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Growing educational differentials in the retreat from marriage among Korean men

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ABSTRACT

Applying discrete-time hazard models to person-year data constructed from 1% microdata sample of 2010 Korean Census, we explore how men's education affects their transition to first marriage, and how the relationship between education and marriage has changed across three 10-year birth cohorts of Korean men born from 1946 to 1975. Drawing on Oppenheimer's theory of marriage and review of changing educational and economic contexts of Korean men, we develop a hypothesis on growing educational differentials in marriage. We find that the high educated delay marriage until later ages but catch up to the extent to which they are eventually more likely to marry than the low educated. There is a continued trend across cohorts toward the delay and avoidance of marriage at all educational levels. However, the trend of retreat from marriage has been more substantial for men with high school or less education compared to men with a university degree, leading to growing educational gaps over time in marriage. Among the three cohorts, the youngest cohort, among which low educated men's economic prospects have particularly deteriorated due to rapid educational expansion and economic crisis, shows most pronounced decline in marriage.

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1. Introduction

During the past decades men and women in South Korea (Korea, hereafter) have increasingly postponed marriage: the mean age at first marriage has increased four years over two decades from 1990 to 2010 for both men (27.8–31.8) and women (24.8–28.9) (Statistics Korea, 2011; see also Raymo et al., 2015). The trend of delayed marriage in Korea is evident given that it has taken more than three decades for the median age of first marriage among men in the United States to increase by four years from 24.2 in 1977 to 28.2 in 2010 (US Census Bureau, 2011). Recent evidence even seems to suggest that the claim of universal marriage may not hold up among Korean men in coming years. According to our own calculations on the basis of census tabulations provided by Statistics Korea, the proportion of men aged 45–49 who never married was only 0.8 percent in 1990 indicating the level of universal marriage. Two decades later, however, the corresponding percentage increased to 7.5 percent (see also Raymo et al., 2015). Considering that almost everyone had married until very recently, this trend toward later and less marriage can mean fundamental transformation of family behavior in Korea.

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Despite growing attention to later and less marriage, however, little known is whether the trend of retreat from marriage appears similarly across different socioeconomic groups or whether the trend is more evident for a specific socioeconomic group than others in the Korean context, especially among men. In fact, there is a dearth of literature on socioeconomic differentials in marriage among men, not only for Korea but also for other neighboring Asian countries. Several studies have examined how women's socioeconomic characteristics, particularly educational attainment, affect their transition to marriage in East Asia (Chang and Li, 2011; Fukuda, 2013; Park et al., 2013; Raymo, 2003). However, much limited is research on how men's socioeconomic characteristics are related to their marriage chances in East Asia. This lack of scholarship on marriage among men seems to reflect the general tendency of focusing on women but ignoring men when studying family behaviors such as marriage and fertility (Lloyd and South, 1996; Oppenheimer et al., 1997). Although several studies have examined the effects of men's socioeconomic characteristics on their marriage either in the United States and Europe (Kalmijn, 2011; Oppenheimer, 2003; Oppenheimer et al., 1997; Xie et al., 2003), this balanced interest to men's marriage behaviors has not been shown for men in East Asia.

Particularly troublesome is the paucity of research that examines how the relationship between men's socioeconomic characteristics and marriage has changed over time. Research on *changes* in the relationship is considerably limited even in the Western context. Obviously, economic and cultural contexts of marriage have shifted considerably over time in many countries, suggesting that not only marriage has been increasingly delayed or forgone but also the effects of men's socioeconomic characteristics on marriage might have changed as well. Exploring how the relationship between men's socioeconomic characteristics and their transition to marriage has changed over time, and particularly identifying who are more likely to delay and avoid marriage can help better understand potential causes of increasing retreat from marriage. Moreover, research on changing relationships between men's socioeconomic characteristics and marriage in Korea and other Asian countries, which have distinctive family contexts from those of Western societies, can offer an excellent opportunity of testing generability of sociological theories of marriage that are primarily based on experiences in the West (see Kalmijn, 2011).

In this study, we investigate how men's educational attainment affects their transition to first marriage in Korea, and how the effect of education on marriage has evolved over time. Although we acknowledge that educational attainment is only one of various socioeconomic characteristics that can influence marriage chances, it has been of a major focus of many studies that addressed socioeconomic differentials in transition to marriage (Raymo, 2003; Schoen and Cheng, 2006). Specifically, using large data from Korean Census 2010, we compare the relationship between educational attainment and marriage across three 10-year birth cohorts of Korean men born in 1946–55, 1956–65, and 1966–75. The current scope of our study does not allow us to directly adjudicate alternative theories of marriage. However, temporal changes in the education-marriage relationship, observed among Korean men, may inform the extent to which Oppenheimer's theory of marriage timing, which will be introduced in detail below, is applied to the Korean context (Oppenheimer, 1988; Oppenheimer et al., 1997). Given scant research on long-term trends in the effects of men's socioeconomic characteristics on marriage, our comparison of the education-marriage relationship over three decades adds value to the literature.¹

2. Theories of marriage

Studies in the United States and Europe have generally shown that men's socioeconomic characteristics are positively associated with marriage formation (Kalmijn, 2011; Oppenheimer et al., 1997; Schoen and Cheng, 2006; Xie et al., 2003), although the effects of women's socioeconomic characteristics are somewhat inconsistent (Blossfeld, 1995; Oppenheimer, 1997). Regardless of methods to estimate the effect, “[a]ll empirical methods suggests that men's economic opportunities exert a strong influence on marriage and divorce. Improved male earnings appear to hasten marriage and may also increase the overall prevalence of marriage” (Ellwood and Jencks, 2004: 47; see also Burstein, 2007). The positive relationship between men's socioeconomic characteristics and marriage is consistent with the prediction by the economic model of marriage that emphasizes benefits of marriage due to specialization of spouses (Becker, 1981; Ellwood and Jencks, 2004; Burstein, 2007). Because of men's specialization in labor market, on the one hand men with higher economic prospects (including higher education) are likely to have a higher probability of marriage than men with poorer prospects. On the other hand, under the division of household work between spouses, women who can be more economically independent tend to have less to gain from marriage and thus are less likely to marry than women with poorer economic prospects (Oppenheimer, 1997).

However, as recognized, the economic model is mostly to explain the overall likelihood of marriage but may not be so adequate to explain the pattern of delaying marriage (Ellwood and Jencks, 2004; Oppenheimer, 1988). Moreover, the economic model of marriage primarily focuses on women's marriage behavior affected by their economic independence (Kalmijn, 2011). By applying a job-search model to marriage selection, Oppenheimer (1988) provides an alternative explanation of marriage timing that emphasizes uncertainties in marriage selection, which lead to delaying marriage until uncertainties about future prospects decrease along with ages. In particular, Oppenheimer emphasizes uncertainty in establishing a stable work career as a major factor affecting timing of marriage, considering the critical role of work for lifestyle and socioeconomic status that are foundations of stable marriage. This theory of marriage timing suggests us to pay attention to changes in the timing of men's transition to a stable work as a critical cause of delayed marriage: “the age at

¹ In particular, the current study of Korean men complements our previous study, which applied the similar methods and research design to investigate marriage among Korean women (Park et al., 2013).

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