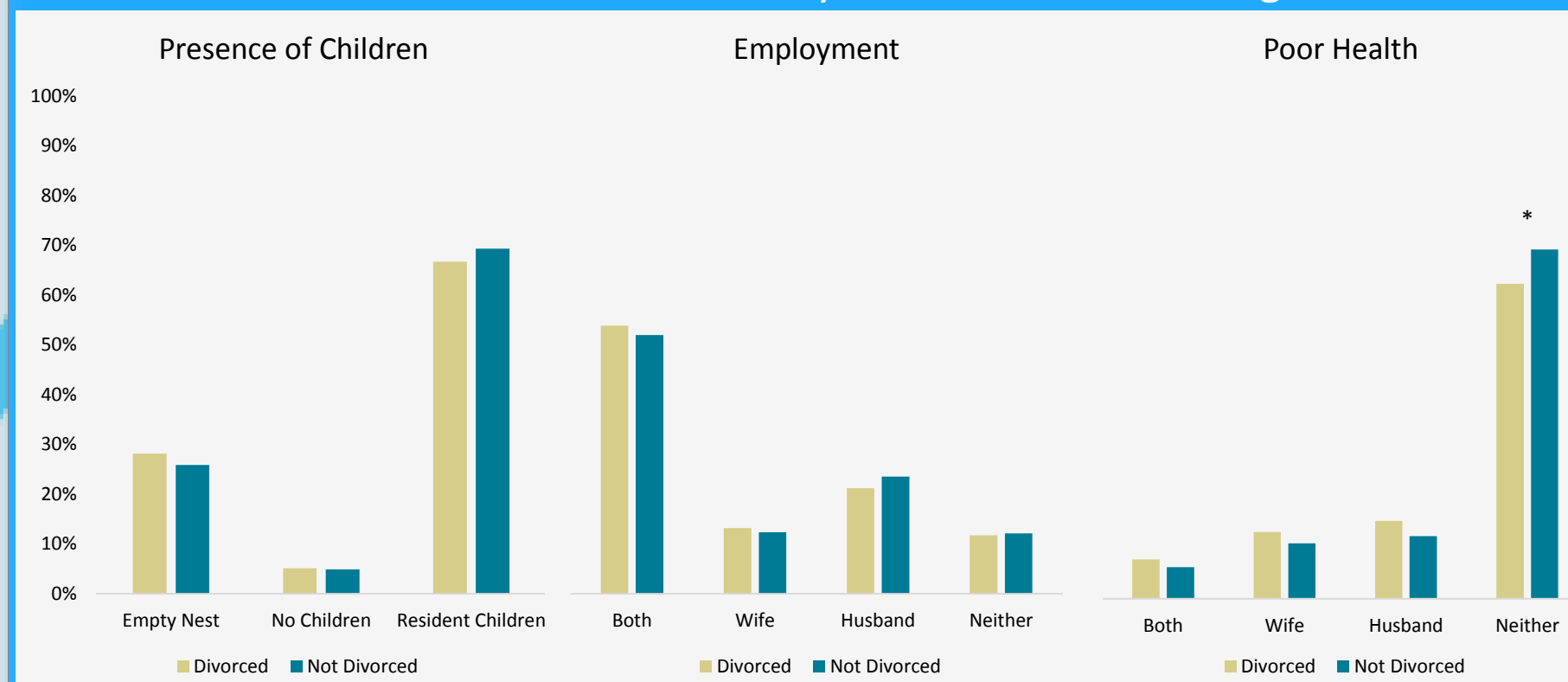


Table 1. Weighted Descriptive Statistics by End Status of Marriage

	Divorced	
	Yes	No
<i>Characteristics of Marriage</i>		
One or both spouses are remarried	66.33	44.96 ***
Marital duration (in years)	16.56	23.93 ***
Husband's marital interaction (2-6)	4.27	4.61 ***
Wife's marital interaction (2-6)	4.14	4.49 ***
<i>Demographic Characteristics</i>		
Age		
Husband's age at marriage	37.70	31.23 ***
Wife younger than husband by 5+ years	44.18	32.77 ***
Wife is older than husband by 2+ years	17.71	12.82 **
Racial or Ethnic Background		
Both spouses are white	70.14	76.31 *
Both spouses are nonwhite	20.96	18.06
Spouses are of different races	8.90	5.63 *
Educational Attainment		
Husband has less than high school education	20.91	17.17
Husband has high school education	26.29	28.48
Husband has some college education	25.92	22.59
Husband has college education or more	26.88	31.76
Wife has higher education	28.48	23.79 *
Husband has higher education	27.49	27.05
<i>Economic Characteristics</i>		
Own Home	78.66	85.48 **
Wealth		
In Debt	10.38	19.20 ***
\$0 to \$50,000	47.93	40.11 ***
\$50,001 to \$100,000	10.97	10.97
\$100,001 to \$250,000	13.23	12.23
\$250,001+	17.49	17.49
Unweighted N	584	8,727

* p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001

Table 2. Odds Ratios from the Weighted Logistic Regression Predicting Divorce

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
<i>Life Transitions</i>					
Empty Nest	0.79 *				1.26 +
No Kid	0.89				0.77
Both Work			1.86 ***		0.85
Wife Works			2.05 ***		1.15
Husband Works			1.66 **		0.89
Both Poor Health				2.01 ***	1.76 **
Wife Poor Health				1.34	1.12
Husband Poor Health				1.58 ***	1.36 *
<i>Characteristics of Marriage</i>					
One or both spouses are remarried	0.94				0.88
Marital duration (in years)	0.91 ***				0.90 ***
Husband's marital interaction	0.83 **				0.83 **
Wife's marital interaction	0.75 ***				0.76 ***
<i>Demographic Characteristics</i>					
Age					
Husband's age at marriage	0.97 **				0.95 ***
Wife younger than husband by 5+ years	1.34 *				1.39 *
Wife is older than husband by 2+ years	1.27				1.20
Racial or Ethnic Background					
Both spouses are nonwhite	1.03				1.01
Spouses are of different races	1.44				1.40
Educational Attainment					
Husband has high school education	0.79				0.86
Husband has some college education	1.16				1.32
Husband has college education or more	0.94				1.14
Wife has higher education	1.21				1.23
Husband has higher education	1.13				1.09
<i>Economic Characteristics</i>					
Own Home	0.78				0.81
Wealth					
\$0 to \$50,000	0.81				0.88
\$50,001 to \$100,000	0.58 *				0.65
\$100,001 to \$250,000	0.62 *				0.69
\$250,001+	0.62 *				0.69
Constant	4.10	0.01 ***	0.01 ***	0.01 ***	6.54 *
Couple-wave observations	42440	42440	42440	42440	42440

* p < .10, ** p < .05, *** p < .01, **** p < .001

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.

This research was supported by a grant to Brown and Lin from the National Institute on Aging (R15AG047588).

This research was supported in part by the Center for Family and Demographic Research, Bowling Green State University, which has core funding from the *Eunice Kennedy Shriver* National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (R24HD050959).