



Employment and weight status: The extreme case of body concern in South Korea

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ABSTRACT

For an industrialized nation, obesity rates in South Korea are extremely low. Yet, reflecting an extremely fat-averse, thin-positive society, efforts to lose weight are now reportedly very common. Since the 1980s, South Korea has experienced an increasingly flexible and insecure labor market which was exacerbated by the 1997 economic recession. In this social and economic setting, body shape and weight status, as human capital, may have gained significant bargaining power in the labor market. Consequently, we propose that Koreans, particularly those who are employed in “stable” jobs (i.e., non-manual and regular jobs), would increasingly engage in intense weight management and reduction activities even when not technically overweight or obese as a means to job security and upward mobility. Using nationally-representative data from the Korean Nutrition and Health Examination Survey (KNHANES), we identify the changing role of weight concerns versus actual body weight in predicting South Korean efforts to lose weight between 2001 (KNHANES-phase 1) and 2007–2009 (phase 4). The patterns were examined by occupation type (manual and non-manual jobs) and status (regular and non-regular jobs). Oaxaca decomposition analysis supported that people’s perception of being “fat,” rather than actual weight status, was crucial to explaining accelerated weight management efforts in South Korea over the decade (coef. = 0.062 and p -value < .0001 for male with regular work; coef. = 0.031 and p -value = .002 for female with regular work). Occupation status, rather than employment in itself, mattered. Job stability predicted increased effort; the pattern of change through time suggests efforts to invest high levels of effort in appearance positively impacts both employment opportunity and stability.

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1. Introduction

Weight status, especially high BMI/obesity, interacts with labor markets and occupational status in multiple complex ways. In industrialized nations such as the U.S., Canada, Germany, and the U.K., very high body weight is associated with fewer employment opportunities and stunted career advancement due to weight-related stigma (Caliendo and Gehrsitz, 2016; Chu and Ohinmaa, 2016; Giel et al., 2010; Larose et al., 2016; Kinge, 2016; Puhl and Heuer, 2009). There are different theoretical models that might explain such patterns. For one, the ‘welfare regime’ hypothesis emphasizes the role of stress-induced eating under conditions of economic uncertainty especially in the market-driven economy encouraging low cost high caloric food consumption; hence, body

weight will rise in conditions with worse social welfare safety nets or other forms of economic uncertainty (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Goodin et al., 1999; Brennenstuhl et al., 2011; Offer et al., 2010). Various referred to as the “slimness premium” or the “obesity penalty” (Caliendo and Gehrsitz, 2016), recent anthropological analyses focused on body image concerns that efforts to maintain desirable slimness can be well-rewarded in individual upward mobility in transitional or unstable economies – most especially for women (Anderson-Fye and Brewis, 2017). The adverse effects for women in Canada were as much as 4–4.5% reduced annual income compared to men (Larose et al., 2016).

In 1980, in response to domestic and international demands, South Korea undertook various economic reforms and restructuring in order to enhance national stability (Heo et al., 2008). These reforms ultimately led to market liberalization having an effect on many industries and labor markets (Haggard and Moon, 1990). The Asian financial crisis of 1997 sped up the neoliberal restricting with particularly negative effects on job security. The massive changes to labor categories created intense competition and anxiety about

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job acquisition and security as reliance on ‘the market’ increased (Lowe-Lee, 2006). The labor market restructuring combined with pronounced, South Korea provides a special case to consider how weight and job markets interact, particularly testing the proposition that efforts around management of weight appearance may be crucial to understanding employment opportunity and stability. The availability of prospective, nationally-representative KNHANES data from South Korea provides the means.

1.1. Weight and body image in South Korea

South Korea is an especially interesting context to consider how job markets shape body weight, most simply because it is such an extreme case. By gender, only 6.1% of South Korean men and 4.6% of South Korean women were categorized as obese (BMI ≥ 30 kg/m²) in 2015 (data available at <http://stats.oecd.org>). Despite this low level of obesity, South Korea has some of the highest levels of explicit stigmatization of larger bodies (Marini et al., 2013; Brewis et al., 2017) as well as disordered eating and body dissatisfaction in the world (Pike et al., 2014). Everyday conversations between people (Kim, 2014; Schwekendiek et al., 2013) and the mass media have been two effective means of spreading a strong culture of lookism in Korea (Schwekendiek et al., 2013; Lim and Kim, 2012; Han, 2003).

In fact, regardless of their actual weight, both men and women in Korea are held to be obsessed with dieting and body modification (Han, 2003; Jung and Lee, 2009). The obsession with achieving a perfect, slim body image in South Korea is a relatively modern social phenomenon, with scholarly documentation of a recent shift from traditional Confucian body ideals to contemporary ideals that are globally influenced (Cho, 2009; Kim, 2009; Kim, 2003; Woo, 2004). While elective cosmetic surgery became increasingly available in the late 1950s (DiMoia, 2014; Woo, 2004), the emphasis on a particular look and shape of the body was especially aggravated after South Korea’s financial crisis in 1997. Increasing attention was paid to physical attractiveness, precipitating a rise in the popularity of fitness, body management, and cosmetic surgery (Cho, 2009; Kim and Lennon, 2006) boosted by the upsurge in internet usage since the 1990s (Park, 2007).

1.2. Heightened job insecurity and bargaining power of appearance in South Korea

In trying to understand the factors contributing to this overall upward trend in body concerns for both genders, it is important to take into account South Korea’s underlying economic and labor situation in combination with the increasingly strict attention to body ideals and norms and the importance of adherence to them. South Korea experienced high economic growth in the 1980s; as this began to slow down in the early 1990s, labor reform (among other things) was targeted as a means to revive the lagging economy (Heo et al., 2008). In 1997, the world global financial crisis drove the Korean currency down from 844 won to the US dollar to 2000 won to the dollar (Shin, 2013: 336). This economic recession, so-called IMF crisis, accelerated the financial/economic restructuring by the Korean government that legally allowed Korean companies to replace permanent jobs with precarious and temporary ones leading to markedly lower job security (Lee, 2011; Shin, 2013).

This economic context places South Korea firmly within the “liberal welfare regime” category within the theory of welfare regime (Esping-Andersen, 1990). The theory groups countries into three regimes based on the level of decommmodification of labor: liberal welfare regime, conservative welfare regime, and social demographic regime. According to this theory, in countries with a high degree of market liberalism, a high level of stress is associated

with work-related (in)security; this characterization effectively describes South Korea since the government-driven market reform in the 1990s. In fact, people who retain their regular worker status tend to experience intense pressure as they witness their co-workers being laid off or involuntarily retired and begin to worry intensely about their own situation (see Matanle et al., 2008).

The theory also suggests a significant association between stress-induced “job insecurity” and changes in eating behavior leading to obesity. Offer et al. (2010) empirically tested this association by using the ILO index of economic security and found that employment security, among multiple factors, had a significant and negative association with obesity especially in countries with a liberal market. They argue that this can be explained by the changing nature of the bargaining power of individuals with different levels of job security. Specifically, like in most developed countries, as individuals collect more human capital through education, the power to bargain collectively in labor markets reduces, but the power to bargain individually increases. In other words, compared to negotiation through collective actions like unionization, individual human capital becomes a crucial factor in the acquisition and maintenance of job security especially in the context of high job insecurity. Their findings suggest that those individuals who are rich in human capital are less likely to be under a high level of stress and hence less likely to be obese than those who are poor in human capital. In such instances, the social capital accrued to the body ultimately imbues physical appearance with considerable power. This is particularly underscored in the realm of labor (Larose et al., 2016; Chu and Ohinmaa, 2016; Kinge, 2016), particularly among white collar jobs (see Caliendo and Gehrsitz, 2016) in the labor market (Kim and Han, 2017; Kim et al., 2012), especially given the requirement that a job applicant submit a photograph with each application.

The problem is that appearance, as a form of important human capital in the context of a high level of lookism in South Korea, fades or changes over time. Thus, even people with secure jobs are constantly under pressure to be thin and to maintain their weight status. This pushes people not only to continuously worry about the status of their body shape, weight, and facial beauty but also to manage these features even when it is not required clinically.

These considerations lead to the hypothesis that increased body image concern is one of the main factors driving increasing numbers of Koreans to engage in activities designed specifically to lose weight. We propose that this was driven not only by increasing proportions of overweight or obese Koreans over time, but also by more people perceiving themselves to be “a little bit fat” or “very fat.” And, drawing on the general principles underlying the welfare regime hypothesis, we also considered if this expected pattern would be more evident among Koreans with stable or secure employment (i.e., non-manual or regular employment) compared to Koreans with unstable or insecure employment (i.e., manual or non-regular employment). A close, detailed analysis of labor categories with regard to body image and weight management practices in South Korea exposes the ways in which attention to the body, specifically in terms of weight and weight management, maps unevenly across occupation types and statuses.

Previous studies in Korea emphasize the important role of body image in explaining weight management practices outside of the Western context as well. The study of Kim et al. (2008) found a mediating effect of body image on the association between body mass index and unhealthy weight control behaviors (e.g., skipping meals, taking diet pills/products, using laxatives/diuretics, or weight loss surgeries) in the context of Seoul, South Korea’s capital city. A similar study using a nationally representative sample collected in 2008 also found that body image played a significant role in the association between body mass index and weight loss (Boo, 2013). The study by Joh et al. (2013) also revealed a significant

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