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Variables Associated with Divorce in Northwest Georgia, 2007-2016

I. INTRODUCTION AND STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

During the last three decades of the twentieth century, divorce ratios sky rocketed in Northwest Georgia, reflecting a considerable increase in the State of Georgia and the United States as a whole. However, these ratios started to decline in the 1990s then leveled off in the first decade of the twenty-first century. This paper focuses on the explanation of divorce as reported by divorced interviewees in Northwest Georgia during the years 2007-2008 and 2014-2015.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A review of research showed that the divorce ratio in the United States increased dramatically from the 1960s to the 1980s and then gradually dropped. The common belief that about half of all marriages end in divorce is approximately true. Research also showed that the decline in the divorce ratio is attributed to the rise in age of first marriage and increase in educational levels. Studies showed that demographic and economic predictors of divorce included marrying as a teen, poverty, unemployment, low educational levels, cohabitation, premarital birth, bringing children from a prior relationship to the marriage, marrying out of race, second or third marriages, and growing up in a household without two continuously married parents. Interpersonal predictors of divorce included domestic violence, frequent conflict, infidelity, perceived relationship problems, weak commitment to marriage, and low levels of love and trust between spouses (Amato, 2010).

Divorce has 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). The result is that divorce is now linked to the pursuit of satisfaction. Even the presence of children is not a deterrent to divorce if such satisfaction is no longer there (Olson et al. 2014: 466).

Young age at marriage has been identified as a major cause of divorce. When women's age at marriage increased, it contributed to a decrease in divorce rates after the 1980s peak. Thus, the rise in age at marriage in general can explain the decrease in divorce rates in the 1990s (Rotz, 2012). Women's employment also has been found to increase divorce in unhappy marriages (Schoen et al. 2002).

Recessions and economic downturns may contribute to a decline in divorce due to people's tendency to stay together at times of financial hardships. However, the continuous rise in cohabitation might have 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).

To sum up, there are some well-known factors that put people at higher risk for divorce in the United States. These include marrying at a very early age, less education, low income, living together before marriage, a premarital pregnancy, no religious affiliation, coming from a divorced family, and feelings of insecurity. However, the most common reasons people give for their divorce are lack of commitment, too much arguing, infidelity, marrying too young, unrealistic expectations, lack of equality in the relationship, lack of preparation for marriage, and abuse (Doherty, 2013: 41).

Infidelity as a Major Reason for Divorce

National panel data collected between 1980 and 1997 was used to classify 208 people's open ended responses to a question on why their marriages ended in divorce. **Infidelity** was the most commonly reported cause, followed by incompatibility, drinking or drug use, and growing apart (Amato and Previti, 2003).

In a study about susceptibility to infidelity in the first year of marriage, researchers identified six types of infidelity with a member of the opposite sex. These are flirting, passionately kissing, going on a romantic date, having a one night stand, having a brief affair, and having a serious affair. Researchers found out that infidelity may be explained by personality traits, such as low conscientiousness, high narcissism, and high psychoticism. They also found that there were relationship contexts most strongly linked to susceptibility to infidelity, particularly sexual dissatisfaction and specific sources of conflict, such as partner complaints about jealousy (Buss and Shackelford, 1997).

In another study about infidelity of newlywed couples, an analysis of two longitudinal studies of 207 newlywed marriages demonstrated that own and partner attachment anxiety interacted to predict marital infidelity. This was explained by the argument that spouses were more likely to perpetrate infidelity when either they or their partner was high (vs. low) in attachment anxiety (Russell et al., 2015).

Infidelity was also found associated with economic dependency of partners. Breadwinning increases infidelity for men but decreases it for women. By remaining faithful, breadwinning women neutralize their gender deviance and keep potentially strained relationships intact. However, the influence of dependency on men's infidelity is greater than the influence of dependency on women's infidelity. For economically dependent persons, infidelity may be an attempt to restore relationship equity. However, for men, dependence may be particularly threatening. Thus, infidelity may allow

economically-dependent men to engage in compensatory behavior while simultaneously distancing themselves from breadwinning spouses (Munsch, 2015).

Sexual infidelity was reported by 291 (11.2%) of 2,598 of married and cohabiting Americans, who participated in the 1992 National Health and Social Life Survey. Researchers conducted a statistical analysis of the survey and reached a number of conclusions. They found out that infidelity was associated with personal values or preferences, constraints or sexual opportunities, and marital relationships. People who were more interested in sex were more likely to have multiple partners but people with non-permissive values were less likely to engage in sexual infidelity. Prior sexual experiences were also found positively associated with infidelity. However, those who often attended religious services were less likely to have had multiple sex partners. Moreover, infidelity was found associated with sexual opportunities in the workplace, cohabitation, and subjective dissatisfaction with a union. No association with gender was found. When interest in sex and permissiveness of sexual values are controlled for, men and women may engage in infidelity alike (Treas and Giesen, 2000).

III. HYPOTHESES

On the basis of the literature review, the following three hypotheses were formulated:

First, divorce in Northwest Georgia maybe associated with the lack of readiness for marriage, which is reflected in a cluster of variables that includes young age, low-levels of education, absence of conflict resolution skills, and financial problems.

Second, divorce may be associated with marriage dissatisfaction, which is reflected in such variables as abuse, negative external influences, and lack of satisfying spousal needs and expectations.

Third, infidelity is the major given reason for divorce, which happens in association with marriage dissatisfaction and lack of readiness for marriage.

IV. METHODOLOGY

The data was collected through 191 **face-to-face interviews with divorced individuals** in Northwest Georgia in 2007-2008 and in 2014-2016. Interviewees lived in several cities in the region, particularly in Dalton, Ringgold, Calhoun, Chatsworth, and Ellijay.

The 2007-2008 dataset is composed of 97 interviews and the 2014-2016 dataset is composed of 94 interviews. The two data sets were combined into one for the use of this paper because there were no significant differences in the results to allow a comparison.

The interviews were conducted by college students, who attended this author's Marriage and Family course, and used the data in their papers. They were instructed to ask interviewees the three open-ended questions:

1. What was your age at marriage, level of education, marriage span, and racial background?
2. What was / were the major reason / reasons for your divorce?
3. What were the major consequences of your divorce?

While there was a total of 191 interviews, some data was missing in each of the above-mentioned five variables. Thus, there were 154 answers about age, 148 about education, 141 about marriage span, and 156 about the racial background.

All interviewees gave answers about their divorce, which included several reasons in many cases. However, infidelity was the most frequently reported reason for divorce, as it was mentioned in 107 interviews. As a result, the reported variables associated with divorce are not mutually exclusive. It is note-worthy that all interviewees, who mentioned infidelity as a reason for their divorce, reported that it was the other spouse who was involved in infidelity. No interviewee mentioned that he/she was the one was involved in it.

Finally, the variable of substance abuse combined two reasons of divorce. These were drug abuse, which was mentioned by 12 interviewees and alcohol abuse, which was mentioned by 8 interviewees.

V. DATA

Table 1 summarizes the findings of this study. It shows that from a total of 156 answers about the interviewees' **racial background**, 135 (86.5%) of them were European Americans. The rest were Latinos, African Americans, Asian Americans, and Native Americans. This shows that this sample of divorced interviewees reflected the general trend of the demographic data of Northwest Georgia. However, it was over-represented by European Americans, who actually constituted 59.4% of the area population, followed by Latinos with 33.9%, African Americans with 4.6%, Asian Americans with 1.6%, and Native Americans with 1.4%, according to the Census (2015).

Age at marriage showed that the studied divorced individuals were very young when they got married. Out of the 154 answers about age at marriage, 83 (53.8%) were between 15 and 20 years old, and 52 (33.8%) were between 21 and 25 years old. Combined, those who got married under 25 years of age were 135 individuals, representing 87.6% of the total number of divorced people in this study. Thus, the data has demonstrated a significant association between divorce and young age at marriage.

The findings about education showed a significant association between low **educational levels** and divorce. From a total of 148 answers about the interviewees' educational levels, 89 (60.1%) of them had 12 years of education or less. However, there were 54 individuals (36.5%), who had some college education, and there were even 5 interviewees (3.4%) with a Master's degree.

From a total of 141 answers about their **marriage span**, 44 (31.2%) of the interviewees mentioned that their marriage lasted three years or less. Thirty-eight individuals (26.9%) mentioned that it lasted 4-6 years. Thus, marriages which lasted six years or less represented 58.1%. However, there were 18 marriages (12.8%) which lasted 7-9 years, 21 marriages (14.9%) which lasted 10-13 years, and even 20 marriages (14.2%) which lasted more than 14 years.

Table 1

Age, Education, Marriage Span, and Racial Background of Divorced People in Northwest Georgia, 2007-2016

| Categories | Age in Years | Years of Education | Years of Marriage Span | Racial Background |
|------------|--------------|--------------------|------------------------|-------------------|
| 1 | 15-20: 83 | 1-8: 3 | 1-3: 44 | European: 135 |
| 2 | 21-25: 52 | 9-12: 86 | 4-6: 38 | African: 8 |
| 3 | 26-30: 13 | 13-16: 54 | 7-9: 18 | Latino: 8 |
| 4 | 31-35: 2 | 17-18: 5 | 10-13: 21 | Asian: 2 |
| 5 | 36+: 4 | 19+: 0 | 14+: 20 | Native: 3 |
| Total | 154 | 148 | 141 | 156 |

Reasons for Divorce

All of the 191 interviewees gave reasons for their divorce. Some of them mentioned one reason but many of them mentioned several reasons. As a result, the reported reasons for divorce are not mutually exclusive, in the sense that they do not add up to 100%.

Table 2 lists down 16 reasons for divorce, all of which were mentioned by the interviewees, except the abuse reason. It combines the physical abuse which was mentioned by 19 individuals, verbal abuse which was mentioned by 11 individuals, and psychological abuse which was also mentioned by 11 individuals.

The 16 reasons mentioned for divorce can be divided into the following three categories, on the basis of the frequency of mentioning them by the interviewees.

The first category includes infidelity, communication problems, abuse, financial problems, lack of conflict resolution skills, and drug or alcohol abuse.

As shown in Table 2 and illustrated in Figure 1, about the Divorce Reasons Bar Graph, **infidelity** was the major reason of divorce, as it was mentioned so by 107 individuals out of the total number of 191 interviewees, representing 56% of them.

Communication problems were mentioned as a reason of divorce by 61 individuals, representing 31.9% of the sample. **Abuse** was the third reason, mentioned by 41 individuals, representing 21.5% of the interviewees. The fourth reason was **financial problems**, which was mentioned by 36 individuals, representing 18.8% of the sample. The fifth reason for divorce was the lack of **conflict resolution** skills, which was mentioned by 31 divorced interviewees, representing 16.2% of the sample. **Drug or alcohol abuse** was the sixth reason of divorce, as it was mentioned by 20 people, representing 10.5% of the divorced interviewees.

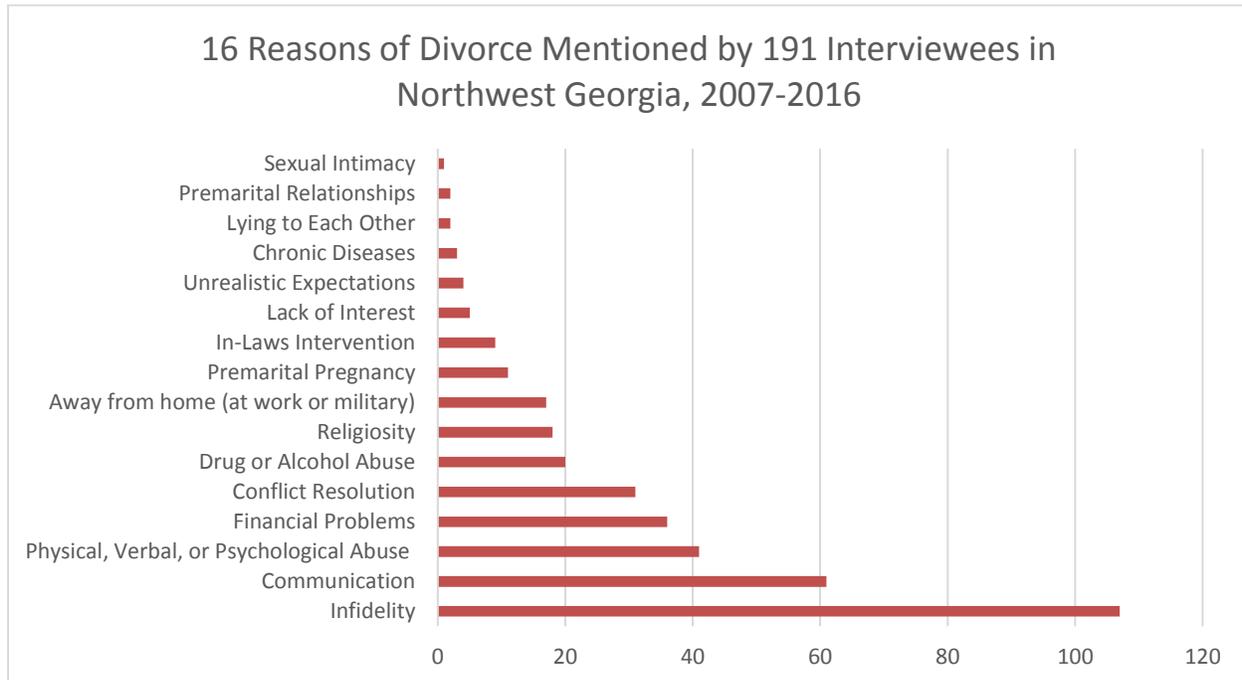
The second category of divorce reasons includes differences on the degree or presence of religiosity which was mentioned by 18 (9.4%) of the interviewees, being frequently away from home for military or work purposes which was mentioned 17 times (8.9%), premarital pregnancy which was mentioned 11 times (5.8%), and in-laws' intervention which was mentioned 9 times (4.7%).

The third category of divorce reasons includes lack of interest which was mentioned by 5 (2.6%) of the interviewees, unrealistic expectations which was mentioned 4 times (2.1%), chronic diseases which was mentioned 3 times (1.6%), lying to each other which was mentioned twice (1%), premarital relationships which was mentioned twice (1%), and problems about sexual intimacy which was mentioned once (0.5%).

Table 2
16 Reasons of Divorce Mentioned by 191 Interviewees in
Northwest Georgia 2007-2016

| Reasons of Divorce | Times Mentioned by interviewees |
|--|---------------------------------|
| Infidelity | 107 |
| Communication | 61 |
| Physical, Verbal, or Psychological Abuse | 41 |
| Financial Problems | 36 |
| Conflict Resolution | 31 |
| Drug or Alcohol Abuse | 20 |
| Religiosity | 18 |
| Away from home (at work or military) | 17 |
| Premarital Pregnancy | 11 |
| In-Laws Intervention | 9 |
| Lack of Interest | 5 |
| Unrealistic Expectations | 4 |
| Chronic Diseases | 3 |
| Lying to Each Other | 2 |
| Premarital Relationships | 2 |
| Sexual Intimacy | 1 |

Figure 1



VI. DISCUSSION

The data supported the findings of other researchers, particularly Amato, (2010) and Doherty (2013: 41). The data demonstrated that divorce in Northwest Georgia was significantly associated with lack of readiness for marriage, marriage dissatisfaction, and infidelity. The lack of readiness for marriage was represented by a cluster of variables which included young age, low-levels of education, financial problems, absence of conflict resolution skills and absence of communication skills. The core of these variables was the **young age** at marriage, as 53.8% of the participant divorcees were between 15 and 20 years old, and 33.8% were between 21 and 25 years old. Thus, 87.6% of them were under 25 when they got married.

Thus, young age at marriage is at the center of the **first group** of the mentioned reasons for divorce. It is maximized in its influence on marriage by the presence of other variables associated with it, such as low levels of education. Interviewees who had high-school level of education or less represented 60.1% of the sample. Spouses with such level of education won't be able to have jobs that provide them with minimum financial stability. As a result, they may not be able to pay for such basic necessities of life as housing, healthcare, food, and transportation. Such financial problems were mentioned as a reason of divorce by 18.8% individuals.

Moreover, young age may reflect a lack of conflict resolution skills, as was the case with 16.2% of the interviewees and a lack of communication skills, as was the case with 16.2% of them. People gain such skills through interaction with others, as they get older, through work experiences, and by direct instruction, such as what they learn in college education.

The data also showed a **second group** of the mentioned reasons for divorce. These include five different types of abuse are associated with divorce. While the physical, verbal, and psychological types of abuse cause direct harm to the victim spouse, drug and alcohol abuse cause direct harm to the abuser and indirect harm to the victim spouse. Divorce in this case is a solution to put an end to an abusive relationship. That was the case of 32% of the divorced interviewees, who suffered from such types of abuse,

A **third group** of the mentioned reasons for divorce may be described as external influences on marriage. These include frequent absence of a spouse because of work or military purposes, in-laws' intervention, and premarital relationships. In these cases, the victim spouse may feel that the marriage is negatively affected by such circumstances which he/or she is not responsible for. The external influences on marriage represented 19.4% of the reasons given for divorce in this study.

Moreover, the findings point to a **fourth group** of mentioned reasons for divorce. A victim spouse may file for divorce as a result of unrealistic expectations, a lack of sexual intimacy, a chronic disease of a spouse, a lack of interest in or from a spouse, and a lack of trust in a spouse because of his/her lying. This group of reasons was mentioned by 8.9% of the divorced interviewees.

Infidelity

The most important finding of this study was mentioning infidelity as a reason for divorce by 56% of the interviewees. Infidelity may stand on its own as an independent and main reason of divorce. However, it may also be argued that infidelity is associated with the marriage dissatisfaction and the lack of readiness for marriage, as represented by the other fifteen mentioned reasons of divorce, individually and collectively.

Among the 107 respondents who mentioned infidelity as a reason for their divorce, 34 (31.7%) of them reported that it was the only reason. Taking their answers on face value, that there are no other reasons for their divorce, then **causality** can be mentioned in about one-third of the divorce cases in this study. However, for the vast majority of the respondents (68.3%), infidelity was associated with other mentioned reasons for divorce. This is an indication that the relationship between infidelity and divorce was one of a **correlation**, for the vast majority of the cases.

Actually, communication problems were mentioned by 33 respondents out of the 107 (30.8%), who also mentioned infidelity, lack of conflict-resolution skills was mentioned by 24 respondents (22.4%) who also mentioned infidelity, financial problems were mentioned by 23 (21.4%) of similar respondents, and absence of spouses away for work or for military duties was mentioned by 14 such respondents (13%).

Moreover, there were 29.8% of the interviewees who mentioned sexuality-related reasons for their divorce. These were the presence of a less religious or not religious spouse (9.4%), a spouse who is frequently away from home for military or work purposes (8.9%), premarital pregnancy (5.8%), lack of interest in a spouse (2.6%), chronic disease of a spouse (1.6%), premarital relationships (1%), and problems about sexual intimacy (0.5%).

It may be argued that these sexuality-related reasons may lead to divorce directly on their own, as mentioned by 29.8% of the interviewees, or indirectly as they may lead to infidelity, as argued by Buss and Shackelford (1997) and Treas and Giesen (2000). Because infidelity was mentioned as a reason for divorce by 56% of the interviewees, it needs to be explained in broader contexts than just sexuality-related circumstances.

Thus, an unready and unsatisfied spouse may become more susceptible to infidelity, in reaction to his/her unhappiness about the relationship, which may lead the estranged spouse to file for divorce when infidelity is discovered.

VII. CONCLUSION

The data presented supported the first hypothesis that divorce in Northwest Georgia maybe associated with the lack of readiness for marriage, which is reflected in a cluster of variables that includes young age, low-levels of education, absence of conflict resolution skills, and financial problems.

Thus, a main conclusion is that young age at marriage is a major variable that may contribute to divorce. This may be explained in that young age is associated with several other reasons, which indicate that young spouses of high-school age and level of education or lower are less ready for marriage and consequently more susceptible to divorce.

The data also supported the second hypothesis that divorce may be associated with marriage dissatisfaction, which is reflected in such variables as abuse, negative external influences, as well as lack of satisfaction in spousal needs and expectations.

Moreover, the data from this Northwest Georgia sample supported the third hypothesis that infidelity is the major given reason for divorce, which happens in association with marriage dissatisfaction and lack of readiness for marriage. An unready spouse may

become an unsatisfied spouse, who may become more susceptible to infidelity in reaction to his/her unhappiness about the relationship. However, because infidelity as a reason for divorce is mostly mentioned in association with other reasons, the relationship between divorce and infidelity is more of a correlation than causality.

In conclusion, because infidelity was found to be the most frequently-mentioned reason for divorce in the studied area, it warrants more research to understand it in the future.

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