

Emerging Pattern of Cohabitation in Korea: Delayed Registration of Marriage

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Issue:

This study explores the emerging pattern of cohabitation in an East Asian country, South Korea, by focusing on a particular type of cohabitation, delayed registration of marriage. In Korea, marriage becomes legal only by registering it to the family registration system. The Civil Law requires all family status changes, including marriage, divorce, birth, death, and adoption, to be registered in the family registration system (*Hojeok*), which is administered by the central government, Ministry of Government Administration and Home Affairs. Wedding ceremony alone does not make a marriage legal although it can provide a piece of evidence proving de facto marital relationships. Conversely, registration without a wedding ceremony makes a marriage perfectly legal, according to the Civil Law¹.

Through the past several years, the media in Korea has reported an increasing trend of delay in marriage registration after wedding (Doorimoa 2007; Lee 2004; Lee 2007; Park 2001; Rho 2005; Shin 2007; Yu 2005). The reports say that many couples wait one year or so after their wedding before they register the marriages. The main explanation is that rising divorce rates fuel the fear of marital disruption among newly wedded couples and that they have a reservation in becoming legally bounded before practicing marital life for some time. In case of marital problems, the process of (legal) divorce would be cumbersome and, most of all, leave a trace in the family registration record that one had been previously married, which brings about stigma (Park 2001; Yu 2005). The reports also say that a delay in registration itself may increase union instability as some couples hasten to dissolve conflict-ridden relationships before it gets too late (Lee 2004; Park 2001).

This popular description of delayed marriage registration fits well to an ideal of cohabitation described in the literature, i.e., trial of marriage (Smock 2000). Further, the media explanation for such trials supports the institutional hypothesis that is widely argued in the literature, in that rising divorce rates facilitate cohabitation and cohabitation in turn may contribute to breakups of unions (Bumpass 1990). Despite those reports, systematic research on cohabitation is rare in Korea, mostly because of the lack of appropriate data. As cohabitation (or delay in marriage registration) increased only in the past several years, the percentage of the population who are currently cohabiting is still small. Surveys based on nationally representative samples of households have not yet asked about cohabitation, and most of them do not have a large enough number of cases to allow robust statistical analysis of cohabiters anyway. This study will use two data sources that seem to provide the best data available so far, data from the entire cases of marriage registration between 1991 and 2005 and a national survey, Social Statistical Survey conducted in 2006, that asked marriage registration status.

Theoretical Background and Hypotheses:

What does cohabitation mean for the family system is an ongoing research question, as the characteristics of cohabiters and the nature of cohabiting relationships are still evolving (Smock

¹ It is noteworthy that the legislators passed a drastic revision of Civil Laws and Family Registration Laws regarding kinship and inheritance in March 31, 2005 and the new laws will be enacted from January 1, 2008. The new laws abolish the principles of patriarchal organization, but the system of family registration will remain alive.

2000). The literature shows that cohabitation is becoming more like marriage, i.e., becoming an alternative to marriage, in the United States, but cohabitation is also observed as a precursor to marriage or an alternative to single life (Raley 2000, 2001; Rindfuss and VandenHeuvel 1990; Smock 2000). In Europe, many couples choose cohabitation as an alternative to marriage with no intention to marry; cohabiting relationships function as marriages and are not transformed into marriages. A precursor to marriage means a trial of marriage; if cohabiting relationships are sustained, the couples eventually marry. On the other hand, Rindfuss and VandenHeuvel (1990) find that the socioeconomic and attitudinal characteristics of cohabiting couples are more similar to those of single people than of married persons and conclude that cohabitation is an alternative to being single.

Whichever is the nature of cohabitation, the institutional hypothesis postulates that increasing cohabitation goes hand in hand with many other changes in family life (Bumpass 1990). Those trends together may be broadly labeled as “second demographic transition” (Lesthaeghe 1983, 2007; van de Kaa 2003). The term implies that such trends as low fertility, late age at marriage, high marital disruption, and increasing cohabitation are mutually reinforcing (Bumpass 1990). The term also suggests that such transition will be universal across the societies only at different timing and tempo, as was the case for the first demographic transition.² Cohabitation is expected to increase in the process of second demographic transition.

The concept of second demographic transition was originally developed in Europe, but in recent decades, similar trends are observed across the countries in Asia: age at marriage has increased (Jones 2006), fertility has dropped, and divorce rates increased. Currently, fertility in East Asian countries is well below the replacement level and among the lowest in the world. In Korea, the total fertility rate has continuously declined from the 1960s; it went below the replacement level in the mid 1980s and reached 1.1 by 2005. The crude divorce rate has increased drastically from mere 1.1 in 1990 to 3.6 in 2003, closing the gap with the United States where the rate is slightly declining from the plateau of 4.1 during the 1980s (Lee and Bumpass 2006). This study explores cohabitation in the environment of these changes in family life in an Asian country, Korea.

Beside the institutional hypothesis, this study will examine a few other hypotheses of cohabitation, those emphasizing socioeconomic status and young adults’ geographic independence from the parents. One of the early explanations for cohabitation stresses low income and lack of employment as its determinant (Wilson 1987). People with low incomes cannot afford to marry, and live through one unstable cohabiting relationship after another. The main reason for high cohabitation among people of low socioeconomic status is economic one, but a recent study argues that it is also related to the risk of physical and sexual abuse. Women who have experienced abuse are less likely to marry. They refuse to marry if they are not convinced that their partners treat them fairly (Cherlin et al. 2004). Geographic mobility among young adults and reduced parental control increase non-traditional union formation (Rosenfeld and Kim 2005).

Data Sources:

From 1997, the marriage registration form in Korea includes a question on actual wedding date. This study focuses on the duration between the date of actual marriage and that of marriage registration to examine its determinants. Marriage registration data, however, have a major

² Refer to Lesthaeghe (2006) for criticisms against the concept of “second demographic transition.”

shortcoming in reflecting the overall trend of cohabitation. The data include only the couples that eventually marry. Those couples whose de-facto marital relationships break down before registering the marriages are excluded from the data. Also excluded are the couples that are currently in de-facto marital relationships or are cohabiting without an intention to marry. Despite the shortcoming, this study explores the registration data as they provide important insights on the trend of cohabitation. While the registration is being delayed, some relationships are likely to break up. Also plausible is that among couples that chose to cohabit without any intention to marry, some may end up marrying to each other. Thus, the pattern of registration delay will help us to estimate the trend of cohabitation and the number of breakups. Also the micro-files of the data used in this study contain all marriages registered from year 1997 through 2005, allowing no sampling error. Data for registration from 1991 through 1996 will also be used but the registration forms in those years do not ask “actual date of marriage.” Around 300 thousands couples register their marriages each year.

To supplement the registration data, we also use data from a nationally representative survey, Social Statistical Survey conducted in 2006. The National Statistical Office conducts the survey every year to provide policy markers with trend data of diverse social issues. The survey includes a module on family life every four years, and in 2006 it asks two questions on marital status; one is a more conventional question but its response choices include “have a spouse” instead of “currently married.” The second question is only for those who have a spouse and asks whether the marriage was registered (“Did you register the marriage?”). The 2006 sample consists of 30,578 households with 85,179 individuals. Among 43,388 respondents who have a spouse, 1,068 (2.5 percent) say their marriages are not registered.

Analysis:

The marriage registration form, which is filled out by the couple and submitted to the local government office, includes questions about personal characteristics of both spouses at the time of actual marriage³, including age, educational attainment, occupation, residence area, and type of previous marriage. From 1997, the form also includes a question on “actual wedding date”. Our analysis examines the duration between the dates of actual marriage and marriage registration, and investigates its determinants. To explore possibly differential effects of the explanatory variables by the length of delay duration, we try different ways of coding for the dependent variable: continuous, the number months; categorical, 0-6, 7-12, 13-18, 19 or more months; and dichotomous, 0-18 and 19 or more months. The corresponding statistical models are linear regression, ordered logit, and binomial logit, respectively. The threshold of one and half years is rather arbitrary but the duration seems long enough to assume the delay is intentional. Preliminary findings are discussed below.

Using data from the Social Statistical Survey, we will examine various covariates of cohabitation (i.e., non-registration), including parent characteristics, educational achievement, detailed employment characteristics, a set of attitudinal variables related to marriage, divorce, and gender roles, residence region characteristics (as marriage market characteristics), and life satisfaction. We will compare these characteristics of cohabiting respondents with married couples and with single respondents of same age and sex groups.

³ The National Statistical Office warns the users of the data that despite the instruction some couples may have put the characteristics at the time of registration.

Preliminary Findings:

Our preliminary analysis of marriage registration data confirms some of the common beliefs. The combined data of couples that wedded in 1997 and registered through 1997 and 2005 contain about 376,000 cases. According to the data, a majority of couples register their marriages either in the same month or within six months of the wedding (85.2 %), but some couples register several years later (7.6, 3.0, 4.2 % register after the delay of 7-12, 13-18, 19 or more months, respectively). Delay is more frequent for re-married couples than for couples of first marriages, with the frequency especially high among those who were previously divorced; among couples where husband divorced previously, wife divorced previously, and both husband and wife previously divorced, 11.5, 13.9 and 18.7%, respectively, register the marriage 19 months or longer after the actual wedding. For couples where both spouses marry first, only 2.4 % register the marriage 19 months or more after the actual wedding. Contrary to the media reports, delay in marriage registration is much less common among couples of first marriages than among couples of higher order marriages. The results provide a firm support for the institutional explanation of cohabitation (Bumpass 1990; Lestaege 1983). Divorce facilitates cohabitation (or de-facto marital relationships). An increasing proportion of the registering couples consist of spouses who were previously divorced, and more delay in registration is expected in the coming years. For example, of all couples that wedded in 1997 and registered between 1997 and 2005, the couples whose either spouse was previously divorced comprise 11.6 %. The analogous percentages increase among later marriage cohorts, 13.8, 16.7 and 16.8 % among those who wedded in 1998, 1999, and 2000, respectively.⁴

For both first and higher order marriages, less educated people are more likely to delay registration than are their more educated counterparts, which seem to support the income and employment hypothesis (Wilson 1987) or the hypothesis of physical and sexual abuse (Cherlin et al. 2004). However, such educational gaps are significantly narrower for re-marriages than for first marriages, and the results were consistent across the three forms of the dependent variable. That is, failure of the first marriage affects educated people's behavior more strongly than the behaviors of less educated people. The experience of divorce makes educated people have a reservation on their second marriage, an interaction effect of socioeconomic status and institutional influences. Predicted probabilities of registration delay will be calculated later for the subgroups of education and previous marriage types.

Summary:

According to marriage registration data, among those who wedded in 1997, 2.4% of the couples of first marriages register their marriages one and half years or more later than the actual wedding date, whereas almost one in five (18.7%) couples whose both spouses were previously divorced have such a long delay. Further, these figures of the delay should be an underestimation given the risk of breakup during the period of delay. Whether it is called de-facto marital relationship or cohabitation, unregistered unions are increasing in Korea. The differentials in the trend by previous marital experiences support the institutional explanation of cohabitation. This study will explore various circumstances related to such non-registered union status (either delay in or lack of marriage registration), and discuss the theoretical and social implications.

⁴ The percentage increase is underestimated because of the right censoring in registration, i.e., observation ended in 2005, and because previously divorce couples tend to register later than first married couples.

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