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Gray Divorce: Explaining Mid-life Marital Splits

Jocelyn Elise Crowley
Edward J. Bloustein School of Planning
and Public Policy
Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey
33 Livingston Avenue
New Brunswick, New Jersey 08901-1980
(848) 932-2971
jocelync@rutgers.edu
jocelyncrowley.com

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ABSTRACT

Recent research suggests that 1 out of every 4 divorces in the United States is now “gray,” meaning that at least one half of the couple has reached the age of 50 when the marriage breaks down. To understand why this age group—the Baby Boomer generation—is splitting up, this study conducted 40 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with men and 40 with women who have experienced a gray divorce in their lifetimes. Respondents’ beliefs in an expressive individualistic model of marriage, where partnerships are only valuable if they help individuals achieve personal growth, were compared against their potential adherence to what I call a commitment-based model of marriage, where binding, romantic love holds couples together unless there is severe relationship strain. The results demonstrated that the commitment-based model most strongly governs marriage and the decision to divorce among Baby Boomers for both sexes, although some specific reasons for divorce differ for men and women.

KEYWORDS: Gray Divorce, Marital Dissolution, Sex
Introduction

Recently, the phenomenon of gray divorce has been gaining attention in the United States (Uhlenberg, Cooney, & Boyd, 1990; Wu & Schimmele, 2007). Gray divorce most commonly refers to any marital split where one of the former partners is age 50 or older. While the divorce rate for the country among younger people has stabilized over the period between 1990-2010 (Kennedy & Ruggles, 2014), the divorce rate for adults age 50 and over has doubled (Brown & Lin, 2012). Overall, this means that 1 out of every 4 divorces in the country is now gray, translating into about 643,152 older individuals obtaining a divorce in 2010 alone (Brown & Lin, 2012).

While we know that the number of gray divorces is rising dramatically in the United States, we have much less of an understanding regarding the reasons behind the splits, and if these reasons differ by sex (Gander, 1992). This is important because such knowledge might help us reduce the prevalence of divorce in later life, by, for example, directing professionals to both teach appropriate conflict resolution skills as well as provide suitable marriage counseling on issues most salient to each sex. This leads to the current research questions addressed here: What are the causal motivations that prompt members of the Baby Boomer generation to undergo a gray divorce, and do the reasons offered for divorce differ for men versus women? This study examines these issues through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 40 men and 40 women across the United States who have experienced at least one gray divorce in their lives.

Commitment-based versus expressive individualistic models of marriage

Heterosexual marriage as an institution in the United States has evolved in many ways since the beginning of the twentieth century to the present. In the early twentieth century, there
was a high degree of gender-based segregation in terms of family duties, such that each partner had particular expectations to fulfill (Coltrane & Adams, 2008). Couples also were attached to each other in another way (Coontz, 2006). More specifically, romantic love, previously viewed as unnecessary for couples, became a threshold foundation upon which most marriages were built. It is important to note that romantic love in this context did not simply mean a mutual attraction; it implied binding responsibilities toward one another as partners. Only under extreme circumstances, where one or both partners placed significant strain on the relationship through their actions, would divorce even be considered. Burgess and Locke (1945) and later Cherlin (2009) labeled this sexual division of labor in conjunction with romantic love as forming the basis of a “companionate marriage.” However, over time, the strict gender-based assignment of duties within the family diminished in importance, while the promise of enduring love remained. This became a modified form of the companionate marriage that I call the commitment-based model of marriage in this analysis.

Beginning in the mid-twentieth century, however, a new philosophy of marriage emerged that was at odds with this commitment-based model. Growing up in an era of consumerism and massive political and social change, Baby Boomers came to be defined as a generation that highly prized the concept of expressive individualism (Bellah et al., 2007; Russell, 1993). A belief in expressive individualism meant that everyone’s most important concern should be his or her own personal development. According to this new perspective, marriages themselves would be sites for personal growth. By being part of a couple, each partner was promising to help the other achieve his or her own unique life goals. The success of a marriage, then, became measured by each person’s ability to attain these goals, and if this were not possible, divorce
became a socially acceptable practice, as opposed to the option of last resort (Hackstaff, 1999; Wu & Schimmele, 2007).

Taken in its entirety, the commitment-based model of marriage implies that divorce should only take place in extreme circumstances, that is, when the rules of binding, romantic love are violated. Examples might include incessant arguing over specific topics, such as finances and children, adultery, personality flaws, communication problems, addictions, behavioral or mental dilemmas, or various types of abuse. The expressive individualistic model of marriage, on the other hand, suggests that divorce may occur when either partner no longer feels that he or she has the ability to personally evolve in the marriage; growing apart, having different values/interests, wanting divergent lifestyles, becoming unhappy, or falling out of love are ways in which breaches of this expressive individualistic model of marriage might be articulated. In sum, divorce can now result from different belief systems about marriage and their corresponding implications of what constitutes violations of these distinct marital models.

**Reasons offered for a gray divorce**

There is limited research regarding the reasons why individuals seek a gray divorce, and much of the data that have been collected are based on small sample sizes (n<=15), thereby preventing substantial gender-based analyses. However, the studies are still suggestive. Some of this research indicates that both models of marriage—the commitment-based model and the expressive individualistic model—are relevant for this age group. Canham et al. (2014) found that some of their research participants’ (ages 58 to 68) expressive individualistic goals were not being met in their marriages, in that they had experienced a change in interests or long periods of unhappiness with their partners when they considered divorce. Still, adherence to the
commitment-based model of marriage also played a part in others’ decisions, and only severe 
relationship strain caused their unions to fall apart. These strains included their own or their 
partners’ personal ‘baggage,’ flawed reasoning to initially marry, physical/emotional abuse, and 
communication problems. Interestingly, other research of older adults has found no evidence of 
expressive individualistic notions of marriage, but, rather, only the commitment-based model 
(Rokach, Cohen, & Dreman, 2004). Rokach, Cohen, and Dreman (2004) reported that their 
study participants (ages 46 to 59) pointed to the following relationship challenges in their 
decisions to divorce: a lack of emotional mutuality and communication, the presence of 
alternative relationships (long-term adultery), affairs (short-term adultery), and physical and 
emotional abuse (Rokach, Cohen, & Dreman, 2004).

Beyond these small studies of this older population, there is one large-scale study that 
was conducted by the AARP (formerly the American Association of Retired Persons) in 2003 
(Montenegro, 2004). This research focused on 1,148 Americans experiencing a divorce in a 
somewhat younger age bracket, specifically between the ages of 40-79. When asked about their 
top five reasons for divorcing their spouses, men and women differed, but both reported a belief 
in the two models of marriage discussed here. For men, the top reason related to their desire and 
ultimate failure to obtain an expressive individualistic marriage: they fell out of love without a 
specific cause. Their second most common reason was a tie between their lack of ability to 
achieve an expressive individualistic marriage as embodied by different lifestyles and values 
with their partners, and their failure to attain a commitment-based marriage in the area of 
infidelity. Commitment-based ideals of marriage and their inability to realize them took third, 
fourth, and fifth places as reasons for their divorces in the survey among men: 
verbal/physical/emotional abuse, drug/alcohol abuse or refused to answer (a tie), and falling in
love with someone else (adultery). Women listed many of the same reasons for their divorces, but their failure to achieve commitment-based ideals took their top three spots: verbal/physical/emotional abuse, drug/alcohol abuse, and cheating. Lack of success in attaining expressive individualistic goals of marriage represented the fourth and fifth reasons offered among women for their divorces: different values/lifestyles and falling out of love. This study thus provides some indication that men and women might have different reasons for divorcing.

There are two important limitations, however, to the information provided by this large scale AARP study. First, the AARP study does not precisely deal with attribution. For each explanation given, a respondent could answer whether it applied “mostly” to himself/herself, “mostly” to his/her partner, or “mostly” to both parties. This produces ambiguity in terms of discerning exactly whose belief in which marriage model was violated. Second, the survey relied on collecting closed-ended responses from those experiencing a gray divorce. The research presented here, in contrast, provides men and women experiencing a gray divorce with the opportunity to explain their reasons for divorcing in their own words such that the richness of their experiences can fully emerge.

**Methodology**

This project is based upon the collection and analysis of 80 in-depth, semi-structured interviews, 40 with men and 40 with women, none of whom were either related or previously married to each other and all of whom were heterosexual. These interviews were conducted as part of a much larger project on gray divorce that aimed to examine many facets of the lives of those undergoing this mid-life transition (Author forthcoming). In addition to collecting sociodemographic data and data on the causes of gray divorce, as part of this greater research initiative, participants were asked questions about financial holdings, social support networks,
general attitudes toward divorce policy, and thoughts about their future life prospects. I conducted all of the interviews from July 2014 through February 2015 by telephone, and each interview lasted approximately one hour on average. All of the interviews were recorded and then professionally transcribed. In addition, all respondents were given pseudonyms to protect their identities.

Sample recruitment

While the number of individuals experiencing a gray divorce has been rising over time, the incidence is still relatively rare within the general population. These relatively small numbers of people experiencing a gray divorce make it difficult to sample them (Tourangeau, 2014). Notably, however, social networking websites have recently gained academic attention as effective means of locating hard-to-reach populations (Bhutta, 2012; Rife et al., 2016; Schneider, Burke-Garcia, & Thomas, 2015). Facebook, in particular, allows advertisers to focus their messages on pre-selected sociodemographic groups. For this study, I ran recruitment advertisements on both mobile devices and desktops for persons 50 years or older and living within the United States (Author 2017). These advertisements carried the headline, “Study of Mid-Life Divorce” along with a university logo. The following statement then appeared, “If you had a divorce at or after 50 years old, and would like to participate in this interesting academic study, please click the link to learn more about the project.” All individuals who clicked forward were again asked about their qualifications, given more information about the project, and then prompted for their contact information.

To qualify as a potential participant in this study, an individual had to have met the following requirements: 1) Experienced a divorce at age 50 or older (whether a first, second, or later divorce); 2) Lived in the United States; and 3) Spoke English. The recruitment proceeded
over 13 days in four waves (from July 2014 through February 2015), which produced 178 presumptively qualified participants. Ultimately, 11 of the 178 in the preliminary screening stage failed to actually qualify, leaving a final sample of 167 participants. I conducted the recruitment in waves in order to secure willing participants who would be able to schedule and conduct their interviews with me immediately. I initially sought 60 participants, but after the second wave of contacting both male and female participants, realized that I was still acquiring new information from my respondents (Hennink, Hutter, & Bailey, 2011). Therefore, because I wanted to gain as much insight as possible, I pursued collecting the final, two additional waves of data, the third for men only and the fourth for women only.¹

Data analysis

All participants were asked to explain the cause of their divorces to the best of their abilities and to the extent to which they felt comfortable. As they answered, I probed them for further clarification when necessary. After the interviews were conducted, I then proceeded to read through each interview transcript several times. I relied on the relevant literature to provide sensitizing concepts in analyzing the participants’ answers but was also open to new themes emerging among their accounts as well (Blumer, 1986). More specifically, I used open coding procedures in my grounded theory analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Codes such as “ongoing arguing about financial differences/problems,” “engaging in physical infidelity,” “dealing with spouses’ mental health issues,” and “growing apart” all emerged here. To organize the themes more methodically, I employed the qualitative software program Atlas.ti. This was especially useful since I followed Montenegro (2004), Canham et al. (2014), and Rokach, Cohen, and Dremen (2004) by allowing participants to identify as many causes of their divorces as they

¹ Wave 1 of data collection took place from 7/23/14-7/28/14; wave 2 from 8/19/14-8/21/14; wave 3 from 1/5/15-1/6/15; and wave 4 from 2/6/15-2/7/15.
wished to identify. This meant that while, at times, some participants offered only one cause, at other times they offered multiple causes and, therefore, could be matched with multiple codes.

After this initial coding, I used focused coding which involves noting both the relationship among these identified codes and returning to the literature for additional clarification as to what issues might drive couples to divorce (Charmaz, 2005). This process led me to link each of these codes to its particular model of marriage. As an example, the causal theme “dealing with spouses’ mental health problems” was matched to the commitment-based model of marriage, while “growing apart” was tied to the expressive individualistic model of marriage. The final stage of selective coding involved examining how all of these focused codes produced coherent perspectives around the causes of gray divorces in the United States today (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). To be considered a substantive reason or explanation in this analysis, I determined that it had to be discussed by more than five members of either sex.

To guarantee the trustworthiness of the data (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011), I first permitted the participants to use their own words in the results for credibility purposes. Transferability was achieved by placing these divorce experiences within larger patterns of family life in American society, and dependability was attained by collecting the data within a short period of time. Lastly, I obtained confirmability, as multiple external readers of the same interview excerpts generated similar conclusions about the reasons offered for divorce.

**Results**

**Sample Characteristics**

With the exception of household income, men and women in this sample were quite similar in terms of their sociodemographic characteristics as demonstrated by Table 1. Overall, participants were approximately 59 years old, on average, and their former spouses were
approximately 57 years old. The mean duration of their marriages ending in a gray divorce was 24.2 years ($SD = 10.9$), and many had been married more than once. Slightly over half – 46 out of 80, or 58% – lived with their former partners before they got married. Approximately 50% of the sample initiated the divorce (43 out of 80), with more women doing so than men. Almost 75% (58 out of 80) had biological and/or adopted children from their marriages, with the average being two children. Only one participant had remarried by the time of the interview, but on average, most participants tended to live with at least one other individual in their household (including family and non-family members). Four lacked health insurance at the time of their interviews, but only six had long-term health care insurance policies in place. Most participants identified with either the Republican Party or Democratic Party (25 each out of 80, or 31% for each); the others were either “Independents” (10 out of 80, or 13%) or members of “other” parties (19 out of 80, or 24%). Average yearly household income was $88,402 per year, and the sample was highly educated, with a total of 50 out of 80 (63%) of the interviewees holding a bachelor’s degree or a graduate/professional degree. With respect to religion, a sizeable majority were either non-Roman Catholic Christian (40 out of 80, or 50%) or Roman Catholic (14 out of 80, or 18%). Lastly, in terms of race, 73 out of 80 (91%) of the participants were white.

As Table 2 demonstrates, men and women discussed both similarities and differences in their reasons for seeking a gray divorce. In terms of their commonalities, both sexes cited only one violation of the expressive individualistic model of marriage: growing apart. The remaining two common reasons represented failures to achieve the commitment-based goal of marriage: physical infidelity and their spouses’ mental health problems. With respect to differences between the sexes, both still focused only on breaches of the commitment-based model of marriage. More specifically, men discussed financial differences/problems and problems over
raising children. Women, on the other hand, pointed to their spouses’ alcohol/drug/pornography addictions and their spouses’ verbal and emotional abuse as causing their divorces.

[Tables 1 and 2 about here]

**Reasons offered by both sexes: Growing apart**

The failure to achieve an expressive individualistic marriage was mentioned by both men and women only as one primary reason: growing apart. Growing apart meant that the union was no longer personally enriching for each individual who identified it as a cause of his/her marital breakdown (De Graaf & Kalmijn, 2006). For some of the total of 17 men and 7 women who reported this dynamic, growing apart translated into one person changing over time, usually for the worse; this prevented either or both halves of the couple from being fully satisfied in the marriage. Paul, 56 years old, provided one of these types of narratives about his 33-year-old marriage. While initially his marriage was one filled with love that produced three children, Paul became concerned that over time, his wife, also 56 years old, had become obsessed with regaining her youth. He stated that “Botox to [keep] herself young-looking was costing us a fortune…She was spending $500 to $700 [per] month on Botox [I think].” He tried to tell her that he did not worry about her wrinkles and that he liked her the way she was, but she did not care and continued to pursue those activities.

Making matters worse, the couple bought their first computer later in life and asked their children to help them to learn how to use it. That was when, as per Paul, his wife’s desire to turn back the clock went into even higher gear.

She went on Facebook…[She said.] “Oh, look at this one from our school. Look at this one. Oh, look at how they look.” So, the reconnection to our teenaged youth, 17, 18, early 20s--that really [got her excited]…[She said.] “Oh, I’ve got to go see them and see them and see them.”…She started going into the old haunts…and reliving and hanging out, and staying out and smoking a joint here and there.
Eventually, Paul felt completely disconnected from his wife as she withdrew from him sexually and continued to seek out these old friends. Upon reflecting on what might have caused these changes in his wife, Paul noted that she had previously battled breast cancer and that this had been very difficult for her. Paul, too, had his share of challenges when he had to face both testicular as well as bladder cancer. But while Paul’s wife “ran from God” when she got sick, Paul “ran to God” and found himself with a renewed sense of faith after his health scares. In Paul’s view, his wife had lost her moral compass, such that when he had a stroke at age 40—an additional medical crisis—she became even further alarmed that her life would no longer be fun if she had to “push me around in a wheelchair.” Ultimately, Paul felt that he had no choice but to give in to her request for a divorce.

For other couples, growing apart meant that both rather than one individual in the marriage changed over time in ways that made them feel suffocated if they stayed together. Janice, 61 years old, was married to her husband, 60 years old, for 36 years. Janice explained that the couple had gotten married in their twenties, and that upon retrospect, they “were young …and we just had different career paths. Our interests began to grow distant.” While they loved each other, in the early years of their marriage, they were surrounded by many friends and social activities. Later, when Janice explained that “we were face-to-face with each other [alone], I think a different persona presented itself.” Over time, Janice started understanding the depth of these differences.

He is not a conversationalist and not really social. And that didn’t really show itself during our dating years. Once we were married, he was content reading a book and watching sports and I wanted to go out with friends and be engaged in what was going on in our community…I wanted to learn to golf with him because he was a golfer in high school… Then [he] had no interest later on. I wanted to learn to ballroom dance. I was teaching aerobics and working full-time. So I was active...And he didn’t have those types of active interests.
Yet, while they were still young, they both took strong roles in raising their two daughters, so for a while, this parenting partnership trumped their increasing differences.

Nonetheless, with more time, Janice found herself even more dissatisfied in the marriage. She thought that she was developing new possibilities for herself, whereas her husband was reducing his ambitions.

I also went back to school. I have two degrees. I went back to school to get a third degree in interior design and got little or no support from him other than… we jointly paid for my tuition. He was very indifferent. [He] didn’t ask what was going on. I obviously was taking classes during the day so I would be around for our two daughters, but when I came home and had homework to do or projects, he was not interested at all. And so I got resentful.

Janice worked her way up into a position as a director for a non-profit organization, while her husband continued to be employed in the field of information technology. With their mutual interests dwindling, she wanted to separate. Her husband moved out of the family home and informally supported her for 12 years before she finally decided to divorce him officially.

*Reasons offered by both sexes: Spouses’ physical infidelity*

Failures to achieve the commitment-based model of marriage materialized for men and women in a variety of ways; the first was physical infidelity. Cheating remains one of the most significant challenges to modern marriages, plaguing younger couples as well as those age 50 and above (Allen & Atkins, 2012). Like younger individuals, most older couples expect monogamy in their marriages, and when they do not receive it, they are unlikely to stay together. For the 13 men and 13 women in this study who experienced this issue, this infidelity crept into their marriages unexpectedly. William, 59 years old, had been married to his wife, 58 years old, for 31 years. At one point, she experienced a shoulder injury and went to physical rehabilitation. There, she met a man 18 years her senior, who was wealthy but had been previously married and
divorced four times. Since he also had a shoulder injury, the rehabilitation staff encouraged him to do his exercises with William’s wife. Soon the two were coordinating their schedules together and even disappearing into the facility’s back room to be alone. Eventually, William knew that he had to do something about what he came to perceive as their excessive closeness.

She was saying he was just a friend, just a friend, just a friend. I could tell differently and every time I made any type of effort to separate her from him, I was met with a very strong resistance. Finally, about nine months later, I openly accused her of having an affair. She adamantly denied it…[But] the rehab had long been over [and] she was still finding ways and places to meet with the man. I had confirmation of this.

Because of this man’s past, William felt like he had to protect himself emotionally and physically from any potentially sexually transmitted diseases. He therefore moved out of the bedroom he shared with his wife.

One day, she came home from work extremely late from her job as a schoolteacher. At that point, she announced to William that she wanted a divorce and she immediately left to spend the night with her boyfriend. However, life was not perfect with her boyfriend either. After spending only days with him, she asked William to take her back. He still loved her, so he did. However, his wife continued this pattern of leaving and then wanting to return, until William finally demanded that they see a counselor. The counselor agreed to help them, but insisted on treating his wife alone for a period of time in order to help her with her trust issues first. During this time, the couple decided together that they would work on their marriage, but only if his wife got her own separate apartment for at least six months. On the day that William was helping her set up her bedframe in this new apartment, she wondered aloud, “What if we don’t make this work and…” She then went silent. William knew how to complete the rest of her sentence—“What if the marriage did not work and her boyfriend was no longer there for her.” William stopped in his tracks and said, “Dear, this is over. You do not know your [own] mind
but one thing you do know is that you do not want to be married to me. Go call [your boyfriend] right now and see if he is still available for you again.” She did, and with that step, the marriage was officially over.

Many individuals like William, who confronted physical infidelity in their marriages, dealt with the issue within a short period of time and then moved on to the decision to divorce. For others, the infidelity initiated a much longer struggle over whether to stay married or not. Christine, 64 years old, faced a sustained period of turmoil with her husband, 63 years old. The couple stayed married for 31 years, but after about 20 years, she suspected that he was cheating on her with their neighbor. Christine noted, “They were just a little too cozy with each other. It just wasn’t normal.” Making matters worse, this woman was also her best friend. When she confronted her husband, he admitted to the affair, and they both agreed to go to counseling. The counselor asked him to stop seeing the neighbor, and he did.

However, this infidelity demonstrated that there were severe cracks in their marriage. Later on, Christine suspected that he was continuing to cheat on her.

[My husband] is a physician so he would have drug reps [who] came to his office…He became very close with one particular drug rep. He would take her out. They would go out dancing on Saturday night and he wouldn’t come home until four in the morning. And at that point, I didn’t even want to [know]- I sort of knew, but I thought, ‘What's the point?’

Christine had been a stay-at-home mother while her two children were growing up. Since she relied on her husband for income, she stated that she just “tried to put up a wall and say, okay, I’ll stay in it for the kids and the money and I don’t care what you do.” Finally, during a particular intense confrontation in their marriage, he yelled, “I don’t love you. I haven’t loved you for a long time and I don’t think I’ll ever love you again.” Soon afterwards, he filed for divorce.
Reasons offered by both sexes: Spouses’ mental health problems

Other men and women pointed to their spouses’ mental health problems—another violation of the commitment-based model of marriage—as the main cause of their gray divorces. A total of 8 male and 6 female participants cited all types of mental health issues such as codependency, depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder, narcissism, and others when they explained how their marriages unraveled over time. Sometimes these mental disorders worked alone to provoke marital disruptions, and other times, they interacted with additional causes in prompting these marriages to break down (Butterworth & Rodgers, 2008). In addition, some of these illnesses were diagnosed by doctors, while in other cases, spouses were drawing their own conclusions about the mental issues affecting their partners.

As an example, Kenneth discussed how he and his wife were only 20 and 19 when they initially got married. During the course of their 31-year marriage, they had one daughter and two sons together. Kenneth noted that the couple had a lot of “together” time—something he thought of in a positive light. Yet, this happiness was not to last. Kenneth believed that his wife started to have problems in the marriage when her father died. He saw their father-daughter relationship while he was alive as dysfunctional, a thought that was confirmed by a therapist.

She had real codependency issues with her dad [as he] was an alcoholic. I think that was a factor [in our divorce]. [When] he died, I think she was kind of lost after that…I mean the psychologist actually called it emotional incest. There was nothing ever physical but her mother…would become very distant when he was drinking…[When this happened, my] wife would step in and basically be his wife, you know?…Looking back, it was a very strange relationship…and she took care of him.

Adding to their problems was the Great Recession of 2008. Both of them worked in the construction industry, and the business that they owned together completely crashed. In addition, many of their investments were in real estate, and they lost them all. Kenneth feared
that the end of the marriage might be near when they found themselves constantly fighting about money. As the separation grew near, his wife admitted that she was becoming involved with an old boyfriend once again. When she told him that she wanted a divorce, Kenneth stated, “It was worse than a death…it was the worst experience of my life.” Yet he felt that he had no choice but to go along with her divorce plan.

Codependent relationships with other family members can clearly wreak havoc on marriages. Other individuals discussed the multitude of ways more extreme mental health issues affected their marriages. For example, unlike many other participants in this study, Joyce, 64 years old, was only married to her 67 year old husband for a short time: three years. When the couple got married, Joyce knew that her husband was a religious Pentecostal. She respected his religion and his devotion to God. However, six months into their marriage, his behavior completely changed.

We would go to Walmart and he would walk up to… perfect strangers and tell them he had a word from God for them…It’s so embarrassing. I would take off in the other direction. He threatened to stand up in the middle of church…to teach the minister how to preach…I would wake up in the middle of the night at 3:00 a.m. He would be out in the garage, screaming at the top of his lungs in tongues. Joyce suspected that he was schizophrenic, but her husband told her that he was being treated for bipolar disorder. A central problem was that he did not always take his medicine.

This was Joyce’s second marriage. Her first had ended in divorce, as her husband was extremely verbally abusive. He constantly told her that she was “stupid” and that since she had nothing worthwhile to say, she should keep her “mouth shut in public.” Joyce’s level of tolerance for any type of deviant or humiliating behavior at this stage in her life was, therefore, very low. To her credit, Joyce did go see a minister with her new husband, who “told him that he needed to settle down and straighten up and take his medicine or he was going to lose me.”
However, her husband refused to take this advice. Without any improvement in behavior on his part, Joyce filed for divorce.

Although both men and women pointed to growing apart, physical infidelity, and their spouses’ mental health problems as the primary reasons for their gray divorces, there were differences where a reason for divorce was vocalized by one sex but did not emerge as a substantive reason by the other sex. However, they were similar in that all of these remaining explanations from men and women represented failures to achieve the commitment-based rather than the expressive individualistic model of marriage. First we will consider the reasons presented by men, before turning to those articulated by women.

*Reasons offered by men: Financial differences/problems*

For 9 men in this study, financial differences and/or problems with their spouses were paramount, a common marital issue that has been documented elsewhere (Atwood, 2012). For these participants, excessive monetary stress emerged when the couple was outspending its resources, perhaps due to other strains in their own relationships (Ashby & Burgoyne, 2008).

David described his divorce as occurring in large part due to financial problems. At 53 years old, David was married to his wife, 44 years old, for 15 years. They had one son together.

David was in the Army and was constantly deployed during their marriage. Because he was going to be away from home so much, he thought it was a good idea that the couple purchase a house right next door to her parents’ home. In this way, his wife would receive the caregiving and emotional support that she needed during his time out of the country.

David acknowledged that the long periods of time apart were difficult on the marriage. He admitted to not calling or emailing daily when he should have. However, their financial problems only made matters worse.
David did not solely blame his wife for their financial problems. He knew that he should have taken more responsibility for living within their means even though they had agreed that she would manage their daily budget. Yet their financial stressors, in combination with the lack of regular communication, put their marriage over the edge. When his wife needed any type of assistance, her parents—rather than David—were right there. When he finally returned home one month and told her that the Army wanted to relocate him again, she said, “Well, go ahead. I’m not leaving.” That marked the end of their marriage.

Another dynamic involving money was secrecy regarding spending. Frank was married to his wife for 22 years and they had two sons together. He was 56 years old and worked for the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC), and his wife was 54 years old and had a job in the field of social services after years of staying at home full-time to raise the children. Frank stated that she needed to work for pay after the boys got older, as their financial circumstances demanded it. However, even though he knew that they both had to keep expenses below their income, Frank began to notice that his wife was developing a very disturbing attitude toward money.

I think as time went on, she had a greater interest in not working anymore, or not working and kind of living the lifestyle that some of her friends were interested [in living]…She was really indifferent as to my feelings about that particularly since, you know, she was at home with the kids for many years…I kind of thought, well, it’s time…You know, the kids are older now. You can go back and work and we can start building toward retirement. [But] she had a different view of the world.

Because she desired to live a more affluent lifestyle—more than the couple could afford—she
started to engage in secretive financial behaviors. Frank stated that she hid her spending in a variety of ways. First, she was underpaying taxes. Frank found out about this each April when he realized how much unexpected money he owed the Internal Revenue Service (IRS). Second, he set up Individual Retirement Accounts (IRAs) but her name was also on them. She was therefore able to regularly take money out of them without Frank knowing. Third, she racked up charges on her credit cards. When she refused to stop charging, Frank would put limits on the cards. “And that’s how that ended and then she’d move on to some other strategy.” Frank concluded that he “just couldn’t live like that anymore, particularly given the way the rest of the relationship was going,” and decided to pursue a divorce.

*Reasons offered by men: Problems related to their children*

Men going through a gray divorce also pointed to problems in achieving the commitment-based model of marriage when they had sharp disagreements with their wives over raising their children. It is important to note that within this study population, only 22 of the 80 participants reported having no children from their marriages that ended with a gray divorce. Fourteen participants still had at least one child under the age of 18 at the time of the divorce. This left the majority of the participants – 44 – with only adult children when they experienced their own gray divorces. Yet, regardless of the age of their children at the time of the divorce, arguments over how to raise them disrupted their marriages. Six men reported this difficulty in this study.

For certain men, even though they likely spent less time than their wives with their children while they were growing up (Phares, Fields, & Kamboukos, 2009), differences emerged over parenting perspectives, such as in the area of discipline (Tavassolie et al., 2016). Terry, 59 years old, and his wife, 58 years old, were both teachers when they first got married – a marriage
that ultimately lasted 27 years. They were raising two sons together, and while the beginning of their marriage was strong, they later found themselves drifting further and further apart, mostly over how to bring up the children. Terry argued that they developed two divergent philosophies over how to discipline them.

The reason really [was] that in my belief, she was a little too permissive in the raising of our children. And in all honestly, I was probably too restrictive in the raising of our children. I wanted to instill a strong sense of responsibility and deferred gratifications and she was almost in the polar opposite direction.

As an example of her excessive permissiveness, at one point, Terry found a credit card receipt that showed his wife had bought one of his son’s girlfriends a $900 pocketbook without his knowledge. Of course, he thought this was an extravagant gift that was totally unnecessary.

In addition to his wife giving his sons money without their earning it, which Terry believed did not teach them the value of hard work, his wife also refused to punish them for bad behavior. He described an instance where his older son came home with a report card with many Cs and Ds. At first, his wife hid the report card from him, but Terry later found it. Terry then discovered that his wife had nonetheless allowed his son to go out and play at the town’s recreation center. They fought, and Terry yelled, “This is ridiculous. You are rewarding this kind of lack of responsibility with [more] rewards.’ So I literally got in the car—calmly—but I went to the recreation center and I said [to my son], ‘You [have] got to come home with me because this isn’t right.’” This behavior continued when his two sons went to college, as they racked up motor vehicle violations and his wife hid the tickets from him. Ultimately, he and wife found themselves arguing incessantly, and she ultimately filed for divorce.

Beyond different philosophies in disciplining children, other men discussed the ways in which they believed their wives’ personality defects inhibited their children’s growth. Edward and his wife were married for 22 years. He was 56 years old, and she was 50 years old with a
son from a previous marriage. During their marriage, they had an additional two sons together. Over time, Edward noticed a disturbing habit that his wife began developing. Perhaps due to low self-esteem, she began exaggerating circumstances around her and the role she played in shaping them. For example, she volunteered at a local hospital as a candy striper, but then told anyone who would listen that she actually worked in the operating room as a nurse. She also went for one semester to a community college, but publicly discussed how she attended a prestigious four-year state university to study biochemistry before dropping out.

Edward was quick to commend his wife’s care in raising the boys when they were young, saying, “She’s very talented with kids.” However, as their three children got older, his wife’s low self-esteem turned into a desire to control her sons’ behaviors in ways that would only reflect beneficially on her. Edward reported feeling as though his wife would not allow their sons to be the individuals they were meant to be:

> Once our sons started becoming individuals, which is, in my opinion, what parents want their children to be – self-functioning, good citizens [who are] productive, know right from wrong – [each parent must recognize that] they’re not an extension of me. They are individuals. They have their own dreams, hopes, fears, desires, interests, and all that kind of stuff…Well, what started happening was…with the first son…he would start expressing an interest in doing things…and she would immediately say, “No, you can’t do that,” or “No, that’s not appropriate,” and no more conversation [would be allowed to occur].

Edward sadly stated that he came to realize that “She doesn’t possess the ability to relate to somebody outside the context of [his/her] relationship with her.” Edward believed that this approach inhibited their growth and subsequently found the marriage more difficult to sustain each year. This butting of heads ultimately led to their later decision to pursue a gray divorce.

*Reasons offered by women: Spouses’ alcohol/drug/pornography addictions*

Women had their own distinct reasons for pursuing a gray divorce, but like their male counterparts, all involved failures to achieve the ideals of a commitment-based model of
marriage. One of the most common explanations among women involved their spouses’ addictions, whether those be to alcohol, drugs, or pornography; a total of 10 women reported this as the reason for their divorce (Lowenstein, 2005; Schneider, 2003). As an example, Susan, 63 years old, battled with her husband, 67 years old, over his alcoholism. When they initially met, her husband had bought a bar and was, at first, simply a social drinker. Later, he left that business and they both moved into very stressful jobs until they retired. She worked in corrections, and he was a probation officer. While married, they had two daughters together.

Susan reported that while sometimes her husband would drink excessively early on in their 39-year marriage, he later went through a period of several decades when he was completely sober. This was really important to Susan as his entire family battled addictions to a variety of substances, and she did not want him to succumb.

Unfortunately, the family soon faced a tragedy. One of Susan’s adult daughters was diagnosed with cancer, and she soon found herself spending days at a time at her home taking care of her. It was during this time that her husband returned to drinking. She guessed that he started to drink as a means of coping, and his addiction quickly made him erratic and moody. She also stated that she constantly was ashamed by his public behavior. She noted, “I mean, he was a horrible drunk.” Although her husband did try to get help on numerous occasions, when he succumbed, he always blamed his behavior on her. There was nothing that she could do to help him, and the ramifications of his addiction finally became intolerable. While she was still working and he had finally retired, Susan came home one evening and “he was so drunk [that] he was stumbling and falling and something snapped [in me].” She said that at that point, she knew that it was over.

Another central type of addiction described by women experiencing a gray divorce
related to Internet pornography. Beverly was married to her husband for 24 years. At 64 years old, she was seven years his senior. During the last ten years of her marriage, Beverly started to suspect that her husband might be gay. She found that he was avoiding her and that there was little intimacy in her marriage. They both agreed to see a counselor together. During the period of time in which they were seeing the therapist, and while her son and her daughter were in their early teenage years, Beverly taught Sunday school. On one particular Easter Sunday, she went to the family computer to look up some information for her class, and she was shocked to discover a picture of a nude man saved to the hard drive. She confronted her husband right away, but he denied downloading it. At their next therapy session, Beverly brought this issue up.

[The therapist]...had known both of us for quite some time, a long time. We had been seeing her in and out for a number of years and her response was, “I don’t think that he is gay. I think he was just wanting to know how that [type of sex] works,” knowing that there was no intimacy in our relationship.

At that moment, Beverly felt that her emotions were invalidated, but did have her husband agree in that session that “if it happens again, then I think we need to look at a divorce. And everybody seemed to think that [that] was a reasonable stance.”

Not long after, her husband set up his new office in the garage. Once, in the middle of the night, Beverly was startled to find her entire house awake. At that moment, everyone was on an electronic device. As Beverly opened the garage door to speak with her husband, she saw another nude man on his computer screen. When she looked again, the image was gone; her husband had shut off the computer. At the next therapy session, she made good on her threat of divorce. She told her husband that she could no longer live like this. He immediately moved to sleep on a cot in the family home, and they told their children about their decision to separate. While her daughter was devastated, her son was not as surprised. Beverly explained that she found out much later that he knew about it. He was studying computers at school at the time,
and “one of the tasks he had was something that led him to find out that somebody in our house was looking at male pornography, and he made an assumption [that] it wasn’t me. And he made an assumption [that] it wasn’t his sister, and that, therefore, it had to be his dad.”

*Reasons offered by women: Spouses’ verbal and emotional abuse*

The final set of reasons for their gray divorces offered by 9 women in this study pertained to their spouses’ verbal and/or emotional abuse that they could no longer withstand—a clear violation of the commitment-based model of marriage. Joan was one of these women, and she, like many others, experienced multiple types of abuse (Anderson, 2010). She was married to a pastor, who simultaneously held a variety of service industry jobs. She reported being very much in love with her husband until the end of her 34-year-old marriage, when they were both 53 years old. He was a very dynamic and engaging man and loved to be at the center of attention. Together they had four children, two boys and two girls. The central problem for Joan was that his controlling nature resulted in severe verbal and emotional abuse. Over time, they become “very toxic to each other.”

The source of his issues, according to Joan, was that he had a strong need to be adored, worshipped, and followed by those around him. Being a pastor was a way to fulfill these needs as “he liked having his ego stroked by different women.” If he ever had a problem with his wife, he went and “played the woe-is-me card to this flock of women.” At home, he kept Joan directly under his thumb. She described his behavior in the following way:

> He gets obsessive about a point and he will just sit there and hound, and hound, and hound about this point until you agree with him even if you don’t. There are times…when he is really fun and really cool to hang out with in public. [When] there are other people around, he’s great, but when it’s in the home,…[it is] his way or the highway.

Joan reported that he restricted her employment prospects to only those jobs that were lower
paying than his so that she did not outshine him; his ultimate wish was to not have her work for
pay at all. He also carefully guarded their money such that she did not have what she needed to
raise their four children. Since she lived within the confines of a church community, she also felt
that she “had to be what he wanted me to be, and I wasn’t allowed to be my own person. So I
had no outlet, [and] I had no friends to talk to; I had to go to therapy.” Joan entered therapy and
was able to get her husband to go to couples counseling as well. Unfortunately, that did not help
them as a team. Joan reported that even within the confines of the therapy sessions, he tried to
“dominate every conversation.” Given this reality, Joan could never find her own voice within
the marriage. Equally important, her husband was angry that he could not berate her into
complete submissiveness. He was then the one who finally decided to file for divorce.

Women such as Joan felt verbally or emotionally abused when their husbands tried to
control every aspect of their lives. Other women experienced similar types of abuse when their
husbands inappropriately held them responsible for the couples’ overall levels of happiness.
Margaret was a smart, 56 year old woman who was married to her 55 year old husband for 25
years. They met in their twenties and had a wonderful early life together, “resort-hopping” from
place to place without any responsibilities. After they decided not to have children, the couple
embarked on what would become their joint occupation: designing, owning, and operating
restaurants. Margaret was the more business-minded of the two, and her husband was more
creative. They had the assistance of her very close sister and her sister’s husband, an attorney, in
operating these ventures.

The problem was that in the series of restaurants that they owned over the course of
twenty years, Margaret’s husband would become very involved in the design phase of the project
but then would “check out.” He started drinking more frequently as alcohol was always
available to him at these restaurants and, subsequently, would not get anything accomplished.

When Margaret would confront him about becoming disengaged with the business, he would jealously yell, “You’re married to your sister, not me.” To Margaret, her husband wanted to relive his youth of no responsibilities instead of being actively engaged in their restaurants where he needed to be.

So it’s like he is a person [who] lives entirely in the past...He was always like, “You’ve ruined my life!” [I constantly heard that] he’s lost me to my sister...He thinks [that] I’m married to her versus married to him because of [the] business. [The breaking point for me was]...the verbal abuse, the attitude toward me, and just every day bringing up stuff that we had talked about over and over and over again...It’s like, you know what? I’m tired of this. I can’t do this anymore. It’s like I’ve ruined his life. That was a common verbiage of his and I finally decided that I guess I [had] to give [him his] life back.

Margaret said that he was extremely angry when she told him that she wanted a divorce, but that he had no choice but to accept it. She wanted out.

**Discussion and conclusions**

This study demonstrates that the conditions for gray divorce for the Baby Boomer generation are much more complex than one model of marriage would predict. The data collected for this study show that even though they could cite as many reasons for their divorce as they wanted, expressive individualistic ideals of marriage are only somewhat important for this population. For the 80 adults interviewed here, only “growing apart,” articulated by 17 men and 7 women, encapsulated a desire to achieve personal goals at the expense of marital stability. The other reasons for divorce fell squarely within failures to achieve the commitment-based model of marriage (Stark, Kirk, & Bruhn, 2012). That is, those experiencing a divorce at age 50 or older cited severe relationship strains in explaining their divorces, which included the following substantive reasons: those articulated by men and women, including their spouses’ physical infidelity (13 men and 13 women) and their spouses’ mental health problems (8 men
and 6 women). Next, there were explanations offered by the men: financial differences/problems (9 men) and problems related to their children (6 men). Finally, there were reasons offered by the women: their spouses’ alcohol/drug/pornography addictions (10 women) and their spouses’ verbal and emotional abuse (9 women). These results demonstrate the enduring power of the commitment-based model of marriage among Baby Boomers. Importantly, this is not to say that all of the participants themselves could be each distinctly divided into either camp. Because they could offer multiple explanations for their divorces, 15 out of 80 or about 19% mentioned both expressive individualistic and commitment-based reasons for why their marriages broke down. Motivations for divorce are complex and sometimes difficult to disentangle for individuals. Yet, these results do not change the overall finding that divorce explanations drawn from the commitment-based model dominated among this population.

This study also provides important insights into how an individual’s sex enters the decision to divorce for those age 50 and older. Some research has suggested that women value the principles of commitment in a marriage more strongly than men (Fincham, Stanley, & Beach, 2007; Wilcox & Nock, 2006). Yet, the findings presented here showed that both men and women identified many commitment-based violations as reasons for their divorces in later life. In addition, within this category of commitment-based violations, both men and women pointed to their spouses’ physical infidelity and their spouses’ mental health problems as causing their divorces. Men then cited financial differences/problems and problems related to their children, whereas women pointed to their spouses’ alcohol/drug/pornography addictions and their spouses’ verbal and emotional abuse. One distinction, therefore, between the sexes is that men’s reasons for mid-life divorce tended to focus on distinct approaches to common marital issues of interaction – money and children – whereas women faulted men’s behaviors. This difference
serves to notify us as to what stressors may be most relevant for each sex as they consider a
divorce. With this information in mind, interventions such as conflict resolution classes and
marriage counseling can therefore be most effectively designed and targeted based on the issues
that are most salient to each sex.

There are several limitations to this research. Participants self-selected into the study,
which could have produced a more extreme set of reasons for divorce than a random sampling
procedure. Its results are also not generalizable. The study sample was also fairly homogenous;
most were advantaged, white, and all were heterosexual, which is different than what a random
sample of the gray divorced population would look like at a given point in time in the United
States (Brown & Lin, 2012). Future studies should focus on diversifying the sample under
investigation. In addition, each interview represented only one side as to why an individual
marriage ended. This study did not attempt to validate these participants’ claims. Lastly, each
participant was only interviewed once. With more time for reflection, participants might have
new perspectives on the reasons for their divorces or offer additional explanations.

Nonetheless, this study represents an important contribution to our understanding of gray
divorce in the United States today. It shows that, overwhelmingly, divorce is not an easy or
quick decision for most mid-life couples. Instead, for the most part, they take their marital
commitment seriously, and only after severe relationship strain do they move toward the divorce
decision.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Women</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>59.0</td>
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<tr>
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<td>1.5</td>
<td>1.5</td>
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<td>Number of Participants who Initiated Divorce*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Number of Participants with Biological/Adopted Children from this Marriage?</td>
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<td>Average Number of Total Children from Focal Marriage</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Number of Participants Who Have Long-term Care Insurance</td>
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<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td>40</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>80</td>
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Notes: *Initiated Divorce: 2 men reported the divorce decision to be mutual. **Average Number of People in Household: 1 man reported this number as varying. ***Political Party Identification: 1 woman refused. ****Average Household Income: 3 women refused.
Table 2. Reasons for gray divorce.

<table>
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<th>Why Did You Get Divorced?</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Spouses’ Physical Infidelity</td>
<td>2. Problems Related to Their Children</td>
<td>2. Spouses’ Verbal and Emotional Abuse</td>
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<td>3. Spouses’ Mental Health Problems</td>
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REFERENCES

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