

Chapter 13

The Demography of Unions Among Older Americans, 1980–Present: A Family Change Approach

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The current generation of older Americans faces more complex family and marital histories than any prior generation. Moreover, baby boomers, the first cohort to experience high levels of divorce, single parenthood, and remarriage, are now moving into older adulthood. This movement will likely exacerbate the trend away from marriage among older adults. Researchers are uncovering greater heterogeneity and complexity in the family life of older Americans, which in turn portends a shift in the benefits and rewards offered by certain family circumstances (Allen et al. 2000; Cooney and Dunne 2001). The growing diversity of living arrangements characterizing older adulthood is likely to have important consequences for individual health and well-being as well as policy ramifications for the changing types of institutional support older adults require (Wilmoth and Longino 2006).

In this chapter, we document changes in the marital status and household living arrangements of older Americans over the past 4 decades, integrating explanations for and consequences of these changing patterns. The increasingly varied family life course trajectories experienced in early and middle adulthood have enduring consequences. Namely, older adults are much less likely to be married now than were previous cohorts. This trend is expected to accelerate with a declining share of the older adult population being married in coming decades (e.g., Allen et al. 2000; Cooney and Dunne 2001). A decade ago, gerontologists predicted that older men more likely will be never married, and older women increasingly will be divorced rather than widowed (Cooney and Dunne 2001).

The purpose of this chapter is threefold: describe how family change approaches can elucidate recent demographic shifts in the union behaviors of older adults; provide empirical evidence that describes the recent trends in marital status and living arrangements for older adults; and discuss the implications of these new marriage and family patterns for individuals, families, and society. In addition to examining marriage and widowhood, which have been the primary foci of earlier work on the family status of older adults, we also consider union experiences which fall outside these typical marital status categories. Specifically, we investigate cohabitation, living apart together (LAT), and same-sex unions, all of which appear to be increasing among the older adult population but have received limited attention from researchers (Bennett and Gates 2004; Brown et al. 2005, 2006; de Jong Gierveld 2005; Gates 2003; Huyck 1995).

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Family Change Approaches

There is wide recognition of rapid changes in marriage and family, but there is not a consensus about the mechanisms underlying these changes. The most commonly cited reasons for changes in marriage and family behavior include economic, normative, and institutional explanations. While the recent changes in family and marriage have been widely noted, it is important to recognize that social scientists have long been interested in the causes of family change and have invoked these theories of change across a broad range of time periods (Smock 2004).

The life course perspective is a popular approach used to study marriage and family behavior. Among older Americans, this perspective is important because it recognizes that family behavior is age-graded and integrates social, historical, cultural contexts. Life course theory posits that one's life is a sequence of events, social roles, and changes that begin in infancy and continue until death (Caspi et al. 1989). The lives of family members are "linked" in the decisions of one member who have implications for the other family members (Elder 1985). These linked lives imply that generations are connected (e.g., parents and children) as well as family members of the same generation (e.g., siblings, spouses). Further, an individual's actions that occur earlier in the life course both directly and indirectly influence behavior in later life stages (Elder 1985). This perspective highlights interactions between individuals and their social environments. Age, timing, and sequencing are key concepts within a life course framework. The timing of transitions (e.g., parenthood or marriage) can be considered early, on-time or late which subsequently has implications in later life. A fundamental feature of the life course perspective is the individual-level progression or trajectories through life and the recognition that trajectories may shift across time or context. While the life course approach showcases how individual family experience progress over their life, it does not provide a direct explanation for the mechanisms or reasons for family change.

Most research examining family change focuses on earlier points in the life course (e.g., the twenties) with an emphasis on how young adults form and sustain relationships. This attention on young adults is based on concerns about the well-being of children, i.e., providing stable home environments for children. As many changes in families have occurred among young adults, they have reverberations among older adults. For example, divorce in her early thirties may have implications for the accumulation of wealth for a woman in her sixties. Yet studies of marriage are often based on realities of young adults, ignoring the distinct patterns of union formation and stability among older adults. The generations that have experienced the most family change have not yet reached their older years, and we have much to learn about their experiences. As a result, our theories of union formation may be useful for explaining current behavior; however, they may not adequately predict or explain future trends (Seltzer et al. 2005).

The reasons for changes in marital behavior are interrelated and include the following: shifts in economic gains to marriage, ideational changes, and institutional recognition of a broad array of families (e.g., Cherlin 2004; Seltzer et al. 2005; Waite et al. 2000). First, the gendered basis to marriage has changed. Women are increasingly valued for their economic contributions to families. Women with higher incomes and education are actually more likely to marry than their counterparts with fewer economic resources (Sweeney 2002). This shift in the traditional marital bargain calls for new approaches to studying the criteria for marriage as well as the complicated balance required to sustain marriage. These new economic realities challenge a traditional home economics perspective (Becker 1974), which focuses on a gender-based traditional division of labor with the decision-making power assigned to the male head of the household (Bianchi et al. 2008). The shift in the gendered economics surrounding marriage and the value of women's economic position are broad and have implications not only for younger but also for older Americans today.

A second explanation for family change is based on normative or cultural change brought about in part by the greater secularization or individualization of American society (Lesthaeghe and Neidert 2006). These types of normative changes are often measured in terms of attitudes, such as

beliefs about gender equity. However, it remains a challenge to measure the accepted rules of behavior and discern subgroup differences (Rossi and Rossi 1990). The change in attitudes about cohabitation, single parenthood, and the fragility of marriage have been well documented (Axinn and Thornton 2000; Cherlin 2004). A related normative shift is the fundamental reason for or meaning underlying marriage. The focus of contemporary marriage is on emotional fulfillment and love leading to shifts in the purpose and stability of marriages (Cherlin 2004). Thus, the nature of couple interactions may be altered in part because of this new normative climate. As the demands of marriage increase, there may be further shifts in the timing and stability of marriage.

A third reason for change in families is that adults now may enjoy many of the instrumental and social benefits of marriage without actually marrying. For example, social welfare benefits, property rights, and custody arrangements are not based solely on marital status. As we observe more legal arrangements, social policies, and institutions that do not discriminate based on marital status, the benefits of marriage become less clear. Further, marriage may require a level of interdependence or enmeshment (financial and emotional) that is not desirable which in turn may encourage new family forms. Certainly, marriage offers a legal commitment and bond that secures some stability and permanence. Cherlin (2004:855) refers to this as “enforceable trust” and claims that it could be “eroding.” As the traditional supports for marriage are shifting, the uncertainty or ambiguity surrounding the meaning and definition of marriage may have implications for marital and family decisions and contribute to the rise in unmarried family forms (Settersten 2009).

The ramifications of these economic, normative, and institutional changes for the family behaviors of older adults remain largely unexplored both theoretically and empirically, but family changes are identified by gerontologists and family scholars as integral to our understanding of the demographic shifts taking place in an aging society (Allen et al. 2000; Cooney and Dunne 2001). This chapter aims to interpret the latest demographic patterns through the lens of the family change approach to provide a richer portrait of aging families in the contemporary U.S. context.

Measures and Data

Our empirical analyses focus on older Americans defined as men and women aged 65 and older. We compared older Americans in 1980 (65-year-olds were born in 1915) to 2008 (65-year-olds were born in 1943). The early cohort became adults during the Great Depression, and the later cohort became adults during the economic boom years (1960s). This time span includes those adults who produced the peak of the baby boom.

The United States is an aging society with older Americans representing an increasingly greater share of the total population. In 1980, persons over age 65 comprised 11% of the American population, while in 2008 those over age 65 were 13% of the population. Over the next 50 years, the population of adults aged 65 and older is predicted to double. By 2050, the U.S. older adult population will reach 88 million or one-fifth of the population (U.S. Census Bureau 2008).

Life expectancy is increasing for women and men alike, but the two groups continue to have different life expectancies. Currently, life expectancy for men is about 75 years, whereas for women is 80 years. Consequently, the majority of older adults are women (Heron et al. 2009). In 2007, there were 137 women over age 65 for every 100 men over age 65 in the United States. This ratio increases among the oldest old. By the time older adults reached their mid-eighties, there were 210 women to every 100 men (Administration on Aging 2009). The lengthening life span of Americans presents the possibility of more relationships in older adulthood including the potential for expanded intergenerational family ties and at the same time potentially more opportunities for family instability. As Settersten (2007) argues, divorce rather than death is the primary cause of family disruption.

Apart from gender, life expectancy also varies by race-ethnicity. Although the racial gap in life expectancy has declined over time as minorities are living longer, nonetheless, whites enjoy greater

life expectancies than do either blacks or Hispanics in the United States. For instance, current life expectancy among whites is about 78 years, whereas for blacks it is 73 years. Today, among 65-year-olds, life expectancy is roughly 2 years greater for white than black men and 1 year greater for white than black women (Heron et al. 2009). Consequently, the older adult population is now more racially and ethnically diverse than in the past. In 1980, 8% of the 65 and older population was black, and less than 3% was Hispanic. Today, nearly 9% of older adults are black, and more than 6% are Hispanic (National Center for Health Statistics 2009). Population projections estimate that by 2050, about 58% of the older population will be non-Hispanic white, 20% of the older population will be Hispanic, and 11% black (Administration on Aging 2009). Changes in immigration in the United States portend an increasing share of older Americans will be foreign-born, and nativity status is likely to play a role in the lives of older Americans.

Gender and race-ethnicity structure the experience of aging. Therefore, we provide gender-specific comparisons of marital status and living arrangements across age groups. We focus on similarities and differences in the experiences of older men and women. Where possible, results are shown for specific racial and ethnic groups.

This chapter draws on several data sources. A primary source of data is the United States decennial Census, which offers a view of the trends in marital status and living arrangements of older Americans. The recent American Community Survey provides specific measures about marriage that are not available in the Census data. We also present findings from published results from surveys, such as the Current Population Survey March Supplement and the Health and Retirement Study. In the concluding section, we discuss future data needs for research on the family demography of an aging population.

Marital Status

Marriage

Overall, there has been a decline between 1980 and 2008 in the proportion of older men who are married, as shown in Fig. 13.1. In 1980, more than three quarters (76%) of older men were married. By 2008, there was a modest decrease, and 71% of older men were married. In 1980, the proportion of men married was negatively associated with age. In 2008, the proportions married were less sensitive to age than in 1980, with those ranging in age from 65 to 79 almost equally likely to be married. The trend in proportion married between 1980 and 2008 varied by age, such that among the young old (65–74), smaller proportions of men were married in 2008 than in 1980, whereas among the old old (75–84) and oldest old (85 and older), married men were a bit more prevalent in 2008 than in 1980. For instance, 83% of 65–69-year-old men were married in 1980, but just 75% of men in this age group were married in 2008. In 1980, 48% of men 85 and older were married. By 2008, 54% of oldest old men were married.

Among older women, the proportion married appears to have changed little over the past 4 decades Fig. 13.2. In 1980, 37% of older women were married compared to 40% in 2008. This overall pattern characterizes young old women, too, but not old old and oldest old women, who now compose larger shares of the population. Among women 65–69, there was essentially no change between 1980 and 2008 in the proportion married (55 and 56%, respectively). All other age groups witnessed increases in the proportion married over time. Among 75–79-year-olds, the proportion married grew from 29% in 1980 to 41% in 2008. Similarly, among the oldest old, the proportion married rose by 50% from 8% in 1980 to 12% in 2008.

Comparing the proportions of men vs. women who were married reveals that more men were married than women, regardless of age or time period. Gender distinctions in marital status were

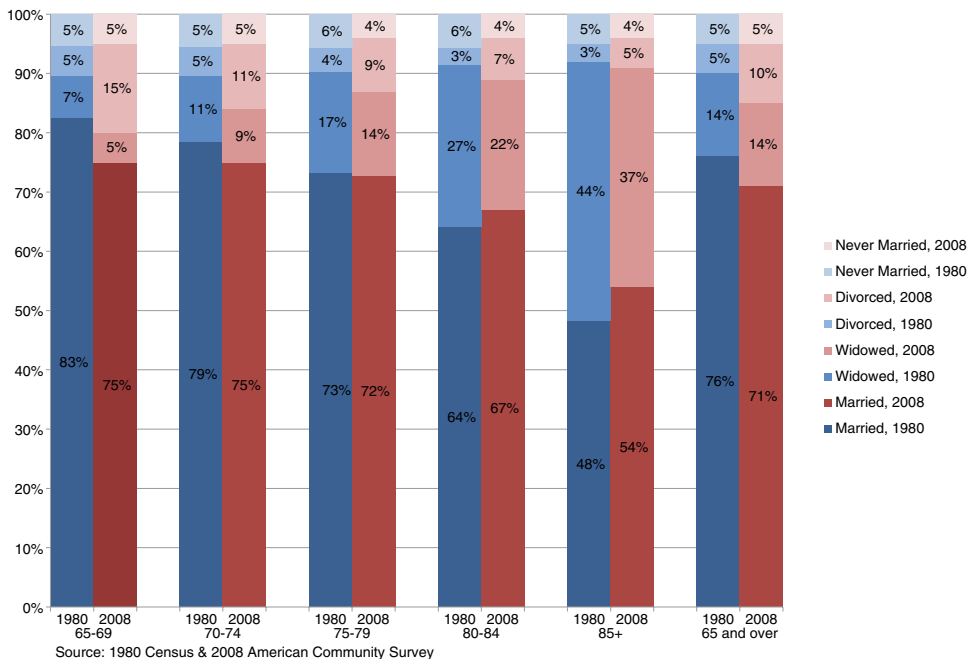


Fig. 13.1 Marital status by age for males, 1980 and 2008

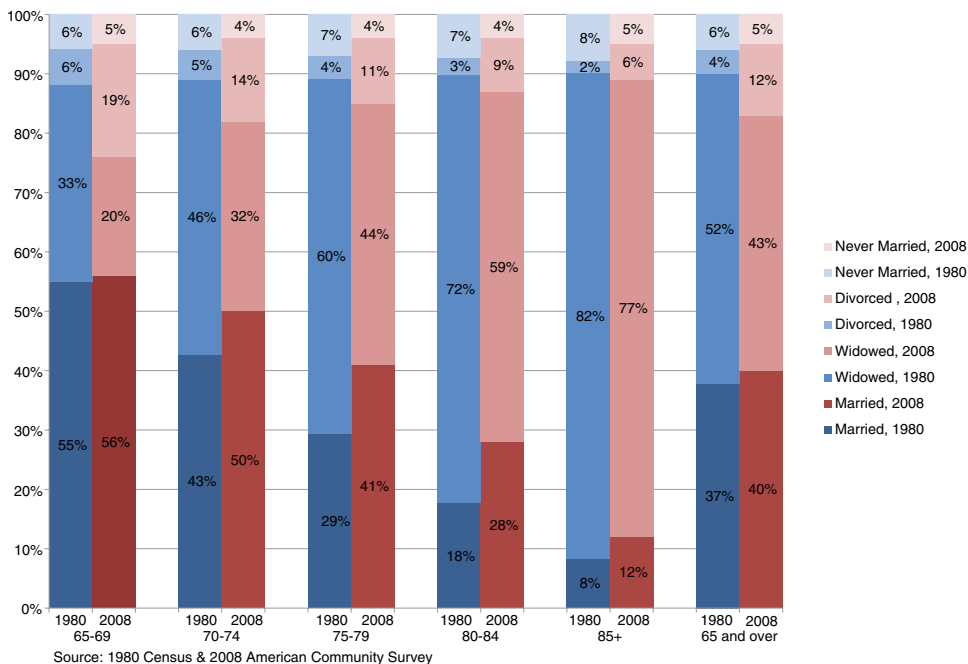


Fig. 13.2 Marital status by age for females, 1980 and 2008

due in part to the substantial gender differentials in mortality and life expectancy and the tendency for women to marry men a few years older than themselves. Indeed, at all ages, older men were more likely to be married than older women, and this differential became more pronounced with age. Nonetheless, the gender differential was smaller in 2008 than it was in 1980. Six times as many

men as women aged 85 and older were married in 1980 (48 and 8%, respectively) vs. 4.5 times in 2008 (54 and 12%, respectively).

These trends reveal the distinct gendered patterns characterizing marriage in later life. Married is the modal marital status for men, but not for women. It is notable that the proportions married have declined modestly among older men at the same time they have increased slightly among older women. This convergence is consistent with the family change approach, which suggests increasing gender similarity in the mate selection process.

Widowhood

Widowhood remained consistent among older men over the past 4 decades: 14% in 1980 and 2008 (Fig. 13.1). Despite this overall stability, the pattern varies by age group, with the growth in widowers concentrated among the oldest old men. In 1980, less than one-fifth of men aged 65–79 were widowers, about one-quarter of 80–84-year-old men were widowers, and nearly half of men over age 85 were widowers. In 2008, less than 15% of men aged 65–79 were widowers, 22% of men 80–84, and 37% of men over age 85 were widowers. Stated differently, widowhood has declined most precipitously among the oldest men.

By contrast, there have been declines in widowhood among all older women, from 52% in 1980 to 43% in 2008 (Fig. 13.2). In 1980, the proportion of women widowed ranged from one-third among 65–69-year-olds to 82% among women aged 85 and older. The proportion of women who were married outpaced those who were widowed only at ages 65–69. At every other age, the proportion of women married was less than the proportion widowed. In 2008, one-fifth of the youngest older American women were widowed, and 77% of women aged 85 and older were widowed, but the proportion married was higher than the proportion widowed not only for 65–69-year-olds but also for 70–74-year-olds. These results suggest that we may be observing a slight delay in widowhood among women, which is consistent with lengthening life expectancy.

As expected, widowhood increased with age, but the age gradient was steeper among women than men. A greater proportion of women were widowed than men at every age. Among the oldest old, widowhood was 50% higher among women than men (77 vs. 37%, respectively, in 2008). The modal marital status category among women is widowed, although the proportion of older women who are widowed has declined since 1980 and a corresponding increase over this time period occurred for the proportion divorced. This pattern is in line with predictions by Cooney and Dunne (2001). Widowhood, while common, brings a host of stress in terms of emotional loss, social network shifts, financial concerns, and instrumental support. Men and women respond differently to widowhood with men much more likely to remarry (see Chap. 10 for further discussion). Family change approaches do not provide much insight into the changing patterns of widowhood, but they reflect both lengthening life expectancy and arguably shifts in preferences for remarriage formation. Future research should attend to whether the propensity to remarry following widowhood has changed in recent decades as well as the extent to which these changes are gendered.

Divorce

Sustained high levels of divorce over the past few decades in the U.S. population have contributed to the declines in the proportions of older adults who are married. We combine separated and divorced into one category. In fact, the proportion of older men who were divorced (or separated)

doubled between 1980 and 2008 (Fig. 13.1). Only 5% of older men were divorced in 1980, whereas the figure rose to 10% in 2008. This growth is concentrated among the young old. In 1980, 5% of men ages 65–69 and 6% of men ages 70–74 were divorced. In 2008, the corresponding figures were 15 and 11%, respectively. At older ages, the proportions of divorced men did not change much over time. Among the oldest old, 3% of men were divorced in 1980, and 5% were divorced in 2008.

Among older women, there is a similar pattern. The proportion of older women who were divorced climbed from 4% in 1980 to 12% in 2008, nearly identical to the proportions documented earlier for older men (Fig. 13.2). The rise occurred among all older women. Among 65–69-year-old women, 6% were divorced in 1980 vs. 19% in 2008. For women ages 80–84, 3% were divorced in 1980, and 6% were divorced in 2008. The proportion of the oldest old that is divorced increased from 2% in 1980 to 6% in 2008.

Comparing the trends for men and women, the proportions divorced in each 5-year age interval were essentially the same in 1980. By 2008, older women were somewhat more likely to be divorced than were older men, at least at younger ages. There were no gender differences in divorce among the oldest old. With sustained high levels of divorce in the U.S. population coupled with the weakening propensity to remarry following divorce (the divorced increasingly favor postmarital cohabitation), it is likely that the proportions of older men and women divorced will rise in the coming years. The implications of divorce most likely depend on its timing (Shapiro and Cooney 2007). Early divorce in the life course has been found to influence later relationships between adult children and older fathers (Shapiro and Cooney 2007), and divorce in older adulthood may translate into declines in social and economic support. Throughout the life course, the costs of divorce appear to differ according to gender. From a family change approach, the normative and institutional constraints supporting marriage continue to erode, opening up the possibility of other forms of family outside of marriage (e.g., cohabitation) and increasing the acceptability of living alone.

Never Married

The percentage of the older population never married has not shifted over the past 4 decades, nor does it differ for men and women (Figs. 13.1 and 13.2). Between 5 and 6% of the older adult population was never married in 1980 and 2008. In 1980, only 2 or 3% of old old and oldest old men and women were never married. By 2008, between 4 and 5% of both older women and men in all age groups were never married. Even though men and women are equally likely to remain never-married, there is a gender gap in the well-being of never-married men and women. Never-married women appear to fare as well as married women in old age while never-married men appear to fare worse than their married counterparts (see Chap. 10). The proportion of older adults who are never married is expected to rise in the future, especially among men (Cooney and Dunne 2001), reflecting more inclusive normative expectations about families and loosening institutional constraints.

Racial and Ethnic Variation

Most research on the marriage and living arrangement patterns of older Americans focuses on gender and age distinctions. However, given the striking racial differences in marriage and divorce rates, it is important to consider race and ethnicity when studying marriage and other close relationships among older Americans.

In 2008, the majority of older white, black, and Hispanic men were married. Nearly three-quarters of white men, two-thirds of Hispanic men, and about half of black men were married. Widowhood levels were similar across race and ethnic groups, with slightly higher levels among black men (18%) than Hispanic (14%) or white (13%) men. The proportion of older men who were divorced was twice as high among black as white men. A substantial minority (9%) of black men had never married in contrast to 5% of Hispanic and 4% of white men.

Older women were less likely to be married than men, and less than half of each racial and ethnic group was married. White older women were more often married (42%) than Hispanic (36%) or black (23%) women. Nearly half of black older women were widowed, and about two-fifths of white and Hispanic women were widowed. The levels of divorce were higher among black (20%) and Hispanic (17%) women than that of white (12%) women. The vast majority of older American women was ever married; however, black (9%) and Hispanic (7%) older women were more often never married than white (4%) older women. Racial and ethnic variation in family formation behaviors earlier in the life course is likely to have persistent effects as people age, yet few researchers have considered racial and ethnic differences in family behaviors among older adults (although see Calasanti and Kiecolt 2007; Coward et al. 1996). Indeed, from a family change perspective, the economic and normative factors may vary considerably by race and ethnicity for older men and women, but this remains largely unexplored.

Marriage and Divorce in 2008

We rely on the American Community Survey to specifically examine marriage and divorce among older Americans. While we typically think of brides and grooms as young men and women in their twenties, according to the American Community Study there were about 91,000 marriages among older Americans, including 31,500 brides and 59,300 grooms, over the age of 65 in 2008. In 1985, nearly 25 years ago, 71,000 persons over age 65 married (Meyers and Wilson 1988). The increase was not necessarily due to an increase in marriage rates among older Americans but a shift in the age structure of the population. The American Community Survey data indicate that most older Americans who married in the last year were not first time brides or grooms; only 10% were first marriages. About half (54%) of marriages in the last year to older Americans were second marriages, and one-third (35%) were third marriages. The patterns and levels are similar for men and women. In 1985, one-quarter of grooms over age 65 were divorced, and three-fourths of the brides were widowed (Meyers and Wilson 1988). In 2008, about three-quarters of married older Americans were still in their first marriage, which is similar to 76% among the population over age 15 (National Center for Family and Marriage Research 2009).

In the American Community Survey 2008 data, there were approximately 119,700 divorces among older Americans. The ratio of marriages to divorces among older Americans in 2008 is opposite of what it is among the total population. Among older Americans, there were only 0.8 marriages for every one divorce, indicating divorce is more common than marriage. Among the total population over age 15, the ratio is two marriages for every one divorce. Given the stabilization of high divorce rates among the total population (Raley and Bumpass 2003), we expect divorce rates among older Americans to follow the broader population trends. What is notable for older Americans is that they are relatively unlikely to marry again following divorce. Whether they form an unmarried cohabiting union or remain single is unclear, but both pathways are consistent with the family change approach.

The most common marital status change in older adulthood is widowhood. As indicated earlier, widowhood is prevalent among older Americans, and over one million older Americans were widowed in 2008. Women were 2.3 times more likely to experience widowhood than men.

Projections provide a glimpse into the relationship patterns of older Americans in the next few decades and indicate that by 2040, 42% of older women and 69% of older men will be married (Wade 1989). Wade argues that women's decline in marriage will be the result of declines in widowhood and growth in divorce, while men's decline will be due to older men's lack of marriage (never married status). These predictions mirror those of Cooney and Dunne (2001). Updated projections suggest that the proportion of older adults never married will increase, the proportion married will decline, and the proportion divorced will stabilize in recent years (Tamborini 2007).

Living Arrangements

The living arrangements of older Americans are tied to their marital status but living arrangements offer a unique lens on the potential sources of support available to older adults within the household. For instance, marital status per se does not reveal whether an individual lives alone or with other family members. The rapid rise in older adults living alone is of considerable policy interest to the extent that it portends growth in the share of elderly without the supports required to delay or avoid institutional care (Mutchler 1992). Transitions in living arrangements among older adults sometimes follow a different pattern than that documented at a single point in time (Wilmoth 1998), but they are beyond the scope of this chapter.

We examine changes in living arrangements among older adults over time, distinguishing among four categories: living alone, married and living with spouse, living with family members, and living with nonfamily members. Older Americans also may live in group quarters but are not included in our Census estimates below. The term “group quarters” may include a variety of circumstances. The Administration on Aging (2009) reports that, in 2007, 1.57 million or 4.4% of older Americans lived in institutional settings, and 2–5% lived in senior housing with support services.

Living Alone

Figure 13.3 shows that the proportion of older men living alone has increased slightly from 15% in 1980 to 19% in 2008. As men age, a greater proportion were living on their own; the oldest old were about twice as likely to live alone as the youngest old. In 1980, 11% of men ages 65–69 lived alone, and 26% of the oldest old men lived alone. Similarly, in 2008, 15% of men ages 65–69 years old lived alone, 32% of men aged 85 or older also did so.

There was a consistent pattern in the proportion of older women who lived alone in 1980 and 2008: 40% in 1980 and 37% in 2008 (Fig. 13.4). The proportion of older women who lived alone increased sharply according to age. In 1980, 30% of women 65–69 lived alone, and 46% of the oldest old lived alone. In 2008, there was a steeper age gradient, 26% of women ages 65–69 lived alone, while 56% of women over age 85 lived alone.

Women more often live alone than men, and this is true for every age group of older Americans. In fact, the gender gap in living alone increases with age. In 2008, among the oldest old, about one-third (32%) of men and over half (56%) of women lived alone. Solo living in older adulthood is related to fewer economic resources in addition to lower levels of social support. As the population ages and life expectancy increases, living alone will be more prevalent among older adults and its consequences for society more salient.

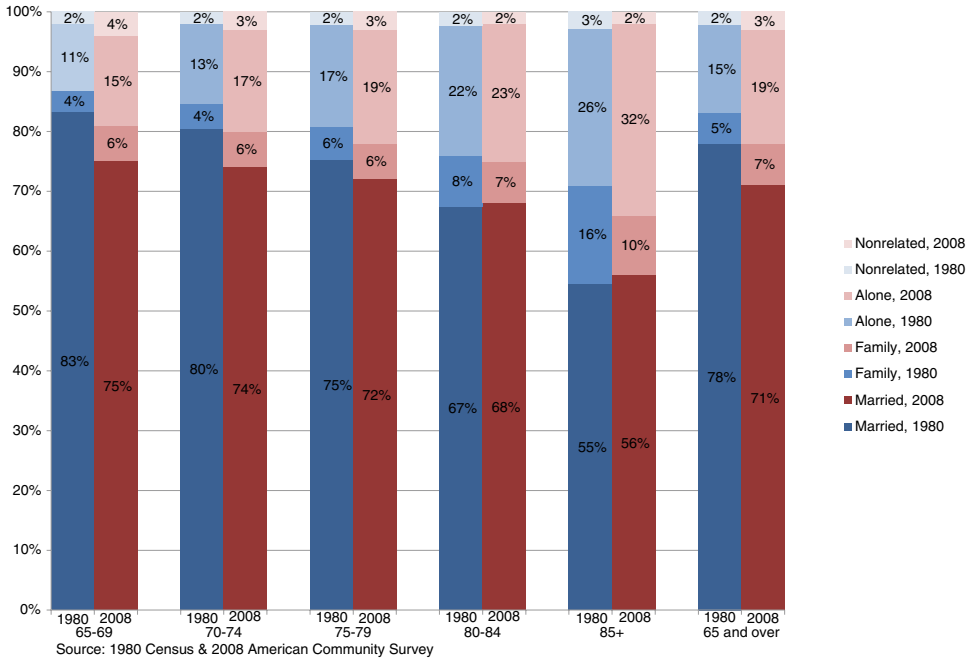


Fig. 13.3 Living arrangements by age for males, 1980 and 2008

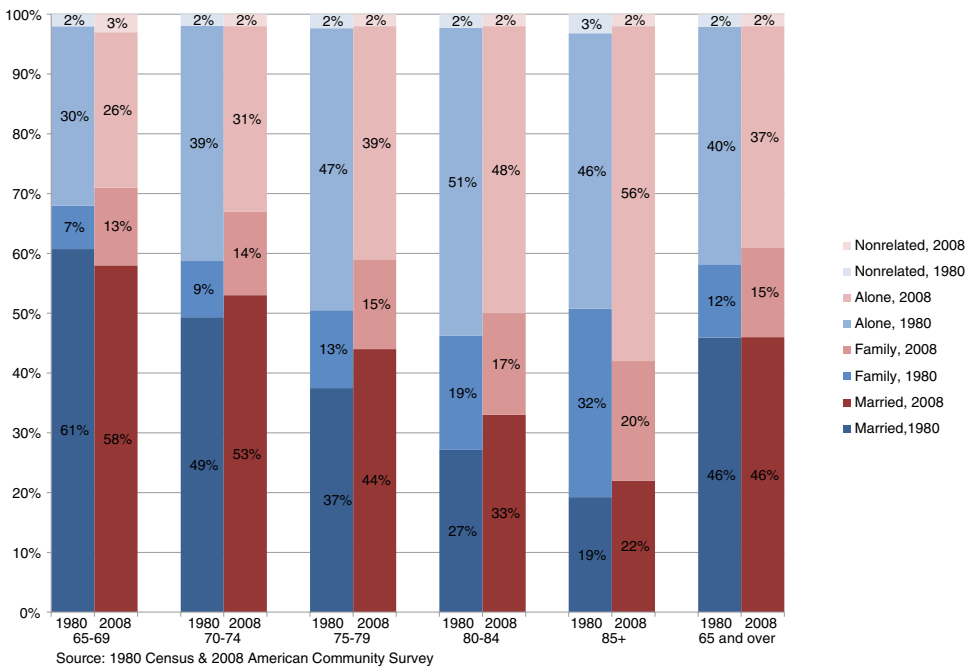


Fig. 13.4 Living arrangements by age for females, 1980 and 2008

Married with Spouse

These estimates differ slightly from the levels discussed earlier because we exclude in the denominator older Americans living in group quarters. Accordingly, these estimates are limited to older Americans who are not living in group quarters. Over the last 40 years, there has been a small decline in the proportion of older American men who were married, from 78% in 1980 to 71% in 2008 (Fig. 13.3). In 1980, young old men experienced the highest levels of living with a spouse (80–83%), and this declined to 55% among the oldest old. A similar age pattern existed in 2008.

There has been no change in the proportion of older women who live with a spouse (46%) in 1980 and in 2008 (Fig. 13.4). About three-fifths (61% in 1980 and 58% in 2008) of women 65–69 lived with their spouse. In both 1980 and 2008, oldest old women experienced a sharp decline in coresidence with their spouse; only 19% in 1980 and 22% in 2008 lived with their husband.

As discussed earlier, a greater proportion of older men than women lived with their spouse. In 1980, 46% of women and 77% of men were living with their spouse. The gender gradient in marriage increased with age, and the levels remained consistent in 1980 and 2008. In 2008, men 65–69 years old were 1.3 times more likely to be living with a spouse than women, while men 85 years old and older were 2.5 times more likely to be living with their spouse than women. Most women not residing with a spouse live alone, meaning they are at risk of lower levels of economic, socioemotional, and physical well-being.

Living with Family or Nonfamily Members

In 1980, it was relatively rare for older men to live with family members (5%) or nonfamily members (2%) (Fig. 13.3). Coresiding with family (7%) or nonfamily (3%) members remained uncommon in 2008. The proportion of men living with nonfamily members remained nearly constant across age groups. By contrast, in 1980, there was fourfold gap in the proportion of men living with family between the youngest and oldest age groups. About 4% men ages 65–59 and 16% of oldest old men lived with family members. In 2008, 6% of men ages 65–69 lived with family, and only 10% of oldest old men lived with family. Thus, there was a decline in the proportion of the oldest old men who were living with family members.

In 1980 and 2008, a similar proportion (2%) of older women lived with nonfamily members (Fig. 13.4). The low level of nonfamily coresidence persisted across age groups. In 1980, 12% of women lived with family members, and in 2008, about 15% lived with family. In 1980, 7% of 65–69-year-old women lived with family, and 32% of 85+ year-old women lived with family. By 2008, there appears to be an increase in family living among young older women (65–69) and a decline among older (85+) women. Consequently, in 2008, 13% of 65–69-year-old women lived with family members, and 20% of women aged 85 or older lived with family members.

There is no gender gap in the proportion of older Americans living with nonfamily members. However, in 2008, older women more often lived with family members (12%) than men (7%). At each age, women were more likely to live with family than men, and the proportion living with family increased with age. The gender gap is consistent across age groups at both time periods; women experience about 2–3 times higher levels of family coresidence than men. These patterns illustrate the closer family ties enjoyed by women relative to men. Among those residing without a spouse, both men and women are most likely to live with family members, but this is more pronounced among women and accounts for a larger share of all women. As family instability weakens men's ties to their children and other family members, we can anticipate that older men's coresidence with family members will proceed at a slower pace than that for older women.

Racial and Ethnic Variation

As discussed earlier, there were racial and ethnic distinctions in the proportion of older Americans who were living with a spouse. White men and women more often lived with a spouse than did black men or women. Very few (5%) white older men lived alone, while 15% of black and 16% of Hispanic men lived alone. About one-quarter of black men lived with family members in contrast to only 18% of white and 16% of Hispanic older men. Living with nonfamily members is relatively rare and quite similar across race and ethnic groups.

The majority of older women did not live with a spouse; two-fifths (42%) of white women, 36% of Hispanic women, and only about one-quarter of black women lived with their spouse. One-third of older black women lived alone, while 28% of older Hispanic women and 12% of older white women lived alone. Nearly two-fifths (38%) of black women lived with family members, representing the most common living arrangement among older black women. Similar proportion of black and white older women lived with family, and 28% of Hispanic older women lived with family. Only 2% of older women lived with nonfamily members, and this was similar for each race and ethnic group considered here.

New Union and Couple Forms

There are several union and couple experiences that are not captured with the traditional indicators of marital status and living arrangements, including cohabitation, LAT, and same sex unions. Although these less traditional couple relationships have received comparatively little attention in the gerontological literature, aging scholars have begun to call attention to the importance of examining these emerging union types (Cooney and Dunne 2001; Huyck 1995). As fewer older adults are married, a larger share is available to form nonmarital relationships. Whether these relationships offer benefits akin to marriage is largely unknown although some research has compared either the relationship quality (Brown and Kawamura *forthcoming*) or the psychological well-being of older cohabitators and marrieds (Brown et al. 2005) and shows that the union type gap in well-being is relatively modest. Here, we document the demographic trends in cohabitation, LAT, and same sex relationships.

Cohabitation

In recent decades, cohabitation, or the sharing of a household by an unmarried opposite-sex couple, has increased dramatically in the United States. This growth is not limited to younger adults but rather extends through older adulthood (Brown et al. 2006; Chevan 1996). The reasons for cohabiting later in life are distinctive. For instance, older adults may prefer to cohabit to retain financial autonomy and protect their wealth for eventual transfer to their heirs (Brown et al. 2005; Chevan 1996; King and Scott 2005). Among older adults, cohabitators tend to be younger than marrieds. Cohabitators are disproportionately black. Most older cohabitators are divorced (71%) as opposed to widowed (18%) or never married (11%) (Brown et al. 2006). Chevan's (1996) estimates using indirect measures of cohabitation revealed sustained growth in cohabitation between 1960 and 1990 for adults aged 60 and older. Direct measures indicate that by 2000, more than 400,000 persons in this age group were cohabiting (Brown et al. 2006). In 2008, the number of older Americans who were cohabiting increased, 4% of cohabiting couples had a member aged 65 or older (U.S. Census

Bureau 2009). Among older Americans living in an opposite sex relationships, about 2% were cohabiting, and 98% were married (U.S. Census Bureau 2009).

Living Apart Together

The concept of LAT relationships evolved from research in Europe (Levin 2004; Haskey and Lewis 2006) and has extended to the United States (Strohm et al. 2009). These relationships are committed, long-term intimate unions in which couples do not share a home but rather maintain separate residences. Most of the United States and European studies are limited to younger age groups, and only a few examine patterns among older adults. De Jong Gierveld (2004) focused on Dutch respondents aged 50 and older who experienced widowhood or divorce and found that one-third of those who repartnered after age 50 were in LAT relationships. She concluded that older adults are more likely to live apart together than their younger counterparts (De Jong Gierveld 2004). Research in Sweden indicates that this arrangement is increasingly common among older couples as a strategy to engage in emotional support with some level of autonomy (Karlsson and Borell 2002). This seems to be a relationship that may be especially well suited to older Americans who can afford to live separately and want to maintain some autonomy while experiencing the benefits of a close intimate bond. Unfortunately, estimates of LAT relationships among older adults in the United States are not available.

Gays and Lesbians

Research on gay and lesbian family experiences is typically restricted to young ages, excluding older Americans. Of course, older Americans are part of same sex couples, too. Recent data permit measurement of the prevalence of same sex households in the United States. In the 2007 American Community Survey, just over 10% (11.3%) of same sex couple households had one member over the age of 65. A greater proportion of these were male (60%) than female (40%) couples. Seventy-one percent of same-sex older couple households had coresided for 5 years or more (Bennett and Gates 2004). According to the 2000 census, almost every county (97%) had an older same-sex American (Gates 2003).

Given new legislation about marriage among same-sex couples and the development of domestic partnership agreements, there are more options available for older Americans. The legal definitions of these relationships are significant when one member of the couple dies (Bennett and Gates 2004). The social security benefits are lower, and taxes on inheritance and retirement plans are larger among gays and lesbians than among married couples (Bennett and Gates 2004). Gay and lesbian older Americans also face constraints due to Medicaid and property laws that may make it difficult for partners to remain in their home following their partner's move to a nursing home or death (Bennett and Gates 2004).

Conclusion

The aging of the U.S. population coupled with rapid changes in family formation and dissolution earlier in the life course has contributed to shifts in the marital status and living arrangements of older men and women over the last 30 years (Chevan 1996; Cooney and Dunne 2001). This chapter documents

changes in the marital status and living arrangement distributions of women and men between 1980 and 2008 using data from the decennial census and the American Community Survey. We also describe racial and ethnic variation in these patterns. These changes are discussed in terms of the family change approach, which emphasizes how shifting economic, normative, and institutional constraints have contributed to family change. These patterns are informative for researchers and policymakers alike, as an increasingly diverse older population likely will require an array of both informal and formal supports as they age. Specifically, with fewer older adults married and more living alone, increased institutional supports will be needed. New family forms, such as cohabitation, LAT, and same sex relationships also merit careful study to determine the costs and benefits of these unions relative to other living arrangements. These new living arrangements appear to be here to stay and represent the future of families. Moreover, much can be learned by considering the full range of families which move beyond just legal heterosexual marriages. For example, family change means that traditionally taken for granted intergenerational family ties are more complex and disrupted. Among younger samples, there is lower social support for gay and lesbian couples (Kurdek 2004) and cohabiting couples (Eggebeen 2005), which is suggestive of what may happen among older Americans who do not engage in traditional marital relationships.

Similar to the overall U.S. population, marriage among older adults has declined since 1980. This decline has been more pronounced among men than women. For women, the proportion married has changed very little. Consistent with the projections made in prior research (Wade 1989), widowhood has fallen, whereas divorce has risen among women. Men are also much more likely to be divorced today than they were in 1980. The share of men who are never married remains essentially unchanged, even though it was projected to double between 1990 and 2040 (Wade 1989). More recent projections indicate that the proportion of older adults married will continue to decline with a corresponding increase in the never married. The proportion divorced should stabilize in the coming years (Tamborini 2007). These levels of divorce will most likely have negative implications. Lin (2010) reports that divorced parents expect less support from children, and divorced men are most likely to experience a retraction of their children's support in old age.

Living alone is more common today than in 1980, and a larger share of women than men reside solo. Family and nonfamily living arrangements remain rare. The vast majority of older adults are residing either with a spouse or alone, and this is especially true among whites. Blacks are relatively less likely to be married and more likely to reside with family, reflecting the racial and ethnic variation characterizing the living arrangements of older adults (Himes et al. 1996).

This examination of changes in marital status and living arrangements does not capture all family and relationship types that exist among older Americans. For instance, our measure of marriage does not distinguish between first and higher order marriages. Remarriage among older Americans in 1980 was largely a function of widowhood rather than divorce. In 1980, most widowed older Americans did not remarry; just 1% of women and 25% of men remarried (Moss and Moss 1981). More recent analysis of remarriage is warranted, as remarriage and stepfamilies are linked to variation in support in older adulthood (Curran et al. 2003; Lin 2010).

Our descriptive analyses rely on cross-sectional data to provide a snapshot of older adults at two points in time. This approach is useful because it illustrates the distribution of older adults across marital status or living arrangement categories, but it obscures the broader trajectories of relationship histories that unfolded earlier in the life course. Increasingly diverse family and living arrangement experiences during young and middle adulthood have enduring consequences for later life (Cooney and Dunne 2001). At the same time, older adults experience living arrangement transitions and, from a life course perspective, these transitions are contingent upon earlier events and experiences (Wilmoth 1998). Voluntary (e.g., marriage or divorce) vs. involuntary (e.g., widowhood) transitions may have differential effects on older adult well-being.

For these reasons and to better test union formation and stability theories, future work on the demography of unions in later life would benefit from a longitudinal approach that incorporates

family and living arrangement transitions both prior to and during older adulthood to provide a more nuanced portrait of the family and relationship experiences of older adults. In the last 30 years, new and on-going data collections have offered longitudinal (e.g. NLSY, NSFH, WLS) and periodic cross-sectional (e.g., NSFG, CPS, Census) assessments. To best understand the experiences of family life among older Americans in the next 30 years requires investment in longitudinal data collection of young and middle age adults today. In addition, men and women experience relationships differently, but few large-scale studies include information from both men and women or couples. Indeed, intimate relationships outside of marriage have risen in recent years. Growing attention has been paid to unmarried intimate relationships among older adults, including cohabitation, LAT, and same sex relationships (Cooney and Dunne 2001). Still, little is known about the prevalence of these union types or the determinants of entry and exit from these unions (Brown et al. 2006). As they become more common, especially with the movement of the baby boom cohort into older adulthood, it will be more feasible to incorporate these emerging relationship types in large, national surveys to generate new scholarship on the demography of these unions. This line of inquiry will be enriched by theoretical developments concerning the meaning and significance of these new partnerships for the health and well-being of older adults.

We focus on *coresidential* relationships, including marriage, cohabitation, and family household membership and therefore do not examine romantic or sexual relationships. Qualitative evidence suggests that dating among older adults following widowhood or divorce is fairly common (Bulcroft and Bulcroft 1991; Cooney and Dunne 2001), although women are less likely to desire remarriage than men (Talbot 1998). There are few empirical studies of dating, with Carr's (2004) recent work a notable exception. She finds that widowers' interest in dating is greatest when they lack other forms of social support, whereas widows' interest in dating does not depend on levels of support from friends.

In addition to dating relationships, new research is emerging on sexual activity among older adults. Waite (2009) maintains that sexual functioning is integral to overall well-being in later life. Even though research often assumes that older Americans are not sexually active, Lindau et al. (2007) report that in a sample of partnered older adults, 67% of men and 40% of women aged 65–74 report being sexually active in the last 12 months, while 39% of men and 17% of women aged 75–84 did. These figures are from the recently fielded National Social Life, Health, and Aging Project (NSHAP), which provides detailed data on the relationship and sexual behaviors of Americans ages 57–84. The declining share of married older adults translates into rising proportions at risk of forming new sexual partnerships, which not only may have ramifications for access to social support but also for physical and mental health.

Older adults are a growing share of the U.S. population. In fact, the oldest old are the fastest growing age group today (National Center for Health Statistics 2009). The older adult population, which is diverse in terms of racial and ethnic composition, has witnessed significant changes in marriage and living arrangements since 1980. The decline in marriage coupled with increase in divorce and living alone have consequences for the well-being, care, and support of older adults. Shifts to more complex family living arrangements, including the emergence of unmarried partnerships, have led to more varied types of support networks. Mounting evidence suggests that men will pay a higher cost for less stable family life by having limited support networks in old age (Lin 2010). Theoretical perspectives on family change must pay attention to the shifting demographic foundations of families and households across the life course.

Family change has not been experienced in the same way by all Americans. We have shown differentials according to gender and race/ethnicity, but there are also likely socioeconomic differences in living arrangements and relationships among older Americans. Consistent with both the family change approach and a life course perspective, these social inequalities in family formation and stability have ripple effects and continue to exist among older Americans.

The demography of unions in older adulthood has important social policy implications. Institutional supports will be needed to serve a growing, heterogeneous population that will have fewer forms of

informal support to draw from. Lengthening life expectancies will only exacerbate these trends. Policymakers must be aware of the wider array of family situations characterizing older adulthood to ensure responsive policies are developed and maintained that reach across the range of relationship and living circumstances experienced by older adults. Close relationships play an integral role in the health and well-being of older adults, and formal institutional supports, particularly large government-sponsored initiatives, have the potential to greatly enhance the lives of the aged.

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