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Do your children or my children matter? A study on the association between common children and stepchildren and divorce among older couples in Sweden

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Abstract

In many Western countries, divorce among older age groups has slowly increased. One potential explanation is the increase in the diversity in family structures, such as a blend of joint children, stepchildren and stepgrandchildren. We investigate the link between multigenerational family complexity and later-life divorce (60+) in Sweden. Multigenerational family complexity includes the couple's joint children/grandchildren and any children/grandchildren to whom one of the partners is a parent/grandparent, i.e., when the female partner, male partner or both partners have children/grandchildren from previous unions. Utilizing Swedish register data, we find that biological ties are stronger than step ties; couples with only joint children/grandchildren have the lowest risk of divorce in later life compared with all other family structures. We also find that "bridge" children decrease the risk of divorce for couples with joint children and where female partner has children from previous unions, and all couples who have "bridge" grandchildren, regardless of who is the stepchildren's parent. Lineage patterns of family complexity in the third generation operate somewhat differently than in the second generation. We provide novel insights into how biological and step ties as well as maternal and paternal lineage across generations relate to the divorce risk in later life.

Keywords: Later-life divorce, family structure, step ties, older unions, gender

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Introduction

Divorce among older age groups has slowly increased in several Western countries in recent decades (Brown & Lin, 2012; Brown & Wright, 2019; Franklin & Creighton, 2014; Kennedy & Ruggles, 2014; Solaz, 2021; Tosi & van den Broek, 2020; Wu & Penning, 1997). In Sweden, divorce doubled for people aged 60 and older over the 2000-2020 period (Statistics Sweden, 2023). One potential explanation is the increase in diversity in family structures, including a blend of joint children, stepchildren and stepgrandchildren (Brown et al., 2021; Thomson, 2014). Stepfamilies have been argued to be an "incomplete institution" without the institutionalized solutions of everyday family life compared with intact families, which are more likely to follow social norms about how the different members should behave (Cherlin's, 1978). The same applies to relationships to grandchildren (Gangong & Coleman, 2012). Although stepfamilies have been a common family type for a long time, they are a family form in which (gendered) norms, expectations and behaviours have still not been clearly established. The lack of established norms may be most evident when unions with stepchildren dissolve, leaving family ties that are neither blood nor family relations (Coleman et al., 2015).

While the general understanding of the link between stepfamilies and divorce in later life remains limited, valuable insights can be deduced from research on predictors of later-life divorce in relation to family dynamics. A key finding in this research is that remarried older couples in the US are more likely to divorce (Brown & Lin, 2012). Within complex family structures, a remarriage effect arises when at least one of the partners has experienced divorce or separation in the past, consequently increasing the likelihood of future separations. Remarriage often implies that the couple has children (either shared or from previous unions). Lin and colleagues (2018) expected that older couples who had nonshared children would have a higher likelihood of divorce than couples who had only joint children and childless couples combined but did not find support for this assumption. However, they studied the US context, and the role of the family structure may differ in a Nordic context, such as Sweden. At the same time, it is valuable to analyse these groups separately as they differ greatly regarding, for example, investments and stability. Stepfamilies may also have additional challenges related to the fact that the children often come from different unions and are brought by either the mother or father into the new union. Gendered differences in mothers' and fathers' roles for biological and stepchildren as well as the other partner make it crucial to distinguish the maternal and paternal lineages when studying later-life divorce. Beyond that, so-called "bridge" children are

often an important dimension of stepfamilies, as they may strengthen ties over time in ageing stepfamilies by being biological links to all family members (Bildtgård et al., 2021).

An aspect that indicates lower cohesion in ageing stepfamilies is the weaker intergenerational support in these families than in intact families (Steinbach & Hank, 2016). Additionally, there may be gender differences in the way older stepparents perceive their stepchildren; for example, older stepmothers less often include their stepchildren in their personal network than older stepfathers do (Samzelius, 2023; Suanet et al., 2013). The authors explain this finding as stepmothers' tendency to have a weaker commitment to their stepchildren (potentially through the father) than to their biological children. Becoming a grandparent has been shown to decrease the risk of divorce in later life among older American and European couples (Brown et al. 2021; Alderotti et al. 2022) whereas stepgrandchildren have been shown to increase divorce risk in American couples (Brown et al., 2021).

This study investigates the link between multigenerational family complexity and later-life divorce in Sweden from a family stress perspective to distinguish between various situations that may include different levels of precarity. Multigenerational family complexity here includes different types of children and grandchildren: the couple's joint children/grandchildren and/or children/grandchildren to whom only one of the partners is a parent/grandparent, i.e., the female partner, the male partner or both partners have children/grandchildren from previous unions. Compared with previous studies on late-life divorce and family ties, we utilize Swedish register data that have much more detailed information on family structures across generations. The study focuses on the 1990-2017 period and includes all couples who were married at age 59 and at risk of divorce. Our main research question is whether children and grandchildren from different unions are differently associated with the risk of divorce at older ages and the central role of maternal and paternal lineage.

Sweden is an interesting country for exploring this association. The country has high rates of cohabiting couples, divorce, repartnering and multiple partner fertility (Ohlsson-Wijk et al., 2020) and a high share of individuals living in stepfamilies for a long period, which means that "new" family forms are also prevalent among today's older population (Bildtgård et al., 2021; Ohlsson-Wijk et al., 2020). The historically high female labour force participation together with extensive social welfare support has contributed to women at different ages being more economically independent in Sweden (Ståhlberg et al., 2006; Wetterberg, 2013) and thus better able to support themselves in case of divorce. Sweden has also had a rapid increase in life expectancy with the male population gaining the most years (Rau et al., 2013), resulting in a large pool of intact older couples who are at risk of divorce. Research from the US has shown

that older spouses who in the past would have remained in their marriage unsatisfied are now more likely to end the marriage (Carr & Utz, 2020; Wu & Schimmele, 2007). Arguably, this could also apply to Sweden, which was one of the first countries to experience a spread of values such as individualization, self-expression, and secularization and a weakening of the role of tradition (Lesthaeghe, 2010; Surkyn & Lesthaeghe, 2004; van de Kaa, 2002).

Ageing stepfamilies and divorce in later life are two co-occurring phenomena. We intend to investigate whether and how they are interrelated. Both phenomena are of increasing concern for researchers and policymakers due to the variety of consequences they may have for individuals, couples and families. For many older individuals, family ties, including stepfamily relations, and marital quality are important for remaining healthy in old age, and divorce interrupts or weakens these relations and networks. On the other hand, divorce can also present opportunities for self-fulfilment at a late stage in life (Bildtgård & Öberg, 2015) and improve individuals' well-being after they have lived in an unsatisfactory relationship.

Family Stress Theory

Family stress theory explains how family stress is tied to negative family/marital outcomes, such as divorce (Burr & Klein, 1994). Stressor events and transitions are defined as positive or negative experiences in life that may produce change within the family social system (Lavee et al., 1987; McCubbin & Dahl, 1985). They have many shapes and levels of intensity (Malia, 2006). In this study, family complexity is assumed to negatively shape couple stability because it often puts pressure on members to change the family's boundaries, to define new role models and to restructure the family's distribution of resources, such as time, money and affection (Boss, 1987; Crosbie-Burnett, 1989). For the biological parent, the entry of a stepparent into the household may also be a threat to the relationship between the parent and the children (Crosbie-Burnett, 1989). Stepfamilies often bring together two family cultures and individuals at different stages in family life cycles. As a result, couples who cannot cope with or adjust to the stressor may divorce (ibid.) A subsequent common child will be blood related to both parents and to the step-parent's child(ren), providing a "bridge" between the stepfamily members and thus reducing conflict (Crosbie-Burnett, 1989).

The so-called stepgap has also been consistently found among stepgrandparent and stepgrandchild relations (Delongis & Preece, 2002; Steinbach & Silverstein, 2020). The more complex interpersonal relationships are, the greater the potential for experiencing strains

and conflict. In particular, the different responsibilities to "my" and "your" children and grandchildren may be conflictual, a situation that is not present in a family where both partners are the biological parents of all of the children (Crosbie-Burnett, 1989; Kheshgi-Genovese & Genovese, 1997). If both partners additionally bring children, the complexity increases, and more conflict can be expected.

Family stress theory also emphasizes that differences in whether family-related events are perceived as stressors and how family members cope with them are linked to gender roles, expectations and normative role strain (Crosbie-Burnett, 1989). Thus, potential family conflicts may also involve a gendered dimension where expected responsibilities towards children are greater for the woman, who traditionally has had the role of the main caregiver and the "kin keeper" of the family (Eisenberg, 1988). As women are found to be more central in caring, these expectations of care and contact are likely to be mainly towards the woman's own children and, to a lesser degree, towards the children of her partner. When the male partner brings children to a union, this creates more stress than when the female partner does. This idea is similar to the notion of the "evil stepmother", including the gendered nature of family life and idealization of motherhood (i.e., women favouring their own children while disfavouring the children of their partner) (Crosbie-Burnett, 1989; Nielsen, 1999). Thus, families with stepmothers are likely to be more vulnerable to family stress due to the stepmothers' exposed situation in a stepfamily.

The concept of "recycling family" from the late 1970s provides an alternative perspective on the creation of a new family after divorce (Furstenberg & Spanier, 1984). The concept emphasizes that (often) men take on the role of the father in the stepfamily and distance themselves from their own children; thus, the male partner's children will be less of a threat to union stability. This may particularly be the case among the older cohorts observed in this study, although it may be less likely among the succeeding generations.

Challenges of Stepfamilies

Most studies on stepfamilies focus on younger couples and younger families, whereas this study focuses on older couples. Nonetheless, studies on younger couples provide a broad picture of the challenges in a stepfamily and how they may relate to marital stability and divorce risk in later life.

Living in a stepfamily may enrich life and provide support in difficult times, particularly in later life (Connidis, 2020). Stepparents without children of their own may consider

stepchildren substitutes for their own children (Svare et al., 2004), potentially strengthening the cohesion and stability in the couple and the family. The presence of a so-called "bridge child" can bring the different step ties closer and contribute to shaping each member's role in the family (Bildtgård et al., 2021).

However, one of the conclusions that can be drawn from the literature on stepfamilies is that these families often pose specific challenges to their members, not least for the couple (Ganong & Coleman, 2004; Hobart, 1991; van Eeden-Moorefield & Pasley, 2013). Most of the conflicts experienced by repartnered couples appear to be around boundary issues for themselves and the children (Coleman et al., 2001). Parents also often feel caught in loyalty conflicts between their partner and their children (Afifi, 2003; Golish, 2003), and young and older parents alike tend to feel closer to their biological children than to stepchildren (Becker et al., 2013; Bildtgård & Öberg, 2022; O'Connor & Boag, 2010). In general, stepparenting is often perceived as more challenging than parenting a biological child (MacDonald & DeMaris, 1995; van Eeden-Moorefield & Pasley, 2013).

Additionally, the roles in a stepfamily may be gendered. Stepmothers and stepfathers share many common experiences; however, it is often very different being a stepmother or a stepfather (Cartwright, 2012; Nielsen, 1999). One dimension is that stepmother-child relationships may be more strained as biological mothers often are involved, which can create conflicting roles for stepmothers and mothers (Ihinger-Tallman & Pasley, 1997; Samzelius, 2023). Mothers often have a more central role for the children, and the children often compete with the stepmother regarding, for example, economic resources. Thus, children may be resentful towards their stepmothers because the stepmother has more resources, making the relationship more difficult. Overall, stepmothers perceive their role as more stressful compared with the way stepfathers perceive their role (Nielsen, 1999). Therefore, when the male partner brings children to the union, it may have a stronger spillover effect on the couple's relationship than when the female partner brings children to the union. Another perspective that is in line with the concept of "recycling family" is that older divorced fathers have less contact with and receive less support from their (adult) children than divorced mothers do (Kalmijn, 2013, 2015); thus, it is likely that the male partner's children are less of a threat to the couple. Either way, there is likely to be a gender difference in who brought children to the union. Gender and lineage differences in intergenerational family relations have also been shown to be important for several other co-occurring family-related dimensions, such as emotional closeness, contact frequency and support (Danielsbacka et al., 2015; Steinbach & Silverstein, 2020).

Variation in family cohesion and problems between different family members may also be tied to the degree of complexity of the family structure. Families with three sets of children (i.e., the partners have one set of children each and joint children) are more likely to experience boundary ambiguity compared with couples with two sets of children (i.e., one of the spouses has children and one set is joint children) (Stewart, 2005), indicating that more complex family structures may be more challenging for the couple. At the same time, joint children tend to have a stabilizing effect on couples (Sandström et al., 2014), and family boundary ambiguity has been shown to be lower in stepfamilies with joint children than in stepfamilies without joint children (Stewart, 2005; Ward et al., 2009).

For some couples, divorce is a likely outcome of the challenges that stepfamilies experience (Zahl-Olsen, 2022). However, there are other outcomes of stepfamily dynamics. For example, compared with biological families, stepfamilies often have higher stress levels (Bray & Berger, 1993; Nielsen, 1999) and greater tendencies towards jealousy, ambivalence, negative communication, weak trust, weaker emotional contacts, and inheritance disagreements (Becker et al., 2013; Ganong & Coleman, 2004, 2017; Jensen et al., 2019; Kalmijn, 2013). These are often interrelated with divorce in different ways.

The present study

Based on family stress theory as well as a gendered lens, this study presents a set of assumptions about how multigenerational family complexity may relate to divorce in later life. First, we assume that biological ties (e.g., joint children) are stronger than step ties (e.g., when the partner has children). Second, we assume that "bridge children" unite the family and, thus, may make the union more stable, lowering the risk of divorce. Third, family cohesion is often linked to gender, and in complex families, it may also be linked to whom the children belong to. Therefore, it may be more challenging for the couple (and family) when the man brings children to the union compared with when the woman does so. However, in the third generation (i.e., grandchildren), this may not be true, as grandchildren may be absent. Women still often carry the burden for relational tasks, function as "kin keepers" and maintain closer contact to their grandchildren than men do (Ahrons, 2007; Bridges, Roe, Dunn, & O'Connor, 2007; Eisenberg, 1988). Women's grandchildren are therefore more likely to affect family life than men's grandchildren are. We have no assumptions regarding childless couples, as there is no clear direction in previous research.

Other Predictors of Late-Life Divorce

Previous research has found other predictors of later-life divorce that need to be considered in this study. Foremost, later older cohorts are more prone to divorce, especially the so-called Baby Boomers, and individuals born after 1945 are more likely to divorce (Brown & Lin, 2012; Cohen, 2019; Crowley, 2019; Lin, Brown, Wright, et al., 2018). The social acceptance of union dissolution may also differ depending on birth cohort (Brown & Wright, 2019; Cohen, 2019).

A greater share of the older population is in higher-order marriages, which have a greater risk of divorce (Alderotti et al., 2022; Brown & Lin, 2012; Crowley, 2019). However, the probability of divorce has been found to decline as marital duration increases in both the European (Alderotti et al., 2022) and American contexts (Brown & Lin, 2012; MacDonald & DeMaris, 1995; Wu & Penning, 1997). In particular, remarried couples in the US have a higher probability of divorce, even in long durations, compared with first marriages; however, the probability stabilizes after 35 years of marriage (Lin, Brown, Wright, et al., 2018). In addition, previous studies on stepfamilies have indicated that time as a stepfamily makes the family bonds stronger and that stepfamilies become more similar to biological nuclear families (Chapman et al., 2016, 2018). A similar buffering effect of duration has been found among stepgrandparents. For example, an American study found that stepgrandparents who have been present in their stepgrandchildren's life for a longer period (even before the grandchildren were born) are defined as part of the family (Chapman et al., 2018). In contrast, relations with stepgrandparents initiated at a later period in life may be perceived as distant or threatening (Chapman et al., 2018).

The partners' education level has been shown to have mixed results on later-life divorce. For example, a study in Canada found that the risk of divorce increases with educational level (Wu & Penning, 1997, 2018), while studies in the US have shown that educational level has only a limited effect on the probability of divorce (Brown & Lin, 2012; Lin, Brown, Wright, et al., 2018). A cross-European study that included Sweden did not find that education level mattered (Wilson & Waddoups, 2002). However, these studies did not consider the educational composition of the couples, which has been shown to matter for divorce risk among younger couples (e.g., Jalovaara, 2003). Thus, this study takes into account the educational composition of couples.

Partners' work and retirement status may also matter for the prevalence of divorce in later life. In a cross-European setting, retired individuals are more likely to experience union

dissolution than working individuals or otherwise nonretired individuals (Alderotti et al., 2022). Brown and Lin (2012) found that among US couples, full-time workers and unemployed individuals were more likely to divorce than individuals who were out of the labour force. Another study in the US (Lin et al., 2018) found that the wife's or husband's retirement was unrelated to the likelihood of later-life divorce, whereas a Canadian study found that retired women, but not retired men, had a lower likelihood of divorce (Wu & Penning, 2018).

With regard to age difference, studies in the US show that age difference matters; that is, later-life divorce is more likely when the man is much older than the woman (Karraker & Latham, 2015; Lin, Brown, Wright, et al., 2018). However, other studies have shown that age difference is not important (Lin, Brown, Wright, et al., 2018). Moreover, union dissolution among cohabiting older couples has been described in a few studies (Brown & Lin, 2012; Karraker & Latham, 2015; Lin et al., 2018). In Sweden, cohabitation and marriage are similar union forms (Perelli-Harris & Gassen, 2012). Nonetheless, we would expect to find significant differences in the rate of union dissolution between these two types.

Data and Methods

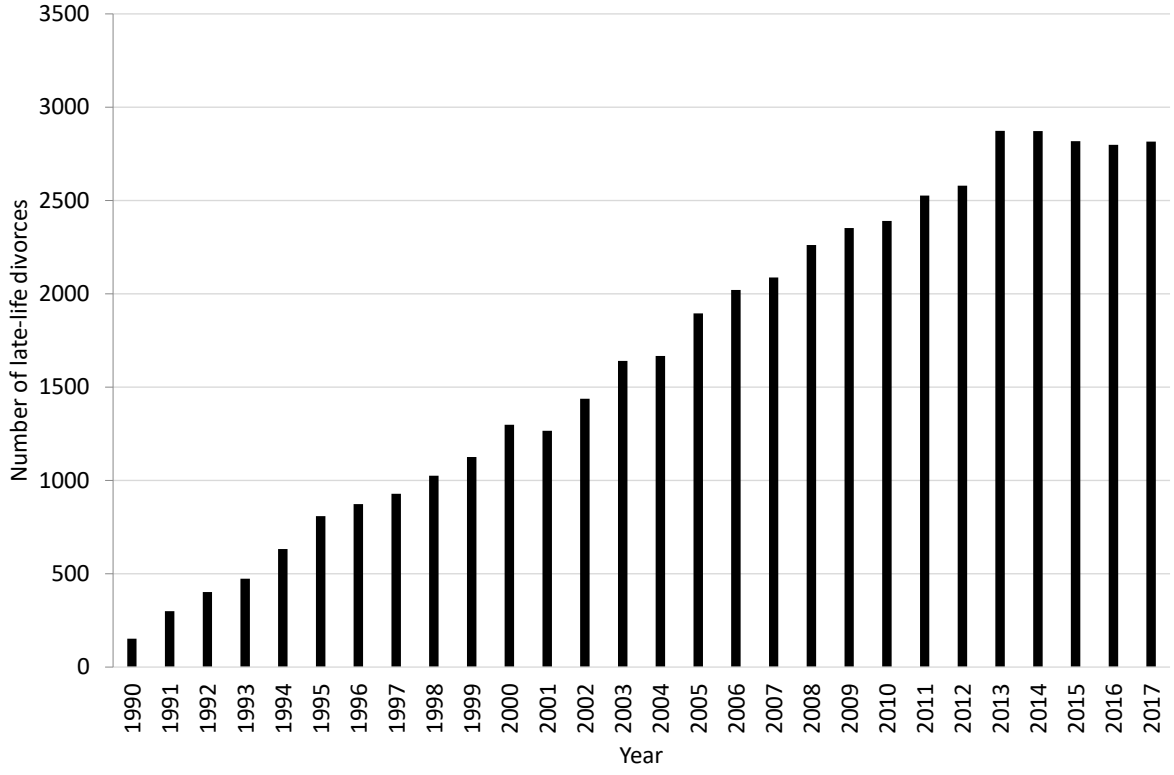
Swedish register data

This study is based on Swedish register data. Individuals (in a union) were first matched as married and linked to other demographic and socioeconomic information through their unique identifying number. The population in the study consisted of all couples who were married when one or both of the partners were 59 years old and where at least one of the partners was born between 1930 and 1956. The couples were observed until they divorced (earliest year:1990) or until the end of the observation period in 2017. The study's criteria implied that not all cohorts were followed for an equally long period; the youngest cohorts may have been observed for only a few years. Nonetheless, the cohorts were chosen so that it was possible to follow them over some years after age 60. Notably, we could only observe marriages, as it was not possible to trace cohabiting unions in the Swedish registers before 2011 if they did not have joint children (Thomson & Eriksson, 2013). In sensitivity analyses, we performed analyses on the dwelling register available from 2011 (see results section).

Dependent variable

The time-varying dependent variable was whether the couple experienced divorce (yes/no) when at least one of the partners was 60 or older. Compared with most studies on later-life divorce (e.g., Alderotti et al., 2022), the study defines later-life divorce from age 60 and onwards, predominantly for three reasons. First, 60 and older is the phase when individuals are about to retire or have retired and are in a particularly vulnerable phase of life. Second, ages 50-59 can be considered a time when couples still have responsibility for family and children, at least among the younger cohorts who tend to postpone childbearing. Most of these individuals were still part of the labour force in their 50s (Statistics Sweden, 2020). Third, the study's aim was to observe divorce that occurred later in life, and the 50s may not be considered late. In particular, the reasons that people divorce in their 50s may be different from the reasons for people of older ages. Studies using survey data that included divorces occurring in the 50s may have been driven by the relatively few divorces. Using register data, it is possible to more freely choose the stage of the life course (i.e., age) to study based on demographic actualities, empirical findings and theoretical assumptions without such limitations. Figure 1 shows that in raw numbers, the total number of divorces at age 60 or later increased over time in the studied population.

Figure 1. Number of divorces at age 60 and older in the studied population in which at least one partner was born 1930-1956.



Independent variables

The study has two key time-varying independent variables. The first is "family complexity in the 2nd generation", which is categorized as whether the couple has

1) joint children,
2) joint children and she has children from previous unions,
3) joint children and he has children from previous unions,
4) joint children and both partners have children from previous unions,
5) she has children from previous unions,
6) he has children from previous unions,
7) both have children from previous unions, and
8) no children.

The second variable is "family complexity in the 3rd generation", categorized as whether the couple has

1) joint grandchildren,
2) joint grandchildren and she has grandchildren,
3) joint grandchildren and he has grandchildren,
4) joint grandchildren and both have grandchildren,
5) no grandchildren but the couple has joint children,
6) she has grandchildren from previous unions,
7) he has grandchildren from previous unions,
8) both have grandchildren from previous unions, and
9) no children.

Table 1 displays the descriptive statistics of the two family complexity variables at entry into the study when at least one of the partners is 59. Slightly more than 50% of the couples have only biological children. In total, 7% have common biological children and the female partner's children from previous unions, 8% have common biological children and the male partner's children from previous unions, and 4% have common biological children and both partners have children from previous unions. Among couples who do not have common children, 5% have children from the female partner's previous unions, 7% have children from the male partner's previous relationships, and in 12%, both partners have children from previous unions. Of all couples in the study population, 6% are childless. With regard to family complexity in the third generation, 30% have only biological grandchildren. Among couples in which both partners have biological children, 2% of the couples have grandchildren from the female partner's previous unions, 7% have grandchildren from the male partner's previous

unions, and in 1%, both partners have grandchildren from previous relationships. Thirty-three percent do not have any grandchildren yet but have biological children. In total, 11% of the couples have grandchildren from the female partner's previous unions, 9% of the couples have grandchildren from the male partner's previous unions, and 7% of the couples have grandchildren from previous unions. Importantly, some of these groups are quite small; thus, the interpretation of the results should be performed with some caution.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of the studied couples at entry into the study period when at least one of the partners was 59 years old

		%
Family complexity 2nd generation	Joint children	54
	Joint children and she has children from previous unions	7
	Joint children and he has children from previous unions	8
	Joint children and both have children from previous unions	4
	She has children from previous unions	5
	He has children from previous unions	6
	Both have children from previous unions	11
	Childless	6
Family complexity 3rd generation (only among those with children)	Joint grandchildren	30
	Joint grandchildren and she has grandchildren from previous unions	2
	Joint grandchildren and he has grandchildren from previous unions	7
	Joint grandchildren and both have grandchildren from previous unions	1
	No grandchildren but couple has joint children	33
	She has grandchildren from previous unions	9
	He has grandchildren from previous unions	11
	Both have grandchildren from previous unions	7
Period	1990-1999	22
	2000-2009	44
	2010-2017	34
Age composition	Partners are the same age or +/- 2	40
	Woman 3 or more years older	9
	Man 3 or more years older	51
Educational composition	Both tertiary	17
	One tertiary and one secondary/primary	56
	Both secondary/primary	26
Duration	5 years or less	12
	6-10 years	5
	11-15 years	5
	16-20 years	7
	21-25 years	10
	26-30 years	14
	31 years or more	47
Country of birth	Both Swedish	81
	One born abroad	12
	Both born abroad	7
Working/retirement status	Both retired	5
	One working and one retired	17
	Both working	52
	One partly working and partly retired, one retired	3
	One partly working and partly retired, one working	11
	Both partly working and partly retired	1
	Both not working but have other source of income, one retired	3
	One working, both have also other source of income	8
	Both neither working nor retired but have other source of income	10
	Total population N	1043647

The analysis adjusts for a set of relevant predictors described earlier: year, age composition, relationship duration, educational composition, country of birth and whether the partners are working or retired. Some of these may be indicators of partners' homogamy, which is often beneficial for union stability. Age composition is categorized as 1) homogamous, up to 2 years age difference, 2) woman is three or more years older, and 3) man is three or more years older. Moreover, marriage duration can be used as a proxy for how well the partners and their family are integrated. In the analysis, duration is time-varying and indicates the number of years the couple has been together. Educational composition is categorized as follows: 1) both partners have tertiary education, 2) one partner has tertiary education and the other partner has lower education, and 3) both partners have lower education. Lower education is equivalent to primary or secondary education. This variable is time-varying, but in the ages studied here, there is not much upward mobility in educational levels. Whether the partners are working or retired is estimated using time-varying information on the partners' working and retirement status. Working is defined as whether the partners have employment, and retirement is defined as when 10% or more of the total annual earnings come from pension income. The variable is categorized as 1) both partners retired, 2) one partner working and one retired, 3) both partners working, 4) one partly working and partly retired, one retired, 5) one partly working and partly retired, one working, 6) both partly working and partly retired, 7) both not working (other source of income), one retired, 8) one working, both not retired (other source of income), and 9) both neither working nor retired (other source of income). Table 2 displays the descriptive statistics for adjusting variables when the couples enter the study period, that is, when at least one of them turns 60 years old.

Table 2. Risk of divorce at age 60 or older by family complexity in second generation (adjusted model), complement log-log model

		Risk of divorce	
		HR	**95% C.I.**
Family complexity 2nd generation	Joint children	1	
	Joint children and she has children from previous unions	1.52	1.45-1.58
	Joint children and he has children from previous unions	2.10	2.03-2.16
	Joint children and both have children from previous unions	2.73	2.61-2.85
	She has children from previous unions	1.94	1.85-2.02
	He has children from previous unions	2.04	1.96-2.13
	Both have children from previous unions	2.86	2.75-2.95
	Childless	0.99	0.94-1.03
Period	1990-1999	0.90	0.91-0.96
	2000-2009	0.93	0.87-0.93
	2010-2017 (ref)	1	
Duration	0-5	1.19	1.14-1.24
	6-10	1.24	1.20-1.31
	11-15	1.13	1.08-1.17
	16-20	1.07	1.03-1.11
	21-25	0.95	0.92-0.98
	25-30	0.85	0.82-0.88
	31 or longer		
Age composition	Partners are the same age or +/- 2	0.66	0.65-0.68
	Woman 3 or more years older	0.87	0.84-0.90
	Man 3 or more years older (ref)	1	
Educational composition	Both tertiary (ref)	1.23	1.20-1.26
	One tertiary and one secondary/primary	1.21	1.19-1.24
	Both secondary/primary	1	
Country of birth	Both Swedish (ref)	1	
	One born abroad	1.88	1.83-1.92
	Both born abroad	3.94	3.84-4.04
Working/retirement status	Both retired (ref)	1	
	One working and one retired	2.25	1.18-2.32
	Both working	2.08	2.01-2.14
	One partly working and partly retired, one retired	1.43	1.37-1.49
	One partly working and partly retired, one working	1.92	1.85-1.99
	Both partly working and partly retired	1.15	1.07-1.24
	Both not working but have other source of income, one retired	3.72	3.57-3.86
	One working, both have also other source of income	3.61	3.47-3.77
	Both neither working nor retired but have other source of income	4.57	4.31-4.85
Total number of observations 81516732 (with 47696 events of divorce)			

Statistical analysis

This study employs complement log-log models with hazard ratios to estimate the risk of divorce in later life during the period 1990-2017. Such analysis is often applied when data (as here) are organized in discrete, continuous time periods for events that occurred within one year (Allison, 2010). The hazard ratios are interpreted as a decrease or increase in the risk of divorce. For example, if the estimated hazard ratio for a specific group is 0.85, then there is a 15% decreased risk that the event will occur for this group compared with the reference group. The report of results also presents confidence intervals, as it is valuable to have the variance around the estimates even when studying a full population. In total, two models are analysed. The first model includes family complexity in the second generation and all the adjusted variables, i.e., year, age composition, duration, educational composition, country of birth and whether the couple is working. The second model includes family complexity in the third generation and the adjusting variables. In these latter models, we only include those who have children; thus, we exclude 6% of the couples in the study population who are childless.

Results from Event History Analysis

Tables 2 and 3 present the results from two complement log-log models where the outcome is the risk of divorce at age 60 or later. The reporting of the results begins with addressing the assumption that biological ties are stronger than step ties and that couples with only joint children should therefore have the lowest risk of divorce compared with couples that have step ties (only step ties or in combination with joint children). The results in Table 2 support the assumption and show that couples with only joint children have the lowest risk of divorce (reference category), as all other categories of family complexity have a hazard ratio higher than 1. More precisely, most of the family complexity categories have a hazard ratio of 2 or closer to 3, indicating that these couples have a two- or three-times higher risk of divorce compared with couples with only joint children. Couples with only stepchildren have the highest risk of divorce compared with all other couples (HR 2.85). Finally, there is no difference between childless couples and couples with only joint children.

The second assumption states that "bridge" children should unite the family and that families with such children should have a lower risk of divorce. To test the potential significance of "bridge" children, we contrast couples who have both joint children (i.e., "bridge" children) and where the female partner additionally has children from a previous union with couples where the only children in the union come from the female partner's previous union. We apply the same procedure for couples where the couple has joint children and the male partner has children from a previous union and for couples where he has children from previous unions. The results show that "bridge" children matter for couples where the female partner has children from a previous union. More precisely, couples with joint children and where the female partner has children from a previous union have a lower risk of divorce compared with couples where only the female partner has children from a previous union. We also observe a similar tendency among couples who have joint children and where both have children from previous unions, but the confidence intervals between these groups slightly overlap. For couples where the male partner has children from a previous union, it does not seem to matter whether the couple has "bridge' children" as couples with or without such children seem to have similar risk of divorce (HR 2.10 and 2.04).

The third assumption includes a gender aspect stating that it may be more challenging for the couple when the male partner brings children to the union than when the female partner does; thus, couples with "his children" should have a higher risk of divorce. To

address this assumption, we compare couples where both partners have children from previous unions, either in combination with joint children or without joint children. The results show that among couples who have joint children, when the male partner also has children from a previous union, the couple has a higher risk of divorce than when the female partner has children from a previous union. Among couples who do not have joint children, the result indicates that there is a slightly higher risk of divorce when the male partner has children compared with when the female partner has children from a previous union. In an additional analysis, we find that the former group has a 5% higher risk of divorce than the latter group (95% confidence interval 1.01-1-11). However, the slightly overlapping confidence intervals (Table 2) indicate that the result must be taken with some caution.

In the next step, the results address family complexity in the third generation on divorce risk in later life, as displayed in Table 3. In line with the study's assumptions that biological ties are stronger than step-ties, the results show that couples who have only joint grandchildren have the lowest risk of divorce compared with all other family structures.

The second assumption is that "bridge" grandchildren should unite the family; thus, these couples should have a lower risk of divorce. The results support this assumption for all three groups that we tested. More precisely, we compare couples with joint grandchildren and where the female partner has grandchildren from a previous union with couples who only have grandchildren from previous unions. We do the same for couples where the male partner has grandchildren from a previous union and where both partners have grandchildren from previous unions. In all three comparisons, couples without "bridge" grandchildren have a higher risk of divorce compared with couples with "bridge" grandchildren.

In the third assumption, we postulate that the male partner's grandchildren are more absent than the female partner's grandchildren; thus, her grandchildren affect family life and divorce risk more than his do. This assumption is tested in two ways. First, couples with joint grandchildren and couples in which the female partner has grandchildren from a previous union are compared with couples who have joint grandchildren and couples in which the male partner has grandchildren from a previous union. For the former family structures, the 95% confidence interval overlaps (1.36-1.58 and 1.11-1.21); however, the result is in line with the assumption and indicates that couples where the female partner has grandchildren from a previous union have a higher risk of divorce. Second, we compare couples where the female partner has grandchildren from a previous union with couples where the male partner has grandchildren from a previous union. In contrast with the assumption, the results show that couples where the male partner has grandchildren have a higher risk of divorce.

To check the robustness of the main findings, we perform a set of additional analyses. First, we conduct an analysis in which couples who married after age 59 were included. The results were similar to those presented here, as few couples married after age 59. Second, we analysed whether the results differed when we included separations and not just legal divorces. For this, we conduct a separate analysis including cohabiting couples at age 59 by using the dwelling register. These registers are available from 2011; thus, we limited the analysis to 2012-2017. We perform two interactions between two family complexity variables and whether the couples were cohabiting or married. The results indicate that cohabiting couples have an overall higher risk of separating than married couples' risk of divorce in all family complexity categories, including family complexity in the third generation. However, the hazard ratios are much higher, reflecting the rather small proportion of older couples who cohabited and separated during the short period of 2012-2017. A limitation of this analysis is that it is not possible to know how long couples have been cohabiting, and partners relocate more frequently compared with married couples, making it more difficult to estimate whether the couples are actually cohabiting. To further analyse whether the association is sustained for couples where one of the partners is older than 65, we restrict the population to couples who were married when at least one of them was aged 64 and who were at risk of divorce from the age of 65. Overall, the results are stronger for all categories of family complexity.

Table 3. Risk of divorce at age 60 or older by family complexity in the third generation (adjusted model), complement log-log model (only among those who have children)

		Risk of divorce	
		HR	95% C.I.
Family complexity 3rd generation	Joint grandchildren	1	
	Joint grandchildren and she has grandchildren from previous unions	1.47	1.36-1.58
	Joint grandchildren and he has grandchildren from previous unions	1.16	1.11-1.21
	Joint grandchildren and both have grandchildren from previous unions	1.93	1.75-2.12
	She has grandchildren from previous unions	2.13	2.04-2.22
	He has grandchildren from previous unions	2.83	2.74-2.94
	Both have grandchildren from previous unions	2.84	2.73-2.95
	No grandchildren but couple has joint children	1.92	1.86-1.97
Total number of observations 81516732 (with 45188 events of divorce)			

Model adjusted for year, age composition, duration, educational composition and working/retirement status

Discussion

This study investigated what type of (step)family structure increases the risk of later-life divorce among couples living in Sweden. In particular, it considered family complexity in the second and third generations, including maternal and paternal family lineage. Later-life divorce was defined as divorce that occurred when one or both partners were aged 60 or older. The population consisted of Swedish-resident couples where at least one of the partners was born in the 1930-1956 period. The study had a set of assumptions grounded in family stress theory (Crosbie-Burnett, 1989) and previous research and assumed that biological ties are stronger than step ties, "bridge" children unite the family, and family cohesion is often linked to the partner to whom the children belong. Regarding the latter, we expected that there would be a gender difference and that women's position as stepmothers is often more exposed, making couples in which the male partner brought children to the union more challenging than couples in which the female partner brought children to the union. However, we expected the opposite in the third generation, as the male partner's grandchildren are often more absent than the female partner's grandchildren are and thus should have a smaller influence on family life.

From the perspective of family stress theory, complexity in family structure is understood as something that creates challenges. This study found support for this idea. The results from event history analysis indicated that the lowest risk of divorce in later life is among couples who had only joint children, which was in line with the assumption. The results were also in line with the "remarriage effect", i.e., repartnered individuals have a higher risk of divorce/being separated again. Additionally, the study's findings that "bridge" children decrease the risk of divorce (except when the male partner has children from a previous union) contrast with the results of Lin, Brown and Cupka (2018), who did not find a difference in relationship quality by complexity in the stepfamily structure or joint children.

However, we found a few interesting patterns among the remarried group that were also in line with the theoretical assumptions that, for example, stepmothers and families with stepmothers are often more conflictual (Crosbie-Burnett, 1989; Nielsen, 1999). The results indicated that when the female partner had children from previous unions, this situation was more protective against later-life divorce than when the male partner had children from previous unions or when both partners had children from previous unions. The risk of divorce was highest in the latter group. In general, the risk of later-life divorce was lower when couples had joint children and stepchildren compared with couples without joint children but with

stepchildren, supporting the idea that joint children, or so-called bridge children, may unite and stabilize the family.

The study also addressed the link between family complexity in the third generation and later-life divorce. The results did not entirely follow the assumptions, although the broad patterns were supported. That is, joint grandchildren reduced the risk of later-life divorce and stepgrandchildren increased the risk, especially in couples who did not have joint children. Thus, this study supports previous research that has found that becoming a biological grandparent decreases the risk of divorce in later life among older European and American couples (Brown et al. 2021; Alderotti et al. 2022) and that having stepgrandchildren increases the divorce risk in the American context (Brown et al., 2021).

Interestingly, the study did not find similar lineage patterns in family complexity in the third generation as in the second generation, suggesting that these ties may operate slightly differently across generations. We found that couples who had joint grandchildren and the female partner had grandchildren from a previous union had a higher risk of divorce. Potentially, men's weaker attachment to children, especially grandchildren, after separation (compared with women's) means that the male partner's ties to grandchildren are weaker than those of the female partner (Ahrons, 2007; for other situations where maternal lineage seems to matter among ageing families in Sweden, see Kridahl & Duvander, 2021). Therefore, the male partner's grandchildren may not be perceived as a threat to the common grandchildren and the union. At the same time, grandmothers are generally more engaged, which may create tensions in the union in cases where the stepgrandfather is not equally engaged in either their joint or her grandchildren. In contrast, if the stepgrandchildren belong to the male partner, the female partner may engage to a higher degree as she is already more engaged in the joint grandchildren (than he is), thus decreasing the tensions between the partners. When couples have only stepchildren, the results follow the same patterns as in the second generation; that is, the risk is lower among couples where the female partner has grandchildren from previous unions. This is likely explained by the stronger family ties that mothers and grandmothers maintain and that may dominate the kin relationships of fathers and grandfathers. This study contributes to this research by showing that maternal and paternal lineage are also important when studying divorce in later life.

The registers did not include any information on, for example, conflicts and argumentation between the partners or the children/stepchildren; hence, it is unclear what preceded or led to divorce. Nevertheless, the results mirror the challenges that, for example, Cherlin (1978) has suggested about stepfamilies being an incomplete institution without

guidelines for the way different members should behave in everyday family life. Consequently, there are more opportunities for disagreement between the partners and the children. The results are surprising overall as stepfamilies have been a common family type for a long time, but strong norms and expectations of behaviour in such families have apparently not been created.

Study limitations

The study does not come without limitations. First, the analysis included all couples registered as married in the Swedish register when at least one of the partners was 60 or older. It was not possible to include unmarried couples who were together but were registered at different addresses (living apart together). However, it is well established that such relationships are important for older couples (see, e.g., Bildtgård & Öberg, 2015; Koren et al., 2022). It is also possible that the divorced couples separated much earlier than the divorce date, which would present a bias in the year/period of divorce. However, according to the Swedish Marriage Act (1987:230), couples without common children younger than 16 who agree to divorce can do so relatively quickly (in approximately one to six months), partly due to the no-fault grounds for divorce (Sandström 2011). Older individuals also lose the possibility of receiving a housing allowance when they live with a person they do not define as a partner because it is a "shared household" that is considered the unit for evaluation when older individuals apply for a housing allowance. Thus, it is highly likely that the group who separated much earlier is very small. Second, it was not possible to determine from the registers which of the partners filed for divorce to the district court. It is possible that the partners disagreed and that only one wanted to divorce. Considering that older women more often initiate late-life divorce in other contexts, such as the US (Montenegro, 2004), it would have been interesting to know whether there were gender differences among the couples observed in this study, especially when studying stepfamilies and which of the partners brought children into the marriage. Third, using register data, it is not possible to determine whether the couple has a relationship with all children and grandchildren, including step relationships. Fourth, the analysis omitted important predictors of later-life divorce given the available registers, such as relationship quality. However, the models were comprehensive and included many couple-level predictors that are important indicators of or proxies for different aspects of the relationship, such as couple stability and homogeneity.

Future directions for policy makers and research

The overall results from the study showed that any form of step ties in the second and third generation matter for the risk of divorce after age 60. The increased risk of divorce in stepfamilies and their complexity indicate that policy-makers may need to acknowledge and improve stepfamily integration over the life course and for later-life stepfamilies. An important aspect of the potential consequences of later-life divorce related to the study's findings is that stepparent(s) most likely lose their bonds to stepchildren and stepgrandchildren (Ganong & Coleman, 2017). This may have a negative effect on the size and quality of social networks, support and quality of life at older ages. Hence, later-life divorce may have significant impacts on other life domains, such as health and well-being, which policy-makers may need to acknowledge. For example, policy-makers may encourage more extensive work with so-called family maps and family chronology (Taylor 2002).

The few explanations for the increase in divorce in later life proposed in the current study and the literature make the topic an important research area (see also Carr & Utz, 2020). One dimension that was not explored in the study is the pathways to stepgrandparenthood and complex family (Chapman et al., 2016). This focus would highlight the significance of the timing of life events in the development of steprelationships on divorce in later life. Relatedly, it would be interesting to continue to explore complex family structures and divorce in later life to study the gender constellations of complex families. Additionally, a qualitative approach would nuance this study's findings, such as interviews after divorce with both partners and their children, stepchildren and grandchildren using a stepfamily analysis (see, e.g., Koren et al., 2022; Samzelius, 2023). In addition, there is a need for more research on the consequences of later-life divorce on multigenerational stepfamily ties (e.g., Sanner et al., 2018). Although this study focused on Sweden, this does not mean that the role of complex family structures on divorce in later life is unique to the Swedish context. Many Western European countries and the US are on the way to broadly similar demographic landscapes. Hence, it would be interesting to explore whether this study's findings are supported in cross-national studies or in other countries.

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