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Article begins on next page

Does Everything Fall Apart? Life Assessments Following a Gray Divorce

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Abstract

The divorce-stress-adjustment theoretical framework emphasizes the negative consequences associated with marital dissolution, but also the positive outcomes that can eventually emerge after former spouses part ways. This study aims to examine the subjective life assessments of the heterosexual gray divorced population within the first three years of their marital splits with respect to this framework. Qualitative data based on 66 in-depth interviews of the gray divorced population were collected and analyzed using grounded theory methods. Negative consequences of gray divorce included financial worries and loneliness. However, participants also identified positive aspects of their new lives, including higher levels of overall happiness, liberation from their ex-spouses, and enhanced independence and freedom. These results show that immediately after their marriages dissolve, members of the gray divorced population experience complex reactions in accordance with the divorce-stress-adjustment framework. More specifically, these men and women see both challenges and opportunities after their gray divorces.

Keywords: gray divorce, adjustment, divorce consequences, interviews

Introduction

Gray divorce, or divorcing one's partner at age 50 or older, has grown as a sociodemographic phenomenon in the United States over the past several decades (Montenegro, 2004). In fact, while the divorce rate for the overall country has stabilized and even declined somewhat in recent years, between 1990-2010, the gray divorce rate doubled (Brown & Lin, 2012). Now, about 1 in 4 divorces is gray. These statistics mean that in 2010, there were 643,152 individuals age 50 or older who experienced a divorce; projections are that by 2030, this number will rise to 828,380 (Brown & Lin, 2012).

The rising number of gray divorces can be attributed to many factors. First, the Baby Boomer generation is aging. In 1990, there were only 63.5 million Americans age 50 and older; however, by 2010, there were 99 million Americans in this same age group (Census, 1990; Census, 2010). Census population projections estimate that by 2050, there will be 156.7 million individuals age 50 and over (Census, 2017). With more people crossing the threshold into this age group with perhaps a greater willingness to split up, the spiking gray divorce rate is not surprising. Second, life expectancy has increased over time. More specifically, in 1950, the average man could be expected to live 65.6 years, while the average woman could be expected to live 71.1 years (CDC, 2017). By 2016, these statistics had increased to 76.1 and 81.1, respectively (CDC, 2018). Simply put, as people live many more years than they had in the past, they have a longer time to become dissatisfied with their marriages and thus subsequently divorce. Third, Americans have not given up on the promise of marriage, and significant numbers remarry every year. In fact, considering all marriages in 2016, almost one-third, or 27%, were remarriages (Payne, 2018). Since remarriages are relatively less stable than first-time

marriages, as members of the older population remarry in their later years, this factor can also function to increase the gray divorce rate (Jensen, Shafer, Guo, & Larson, 2017).

Given the increasing divorce rate among those age 50 and older, then, the central aim of this research is to examine how this population subjectively assesses their lives right after their marital splits. What is the range of their reactions, both negative and positive, as they start to craft new lives? Understanding their perspectives provides us with clues as to what types of concerns they need to address as they begin to move on, as well as information regarding their relative resilience over the short-run.

The Divorce-Stress-Adjustment Theoretical Framework

Divorce is one of the most difficult life transitions experienced by adults and their families in contemporary society (Das, 2013; Kalmijn, 2015; Kok, Aartsen, Deeg, & Huisman, 2017). The divorce-stress-adjustment theoretical framework emphasizes that divorce is not a discrete event, but rather a process of significant duration (Amato, 2000; Amato, 2010). It begins with dissatisfaction from at least one member of the couple that the marriage is no longer adequately meeting their needs. Uncoupling then commences, first with the legal dissolution of the marriage, and then the coping that must take place as individuals build new lives. Typically this marital unraveling produces a series of negative emotional, behavioral, and health-related outcomes for the involved adults. On this point, however, there is some debate as to whether these outcomes are experienced as a crisis event, with stress being highest over the short-term (three years or less postdivorce) (Pudrovska & Carr, 2008; Umberson, Liu, & Powers, 2009), or as a chronic event, which posits that after the initial split, although some individuals recover, others never regain their pre-divorce levels of well-being (Johnson & Wu, 2002; Rote, 2017).

Nevertheless, whether a crisis or chronic event, eventual individual-level adjustment will vary, first based on the role of both mediators and moderators in each person's life (Amato, 2000; Amato & Previti, 2003; Bowen & Jensen, 2017). Mediators are the mechanisms by which the divorce process shapes individual well-being over time. For example, during and after the divorce process, mediators can be factors that can harm functionality and judgment, such as declining social interactions, financial worries, and perhaps the disruptive necessity of moving. Critically, however, also included in this model are moderators, which are factors that have a protective capacity against such mediators. They can facilitate personal adjustment, such as individuals' adaptive perspectives on why the divorce happened, healthy notions of self-efficacy, and high levels of community support. Second, pre-divorce marriage health also matters. Individuals leaving high-distress marriages report higher levels of happiness after a divorce, while individuals leaving low-distress marriages report a reduction in happiness (Amato & Hohmann-Marriott, 2007). Overall, considering all of these dynamics, this prior research posits that postdivorce adjustment can be a heterogeneous process across individuals based on their own particular circumstances (Hawkins & Booth, 2005).

Previous Qualitative Life Assessment Research Among Midlife, Divorced Adults

This heterogeneity can be seen in qualitative studies conducted among midlife individuals as they assess their lives in light of their earlier divorce transitions. Bair's (2007) analysis of 310 midlife divorced individuals richly demonstrates some of these mixed outcomes;

however, this work relies on journalistic composites and cases studies to tell individuals' stories, thereby preventing comprehensive thematic analysis. In addition, Bair does not offer descriptive statistics on her study's sample of men and women—including their current ages and how long after the point of divorce their reported life assessments took place. All of these factors make Bair's work difficult to compare to standard social science research.

In terms of traditional academic scholarship, several studies have found diverse divorce reactions among men and women, such as emotional pain, insecurity, uncertainty, changes in postdivorce parenting, and pressing needs for financial planning, but also a sense of starting over (Kemp, Rosenthal, & Denton, 2005; Määttä, 2011; Lloyd, Sailor, & Carney, 2014). Other similar studies have examined the divorce experiences of midlife women only, and reported themes related to depression, guilt around parenting, ruminating, and vulnerability, but also support, personal growth, and the acquisition of new roles (Sakraida, 2005a; Sakraida, 2005b; Baum, 2007; Thomas & Ryan, 2008). However, in addition to sometimes focusing only on one sex, it is critical to note that these aforementioned qualitative studies also tend to combine samples of older and younger individuals (above and below the age of 50), are often nonspecific about the time frame in which these post-gray divorce assessments are made (combining crisis and chronic evaluations), and most importantly for this analysis, do not require that their samples be limited to those whose divorces occurred at or after they turned 50 (see Table 1). That is, in these previous midlife studies, the age at divorce is left unspecified, resulting in samples in which individuals divorced both *before* and *after* the age of 50.

[Table 1 about here]

This lack of precision regarding the age at divorce is a critical point in that the timing of marital dissolution during the life course might have distinct and particular effects on

postdivorce well-being (Elder Jr., 1994; Uhlenberg, 1996). More specifically, midlife individuals who went through an earlier life divorce might express very different opinions about their current circumstances than midlife individuals who experienced a gray divorce. For example, the role of children—including the effects of child support, child custody, and sole parenting issues—might be differentially transformative for each of these two groups (Pudrovskaya & Carr, 2008). Midlife individuals who experienced a much earlier divorce might have struggled with these child-related matters, creating significant changes in their postdivorce parenting approaches as they had to regularly interact and perhaps compromise with their former spouses. In contrast, the gray divorced population is more likely to have older and often adult offspring at the time of separation, thereby producing different types of parenting problems, including handling unsupportive or emotionally upset grown or nearly-grown children (Jensen & Bowen, 2015). Other differences between these two groups also might be important. For example, those midlife individuals who have gone through this transition earlier in life will have had more time to economically readjust. Their current monetary concerns therefore might have to do with opportunities and constraints around financial planning for the future. Midlife individuals going through a gray divorce, on the other hand, do not have as much time to recover and thus are more likely to have immediate financial worries (Zissimopoulos, 2013; Lin, Brown, & Hammersmith, 2017). This present qualitative analysis thus places divorce timing—by focusing solely on the gray divorced population—as central in systematically mapping out the subjective, life assessments of both men and women whose divorces occurred within the last three years.

Method

Sample and Recruitment

This analysis is part of a larger research project on the causes and consequences of gray divorce in the United States that is based on in-depth interviews of this population (Author, 2018). There were four main components in this research on midlife marital splits: the causes of their marital breakdowns; their current and future economic worries; the extent of their social support networks; and lastly, their perspectives on divorce in general and their views of their lives going forward. In addition to these topical modules, I also collected basic sociodemographic characteristics from each participant. In order to be eligible to be interviewed, an individual had to meet three criteria: 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. Although the number of gray divorces has been growing, the incidence of this type of dissolution is still low in the population at large. I therefore used targeted Facebook advertising to recruit participants, a technique that increasing numbers of scholars are utilizing to find hard-to-reach populations (Rife, Cate, Kosinski, & Stillwell, 2016; Author, 2017).

More specifically, I ran targeted Facebook recruitment advertisements on individuals' mobile and desktop devices that had a university logo alongside an announcement that stated "Study of Midlife Divorce." The specific language for the recruitment was as follows: "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." If an individual clicked on the advertisement, they were then asked more about their qualifications, given additional information about the research, and prompted for their contact information to schedule their telephone interviews.

The recruitment occurred over the course of 13 days in four distinct waves (overall from July 23, 2014 through February 9, 2015). Both men and women were asked to participate in the

first two waves of data collection (July 23, 2014-July 28, 2014 for wave one, interviewing 12 men and 21 women, and August 19, 2014-August 21, 2014 for wave two, interviewing 5 men and 9 women). The final two waves of data collection focused on each sex separately, the third of men only (from January 5, 2015-January 6, 2015, interviewing 23 men) and the fourth of women only (from February 6, 2015-February 7, 2015, interviewing 10 women). The participants' names and contact information were collected over short periods of time in order to facilitate rapid follow-up and interview scheduling. This procedure produced a total of 40 heterosexual men and 40 heterosexual women for the in-depth telephone interviews (none related to each other), which lasted approximately one-hour in length, were recorded, and then were professionally transcribed. All participants were given pseudonyms for confidentiality purposes.

Since we know that divorce adjustment can be very different for those over the short-term (crisis) versus those over the long-term (chronic), this study focused on the circumstances of the great majority of the sample, or those who were experiencing the crisis period immediately following a dissolution (three years or less from divorce finalization to their interviews). The final sample here is therefore smaller, composed of 33 men and 33 women, for a total of 66 individuals. Table 2 reports descriptive statistics for this overall sample as well as by sex.

[Table 2 about here]

Data Analysis

In addition to the background and sociodemographic questions as reflected in Table 2, in this study, I asked all participants the following questions: “What is the worst part about being divorced this last time? What is the best part about being divorced this last time?” After reading the transcripts numerous times, I first applied the sensitizing concepts of “post-gray divorce experiences,” “post-gray divorce attitudes,” and “post-gray divorce emotions” to begin analyzing

the data (Blumer, 1986). I then proceeded to use the software program Atlas.ti and open coding as defined by grounded theory methods to identify emerging themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). For example, statements concerning paying the bills on time were coded as “having immediate financial worries,” and statements concerning joyful feelings around personal development were coded as “being happier.” Participants could express more than one type of assessment related to being divorced at this stage in their lives.

Next, I employed focused coding to systematize these open codes further by going back to the relevant literature (Charmaz, 2005). For instance, “having immediate financial worries” was linked to negative aspects of gray divorce, and “being happier” was linked to positive aspects of gray divorce. Finally, I relied on selective coding to connect all of these focused codes together in order to produce a comprehensive picture of post-gray divorce assessments overall (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). This process is the method by which ideas are combined with one another in a way to produce a coherent “story line” of the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). In the results that follow, I use actual quotations from these interview participants as they articulated the worst and best parts about being divorced at this time.

Finally, it is important to understand the trustworthiness of these data as well as their limitations within the overall context of the data being analyzed and coded by the sole author (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). First, with respect to data credibility, the participants were not given their full interview transcripts to review. However, I did request additional information from them when I reread their interviews and needed further clarification. In addition, I engaged in peer-debriefing, providing two expert faculty members with preliminary reports of my findings and allowing their comments and critiques to shape my ongoing coding efforts. Second, there are many features of this study that must be noted related to its transferability. Some include the

goals of the participants as well as their perceived burdens in participating; interviewer-participant interaction effects; and the overall length of the study period. Third, I used the code-recode method in Atlas.ti to insure the dependability of the thematic findings drawn from the data. This process involved coding the assessments of the sample's post-gray divorce lives on a subsample (20 individuals), waiting a period of two weeks, and then recoding the data to ensure that the same codes emerged. Fourth, I employed a reflexive journal to log my own biases related to the data; this journaling helps define the data's confirmability.

Findings

In evaluating their immediate post-gray divorce lives, most individuals identified both negative and positive changes. Two themes emerged as the worst part about being divorced at this stage in their lives: immediate financial worries and loneliness. In contrast, individuals identified three themes that represented positive aspects of their post-gray divorce lives: being happier, becoming liberated from their ex-spouses, and acquiring independence and freedom. Notably, only four individuals could not name any negative factor associated with getting divorced at or after the age of 50, and only six reported no positive aspects related to getting divorced in midlife.

Negative Aspects of Gray Divorce

Immediate financial worries. Many individuals had financial concerns soon after their gray divorces. One concern related to the costs involved in the actual divorce proceedings themselves. Divorce can be extremely expensive for couples, especially if there are significant issues over which to litigate. Larry (age 57) stated that he was most upset over the legal fees that he had accrued during the divorce. He explained that his ex-wife "wanted to fight over

everything and be unrealistic. In fact, my children's inheritance and their college education and just the help with [buying] their first homes—all of that kind of money evaporated.” Another cost of divorce is that once the dissolution is finalized, each half of the couple ends up with fewer assets than they had as an intact couple. On this point, Gregory (age 67) observed:

To me, even though I'm okay financially...I lost half of my equity...To start all over—I'm sure it's devastating to a lot of people. [I know people] put too [much] value on material things and that's what I'm doing. So that's the wrong [way] to think but that's what it is.

Clearly, although he noted that these were only “material” consequences, these financial losses were large enough to trouble him within the first several years of his divorce.

For other individuals, the financial worries that they expressed were more serious in that they involved fears associated with making ends meet on a regular basis. Notably, this type of anxiety was reported only by female participants. Diane (age 51) stated, “Even though I [can] pay most of...the bills...there's no little extra for anything else.” Rebecca (age 56) shared the same worry when she observed, “Well, [my ex-husband] made \$30 an hour. We had an income—I made \$28, so we had that income, and now...I'm living paycheck to paycheck.” Cheryl (age 68) also had long-term fears about her solvency:

[I am most worried about] the money, [and] what I'm going to do when the little bit of money I have runs out...I have just enough money to live. And that's it, [and if] anything major happens, I'm up a creek. And Medicare is incredibly expensive...My biggest expense is medicine.

In sum, in all of these cases, gray divorce prompted a serious type of financial inventory-taking as these individuals pondered their economic lives going forward.

Loneliness. The other major theme related to the negative consequences of gray divorce was loneliness. The concept of loneliness had different meanings across the gray divorced

sample. Some individuals discussed the sense of being physically alone in their own homes as the worst form of loneliness. John (age 54) described it as similar to “a death” and noted that even when he and his ex-wife were not getting along, “it was still [good] knowing that [the] person was there, and now that’s gone.” Janice (age 61) missed hosting events as she reflected upon her empty house: “I was the glue that held everything together and had family functions [in my home]...and that's the hardest thing I still deal with.” Providing another concrete example, Donald (age 52) recalled a time when he tried to contact his children at his ex-wife’s house. When Donald called, he learned that his son and daughter were just was about to have dinner with his ex-wife and her new boyfriend.

And [my son] said “Dad, can I call you back in just a minute? We’re fixing to sit down and eat.” And in the background, I heard my ex-wife, her boyfriend, and my daughter laughing. [They weren’t laughing] at me; I’m sure they were just having a good old time and they were laughing and cutting up. And I said, “Yeah, that’s fine; call me back when you get finished eating.” And I sat down at the table, looked at my food. . .I was sitting there by myself, and I cried.

Donald concluded that it would be a long time before he would be able to adequately manage these feelings of loneliness.

In now living by themselves, what was most difficult for other individuals was not having anyone with whom to talk on a regular basis. Julie (age 59) described her sad feelings this way: “I sit on the couch and sometimes I just want to turn and talk to him, but he’s not there.” Part of having no one with whom to speak pertained to making decisions. Individuals reported the difficulty of being accustomed to making decisions with their ex-spouses and then having to change course and manage their life choices on their own. James (age 53) described the experience of being married and then divorced in the following way:

When you’re married, you’re part of a machine. Now [with a divorce], you [have] separated the two halves of the machine and they have to run independently. [But] you’re used to having a sounding board, a second opinion, a

moral compass. Each side uses the other. [Like,] “Should I do this?” “You didn’t look at this issue.” “Oh, no, I didn’t think of that, damn, thank you.” You know, so...you get used to being part of a well-oiled machine and once you take that apart,...for a while, your engine runs a little rough.

Brenda (age 56) echoed this view by stating, “not being married, not having a special someone who only has to check with you before they make major decisions, you know, or vice versa” made her feel very lonely.

In addition to having no one with whom to speak and make decisions, individuals grieved the loss of a spouse with whom to share activities. Joseph (age 63) described his pain this way, “You know, when you’re with all [of] your other friends [who are...all] couples or whatever, and then you have to show up to events alone, that’s probably the worst part [about being divorced].”

Lisa (age 55) similarly stated:

[The worst part about being divorced right now is not] necessarily having somebody to do something with if I have the day off or the weekend off—or an evening or lunchtime to meet with somebody. I mean, I have a lot of friends that I can do that with, but it would be nice to have someone who was in a relationship [with me].

Lisa reported that now while she was single, she no longer found much joy in her social outings. Indeed, the desire for partners with whom to share experiences was a strong yet elusive goal for many after their gray divorces.

Positive Aspects of Gray Divorce

Being happier. While individuals worried about immediate financial concerns and reported being lonely as their most prominent negative post-gray divorce experiences, most were readily able to point out that their new lives also had many positive aspects. One central theme involved an improvement in their overall levels of happiness. After a gray divorce, individuals often remarked that they found joy by discovering or rediscovering new parts of their inner

selves. For example, Connie (age 61) observed that she was extraordinarily happy after her gray divorce: “This is the longest time that I’ve ever been on my own. Up until then, I used to kind of joke about [the fact that] I’d never gone more than four months without some sort of a serious connection to someone. It’s [now] been a couple of years and I actually have developed [into] my own person.” Ronald (age 53) put it this way:

I’m just a happier human being. And it took me until this long to figure out how to be the man I need to be. I mean, the next person...stands to gain everything because I know where I went wrong and what I did wrong. I know the wants, needs, and desires of a woman. I know that she needs nurturing and support and encouragement. I know all [of] the things I didn’t do the last time.

In many ways, Ronald took responsibility for his contribution to his divorce due to his workaholic tendencies and alcoholism, but after his marriage ended, saw himself as a person who could now offer a new partner a better version of himself. Overall, the separation from their ex-spouses gave individuals like these permission to grow in new ways.

Happiness for others meant the elimination of anxiety caused by their bad marriages.

Carol (age 54) stated, “I feel a million times better. I had no idea how stressed I was because of my ex-husband—probably [because] his unhappiness was so heavy—but now I feel like myself again.” Happiness in this form also explicitly meant substituting calm for the chaos that their poor quality marriages had imposed upon their lives. For example, Cheryl (age 68) believed that her difficult marriage had elevated her stress levels to the point where they ultimately manifested themselves as heart problems. Now that the marriage was over, she declared:

I’m happy. I’m peaceful. I’m not angry all the time...Before I got married, I was perfectly fine...But I’ve had heart problems and...heart problems are not something that’s common in my family...Coming home and not having an ally or someone who had my back there made [life] incredibly stressful...I really believe being married to my husband caused my heart problems because I was stressed all [of] the time and I’m not now. I’m at peace now and I’m who I used to be. I lost who I was in my marriage and [now] I’m not having to yell and scream all the time...I couldn’t get it under control and it made me feel terrible about myself,

and that's all gone and I'm much, much better off.

Paul (age 56) noted a God-centered element to his sense of happiness as a result of reduced anxiety when he stated, "I'm just liking the quietness. I can focus on my scripture...I have quietness with me and my maker."

Liberation from their ex-spouses. For many individuals in this study, the best part about being divorced at this stage in their lives was not having to deal on a daily basis with their ex-spouses, interactions that they viewed as damaging to them over the long-run. Bruce (age 59) put it this way: "I guess the best part literally is that I'm not in a bad, dysfunctional relationship." Catherine (age 66), too, used the word "dysfunctional" to illustrate the severe problems within her marriage:

It's an emerging feeling, but I'm beginning to feel liberated, which I take as a sign of recovery...As time elapses, I have come to realize to a greater extent the dysfunctions of that relationship and the ways in which it bound me and I'm now free of it...It's a good thing because I don't have to put up with all [of] that garbage...You pay a price for companionship...[like] competing with an ego the size of our living room.

Similarly, Scott (age 65) observed that although he tried to work his relationship out with his ex-spouse, his anger toward her non-stop verbal abuse could not be contained after she refused to change. "When you finally get to the point where you threaten to kill somebody [metaphorically] if they don't leave you alone, you know that something is really wrong with the relationship."

Even more commonly expressed was the relief that many individuals felt because they no longer had to confront the uncertainty that life with their ex-spouses had brought upon them.

Charles (age 53) stated:

So the best part of [my] divorce...is that I don't come home anymore wondering

if my wife is drunk or not...I mean, that's about the best thing I can say is that there are no more questions...When I go home, there's no one drunk at home...I don't have that [uncertainty]—it was [always] a flip of the coin. You just never knew; you really just never knew. And then you would walk through the door and you would know instantly. That's gone. That is gone and that is gone forever.

In a similar way, Rebecca (age 56), whose ex-husband also was an alcoholic and verbally abusive, remarked, “I can come home and I have a soft place to fall...I don't have to worry about what I'm going to be accused of, [or] what he's going to be mad at.” Keith (age 55), whose ex-wife had an affair while they were together, added, “Well, you don't have to worry about that person anymore; you're not stressing out over what they are doing.” Overall, this newfound sense of control derived from time away from their ex-spouses made these individuals extremely satisfied with the direction in which their lives were headed.

Independence and freedom. Individuals were also extremely fulfilled by another aspect of their post-gray divorce lives. Their satisfaction had to do with the independence and freedom that they had acquired upon parting ways with their former spouses. For some, this sense of contentment simply meant now doing things however they wished. Karen (age 53) described her life after her gray divorce as follows:

The best part for me was...I finally got to be me...I got married, [and] I was a mother when I was very young. I was always taking care of somebody else... Everything that I did had to do with what somebody else wanted. That got to stop and I got to make decisions based on what I wanted. If I wanted to go somewhere, I got to go somewhere...I got to decide what kind of furniture I wanted in my house, what kind of dishes I wanted in my house,...what time I was coming home, and what I was eating for dinner if I was eating dinner. I never got to do that in my life. So it was freedom, you know.

Brenda (age 56) added: “Being able to say at the last minute, ‘Sure, I'll go to dinner with you’ or ‘Sure, we can go to a movie’ [is the best part of being divorced right now]...You make the

decision yourself, and it's very nice." Being divorced at this stage in their lives also relieved these individuals from family obligations that they sometimes saw as stifling. Kenneth (age 52) described his feelings in the following way: "I can do what I want to, when I want to do it. If I want to go skydiving tomorrow, I could...I don't know that I would have time for that if I [were] married."

Another important component of independence and freedom for these individuals was the ability to engage in life's activities without having to "clear" their choices with their former spouses. Deborah (age 55) summarized this feeling by saying, "I can make my own decisions. I don't have to ask anybody...Basically, I've never felt better." Diane (age 51) found more confidence in her decision-making powers after her divorce: "I'm trying now to fix the house and normally I would have consulted [my ex-husband] money-wise. [I would have asked], should I do this? Should I do that? Instead, I just took myself to the bank and spoke with [an employee there], so it felt good being able to do that." Lisa (age 55) similarly declared:

Being by myself [is the best part of being divorced]. Is that funny?...When I do think about, oh, could I fit a man into my life, I'm like, I don't know...I really like the way that I have a lot of flexibility and a lot of freedom...I don't have to ask, do these pillows make you smile or...are these curtains ugly or do you think I should spend this money or do you think I should go here. I mean, I don't have to ask anybody any of that stuff. I just do it.

As they started over, then, these particular gray divorced individuals were both prepared and excited to map out their futures with their own life preferences as their guides.

Discussion

The divorce-stress-adjustment theoretical framework argues that immediately following a divorce, most husbands and wives will experience a broad range of emotional, behavioral, and health difficulties, but also opportunities for growth (Amato, 2000; Amato, 2014). However, the

timing of the actual divorce during the life course might shape these outcomes in particular ways. This research fills a gap in the qualitative literature by systematically providing insight into how men and women who go through a divorce at or after the age of 50 subjectively assess their lives over the short-run.

The first major contribution of this study is its identification of both negative and positive aspects of the gray divorced population's lives within three years of their marital break-ups. In terms of the negative issues associated with being divorced, participants reported immediate financial concerns, predominantly the cost of the divorce itself as well as its economic consequences. Notably, men tended to describe asset loss within this theme, whereas women focused upon a more dire inability to make ends meet. Loneliness was another negative consequence of a gray divorce. Loneliness manifested itself in terms of physically being alone, having no one with whom to talk or make decisions, and having no one with whom to share activities.

Most participants also ably identified the positive aspects of being divorced at this stage in their lives. They discussed being happier overall, both in terms of their ability to discover new parts of themselves that had been suppressed in their bad marriages, as well as being calmer. Next, they reported positive feelings about being liberated from their ex-spouses who had often engaged in damaging interpersonal interactions and caused intense levels of internal anxiety. Finally, these participants were optimistic about the new levels of independence and freedom in their lives, which enabled them to do everyday activities in the way that they desired and without having to clear their choices with their ex-spouses. Notably, only four participants could not identify any negative issue associated with being divorced, and six could not name any positive

aspect. These small numbers mean that the majority of the sample perceived both costs and benefits to midlife divorce within the first three years of their marital dissolutions.

Only two themes were similar to those reported in earlier qualitative studies of midlife individuals who were reflecting on divorces that were not necessarily gray: loneliness, as well as independence and freedom (Määttä, 2011). This minimal level of thematic overlap meant that the gray divorced population did not emphasize any of the other themes identified in these prior studies, such as changes in postdivorce parenting—including guilt—and divorce as a catalyst or constraint to financial planning (see Table 1 for the complete list of these previously identified themes) (Kemp, Rosenthal, & Denton, 2005; Baum, 2007; Lloyd, Sailor, & Carney, 2014). In addition, immediate financial worries, happiness, and liberation from their ex-spouses were new themes identified by the gray divorced population. It is difficult to say, however, whether these differences were generated solely due to the earlier age-related timing of some of the divorces in these prior studies versus those in the current analysis, all of which took place at age 50 or older. This ambiguity is present because as described earlier, other factors in this previous work also diverged from the current study's design, such as the time elapsed since the divorce (often combining evaluations across both crisis and chronic periods), the age of the participants (broadening or loosening the definition of midlife), and the sex composition of the samples (frequently focusing mostly on women). Future research attempting to expand upon and/or replicate the findings presented here should pay careful attention to controlling these other key variables.

The second major contribution of this study is that it helps us better understand the limited quantitative research that has been conducted on adjustment patterns after a couple undergoes a gray divorce. More specifically, this quantitative work has focused on the

repartnership patterns of this population after their midlife divorces, as well as their economic well-being. With respect to household repartnerships, the largest percentage of these adults remains unpartnered, followed by remarriage and then cohabitation (Brown, Lin, Hammersmith, & Wright, 2018). Men are more likely to be repartnered through remarriage and cohabitation than women. Living apart together, or LAT relationships, might be important for this group as well. In these cases, couples are involved in long-term, romantic, and committed relationships in the same geographical area, but choose not to reside together (Funk & Kobayashi, 2016). In this way, they can reap some of the rewards of an intimate relationship while preserving aspects of their own independence. In terms of economic well-being, researchers have noted that gray divorced women in particular often confront significant levels of economic insecurity, driven by low Social Security benefits and high poverty rates (Lin, Brown, & Hammersmith, 2017).

The qualitative research reported in this present study adds further meaning to these quantitative findings in innovative and important ways. For example, the loneliness reported here might be the primary motivator behind some of the repartnerships found in the quantitative research. Yet higher levels of happiness, the removal of toxic spouses, and the acquisition of highly valued independence and freedom may lead more men and women to remain unpartnered. Financially, although both men and women had worries in this present study, men's negative assessments had more to do with the costs of the legal process itself and asset loss, whereas women remained more concerned with their ability to survive economically on a daily basis. These results align with the quantitative findings that severe economic insecurity is an issue that primarily plagues part of the female rather than the male gray divorced population.

There are, of course, limitations to this research. The first limitation pertains to the sample of individuals studied using Facebook as a recruitment tool. There is undercoverage in

that not all of the gray divorced population uses Facebook. One estimate is that Facebook reaches approximately 53% of the age group under consideration here (Author, 2017). In addition, of course, is the issue of self-selection into the sample (Author, 2017). These factors produced a more advantaged sample as indicated by characteristics such as household income, education, and race than in a random sample of the gray divorced population (Brown & Lin, 2012). Moreover, individuals who self-selected into the study might have more extreme views on their post-gray divorce lives than those in the general population. Future research should look toward expanding the range of views presented here by encouraging more diverse participants, including those exiting from same-sex unions.

Second, only one-half of the couple was interviewed in this study; there was no way to independently verify the details of their accounts that led to negative and positive assessments of their lives. Research using spousal dyads would help address this issue. In addition, interviewing children from a gray divorced couple would also help complete the picture of how family life evolves after these types of marital splits. They could describe how they believe their parents are coping, as well as what they worry about and hope for regarding their fathers' and mothers' futures.

Third, each participant was asked to consider both the worst and best parts of being divorced at this point in their lives. Although they could refuse to identify features in either category—and some did—perhaps this specific prompting encouraged the participants to address each category in ways that would have been different than if they were queried about how their lives have changed more broadly after their gray divorces. That is, it is possible that by asking these participants to simply reflect on their lives after their splits, the majority would focus either on negative *or* positive events. In this way, we might get a better sense of their overall life

impressions—and whether they tend to stress a negative or positive personal trajectory. In a similar way, prompting them on specific topics regarding their current circumstances, such as how they felt about their relationships with their children or their views on their new romantic lives, might have encouraged them to elaborate on these particular issues in greater detail. In sum, then, question wording regarding life assessments may have had an important impact on the results presented here.

Conclusion

Gray divorces, or divorces that take place at age 50 and older, have been increasing in the United States and are expected to continue to grow in the coming years. This study contributes to the family studies literature by analyzing the gray divorced population's subjective life assessments soon after their splits. Qualitative interviews demonstrate that both men and women face difficulties such as immediate financial worries and loneliness, but they are at the same time able to appreciate being happier, flourish once they are separated from their ex-spouses, and individually grow from enhanced independence and freedom. Overall, mapping out these personally-lived perspectives provides evidence that gray divorce is a life transition that exposes men and women to a distinct set of both challenges and opportunities going forward.

Table 1. Qualitative Studies on Midlife Individuals Who Experienced a Divorce At Any Earlier Age.

<i>Study</i>	<i>Sample Size</i>	<i>Sample Restricted to Gray Divorce Cases</i>	<i>Time Since Divorce</i>	<i>Sample Ages</i>	<i>Sample Sex Composition</i>	<i>Author-Identified Major Life Assessment Themes</i>
Bair (2007)	N=310	Yes, but unclear age cut-off	Not specified	Not specified	Men=126 Women=184	-Not coded systematically (composites and case studies)
Lloyd, Sailor, & Carney (2014)	N=14	Not specified	2 years or more (mix of crisis and chronic)	42-64	Men=6 Women=8	-Time -Emotional pain -Changes in postdivorce parenting -A sense of starting over
Kemp, Rosenthal, & Denton (2005)	N=51 (only 10 divorced or separated)	Not specified	Not specified	45 and up	Man=1 (divorced or separated man) Women=9 (divorced or separated women)	-Catalyst for financial planning -Constraint for financial planning
Maatta (2011)	N=74	Not Specified	1-14 years (mix of crisis and chronic)	24-76	Men=3 Women=71	-Hate -Grief -Embarrassment and Guilt -Relief and independence -Enjoying social support and freedom -Renewal: Creating an identity -Strengthening: The ability to handle everyday life -Tiredness and Loneliness
Sakraida (2005a)	N=24	Not Specified	2 years or less (crisis)	34-54	Women=24	-New roles -Depression -Coping

						-Promoting better health -New relationships
Sakraida (2005b)	N=24	Not Specified	2 years or less (crisis)	34-54	Women=24	-Self-focused growth -Optimism -Social support losses -Social support opportunities -Being left -Ruminating -Vulnerability -Spiritual comfort
Baum (2007)	N=2	1 out of 2 cases	Gray divorce case: 3 years (crisis) Other case: 5 years (chronic)	42 and 57	Women=2	- Guilt thwarting the development of new intimacy -Guilt impairing maternal functioning
Thomas & Ryan (2008)	N=10	Some Gray	Not specified	48-73	Women=10	-Dating reflections -Married life -Self-perceptions -Support or lack of support -Family -Personal emotions -Personal growth -The future

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of the Study Sample.

<i>Characteristic</i>	<i>Men</i>	<i>Women</i>	<i>Total</i>
Average age	58.0 (4.9)	58.0 (4.8)	58.0 (4.8)
Average age of ex-spouse	54.0 (8.0)	58.8 (6.6)	56.4 (7.7)
Average number of years from divorce to interview	1.5 (.97)	1.7 (1.1)	1.6 (.83)
Average years married before gray divorce	21.1 (10.8)	26.3 (11.0)	23.7 (11.1)
Average number of total divorces	1.5 (.71)	1.5 (.94)	1.5 (.83)
Number of participants who lived together before marriage that ended in a gray divorce	20	22	42
Number of participants who initiated divorce*	12	24	36
Number of participants with biological/adopted children from this marriage?	23	25	48
Average number of total children from focal marriage	1.6 (1.3)	1.9 (1.6)	1.7 (1.4)
Average number of persons in household**	1.4 (.76)	2.2 (1.3)	1.8 (1.1)
Number of participants currently cohabiting	1	3	4
Average household income***	\$98,169.63 (68,028.93)	\$80,483.33 (54,118.72)	\$89,611.74 (61,836.07)
Education (number of participants)			
Less than high school	2	0	2
High school diploma	3	3	6
Some college	5	8	13
Associate's degree	1	3	4
Bachelor's degree	8	12	20
Graduate or professional degree	14	7	21
Religion (number of participants)			
Roman Catholic	5	4	9
Protestant	16	18	34
Jewish	2	4	6
Spiritual	6	3	9
None	3	4	7
Other	1	0	1
Race (number of participants)			
White	30	30	60
African-American	2	1	3
Hispanic	1	2	3
TOTAL	33	33	66

Notes: *Initiated Divorce: Excludes 2 men who reported the divorce decision to be mutual. **Average Number of People in Household: 1 man reported this number as varying. ***Household Income: 3 women refused. Standard deviations are in parentheses.

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