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## Sex after divorce: older adult women's reflections

Kate A. Morrissey Stahl, Jerry Gale, Denise C. Lewis, and Douglas Kleiber

University of Georgia School of Social Work, Athens, Georgia, US

### ABSTRACT

People who divorce experience a number of negative impacts, and yet divorce also offers opportunities for growth and transformation. This qualitative study of older adult women offers the possibility that divorce may be sexually empowering, especially for women, based on in-depth interviewing of women who had gone through one or more divorces. Detailed examples of the experiences of fourteen women with divorce and sexual expression are offered, focusing on in which situations divorce might be empowering and how it could contribute to sexual exploration and satisfaction. Overall, for the fourteen women in the study who had experienced divorce, the quality of sex in the marriage impacted the quality of sexual expression after the divorce. Also, these findings supported the idea of transformational learning through divorce, and expand divorce-stress-adjustment and transformational learning perspectives to apply more specifically to sexual expression. Understanding possible impacts of divorce over the lifespan, including strengths-based aspects, is important for social workers as the population they serve ages.

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Older adults have lived through massive social change, including the legalization of no-fault divorces, the impacts of second-wave feminism, and longer life spans with healthier older adulthood (Fileborn, Thorpe, Hawkes, Minichiello, & Pitts, 2015; Lindau & Gavrilova, 2010; Sykes Wylie, 2016; Yelland & Hosier, 2017). As the population ages, many people are reaching old age having gone through one or more divorces (DeLamater, 2012). This includes a more recent upward trend in so-called gray divorce, which is older adults divorcing after many years of marriage (Brown & Lin, 2012; Gray, De Vaus, Qu, & Stanton, 2011). Although social workers will be serving increasing numbers of older adults as the population grows, they may be ill prepared to consider the topic of divorce and aging because the research on the effect of divorce over the lifespan is scant (Glaser, Stuchbury, Tomassini, & Askham, 2008). The research on the effect of divorce on sexual expression specifically is even more limited and tends to be only a part of the discussion on social connections after divorce (e.g. Bogolub, 1991), with one important exception by Montemurro (2014) who explores sexual pleasure

**CONTACT** Kate A. Morrissey Stahl ✉ [kstahl@uga.edu](mailto:kstahl@uga.edu) 📍 279 Williams St., Athens, GA 30602, USA.

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and divorce more explicitly. Women make up a larger proportion of the older adult population due to differing mortality rates, and women also historically tend to be held to more stringent moral standards in terms of sexual experimentation (Bergner, 2013), so exploring their experiences of sexuality and aging offers a rich opportunity. Considering how women make meaning of their divorces as older adults looking back over their lives could offer important perspectives on how divorce impacts women's sexual expression over the lifespan and help to fill in social workers' knowledge of possibilities within this population.

Available research tends to indicate that divorce has negative effects on several areas of life over time, including in terms of finances, health, and social support (Amato, 2010; Amato, 2014; Choi, 1996; Gray, De Vaus, Qu, & Stanton, 2011; Lorenz, Wickrama, Conger, & Elder, 2006). However, in some ways, such as earning potential (Tamborini, Couch, & Reznik, 2015), personal growth (Thomas & Ryan, 2008), and sexual pleasure (Montemurro, 2014), divorce may be a boon to women in particular. Although women who are employed do not leave happy marriages at higher rates, they do leave unhappy marriages at higher rates (Sayer, England, Allison, & Kangas, 2011), which could include sexually unhappy relationships. Changing social norms ushered in by the Baby Boomers have led to more acceptance of a range of types of relationships in addition to marriage to meet sexual needs (Sears-Roberts Alterovitz & Mendelsohn, 2011), which may change the impact of divorce on sexual expression. It has been rarer to study how divorce impacts how older adult women think about sexuality, although Montemurro (2014) conducted one helpful qualitative study in the Northeastern United States corroborating the significance of divorce for women's sexual pleasure. The possibility of divorce may be important to women seeking sexual pleasure, as women sometimes have to break rules to find sexual pleasure for themselves in a society which is not consistently supportive of female sexual pleasure (Morrissey Stahl, Gale, Lewis, & Kleiber, 2018). Arguably, sexual expression is a basic right of women (Barrett & Hinchliff, 2017), and so it would be a best practice for social workers to attend to this dimension of aging. This article contributes to the consideration of the impact of divorce on women over time, focusing specifically on sexual expression from a strengths perspective. We suggest that divorce can be empowering sexually for women, especially if their marriages were not sexually empowering.

For the purposes of this paper, sexual expression and sex will be defined broadly to include any activity intended for sexual pleasure. Sex can include individual or relational activity, such as penetrative intercourse, masturbation, oral sex, intimate contact like mutual masturbation, handholding, dressing up, dancing, engaging with fantasy material like pornography or erotica, and more (Price, 2014). This definition is offered to be inclusive, in agreement with Syme (2014), who argues that "a holistic view of sexuality

incorporates an integration of emotional, social, intellectual, and somatic experiences, represents diverse sexual experiences, reflects relationship context, and focuses on pleasure as well as on sexual dysfunction” (p. 36). One way that a qualitative approach can support better understanding of sexual expression is being able to provide more detailed and nuanced distinctions of different experiences of sex than numeric frequencies of types of sexual encounters, which will make it easier for social workers to have awareness of a rich range of sexual outcomes associated with divorce. The study’s theoretical orientation and methods will be described below, with special consideration to the impact divorce had on sexual pleasure for the participants. We conclude with a discussion of the results of the study, limitations, and implications for both further research and gerontological social work practice.

### **Theoretical orientation**

This project has phenomenological, feminist, and critical gerontological theoretical roots. Seidman’s (2013) in-depth interviewing approach is based on phenomenology, as is phenomenological heuristic analysis (Moustakas, 2001), which will be described in more detail in the methods section. Seidman (2013) outlines phenomenological assumptions underlying in-depth interviewing as a method. The experience of participants and the meaning they construct from their memories of those experiences is the heart of the approach. For this project, that meant accepting participants’ perspectives on their own lives while still asking questions to better understand each woman’s subjective reality. This emphasis on contextual subjective understanding led the decision to engage in in-depth interviewing.

A feminist perspective also contributed to the study design. Calasanti and Slevin (2006) argued in the introduction of their edited book that age has been an underrepresented issue in feminist studies and sought to remedy that. They were concerned about ageism, a concept coined by Robert Butler to describe prejudice toward older adults and aging, discriminatory practices, and institutional structures that keep such stereotypes in place (Wilkinson & Ferraro, 2002). Calasanti and Slevin point out that many mainstream studies of sexuality do not include older adult populations (Calasanti & Slevin, 2001), a population featured in this study. Gullette (2011) considers how social structures and meaning influence women’s sexual well-being as they age, including dubious ideas that youth sex is good and older adult sex is not. Also, Shaw (2012) considers how aging can affect sexual expression with an emphasis on opportunities created and possibility of aging being associated with benefits for sexual expression. For this project, questions were designed to invite consideration of links between personal experience and social structures, which is influenced by a feminist perspective. Finally, the study’s

focus on the practical experience and wisdom of participants is influenced by a feminist approach.

Third, a critical gerontological perspective influenced the study design. This approach has goals laid out in a seminal article by Moody, which include theorizing “subjective and interpretive dimensions” of aging, to focus on praxis, to “link academics and practitioners,” and to produce “a positive vision of how things might be different” (Moody, 1988, p. xvii). This project supports those goals through a focus on how subjective and interpretive dimensions can lead to theories of aging and through the interviewer being a practitioner scholar. Overall, these theories together helped to create a project that both brought forth interesting, useful stories and created an experience that participants described as enjoyable and empowering.

## Methods

One main research question guided the overall project, of which these results were a part: What factors are associated with satisfaction with one’s sexual life as one ages? The theme of divorce supporting sexual pleasure emerged as one significant topic from data collected for this larger research project. For the overall project, I (the lead author) conducted individual interviews with 16 women aged 57–91 in two in-depth interviews of up to two hours each in a mid-sized Southeastern college town. The choice of interviewing was influenced by Seidman’s in-depth interview series design (Seidman, 2013). Participants were screened only for age and gender identity, with the requirement being female-identified persons over the age of 55. Old age is a construct that is used different ways in different environments, but in this case the relatively young age of 55 was chosen in keeping with sexuality literature, which puts old age at the time when most women would have experienced menopause. Participants were recruited through public electronic bulletin boards and by word of mouth, which led to participation by women from smaller towns in the region, one large nearby city, and most of the participants being from the mid-sized Southeastern college town where all of the interviews were conducted. We encouraged retention and expressed gratitude by giving participants 10-dollar gift cards at each interview.

In the first semi-structured interview, I asked questions to better understand the history of meanings participants associated with their sexuality and sexual expression over time. A second interview was scheduled between three to eight weeks later so that I would have time to transcribe the interviews and become immersed in the data. At the second interview, the participants reviewed and edited printed copies of the transcripts of their interviews, effectively creating an initial member check, and gave feedback on the transcripts and initial themes. Any edits suggested by the participants were

incorporated in the final transcripts. I or participants could have requested additional interviews as needed, although in the end each participant engaged in only two in-person interviews, some with phone calls in between and after.

I (the lead author and interviewer) was 35 years old during the interview process and identified as a cis-gender female. During much of the interviewing process, I was visibly pregnant, and this likely influenced the discussion, especially on the sensitive topic of sexuality (Thorpe et al., 2017), because it drew attention to the likelihood that I had relatively recently been sexually active and to some extent to the fact that I am married. I also work as a sex therapist and clinical social worker in the community, which the participants knew because I described my role in the community as a mandated reporter to them in the informed consent portion of the interview.

The sample of participants included 16 women, with five in the 55–64 age range, five in the 65–74 range, and six 75 or over. Ten of the participants were “Baby Boomers,” born between 1946 and 1964 (Hooyman & Kiyak, 2011), and six of the generation before the Boomers, so they represent a rather wide generational span of older adults. All participants were white. Two identified as bisexual, with the rest identifying as heterosexual. One identified as male-to-female transsexual and had completely transitioned to living as female as an adult. All but one of the participants had been married at some point in their lives, yet only one participant was currently living with a married partner. Other current relational configurations included three women cohabiting with romantic partners, six having partners with whom they did not live, and six being single. Six of the participants had experienced widowhood. Eight were currently paired were with men and one was partnered with a woman. All but two had experienced at least one and sometimes more than one divorce, and the experience of the two women who did not experience divorce was left out of the current analysis—one of those women was in the 55–64 age group and one was in the 75–92 age group. Two were first widowed and then divorced in later marriages. The participants are named with pseudonyms in alphabetical order by age—Brenda, the youngest participant, through Rita, the eldest—in the analysis below. Brenda, Cynthia, Debra, and Elizabeth were aged 55–64; Frances Gloria, Helen, Isabelle, Jill, and Karen, 65–74; and Karen, Laura, Martha, Norma, and Patty, 76–92.

I conducted and transcribed the interviews over a 15-month period, listing themes from the data at the end of the transcripts and reflecting on follow-up questions to ask. As noted earlier, these initial themes and the transcripts were member-checked. I also kept a research journal of reflections on the interviews and on the data analysis process. When all the interviews and transcripts were completed, I re-read them, looking for surprises, overall themes, and negative cases. I concept-coded the data, focusing on the broad categories of pleasure, marriage, divorce, widowhood, affairs, and menopause because these themes stood out as having interesting rich data from early analysis (Saldaña, 2015). I

used the online qualitative analytical program Dedoose to help with the coding and analysis. Through the analysis, the meanings created by the participants and the meanings created by me coalesced (Moustakas, 2001) in dialogue with my coauthors regarding the organizing and theorizing of themes, to form the current article, which is intended to help to give readers a sense of the range of ways in which divorce impacted sexual expression for the participants. Themes emerged from the data that were featured either because they were common among participants or because they represented something uncommon but important to recognize about the impact of divorce on sexual expression. After exploring the themes, I considered how they fit in with current research, including Amato's (2014) divorce-stress-adjustment perspective and Thomas and Ryan's (2008) findings on transformational learning through divorce because both of these perspectives help to support understanding of the experiences of the women in the study.

## **Results: Divorce and sexual pleasure**

The participants' experiences of divorce were varied and included both positive and negative dimensions, yet vivid accounts in the participants' narratives supported the idea that divorce often helped to encourage opportunities for pleasurable sexual expression. Compared to most of the literature (i.e. Amato, 2010; Amato, 2014; Choi, 1996; Gray, De Vaus, Qu, & Stanton, 2011; Lorenz et al., 2006) but in support of some (Montemurro, 2014), divorce had more positive impacts over time than one might expect. Here, the themes of quality of sexual expression in the marriage overall impacting sexual expression after divorce will be discussed, as well as the limited regrets expressed by participants about their divorces.

### ***Quality of marital sex***

The quality of marriage affects whether people view their divorces as stressful or as a relief (Amato, 2014), especially sexually (Montemurro, 2014). Amato's divorce-stress-adjustment perspective can be used to organize ideas about how the quality of marriage, as well as meanings attributed to divorce over time, influences the impact of divorce over a lifetime. This perspective "views marital dissolution not as a discrete event but as a process that begins while the couple lives together and ends long after the legal divorce is concluded" (Amato, 2014, p. 1271). This process is moderated by protective factors that could reduce the stress of the transition, with ability to form social bonds and inclination to explore sexual pleasure arguably being protective factors. The stories shared by the 14 participants in this study who had experienced divorce support these claims applied specifically to sexual adjustment. For example, if marriage felt compulsory, then divorce was important for sexual



satisfaction. Women described needing freedom to explore to find what was pleasurable for them (Morrissey Stahl et al., 2018).

Sometimes sex was a factor in the participants' decision to marry, which meant that divorce was important to create a sense of agency. Most of the participants were raised with the idea that one needed to marry before having sex or at least to marry the person with whom they first had sex, with sex defined as intercourse. All of the participants mentioning this also said explicitly or implied in their sexual stories that they no longer considered sex an adequate reason to get married. So, in considering the importance of divorce for the current generation of elders, it is important to note that marriage sometimes seemed compulsory and sexual exploration outside of marriage was often not available.

For various reasons, sometimes the marital sex described by participants was not pleasurable for the woman. This set up situations in which divorce or breaking up ended up being useful for women's pleasure, except in one case where finding new partners proved to be difficult. The two most obvious factors in marital sex satisfaction with age were issues with boredom and with physical changes associated with aging. Less commonly discussed but important issues affecting sexual expression in marriages included differences in sexual function, reactions to stress, addiction, a sense of performativity, and managing mixed sexual orientation, all of which had a negative effect on the pleasure experienced in marital sex.

### ***Quality of sex after divorce***

Thomas and Ryan (2008) found transformational learning occurring through divorce in their qualitative study. They follow Mezirow's theory of transformational learning (2000), describing phases of growth that happen through life events, including disorientation, critical appraisal, transformation, and bringing new meanings. Montemurro (2014) also found that after a period of disorientation, women often found divorce to be sexually empowering. This study supports the idea that transformational learning about sexual expression occurred for many of the participants in their experiences of divorce. Again, the quality of the marriage impacted the experience of the divorce, and this was especially true with sexual expression. Less sexual pleasure in the marriage often meant that after the divorce, sexual learning was experienced as thrilling.

Some research has indicated that the stress of divorce depends on various factors, such as how stressful the marriage was, which can make divorce feel like a relief, and who initiates the divorce, with the initiator typically having an easier time sooner after the divorce (Amato, 2010). For the participants, divorce created opportunities for sexual experimentation and pleasure and was seen in hindsight as a worthwhile move forward in their lives. Although



some participants described divorce as painful, none said they would prefer not to have divorced in the long run. As Norma, who married and divorced young after a relatively brief marriage, put it, “There are some divorces that are so empowering, and that’s what that was for me.” This empowerment grew from multiple roots. Sometimes, divorces helped the participants to challenge social norms. Sometimes they created some freedom from child-care or from an abusive relationship. Most often, they created space for new relationship energy and sexual exploration, and, perhaps paradoxically, sometimes they created a sense of security that aided experimentation.

Most of the participants described the time of their divorce as a time of gaining some insight into social norms around sex and, through that, an ability to relate to those norms more flexibly. Norma said that she experienced a cultural norm that “divorcees were loose women ... because you’d had sex, and once you’d had sex you couldn’t do without it.” That assumption suited her, and she went on to experiment extensively with sexual expression after her marriage allowed her to leave the rural town she grew up in and to get work in a large city. Brenda also married to leave home, and she described her first divorce after having two children as starting “the whole change in how I lived my life,” including challenging her own previous assumptions about sexual expression.

Some, but not all, of the participants with children found more time available for sexual expression after the divorce because of custody arrangements. This offers a counterpoint to some research which indicates that childcare issues are a stressor for divorcees (Amato, 2014). It does make sense that the impact overall might be different than the impact on sexual expression in particular. For the first time since being married, women could have new partners over for a sexual encounter without worrying about their children being at home. Brenda’s comment was typical of how participants described the newfound space to have sexual encounters due to custody arrangements: “Well, it ended up being a time...you know because he would get the girls every other weekend, all of the sudden, I have free time.”

For three of the women interviewed, their divorces freed them from relationships that were becoming increasingly abusive, which ended up challenging both moral norms of marriage and of sexual expression. Frances described her divorce from her second husband, whom she married after her first husband and the father of her children died. She had not believed in divorce and had been counseled by a clergy person to stay in her marriage despite escalating violence over the years of marriage, including her husband kicking a dog to death in front of her and breaking holes in walls. She said

I began going to [domestic violence] meetings and trying to figure out, you know. ... And, uh, and just slowly sorted through to realize there’s worse things than divorce, and being in this relationship is way worse and it’s better for all of us, him and me and everybody, to divorce and get peace.

Her journey with divorce led to a journey of reflection on the morality of seeking sexual pleasure outside of marriage, and she decided both that God wanted her to enjoy her body sexually and that legal marriage did not provide any guarantees of safety. As Laura's decades-long marriage in which she had both of her children moved towards divorce, her husband had multiple affairs. Laura tried to win him back by learning new sexual techniques and generally working harder to please him to keep the relationship, in part for her children. When he was caught flashing underage girls, she was finally ready to let him go, and she entered the world after her divorce well equipped for sexual experimentation with new partners.

After divorcing, most of the participants entered into new relationships and described enjoying the energy and passion the new relationship had. For some, it was the first time they had pleasurable sex in their lives. The description of the intensity of this new time was not unambiguous—like limerence phases in general, the new sexual exploration was at times exciting and at times anxiety-provoking. Karen divorced after having married and raised children for three decades with a man who came out at the end of their marriage as gay. She described her experience in her late forties, which was similar in timing and tone to the experience of several other participants, primarily with delight:

I laugh about it because in some ways it was so much fun, you know ... so along comes this guy, because I really gave myself permission, you know. ... along comes my lover, who was this six-foot-two guy with a fabulous singing voice and his favorite thing in the world was making love. ... It was such an awakening. ... I was just going off like a volcano or something. I mean all of that stuff that had been repressed just came out ... part of me was just a little crazy, you know, but I mean, I can see that sex could be addictive, because it is so pleasurable.

Beyond the pleasure of sexual exploration, some participants also described gaining a sense of security from knowing that they could weather a relationship ending. It created some degree of independence and made it easier to be in a new relationship with an increased sense of security. For example, Cynthia, who had been divorced twice, with both marriages lasting around a decade each, said "when I was younger I was more insecure or worried about leaving relationships, or the relationship ending, and then...I guess now it's just...trusting or thinking 'well I've been through break[ups] ...you know, and it's okay. I won't be worried if that happens anyway, you know?'" From this place of increased security, most of the participants expressed a desire to be in partnerships, but not at the price of staying with something that was not working. From the place of increased security, participants described being able to ask for what they wanted sexually and to insist on tending to their own pleasure as well as their partner's. Subsequent marriages are more likely to end in divorce (Amato, 2010), and although there are likely

to be a range of reasons for that, this sense of security—that one could leave a relationship and things would still be all right—may be one of those reasons.

## **Regrets**

Overall, the participants in the study did not describe their divorces with regret. However, there were some regrets that they had that overlapped with the question of sexual pleasure and divorce which are important to acknowledge. Cynthia's second marriage ended during a time when the sex was really good, and so she was concerned she would not find a lover like her ex-husband. She ended up having enjoyable sex with more people after that, which she attributed to her increasing skill in knowing and asking for what she wanted, realizing she was not reliant on her partner's initial skill to experience partnered sexual pleasure. Elizabeth had a very contentious divorce before having a deeply satisfying sexual revolution and regretted that the divorce went that way more so than regretting being divorced.

Rita, one of the participants who was in her nineties at the point of the interview, had hoped not to divorce, but wondered if that made her wait too long to divorce after staying in her marriage more than 30 years. Getting divorced later in life as well as her work responsibilities made it more difficult for her to date after the divorce. She wished that she had divorced sooner and had expected to remarry, although she had not as of the time of the study. She stayed for the children and even had an affair with a potential partner while she was in the marriage, but she ultimately decided to wait until her children left home to get divorced. She said later in a phone call that she thought that what made moving on from a divorce easier was a willingness to take risks on new relationships, which she had been reluctant to do.

Getting divorced, then, was not without its regrets and its challenges. However, in retrospect, most of the participants described divorces as openings while fewer recognized it as a source of long-term regrets, especially in terms of sexual pleasure. This supports Thomas and Ryan's (2008) finding about transformational learning through divorce and extends that learning to sexual expression and Montemurro's (2014) findings about sexual growth. It also takes seriously women's right to seek pleasure and to overcome barriers to pleasure even if those barriers are socially sanctioned (Morrissey Stahl et al., 2018).

## **Discussion**

Divorce can be empowering for women (Montemurro, 2014; Stevenson & Wolfers, 2006). Although dimensions of divorce were stressful, over time participants often found meaning in the experience and learned from it. One source of meaning was having the opportunity for sexual exploration. It is likely that divorce played an especially important role with the older adult

generation because of social elements that made marriage feel compulsory for sexual expression. Generational context, but also class, race, family history, and cultural norms all impact how people will think about divorce (Wolfinger, 2017). Many of the women in the study retrained for careers after long marriages, creating more voluntariness in their next marriages. Wives being able to work predicted divorce in unhappy but not happy marriages, lending support to the idea that being able to make a living will impact women's sense of agency (Schoen, Astone, Standish, & Kim, 2002). It also supports the idea expressed by Cynthia in this study and found by Montemurro (2014) in her study of women's sexuality that a sense of security generally can come from thriving after divorce.

Divorce created new opportunities for sexual exploration for the women in this study, and especially rich opportunities for those who had not found sex pleasurable in their marriages. Splitting from partners with whom they had less satisfying sex lives created opportunities to explore sexual expression with a range of other people, which increased sexual excitement (Kingsberg, 2002). This was true for the research participants at many different ages; much of the sexual reinvention experienced by this group was in the women's forties, fifties, and beyond.

Being forced out of one's comfort zone, which divorce did, often led to trying new things to get intimacy and connection needs met, consistent with a transformation learning hypothesis (Thomas & Ryan, 2008) and the experience of women in Montemurro's (2014) study. The participants described being excited and energized by the range of sexual experiences they had the opportunity to have, even when they were brief and did not end up in relationships that were otherwise significant. Thus, although divorce has been shown to have several types of negative impacts, including unavailability of social support and less financial stability (Amato, 2010; Amato, 2014; Gray, De Vaus, Qu, & Stanton, 2011), these were not the dimensions focused on by this group of participants. One interpretation of this could be that over time, women chose to focus more on what they have gained from experiences and less on the painful dimensions—what one research team called 'socioemotional selectivity' (Carstensen, Fung, & Charles, 2003) and another 'positive looking' (Isaacowitz, 2012). Even if it is part of the process of remembering rather than divorce itself, it is worth noting that for this group, divorce was not primarily a source of regret. In Thomas and Ryan's (2008) study, the divorcees experienced the most growth and the fourth stage of transformation after they had time to reflect on the divorce and, importantly, after the children were grown who had linked them more closely to their ex-spouses. All of the women interviewed were in that stage, in the sense that their children had left home, which may have influenced the relative detachment with which they viewed their divorces. For many women in this study, like those in Montemurro's study (2014), divorce provided a catalyst for sexual growth.

## Limitations

This study had a number of limitations. The participants in the study were white and middle- to upper-class, both of which are associated with privilege. More research is needed with other racial groups and people of a broader range of social classes. The participants were women, and research on men is needed. The women in the sample were more educated than the population at large, and to the extent that they were religious, they tended to have more liberal views. It also was not always clear how they came to hear about the study, which would have been useful to track.

As an exploration of divorce in the older adult population, a difficulty accentuated by this research is the complexity of family structures. Participants in this study were widowed then divorced, divorced several times, divorced very early and then cohabiting, in serious relationships that were non-marital, and many other configurations. Several participants were choosing not to marry in their later-life relationships due to legal issues, which also means that drawing a line between divorcing and breaking up may create a false dichotomy, especially in later life. Creating research that incorporates such richness is important. In addition, accounting for the context of the divorce in research in which a person reflects on their lifespan is challenging. Overall, more research on divorce and sexual expression is needed with different samples and different methodological approaches to flesh out a nuanced understanding of the role of divorce in older adult well-being. Future research on the role of solo sexual expression over time would be useful for understanding sexuality regardless of partnered status. Also, since this group of women expressed having particularly pleasurable middle-age experiences, more research with that population overall could help to indicate if the experience is generalizable.

## Implications for gerontological social work practice

As the population of older adults grows, including gerontological considerations in social work education is increasingly crucial (Rosen, Zlotnik, & Singer, 2003). Having a sense of how divorce might impact women over a lifetime could be part of this. In addition to assessing challenges with divorce, a strengths-based assessment of divorce, with an emphasis on transformational learning, is warranted. When considering issues of aging and relationships, sexual expression should be part of the consideration so that women's sexuality is not overlooked or turned into a taboo or a caricature (Thorpe, Fileborn, & Hurd Clarke, 2017). This discussion of divorce and of sexuality could be part of a general life review and can be useful in terms of providing an opportunity for integrating lessons learned throughout one's life (Westerhof & Bohlmeijer, 2014).

In addition, this study invites the question of whether sex education would have helped to nurture marital sexual expression in some cases. For example, if

women knew more about masturbation and their own pleasure and were in a place to give feedback about that rather than seeing it as a shameful secret and an insult to their husbands, they may have found more sexual satisfaction within their marriages and been spared the stress of divorce. Some also ascribed to widely held cultural myths about orgasm during intercourse, that it is typical for both men and women, or indeed that vaginal-penile intercourse is generally orgasmic for women, which it is not (Nagoski, 2015). Perhaps sexual function issues could have been treated, or a range of sexual behaviors taught so that partners were not relying on penetrative sex for mutual sexual pleasure. That said, issues with sexual function are fairly common even in non-clinical samples, and people often still express satisfaction with their marriages and even sex lives while they are experiencing dysfunction (Metz & McCarthy, 2012). Also, although information could affect sexual expression within a relationship, issues of power and ability and willingness to talk about sex by both partners would impact whether information could be applied within the relationship. Education around aging and sexual expression by social workers could help to address some of the lack in sex education for older adults. Social workers could provide information if they assessed for sexual expression, since often clients will not share sexual information unless they are explicitly invited to do so (Morrissey Stahl et al., 2018).

For social workers with clients who are elders, the voices of these women offer opportunities for consideration. First, they challenge the idea that divorce necessarily is a problem in someone's history. They also accentuate the potential benefits of talking about issues of sexual expression and pleasure with older adult women as a social justice issue. Learning both about the quality of marriages and the quality of divorce could help social workers to be more attentive to the varied ways in which relationships can impact wellbeing as women age. Although challenges should not be ignored, a strengths perspective also applies here in terms of how divorce might affect sexual expression over the lifespan.

## Conclusion

Divorce changes people's lives in profound ways, including sexual expression. How these changes occur and the types of changes have received relatively little attention in research literature, especially the dimension of sexual expression. This paper offers groundwork for considering the rich breadth of women's experiences of the impact of divorce on sexual expression by arguing that the quality of sex in the marriage impacts the quality of sexual expression after the divorce. Sexual dissatisfaction in marriage was associated with the possibility of sexual evolution after divorce and for divorce to thus be sexually transformational. This awareness of potential benefits of divorce



for sexual expression could be helpful in informing the perspectives of social workers engaged with older populations.

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