

Relationship between Divorce and Well-being among Older Europeans

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Abstract. This study explores the relationship between divorce and well-being among older Europeans (50+), utilizing data from eight waves of the Survey on Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe (SHARE). A quasi-experimental design was used to compare the well-being of divorced older adults before and after divorce with a control group of married individuals. CASP-12 scale was used to assess well-being. Results from a Linear Mixed Model reveal that divorced individuals tend to have lower well-being compared to their married counterparts, likely due to negative outcomes associated with divorce or preexisting lower well-being among those who choose to divorce. However, divorce is not associated with a change in well-being in the 2–3 year period surrounding divorce, potentially due to extended intervals between measurements or the absence of immediate effect of divorce.

Keywords: divorce, well-being, older adults, ageing.

Skyrybų ir gerovės ryšys tarp vyresnio amžiaus europiečių

Santrauka. Šiame tyrime nagrinėjamas skyrybų ir gerovės ryšys tarp vyresnio amžiaus europiečių (50+), remiantis aštuonių Europos sveikatos, senėjimo ir išėjimo į pensiją tyrimo (SHARE) bangų duomenimis. Taikytas kvaziekperimentinis tyrimo metodas, siekiant palyginti išsiskyrusių vyresnio amžiaus asmenų gerovę prieš skyrybas ir po jų su kontrolinės susituokusių asmenų grupės gerove. Gerovei įvertinti buvo naudojama CASP-12 skalė. Tiesinio mišriojo modelio rezultatai atskleidė, kad išsiskyrusių asmenų gerovė turi tendenciją būti mažesnė nei susituokusiųjų, tikėtina, dėl neigiamų skyrybų pasekmių arba dėl to, kad skirtis yra linkę individai, kurių gerovės lygis žemesnis.

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Imtyje matomas gerovės pokytis per 2–3 metų po skyrybų laikotarpį, tačiau šis pokytis nėra siejamas su skyrybomis; tai gali reikšti, kad skyrybos neturi sąsajos su gerove trumpalaikiu laikotarpiu arba dėl ilgo intervalo tarp matavimų pokytis nėra matomas.

Pagrindiniai žodžiai: skyrybos, gerovė, vyresnio amžiaus žmonės, senėjimas.

Introduction

Divorce affects many individuals. In 2022, there were 6 million divorces in Europe, affecting twice that many individuals (Eurostat, 2024). In the US, a chance for marriage to end in divorce is 43–46%. (Schoen & Canudas-Romo, 2006). For older individuals (50 years old or more), the divorce rate is even higher, with an increasing trend in the EU (Raley & Sweeney, 2020), and 1 in 3 divorcees being over 50 in the US (Brown & Lin, 2022). Given the high and growing proportion of older divorcees, it's important to consider this demographic.

Amato (2000) argues that divorce significantly impacts various aspects of an individual's life. Divorce is associated with increased mortality and other negative health outcomes, including mental health, reduction in social standing as well economic status (Sbarra & Whisman, 2022). Gray et al. (2011) suggest divorcees have a lower well-being for a long time after divorce. There is evidence showing that divorced individuals report to be less happy not only compared to married individuals, but also the ones who are widowed or were never married (Uğur & Aydınbakar, 2024). Finally, research shows that divorce initiators may experience fewer negative emotions, but the level of stress is the same for initiators, noninitiators and in case of a mutual decision (Frisby et al., 2012). Thus, it can be expected that divorce is likely to result in diminished well-being of both parties.

On the other hand, research on the link between divorce and well-being is mixed. There is evidence suggesting well-being improvement after a divorce (Cavapozzi et al., 2020). Amato (2000) highlights individual differences among divorcees: some experience a lasting drop in well-being, some return to baseline over time, and others may view divorce as a positive development, allowing to end an unsatisfying relationship. This highlights the need to consider individual differences.

Amato's (2000) divorce-stress-adjustment perspective explains these differences. The model posits that well-being after divorce depends on stressors (mediators) and protective factors (moderators). Stressors include sole parenting, loss of child custody, lack of emotional support, ongoing conflict with an ex-spouse, and financial issues. Protective factors include personal resources, attitudes towards divorce, and demographic characteristics. Well-being is reflected in adjustments, such as problem severity and duration, functioning in new roles, and identity independent of the former marriage. These stressors can affect well-being long before the formal divorce process, which is often the climax of years of tension (Amato, 2000).

Despite observed increase in divorce rates among older adults (Raley & Sweeney, 2020), this demographic group remains understudied (Brown & Lin, 2022). Moreover, several additional factors make this group unique and warrant further research. It is ob-

served, that married individuals have longer total and active life expectancies compared to unmarried (Jia & Lubetkin, 2020), highlighting the importance of partnership in later life and possible negative effects of divorce in later life for health and well-being. Furthermore, the long-term negative effects of divorce tend to diminish with remarriage (Gray et al., 2011), a process that may be more challenging for older adults. Finally, the differences in well-being between different age groups found in the studies (following a U-shaped curve in some countries and steadily decreasing in others (Step toe et al., 2015)) raise questions about whether the findings on the relationship between well-being and divorce at younger ages can be applied to understand the situation of older people.

The purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between divorce and well-being among older Europeans.

Methodology

Participants and procedure

The study was conducted using data from the Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe (SHARE; SHARE-ERIC, 2024). SHARE is a multidisciplinary and longitudinal study focusing on individuals aged 50 and older, conducted across 27 European countries and Israel. Respondents are enrolled in the study using a stratified probability sampling and the data is collected around every 2–3 years via face-to-face interview (Bergmann et al., 2019). The data for this analysis was drawn from 8 out of 9 available data collection waves, excluding wave 3 that did not have the required data.

The study design used was quasi-experimental, specifically, the nonequivalent control group design, where well-being was compared both between the divorced and nondivorced groups (between-group comparison) and within each group over time (within-group comparison), despite the lack of random assignment. The experimental group comprised of individuals who were married or had a registered partnership in the wave before and were divorced in the wave after. Since divorcees could have divorced at any time between the two measurements, there could be up to a 3-year gap between the divorce and the well-being measurement taken after the divorce. The control group consisted of individuals who were married or had a registered partnership in both waves.

The waves were divided into 6 pairs (1–2, 4–5, etc.) for the purposes of comparing well-being between adjacent waves during which divorce occurred; then all the 6 pairs were analysed in one model. For participants in control group present in more than two waves, two adjacent waves were chosen randomly for the purposes of comparison.

The demographics of the analysed participants are presented in Table 1. It is evident that there are huge sample differences between the compared groups, however, the statistical model used is robust enough to handle unbalanced group size (Gu et al., 2022).

Table 1
Demographic characteristics of analysed participants

Waves compared	No. participants	Gender		Age	Marital status	
		Male	Female		Divorced (experimental group)	Married (control group)
1–2	5 157	2 701 (52.4%)	2 456 (47.6%)	63.2 ± 8.8	31 (0.6%)	5 126 (99.4%)
4–5	3 212	1 605 (50.0%)	1 607 (50.0%)	67.2 ± 8.2	22 (0.7%)	3 190 (99.3%)
5–6	7 252	3 649 (50.3%)	3 603 (49.7%)	66.0 ± 8.8	53 (0.7%)	7 199 (99.3%)
6–7	11 876	5 928 (49.9%)	5 948 (50.1%)	66.4 ± 8.5	89 (0.7%)	11 787 (99.3%)
7–8	6 769	3 455 (51.0%)	3 314 (49.0%)	66.8 ± 8.3	70 (1.0%)	6 699 (99.0%)
8–9	6 254	3 149 (50.4%)	3 105 (49.6%)	68.3 ± 7.8	39 (0.6%)	6 215 (99.4%)
Total	40 520	20 487 (50.7%)	20 033 (49.5%)	66.3 ± 8.4	304 (0.7%)	40 216 (99.3%)

Variables and their measures

Well-being was measured using Control, Autonomy, Self-realization and Pleasure (CASP)-12 scale (Knesebeck et al., 2005). The 12-item scale comprises of four afore-mentioned aspects forming well-being. The participants chose answers on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (Often) to 4 (Never). The responses were summed to form the well-being score, ranging from 12 to 48, with higher scores indicating greater levels of well-being. The psychometric properties of the CASP-12 were validated by Oliver et al. (2021) using SHARE database. Confirmatory Factor Analysis supported the second-order four-factor structure with strong fit indices, modelling well-being as a single higher-order construct with four strongly interrelated before-mentioned components. This supports the use of total score of CASP-12 as a measure of overall well-being. Reliability analysis showed excellent internal consistency for the scale with *Cronbach's α* over 0.8 (Oliver et al., 2021).

Data analysis

The data analysis was performed using R (version 4.4.0) software package. The study was performed using a Linear Mixed Model (LMM) (using *lme4*; Bates et al., 2015). LMMs are preferred over traditional methods (e.g., ANOVA) for quasi-experiments because they allow for more complex and realistic data modelling (Brown, 2021). The LMM allows to examine whether and how divorced and nondivorced individuals differ in well-being,

whether well-being changes across time points, and whether these changes are linked to divorce, while also assessing the role of control variables and individual differences between participants.

The dependent variable is well-being, the independent variables are divorce, time, their interaction, age, gender (as fixed-effects), the waves being compared, country (as random intercepts), and the participant (as random intercept and slope). Time is a binary variable indicating whether the observation occurred before (0) or after (1) divorce (or a reference point for the control group). This allows the model to capture changes in well-being over time and compare whether these changes differ between the groups. Yeo–Johnson transformation (using *bestNormalize*; Peterson, 2021) was performed on the dependent variable for normalisation. The model met the assumptions of normality, linearity, random distribution of residuals and homoscedasticity. The significance of independent variables was tested using Satterthwaite’s method.

Results

The details of LMM are shown in Table 2. The model explains 66.2% of the variance in well-being ($R^2_c = 0.662$).

Controlling for the aforementioned variables, the results indicate that divorcees have significantly lower well-being compared to the control group ($\beta = -0.343$; $t(478) = -6.355$; $p < 0.001$). Additionally, well-being shows a slight but significant improvement over time across both groups ($\beta = 0.013$; $t(45\ 810) = 3.161$; $p < 0.05$). Importantly, the interaction between divorce status and time is not statistically significant ($\beta = 0.064$; $t(40,520) = 1.341$; $p = 0.179$), indicating that the rate of change in well-being is similar for both divorced and nondivorced individuals, and thus, well-being changes are not attributable to divorce. In summary, while divorcees report lower well-being, the trajectory of well-being over time is not associated with divorce.

Within the sample of individuals aged 50 and older, age was found to have a significant negative relationship with well-being ($\beta = -0.016$; $t(40,720) = -34.538$; $p < 0.001$), indicating that younger individuals reported higher well-being. Additionally, males had significantly lower well-being compared to females ($\beta = -0.084$; $t(40,500) = -10.442$; $p < 0.001$).

Regarding random effects, the variability in participants’ baseline well-being was reflected by a variance of 0.468, indicating substantial individual differences. The variance for the effect of divorce across participants was 0.066, showing smaller variability in how divorce is associated with well-being. Across countries, baseline well-being showed a variance of 0.173, suggesting moderate differences. The variance across waves was minimal (0.008), indicating negligible differences in baseline well-being across waves. Lastly, the residual variance was 0.342, capturing differences unexplained by model.

Table 2
Linear Mixed-effects Model details

Fixed effects				
	Est./β	SE	t (df)	p-value
Intercept	1.210	0.106	11.434 (29)	< 0.001
Divorced	-0.343	0.054	-6.355 (478)	< 0.001
Time	0.013	0.004	3.161 (45 810)	< 0.05
Divorced * Time	0.064	0.048	1.341 (40 520)	0.179
Age	-0.016	0.000	-34.538 (40 720)	< 0.001
Gender	-0.084	0.008	-10.442 (40 500)	< 0.001
Random effects				
	Variance	Std. Deviation		
Participant (intercept)	0.468	0.684		
Participant (slope)	0.066	0.256		
Country (intercept)	0.173	0.416		
Wave (intercept)	0.008	0.087		
Residual	0.342	0.585		
Model fit				
R ²				
Marginal (fixed-effects only)		0.020		
Conditional (random and fixed-effects)		0.662		

Discussion

The findings indicate that older divorced individuals tend to have lower well-being compared to their married counterparts, consistent with previous studies such as Gray et al. (2011) and Uğur & Aydınbakar (2024). This lower well-being among divorcees can be attributed to the wide-ranging negative effects of divorce on physical health, mental health, social standing, and economic outcomes (Sbarra & Whisman, 2022).

However, the study also shows that divorce is not associated with changes in well-being during 2–3 year period in which formal divorce ensues. This suggests that the decline in well-being likely occurred prior to the measurement period. Two explanations are possible: first, well-being may have deteriorated long before the formal act divorce, which often marks the culmination of years of marital tension (Amato, 2000). Second, individuals who divorce may have lower baseline well-being in the first place.

As for why divorce itself is not linked to noticeable changes in well-being, two possibilities emerge. Either well-being shortly changed but returned to baseline before the second measurement, or remained stable throughout it, in which case immediate formal divorce effect is not suggested.

As Amato (2000) noted, individual differences were observed, albeit nuanced. Well-being varied substantially within participants and across countries before divorce but became more consistent after divorce, suggesting a uniform adjustment process.

The study has several limitations. The comparability of different CASP-12 adaptations was not tested. Additionally, more frequent measurements, as well as expanding the measurement interval beyond the current 0–3 years, would be important to capture the changes over a longer period. Lastly, there is a big discrepancy between the compared group sizes. While the study provides valuable insights into the well-being of older divorcees, future research should address these limitations.

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