

Exploding “Grey Divorce”

Dalrock | 28 June, 2010 | by Dalrock

My wife saw something in the media about some large trend of couples divorcing at or around retirement age, dubbed “grey divorce”. She was very troubled by this. I agreed entirely with the sentiment, but was also intrigued. Why would there be a swell of divorce at that particular time? Retirement is for many a time of great uncertainty and risk. Why jettison the partnership which has gotten you through the other trying times of life just as this new one approaches? Retirement is also a time to enjoy the fruits of a lifetime’s labor. Why not enjoy as a team the fruits you worked so hard to earn together? Furthermore, the one fact that everyone seems to agree on regarding divorce is that they are mostly initiated by women. But late in life the benefits of marriage to women are *increasing*. It simply made no sense.

So I set out to better understand this phenomenon. I googled “grey divorce” and read all of the articles I could find. I was especially interested in the source of the statistics driving this conclusion, and how they were being used. Here are some examples of what I found:

- [Saying “I Don’t:” Gray Divorce](#) *Not every couple in their golden years will have a golden anniversary. Here’s why more and more long-time marrieds are calling it quits—and how they recover.*
- [Women getting feet under them after “gray divorce”](#) *Initiating more divorces after lengthy marriages, females can end up anywhere from fulfilled to frustrated.*
- [Grey Divorce – Letting Go and Starting Over!](#)
This is the same author/ similar content as you will find at: <http://www.latelivedivorce.com/> Both end with a link to a **divorce law firm**.
- [Over 40 and divorced: Why older couples are breaking up](#)

From the headlines, a promising start! I should know more about what is really happening with just a few clicks, right? No such luck. When you strip out the sensationalist claims made by those who stand to profit from an increase in divorce (authors of books on divorce and divorce attorneys), all that remains are some vague references to US Census data and more commonly, a [study performed by the AARP in 2004 on divorce after 40](#).

One phrase you will note on nearly every story about grey divorce is the assertion that it is “exploding”, or an “exploding phenomenon”. This catch phrase originated in the book *Calling It Quits: Late-Life Divorce and Starting Over* by Deirdre Bair. From the Amazon description, the book is a collection of individual stories of late life divorce, and was inspired by the AARP survey and the author’s own late life divorce.

I’ll [go into the Census data in a later post](#), and briefly cover the AARP study in the remainder of this post. First off, the AARP study did *not* find an increase of “grey divorce”. In fact, *the study wasn’t even focused on divorce after retirement age*. 73% of the divorces examined in the study occurred when the respondent was in their 40s. Another 15% of the divorces they studied occurred when the respondent was 50-55. *Only 11% occurred when the person answering the survey was over 55*.

So we know what the AARP study *didn’t say*. Did it say anything interesting? As it turns out, yes it does! **Late life divorce tends to work out (relatively) better for men and worse for women**; try finding that in an article on grey divorce. Here are some selected quotes from the study that the news stories decided not to share since it would have gone against their goal of selling divorce to older women (emphasis in quotes is mine):

Almost 9 in 10 men (87%) dated after their divorce, compared to 8 in 10 women (79%)... Among those who dated after the divorce, **more than half of men (54%) but fewer women remarried (39%)**. (Page 39)

Many women, especially those who have not remarried (69%), do not touch or hug at all sexually. An even larger majority of women who have not remarried do not engage in sexual intercourse (77% saying not at all), in comparison with about half of men (49%) who have not remarried. (Page 6)

Note: The table at the bottom of P A-35 gives the breakdown of men vs women reporting no sexual intercourse over the last month. 33% for men, 59% for women. This doesn't seem to be explained by age distribution of survey respondents. 56% of responses were from those in their 40s and 50s. 87% of the survey takers were in their 60s or younger.

Their age at the time of divorce also impacts dating, especially among women. Eighty-eight percent of women in their 40s dated (35% did before the divorce was final), while 79 percent of women in their 60s and older did the same (13% did before the divorce was final). (Page 39)

While women appreciate their new-found self-identity, freedom, and independence, their finances pose hurdles after divorce... [men] mention having more sex or different sexual experiences five times more than women as something they like best after divorce. They also tend to be better off financially. (Page 31)

This is just a cursory overview. If you are interested you can follow the [link](#) and look at the whole report. Even if you don't look at the original report, note the [misleading cover image](#) of the sad older man dining alone.

While no doubt there is plenty of misery to go around following late life divorce, based on the survey results (and census data) **the cover image really should have shown a picture of an older woman dining alone.**

Conclusions

1. While at some point someone may have seen an up-tick in retirement age divorce, there is no evidence to back up the type of event being reported in the media. Put differently, if the media has any data to back this up they aren't sharing it.
2. Men tend to fare better than women when considering remarriage and/or physical affection following late life divorce. A surprisingly large percent of women who divorced after 40 report receiving no physical affection at all, *not even hugs*. (more on why this is likely the case in [part two](#) when we go over the census data)
3. Men tend to fare better than women financially following late life divorce. (part three will explore why this is likely the case)
4. The media is selling late life divorce to women as *empowering*, and an *exiting new trend* even though the report which originated the interest in the topic showed this is the opposite of what most women experience.

This is the first part of a three part series I will do on the topic. [Part two](#) will look at the census data and the dating/sexual marketplace implications of late life divorce. [Part three](#) will explore the shifting financial incentives regarding divorce as couples enter retirement.