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Comparison of Three Levels of Divorce in Whitfield County, State of Georgia, and the United States in Two Decades, 1990-2009

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Cover Page Footnote

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Comparison of Three Levels of Divorce in Whitfield County, State of Georgia, and the United States in Two Decades, 1990-2009

Abstract:

In this paper, there is an investigation of the North West Georgia divorce ratios in 1990-2010 and how they are related to the same ratios in the State of Georgia and the United States as a whole. The data showed that there was a decline in divorce ratios on the three levels. However, the North West Georgia divorce ratios were still much higher than the State and the national ratios.

Comparison of Three Levels of Divorce in Whitfield County, State of Georgia, and the United States in Two Decades, 1990-2009

I. INTRODUCTION AND STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

During the 1990s, divorce ratios sky rocketed in North West Georgia. However, these ratios declined then leveled off during the first decade of the twenty-first century. This author has been interested in investigating this phenomenon because of its North West Georgia uniqueness and because of its relationship to the same trend in the larger contexts of the State of Georgia and the United States as a whole. Data about divorce ratios was collected, tabulated, illustrated, and compared for the three levels of the investigation.

This paper focuses on the documentation of the divorce ratio trend on the three levels of the investigation, as a first stage in a larger research endeavor, which will be followed by an investigation to explain it.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Divorce rates in the United States started to rise sharply in the 1970s, continued to rise to a climax in 1979-1981, then stabilized during the 1980s, and started to decline in the 1990s. The sharp rise in the 1970s could be due to instituting the no-fault divorce laws, the feminist movement empowering of women, and the availability of contraceptives (Cole and Broussard, 2006).

The increase in women's age at marriage was the main proximate cause of the decrease in divorce rates after the 1980s peak. The rise in age at marriage in general also can explain the decrease in divorce rates in the 1990s (Rontz, 2012).

Recessions and economic downturns may contribute to a decline in divorce due to people's tendency to stay together at times of financial hardships (Wilcox, 2009).

Divorce has also become an expected outcome of marriage, as society has created and maintained a divorce culture, which lessened the social pressure to stay married (Adams and Coltrane, 2007).

Authors of the "The State of Our Unions: Marriage in America" demonstrated that divorce rates rose in the 1970s and the 1980s, slightly declined in the 1990s, then rose again in the first decade of the twenty-first century. They also demonstrated that the numbers of cohabiting couples of men and women have been continuously rising from 0.439 of a million in 1960 to 7.599 million in 2011. Finally, they demonstrated that live births for unmarried women have been ever increasing since 1960. In 2011, live births reached 72.3% to unmarried black women, 29.1% to unmarried White women, and 53.3% to unmarried Hispanic women (Marquardt et al, 2012).

The continuous rise in cohabitation might have also contributed to more divorce, as the divorce rates among couples who cohabit before marriage are higher than those who do not. Likewise, rising live births to unmarried women might have contributed to rising divorce rates, as the divorce rates among couples who have children before marriage are higher than those who do not (Wilcox, 2009).

Men and women in the South had higher rates of divorce in 2009 than in other regions of the country, 10.2 per 1,000 for men and 11.1 per 1,000 for women, according to a report from the U.S. Census Bureau. The national divorce rate was 9.2 for men and 9.7 for women. "Divorce rates tend to be higher in the South because marriage rates are also higher in the South," said Diana Elliott, a family demographer at the Census Bureau. In 2009, Georgia was among 14 southern states which had divorce rates for men and women that were significantly above the U.S. average (U.S. Census, 2011).

In 2009, divorce rate in Georgia was about 11.6 per 1,000 inhabitants. This was higher the U.S. rate of 9.5. Among the variables which may explain this high Georgia divorce rate, compared with those of Minnesota (7.6), were more marriages (22.3 per 1,000), less high school graduates (70.9%), more blacks (30% of the population) who have higher rates of divorce (49%) than whites (41%), and more households under poverty level (12.7%) than in Minnesota (Divorce Science, 2011).

In 2010, Dalton, Georgia, was described as 11th highest divorce capital in the U.S., with a divorced population of 13.4% (The Daily Beast, 2010). In reaction to this Dalton phenomenon, Kathy McGhee Schleier, a city resident who got divorced in 1989, established the Northwest Georgia Marriage Initiative, which later became the Family

Frameworks, a non-profit organization which aims at preventing divorce through working with the area churches (Millican, 2012).

The Family Frameworks started in 2004 with a grant from the federal Healthy Marriage Initiative. It has been teaching classes about marriage at high schools of Whitfield and Murray counties and offering premarital and marital counseling services (Schleier, 2015).

III. HYPOTHESES

On the basis of the literature review, I formulated the following two hypotheses:

First, I hypothesized that North West Georgia reflected the general trends of divorce ratios in the State of Georgia and the United States, during the previous two decades.

Second, I hypothesized that North West Georgia had very much higher divorce ratios than the State of Georgia and the U.S. levels, during the investigated period.

IV. METHODOLOGY

Data Sources

This author collected the data about marriage and divorce in Whitfield County, North West Georgia, in the 1990s, from the Courthouse official records at the City of Dalton. He also obtained the data about marriage and divorce in 2000-2009 from the Executive Director of Family Frameworks, in Dalton, Georgia.

This author also obtained the State-level and national-level data about marriage and divorce from the published reports of two US government agencies (US Government Census and the Center for Disease Control), and two other sources (Divorce Reform and Info Please), which are also listed as sources for the data tables and referenced fully in the bibliography.

Ratios as a Measure of Divorce Trends

Although five measures of divorce have been identified in the literature review, two of them have been in more use despite the shortcomings associated with each one of them. These are the refined divorce rate and the divorce ratio.

The main shortcoming of the refined divorce rate is that it compares a variable that occurs in a year (number of divorces) with another that refers to many years or even a life time (number of all married women in the population). The outcome is a very small figure, which gives a false sense that there are just few divorces.

The divorce ratio is used in this paper because it stands as the most accurate in measuring trends of divorce, as it compares two variables that occur in the same year (divorces and marriages). However, there should be no claim about predicting the possibility of divorce among married people, on the basis of divorce ratios.

The crude divorce rate is faulty and cannot be considered reliable as it includes children, the elderly, and the unmarried. The prediction formula has been described as tricky and complicated.

Only in longitudinal studies of the same couples, we can get the real percentage of divorce. However, longitudinal studies are very expensive and time consuming.

Calculating Divorce Ratios

Divorce ratios for any investigated year were obtained by dividing the real number of divorces by the real number of marriages in any of the three investigated levels: Local, State, and national levels.

Because there is an interest in this paper to compare two decades, marriage and divorce statistics for each investigated decade were also added up. Then, the total number of completed divorce cases was divided by the total number of granted marriage licenses. The result was the overall divorce percentage, or ratio, for the investigated decade, in addition to the full investigated two-decade period.

Background on the Use of Divorce Measures

Some of the main marriage and family textbook authors, such as Aulette (2002: 256-257), identified five main measures of divorce. These are crude divorce rate, refined divorce rate, divorce ratio, percentage of divorce from longitudinal studies, and prediction of divorce formula.

Strong et al (2005: 492-493) outlined the three main sociological measures of divorce. The first measure is the crude divorce rate, which is represented by the number of divorces in a given year per 1,000 people. It's an inaccurate measure as it includes children, the elderly, and the unmarried adults. Second, the refined divorced rate, which measures the number of divorces that occur in a given year, divided by the number of married women in that year, and multiplying the outcome by 1,000. Third, the ratio measure of divorce, which is calculated by dividing the number of divorces by the number of marriages in a given year. It can be misleading if one of them stays the same while the other changes from one year to another. The authors also added a fourth measure, the predictive divorce rate, but mentioned that it is tricky and too complicated, as it attempts to predict the future on the basis of past experiences.

Shehan (2003: 410-412) explained the calculation of the refined divorce rate, by dividing the number of divorces in a year by the number of all married women in the same year. This results in a decimal fraction that can be removed by multiplying it by 1,000 (following the method used in the federal government statistics).

The three main measures of divorce were outlined with mentioning their shortcoming by many marriage and family textbook authors, such as Coltrane and Collins (2001: 506-507), Knox and Schacht (2008: 426-427), Lamanna and Riedmann (2000:450-451), Marquardt et al. of the National Marriage Project (2012: 67), Newman and Grauerholz (2002: 444), Olson et al (2014, 9-10), Schwartz and Scott (2007: 404-405), Shehan (2003: 410-412), Welch (2007: 434-435).

V. DATA

DOCUMENTATION OF CHANGE IN DIVORCE RATIOS

This section of the paper focuses on the documentation of the changes in divorce ratios on the three levels of North West Georgia, the State of Georgia, and the United States as a whole.

Divorce Ratios in Whitfield County, North West Georgia, in 1990-2009

As reported in **Table 1**, the total number of completed divorces in Whitfield County, North West Georgia, during the two decades of 1990-2000, was 11,722. The total number of granted marriage licenses in the same period was 9,457. By dividing the number of divorces by the number of marriages during the investigated period, a divorce ratio of 123.9% was obtained for Whitfield County during the period of 1990-2000.

While this statistic indicates a very high ratio of divorce, it represents the entire period of the two investigated decades together. A closer look at each one of them may show whether there was a difference between them or not.

The total number of completed divorces during the ten years of the 1990s was 7,241. The total number of granted marriage licenses was 4,749. By dividing the number of divorces by the number of marriages during the investigated period, a divorce rate of 152.4% was obtained for Whitfield County during the 1990s.

Marriage and divorce statistics for 2000-2009 in Whitfield County were added up. Then, the total number of completed divorce cases was divided by the total number of granted marriage licenses (4481 / 4708). The resulting overall divorce ratio was 95.1% in Whitfield County, during the first decade of the twenty-first century, as reported in **Table 1**.

Table 1
Marriage and Divorce in Whitfield County in 1990-2009

YEAR	NUMBER OF MARRIAGES	NUMBER OF DIVORCES	DIVORCE RATIOS
1990	352	781	221.8
1991	646	770	119.1
1992	470	788	167.6
1993	430	777	180.6
1994	480	732	152.5
1995	467	685	146.6
1996	433	702	162.1
1997	425	713	167.7
1998	629	645	102.5
1999	417	648	155.3
2000	459	692	150.7
2001	600	593	98.8
2002	541	671	124.0
2003	864	521	60.3
2004	662	189	28.5
2005	171	210	122.8
2006	394	454	115.2
2007	415	454	109.3
2008	365	462	126.5
2009	237	235	99.1
TOTAL NUMBERS	9,457	11,722	123.9%
AVERAGE PER YEAR	473	586	123.9%

Table Sources: Whitfield County Courthouse Annex and Family Frameworks, Dalton, Georgia. ⁱ

Divorce Ratios in the State of Georgia, in 1990-2009

As reported in **Table 2**, the total number of completed divorces in the State of Georgia, during the two decades of 1990-2004, was 505,964. The total number of granted

marriage licenses in the same period was 923,107. By dividing the number of divorces by the number of marriages during the investigated period, a divorce ratio of 55% was obtained for the State of Georgia, during the period of 1990-2004.

While this statistic indicates a high ratio of divorce, it represents the entire period of the two investigated decades together. A closer look at each one of them may show whether there was a difference between them or not.

The total number of completed divorces during the ten years of the 1990s was 372,007. The total number of granted marriage licenses was 631,123. By dividing the number of divorces by the number of marriages during the investigated period, a divorce ratio of 58.9% was obtained for the State of Georgia during the 1990s.

The total number of completed divorces during the five-year period of 2000-2004 of available data was 133,957. The total number of granted marriage licenses was 291,984. By dividing the number of divorces by the number of marriages during the investigated period, a divorce ratio of 45.8% was obtained for the State of Georgia during the years 2000-2004.

Table 2

Marriage and Divorce in the State of Georgia in 1990-2009

YEAR	NUMBER OF MARRIAGES	NUMBER OF DIVORCES	DIVORCE RATIOS
1990	66,800	35,700	53.4
1991	70,500	42,000	59.5
1992	63,400	39,600	62.4
1993	61,577	38,349	62.2
1994	62,879	37,001	58.8
1995	61,555	37,209	60.4
1996	60,092	35,909	59.7
1997	61,915	36,259	58.5
1998	59,763	35,753	59.8
1999	62,642	34,227	54.6
2000	56,031	30,734	54.8
2001	51,099	25,968 *	50.8
2002	55,432	21,308	38.4
2003	60,525	27,693	45.7
2004	68,897	28,254 **	41.0
2005	62,893	-	-
2006	66,456	-	-
2007	64,034	-	-

2008	57,361	-	-
2009	63,640	-	-
TOTAL NUMBERS	923,107	505,964	55%
AVERAGE PER YEAR	61,540	33,731	55%

Table 2 Sources: CDC, Census Bureau, Divorce Reform, Info Please

See Endnote ⁱⁱ for details and full references of Table 2 sources.

Divorce Ratios in the United States, During the 1990s

The author of this paper obtained data about marriage and divorce in the United States from 1990 to 1999 from the official published reports of the US federal government agency, the CDC, and two other websites.

As reported in **Table 3**, the total number of completed divorces in the United States, during the ten years of the 1990s, was 11,519,384. The total number of granted marriage licenses in the United States for the same investigated period was 23,555,000.

By dividing the number of divorces by the number of marriages during the investigated period, a divorce ratio of 48.9% was obtained for the United States during the 1990s.

Divorce Ratios in the United States in 2000-2009

The author of this paper obtained data about marriage and divorce in the United States from 2000 to 2009 from the official published reports of the US federal government agency, the CDC, and two other websites.

As reported in **Table 3**, the total number of completed divorces in the United States, during the ten years of 2000-2009, was 8,904,000. The total number of granted marriage licenses in the United States for the same investigated period was 22,331,000.

By dividing the number of divorces by the number of marriages during the investigated period, a divorce ratio of 39.8% was obtained for the United States during the investigated decade of 2000-2009.

Table 3**Marriage and Divorce in the United States in 1990-2009**

YEAR	NUMBER OF MARRIAGES	NUMBER OF DIVORCES	DIVORCE RATIOS
1990	2,448,000	1,175,000	47.9
1991	2,371,000	1,187,000	50.0
1992	2,362,000	1,215,000	51.4
1993	2,334,000	1,187,000	50.8
1994	2,362,000	1,191,000	50.4
1995	2,336,000	1,169,000	50.0
1996	2,344,000	1,150,000	49.0
1997	2,384,000	1,163,000	48.7
1998	2,256,000	1,135,000	50.3
1999	2,358,000	947,384	40.1
2000	2,315,000	944,000	40.7
2001	2,326,000	940,000	40.4
2002	2,290,000	955,000	41.7
2003	2,245,000	927,000	41.2
2004	2,279,000	879,000	38.5
2005	2,249,000	847,000	37.6
2006	2,193,000	872,000	39.7
2007	2,197,000	856,000	38.9
2008	2,157,000	844,000	39.1
2009	2,080,000	840,000	40.3
TOTAL	45,886,000	20,423,384	44.5
AVERAGE	2,294,000	1,021,000	44.5%

Table 3 Sources: CDC, Divorce Reform, Info Please

See Endnote ⁱⁱⁱ for details and full references of Table 3 sources.

V. DATA ANALYSIS:

COMPARISON OF DIVORCE RATIOS AMONG THE THREE LEVELS

A comparison of divorce ratios between the three levels of this investigation (North West Georgia, the State of Georgia, and the United States as a whole), demonstrates several similarities with the literature review.

First, divorce rates leveled off during the 1990s, after the sharp rise in the 1970s and the 1980s. Second, divorce ratios in the State of Georgia were higher than those of the United States as a whole. Third, though divorce ratios in North West Georgia declined even more in the first decade of the twenty-first century, these ratios were still much higher than the U.S. and Georgia ratios, as illustrated in the **Linear Graph 1**.

Actually, the North West Georgia divorce ratio in 1990 represented a continuation of the high divorce ratios of the 1980s (221.8%), which then declined to the average of 157.5% for the 1990s, as demonstrated in the Linear Graph and Table 1. However, the declining trend continued to the average of 103.5% during the first decade of the twenty-first century. This may be considered a difference from the leveled off ratios in the State of Georgia and the United States as a whole, as demonstrated in the Linear Graph 1 and Table 2.

More specifically, the U.S. divorce ratios leveled off in the 1990s. Then, these ratios declined in 1999 and leveled off during the first decade of the twenty-first century.

For the State of Georgia, divorce ratios leveled off during most of the 1990s and declined in 1999. Then, these ratios leveled off during the documented years of 2000-2004.

Thus, the data from the three levels of the investigation supported my first hypothesis that North West Georgia reflected the general trends of rising, leveling off, and declining divorce ratios in the State of Georgia and the United States, during the investigated two decades.

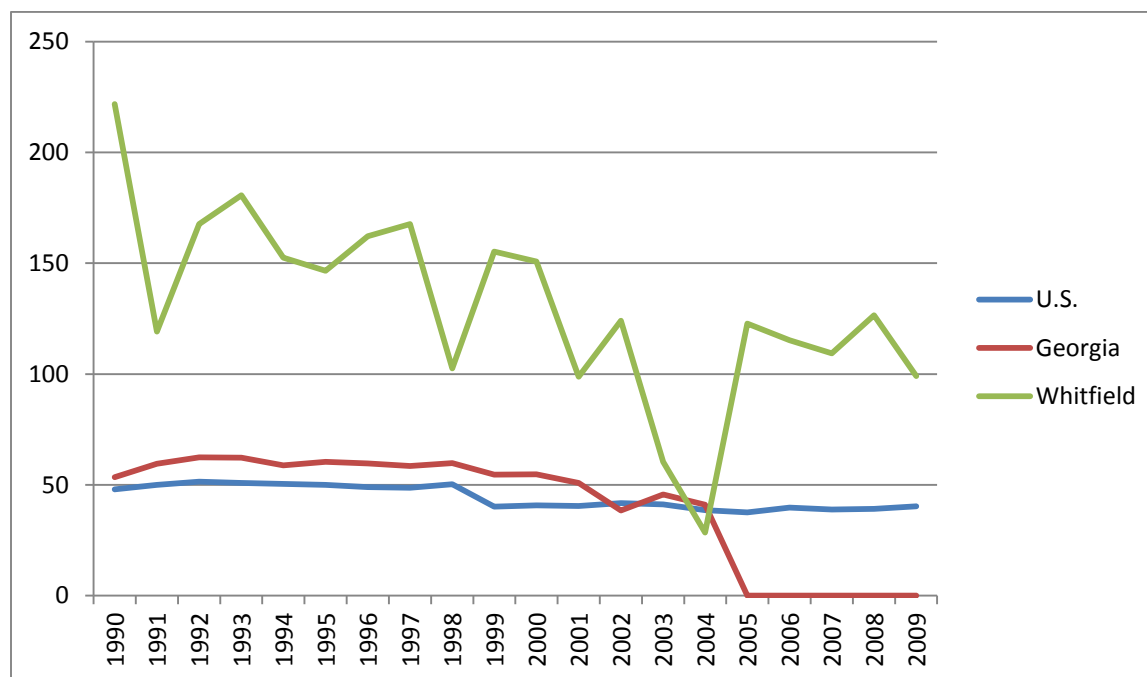
The data also supported my second hypothesis that North West Georgia had very much higher divorce ratios than the State of Georgia and the U.S. levels during the investigated period.

During the 1990s, divorce ratios averaged about 48.9% in the United States and about 58.9% in the State of Georgia. However, divorce rates averaged about 152% in North West Georgia, which is more than three times higher than the United States and two and a half more times higher than the State of Georgia.

The same trend can also be observed during the first decade of the twenty-first century. Divorce ratios averaged about 39.8% in the United States and about 45.9% in the State of Georgia. However, divorce ratios averaged about 95% in North West Georgia, which is more than twice higher than both of the United States and the State of Georgia.

Linear Graph 1

Divorce Ratios in the U.S., State of Georgia, and Whitfield County, in 1990-2009



These trends of leveling off during the 1990s, then the decline and leveling off during the first decade of the twenty-first century are very clear for Whitfield County, as illustrated by Linear Graph 1. However, the graph does not show the same clarity for the State of Georgia and the US trends. Apparently, this is because the County data dwarfed the data from the other two levels. When data from the US and the State of Georgia is illustrated without the presence of the County data, then the divorce ratio trends become clear.

VI. Conclusion

The data from the three levels of the investigation supported the first hypothesis that North West Georgia reflected the general trends of rising, leveling off, and declining divorce ratios in the State of Georgia and the United States, during the investigated two decades.

The data also supported the second hypothesis that North West Georgia had very much higher divorce ratios than the State of Georgia and the U.S. levels during the investigated period.

The main findings from this paper about the astonishing high divorce ratios in North West Georgia in particular, and the State of Georgia as a whole, beg the need for further research and more efforts to address this phenomenon.

Primary research is needed to help explain this phenomenon. We not only need to know from divorced Georgians about what's in common between them and other divorced Americans but also what's unique about them.

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Endnotes About Detailed Sources of the Tables

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Marriage and divorce statistics for various years are from:

http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/products/mvsr.htm#43_12s

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For years 1998-1999:

<http://www.divorcereform.org/98-00divorces.html>

- The State of Georgia Department of Public Health (<http://dph.georgia.gov/>) stopped combining divorce statistics and providing them to the CDC starting from 2005. This explains the absence of the Georgia divorce statistics for the period 2005-2009 in this paper.

Sources:

For various years:

http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nvsr/nvsr58/nvsr58_25.htm

<http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/products/nvsr.htm>

https://www.census.gov/compendia/statab/cats/births_deaths_marriages_divorces/marriages_and_divorces.html

For Year 2000:

<http://www.divorcereform.org/98-00divorces.html>

* The divorce statistic for year 2001 was calculated from the rate of 3.1 out of 8.377 million Georgia inhabitants.

** The divorce statistic for year 2004 was calculated from the rate of 3.2 out of 8.829,383 Georgia inhabitants. <http://www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0923080.html>

iii **Table 3 Sources:**

For the 1999 divorce statistic:

<http://www.divorcereform.org/98-00divorces.html>

For marriage statistics, years 1990-1998:

<http://www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0005044.html>

http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nvss/marriage_divorce_tables.htm

Source: For marriage statistics, years 2000-2009:

http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nvss/marriage_divorce_tables.htm