"Grey Divorces" in Europe: Trends and Correlates

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Abstract

The so-called grey divorces – i.e. voluntary marital dissolutions after age 50 – have been receiving growing attention, both by the press and non-academic discourses. Nonetheless, while a vast amount of research on the socio-demographic, health-related, and economic consequences of divorce at older ages exists, only a few studies analysed trends and correlates of "grey divorces". In addition, these few studies are largely limited to the U.S. context. This paper aims at filling this gap. Using data from 6 waves of the Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe (SHARE), we document the correlates of divorce in later life across Europe, shedding light on a still rare, but demographically and sociologically interesting phenomenon. Preliminary results show that, when older individuals are considered, the determinants of grey divorce are not much different from the ones associated with divorce early in life. Additionally, we found significant interactions between education and countries as for example in Southern Europe, the Netherlands and Belgium where people with tertiary education are more likely to get divorced, while the opposite is true in Czech Republic. Further analyses will be performed on couples considering both individual and couple characteristics.

Motivation and Aim

A vast amount of literature concentrated on the socio-demographic, health-related, and economic consequences of divorce at older ages. Divorced has been associated with worse health conditions in later life (Grundy and Tomassini 2010) and with wealth reduction, especially for women (Zagorsky 2005). There is strong evidence in the United States, the Netherlands, and Norway that family disruptions over the life-course (particularly divorce) do have deleterious consequences for support at older ages (Daatland, 2007; Kalmijn, 2007; Tomassini, Glaser, Stuchbury 2007). These studies show how divorce decreases contacts and relationship quality with adult children as well as perceived support from children (or from any source) (Kalmijn, 2007).

Beside this research path, while a growing attention has been devoted to the so-called "grey divorces" – voluntary marital dissolutions after age 50 – by the popular press and in non-academic discourses, only a few studies analysed trends and correlated of grey divorces. In addition, these studies are largely limited to the U.S. context.

Brown and Lin (2012) documented that divorce rate among adults ages 50 and older doubled between 1990 and 2010 in the United States. Demographic characteristics, economic resources, and the marital biography were showed to be associated with the risk of experiencing a grey divorce: for example, the rate of divorce was 2.5 times higher for those in remarriages versus first marriages, while the divorce rate declined as marital duration rose. Indeed, later life marital dissolution increasingly occurs through divorce rather than

widowhood (Lin et al. 2018). Karraker and Latham (2015) examined the role of serious physical illness onset in subsequent marital dissolution. Their study did reveal a key gender difference: only measures of wife's illness onset are associated with elevated risk of divorce. Having experienced selected life transitions, such us empty nest —when the children move out of the parents' house—or retirement, have been found to be not associated with grey divorce; on the other side, determinants that have been found significant for divorce earlier in life, still hold their power to predict a grey divorce (Lin et al. 2018). Namely quality of the marital relation, income, tenure and ethnic heterogamy and period of occurrence have been found all significant in explaining divorce after age 50. Lin et al. (2018) concluded that gerontological research should not solely focus on widowhood but also should pay attention to divorce and repartnering during later life.

Very little is known about European grey divorces. Information on the determinants on grey divorce may be gathered from longitudinal surveys only and few European studies combine the longitudinal design with an adequate sample size that may allow to study such a rare event, while retrospective surveys are unable to provide information on the previous partner of divorced people and the potential determinants are collected at the time of the interview not allowing the correct causation of the phenomenon.

This study addresses this oversight by using data and 6 waves of the Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe (SHARE) to describe correlates of "grey" divorces across Europe.

Eurostat data from different censuses show that the proportion of divorces among older people has increased in the last decades (Figure 1). Both in countries where divorce has been introduced earlier and in countries where the marital dissolution has spread more recently, the proportion of older divorcee has increased dramatically: In the Netherlands, where divorce legislation dated back to the end of the 19th century, the proportion of divorced older men increased sevenfold between 1975 and 2011; in Italy (where divorced became legal by means of a popular referendum in 1974) the proportion increased twofold (but 5 times for women). Such trends suggest that over the years important changes may have occurred in the determinants and their power to predict divorce in later life.

Unfortunately, Censuses or cross-sectional data are not able to pick these associations and longitudinal data are vital for studying the temporal sequence between selected determinants and grey divorce.

Figure 1 Proportion of divorced men (a) and women (b) aged 65 and over in Germany, Italy, Netherlands and Sweden in selected years

(a)

(b)
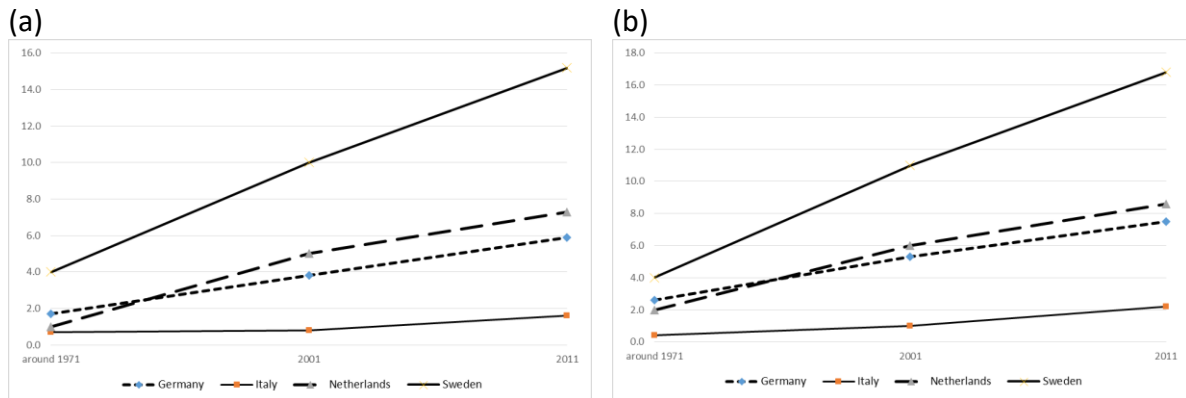
Source: Tomassini et al. 2004 and Eurostat 2018

Data and Methods

We use data from SHARE, a multi-domain longitudinal study that collects detailed information on adults aged 50 and over and their current partner, if living together, regardless of their age. Our sample includes respondents from 17 European countries (i.e. Austria, Belgium, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, and Switzerland) that were part of the study at least twice from wave 1 (2004-05) to wave 7 (2017). Wave 3 was not used since it collects retrospective information and it lacks most current socio-demographic and health variables. Therefore, our analysis is based on 6 time points. To avoid an underestimation of the phenomenon, we study union dissolution rather than divorce in the strict sense of the word. We restricted our sample to individuals who were (1) married or in a registered partnership, or (2) in an informal stable relationship. All individuals that are not at risk of living the event (i.e. union dissolution), such as widowed, never been married, and divorced, were excluded from the sample. After exploratory analyses, we also excluded individuals who were married but living separately (about 1.6% of the initial sample).

Not considering the latest wave (just recently released and not yet included in our analysis) of 76,374 individuals eligible to enter our sample, 21025 (27.5%) were lost at follow-up. Our analysis reveals that the likelihood of attrition is associated with age, sex, citizenship, socioeconomic position, health status, and cognitive functions. In particular, the likelihood of attrition is higher for individuals who are older, from lower socioeconomic status, with poor health, and lower cognitive abilities. Our final sample therefore includes 54584 individuals, of whom 15999 entered at wave 1, 7003 at wave 2, 19981 at wave 4, and 12001 at wave 5 and present at least in one successive wave. Union duration has been imputed for about 5000 cases.

The dependent variable is experiencing divorce or union disruption between two consecutive waves for those who were married or in a stable relationship at the previous wave.

The preliminary set of explanatory variables include indicators of marital biography (marriage duration as time varying, marriage order and age difference between spouses as time invariant), education and country as time invariant, age, job status, tenure and wealth as time varying.

Data Analysis

The identification of the individuals at risk of experiencing a union disruption with SHARE has been particularly time consuming due to the numerous inconsistencies among the variables that should indicate the marital status or partner status of the interviewed. Other inconsistencies have been found in the marital/partner status across waves.

Preliminary, we studied whether individuals experience the event (union disruption) at any point between baseline (when they entered the sample) and follow-up (following wave(s)). We used multilevel logistic regression where the dependent variable is the experience of a union disruption and where respondents are nested within couples. If the event occurs at wave 'n' the predictors are set at wave 'n-1'.

Figure 1 shows the adjusted predicted probability of union dissolution by country. SHARE wave 1-5

Adjusted predicted probability of union dissolution by country
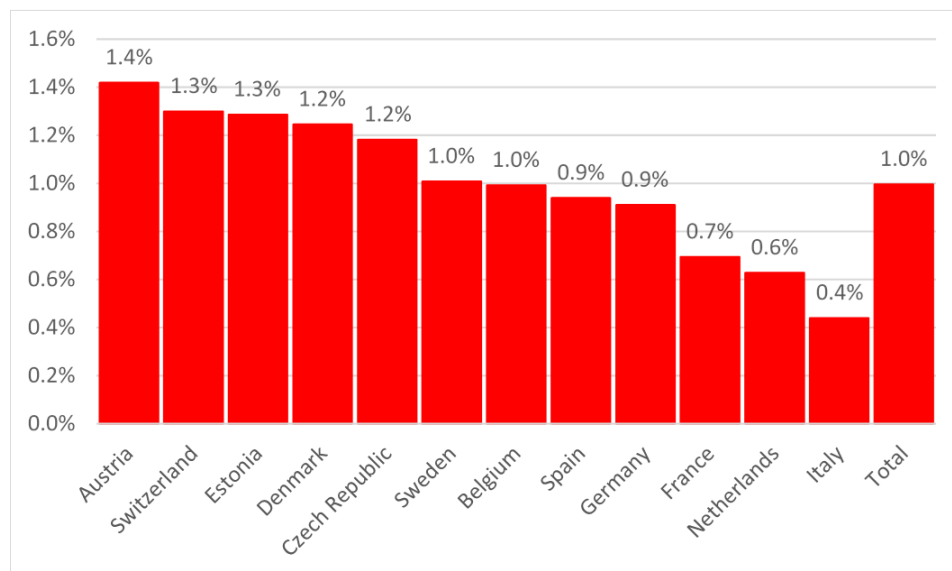
Preliminary results on the probability of union dissolution are reported in Table 1. Logically, union duration is negatively related to union dissolution, meaning that the longest is the duration the smaller is the probability of experiencing a grey divorce. The presence of other

household member (mainly children) is negatively associated with grey divorces as well as being in the third tercile of household income. Interestingly, while the indicator of functional health (ADL) is not significantly related to union dissolution, depression is, as showed in previous studies (Kessler et al. 1998; Torvik et al. 2015; Idstad et al. 2015). Finally, people who entered in the survey in the latest waves have a significantly lower probability of dissolution. Using France as reference category, results show how older people living in all the countries considered have a higher probability of experiencing a grey divorce except Netherlands (not significantly different from France) and Italy (significantly lower).

Table 1 Multilevel Logistic Coefficients for experiencing union dissolution after age 50. SHARE wave 1-5

Variables	Colonna1	Coeff	p value
Women		0.172	
65+ (vs <65)		-0.267	
Union Duration		-0.104	***
Household size		-0.479	***
Had ever work (vs no work		0.919	
Tertile HH wealth (ref 1)			
2		-0.403	
3		-1.067	***
Years of education		0.030	
ADL		-0.188	
Depression scale		0.191	***
country (ref. France)			
Austria		1.193	***
Germany		0.441	**
Sweden		0.609	***
Netherlands		-0.160	
Spain		0.491	***
Italy		-0.715	***
Denmark		0.966	***
Switzerland		1.042	***
Belgium		0.583	***
Czech Republic		0.877	***
Estonia		1.023	***
Wave 2		-0.158	
Wave 4		-0.582	*
Wave 5		-1.168	***

Abridged conclusions

Preliminary results show that, when older individuals are considered, the determinants of grey divorce are not much different from the ones associated with divorce early in life. Additionally, we found significant interactions between education and countries as for example in Southern Europe, the Netherlands and Belgium where people with tertiary education are more likely to get divorced, while the opposite is true in Czech Republic.

Further analyses will be performed on couples considering both individual and couple characteristics. We will estimate discrete event history modelling to handle both right censoring and time varying explanatory variables. Several limitations though have to be considered. The identification of the individuals at risk of experiencing a union disruption has proved to be difficult due to the inconsistencies among the variables that should indicate the marital or partner status of the interviewed. Individuals who were 'living with a partner" but not in a formal relationship (marriage or registered partnership) were included in our analytic sample only if they were assigned a 'couple id'. Additionally, other inconsistencies were found in the marital/partner status across waves as, for example, people who were married in the previous wave and found single in the following one. Last, but not least, we have imputed union duration to around 5000 cases.

Despite all these limitations, this paper sheds some light on a still rare, but demographically and sociologically interesting phenomenon.

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