Premarital Cohabitation and the Timing of Family Formation in East Asia and the West

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Introduction

This study presents the results of comparative analysis of the effects of premarital cohabitation on the timing of family formation in Japan, South Korea, Singapore, France, Sweden and the U.S., drawing on microdata from the 2009 Survey on Comparative Study of Family Policies in East Asia (South Korea, Singapore and Japan) and the 2005 Comparative Opinion Survey on Declining-Birthrate Societies (South Korea, Japan, France, Sweden and the U.S.), which were conducted by the Section for Measures against Declining Birthrate, Director-General for Policies on Cohesive Society, Cabinet Office (CAO, Japanese Government). This is, in a way, an extension of the author’s collaborative studies (Kojima and Rallu 1997, 2008; Rallu and Kojima 2002) which showed that the difference in fertility between Japan and France was partly due to the lack of births by cohabiting couples in Japan. Even though the births by cohabiting couples are still infrequent in Japan, premarital cohabitation experience has become sufficiently frequent and seems to affect family formation as in the West. This study is also an extension of Kojima (2009) and Kojima (2010).

Background

Premarital cohabitation has spread in the West since the 1970s, but it has been believed to be rare in East Asia. But recent surveys show that cohabitation is gradually spreading in East Asia while it largely remains to be a precursor to marriage rather than an alternative. Even in the West, it is a precursor to marriage for many couples. In the Japanese case it is possible that survey respondents are increasingly more candid about reporting the past cohabitation experience than before, considering a large increase from 13.2% in the CAO 2005 survey to 22.5% in the 2009 survey among respondents aged 20-49. These CAO surveys show that, in South Korea, it appears to have declined because of an increase in underreporting, particularly among women who exhibit considerably lower percentage than men.
Retrospective information is more highly subject to bias and memory lapse than information on current status. Cohabitation may be inherently difficult to measure particularly when it is temporary or on and off and it is entered for convenience. Thus, it is subject to various kinds of errors including the different reporting between the two partners as well as misreporting and underreporting and may be affected by change in social acceptability (Hayford and Morgan 2008). The reporting of cohabitation is difficult to get, particularly from women in East Asia where it is stigmatized. Survey effects seem to be prominent for sensitive questions and they are not consistent within or across surveys and, thus, difficult to assess. But it seems to be changing at least for cohabitation experience in Japan. It seems appropriate to analyze it and the analyses on determinants of cohabitation have increased, but there are not too many studies on its effects on family formation behaviors.

**Data and Method**

The data for the analyses derived from the 2009 and 2005 CAO surveys mentioned above. The surveys were conducted on a nationally representative sample of about 1,000 men and women aged 20-49 in each country and, thus, the caution is necessary when interpreting the results due to the relatively small sample size.

The proportional hazard models (Cox regressions) were applied to the microdata for each sex of six countries in the 2009 and 2005 surveys. Dependent variables include the hazard of first marriage, first birth, second birth and third birth. Independent variables include education, urban-rural residence (citizenship and ethnicity for Singapore), premarital cohabitation experiences and the interaction of higher education and premarital cohabitation experience.

**Results**

The results of proportional hazard analyses of microdata for East Asia (2009) show positive (hastening) effects of cohabitation on marriage and first birth hazards among Japanese men and women with medium/lower education and a negative effect on first birth hazard among Japanese men with higher education. They show positive effects on marriage and first birth hazards among Korean men with higher education. They also reveal a positive effect on first birth hazard among Singaporean men and positive effects on marriage, first birth and second birth hazards among Singaporean women with medium/lower education and negative effects among Singaporean women with higher education.

On the other hands, the results of proportional hazard analyses of microdata for East Asia (2005) show positive effects of cohabitation on marriage and first birth hazards among Japanese men and women with medium/lower education and a positive effect on third birth hazard among men with higher education. They also reveal negative effects on first and second birth hazards
among Japanese men with higher education. They show a negative effect on second birth hazard among Korans with medium/lower education but a positive effect among Korea men with higher education.

The results of proportional hazard analyses of microdata for the West (2005) show positive effects of cohabitation on marriage hazard among American men and women with medium/lower education and a positive effect on first birth hazard among America women with medium/low education, but negative effects on second and third births among American men with medium/low education. They reveal positive effects of cohabitation on marriage hazard among French men and women with medium/lower education and positive effects on first, second and third birth hazards among French men with medium/low education. They also show a positive effect on marriage hazard among French women with higher education. The results reveal positive effects of cohabitation on marriage and first birth hazards among Swedish men and women with medium/lower education and positive effects on second and third birth hazards among Swedish women with medium/low education, but a positive effect on marriage hazard among Swedish men with higher education.

Therefore, the results of proportional hazard models reveal that premarital cohabitation tends to have positive (hastening) effects on the timing of marriage and childbearing among Japanese men and women as well as Singaporean women, but that negative effects on the timing of childbearing among Korean men and women. While premarital cohabitation tends to have negative (delaying) effects on the timing of childbearing among male and female college graduates in Japan and female college graduates in Singapore, it tends to have positive effects among male college graduates in South Korea.

Premarital cohabitation tends to have positive effects on the timing of marriage and childbearing among French men, Swedish men and women, and American women. It also tends to have a positive effect on the timing of marriage among French women including college graduates and a negative effect on the timing of marriage among Swedish male college graduates. Among American men, premarital cohabitation tends to have a positive effect on the timing of marriage, but negative effects on the timing of childbearing.

Conclusion

In sum, the positive effects of premarital cohabitation on the timing of marriage and childbearing tend to be found in East Asia and the West except for a few cases. But the precise effect depends on survey years, countries and gender as well as dependent variables. A nationally representative longitudinal survey of couples of all kinds including dating, LAT (living apart together), cohabiting and married as suggested by Smock et al. (2008) is also necessary in East Asia. Direct question in Korean surveys on retrospective history is also
recommended because Korea might have had similar level of cohabitation with Japan in recent past.

References


