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## Statscan's cuts have forced us to see Canada through a U.S. lens

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Earlier in this term my students got a lecture from me. Not the standard university lecture, one where I educate them in the ways of the world, but the reprimanding type of lecture where their professor asks, "What were you thinking?"

The previous week my class had submitted introductions to what would soon become the defining term paper of their university degree in economics. They were writing on a variety of different topics such as: Has increased female employment contributed to the increase in cohabitation rates? What is the relationship between university education and the probability of divorce? Has technology contributed to our seemingly increasing reluctance to marry?

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They were asking important questions, ones that have the potential to yield meaningful answers in an era in which the fundamental economic unit, the household, is in the midst of a revolution.

They had done a good job, but the source of my annoyance was that virtually every introduction included the line, "In the U.S. today..."

As in, "In the U.S. today, more couples are cohabitating than ever before." Or, "In the U.S. today, those with university degrees are far more likely to be married." Or, "In the U.S. today, divorce rates are at their lowest level in 20 years."

Reading their introductions would have left anyone with the impression that the sole responsibility of academic researchers was to explain the behaviour of the average Americans, and only the average American.

When I asked why they had framed their discussion this way the response was simple; they could only find U.S. data.

I was reminded of this discussion when I sat down this week to write a piece that explores the idea that marriage rates have fallen, in part, because Canadians overstate the probability that if they marry, that marriage will end in divorce.

Marriage is a somewhat risky undertaking. If the risk pays off, and the marriage stays intact, the returns to the individuals are large. If the risk does not pay off, and the marriage ends in divorce, the consequence to the individuals can be severe.

When we believe that there is a 50 per cent chance that a marriage will end in divorce, it isn't that surprising that fewer people will choose to take that risk; hence marriage rates fall when the risk of divorce is high.

The problem is that the divorce rate has never been as high as 50 per cent in Canada – that is the rate south of the border – and once you factor in age at first marriage and education levels the risk of divorce is much, much lower for the average Canadian considering taking a walk down the aisle.

My intention was to write a piece that explained how much lower, but I can't do that because Statistics Canada stopped reporting national marriage and divorce rates in 2005 because of budget cutbacks. So, not only do I not have the information I need to do my research, but Canadians do not have the relevant information they need to make informed decisions about their own lives.

At the end of the term, the majority of my students managed to tell stories using Canadian evidence, but that evidence was five or ten years old. It's only a matter of time before the way in which Canadians frame their understanding of our world is through an entirely American lens. We should all be grateful that Americans, at least, have an unending curiosity about who they really are.

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