

Grey divorce – An unexplored path to uncoupling in later life

Projektstitel (svenska)

Att skiljas sent i livet - en utforskad men allt vanligare erfarenhet

Abstract (engelska)

In what has been described as a “gray divorce revolution”, late life divorce is rapidly increasing in the Western world. Among Swedes 60+ divorce rates have almost doubled since the millennium. Today 1 in 10 Swedes getting divorced is 60+ and grey divorce rates are likely to grow further. Still, grey divorce remains almost invisible both in family sociology and gerontology. Existing research is mainly quantitative and from the US. There is no research about Sweden. The project will study the experience of getting divorced late in life and becoming a grey divorcee. Why do people divorce late in life? How do transitions such as the empty nest, retirement and onset of illness shape the grey divorce experience? What is the difference between his and her divorce? How does divorce affect support networks and relationships to adult children? What does grey divorce reveal about older people’s conceptions of family and intimate relationships, and how they think about ageing? We will interview 40 men and women who have divorced/separated 60+, from first and higher order unions. The two applicants, from the Universities of Gävle (project leader) and Stockholm, will participate equally in all aspects of the project, carried out 2018-20. The study is guided by theories of the life course and the individualized family. Grey divorce constitutes a strategic site for studying the transformation of the ageing family in late modernity and fill important international knowledge gaps.

Populärvetenskaplig beskrivning (svenska)

Det har blivit allt vanligare att skilja sig sent i livet i hela västvärlden. I USA har man rent av beskrivit utvecklingen som en skilsmässorevolution bland äldre och den svenska utvecklingen är jämförbar. I Sverige har skilsmässotalen för personer 60+ nästan fördubblats sedan millennieskiftet. Idag är en av tio svenskar som skiljer sig fyllda 60 år och skilsmässotalen för äldre väntas fortsätta öka. Trots detta är skilsmässa på äldre dar nästan utforskat inom både familjesociologi, som tenderar att fokusera skilsmässor tidigare under livsloppet, och inom gerontologin, som tenderar att fokusera på relationer som avslutas genom dödsfall. Befintlig forskning om skilsmässor sent i livet är i huvudsak kvantitativ och från USA. Kvalitativ forskning om den levda erfarenheten av att skiljas sent i livet saknas. Det saknas också helt forskning om det svenska fallet, som ofta setts som en föregångare i familjetrender. Projektets syfte är att studera upplevelsen av att skilja sig och vara skild på äldre dar. Centrala frågeställningar är:

Varför skiljer man sig sent i livet?

Hur påverkar centrala övergångar i livet, såsom barnens utflyttning, pensioneringen och åldersrelaterad ohälsa, skilsmässoupplevelsen?

Vilka skillnader finns mellan ”hans” och ”hennes” skilsmässa?

Hur påverkas det sociala stödet och relationen till vuxna barn?

Vad avslöjar skilsmässa på äldre dar om äldres syn på familj och intima relationer?

Vad avslöjar skilsmässa på äldre dar om samtida äldre generationers förväntningar på åldrandet?

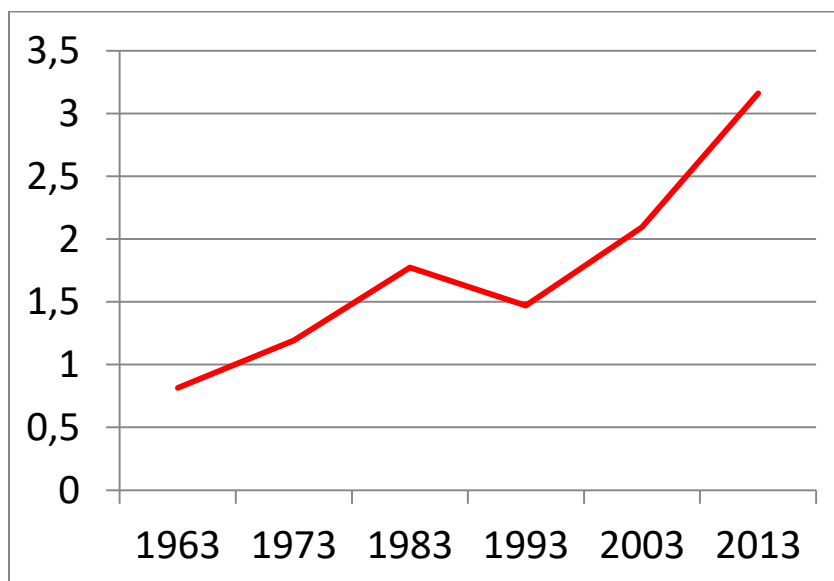
Vi kommer att genomföra kvalitativa intervjuer med 40 män och kvinnor som skilt sig efter 60 års ålder. Eftersom icke-äktenskapligt samboende är så vanligt i Sverige kommer studien inkludera skilda och separerade från både äktenskap och samborelationer. Studien vägleds

av teorier om livsloppets historiska förändring samt teorier om familjerelationernas individualisering. Skilsmässa på äldre dar utgör en strategisk plats för att studera förändringen av den åldrande familjen i det senmoderna samhället – en fråga av stor relevans för planeringen av samhällets insatser för äldre. Vår studie kommer att fylla en viktig lucka i både nationell och internationell forskning på området. Studien planeras att genomföras mellan 2018 och 2020 och är ett samarbete mellan forskare på Högskolan i Gävle (huvudman) och Stockholms universitet.

Purpose and aims

Half of all divorced Swedes are 60 years or older. In this age group more Swedes are divorced than widowed. But also “getting divorced” in later life is rapidly becoming more common across the Western world (Kingston 2007). In the US this development has been described as a “gray divorce revolution” (Brown & Lin 2012). The development in Sweden is comparable. While divorce rates in the general population plateaued after the new millennium, among Swedes 60+ they almost doubled (see figure 1). One in ten Swedes getting divorced is 60+ and grey divorce rates are likely to grow further as post war cohorts, more prone to divorce, continue to successively enter later life.

Figure 1. Crude divorce rate for Swedes aged 60+, 1963–2013 (Statistics Sweden, own calculations).



Already in 1981, Uhlenberg and Myers predicted a future increase in late life divorce for several reasons: 1) Divorce would be more socially accepted. 2) Remarriages, more prone to end in divorce than first marriages, would be more common. 3) Increasing labor participation would make women less dependent on spouses. 4) Longer lives would lengthen the exposure to the risk of divorce.

Despite this early prediction, grey divorce remains invisible both in family sociology, which has tended to focus divorce among younger people, and gerontology, which has tended to focus marital dissolution through widowhood. A vast amount of research has shown the consequences of *widowhood* for loneliness, identity, social support and contacts with adult children (Carr et al. 2002, Dykstra & de Jong Gierveld 2004, Ha 2008, Lopata 1996; and countless others). Although these questions are to a large extent relevant also with regards to

grey divorce, corresponding research is lacking. Increasing rates of grey divorce constitutes a significant change to the landscape of later life and the ageing experience and is a strategic site for studying the changing conditions of ageing and the transformation of ageing families in late modernity.

The purpose of the proposed project is to study the lived experience of getting divorced from a cross-gender marriage in later life (60+) and becoming a grey divorcee as a consequence. Research questions are:

1. Why do people divorce late in life?
2. How does the decision emerge?
3. What are the divorcees' *expectations* for divorce and post-divorce life?
4. What are the divorcees' *experiences* of the divorce process and post-divorce life?
5. What are the consequences for the divorcee's support network and relationship to adult children?
6. How do life phase factors shape the divorce experience?
7. How do the above aspects vary with duration and order of the former marriage?
8. How do the above aspects differ between men and women?
9. Theoretically, what does grey divorce reveal about older cohorts' conceptions of family and intimate relationships?
10. Theoretically, what does grey divorce reveal about older cohorts' conceptions of ageing?

Since non-marital cohabitation is accepted and widespread in the adult population in Sweden (Bildtgård & Öberg 2015a, Kiernan 2002) the study will focus grey divorce from both marriages and non-marital cohabiting unions. In this proposal "divorce" will refer to both transitions.

Survey of the field

Although late life divorce is a growing and major life transition, research is scarce and dominated by a few quantitative studies from the US, focusing on antecedents for and consequences of, grey divorce.

A number of *predictors* have been studied. Some reasons for divorce earlier in life have been linked also to grey divorce: abuse, cheating and addiction (Amato & Previti 2003, Lin & Brown 2016; Montenegro, 2004). Other reasons are logically associated with later life, such as health mismatches between partners (Wilson & Waddroups 2002), especially illness in the female partner (Karraker & Latham 2015). Retirement and the empty nest might also be related to grey divorce (Lin & Brown 2016). Another life phase factor is the risk of growing apart. In Montenegro's seminal study, a majority motivated their grey divorce by falling out of love, relationship boredom or personal change (see also Bair 2007).

The *consequences* of divorce for later life have also been investigated. However, most of this research has considered the effects of divorce taking place *earlier in the life-course*. Research has shown long term negative consequences of divorce on: late life wellbeing and health (Gray et al. 2011), loneliness (Peters & Liebroer 1997), parent – child relationships (Daatland 2007, Kalmijn 2013, Uphold-Carrier & Utz 2012), especially father-child relationships (Cooney & Uhlenberg 1990). Evidence of long term effects on informal support is mixed (Glaser et al 2008, Wijckmans & van Bavel 2013).

Very little research has considered consequences of *divorce taking place in later life (grey divorce)*. A few studies stress the negative impact on individual economy (Berardo 1982). For older generations of women, divorce has been described as "economic suicide" (Connidis

2010), but it seems reasonable that this would be less common as grey divorce increasingly affects dual-earner couples. Late life divorce has been shown to influence relationships with adult children negatively, at least initially (Greenwood 2012), although children has been shown to provide post-divorce support, especially for older mothers (Bowen & Jensen 2015). Montenegro (2004) found that older people see divorce as almost as devastating as widowhood. Older divorcees reported depression, feelings of abandonment, failure and not being loved. They feared becoming lonely, broke, and failing in new relationships.

Prior research has tended to stress the disadvantages of late life divorce. However, if divorce had no benefits for at least one of the partners – why divorce? In Montenegro’s study few regretted getting divorced. What are the promises of grey divorce [*research question 3*]? To escape preconceived ideas more explorative research is needed that can lift the complexities of the late life divorce experience.

Much of our understanding of becoming and being widowed comes from qualitative research (Connidis 2010). This is likely to be true also for grey divorce. With few exceptions (Canham et al., 2014; Lloyd et al. 2014, Radina et al. 2008) qualitative studies of the lived experience of late life divorce are lacking. What characterizes the process [*research question 4*]? Canham et al. has shown how ambivalence permeates the pre-divorce process (explaining why divorce decisions are often delayed) and also post-divorce life. Bair’s (2007) documentary book revealed how women often initiate grey divorce and showed the importance of prior divorce experiences. What is the difference between “his” and “her” divorce? Between first and higher order divorces? [*Research question 7 and 8*]

To conclude, research on grey divorce is mainly from the US and almost exclusively quantitative. Research about the lived experience of grey divorce is almost non-existing. There is no research on the Swedish case, often considered a forerunner in family inventions. Thus, the proposed project can make a substantial contribution to both national and international research about the growing grey divorce phenomenon.

Project description

Theory

Three theoretical points of departure guide and generate questions for the study. Social theory has described a historical individualization of the family. According to Giddens (1992) couple relationships have increasingly become tools for individual self-realization and their form and contents increasingly determined less by external norms and more by negotiation between partners (see also Cherlin, 2004). In this context a non-fulfilling relationship has become a legitimate reason to divorce. Hackstaff (1999) describes a normative change from a culture of marriage to a culture of divorce, where divorce has become a natural get-away from a non-fulfilling marriage, as reflected in the introduction of “no-fault” divorce legislations in many Western countries. According to Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) the main driving force behind this change is increased economic independence for women through dual-earner economies and welfare states. This change affects not only couple but also other family relationships. Sweden has often been considered a forerunner in family inventions. But has this individualization changed how older Swedes think about couplehood and family relationships? About family obligations vs self-realization? [*Research question 9*]

A second point of departure is the life course perspective (Kohli 2007). According to Laslett (1989) the increased healthy life span and systems of organized retirement have restructured the life course, creating a “third age” between working life and deep old age. This life phase

presents new opportunities for self-development and for starting over late in life, and divorce may be one way of doing so. This perspective frames uncoupling, not only in terms of loss, but also in terms of new opportunities. How do older divorcees conceive of later life?

[*Research question 10*]

The life course perspective draws attention to the fact that different conditions frame couple relationships over the life course. Transitions into and out of the third age may challenge established relationship dynamics and increase the risk for divorce. One challenge is the empty nest, a second is retirement (Bildtgård & Öberg 2015b). Both end chapters in the couple's shared life and may disturb low quality marriages. A third challenge can be an unsynchronized transition into the fourth age by the onset of illness in one of the partners (this is especially a risk if there is a big age difference between the partners). This may conflict with the healthy partner's remaining life project. How do these life phase typical transitions shape the grey divorce experience? [*Research question 6*]

A third point of departure is the gender perspective. The gender gap in marital experiences once prompted Bernard (1972) to talk about "his and her" marriage and Kalmijn & Portman (2006) to later talk about "his and her" divorce. In her article "Redoing gender through divorce", Walzer (2008) describes divorce as a process where women critically reflect on gendered practices in their marriages. Women more often initiate divorce, also in later life (Montenegro 2004), despite bigger financial exit costs (Connidis 2010) and smaller opportunities to start over due to a partner market dominated by female singles. This implies that the significance of divorce differs for older men and women, still the knowledge about the gendered experience of grey divorce is limited. Krekula (2007) has criticized gender research for age blindness and gerontology for gender blindness. A focus on the age/gender intersection can help remedy these blind spots and generate knowledge about older men and women's views on divorce and marriage. [*Research question 8*]

Method

In order to capture the lived experience of grey divorce we will conduct qualitative interviews with informants divorced 60+. The age limit is pragmatically set in order to include people who have experienced transitions typical for later life and still guarantee a wide enough pool of informants. The sample will consist of 40 informants who in the last 1–7 years have divorced from a cross-gender marital or non-marital cohabiting union – with equal representation of male and female divorcees from first and higher order unions (Table 1).

Table 1. *The qualitative sample.*

Inclusion criteria:		
Divorced:		
- Aged 60+		
- 1–7 years ago		
- From marital or non-marital cohabiting union		
Sample structure	Men	Women
Divorced from first marriage	10	10
Divorced from higher order marriage	10	10

Sampling criteria have been chosen that are both easily identifiable and significant with regards to our research questions. First, since women and men have been found to have different experiences from their marriages, different reasons to divorce and different post-divorce adjustment strategies, the study will include equal proportions of male and female informants. Second, divorce is known to be more common in remarriages, possibly reflecting a selection effect into remarriage but also reflecting that prior experiences of separation and singlehood make divorce a less dramatic option. For this reason the sample will include equal proportions of divorcees from first and higher order marriages. Since first marriages are likely to have lasted longer than remarriages, this criterion will also guarantee a variation in relationship length.

Also, since the divorce experience is likely shaped by the individual's role in the divorce process, the aim is to include informants in both the male and the female sample who 1) unilaterally initiated the divorce, 2) did not initiate the divorce, 3) co-initiated the divorce.

The sample rests on two more inclusion criteria. In order to capture experiences of "being" divorced at least one year should have passed since the divorce and in order for memories of the divorce to still be current and meaningful no more than seven years should have passed. Also, the sample will not make a distinction between "divorcees" from marital and non-marital cohabiting unions, since in Sweden non-marital cohabitation is in many respects indistinguishable from marriage (Kiernan 2002) and widespread in the adult population, especially in higher order unions (Bildtgård & Öberg 2015a; 2017b).

The recruitment strategy builds on self-selection. To recruit we will use ads in newspapers and retirement magazines and established contacts with the retirement organizations. These strategies are well established and we have used them successfully in prior projects (e.g. Bildtgård & Öberg 2017a; Öberg 1997).

The qualitative interviews will be structured around four main biographical themes: 1) The history of the previous marital relationship, 2) The divorce process, 3) Life after divorce, and 4) Expectations on the future. These main themes will be followed by questions on more specific topics to answer the research questions. For informants divorced from higher order marriages, brief narratives will also be collected about their previous divorces.

The analysis will be carried out following principles from analytical induction (Znaniecki 1969/1934, Denzin 1989, Öberg 1997) – a method for analyzing and generating theory from qualitative data with the purpose of creating more general propositions from a successive analysis of single cases. Following the principles of analytic induction, our analysis will proceed to find initial answers to our research questions about grey divorce in a single interview case. These answers will be tested and reformulated against successive interview cases with the aim of developing a general propositional model regarding the grey divorce experience. When the model is not contradicted by any of the interview cases the process will have reached theoretical saturation. Throughout the process we will strive to identify new questions that are raised by the data and include them in the analytic process. While developing the model we will systematically search for differences between men and women and between divorcees from first and subsequent marriages, but also remain open for other divisions of importance to the grey divorce experience.

Construction of the interview guide will commence in the spring year 1. We will simultaneously prepare and submit a proposal for ethical review of the project. After ethical approval we will start recruiting informants. Interviews and transcriptions will proceed successively over the year. The analysis will be carried out in parallel with the transcriptions,

using the software package Atlas.ti for qualitative data analysis. We will start to present the results in the autumn year 2 continuing throughout year 3, primarily in international peer-reviewed journals, but also at international conferences in gerontology, sociology and social work (such as *Gerontological Society of America*, *International Association for Gerontology and Geriatrics*, *Nordisk Gerontologisk Förening* and *International Sociological Association*).

Significance

This project will fill important knowledge gaps in gerontology and family sociology on an issue which, despite its increasing prominence, is almost invisible in research. This invisibility may be connected to prevailing ageist ideas about the normal life course – where family research tends to assume that divorce belongs to earlier parts of life and gerontology that marriages are dissolved by widowhood. By shedding light on grey divorce this project will counter such stereotypes and illustrate diversity both in the older population and in the population of divorcees.

The project proceeds from the late modern transformation of the family and the concurrent change of the landscape of later life. Changes in the ageing family is of great policy relevance as it concerns questions about older people's access to support and the organization of social resources for older people. By studying grey divorce this project will add knowledge about the changing ageing family. The proposed project is relevant to several research areas: ageing, informal care, social and family relationships. Marriage protects against morbidity and premature mortality (Karraker & Latham 2015, SCB 2014). A partner constitutes a central resource for support. Older people living alone are more dependent on informal (de Jong Gierveld 2002) and formal support (Larsson & Thorslund 2002) from outside the household. Older men living alone have been shown to be particularly vulnerable, with smaller social networks, less contact with children and more risky health behavior than both married men and divorced women (Davidson & Arber 2002). Our study will contribute knowledge about the consequences of grey divorce for access to social support and relationships with adult children.

We have planned and designed this project as a national Swedish research project but collaborate with gerontologists in Israel (Dr Chaya Koren, University of Haifa) and the US (Dr Carey Sherman, University of Michigan) who will apply for funding for similar projects, aiming at future cross-cultural comparisons. Israel is a country in transition from tradition to modernity, where grey divorce is a slowly growing phenomenon, mostly happening in first, long-term, marriages. The US is where “the grey divorce revolution” was originally coined to describe the contemporary increase in late life divorce rates. It is also a country that for a long time has had the highest divorce rates in the world, and where grey divorce is often occurring in higher order marriages. Sweden is different from both the US and Israel by being international leaders with regards to alternative, non-marital, union forms.

Preliminary results

a topic where we have built a unique Swedish profile (hig.se/aldresfamiljerelationer) through studies of grey repartnering and ageing stepfamilies.

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