

Later-Life Marital Dissolution in Italy: An Emerging Phenomenon?

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The phenomenon of marital dissolution in later life, also referred to as “gray divorce”, is described on the rise in contemporary Western societies. This article contributes to the study of marriage breakdown in older age, with a specific focus on Italian society. First, the temporal trends of this phenomenon are reconstructed using official statistics. The data reveal that, although still relatively rare, the dissolution of marriage in later life is expanding in Italy. The analysis of the period from 1974 to 2015 indicates a rise in the average age at separation, a higher percentage of spouses over 50 years on the total number of couples obtaining legal separation, and an increase in the proportion of Italian spouses separating after many years of marriage. Furthermore, data from the national survey “Family and Social Subjects”, conducted in 2016 by the Italian National Institute of Statistics, are utilized to explore the relationship between specific traits of those who separated and their tendency to dissolve marriages before or after the age of 50. The data suggest that individuals with characteristics such as lower educational attainment, residence in the South and Islands, and adherence to more traditional family models are more likely to experience separation in later life.

Keywords: marital dissolution, later life, gray divorce, social inequality, Italy

Some Reasons to Study Marital Dissolution in Later Life

Later-life marital dissolution, also known as “gray divorce”, refers to the propensity of older adults to experience marital breakdown in the second half of their lives. Spouses may choose to legally end their marriage when they are in their 50s, 60s, or 70s and more, often after many years of living together. Recent studies have suggested a growing trend in contemporary Western societies and pointed to some potential consequences for individuals and social groups (see, among the others, Brown & Lin, 2012; Kennedy & Ruggles, 2014; Brown & Wright, 2017 for the USA; Margolis, Choi, Hou, & Haan, 2019 for Canada; Alderotti, Tomassini, & Vignoli, 2020 for Europe). Territorial differences emerge in Europe. According to estimates, “gray divorces” are more frequently observed in Northern European countries, while they are notably less common in Central and Southern European countries, such as Italy (Alderotti et al., 2020).

The rising trend of marital dissolution in later life can be attributed to a complex interplay of demographic, economic, social, and cultural factors (for an introduction see among the others Brown & Lin, 2012; Cecchi & Beffa Negrini, 2005). To begin with, in contemporary Western societies all stages of the life course are being postponed, impacting the timing of both entering and exiting marriages (among the others, see Macmillan, 2005; Buchmann & Kriesi, 2011). Moreover, the average lifespan has extended, leading to individuals enjoying a

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longer life expectancy even after reaching full adulthood (for European countries, see Eurostat, 2023). Spouses have more years to live together facing a lower risk of becoming widowed and a higher exposure to the risk of marital breakdown. Further circumstances should be considered. The elderly years have been increasingly characterized by relatively good health conditions, financial stability, and an enduring pursuit of personal fulfillment. The current view of aging includes a desire for an active lifestyle, maintaining meaningful relationships, and embracing one's sexuality, even in the later stages of life (Katz & Marshall, 2003; Minichiello, Browne, & Kendig, 2000). Women's growing financial and social independence, gained through their involvement in the labor market and autonomy in family roles, can encourage marital breakdown in all stages of life (Kalmijn, 2011). In recent years, spouses have displayed changing attitudes towards family and marriage, no longer viewing marital union as a lifelong commitment (Lesthaeghe, 2010; Perelli-Harris, Kreyenfeld, & Kubisch, 2010). Marriages may end when they are no longer sustained by romantic love and no longer provide fulfillment and self-realization for both partners (Giddens, 1992).

The significance of the "gray divorce" phenomenon is closely tied to its potential impact on individuals and societies, both in the short and long run. Research conducted in recent decades has revealed that the consequences of marital dissolution are multifaceted and have implications for various aspects of individuals' lives (Kitson & Morgan, 1990; Amato, 2000; 2014). The conclusion of a marriage can impact health conditions, physical and mental well-being, work and financial situations, family and social connections, and can influence later stages of life (DeShane & Brown-Wilson, 1982). These considerations apply to both younger and older spouses, potentially increasing the fragility of older people. In the context of marital disruption in later life, a specific concern arises regarding the elderly spouses' giving and receiving support (Daatland, 2007; Kalmijn, 2007). An important source of support in older age comes from family and informal networks, particularly from partner and offspring (Saraceno & Keck, 2008; Uhlenberg, 1993). If spouses separate and do not enter new relationships, the potential support that a partner could offer is compromised. Furthermore, after a separation offspring often become distant from one or both parents, weakening intergenerational social bonds (Albertini & Saraceno, 2007; Grundy & Read, 2015; Spaan, van Gaalen, & Kalmijn, 2022). Not only does the issue involve receiving care, but also giving it. The rise in "gray divorce" can impact spouses' offering help to their children and grandchildren, potentially diminishing the support provided by former partners to younger generations (Daatland, Herlofson, & Lima, 2011; Grätz, 2017). For all these reasons, the phenomenon of marital disruption in later life concerns not only the personal experience of individuals, but also has broader implications for the economic and social spheres as a whole.

Later-Life Marital Dissolution in Italy: The Trends

The study of union dissolution in later life becomes especially relevant in Italy, a society where the exchange of material and symbolic resources within families is crucial (Naldini, 2003; Albertini, Kohli, & Vogel, 2007). In the Italian context, the rise in later-life marital disruption could have a notable effect on care systems, weakening informal support networks and escalating the need for formal support systems. More generally, Italy presents an interesting case for studying family patterns and social change due to its distinct mix of tradition and innovation. In comparison to other Western nations, Italy has a relatively higher marriage rate, a lower rate of non-marital cohabitation, a reduced divorce rate, and a lower number of births outside of marriage. Nonetheless, Italy has shown a significant path of modernization and social change in family dynamics since the 1970s (for the latest data, refer to Istat, 2023 and Eurostat, 2023).

To gain insight into this evolving landscape, the temporal trends of this phenomenon are reconstructed using official statistics.

We examine three key indicators of marital dissolution in later life in Italy. Firstly, the analysis focuses on the ratio of spouses over 50 opting for legal separation concerning the total number of couples undergoing separation in various years (see Table 1). Secondly, the average age at which separations occur in Italy is presented, highlighting how this has changed over time (see Table 2). Lastly, Italian legal separations are analyzed based on the duration of marriage in various years, with particular attention to long-term marriages (see Table 3).

Data on legal separation are analyzed as it is considered the most reliable indicator of marital breakdown in Italy (Barbagli & Saraceno, 1998; Istat, 2008). This is because the Italian legal process involves multiple stages, with divorce requiring legal separation as a prerequisite. Consequently, not all couples progress to divorce and some of them stop at legal separation. Additionally, separation is less influenced by changes in the legal framework compared to divorce. By concentrating on legal separation, patterns of union dissolution among older couples in Italy can be discerned.

Table 1 shows that from 1974 to 2015, the rate of spouses over 50 on the total number of couples choosing legal separation increased from 12.6 percent to 39.7 percent. From 1974 to 2015, the rate of spouses over 60 on the total number of couples choosing legal separation increased from 3.2 percent to 14.6 percent (see Table 1).

Data suggest that in the same period (1974-2015), the average age at separation increased from 38 to 48 for men, and from 34 to 45 for women (see Table 2). Table 2 shows a one-decade shift in the average age at which marriage breakdown occurs in Italy.

Table 1

Separations by Age Group at the Date of Separation - Years 1974-2015 (Percentage Compositions). Italy. Source: Istat (2008 and 2016)

Age at separation (husband)	1974	1985	1995	2005	2015
Less than 25	4.8	2.7	1.3	0.5	0.2
25-29	17.2	13.5	10.2	4.2	1.9
30-34	21.7	21.5	21.8	14.1	6.7
35-39	19.4	21.4	20.7	20.9	13.1
40-44	13.8	15.1	16.6	22.0	18.7
45-49	10.5	11.6	12.3	15.3	19.7
50-54	6.8	6.7	7.4	9.5	15.7
55-59	2.6	3.9	5.0	6.1	9.4
60 and more	3.2	3.6	4.7	7.4	14.6
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Note. Source: Istat, 2008 and 2016.

Table 2

Separations by Average Age at Separation - Years 1974-2015. Italy. Source: Istat (2008 and 2016)

	1974	1985	1995	2005	2015
Average age at separation (men)	38	39	40	43	48
Average age at separation (women)	34	36	37	40	45

Note. Source: Istat, 2008 and 2016.

The data presented in Table 1 and Table 2 clearly indicate a rise in the age of individuals at the time of legal separation. This trend is significant as it highlights that an increasing number of people in Italy are experiencing the end of their marriage during the later stages of their lives. This phenomenon can be partially explained by the postponement of life events in contemporary societies, as mentioned in the first paragraph. This delay affects not only the entry into marital union but also the exit from marriage. In Italy, statistics show an increase in the average age of marriage, although to a lesser extent than the shift in age at separation (Guarneri, Rinesi, Fraboni, & De Rose, 2021).

To gain a better understanding of this phenomenon, it is essential to supplement the data in Table 1 and Table 2 with an examination of the average duration of marriages before legal separation. Studying the trend of couples separating after many years of marriage could provide valuable insights.

We can see that from 1995 to 2015 the rate of separations referring to marriages of long duration (25 years and more) increased from 11.3 percent to 23.5 percent (see Table 3). The weight of the separations that occur in the period between 10 and 24 years after the celebration of marriage remains relatively stable over time. On the other hand, separations obtained within the first 10 years of marriage decrease (see Table 3). The data in Table 3 complement the information from Tables 1 and 2, indicating that couples not only postpone entering into and exiting from marriage but also tend to experience the end of their relationships after a longer duration of marriage.

Table 3

Separations by Duration of Marriage at the Time of Registration for Separation Proceedings - Years 1995-2015. Italy. Source: Istat (2016)

Duration of marriage	1995	2000	2005	2015
0-4 years	24.4	20.4	18.7	12.1
5-9 years	24	23.8	21.9	19.6
10-14 years	16.8	19.6	20.1	17.2
15-19 years	13.1	13.2	14.6	15.1
20-24 years	10.5	9.7	9.7	12.4
25 +	11.3	13.2	14.8	23.5
	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Note. Source: Istat, 2016.

Overall, findings in Tables 1-3 highlight significant trends in Italy's marital landscape. Despite their descriptive nature, these data play a crucial role in documenting the increasing phenomenon of people encountering the end of their marriage in older age, even after many years of marriage. This scenario has an impact on policy definitions, as mentioned in the first paragraph. In cases where young couples divorce early in their union, policies supporting young children and assisting women re-entering the workforce become crucial. For elderly couples undergoing separation, policies addressing healthcare support and grandchild care are essential. Tailoring policies to these specific needs ensures adequate support for individuals and their families in these situations.

Differences in Marital Dissolution in Later Life

In later life, spouses face significant turning points, such as the departure of adult children from the family home (known as the *empty nest phenomenon*), retirement from paid work, or declining health conditions. These

critical moments can influence the dynamics of marriage and impact the overall quality of the marital relationship (Booth & Johnson, 1994; Davey & Szinovacz, 2004; Hiedemann, Suhomlinova, & O’Rand, 1998). For instance, a marriage that was fulfilling when one or both partners were actively engaged in the labor market and shared responsibilities for their children can encounter unforeseen challenges once the couple retires and enters the empty nest phase. Despite the potential for divorce (Bair, 2007), available research suggests that these pivotal moments are not associated to marital dissolution in later life (Lin, Brown, Wright, & Hammersmith, 2018).

Other factors, such as demographic characteristics of the spouses, socioeconomic status, and marital history, are widely recognized in the literature for their influence on the likelihood of marital instability in early adulthood (for a comprehensive review, refer to Teachman, 2002). Recent studies employing quantitative methods and longitudinal data suggest that when older partners are considered, the factors influencing union dissolution are not significantly different from those associated with early marital breakdown (refer to Lin et al., 2018 for the USA; Alderotti et al., 2020 for Europe). These findings establish a robust foundation for future research in this area.

This article proposes a focus on individuals who ended their marriages in Italy, reaching legal separation. In particular, the effect of certain characteristics of the separated individuals on whether they separated before or after the age of fifty is studied. This analysis provides an indication of the circumstances that lead to a late separation (age at separation equal to or above 50 years) compared to an early separation (age at separation below 50 years). As mentioned earlier, one of the central issues driving the study of union dissolution in later life concerns its consequences. Examining the groups most impacted by marital breakdown in later years is crucial for understanding the most vulnerable segments of the population and shedding light on existing inequalities among individuals.

Data used for the analyses come from the National Representative Survey “Family and Social Subjects” carried out by Istat in 2016¹. The study focused on first marriages that ended in legal separation. First unions were included in the analysis because the order of the marriage affects the probability of marital dissolution. Subsequent marriages are more vulnerable to the risk of marital instability (Cherlin, 2004). Additionally, these marriages are more likely to take place in the second half of life. Legal separation was chosen as a reliable indicator of marital instability due to the two-step procedure in the Italian legal system, as explained in paragraph 2.

The data pertain to Italian individuals who obtained legal separation in their life and were aged 60 years or older at the time of the interview. This age criterion ensures an adequate temporal window to capture later-life marital dissolution. As a consequence, the individuals included in the analysis are those born between the 1940s and 1950s. They grew up during the period of economic and cultural expansion that followed World War II in Europe, characterized by significant changes in values and family models. They also represent the first generation in Italy that had the opportunity to divorce, as Italian divorce law was first passed in 1970. The target variable of the analysis is marital dissolution in later life (first marriages that were legally interrupted when spouses were 50 years and older).

The total number of respondents in the dataset who met the selected criteria (those who separated in their first marriage and were at least 60 years old at the time of the interview) is 283 (118 aged 60-64; 132 aged

¹ Data sets were released by Istat and the application process was supported by the center Unidata, University of Milano-Bicocca.

65-74; 33 aged 75 and older). The small number of participants is a limitation that prevents multivariate analysis. The challenge of obtaining data from a national survey on phenomena like legal separation and divorce, especially in later life, exists (see also Alderotti et al., 2020; Guarneri et al., 2021). However, it is crucial to include pieces of information regarding a topic that is starting to be studied but remains largely unknown.

Quite Surprising but not Opposite

Analysis shows that among the Italian partners included in the sample, most individuals separated before the age of 50 (about 65 percent). Separated at a later age, when they were aged 50 or older, are 35%. Differences among the groups emerge.

Table 4 shows that separated people with characteristics such as lower educational attainment, residing in the South and Islands, and adhering to more traditional family models (marriage with a religious ceremony and without premarital cohabitation) are more likely to experience separation in later life. Conversely, individuals with higher educational attainment, residing in the North, and adopting less traditional family models are less likely to experience separation in later life and are more likely to separate early in life. Table 4 reveals that among separated with primary school education, 42% experience later-life separation (58% of primary school-educated separated end their marriages before the age of 50). Among separated with a university degree, only 27% experience the end of union dissolution in later life (73% of university-educated separated individuals end their marriages before the age of 50). Furthermore, 47% of separated residing in the Islands experience marital dissolution after the age of 50, whereas this percentage decline to 28% for individuals in the Northeast. Among the separated, the percentage of those who separate later in life is 34% among those who married in a religious ceremony and 36% among those who did not cohabit before marriage. The percentage of those separated who broke off their union after age 50 drops to 26% among those who had civil union and 27% among those who had premarital cohabitation.

Table 4

Characteristics of Separated Individuals by Timing of Separation (N = 283). Percentage of Separated at 50 Years and More on the Total = 34.6%. Italy. Source: Istat (2016)

	Later-life (50 years+) union dissolution		Later-life (50 years+) union dissolution
<i>Education</i>		<i>Class of origin</i>	
University +	27.0	Higher	36.4
Secondary school	33.3	Middle	41.3
Lower secondary	36.6	Self employed	32.5
Primary school	41.8	Working class	36.6
<i>Geographical area</i>		<i>Rite</i>	
North West	32.6	Civil	26.3
North East	28.0	Religious	34.2
Center	38.2	<i>Premarital cohabitation</i>	
South	39.0	Yes	27.3
Islands	47.0	No	35.6

Note. Source: Our analysis on data is from the Survey “Family and Social Subjects” (Istat, 2016).

At first sight, these results may seem quite surprising because individuals who end their marriages later in life possess traits that in the literature are indicated as reducing the risk of marital disruption (Arosio, 2004;

Todesco, 2008; Vignoli & Ferro, 2009). One might expect that later-life separation constitutes an unconventional behaviour and therefore is associated with characteristics such as higher socioeconomic status, and less traditional family values.

In fact, the analyses in Table 4 suggest that individuals with higher education levels and less traditional family values tend to separate early in life. Those who opt for separation later in life have been more “hesitant” than those who separated at a younger age. Growing older widens the window for “deciding” to end a marriage. Individuals who separated at an older age took their time and chose to end their union at a historical stage where divorces are increasingly accepted (marital disruption was not as accepted when these individuals were in their thirties) (DeShane & Brown-Wilson, 1982). It makes sense that those who exhibit characteristics associated with a more cautious attitude towards family change are more likely to separate later in life rather than at a younger age.

Conclusions and Discussion

The analyses indicate a growing trend in the phenomenon of marital dissolution when considering elderly spouses in Italy and suggest that separation is extending throughout the life course stages. The phenomenon also involves marriages of long duration. The study of individual characteristics suggests that differences among population groups exist. Separated individuals with characteristics that tend to decrease the propensity to marital dissolution in Italy (low educational qualification, residence in the South and Islands, traditional family patterns) tend to experience late separation. Former spouses with characteristics known to increase the propensity to marriage breakdown (high educational qualification, residence in the North, less traditional family models) tend to experience early separation.

These findings carry at least two implications. In the short term, separations in later life are tied to the characteristics of spouses and their marriages, potentially amplifying vulnerabilities and inequalities among individuals. A second concern pertains to future developments. The rate of older adults ending their unions may continue to increase. However, this growth might slow down once separation becomes common and socially accepted. There are signs of this happening, as in Canada, according to Margolis et al. (2019). Older individuals may find it easier to dissolve their unions in later life, particularly if they didn’t separate when they were younger. It’s important to determine if this trend will persist as younger generations, who grew up in a more divorce-tolerant environment, age (also refer to Solaz, 2021).

As Italy continues its path towards social transformation, understanding these circumstances is crucial in effectively addressing the needs and challenges faced by older individuals undergoing legal separations.

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